

WCA Accountable Discipleship Task Force Transition for Existing Churches

Transitioning existing churches into a denomination where membership in the local church is tied to participation in an accountable discipleship small group requires an informed, gracious, and timely process. As stated in the Task Force Report:

Implementing a plan for accountable discipleship will take some time for existing local churches joining the _____ Church from the United Methodist Church. Each annual conference will assist its clergy and existing local churches in developing accountable discipleship groups. Bishops, presiding elders, and pastors will work together to develop expectations and benchmarks for accountable discipleship, and monitor the progress of each local church in the annual conference (p. 10).

Existing United Methodist churches who join the new denomination will have challenges in transitioning membership from a low expectation model to a high expectation model for church membership. To provide a road map for that transition, the Task Force proposed a phased implementation process for existing churches.

A Phased Implementation of Accountable Discipleship in Existing Local Churches

A three-year transition plan may be configured as follows:

Year 1: Teaching and Training on Accountable Discipleship – The local church engages in a year of study and preparation on the purpose and practice of accountable discipleship using resources prepared by the Commission on Discipleship and Just Ministry. Annual Conferences can provide leadership and resourcing for this training as well. Such training and resourcing may take place within existing social space groups within the church, such as Bible study groups or Sunday School classes, and encourage them to experiment with accountable discipleship within those established group relationships.

Year 2: Pilot Groups for Potential Group Leaders – During the second year, the local church launches pilot accountable discipleship groups primarily consisting of persons whom the church leadership identifies as potential group leaders. The pilot groups spend a year experiencing the accountable discipleship process and learn how to lead them.

Year 3: First Accountable Discipleship Groups Launched – The leaders who were trained and who gained experience in Year 2 begin leading their own accountable discipleship small groups. These initial groups should especially include current church leaders and those may be coming into leadership in the near future. Additional groups should be added as leadership becomes available.

A phased process allows time for people to adjust to new expectations and also for those who discover the power of these groups to share their experiences and testify to their own transformation.

Another consideration within this option is to simply “grandfather” existing members who cannot or will not participate in accountable discipleship groups while working with leaders and new members on implementation of accountable discipleship groups. This avoids different categories of membership but does place the emphasis on those who are pursuing accountable discipleship when receiving new members and choosing church leaders for the future.

What about those who may have difficulty participating in an accountable discipleship small group?

Some may want to participate in accountable discipleship small groups but may be unable because of physical or mental limitations, or limited availability of transportation, or lack of access to communication technology. For others, participation may also be conditioned by a particular season in life. Families with young children, for example, need significant support and accommodation in order to fully participate in ways that work for their busy schedules. Those struggling with chronic illness, or who are homebound, or who may be responsible for caring for aging parents may need similar accommodation. The local church should ensure that all persons who want to participate in a group have the means to do so, whether that involves accessibility provisions, altering locations or schedules, providing childcare, helping with technology, arranging transportation, etc.

Those who are differently abled may require special consideration and, if they are not able to fully participate in an accountable discipleship small group, a group should consider engaging in a caring relationship with that person, providing ongoing support, visitation, and prayer.

Accountable discipleship small groups tend to function more as family units where the dominant purpose is to “watch over one another in love.” Creative and caring approaches to developing small groups will not only allow for maximum participation but also provide opportunities for each group to demonstrate Christ-like love toward one another.

Appendix A: “Sunday School” and Transformational Bible Study

United Methodists have a fairly strong tradition of “Sunday School” and other adult Bible studies (e.g., weeknight studies led by pastors or laity). There was some discussion within the Accountable Discipleship Task Force concerning the value of such groups. Critics averred that Sunday School groups were more interested in acquiring new *information* about Scripture than in engaging Scripture formationally and one another personally around Scripture’s formational challenge. Questions were raised about the value of even continuing such groups in the new denomination. Advocates pointed out that “Sunday School” was not a monolithic entity and that groups could find themselves anywhere on the spectrum from a grossly imbalanced emphasis on information only (e.g., listening to a teacher lecture) to a well-balanced experience of reading Scripture for information with a view to formation. Sunday School resources also

display a wide variety along the same spectrum. And ultimately the problem in our congregations is not a glut of Scriptural literacy, but rather a failure both to acquire biblical literacy *and* to engage those texts transformationally.

It seems more constructive to embrace well-established structures that help parishioners engage Scripture and simply help them engage Scripture *better*, i.e., with a view to how each week's Scripture passage(s) call us to self-examination, repentance, and constructive change. At the same time, it is important to change the "culture" of many Sunday School groups, encouraging their members' willingness to become more transparent with – and support of – one another in regard to these very things. One of the tasks for the Commission on Discipleship and Just Ministry may be to identify and to create "adult Bible Study" resources that will achieve these goals within the structures for Bible Study already in place in local congregations. What follows is a sample plan that might help groups think first about the kind of "information" that will provide the groundwork for transformational engagement and then, of course, provide guidance for the latter.

A Sample Plan for Transformational Bible Study

David deSilva

a. You reading Scripture – informational engagement (25-30 minutes)

Understanding the Text:

- i. What does this passage *say*? (It's important to shed our familiarity and presuppositions and really look at the words and what they are communicating afresh.)
- ii. What does this passage *mean*?
- iii. What questions do we have about what the passage means? What information do we not have? What is confusing?
- iv. What objections do we have to what we think the text is saying? (These are worth examining, both in regard to the text and *ourselves*).

Exploring the Text (note: very few passages will actually speak to **all** of these):

- i. What does this passage show us regarding God's character and heart – particularly God's heart for human beings?
- ii. What does this passage show us regarding God's vision for our living in righteousness and holiness as part of a redeemed, covenant community?
- iii. What does this passage show us regarding the forces and impulses that get in the way of living in righteousness and holiness in community?
- iv. What does this passage tell us about God's provisions and possible strategies for our attaining God's vision for us and overcoming the obstacles to the same?
- v. What does this passage tell us about the stakes involved?

b. Scripture reading *you* – formational engagement (25-30 minutes)

Questions to ask as you allow the Scriptures to read each of *you*:

- i. Where do I see attitudes I have had, words I have spoken, interactions I have had, and actions I have taken positively reflected in the things commended in this passage?
- ii. Where do I see attitudes I have had, words I have spoken, interactions I have had, and actions I have taken reflected in the things this passage warns or advises *against*?
- iii. What steps do I need to take, and do we need to take together, to move closer to the positive ideals commended here, and to leave behind further the negative traits and practices identified here?

Close with prayer for one another, that God would cause these specific insights to take root and bear fruit in each other's lives starting in the days ahead.