

Kenneth Brown

A Passion for Leadership

I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or in America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect; having the form of religion without the power.

This undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine and discipline, and the spirit with which they first set out.

John Wesley, August 4, 1786

This often-quoted statement by John Wesley is my personal touchstone Wesleyan quote for the ministry area I shepherd at Christ Church United Methodist—Wesley Fellowship Groups. I am charged with the spiritual task of assuring that small groups do not become simply a religious activity or an extension of church members' social calendars. One of the honing devices for such assurance is the Wesleyan/Methodist heritage of being a "people," a community passionate about keeping the assignment—following Jesus. Wesley suggests a relational pursuit of discipleship as he employs the pronoun "they" as the "people called Methodists." As heirs to this heritage, Christ Church is committed to being a church with an intentional vision to teach others to follow Jesus both in doctrine and discipline. In fact, prominently proclaimed in our vision statement and practiced as a value by our behavior is the congregational goal, "to disciple believers through Wesley Fellowship Groups."

Our small group model of discipleship is a direct descendant from the *Class Meeting* model of the Methodist church which cel-

brates an intentional care of the soul. I cherish this model and often reread the following passage, using my personal copy of the 1868 *Book of Discipline*, which records our heritage of international discipleship:

"When the people called Methodists began to form the United Society, first in Europe and then in America, it was very clear that a society is: 'a company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness—united in order to pray together to receive the word of exhortation and to watch over one another in love that they may help each other to work out their salvation.'" —*General Rules 1868 Discipline*

John Wesley creates an infrastructure for discipleship delivery called classes as a circle for faith formation: "According to their respective places of abode there are about twelve persons in each class; one of whom is styled the leader." (*Discipline 1868*)

This discipleship delivery system affirms that church buildings and church programs are non-essential for life in the Spirit. John Wesley understood that the power of religion is released in relationships. The critical building block of our Wesley Fellowship Groups is the intentional gathering of community based on affinity and desire. While affinity and desire can initiate a relationship, these two experiences cannot sustain a relationship in Christ without others in Christian community. Wesley understood immersion in doctrine and discipline as a faith-forming endeavor which requires community. As the Bible instructs us over and over again, we are to minister to one

another—*disciples make disciples*. The tandem of doctrine and discipline reminds us of the connectional nature of discipleship. Wesley's model of class meetings elevates the role leadership training has in the church.

One of the challenges of the leader of a class meeting was to inquire of each person in his class how his or her soul had prospered over the course of a week. Our Wesley Fellowship Group model is a living testimony of the leadership imperative to effective discipleship—*leaders model godliness*. The leadership caveat nestled in the opening quote is that form does not assure godliness. Godliness is the function of the Holy Spirit convicting us to experience God through His Son, Jesus Christ in redemptive ways.

The book of Acts teaches us that the early church was powered by an operating system called the Holy Spirit. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witness in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth." (*Acts 1:8*)

When Jesus spoke these words, He shared them in community with the Apostles who were still trying to understand the nature of the Lord's kingdom. Wesley understood the nature of the Lord's kingdom would be empowered by the Holy Spirit. Wesley's charge for us to hold fast to both doctrine and discipline is a call for the community of faith to be intentional about maintaining its power source—the Holy Spirit.

In order to avoid having only the *form* of religion, leaders must embrace their spiritual authority to introduce persons to the



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life-changing experience of transformation. Transformation for persons connected to our Wesley Fellowship Group Ministry is not an event. Transformation is a lifestyle. Transformation is multiplied in our ministry to one another.

At Christ Church transformed leaders and followers in our Wesley Fellowship Group Ministry fuel practically all of our efforts to relieve suffering. Our outreach ministries, which provide shelter for homeless families, build affordable Habitat for Humanity homes for the working poor, visit imprisoned men and women, and provide over 5,000 meals a year to kids living in poverty make generosity not only a virtue, but an expression of godliness. These ministries are all led by people who made the connection between religion and the Christian power source of the Holy Spirit. These ministries are led by people who refuse to allow their lives to have the form of religion without the power. **One hundred percent of our outreach ministries are led by persons in Wesley Fellowship Groups.** On average, 80 percent of our adult volunteers to a thriving children and student ministry are connected to a Wesley Fellowship Group. Our leadership base is multiplied by leaders who mentor others to trust in the power of the Holy Spirit, and thereby manifest their spiritual gifts for leadership in God's kingdom.

We honor John Wesley's passion for leadership development by creating ongoing opportunities for leaders to learn the significance of spiritual godliness. Our basic training for new leaders highlights spiritual concerns dear to John Wesley's heart. We ask questions such as:

- "Do you have regular Bible reading time with God?"
- "Do you desire to know your spiritual gift mix?"
- "Do you know your primary evangelical approach?"

By asking such questions of our leaders, we guard against becoming a dead sect. If one understands stewardship as a pathway to intimacy with God, we must not lose relational discipleship or spiritual spaces where honesty with God and others propels us to live in Christ. John Wesley modeled intimacy with God through discipleship and we dare not lose his passion for being fully available to God. □

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