Brothers and sisters, become imitators of me and watch those who live this way—you can use us as models.” Philippians 3:17 CEB

Imitation gets a bad rap. The word alone conjures up thoughts of inferiority. Images of imitation cheese, imitation butter and imitation Rolexes flash before our eyes as examples of, “not the real thing.” In the business world, the term “imitation product” is synonymous with “counterfeit product.”

We in the church see it differently. For those who are following Jesus, imitation is one of the ways God is saving us. We Christians are those who are seeking to imitate the life of Jesus in all that we say and do. When God takes flesh in the person of Jesus, the church mothers and fathers tell us, we are given an example worth imitating. When we see Jesus forgive his enemies, we imitate him when confronted with those who make enemies of us. When we see Jesus break bread with friends and strangers, we imitate by sharing what is on our table and giving thanks. When we see Jesus often withdraw for prayer and solitude with God, we imitate him, offering our prayers and solitude in union with Christ's offering for us.

Of course, this is nothing new. When Thomas à Kempis, the 15th-century imitator of Christ, wrote the beloved devotion, “The Imitation of Christ” he was highlighting the truth that Christians imitating Christ is not a substitute for Christ’s absence. Imitation is the way that the world experiences Christ’s presence in every generation. The body of Christ imitating the life of Christ is still the way that Jesus takes up room and moves in the world.

Naturally, Thomas learned from his holy friends, who were imitating the life of Jesus with him. They taught him how to love, heal, feed, and forgive like the One they imitated. They learned it from those who went before them. They sought to live out Paul’s challenge to the church in Philippi, to imitate Him in order to become the real Presence they were called to be.

Here’s the point: people learn how to follow Christ as they imitate the Christ they meet in each other. Imitation is the only real form of discipleship.

For the followers of Jesus called Methodist, we learn to imitate Jesus by creating and cultivating holy friendships. We call this, “relational discipleship.” Together, with our holy friends, we practice imitating Christ until all heaven breaks out.

In this newsletter, you will find stories of holy friendships where people are imitating each other and Christ. May their stories encourage, challenge and inspire us in our holy friendships. May we imitate what you see Christ doing in and through them. Through our shared imitation, may we experience the real presence of Christ.

Please support our planters with your prayers for communion to be celebrated in new ways in their lives and in their communities.

**30 Second Survey**

How do you prefer to receive communications from New Room Society? Whether it’s by mail, email, text message, phone or social media, we would like to know the best way to reach you. Please go to https://nccumc.org/newfaithcommunities/30-second-survey/ and fill out this 30 Second Survey.
Discipleship is always relational, and relational discipleship is always reciprocal. And having been made perfect, Jesus is leading us on to seeking to receive his ways as our way of life. Today, our relationship to one another is strong and growing, and we are both more like Jesus toward impatience, self-righteous comparison, and dismissal. But thank God, Jesus has a hold of both of us, and we have walked together our congregation. The relationship between me and that person was strained, neither of us trusting the other, and both of us being tempted few years ago, it would have been inconceivable that this person would have become such a leader and powerful proclaimer of the gospel in communal discipleship had transformed the relationship between me and that person, as well as both of our relationships with Jesus. A few months ago, a CityWeller stood before our church family to preach. In those moments I was overwhelmed at the way in which and that he was made perfect through suffering. Surely this suffering included more than just the passion; surely it was also a matter of. Relational discipleship is always reciprocal. There is simply no way to walk in life together, receiving the ways of Jesus together, and for there to be a mere one-way exchange. Even those of us who may be further along in the journey will be changed as we walk with another disciple. I believe this was also true with Jesus. The scriptures say that Jesus was tempted in every way that we are and that he was made perfect through suffering. Surely this suffering included more than just the passion; surely it was also a matter of suffering to walk in relationship with stubborn, clumsy, and less than faith-full disciplines. But when tempted, as we are, toward impatience, self-righteous comparison, or dismissal, Jesus overcame our bent towards sin on the path toward perfection. Disciples were made holy as Jesus was made perfect. Relational discipleship is always reciprocal.

A few months ago, a CityWeller stood before our church family to preach. In those moments I was overwhelmed at the way in which in which communal discipleship had transformed the relationship between me and that person, as well as both of our relationships with Jesus. A few years ago, it would have been inconceivable that this person would have become such a leader and powerful proclaimer of the gospel in our congregation. The relationship between me and that person was strained, neither of us trusting the other, and both of us being tempted toward impatience, self-righteous comparison, and dismissal. But thank God, Jesus has a hold of both of us, and we have walked together seeking to receive his ways as our way of life. Today, our relationship to one another is strong and growing, and we are both more like Jesus then we could have been apart from one another. This friend is now discerning call to pastoral ministry.

Relational discipleship is always relational, and relational discipleship is always reciprocal. And having been made perfect, Jesus is leading us on to perfection. Thanks be to God.

Relational Discipleship & Wesley's Class Meeting

By Rev. Dr. Marty Cauley

“First, by doing no harm, by avoiding evil in every kind; especially that which is most generally practiced. Second, by doing good, by being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and as far as is possible to all men. Thirdly, by attending upon all the ordinances of God. Such are the public worship of God; the ministry of the word, either read or expounded, the Supper of the Lord; private prayer, searching the Scriptures; and fasting, or abstinence. More welcoming with balanced accountability” (Wesley’s rule of life).

We live disconnected lives. Even as I write this, I feel the conviction of it in my own life where I barely know the neighbors who live just next door. We exchange pleasant waves pulling in and out of the neighborhood but I have never shared a meal with them or sat late in the evening and talked about significant things. As an advocate for real connection, I am keenly aware of that same need in my own life.

Several years ago Robert Putnam wrote the landmark text that identified this cultural trend when he penned Bowling Alone. Since then study after study has confirmed that twenty-first-century people live on the most crowded planet in history. We are surrounded by more people and living in closer proximity than any time in history. However, we are almost entirely without connection. Even though the most introverted among us craves some level of connection, we have withdrawn into our corners and cubicles, oftensettling for Facebook friends rather than real relationships. We make tenuous ties that can be snapped and “unfriend” with a few simple clicks. It is time for us to reconnect with our roots and the people around us who need to be invited into communion with Christ.

Class meetings were the foundation of relational disciplership for John Wesley, Methodism’s founder. They were originally led by hand-picked leaders Wesley had personally discipled. This empowering of lay leadership allowed for relational discipleship to extend to every member of the society. Class leaders visited homes, offered instruction, encouragement, pastoral care, and spiritual discipline as needed. (Heitzenrater, Wesley and the People Called Methodist)

Class meetings provided pastoral care for every member of the society and those seeking to become part of the Methodist movement. Class meetings included spirited biblical instruction and acted as a catalyst for missional action as the members were “spurred to perfection.” Additionally, class leaders provided personal mentorship related to families, financial instruction, and addressed lifestyle issues. By visiting house to house, class leaders were able to observe the family dynamic of each member of their class.

In comparison to other revival movements of the day, the Methodists were able to spread faster and last longer in large part due to the relational nature of class meeting disciplership. In most revival movements the movement only lasts as long as the emotionally charged spiritual response continues. With class meetings, Wesley was able to provide ongoing spiritual nurture and accountability to accompany the movement’s powerful preaching.

Lastly, the empowering of lay leadership, a hallmark of Methodism, began to take root. Almost all class leaders were laity, discipled by trained clergy and lay pastors. This decentralization of authority allowed for greater reach into communities previously ignored by the parish church. By creating, lay Methodist missionaries going into every corner of the city and involved in commerce, factory work, and local government, the movement penetrated the heart of the community.

New Faith Communities seeks to recover the practice of relational disciplership practiced by Wesley and his early followers and help people reconnect with God and each other. As a core practice, relational disciplership provides care for, saturates our lives with scripture and prayer, and encourages practices of worship and mission. Most importantly, it allows everyone to fully participate in the act of disciple making. Please be in prayer for our planters and their teams as they see to make disciples for the transformation of the world.