A Fellowship Band Model for Contemporary Wesleyan Traditions in the United States

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Abstract

In his efforts to revitalize the eighteenth century Church of England, John Wesley implemented “fellowship bands,” groups of three to four joined together in accountability. Today, a successful United Kingdom initiative revitalizing bands, known as the Inspire Movement, is also revitalizing Christian communities. The question is thus - how should the Inspire model be implemented within the United States? To address this, I first provide an account of Inspire in the United Kingdom. Secondly, I survey four band models in the United States. Thirdly, I consider the socio-cultural differences between the United Kingdom and United States. Finally, I construct a proposal/curriculum for implementing the Inspire model within Wesleyan-America traditions. In regard to form, I conclude that a band model within the United States should incorporate a small group of consistent members and a repetitive agenda. In regard to content, I conclude there must be a shared theological and aspirational understanding centered upon communion with the missio Dei.
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PART I

INTRODUCTION
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Considering the Question

In the eighteenth century, John Wesley established *fellowship bands* – small groups of three to five who would join together in a bond of accountability. The utilization of these groups were essential within the beginning Methodist Movement in Britain, though with time this practice has disappeared almost completely. Within the contemporary context of England, there is an effort – known as the *Inspire Movement* – where fellowship bands are being employed once again. In fact, the practice is spreading throughout Britain, and is transforming communities of faith. Simultaneously, in the United States, the application of Wesleyan accountability practices has been limited to select models. Of these models, none has led to substantial change in Wesleyan traditions, such as the United Methodist Church. A question thus arises: *Given an account of the Inspire Movement model within Britain, a selective review of the models within the United States in the United Methodist Church, and an awareness of the social-cultural differences - how should the Inspire model be implemented within the United States?*

**Historical Background of the Fellowship Bands**

The eighteenth century was a rather harsh environment for the majority of those living in Britain. A sharp divide was present between social classes, in a manner that was both similar to and different from today’s reality. As Rupert Davies observes, “We today cannot easily understand how one [class] of the country could have shown such little knowledge of the way another [class] was living, or so little concern for its fate.”¹ Those with resources lived extravagantly, while those in the lower classes were barely surviving. This was a time when local communities were stressed by poverty, and gin drinking prevented births from exceeding

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The entire country lacked proper sanitation, clean water, developed educational systems, ethical legal systems, and proper housing. Roy Sturm notes that the Church of England during this period was not overly helpful to the vast lower class experiencing such conditions; rather than addressing the physical and spiritual needs of those in their care, the church actually appeared more concerned with the aristocrats. This led to many calling the Church of England, of the time, a form of “dead religion,” which lacked compassion for others. One of the results of this was a general populace who were spiritually thirsty for something deeper and more authentic.

**Historical Appearance of a Movement**

In 1729, students from Christ Church College at Oxford University sought to develop a spiritual group into which they could invest themselves. In this new group, they would meet weekly for prayer, scripture, and group accountability – an idea that eventually adopted the name *Holy Club*. In order to help them develop this group, one student by the name of Charles Wesley asked his brother John, an Oxford graduate, to return and serve as their mentor. The result was a group so revolutionary in their general methods that members often stood out and were taunted by their college peers.

When John Wesley’s time with the Holy Club came to a conclusion, Wesley traveled to Savannah, Georgia on a mission trip. Through this trip, Wesley came into contact with a group of Moravians, who inspired him with their deep piety and spiritual conviction. As Wesley

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5. From here forward, any reference to “Wesley” should be understood as identifying John Wesley, not his brother Charles.
developed a greater relationship with this group, he designed another intentional small group – which combined his experiences of the Holy Club with the Moravians’ rich history.\(^6\) This eventually led to a joint society being planted on Fetter Lane in London.\(^7\) Unbeknownst to Wesley, all of these unique experiences of designing small groups (from Oxford to the Moravians) were providing him with the necessary tools to start a spiritual movement.

According to a 1743 Methodist document, titled *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies*, one day eight or ten laypersons visited Wesley in London with the desire to come to know Christ more personally.\(^8\) Wesley began to meet with this handful of people on Thursday evenings to offer advice, accountability, and prayer. However, the number of people attending the weekly meetings began growing at such a rapid rate that the formation of the *United Societies* was necessary to provide spiritual care for all who were seeking direction. Founded upon the methodology of Wesley’s past experiences in developing small groups and the Moravian’s value for community – the United Societies were formed as a unique movement of small intentional faith communities. As an Anglican minister, Wesley’s expressed intent in developing such communities was solely to revitalize the Church of England as an extended ministry of the church.\(^9\) His aim was not schism; it was reformation.

**Structure of the 1743 United Societies**

As these societies began to develop all across Britain in places such as London, Bristol, Kingwood, and Newcastle, their structure was mostly uniform and methodical with few inherent

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\(^6\) The Moravians are a religious tradition extending back to German roots. Their foundational identity is found in their desire to return to more primitive Christianity and the use of rather methodical means. See the discussion in Roy Hattersley, *The Life of John Wesley* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 104-105.

\(^7\) Davies and Rupp, *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, 217.


differences. Each geographical society was split into different classes which were based upon residence, gender, and age. Each of these classes consisted of a maximum of twelve persons, of whom one was designated as the leader. Within this setting there was an expectation to live in accordance with an aspirational set of simple principles. Foundationally, a person was required to have “a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins.” Once a person claimed this intent, she/he would then be expected to develop spiritually through three simple rules. These rules consisted of Do No Harm (e.g. liquor, fighting, costly apparel), Do Good (e.g. visiting sick, clothing poor, food for hungry), and Stay in Love with God (e.g. prayer, worship, communion). In general, these United Societies were methodical in mannerism, pietistic in expectation, and had a deeply established system of mutual accountability. It was through these expectations that members began to mature spiritually and to develop an authentic concern for those in need.

Within these United Societies, there was a more intimate stratum of organization, which Wesley called fellowship bands. Every class would be invited to divide into this more intimate structure. According to Roy Hattersley, Wesley’s concept of bands was partially inspired by Peter Böhler, who was a Moravian minister from the group mentioned previously. The idea which Böhler suggested to Wesley was that, “followers were more likely to retain their commitment if the societies in which they worshiped were divided into smaller groups.” It was believed this was especially true if such intimate communities shared a common way of living a holistic life, or a set of aspirational principles.

11 Ibid., 70.
12 The reasons for the name “band” is not specifically known, however its origin can be traced back to the Moravians who first created similar groups titled “bandens.” See the history provided in Kevin M. Watson, Pursuing Social Holiness: The Band Meeting in Wesley’s Thought and Popular Methodist Practice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 23.
13 Roy Hattersley, The Life of John Wesley, 129.
Within the 1743 document, there were six outlining principles which established the structure of the fellowship band’s formation. In regard to their meeting schedule, it was clearly established that the band would “meet once a week, at the least.” Even more fascinating is that these bylaws provide modern scholars with an abbreviated understanding of a band meeting’s characteristics. Meetings would begin promptly with a time of “singing or prayer.” This would then proceed to a time of individual sharing, which would convey “freely and plainly the state of [their] souls, with the faults [they] have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations [they had] felt since [their] last meeting.” After one individual would share, they would invite the rest of the group to offer “as many and as searching questions as may be concerning their [own] state, sins, and temptations.” This would lead to a time of prayer for that specific person. Then the focus would shift to the next member of the group until all were attended to.\footnote{United Societies, *Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies*, 77.} This format would be repeated every week.

**A Question for the Contemporary**

As the Methodist movement transitioned from the eighteenth century into the early twentieth century, Wesley’s earlier notions of societies and classes integrated with more modern understandings of worship and small groups. However, what subtly disappeared as the movement transitioned into a collection of Wesleyan denominations was the practice of fellowship bands. Thus, fellowship bands are not a typical feature within most contemporary Wesleyan congregations – a reality that may be changing.

Today in the southwest of Britain, there is an initiative known as the *Inspire Movement* which strives to revive the practice of fellowship bands. In a previous study, I examined the
compositional, functional, and motivational components of this contemporary movement within Britain.\(^\text{15}\) What I discovered was a near-identical representation of Wesley’s eighteenth century model that is applicable to and advantageous for the modern church. The *Inspire Movement* is having a palpable renewing effect upon its participants in the U.K. Within the United States, there have been a handful of different attempts to revitalize the fellowship band model within Wesleyan traditions. However, none of these American initiatives have been as successful as the *Inspire Movement*. These American models, though, are sharply different than the *Inspire model’s* work; in fact, since they emerged in isolated pockets, they differ not only from the British model but also from each other in both their structure and content.

To date, no one has offered a preliminary survey of the different manners in which fellowship bands have manifested themselves within the context of the United States. In addition, no one has carefully considered the promises and perils of implementing the British *Inspire model* in America. There are many unanswered questions as to how initiatives within both contexts inform each other through best practices, and how British spiritual practices translate to the contemporary Untied States. I ask, therefore: \*Given an account of the Inspire Movement model within Britain, a selective review of the models within the United States in the United Methodist Church, and an awareness of the social-cultural differences - how should the *Inspire model be implemented within the United States*?\*

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\(^{15}\) In the fall of 2013, I received a Richter Grant Fellowship from North Central College (Naperville, IL) to complete a research project titled, “A Study of Contemporary Fellowship Bands in Britain.” I am incredibly appreciative to the Richter Grant Fellowship Committee for supporting that research with financial support, and to Dr. Perry Hamalis and Dr. Kristin Geraty for their enduring academic support in that previous project.
Exploring the Question: Methodology

This research consists of a phenomenological analysis whose findings will be employed to form a constructive proposal. The project will proceed through four components. First, I will provide an account of the form and content of the Inspire Movement within Britain. The source material for this component of the research will be taken from the extensive observations obtained through my previous project. In regard to form, the composition (how it is structured), functionality (how accountability is maintained), and implementation model offered by the Inspire Network will be considered. In regard to content, the theological and aspirational worldview (i.e. Way of Life) will be explored. Such a consideration of form and content will end in a recognition of the inherit strengths and weaknesses that the Inspire Movement model provides.

Second, since no survey of the contemporary Wesleyan accountability movements within the United States has yet been offered, I will provide a selective review of the main types of groups that currently exist. My survey analysis will consider four models that are found within the United Methodist tradition of the United States: the General Board of Discipleship’s Covenant Discipleship, Christ Church United Methodist Church’s (Ft. Lauderdale, FL) Wesley Fellowship Groups, Upper Room Ministries’ Companions in Christ, and Southwestern College’s Discipleship Program. These models do not represent an exhaustive account of contemporary Wesleyan accountability groups in the United States, though they were all developed from differing perspectives. The General Board of Discipleship’s model represents a global church agency attempting to increase local discipleship, while Christ Church UMC’s models represents a local congregation’s desire to value every congregant. The Upper Room’s model demonstrates the prowess that a publishing house can provide, which can be compared to Southwestern
College’s hope of creating a model for their undergraduate institution. Together, these models provide a representative sample of attempts to employ Wesleyan accountability groups in the United States. For each of these models, concise accounts will be given of the group’s form and content. Each considered initiative will additionally end in a discussion of their inherit strengths and the weaknesses. The sources used in analyzing these initiatives will primarily be the curricula and texts written by founding members.

Third, after having developed a descriptive appreciation for the Inspire Movement and similar movements within the United States, I will study the potential synthesizing of movements/initiatives across cultures. This will involve an examination of socio-cultural differences between Christian religiosity in the United Kingdom and the United States. There are two dimensions of this religiosity which will be considered – broader religious practices and the variables that have affected American social change movements in the last century.

Finally, given the results of the Inspire Movement model and the handful of movements within the United States, while still considering the socio-cultural factors present, the final section of the research will be the most significant portion – I will propose a new model for fellowship bands within the United States’ Wesleyan traditions, specifically focusing on the United Methodist Church. This section will also be supplemented by a curriculum, which aims to help United Methodist congregations initiate this model of fellowship band within their context.
PART II

THE INSPIRE MODEL
Preface

The Inspire Network is a movement currently spreading throughout the southwest of England, which seeks to revitalize John Wesley’s eighteenth century practice of fellowship bands. Dr. Phil Meadows, a Professor of Theology at Cliff College in Derbyshire, developed the idea for the Inspire Network through his academic work, with financial support from the Methodist Church in Britain. This foundational support allowed for the development of curriculum resources and coaches who established an extensive network throughout Britain. Due to the conditions of the original funding, this financial support from the Methodist Church concluded at the end of 2014. Despite the now-limited coaching staff, the movement has continued to grow as a successful fellowship band model that incorporates personal piety, ecumenism, and social change.16

Form

The form, or structure, of the Inspire model is almost identical to John Wesley’s published model from 1743.17 However, there are two subtle differences. The first is that the Inspire model meets at least once a month, while Wesley’s model requires that bands meet once every week. The second difference is that the composition and structure of the Wesley model is far more specific and detailed than the intentionally organic composition of the Inspire model. Otherwise, the Inspire model’s structure is strikingly congruent to Wesley’s 1743 model. In regard to composition, the Inspire model consists of three to four people who make a sincere

16 The following account of the Inspire Network’s fellowship band model relies heavily upon my above-mentioned work, “A Study of Contemporary Fellowship Bands in Britain.” The specific data that is employed in the following account comes from the compositional, functional, and motivational sections of the research. In that work, I came to the conclusion that while this model has room for improvement – it is a successful fellowship band model for contemporary Britain.
commitment to keep one another accountable. While all are Christians, it is not necessary that participants have identical worldviews (e.g. church denomination, political convictions). In fact, members are encouraged to learn from one another’s differences. Additionally, every band member takes an equal share in the leadership of the fellowship band – meaning that there is no member with exclusive responsibility for facilitating any of the material. The location of these regular meetings is often in a comfortable and quiet environment, such as a home or retreat center. It is often found that fellowship bands who embrace the freedom to meet less frequently – such as once a month – may meet for three hours at a time, while those who gather weekly may only meet for an hour.

In regard to structure, if there was an aspect of the Inspire model that unified all of the various fellowship groups – it would be the meeting forum itself. Every fellowship band adapts the model to fit their group dynamic; however, what follows is the generally suggested structure for the Inspire model. First, the meeting begins with a time of fellowship. This is the time in which band members catch up with one another. They might discuss current events, drink a cup of coffee, share book ideas, and so forth. The use of this fellowship time might appear unnecessary; however, it is essential as it allows band members to develop greater trust with one another and become better interpersonal communicators. Following this informal time of fellowship, the band enters a time that the Inspire model refers to as centering, which could be described as a time of impromptu worship. One band member may read a passage of scripture, another might offer a prayer, and then another may recall a song that they play through their phone. The significance of this impromptu worship is that it establishes the band meeting as a sacred space, in which persons are invited to be vulnerable and share the depths of their lived experience with one another.
After this period of worship has come to a conclusion, a single band member is focused upon during a time known as *sharing*. This member alone is invited to provide an honest account of her/his soul, specifically in relation to the Way of Life. The “Way of Life” is a theological-ethical vision for how band members are being invited to live their lives radically as Disciples of Christ.\(^{18}\) Beyond the Way of Life, conversation during sharing may also pertain to relationships with others, spiritual disciplines, major life decisions, vulnerabilities, and deep wrestling in relationship with God. Overall, this is simply a time for persons to share whatever topics are bothering them, especially those topics that may not be acceptable in any other context of a member’s life.

After the band member has concluded sharing the state of her/his soul, the band members who have been listening begin to dialogue with the one who shared, in a time known as *engaging*. The Inspire model is rather strict on how this process of engagement should occur. This is not a time for band members to offer counsel, advice, or solutions to another’s challenges.\(^{19}\) As one band member put it, “You know, I have been sitting on this for the last three years, so don’t give me an answer in five minutes.”\(^{20}\) From the Inspire coaches, the curriculum, and the individual band participants themselves – this conceptual point is made paramount. So rather than offering advice or solutions, pastoral support is encouraged within the fellowship band. Band members are pushed to encourage one another in being more spiritually-minded by being self-reflective and having others ask them how they are progressing on points they wish to improve.

After this time of engaging, the dialogue ends with a point of *commission*. This is the time in which band members surround the one who had just been focused upon by offering

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\(^{18}\) See following discussion on the Way of Life in the content discussion, p. 21.
\(^{19}\) For an extended discussion see Tyler Ward, “A Study of Contemporary Wesleyan Bands in Britain,” 20-21.
prayer for the individual. During this time, band members might mention passages of scripture, which they believe are helpful for that specific individual. This prayer not only serves as an act of solidarity with the band member and an act of seeking the will of God during the band meeting, but it also serves as an invitation for the band members to lift each other up in prayer throughout the week. After this time of commission, the focus shifts to another band member as they are asked to share, are engaged with, and then commissioned. This process continues to repeat until all three or four group members have shared.

In the Inspire network, a lot of external support is provided to individual fellowship bands. First, fellowship bands are often introduced into a local congregation, where the pastor or staff persons focus upon the progress and resourcing of the groups. Secondly, there are several Inspire coaches who apostolically travel throughout Britain and ensure that interested church leaders are well-trained in the employment of fellowship bands within local communities. And finally, there are a variety of teaching retreats and online resources that have been provided through the funding of the Methodist Church in Britain. However, with the expiration of the start-up funding at the end of 2014, it will be intriguing to see how these resources continue into the near future.

Content

Within the framework of the Inspire model, which has just been detailed, there is a heavy reliance placed upon the theological-ethical material discussed in the band meeting. There are three key pieces of content to be considered here – the Way of Life, the notion of accountability, and the implication of missio Dei.
Way of Life

The Way of Life is the aspirational and normative component of the Inspire model. The form that the Inspire model currently employs was developed by the leaders of the Inspire movement and establishes the tone of the movement, the construction of the fellowship bands, and the yearnings of band members. There is historic importance for such a Way of Life. Looking back to Wesley’s eighteenth century development of the United Societies, which encompassed the original fellowship bands, Wesley referred to three simple rules of Do No Harm, Do Good, and Stay in Love with God. For Wesley, these biblical principles served as the aspirational goals towards which early Methodists would dialogue. All of this was done in the hope of a more fulfilled life.

Within the contemporary Inspire Movement, this same aspirational component has formed its backbone. However, Inspire has titled this desired manner of living the “Way of Life,” and it is organized in a manner that differs slightly from Wesley’s original approach. The contemporary version focuses upon four principles, rather than three: Seeking Growth (e.g. seeking God, demonstrating God’s presence, leading others in God’s presence), Using Spiritual Disciplines (e.g. prayer, scriptures, communion), Sharing Fellowship (sharing spiritual life, exercising spiritual gifts, imparting spiritual wisdom), and Engaging in Mission (e.g. love neighbors, hospitality, caring gestures, sharing faith). The difference between the Wesley and Inspire aspirational models stems from the purpose of their composition. For Wesley’s three simple rules (i.e. Do Good, Do No Harm, Stay in Love with God), all three principals are active invitations – tasks that can be done and evaluated. Whereas, with the Inspire model, these four

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principles are four forms of relationships – in which one can be asked how they are in relationship to God (i.e. Seeking Growth), their spiritual disciplines, other Christians (i.e. Sharing Fellowship), and the world (i.e. Engaging in Mission).

The manner in which this material is most often broadcasted to individual fellowship bands is through the Inspire Network’s curriculum. In these resources, each principle is defined clearly and sample questions are provided as to expand upon the application of each principle. In fact, the bulk of the curriculum focuses upon establishing and elaborating upon this Way of Life. The reason that the material is so focused upon the Way of Life is that the direction and depth of the conversations which occur within a fellowship band are dependent upon this aspirational heading.

Accountability

As fellowship bands are receiving questions from their fellow band members, many of the conversations’ content becomes centered upon a principle of accountability. Defining this principle is critical to the success of an Inspire fellowship band. One might falsely assume that fellowship band accountability is accomplished through a mechanism of external behaviorism that pressures members to closely pursue a better way of living. However, such a regard for accountability is a dangerous definition, as it suggests a model that places social pressure on persons and removes personal autonomy from spiritual matters. Juxtaposed to this is the definition that members of the Inspire network have embodied: “Accountability is the place

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22 When my previous project was initiated, I was most interested in this sole concept of accountability, which occurs during the time of dialogue (Sharing and Engaging). Accountability was such a personally intriguing concept that I labeled my preliminary work under the pretense of “Wesleyan Accountability Groups.” Yet, one of the most significant realizations I concluded with that study is that my previous understanding of accountability were dangerous and amiss. In my previously errant mind, accountability was externally derived. However, as I began to interview band members, a healthier definition of accountability was offered. For further information upon this section, see Tyler Ward, “A Study of Contemporary Wesleyan Bands in Britain,” 22.
where I choose to give an honest account of how it is with my soul.” This is a sharply different understanding of accountability, one that takes away any external means and places the concept of accountability fully upon the person who is sharing with other band members. Band members are thus free to share the content for which they desire accountability. Through this approach, accountability in the Inspire model is more effective; as at the end of the week the fellowship band will be there to ask how one did on that which they sought accountability.

**Missio Dei**

Another critical component of the Inspire model is the manner in which band members recognize their role within larger society. This is more of a subtle thought that has permeated itself into all forms of the curriculum, especially due to the work of Philip Meadows. Missio Dei translates directly as “the work of God” or “missional God.” For the Inspire model, the notion is that God is not distant and unattached from the realities of this world. Rather, by exploring the missional facets of God’s character, the concept suggests that one comes to an understanding that God desires to do something absolutely incredible with humanity. It is in recognizing this theological truth that Meadows suggests one should consider their own role in this continued work of creation and renewal. As Meadows writes, “Through this divine invitation, we are enabled to be co-workers with God in our own salvation and in the salvation of others.”

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24 Philip Meadows, the founder of the Inspire Movement, wrote an article that best outlines the theological notions of the missio Dei. See Philip R Meadows, “Wesleyan Wisdom for Mission-Shaped Discipleship.” *Journal of Missional Practice* 3 (January 2014).
25 Ibid., 1.
one recognizes an invitation towards mission as a natural expression of discipleship.\textsuperscript{26} In several dimensions, this recognition is similar to the broader Christian notion that faith (i.e. relationship to God) leads to good works (i.e. mission). This recognition of the missio Dei is critical to the content of the Inspire model as it describes an end goal of mission, which arises out of vital piety. “The pursuit of holiness,” Meadows writes, “is not about withdrawing from the world, but being a Jesus-shaped and Spirit-filled presence within it, as the gospel takes flesh and touches lives, one work of mercy at time.”\textsuperscript{27} Thus, it is that the goal of focusing upon the Way of Life through a practice of accountability is not to become distant from the world, but to have a support network for social change.

\textit{Content in Review}

These three components – the Way of Life, a unique understanding of accountability, and the missio Dei – thus work together to form the content of the Inspire model. By reflecting upon the Way of Life one is provided with an aspirational heading. There is the unique sense of accountability, in which persons decide for themselves the content they will share. And then the theological understanding of the missio Dei, which encourages band members to see the goal of their time together as of becoming the greatest instruments of grace possible in the world. This is a powerful theological-ethical foundation.

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Ibid.}, 8.
In Review

At this time, the Inspire model continues to gain momentum throughout the southwest of the United Kingdom. Could it be equally impactful in the United States? In attempting to explore that question, there are four components of Inspire’s form and content that will be helpful to consider in the development of a new fellowship band model. The first is that the Inspire model’s form has been designed in such a manner that all band members can regard themselves as equal participants. Since there is no assigned leader, all band members (in theory) can make the fellowship band their own – they can suggest changes to the form and ensure that the environment is conducive to developing trust. Secondly, the Inspire model tactfully invites group members to discuss deeper content, into which they may not otherwise trek. This is accomplished through employing a common structure which encourages a safe atmosphere where persons can truly reflect upon the condition of their souls. Thirdly, these groups are focused upon making a difference in the world. The purpose of these groups is not an egotistical form of piety, but is focused upon joining the missio Dei (i.e. work of God). And finally, this model is simple and compact. It is a model that can be re-employed in varying contexts, as the common meeting structure and long-term goals provide autonomy for groups to make the practice their own.
PART III

SURVEY OF AMERICAN MODELS
Survey Introduction

In order to best approach the overarching question of how to implement the Inspire model within the United States, a selective review of the existing Wesleyan accountability models in America needs to be considered. This is necessary as it provides a contextual backdrop for which this model will be introduced. However, since such a survey does not yet exist, I offer the following review of four models that have tried to respond effectively to the spiritual and cultural reality of American Christianity. Each of these models comes from different perspectives, including a global church agency, local congregation, publishing house, and an undergraduate institution. The data within this analysis comes from the curricula and texts written by founding members of these efforts. This survey will consist of a content analysis of these efforts in regard to form and content. In regard to the form of the surveyed accountability models, the following two dimensions will be considered - the membership of the meeting structure and the unifying foci of the gatherings. Concerning the content of these accountability groups, three facets will be explored – the purpose for meeting, the tools that are essential for dialogue, and the goal that is being pursued.

Covenant Discipleship

The General Board of Discipleship (GBOD), a general agency of the United Methodist Church, provides a form of Wesleyan accountability group called Covenant Discipleship. This model originates in the 1985 work of a previous director within the GBOD, the Rev. David Watson, and is one of the more prominent efforts to revitalize Wesleyan accountability principles within the United States.
Form

In regard to member composition, the GBOD’s material advises that accountability groups consist of five to seven persons. There are no stipulations regarding gender – as it is even broadcasted that some exemplar groups are all men, some are all women, and many are both. In addition, there appears to be no instruction regarding additional similarities that should be sought in the construction of these groups. One point made is that most groupings should consist of persons from the same congregation, but occasionally the groups extend beyond such structures (especially in a multiple-point charge).²⁸

A paramount feature for Covenant Discipleship is the weekly hour-long gathering. Before any specifics can be raised regarding the flow of such a meeting, the leadership structure must first be explained for this model. A unique characteristic of Covenant Discipleship is that it has three different leadership roles that are well-defined. The first is that of group leader. All group members serve in this capacity at one time or another, as the role rotates between members from week to week. It is made clear, though, that nobody is required to serve in this role. The group leader has the responsibility of ensuring that one person is not monopolizing the meeting time and that all material is discussed within the allotted time. The GBOD thus recommends that the role be switched between members, as the group leader is often unable to relax and experience the full fruits of the practice.²⁹ The second role is of the convener, which is the contact person for the group and the “pastor to their fellow members.”³⁰ This is the individual who is a reliable liaison between the local congregation and the individual group. Additionally, this is the person who reports to the congregational contacts if there are additional resources needed or there are

²⁹ Ibid., 3.
concerns for persons’ health. And the third role is that of a *Covenant Discipleship Council*. For congregations in which there are multiple groups established, it is challenging for a church staff to best organize the Covenant Discipleship efforts alone. Thus, this council is often introduced to develop and resource individual groups. All of this structure is established to support the work of the weekly meetings.

The unifying focus of the gatherings is the covenant, which includes both fixed and variable components that are defined by the group in its formation. The covenant is composed of three parts. First, there is a preamble which states the purpose for meeting together as a group. A sample preamble which a group may decide to embrace is:

Knowing that Jesus Christ died for us and that God calls us to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, we desire to practice the following disciplines in order that we might know God’s love, forgiveness, guidance, and strength. We desire to make God’s will our own. With God’s grace and the support of one another we covenant to the following.\(^{31}\)

This statement sets the tone for the next component of the covenant, which consists of the individual clauses. These clauses are the items to which the group holds one another accountable, and selecting the right clauses requires an intensive process of discernment on the part of group members. All clauses fit within four specific categories, which will be discussed in greater breadth during the content portion of this survey. These four categories are Acts of Compassion (e.g. “I will spend one hour each week visiting a lonely person.”), Devotion (e.g. “I will keep a diary to plan my daily prayers.”), Justice (e.g. “I will express disapproval of racial, social, and sexual prejudice among my relatives and friends.”), and Worship (e.g. “I will attend worship each Sunday.”).\(^{32}\) The overall number of clauses in a covenant is generally eight to ten.\(^{33}\) Every

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\(^{32}\) Ibid., 1.

year it is suggested that the groups review their covenants.\textsuperscript{34} The last part of the covenant is the conclusion, which is a short statement of commitment to the practice. An example of a conclusion is: “Recognizing that there are times when we cannot live up to the standards we have set for ourselves, we covenant to support each other in an encouraging and constructive manner.”\textsuperscript{35} As will be made evident, this document is essential to the success of the Covenant Discipleship model.

The weekly meetings follow the same schedule every gathering, running about an hour. They begin with around five minutes of the group leader offering prayer, which may include scripture at the discretion of the leader. Then, the group reads from the covenant preamble in unison. After the space has been set through these acts, the group leader reads the first clause aloud and then responds on how their own life reflected that commitment throughout the week. When the leader finishes, she/he turns to the next person and asks her/him to share. After that member shares, the leader may ask individual questions concerning their response, or may continue on to the next member. After the first clause has been reflected upon, the leader reads the second clause, and the process continues until the last clause. After the clauses are finished, with five minutes remaining – the group decides who will lead the group the following week before closing in prayer.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{36} Steve Manskar, “Leading a Covenant Group Meeting,” \textit{Covenant Discipleship Connection}.
The theological-ethical substance of this accountability model includes several distinctive features. The first is the fundamental purpose that the model has for meeting together. An analogy that is often used to describe the Covenant Discipleship model is that meeting together serves as a weekly compass heading, in which members are able to reflect upon their lives and adjust their heading back towards Christ. The idea in this is that meeting together in itself is not an act of discipleship, but that by gathering and being reflective – members can ensure that the rest of their hours each week are more discipleship-focused.\(^\text{37}\) This analogy is founded in an even deeper regard that is held towards the term Covenant Discipleship. For this model, Covenant Discipleship consists of the three founding principles of covenant, discipleship, and connection. Covenant – that as Christian people who have taken baptismal vows, the notion of being bound to one another is not a foreign concept. Discipleship – that the goal of living a Christ-filled life is not to serve the self, but to become increasingly concerned for others. And Connection – that this journey of discipleship cannot be done alone, thus we must be bound together within covenant to live the most authentic life of Christly obedience.\(^\text{38}\)

Another dimension of the content for the Covenant Discipleship model is a set of theological-ethical tools or lenses by which groups examine the Christian life during the clause portion of meeting. The first is the process itself, which the movement adopts from the more ancient practices of catechesis, or of dialoguing between a questioner (catechist) and a learner (catechumens). The thought in a Covenant Discipleship group is that members can learn from one another by being asked agreed-upon questions from the covenant’s clauses. Thus, through this process the General Rule of Discipleship, which originates from John Wesley, grounds the

\(^{37}\) Covenant Discipleship Groups – An Introduction,” General Board of Discipleship.

particular group’s conversation. This guiding rule is as follows: “To witness to Jesus Christ in
the world and to follow His teachings through Acts of Compassion, Justice, Worship, and
Devotion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.” These are dimensions of the Christian life that
have purportedly been taken from scripture. Acts of Compassion are those acts that seek to
relieve the suffering of others, Acts of Devotion focus upon one’s personal practices of
commitment to God, Acts of Justice consist of actively advocating for others, and Acts of
Worship are joining together with others to praise God and God’s work. This tool thus serves
as a Wesleyan lens by which to analyze, communicate, and discuss persons’ spirituality within
the Covenant Discipleship group.

Another significant dimension of the content for this Covenant Discipleship model is
what the group is striving towards through meeting together. What is clear is that there are two
points in addressing this. The first is that the goal is to form leaders in discipleship – persons
who habitually are in contact with God’s sanctifying grace and are open to the transformation
that can come from such an interaction. This is for the hope of a Wesleyan understanding of
perfection, in that persons should be open to the transformation of God and that in them is found
the same heart (intention) as was found in Christ. The second point that these groups are
striving for is to be more missionally-shaped as a church community. They ask, “Does your
church exist for its own benefit, to meet its own needs? Or does your church exist for the world,

39 Covenant Discipleship Groups – An Introduction,” General Board of Discipleship,
40 “Sample Covenant Clauses,” General Board of Discipleship, http://www.gbod.org/resources/sample-covenant-
conclusions.
41 Steven Manskar, “Are we going on to perfection?” General Board of Discipleship,
http://www.gbod.org/resources/are-you-going-on-to-perfection.
to be a Christ-centered sign-community of [t]he coming reign of God?” That is the goal of Covenant Discipleship groups.

In Reflection

The Covenant Discipleship model is the American model that I have witnessed the most, across a variety of congregational settings. Several reasons for this model’s success can be identified. The first of which is the manner in which group leadership has been organized. Sharing the discussion facilitator role is beneficial, as every group member has an opportunity to be influential in the dynamic of the group. But rather than leaving communication between the congregation and Covenant Group to this same system of shared responsibility, this model has brilliantly placed one person in constant communication with the larger congregation. This ensures that groups are well-resourced and supported, which could otherwise become challenging. The second strength is in regard to the content being pursued. In the construction of the covenant, persons are invited to reflect upon what is currently missing from their spiritual life. Through this task they may recognize previously unexplored facets of their spiritual life and are provided the means to now consider such areas with great fervor. Although these are significant strengths, I do have several reservations about the Covenant Discipleship model. First, there is simply too much material to discuss within one hour. This is especially true when the GBOD recommends that covenant groups maintain eight to ten covenant clauses, which need to be reflected upon by every group member every week. My fear is that with this mass of material there is little room for depth. This also leads to a second concern in which I fear that this

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model will simply become a communal act of checking off a list (covenant). The limitation of time simply prevents discussion from being much more productive than such.

**Wesley Fellowship Groups, Christ Church UMC**

The Rev. Dick Wills, who later became a bishop in the United Methodist Church, has been a significant supporter of re-introducing accountability models into the life of the church. To the benefit of this study Wills has published a memoir capturing his structural and theological-ethical considerations for beginning Wesleyan Fellowship Groups at Christ Church United Methodist Church (Ft. Lauderdale, FL) in 1992. The catalyst for the bishop introducing such accountability groups was a trip he made to South Africa, where the Methodist Church has long had a culture of class meetings within its congregations. He was so inspired by what he experienced abroad that he transplanted the idea to Christ Church UMC.  

*Form*

In regard to the construction of Wills’s model, the goal is not to maintain small intimate groups. In fact, most groups consist of ten to fourteen people, and a chair is often left open for new members. There were even resources created so that all congregants were aware of the meeting groups, and provides their contact and demographic information. The demographics for these groups are often mixed genders, though most share similar age ranges. Many of these groups within Christ Church do happen to be older adults.  

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44 Ibid., 35-41.
45 Ibid., 42.
dimensions of the group meeting, and this person is often the one to have invited the original members to join the group. Those interested in serving in this leadership role are expected to have participated in a Wesleyan Fellowship Group for several years. As well, these leaders are expected to have “a heart for God, a love for people, a resourceful mind, a self-initiative posture, and a commitment to small groups.”

Unlike other accountability group models, Christ Church UMC has purposefully designed Wesleyan Fellowship Groups with no unifying component, other than the meeting schedule. For other models, there is at least a determined theological-ethical aspiration which serves as a unifying agent. However, Christ Church UMC’s concern is that such a unifying agent might be perceived as a top-down constraint, which might discourage an otherwise more organic structure. Therefore, the invitation of this model is for groups to develop relationships with one another – and through such to develop an aspirational heading and purpose for meeting. This means that every accountability group in this model looks vastly different.

Wesleyan Fellowship Groups are expected to meet for 90 to 120 minutes every week, often in the comfort of a member’s home. There is a common schedule that all of these groups are expected to maintain. For the first 20 to 30 minutes there is an opportunity for members to visit with one another and develop stronger bonds. There are often snacks served during this time. As this model is used within a larger congregation, this time is intentionally present in order to prevent congregants from getting lost within the mass of people at Christ UMC – so that every person has a group of people to which they can entrust themselves. After this time has naturally concluded, the group leader transitions the group into a time of formal welcome,

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46 Dick Wills, *Waking to God’s Dream*, 44.
47 Ibid., 42-47.
prayer, and introduction for new persons. After the space has been set, 20 to 30 minutes is spent responding to the question, “How are you doing this week?” This is when folks are invited to share where they are in their spiritual journeys, and to seek accountability from one another. As the group gets to know one another, this time of discussion begins to develop more vulnerable discussion and some groups develop a list of questions to be asked at every meeting. After every person has shared, the group then participates in 20 to 30 minutes of topical bible study. The curriculum is chosen by the leader (with final approval coming from the staff leadership of Christ UMC), and all of the resources are purchased by the individual members of the group. During biblical study, there is often direct application between the vulnerable topics that persons are sharing and the discussion that is facilitated during study. After the biblical discussion has come to a conclusion, the group enters into a time of worship and closing prayer in which members are advised to hold hands in a circle. Following there are more snacks served. That is the unified model that is practiced from week to week across the groups at Christ Church UMC.

**Content**

The theological-ethical underpinnings of the Wesleyan Fellowship Group model are also rather distinctive. To begin with, the purpose for meeting as a group is centered upon a congregational resonance with Acts 2:42-46, which reads:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of break and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were

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48 Dick Wills, *Waking to God’s Dream*, 41.
49 Ibid., 42.
50 Ibid., 43.
51 Ibid., 42.
52 Ibid., 43.
being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.\(^{53}\)

The intention in meeting within small groups and sharing life with each other rather vulnerably is to embody this more communal understanding of Christian living. The leadership of Christ Church UMC has understood that in order for persons to become more intentional in their faith, they need these smaller and more intentional communities.\(^{54}\)

There are four theological-ethical components that serve as cornerstones for the dialogue which occurs within a Wesleyan Fellowship Group. The first is of **fellowship**, that there is a need within all of us to be loved, as well as to love. Even if persons do not know how to respond to the mess that occurs within persons’ lives, simply being present and accompanying others on the journey is valuable. Secondly, is the practice of **study**, which underlies the rationale for why this form of accountability group does not spend all of its time focused upon confessing and discussing the intricacies of persons’ lives. The understanding for Wesleyan Fellowship Groups is that scripture is the best means for addressing the events of life. Thus in the time of study, biblical application towards the personal life is sought and folk theology is discouraged.\(^{55}\) Then there is the **accountability** piece itself, which takes time and deep relationships to truly facilitate. The thought is that as persons get to know one another better and seek to model the Christian texts they are exploring – they will begin to mutually model their lives after Christ together. The

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\(^{53}\) Acts 2:42-46 NRSV

\(^{54}\) Dick Wills, *Waking to God’s Dream*, 40.

\(^{55}\) *Ibid.*, 42.
fourth and final expectation is of *worship* and *prayer*, with the consideration that it is a good and proper mindset to seek God for the purposes of personal transformation.\(^56\)

Another content consideration for Wesleyan Fellowship Bands is that which they are striving towards. The aspiration for these groups is two-fold. The first is to be more intentional about their practices as Disciples of Christ. For Dick Wills, he explains this principle through an experience he had with Christ Church UMC. After having experienced a season of limited spiritual discipline (i.e. no prayer, limited compassion, and no personal study), Wills approached his congregation and apologized for his lack of spiritual leadership. And to his bewilderment – nobody cared. Dick Wills recognized that his congregation had also become lax in its concern for disciplines and openness towards perfection (i.e. to seek the very heart that was found in Christ). Thus, for Wesleyan Fellowship Groups the aspirational goal is to be a more involved participant of the Christian Church. The second aspiration, which is intertwined with the former, is to be more missional and outreaching. For persons to not only go out into the world for the purposes of caring for others, but to actually develop the inner compassion to do such works. These two thus act as theological-ethical aspirations within this model.

**In Reflection**

Wills’s model is rather intriguing to study, especially when one considers the influence that it could have upon the future design of ecclesial structures. The strength of his model is that it ensures every congregant the opportunity to feel as though she/he can relate more closely to other members in the congregation, via the fellowship group. One of the challenges within current congregations is integrating new persons fully into the life of the church. By focusing the

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\(^{56}\) Dick Wills, *Waking to God’s Dream*, 43.
crux of congregational life upon a class meeting of ten to twelve members, a fascinating and hopeful model emerges for integrating persons more successfully into the life of a larger congregation. However, there are several points of concern that I have for this model, which might even explain this model’s limited success in other congregations. The first critique is that there are no size constraints to the groups. Ten to fourteen persons may simply be too many to have deep and consistent conversations regarding spirituality, especially when others are always welcome to join into this model. This setting is not favorable to an environment of trust and vulnerability. Secondly, the leader of the group is not participating with other members, but rather is qualified to serve in this position of authority. This power imbalance might prevent other persons from claiming the experience as their own, leading them to become passive within the experience. And finally, Wills’s model is based upon a top-down initiative on the part of the congregational leadership to create smaller communities of faith, which seems to be more highly concerned with having the structure present than with an aspirational goal. This might inhibit how successful this model would thus become as a movement.

**Companions in Christ, Upper Room Ministries**

The Companions in Christ model is one of the more rigidly structured groups that will be considered in this survey. Its composition was pioneered by Stephen D. Bryant, who was a publisher for Upper Room Ministries, a publishing house serving the United Methodist Church. As this accountability model was developed and tested in local congregations all throughout the United States, it began to take a new and solidified structure under the guidance of publisher Marjorie Thompson. In its current form, Companions in Christ is a 28-week resource that challenges participants to revitalize their faith through an intensive curriculum.
One of the significant attributes about the Companions in Christ model is that the structure is almost entirely dependent upon the curriculum; however the substance from week to week is constantly changing. The developers of this model thought that by structuring the curriculum in a 28-week cycle with daily and weekly commitments – one’s life could be most guided towards spiritual transformation through being challenged to consider topics and incorporate that content into one’s life through practical means. In regard to the composition of each group, it is suggested that groups consist of six to twelve members. The consideration in this size is an attempt to follow the traditional understandings of a Wesleyan class. Within these groups, there is one leader who guides the group through the curriculum, challenges group participants in their application of the material, and serves as the liaison between the group and the larger congregation. The curriculum specifically asks for leaders that are familiar with a variety of prayer styles, well-versed with scripture and its influences upon faith, comfortable with silence, attentive to the movements of the Spirit, recognized as a spiritual leader by peers, and have rapport with small groups in the past.  

The unifying component of this model is the detailed curriculum, on which the groups depend for their rhythm and communal development. The pattern which is employed by this curriculum is of three parts. The first is a reading of approximately four pages for each group member at the beginning of each week. This reading introduces and frames the particular theme (e.g. intercessory prayer) that will be discussed. Then for five days of the week, participants are challenged with a daily practice (e.g. praying whenever hearing a siren). At the end of the week,  

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the group meets together to discuss the reading, daily practices, and to have discussion around a set of discussion points that are contained within the curriculum. Thus it is that in this ever-changing group environment, the fact that the curriculum is there to guide the process is the only constant throughout the experience.  

One dimension of this structure which needs to be detailed is the layout for the weekly group meeting. The exact structure of every group meeting is articulated with time instructions in the leader’s guide for that week. The typical pattern is as follows. For the first ten minutes, there is a time of opening in which participants are welcomed by the leader into the space. This time of coming together is a combination of fellowship and informal worship. A pivotal question considered during this time is, “What are some of the things you have prayed for this week? After this time has come to a conclusion, the leader begins to share their personal insights from the week – specifically in regard to God’s presence in different situations, the reading material, and their attempts at the daily practices. After the leader has finished, she/he then invites the next person to share. In preparation for this time, participants are encouraged to keep a daily journal. Everyone is encouraged to actively listen and respond with questions. When everyone has concluded sharing their insights from the week and received feedback from one another, there is a break for ten minutes. There are often snacks and refreshments served during this time. As the group comes back together, the leader uses the highly structured questions from the curriculum for deeper exploration of the upcoming week’s topic. There is often dialogue and guided practice incorporated within this time. This period of study and exploration typically lasts forty-five minutes. As this comes to a conclusion, there is a period of closing worship. There is a hymn sung (as suggested from the curriculum for that week) and then everyone is invited to celebrate.

the ways in which they have experienced God’s presence throughout the group meeting. Afterwards, there is a song or recitation of a benediction that is held in significance by the group.\textsuperscript{60}

\textit{Content}

The foundational purpose for meeting in a Companions in Christ group is to develop a deeper appreciation for God in the present. It is to take those who have not fully worked out what they believe or how to model their life after Christ’s own life – and to ask foundational questions. It is to take persons who are nominally religious and challenge them to no longer be passive with matters of faith.\textsuperscript{61} They are invited to see their faith as that which is not reserved to passive participation in worship, but as something which can change persons’ lives.

This is accomplished through discussing five core concepts within the twenty-eight weeks of the curriculum: Embracing the Journey (i.e. exploring the grace of God and spiritual growth), Feeding on the Word (i.e. meditating on and praying with scripture), Deepening our Prayer (i.e. guided experience of different prayer forms), Responding to Our Call (i.e. vocation and call), and Exploring Spiritual Guidance (i.e. receiving spiritual advice from one another after the 28 weeks). After the twenty-eight weeks, groups are invited to consider how they will continue forward with the bond that they have established with fellow participants based upon this last topic of exploring spiritual guidance.

Throughout the twenty-eight weeks, there are five specific tools that shape the manner in which material is discussed as a group. They intertwine with the structure itself and are known within the model as the “five gifts.” The hope in these gifts is that if participants walk away from

\textsuperscript{61} “About,” \textit{Companions in Christ}, http://companions.upperroom.org/about.
this experience with nothing else – then at least they will have these five gifts adopted into their Christian life. These are the elements that are subtly or outright pursued during every weekly meeting. The first is the gift of *Spiritual Practices or Disciplines*, in which members are challenged to maintain a daily practice of prayer, scripture reading, meditation, and reflection. The understanding is that these practices are most necessary for one to be open to the Spirit’s movement.\(^2\) Next is the gift of *Journaling*, for the purposes of connecting the inner and outward journeys. The recognition is that persons are constantly changing, but they do not recognize the change that they are experiencing because they have no point of reference to where they have come from. A journal can thus assist in the development of personal reflection and communal dialogue about the most intimate of spiritual development.\(^3\) Third is developing an appreciation for studying *scripture* as a gift for the Christian life. That by developing an appreciation for the many different means of reading scripture and understanding its rich context, the ways in which Christians live can be founded more purposefully upon a biblical narrative.\(^4\) The fourth gift is to develop *Spiritual Friendship*. By joining together with other Christians, persons might experience spiritual direction, guidance, and friendship that could help them better notice the movements of the Holy Spirit. Not by receiving problem solving or therapy from peers, but rather to find God’s hand in the midst of an issue.\(^5\) And the last gift is of *Befriending Your Vocation*, which is an invitation to re-envision how persons see their role within society so that every task is an opportunity to share the love of Christ with others. These gifts inform the

\[^3\] Ibid., 209-210.
\[^4\] Ibid., 210.
\[^5\] Ibid., 211.
group’s conversation, and their continued use shapes the persons who are formed through the practice of meeting together.66

The Companions in Christ model strives to create persons who are more attuned to the yearnings of God, or who listen to God more. The thought is that by creating a space and life practice that is focused upon listening to the Divine, persons might be shaped by that which is greater than their own life. Secondly, the model holds that such listening will lead to persons that reflect upon the application and implication of their faith in the context of daily life. The hope is that each person might seek after justice and adopt lives of charity, with the expectation that persons will develop the expectation to be personally transformed by Christ.67

In Reflection

The Companions in Christ model has much to offer this survey, especially since it comes from the perspective of a publishing house within the United Methodist Church. In reflecting upon this model, there are several strengths, the first of which is the shear bulk of theological-ethical content that is discussed throughout the 28-week course. By studying and meeting together in an accountability structure, this model promises to help members appreciate a greater variety of facets in the Christian life. An additional strength is that the curriculum provides an abundance of theological questions and discussion points for the weekly meetings. This enhances the dialogue concerning the vulnerable dimensions of one’s spiritual life, as persons are invited to consider the material through different lenses. Yet, there are several concerns about this model. The first is that the structure may be constrained by the curriculum, as it may not be malleable enough to assist with life events. In a situation in which persons are trying to do the

weekly readings and daily challenges, the focus is upon a specific dimension of the Christian life. Therefore, the model’s accountability may not truly be concerned with the state of one’s soul, but may be more concerned about whether one is employing the material. Additionally, the material is simply so comprehensive and in-depth that I fear persons would become overwhelmed by the content. This is not to underestimate the capacity of contemporary disciples, though it is to question whether persons feel that they are able to stay fully involved in the process. My fear is that this model would make it too simple for persons to become passive observers, who simply take in the material but do not dialogue with others or consider how the content can actually have an effect on one’s life.

**Discipleship Program, Southwestern College**

The final accountability group that will be considered for the purposes of this survey is a model that comes from Southwestern College in Winfield, Kansas, which is a United Methodist undergraduate institution. They employ what is known as the Discipleship Program. This was originally developed by Rev. Dr. Steve Rankin, but has subtly been altered by the campus ministers who have followed in his footsteps. It is important to note that what makes this program unique is that the students who participate in this program are offered academic credit, which culminates into a “Discipleship” minor.68

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68 All of the data for this survey has been compiled from two phone interviews with the current chaplain of Southwestern College. Molly Just, phone interviews by Tyler A. Ward, September 9 and December 17, 2014.
Form

For those students who decide to enter the Discipleship program, they are placed within a Covenant Group of 10-15 persons. The program itself is rather exclusive in that there is only one Covenant Group per class level, with four groups for the entire college. These groups stay together as the same set of peers for all four years of undergraduate studies. In order to make these groups function effectively, there are three leadership roles within this model. The first is the Covenant Group Leader, who is a student that organizes the logistics and content for the weekly meetings. This person determines worship components, how much material will be covered, and whether external resources need to be consulted to discuss the material. Then there are Covenant Group Pastors, whose task is to provide the theological-ethical foundation for each group. These are local United Methodist clergy who invest in the same Covenant Group for the four years of their existence. This pastor’s role is to attend every weekly meeting, to challenge students with theological-ethical questions, to flesh out content as requested by the student Group Leader, and to ensure that the groups are staying true to United Methodist doctrine. Overseeing the entire program is the Campus Chaplain, who stays in communication with the Group Pastors, provides resource materials for the groups to study, challenges groups to take risks in the material they study/practice, and organizes larger gatherings for the entire Discipleship Program.

There are two unifying elements within the Covenant Groups that bring the students together in their dedication each week. First is the academic credit which students receive from Southwestern College. These students have made a commitment to be challenged for the sake of intellectual and spiritual development. Though, the continued commitment must be maintained to uphold for their grade. The second unifying element is a mantra that has been adopted from
the words of Charles Wesley – “Let us unite the two so long divided, knowledge and vital piety.”

No matter what material is being studied, this content finds its way into the center of the conversations. Persons are being invited to not only learn from the academic setting about their tradition, but they are being challenged to consider what that truly means for every dimension of their daily life.

Every week, Covenant Groups meet for two hours during a time of their choosing. They are required to meet during this two hour period in order to receive credit from the college. It is the responsibility of the Covenant Group Leader to find the meeting time for the term. Rather similar to the Companions in Christ model, each Covenant Group selects a reading to study throughout the week and then discusses individual reflections during the next meeting. In regard to a particular agenda for the weekly meetings, these Covenant Groups are unique in that there is no agenda forced upon the individual group. Rather, they are encouraged to develop a rhythm for the weekly meeting that is most organic for that particular group. In the end, though, groups are expected to incorporate three components within every weekly meeting.

The first is prayer. Members are encouraged to come to the space that is the weekly meeting in a prayerful manner. The expectation in this is not only that the meeting opens and concludes with prayer, but also that the Divine should actively be consulted within the practice of meeting together. Secondly, every meeting is expected to incorporate study led by the Group Leader. This is often founded upon the readings that the group is sharing in, however this could also be to study more topical matters that have come to the attention of the group. The Covenant Group Pastor is encouraged to ensure that this study is rigorous and orthodox. The last requirement for weekly meetings is accountability itself. There is recognition that all within the group have room to grow and develop as Disciples of Christ. Thus the invitation for students is
to be upfront and honest about their thoughts regarding the content that is studied, and their progress with daily challenges. What is found within this model is that students become far more vulnerable in their sharing as time goes. These three components – of prayer, study, and accountability – are evident in every weekly meeting, however beyond this the group is allowed to own the time and shape it in the manner they see fit.

Content

There are many theological-ethical considerations that determine how conversation is held within this program. One of the most telling of these is the purpose for meeting in Covenant Groups, for which there are two answers. The first is that students sign up for the Discipleship Program because they seek to be intentional about their faith in Christ and to explore practices they have never considered before. This in itself is a highly qualified point of purpose for meeting in these groups. However, through doing this program for over a decade – the institution has recognized the importance of meeting in these groups for the sake of staying healthy in the midst of academic tasks. The recognition from the college’s perspective is that students overcommit themselves. Thus, the college has recognized that it actually benefits the health and work of their Discipleship students, by requiring them to tend to their spirituality and providing them with access to the resources necessary for growth.

There are certain resources that are always required reading for certain years. For first-years, Bishop Dick Wilke’s “Disciple Bible Study” is always used as the reading resource, while sophomore and junior years always study James Bryan’s trilogy the “Apprentice Series.”

are both resources that require participants to be actively engaged in the content, such as with
daily challenges. All additional readings chosen throughout the year are made in consultation
with the Campus Chaplain.

The underpinnings of the material that is discussed within these groups can be
summarized as commitment, orthodoxy and respect. The first point of commitment recognizes
the significance of simply being present at weekly meetings. A well-known phrase that is
engrained within the groups is actually of Rumi: “If you are here unfaithfully with us, you’re
causing terrible damage. If you’ve opened your loving to God’s love, you’re helping people you
don’t know and have never seen.” The recognition is that by simply showing up and opening
one’s posture in willingness to engage with the content a person benefits their self and the group.
This also recognizes that if members are not fully investing themselves into the life of the group,
then they are doing a disservice to the covenant that is held together. The second consideration of
orthodoxy is that there is heavy oversight provided by the college in which materials are able to
be discussed by groups. This stands in tension with the flexibility that is otherwise provided for
organically structuring the group. The positive to having such oversight is that groups are
challenged in ways that do not deviate from the larger Wesleyan doctrine; however this also
limits the materials to which the group is exposed. And finally is the recognition that respect
must be given to all members of the Covenant Group. In a setting in which the very foundations
of discussion are flexible and free-flowing, the Campus Minister made it clear that tensions do
develop. This is where John Wesley’s understanding of Christian Conferencing comes into
greatest importance. The thought of this concept is that although persons may disagree with
those with whom they are engaging in conversation, as a Christian people we are called to

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Trust, 2013), 3195-3219.
respond out of a place of love for one another. These three components thus are central to whatever material is discussed by the group – commitment, orthodoxy, and respect.

The Discipleship Program strives to meet students where they are and to grow Disciples of Jesus Christ. In this, becoming a disciple is recognized as a deeply challenging task, one that requires students to make sacrifices while caring for others above the self. Therefore, the model also aspires to be influential within the vocational decisions of those who have gone through the program. So that no matter where persons end up in life, the may see their role as an opportunity to engage in servant leadership.

In Reflection

This is definitely one of the more unique models, as it takes place within the context of a campus ministry. A great strength of this model is the use of Charles Wesley’s challenge, “Let us unite the two so long divided, knowledge and vital piety.” Being on a college campus can be an opportunity to do more than simply receive a mass of academic training, and this model is an invitation for students to be holistically challenged by the academic material. An additional strength from this model is that persons are given an opportunity to participate in this program for an entire quadrennial. However, there are also several concerns when it comes to Southwestern College’s model. First, the program is limited to only a small number of students of every year, which I fear makes the program rather exclusive in comparison to the larger campus community. Secondly, I find it challenging that there is a pastor who oversees the group, for the power imbalance may exclude a diversity of voices. In this I mean that if a pastor has a more progressive voice, and there are more traditional voices in the group, it may be possible that such traditional voices may not feel as though they can fully contribute into the life of the
group, or vice versa. A third concern relates to the credit that is received by students, for it may get to a point in which students are not seeking spiritual possibilities. Similarly, students may feel as though they cannot remove themselves from the group, as they would lose credit.

**Conclusions of the Survey**

Across the survey of American Wesleyan accountability groups, there were four factors that seemed conducive to the vitality of these models. The significance in labeling and defining these factors is to transpose better the Inspire model into the American context. The first two conducive traits are in regard to form. First, the models that have a *larger structure for appeals and support* (e.g. congregation, network) appeared to be more prepared for long-term group dynamics. For there comes a time in the life of any group in which there is going to be disagreement or uncertainty concerning how to best employ and embody a spiritual practice involving accountability. Three of these models (i.e. Dick Wills, Companions in Christ, Southwestern College) set this forefront within their structure by resourcing and connecting groups to a larger network. A second conducive trait is that most of these models attempted to make the practice one of *mutual accountability and equal group dynamics*. With the exception of Dick Wills and Southwestern College, the other models took incredible precautions (e.g. rotating facilitation roles) in order to ensure that this practice truly is a setting in which all persons can feel safe and vulnerable.

The third and fourth conducive factors concern the content of the accountability model. To start with, it became apparent that the models can be greatly benefited by an *aspirational theology*, or something that is calling the work of the accountability group forward. This was most evident in GBOD’s work of a covenant; however this was not clearly present within the
other three models. And finally, it was evident that it was conducive for these accountability groups to be aimed at *developing a life practice*. Although the approaches were rather different, the models were attempting to establish a pattern of reflecting upon one’s spiritual life and discerning where spiritual growth was being welcomed. In GBOD’s work it was the work of creating a covenant and staying accountable to it, and for Dick Wills it was about getting together as a group of fellow Christians for mutual support. For Companions in Christ this was about becoming familiar with and attempting new spiritual practices, and for Southwestern College it was about combining “knowledge and vital piety.” All of these accountability efforts aim at gradually perfecting a spiritual practice. Thus, all four of these – having a larger structure for appeals, practicing mutual accountability and equal dynamics, focusing upon an aspirational theology, and developing the model as a life practice – are encouraging signs for the potential of translating the Inspire model to the United States.

While the American models revealed several variables that appear conducive to the development of a Wesleyan accountability model, there were several variables that may be detrimental to such development. It is my understanding that these following points have inhibited the growth of the surveyed models within the United States, and thus should be avoided in the design of a new model for the United States. A few pertain primarily to the form of the groups. The first is that some of these models simply include *too many members than can be productive for collaborative group conversation*. With more than six persons in the group, my reasoning is that there are likely members that will begin to become quiet participants of the conversation. This concern was evident in the models from Dick Wills, Companions in Christ, and Southwestern College. A second variable that is detrimental to group development is that these models need to stray away from *structures that are not malleable* enough for discussion on

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71 Charles Wesley, “Hymn 473” in *Methodist Hymnal* (Methodist Church, 1889).
the matters of one’s life. This was a concern that became evident in the Companions for Christ model, in which so much material is being covered and thus the curriculum has become rigid and less able to address life’s occurrences. And a third non-conducive variable is that these models need to ensure that their construction is not affixed upon a system in which participants are punished if they do not fully engage within the practice. This is a scenario that was demonstrated by the Southwestern model, in which there could be a loss of academic credit for students that were not fully engaging. Such a structure could lead to circumstances in which a participant does not want to fully engage in the practice, but feels a guilt or obligation to continue attending. Dependent upon the leader of such a group, such a structure could also lead to a lack of diversity in thought. This was most evident in the Southwestern College model, in which students receive academic credit and the chaplain holds them accountable to participating.

Additionally, there were a few detrimental characteristics in relation to the specific content of these American models. First, some of these groups simply hoped to accomplish too many objectives within the time that is set aside for group meetings. Specifically, the GBOD and Companions in Christ model set such high expectations for the quantity of objectives to be completed that there appeared to be a lack of intimacy within this model. Due to the recommended eight clauses that have to be reviewed in a GBOD group meeting, for example, meetings could become simply an occasion to go through a checklist – as opposed to a developmental conversation and dialogue about the state of one’s soul. A final detrimental characteristic that was evident in the American models is the deeper structure that is not being capitalized upon. Dick Wills and Southwestern College have failed to trek deeper into the exploration of one’s soul, by limiting the material discussed and accountability that is had to the
theological material, rather than reflecting back upon how persons are continuing to apply such material into their daily lives.
Part IV

Sociological Considerations
Sociological Considerations

In the preceding section, I suggest that the Inspire model has more promise than the four existing models in the United States. However, in order to appropriately translate the British Inspire model into the United States, there are two sociological considerations that cannot be ignored: the first is the difference in the religious practices of both nations, and the second is the organizational variables that have been found to help with similar movements based within the United States.

Religious Practices

To explore the contextual differences between both nations, it helps to consult the World Values Survey (WVS). Since the WVS presents the collected data in raw form, I will draw from the helpful work by Pippa Norris and Ronald Ingleart, Sacred and Secular, which has taken the raw data from the WVS and interpreted it in order to illustrate national religious differences. While these findings are not conclusive, they do provide a contextual perspective which identifies relevant factors when attempting to translate religious practices from one culture to another.

Norris and Inglehart’s interpretation of the World Values Survey concludes that the United States and the United Kingdom share several religious characteristics. To begin with, they are both considered Protestant nations, for that is the religion held by the majority of their

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72 As stated by the World Value Survey’s official website: “The WVS is the largest non-commercial, cross-national, time series investigation of human beliefs and values ever executed, currently including interviews with almost 400,000 respondents. Moreover the WVS is the only academic study covering the full range of global variations, from very poor to very rich countries, in all of the world’s major cultural zones” (www.worldvaluessurvey.org).
citizens.\textsuperscript{74} This reality makes sense within the historical development of America, as Protestant Christianity was brought to America by immigrants from countries like Britain. In fact, the Wesleyan traditions may exemplify this sharing of religious ideals between nations. Secondly, in analyzing this worldwide data – there is a strong disapproval of authoritarian leaders and an approval of democratic ideals within both contexts. Thus, the bedrock of these two contexts is fundamentally similar, for they share a history and set of leadership values. However, in what follows it will be made evident that there are three differences which create differences between these two pluralistic nations in regard to religion.

First, Norris and Inglehart observe that religion is more highly participated in by those in America, as compared to Britain. There are a few different statistics which make this clear. Foundationally, from 1947 to 2001, the United States has had an almost constant 94\% of the sampled population who believe in the existence of God, while the United Kingdom has had a decrease in this belief from over 77\% in 1947 to 61\% in 2001.\textsuperscript{75} Secondly, the United States has double the weekly religious participation as compared to the United Kingdom. In America, 46\% of the sample population said they attended worship weekly, whereas Britain had 14\% attending weekly.\textsuperscript{76} Highly correlated to this data on religious participation, these scholars also found that persons in America reported to pray between once to multiple times every week, on average; whereas persons in Britain prayed only several times per year.\textsuperscript{77} The significance of these statistics is that persons in America seem to be participating more in religious activities, as compared to their British counterparts. Since participating in religious activities is a more

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{74} Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, \textit{Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide}, 46.} \\
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 90.} \\
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 74.} \\
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 85.}
familiar action for Americans, this may make any form of Wesleyan practice significantly easier to adopt into the American context.

The second difference between the United States and the United Kingdom is that religious values are more embedded within the culture. Norris and Inglehart analyze how values on various issues are determined, on a spectrum between traditional values to secular-rational values. What they discover is that the United States is more influenced by traditionally Protestant values, whereas the United Kingdom is more influenced by secular-rational values. It must be noted these values were not polarized from one another, yet they were significantly different. Another dimension of this is that both nations are pluralistic when it comes to religious ideas; however it appears that Protestant voices are most influential within the traditional voices that were being considered.\footnote{Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, \textit{Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide}, 239.} This is significant because in the United States it was found that more conservative thoughts were more correlated to religious belief.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 206.} It could thus be said that religion is having a significant influence upon the culture of the United States, as opposed to the United Kingdom. This makes sense as those who do not conform to the religious majority can feel pressed to do so. All of this is relevant for the development of a fellowship band model, as religion is often brought into more spheres of American life, as compared to British life.

A final point made by Norris and Inglehart is that existential insecurity heavily defines the religiosity of the United States. These scholars define greater existential insecurity as a culture in which more meaning-based questions are considered. The general phenomenon follows the principle that existential security increases with the development and affluence of a nation. However, Norris and Inglehart suggest that the United States may be more insecure existentially, as there is great socioeconomic inequality. They recognize that America is nation
marked by socioeconomic inequality, racial inequality, gender inequality, and limited social mobility. All of this creates such a place of inequality, even within the construct of a Postindustrial nation, that there exists existential insecurity. Persons are more prone to ask question such as, “What is the point to this life if I am experiencing such difficulty?” The World Values Survey sheds light upon this notion. Within the United States, where inequality is more prevalent, 49% of the sample population was seeking for the meaning of life in 1981 as compared to 58% in 2001. This is almost a completely different predicament to that which is occurring in Britain, in which there was a decrease in those asking this question from 33% to 25% during the same period. The statistics surrounding this question regarding existential security is astounding, for it depicts a tale in which American inequality in which persons are more prone to ask existential and religious questions. This is beneficial for the introduction of fellowship bands within America, as it depicts a situation in which persons are more motivated and drawn towards asking religious questions and seeking after something deeper in life.

Thus Norris and Inglehart provide a picture for the American religious context that is far more fertile than that of the United Kingdom. This is even before seriously considering the context of the United Methodist Church. Using the World Values Survey, they have depicted a religious context that is more highly participated in, more deeply embedded within the development of personal values, and more motivational towards the inquiring of religious questions. Although such material does not account for the specifics of individual persons and individual circumstances, this information does provide a context that is friendlier towards the development of religious ideas and actions.

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Another question that would be beneficial to explore in the future is the doctrinal awareness that the citizens of both the United Kingdom and the United States possess. This question would be significant as it would have a direct influence upon the amount of underpinning theological material that will need to be discussed within the fellowship band curriculum. At this time, there is insufficient scholarship to address this question. This is due to the lack of scholarship in which Wesleyan persons are comparatively sampled in both nations and asked if they could articulate their beliefs.  

Organizational Variables Affecting Adoption

Another sociological question relates specifically to - what are the variables which will encourage and inhibit a new fellowship band model’s adaptation into the organizational structure of an American organization. Two coinciding variables come from an analysis of American movements, whereas a third variable comes specifically from an analysis of the United Methodist Church.

Participatory Democracy and Structure

The first two coinciding variables come from Francesca Polletta’s work, “Freedom is an Endless Meeting.” In brief, this work discusses the evolution of social organizations within the United States throughout the twentieth century. Mentioned in this analysis are multiple faith-based movements that stand up against racial segregation and gender equality. These are

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81 This missing scholarship would be similar to the work of Christian Smith and Melina L. Denton, in which he asked youth from different faith traditions to articulate their beliefs. Such a methodology, being employed in the both US and UK, would help to explore the question of doctrinal literacy. Christian Smith and Melina L. Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
beneficial to study for this project, because the mass of organizational experiments during that time presented several social lessons that are helpful for the development of a new fellowship band model. Additionally, both activist-oriented group and holy-oriented groups consists of a group of equals that are pursuing social change through their selves. The first variable which Polletta discusses to great length is the importance of recognizing participatory democracy within the structure of such organizations. Polletta has come to understand this construct as one of the greatest developments from the social experimentation that occurred during this period. For this principle held that the perspectives of all on a term can be beneficial on multiple levels for furthering the work of the group. This accomplishes a few beneficial features for the sake of the group. The first is that it makes every individual’s contribution to the group more significant, as each person feels as though their work is more valued which leads that person to often become a more long-term resource to the group’s task. Secondly, when every person feels as though they are more involved in the decision making process of a group, it was found that they were more motivated to tell others about the work that is taking place. This can often take a small movement and create an expansive network of others who are persuaded by team members to become passionate about the topic. And finally, a participatory democracy empowers groups to think more creatively about the challenges that are before them. All three of these notions are beneficial to the development of a new fellowship band curriculum, as the Inspire movement held high importance upon the notion that all group members should embrace these expectations. This thus affirms that dimension of the work.

Yet, Polletta also identifies four concerns that her research on these social organizations revealed. First of all, she noted every decision in which a participatory democracy engages there

83 Ibid., 210.
is a decision that needs to be developed through the use of consensus. However, this becomes increasingly challenging as the size of the group increases, which is often the goal of a group. Such a thought may suggest that fellowship bands continue to be limited to a small number of fixed members. Next, she noted that with a participatory democracy it can sometimes take more time to ensure that the principles of equality and mutuality are being maintained, rather than actually addressing the challenges that face the organization. This may be a reason for fellowship bands to attempt a longtime commitment together, for a group could develop a rhythm that would overcome this. Thirdly, Polletta suggested that participatory democracies only work effectively in localized contexts, and thus the extent of such an organization might not effectively reach into global tasks.\textsuperscript{84} Such a concern will likely not apply in fellowship bands, as fellowship bands are focused upon the localized individual. And finally, she noted that such a democracy may be more of an ideal at times, as there are often persons who corrupt such a system by grasping for more than their share of power.\textsuperscript{85} This suggests that a fellowship band model should be more intentional about establishing a context in which only questions are engaged, rather than power moves such as developing solutions for one another. Additionally, it may suggest that an external network be developed by which to seek counsel in regard to internal disputes and challenges.

\textit{Social Tension}

The third variable comes from an article by Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, titled “The New Holy Clubs: Testing Church-to-Sect Propositions.” Their work is centered upon the idea of sect-to-church regressions, in which it was deemed by H. Richard Niebuhr (1929) that the fate of

\textsuperscript{84} Francesca Polletta, \textit{Freedom is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements}, 212.  
\textsuperscript{85} ibid., 213.
all religious sects, which are defined as structures in tension with society, will settle down in the form of a church, in which they are taken over by the upper class. For Finke and Stark, the United Methodist Church stands as an exemplar of this phenomenon. They recognize that there was once a time in which the Methodist Church stood in high tension with society. This was specifically true within nineteenth century America, and it led to incredible growth. The young Methodist movement went from having 2.5 percent of all church adherents in 1776 to over 34 percent in 1850. Today, Finke and Stark define the United Methodist Church as a more liberalized shadow of its former self.

There are records of the sect-to-church phenomenon occurring within the American Methodist movement as early as 1855. Peter Cartwright wrote an account of this, in which it was detailed that Methodists had “almost let camp meetings die out, ’class meetings were being neglected, and itinerants were dismounting and replacing the local lay preachers.” According to Finke and Stark, the records also show that between 1847 and 1880 the Methodist Episcopal Church went from no institutions of higher education to “11 theological seminaries, 44 colleges and universities, and 130 women’s seminaries and schools.” It is with this increase in Methodist affluence that the clergy began to receive generous salaries, congregations invested in church property, and the overall Methodist movement took its place amongst the Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians as a mainline denomination. As the Methodist Episcopal Church became more prestigious throughout the nineteenth century, authoritarian leadership characterized its composition. Finke and Stark note that, “The Methodist bishops refused to tolerate grass-roots revivalism within the ranks and ejected the most active

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proponents of Holiness, just as the Wesley brothers had been ejected by the Anglican establishment a century before.” Such ejection led to the establishment of other Wesleyan denominations, like the Church of Nazarene.\footnote{Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, “The New Holy Clubs: Testing Church-to-Sect Propositions,” 180.}

Finke and Stark note that as the American Methodist Church left the nineteenth and entered into the twentieth century, the increasingly established church was marked by a growing liberalism and a declining influence. However, tension began to occur in an effort to push the established church back into a sect, or movement. Finke and Stark notice that the most successful of these movements were formed after Wesley’s Holy Clubs, which are the historical structures that led to the formation of fellowship bands and class meetings. These scholars note that the first such revival movement was the Good News Movement, founded by Charles Keysor in 1965. This movement really became a forum for evangelical pastors – from across the American United Methodist church – who felt socially isolated and were dedicated to spiritual renewal in the church. The Good News magazine was created, General Conference initiatives were strategized, and renewal groups were formed in local conferences. Another successful initiative was the Confessing Movement, which was established in 1994 with the intent to “reaffirm the traditional teachings of the United Methodist Church.” This is a less formalized group, however has led to a lot of traditionalist conversations.\footnote{Ibid., 181.} Both of these movements continue to be successful organizations, and have been accepted into the life of the United Methodist Church.

Where these movements excel, as Finke and Stark state, is their incorporation of a social tension principle, in which they are standing in friction with society. By not standing in total agreement with the ecclesial and national culture, there is a marketable point that can attract
others and provide them with a unique identity differentiating them from the larger context. It is through these social movements’ use of social tension that Finke and Stark believe that the sect-to-church regression can be reversed. Thus in the application of Finke and Stark’s findings for the purposes of translating Fellowship Bands, we can ask whether or not the model in itself could create positive tension within the ecclesial structure and national society. The model itself shares much commonality with the revitalized Holy Clubs of the mid-twentieth century. Yet, the fundamental difference is that the revitalized Holy Clubs of the twentieth century created ecclesial tension through their use of a traditional worldview and a well-knit structure that is appealing to Wesleyans. However, my question is – could Fellowship Bands stand in tension with American society with a Way of Life? Is this model capable of transforming persons to be so counter cultural in their pursuit of God, spiritual disciplines, charity, and justice – that it actually creates tension? That is a theoretical and religious question, but it is my belief that Finke and Stark’s sociological analysis recommends a principle of social tension in order to successfully adapt a fellowship band model into the life of the United Methodist Church.

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PART V

A NEW FELLOWSHIP BAND MODEL
A New Fellowship Band Model

The Wesleyan Traditions within the contemporary United States could benefit greatly from the introduction of a new constructive proposal for fellowship bands. My survey of the current models within the United States indicates that there is much to be desired within the construction of these groups. When one also considers the socio-cultural facets of religiosity within the United States, it becomes evident that a fellowship band model could flourish, if constructed appropriately. Thus, in the ensuing pages I will describe lineaments of my constructive proposal for the development of fellowship bands within contemporary America. Many of my proposal’s elements will resonate deeply with the work of the Inspire movement from Britain; however it would be inappropriate to label this as simply a translation of the Inspire model into the American context. Through surveying American models and considering the socio-cultural realities it became evident that a new hybrid model is needed for the continued work of the church.

My role within the construction of this model is rather distinct and purposeful – it is to set the table. I appreciate the aesthetic image of a table because it represents diverse people coming to a common point (often on a regular basis) and sharing in something rather intimate, a meal and/or conversation. And when the same group of folks gathers around a table on a regular occurrence, the conversation becomes more intimate, more challenging, and more inspiring. Thus, my responsibility is to set the table and its elements – to design the form of the table (basics of the structure), how persons relate to one another (basics for conversation), and what sits as the centerpiece (aspirational theology). All of this will be developed in the ensuing section.
The direct result of this intention is that the constructive proposal and curriculum will be designed in order to create a common space and a life practice, rather than some form of a 10-week program. The Inspire model influences this design, for it sets the precedent for a curriculum that develops a life practice. As a fellowship band internalizes the band model, the material gets out of the way and allows band members to adjust the model to fulfill their needs.

Form

The form of this new fellowship band will thus be oriented around the notion of habitual formation. There are several lineaments that I propose for this formation, which consist of: number of members, leadership dynamics, and the weekly meeting schedule.

In the brief survey of American models, it became clear that there are sharply differing expectations when it comes to the size of a fellowship band. My proposal is that fellowship bands strictly consist of four to five consistent members. In many ways, this stems from the Inspire model which meets with three to four members. However, one has to consider the relationships that are gleaned throughout such a practice. By having too intimate of a group size (i.e. three or less) the focus can become distracted by the absence of even a single group member. Complementarily, having too many persons within a group (i.e. six or more) leads to an environment in which one cannot delve deeply into the material being discussed. It is important to clearly note that this constructive model does reject the group sizes of the Dick Wills, Companions in Christ, and Southwestern College models. Maintaining a small group size (i.e. four to five) is not for the purpose of excluding persons, but for setting aside a space in which persons can go deeper in conversation and reflection.
In regard to the leadership dynamics of this new model, I propose that all steps be taken to employ Polletta’s democratic organization principle. Within the socio-cultural context of the United States, she notes, social movements and small groups can only significantly progress if they embody a culture in which all voices are recognized and respected.\(^2\) However, Polletta also notes that while this democratic principle is beneficial to “buy-in” and individual support, there are logistical considerations that need more direct leadership.\(^3\) Thus, I propose that a new constructive fellowship band model incorporate a non-leader for administrative tasks. This is the role of the “Communication Point-Person” within every fellowship band, whose sole responsibility is to ensure that the band members receive communications from the supporting congregation/network and that they provide regular feedback as to the general vitality of the fellowship band. In these communications, it is essential that all confidential material (i.e. any subject material discussed in the fellowship band, excluding safety concerns) stays within the band and is not reported to the congregational/network support.

The core element of this new model will be the weekly meeting schedule. The curriculum will help establish the differing components of the schedule, and groups will be encouraged to maintain this schedule as they continue meeting. In general, I recommend that fellowship bands adopt a run time of approximately sixty minutes. Following is the general schedule of a weekly fellowship band meeting. For the first five minutes band members will Gather together. During this time, members are invited to be intentional about discussing current events, family members, and other informal points of conversation. The goal of this time is simply to develop better bonds between one another, and to get all of such courtesies out of one’s system before the deeper content is discussed. Once this time has simmered down, the next five minutes will be spent in


\(^3\) *Ibid.*, 212.
Setting the Space. This is a time of prayer and reflection, maybe with some singing and scripture reading incorporated. The purpose of this time is to prepare the mind for the tasks before the fellowship band. This is also a great time for groups to recite a common prayer (e.g. Lord’s Prayer, Wesleyan Covenant Prayer).

After this time has come to a conclusion, the group begins to have a time of Engaging for forty-five minutes. The proposed model focuses upon one member at a time. Thus, when one member is focused upon the following question serves as a guide: “How are you in relation to God, Self, Christian Community, and the World?” The first four weeks of the curriculum will focus upon fleshing out each relationship in this question, though the details of such will be discussed within the content portion of this proposal. It should be noted that after a member has responded with their reflections from the week, the rest of the group is invited to dialogue. It is critical that each member dialogues through the means of pastoral support, which the Inspire model exemplifies. This means that no member is allowed to offer advice, counsel, or solutions; instead, members should only respond with questions. The point of this formal characteristic is for the person sharing to become more reflective upon their weekly experiences in relation to the four core relationships—God, Self, Christian Community, and World.

After each member has been focused upon, the fellowship band concludes with five minutes of Discerning God’s Call. This is a time for group members to focus on the following question: “Are there any concrete ways in which I am being called to respond?” The goal of this, shortly following the time of engaging, is that members begin to open their minds to the larger reality of where God is calling them to join the Divine work. Though persons may likely not see God calling them to do something different during this time, the goal is to develop the posture in which one is constantly being more mindful of opportunities to express the love of God. Then, to
finish the weekly fellowship band members are encouraged to select next week’s Group Facilitator and to end in prayer. Fellowship Bands are invited to make this practice their own, however a sense of weekly consistency regarding the schedule is recommended.

The core of my proposal’s formal characteristics is adopted from the Inspire model, though the more frequent meeting schedule has been introduced as a result of the American survey. I was impressed with how other models invited greater theological and creative exploration in response to the reflection. The danger that the GBOD models possess, from my perspective, is that they could simply become a weekly time of checking boxes with no deeper applicable exploration. Thus, in order to prevent such mundaneness, frequency and flexibility has become of paramount consideration to the construction of this proposal.

Content

The principle manner in which the newly constructed proposal breaks from the Inspire model is that I alter its theological-ethical components. Specifically, I replace the vision of the aspirational theology, and I expand the constructs that are beneficial for conversation. Within the Inspire model, the Way of Life serves as both the aspirational theology and the linguistic construct. In other words, the vision of the Inspire model is to “be the ideal Christian” and the conversations within band meetings are centered on whether one is meeting the specific works of this ideal. The model I propose intentionally differs from this; however, I want to acknowledge that such alteration in regard to the content provides both benefits and limitations. The benefits are that the proposed content is more articulate, holistic, and safer regarding accountability principles. The main limitation which arises from this proposal is that the theology employed
becomes exclusive towards motivating mainline Protestant traditions, and strays from Evangelical Protestantism.

The aspirational theology describes the state of affairs for which the members of the fellowship band strive. To use the analogy of the table, the aspirational theology is the centerpiece upon which fellowship band members are invited to focus their exploration. Within this proposed model, the aspirational theology is the invitation to live in sanctifying communion with God and the *missio Dei* (“work of God”) that is permeating throughout all of creation. To be in sanctifying communion with this God is to be in deepening relationship with the God that is continually renewing the world, and to be transformed by such a relationship so that we become fully aware of our invitation to be co-workers in this task. To be in sanctifying communion with this God is to be in relationship with the God that is evident throughout all of creation - the Divine Trinity, our own sanctity, the sanctity of our Christian siblings, and the sanctify of the life in our world. Synthesized, this is the God with whom we are invited to be in relationship, the missio Dei continually evident and sanctifying the world. Our invitation in regard to recognizing the missio Dei as the fellowship band's aspirational theology is thus to explore the beauty and complexity of this Divine invitation - of the ever present God - and joining in such holy work. This is a sanctifying invitation which is ever-present, if only we will develop the eyes and the open posture to accept its invitation. That is the aspirational heading of the proposed model - to be discussed and pursued with the greatest of audacities, of becoming co-workers in realizing the New Jerusalem that is the Kingdom of Heaven.

The linguistic construct is essential to discussing the content of this proposed model. This is deeply intertwined with the aspirational theology for its role is to provide a conversational and

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conceptual framework for discussing one's relation to this larger vision. The basis of this conversational construct is based upon the four core relationships of Christian experience. First, "How are you in relationship to God?" This is concerned with one's perceived experience of God, one's praying with God, and one's general regard for God. Secondly, "How are you in relationship to your Self?" Though this might appear to be an ego-centric question, this question explores if one is making room for one to be introspective, to reflect upon circumstances, and to stay faithful to a Sabbath rest. Third, "How are you in relationship to the Christian Community?" In this point, the focus of reflections becomes increasingly externalized. This question explores whether one is making room for communal worship, small group discussions, and supporting/mentoring other folks. And finally, "How are you in relationship to the World?" In other words, this explores how one is invested in charity, justice, and general compassion for others—both human and non-human creation. The goal of this reflection (epistemological vernacular) is that persons are more mindful of applying the aspirational theology within their life. Additionally, it provides a common language by which to have these conversations.
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FELLOWSHIP BANDS

A NEW MODEL FOR UNITED METHODIST CONGREGATIONS

TYLER A. WARD
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Siblings in Christ,

Developing the following work has been one of the most convicting experiences of my life. It has led me to dive deeper into Wesleyan history, to cross the Atlantic in pursuit of hope, and then to recognize that what I sought has been right before me this entire time. Here is a brief account of how this material has come into existence.

I have always been a United Methodist, and to say that I am proud of this tradition is an understatement. But ever since middle school I have been aware that most of our congregations are rather deficient at equipping disciples. We simply do not have effective ecclesial forums to support persons in their relationship with God and others. At least, most of our congregations are lacking a forum that is malleable enough, consistent enough, and deep enough for our congregations to be a movement once again.

John and Charles Wesley, who helped found the Methodist Movement, had much to say about employing tangible practices to support one another in discipleship. However, I would dare to say that today’s United Methodist Church has not adopted that same desire to support each other’s discipleship. Before I proceed, I want to be clear on this - I do not want the United Methodist Church to return to how the Wesley brothers organized the Methodist Movement in the eighteenth century (our context is rather different today), but I do seek a revival that rivals that found at the beginning of the Methodist Movement.

For when we look back to our Wesleyan roots, there is a practice which we have forgotten, and I would argue that it has great potential for today. It is a practice titled the fellowship band. Fellowship bands are those groups that are bound together for vulnerable fellowship. This may sound a lot like a typical small group, bible study, or topical study group – but those groups share very little in common with the fellowship band forum. For (unlike the structures I just mentioned) in the fellowship band the curriculum is your own life.

It was in the eighteenth century that John Wesley established these fellowship bands for the Methodist Movement. The small groups he established consisted of four to five members each, and their purpose was to consistently come together in trust and vulnerability in order to reflect upon the question, “How is it with your soul?” The results of this intimate practice transformed lives, and the bands’ effects upon the Methodist Movement were incredible – especially for those in leadership.

In 2013, I became aware that fellowship bands were still alive and well within the southwest of Britain, within a new movement known as the Inspire Network. With funding through a North Central College Richter Fellowship, I visited with a few of these groups and what I witnessed

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inspired me. I saw entire communities becoming more intentional and mindful about their discipleship. They were exploring the intimacies of their relationship with God and others in a small communal setting - and in this I witnessed the Church supporting one another’s growth in a manner I had never seen before.

When I returned to the United States, I began to study and experiment with how a new fellowship band model could be developed within the congregational context of the United Methodist Church. I recognized that there have been several efforts in America to revitalize pieces of these early discipleship practices – though I have never seen these existing models sweep across an entire region in a manner analogous to the fellowship bands in Britain.

For those who may be skeptical, there is biblical precedence for considering fellowship bands within our current ecclesial context. Two examples are rather prominent. First, there were many times when Jesus would only take a few disciples with him and teach them in such a small forum. And secondly, we cannot forget the structure of the ancient church, often meeting in both large gatherings and smaller house meetings – “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer ... They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and since hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.”

Such small forums are not new for our Church.

Thus, in the following pages you will find the results of my study for developing such a forum and practice that more readily equips disciples within the United Methodist Church. The material is divided into two main sections:

First, a presentation of the new fellowship band model
Then, tools to help you live out the practice

My hope is that you find something in this material of worth for your personal faith journey. In this material, my role is limited to setting the table – of providing you with the meeting space that is the fellowship band. Your invitation is to gather in this practice, to ponder the aspirations it provides, and to make the conversation your own.

In Christ,

Tyler A. Ward

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2 Acts 2: 42,46b-47 NRSV
A New Fellowship Band Model

basics of the structure
aspirational theology
basics for conversations
Basics of the Structure

**THE WEEKLY MEETING SCHEDULE**

Following is the weekly meeting schedule, lasting just around 60 minutes. Your invitation is to follow this schedule fairly closely, so this pattern of meeting becomes habitual. By developing such a regular pattern of meeting, you can focus upon the material being discussed as opposed to stressing about what will happen next each meeting.

**Gather – 5 min**
Take this time to develop better bonds with one another. Discuss current events, catch up with recent life happenings, and chat concerning other informal topics. This would be a great time to grab coffee and snacks, if your meeting location is conducive to such.

**Setting the Space – 5 min**
The purpose here is to create a distinct break from the time of **Gathering** and to prepare each member’s mind for the tasks of a fellowship band. Spend time in prayer, maybe with singing and a short Scripture reading. The key here is improvised worship – do what comes most natural to the group and yourself for setting aside this space. You are recommended to have a common prayer that you use to start the meeting. Examples include the Lord’s Prayer and Wesley’s Covenant Prayer. You will have an opportunity to explore some recommended prayers in your first four weeks of meeting.

**Engaging the Christian Experience – 45 min**
This time is focused upon one band member at a time. The first member is invited to focus upon the question (which will be explored on page 9): “**How are you in relation to God, Self, Christian Community, and the World?**” After the first member has shared uninterruptedly, the other members are invited to ask questions of the one who shared, but never to offer advice, counsel, or solutions. The goal of engaging in conversation around a person’s sharing is to invite greater introspection and hope. Members are invited to bring up material from last week as well. When the first member has finished, the next band member is invited to share in response to this centering question, and so forth until all have shared.

**Discerning God’s Call – 5 min**
The fellowship band should conclude with a time of prayer. The focal point of this time should be focused upon the question: “**Are there any concrete ways in which I am being called to respond?**” If band members would like to share their thoughts with other band members during this time, they are invited to do so – especially if they would appreciate follow-up during next week’s meeting. End in prayer.
**SIZE OF THE GROUP**

Once a band has begun meeting, it is important the group members stay constant. Thus, be cautious about adding group numbers. A great size for a fellowship band is four to five persons. It is important that such continuity is conducted not with a posture of exclusivity, but of developing deeper trust within the group. Members of a fellowship band do not all have to be friends, and sometimes not being friends is actually of benefit. Though, I would recommend that group members have something in common – whether that is of identity or interest. Especially be thoughtful of how difference in tradition and political thought could affect how you will be vulnerable and discuss content with one another.

**COMMUNICATIONS POINT-PERSON**

Everyone in the group should be on equal footing, for this is a forum without a leader. In the fellowship band, all persons should be reminded that they have the opportunity to alter the group’s construction, if necessary. That being said, scheduling and communicative tasks can become difficult without one person to facilitate discussion pertaining to such logistics.

For this purpose alone, one person should be set aside as the *Communications Point-Person*. There are two roles which this person will facilitate.

- First, in the fellowship band this person will make sure that all are aware when the band is unable to meet together and will facilitate the selection of a secondary date.

- Second, if the fellowship band is supported through a congregational initiative, this will be the person who will be in communication with that larger network.

In regard to confidentiality, it is essential that this person keeps all shared material from the fellowship band within the band. In no manner is this person to be “sharing” what persons share in the band with congregational leadership. The only exclusion to this is when someone’s safety (or that of others) is even remotely in question – to which this person *must* notify the senior pastor. Of course, absolute confidentiality is always expected of the other band members.
Aspirational Theology

The aspirational theology is that which beckons the group towards a common goal; it is the heart behind what you are all striving for. Thus, you must ask yourself – “Why am I engaging myself in this practice?”

Is it to be a ‘better’ Christian? I hope not, for in a fellowship band such a goal can too easily equate to becoming a prude – always checking your qualities against a list of self-righteousness.

Is it to encourage you to do ‘more-Christian’ things? Again, I hope not, for in this context that begins to sound like joining together with others so that you feel a guilt or obligation to do something ‘holy-sounding.’

Both of those intentions are sincere, but there is a deeper invitation here.

What if a fellowship band was about exploring the love we have for God and for others, including our self? What if we took Jesus seriously when he reaffirmed the heart of Jewish teachings by stating that the most important commandments before us are to love God (with all our essence) and to love others?

Are we aware that every day is an opportunity to explore the depths of such great love? Or, do we let the days pass before us, innocently missing out on magnificent opportunities. The fellowship band is as an invitation for us to become more mindful of our relationships with God and others. Specifically the question of, “How are you in relation to God, Self, Christian Community, and the World?” The following page (concerning the Basics for Conversation) will clear away some of the abstractness and will provide you with some common language to use.

As Protestants, we understand that the effect of focusing upon our relationships with God (and the God in all) leads to a yearning within the depths of our soul. As we come into fuller relationship with God and the missio Dei (“works of God”), we begin to recognize our invitation to join into the work that God is doing in the world.³

Thus, I invite you to explore your intention for this practice. But I advise that you guard yourself from self-righteousness, and rather that you walk towards an exploration of the Creator’s love that permeates throughout all of Creation.

Basics for Conversation

It could appear a rather daunting task to get together and respond to the question, “How are you in relation to God, Self, Christian Community, and the World?” However, this question simply explores the four facets of the Christian experience so that one is able to be more mindful of one’s relation to each of these entities. To help you flesh out each of these relationships, I have provided some sample questions:

1) How are you in relation to **GOD**?
   - Do you feel “close” to God?
   - Are you setting aside time to simply exist in God’s presence?
   - How are your prayer habits?
   - Have your understandings of God been challenged? If so, how?
   - How, if at all, are your understandings of God changing?

2) How are you in relation to your **SELF**?
   - Do you feel loved and worthy of being loved?
   - How are your spiritual disciplines (e.g. devotions, Scripture reading)?
   - Are you setting aside time for Sabbath (rest)?
   - How are you prioritizing tasks?
   - How are you respecting your sanctity? How are you taking yourself less seriously?

3) How are you in relation to your **CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY**?
   - How are your worship habits?
   - Are you involved in another small group or bible study?
   - How are you investing in others?
   - Are you working with a larger Christian community?

4) How are you in relation to the **WORLD**?
   - How are you involved in acts of charity (giving to others)?
   - Are you involved in acts of justice (addressing systemic challenges)?
   - How are you caring for your neighbor?
   - Are you a good steward of God’s creation?
   - How are you pushing yourself beyond your comfort zone?
Embodying a Life Practice

It takes time for a spiritual practice to become a life practice. Though, my invitation for you is to make the fellowship band a life practice; to embrace this more wholly as your own.

The role of these following pages is to help you start this Christian practice over the next four weeks. This is to help you envision what a fellowship band actually looks like for the spiritual life of your group, and to encourage you to master the practice so that you can make this an organic component of living a Christ-centered life.
**Have a Planning Meeting**

Before you start meeting regularly, it is recommended that you meet together to address the following logistics for your group:

1.) **Have you all members reviewed the materials?**
   Make sure that *all* have at least read through this material. The reality is that if everyone is truly to take an even role in leading the development of your group – all need to be familiar with the basic content of this material.

2.) **When will you meet?**
   Set aside the same time for every week, and ensure that such a time is kept set aside for the foreseeable future. Make sure that this hour will not be rushed by other commitments.

3.) **Where will you meet?**
   Decide the location where you will meet each week. Great locations are often a secluded corner of a coffee shop or someone’s home. Most groups find that meal locations are not conducive to the environment that is necessary for a fellowship band.

4.) **Who will be the Communications Point-Person?**
   Select one person to be the center of communications, for two purposes. One, if there is a reason the group cannot meet this will be the person to ensure all are aware, and she/he will try to organize a back-up date. And two, if your congregation is providing support for fellowship bands this person will be in communication with that network.

4.) **Commit to Confidentiality.**
   The only manner in which you can become vulnerable with one another is through the development of trust. Take time to discuss how all conversations during the fellowship band meetings will remain confidential – and will not be discussed outside of the band meeting (unless there is a safety concern).

5.) **What is your commitment towards one another?**
   It is important to determine how long you are willing to invest within this fellowship band. Decide whether you will be investing in this practice for the foreseeable future, or if there will be a trial period of three months. Be aware that often times it takes time (and trust) to reach a point of vulnerability and depth within a fellowship band.
BAND MEETING: WEEK 1 (GOD)

Gather – 5 min
As everyone comes to the space, make sure all know that they are welcome. If there is anybody that you do not know already, this would be a great time to learn more about them. Do you know where everyone is from? Where they work? It is helpful to have a few connecting points with others before beginning this work.

Setting the Space – 5 min
After everyone has arrived, transition to a time of prayer. This is a time to center upon the work that is about to begin by centering the mind and soul. Everyone is invited to take an equal role in this time of unplanned prayer and worship. (Though, nobody should feel obligated to say or do anything.) Feel free to contribute a piece of Scripture or a song during this time, but recognize that this is an inappropriate time to study and interpret such. This is a time of prayer to center, not to study.

Engaging the Christian Experience – 45 min
This is the time in which one person will share the state of their soul rather uninterruptedly, to which band members will respond with questions. It is critical to remember that this is not a time to offer advice or counsel to the person sharing, but only to offer questions so that the person sharing may engage with their experience and be more mindful throughout the week. Also be aware of the time so all have an opportunity to share.

After four weeks, you will be invited to share any dimension of the Christian experience. However, for the next four weeks you are invited to focus upon one specific facet of this experience. For this week, explore the question - “How are you in relation to GOD?” Here are possible ways in which you could flesh out this reflection:

- Do you feel “close” to God?
- Are you setting aside time to simply exist in God’s presence?
- How are your prayer habits?
- Have your understandings of God been challenged? If so, how?
- How, if at all, are your understandings of God changing?

Discerning God’s Call – 5 min
Spend time in prayer and reflect upon the question, “Are there any concrete ways in which I am being called to respond?” Band members are invited to share their thoughts with the group, especially if they would appreciate follow-up for next week. Though, nobody has to share. End in prayer.
**BAND MEETING: WEEK 2 (SELF)**

**Gather – 5 min**
Continue to learn more about those who you are in this practice. Do you know where they last vacationed? Do they have any hobbies? Additionally, remember to make yourself comfortable within the space.

**Setting the Space – 5 min**
Transition to a time of prayer, remembering that this is a time of informal worship and that all are welcome to contribute. If there is a piece of Scripture or a song, feel free to contribute that at this time. End this time with the Lord’s Prayer:

> Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.⁴

**Engaging the Christian Experience – 45 min**
This is the time when one person will share, and everyone else will respond with questions. Continue to challenge yourself in what it means to respond in the form of a question, which is a deeply pastoral posture. Again, be aware of the time so all have an opportunity to share.

This week, respond specifically to the question: “How are you in relation to your SELF?” Here are some manners in which you can address this question:

- Do you feel loved and worthy of being loved?
- How are your spiritual disciplines (e.g. devotions, Scripture reading)?
- Are you setting aside time for Sabbath (rest)?
- How are you prioritizing tasks?
- How are you respecting your sanctity? How are you taking yourself less seriously?

**Discerning God’s Call – 5 min**
Spend time in prayer and reflecting upon, “Are there any concrete ways in which I am being called to respond?” If band members would like to share their thoughts with other band members during this time, they are invited to do as such. End in prayer.

⁴ *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House), 894.
**Band Meeting: Week 3 (Christian Community)**

**Gather – 5 min**
Hopefully you have learnt more about those you have together with for this practice. Though, we can always get to know someone more. Do you know what ministries they are involved in? Why they are involved in the congregation they are attending?

**Setting the Space – 5 min**
Once it feels right, transition to a time of prayer. Anyone is invited to contribute a piece of Scripture or a song, but make sure that not too much time is being spent on this act of centering. End with praying Wesley’s Covenant Prayer:

> I am no longer my own, but yours. Put me to what you will, place me with whom you will. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be put to work for you or set aside for you, praised for you or criticized for you. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and fully surrender all things to your glory and service. Amen.5

**Engaging the Christian Experience – 45 min**
During today’s sharing and responding with questions, challenge yourself to be ever-so more vulnerable than before. The reality is that you will only get out of this practice what you put into it – of which honesty is an important component.

This week, respond specifically to the question: “How are you in relation to your Christian Community?” If you are having a hard time responding to this question, here are possible ways in which you could flesh out this reflection:

- How are your worship habits?
- Are you involved in another small group or bible study?
- How are you investing in others?
- Are you working with a larger Christian community?

**Discerning God’s Call – 5 min**
Spend time in prayer and reflecting upon, “Are there any concrete ways in which I am being called to respond?” If band members would like to share their thoughts with other band members during this time, they are invited to do as such. End in prayer.

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5 *United Methodist Hymnal, 607.*
BAND MEETING: WEEK 4 (WORLD)

Gather – 5 min
Get to know a little bit more about your fellow group members. How do they volunteer their time? How do they see their job an opportunity to do good in the world? If they shared anything the prior week, how is that going?

Setting the Space – 5 min
When all are comfortable, start transitioning to a time of prayer. If anyone has a piece of scripture or a song that is on their mind, they are invited to share that during this time. End with the prayer For Courage to Do Justice:

O Lord, open my eyes that I may see the needs of others; open my ears that I may hear their cries; open my heart so that they need not be without succor. Let me not be afraid to defend the weak because of the anger of the strong, nor afraid to defend the poor because of the anger of the rich. Show me where love and hope and faith are needed, and use me to bring them to those places. And so open my eyes and my ears; that I may this coming day be able to do some work of peace for thee. Amen.⁶

Engaging the Christian Experience – 45 min
For your time of sharing and responding with questions – ensure that you are responding with questions, and not masked solution. This will be the last week in which you are invited to focus on one specific facet of the Christian experience.

This week you are invited to respond specifically to the question: “How are you in relation to the WORLD?” Here are possible ways in which you could flesh out this reflection:

- How are you involved in acts of charity (giving to others)?
- Are you involved in acts of justice (addressing systemic challenges)?
- How are you caring for your neighbor?
- Are you a good steward of God’s creation?
- How are you pushing yourself beyond your comfort zone?

Discerning God’s Call – 5 min
Spend time in prayer and reflecting upon, “Are there any concrete ways in which I am being called to respond?” If band members would like to share their thoughts with other band members during this time, they are invited to do as such. End in prayer.

⁶ United Methodist Hymnal, 456.
ON YOUR WAY

The last four weeks of focusing upon the specifics of the Christian experience have come to a conclusion, and you are now invited to make this practice your own. You are invited to read back through the original basics of the structure (page 6), and to follow that structure more ardently in your future weekly meetings.

As you continue to meet, I invite you to consider revisiting the basics once every six months. It is good to re-center yourself upon the primary concerns of this practice.

If this practice is not working, I invite you to talk with your pastor. There could be a few things that are happening:

First, it could be that you all need more time to develop greater trust with one another. This is a practice that takes time for members to develop trust, but once the trust has been developed members often say the patience was worth it.

Secondly, it could be that you have adapted the practice to such an extent that the practice is no longer a fellowship band. If that happens, no worries – revisit the basics.

And thirdly, if six months have gone by, you have revisited the basics, and it still is not “working” – well, it may be time to find a new fellowship band. There is no shame in this; sometimes the group dynamics just are not conducive to having a fellowship band. Recognize the blessings that have come from your meeting together, give thanks for such, and then find others with whom to start a fellowship band.