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WESLEYAN MISSIONAL SMALL GROUPS:

THREE CRUCIAL ATTRIBUTES

by

DAVID WERNER

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Luther Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

2016

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ABSTRACT

Wesleyan Missional Small Groups

by

David Werner

Mixed methods (simple exploratory and participatory action research) study explored ways congregations can draw upon both the United Methodist heritage and the missional approach to foster spiritual formation using small groups that make sense to the postmodern culture and lead to behavior changes.

Three crucial attributes of vital, faith-forming small groups are: creating authentic community (belonging – engaging one another), engaging the Holy Spirit (believing – engaging God), and helping participants make applications to their daily lives (behaving – engaging real life). Congregations must do the hard work of contextualizing these and hold all three together for small groups to empower spiritual growth.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Ad Dei gloriam![1]

[1] To God be the glory!

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FUMC	First United Methodist Church
GBOD	General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church
IRB	Institutional Review Board
JPT	Journey Partner Team
PAR	Participatory Action Research
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
UMC	United Methodist Church
W+2	Worship plus two

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The heritage of Methodism goes back to John Wesley in England gathering together into societies those who responded to his preaching in the 1730s. They did not gather for Sunday worship or the sacraments, for Wesley was adamant that the early Methodists were to be an active part of their local parish churches. Instead, they gathered for the expressed purpose of spiritual growth and faith formation. The societies gathered weekly to hear preaching, listen to biblical teaching, sing about their faith together, pray with and for one another, and hear the stories of what God had been doing among them. Wesley also broke down the societies into smaller groups, called classes, in order to have them focus on their personal needs and struggles. The classes also met once a week to share from their own experiences, give an account of their spiritual progress, and seek prayers and support from one another. Personal sharing, transparency, and accountability were hallmarks of these meetings. There were other specialized groups as well, including bands, which met for the purpose of prayer; select societies, which were gatherings for mature Christians; and training events for class leaders.

One of the keys for the success of the early Methodist movement was that it brought people together in ways that effectively encouraged and enabled them to grow spiritually. The Methodists continued as members of the Church of England, but they met together as Methodists for their spiritual formation. The structure, routine, care, and accountability provided a context for their faith to take form, mature, and be tested.

The Methodist movement eventually organized as a church, first in the United States in 1784 and then in Great Britain after Wesley's death. The Sunday worship service replaced the society meeting, while the classes continued to meet regularly. This structure remained important throughout the 19th century, although in America the expansion west and the revival-meeting culture brought significant changes.[1] For example, the records of a rural Minnesota United Methodist Church that I served list the members in classes as late as 1900.

This class structure has been forgotten almost entirely over the past 100 years. Also during this time, the membership of the various churches that now make up the United Methodist Church has fallen dramatically in the United States. Some may be tempted to see a connection between the decline of the class meeting and the decline of the vitality and numbers within United Methodism. Others may point to the move toward liberalism over this past century. Still others may suggest the United Methodist Church failed to connect with new generations during huge shifts in the culture.

My thoughts, however, go to how the United Methodist church seems to have lost its ability to provide a meaningful structure and pathway for faith formation. Certainly this is something that Wesley brought to his time and context. Certainly this is something that United Methodists are struggling to do today.

The wider church is once again considering small group experiences to be an important part of spiritual formation. The United Methodist tradition has a long history of faith formation within small groups that can inform small group ministry today. The

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[1] See "Chapter 11: The Shape of the Church" and "Chapter 12: The Shape of the Ministry" in Frederick Abbott Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism: A History of the United Methodists and Their Relations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 119-144.

United Methodist General Board of Discipleship, for example, has placed considerable attention on faith formation groups over the past few decades.

Effectively using small groups for faith formation is something that I also am struggling with in my own ministry context. First United Methodist Church (FUMC) claims for its mission statement to "be the visible love of Jesus in our communities and to make disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."[2] We have small group ministries in place (at FUMC they are called "grow groups"), and it is estimated that about 30% of our attending worshipers are involved in a grow group. Yet over the last five years, for the most part the same people have been involved in these groups, which suggests that we have failed to get new people interested in being a part of small groups. We are stuck largely in a traditional Bible study model for many of our groups. We have experimented with a different small group experience, called "The Action Pack," which meets for the sake of doing outreach activities together. This draws upon the United Methodist heritage of linking spiritual growth, small groups, and social action. Even so, the Action Pack model has not been very successful.

Research Question

I explored ways that United Methodist congregations can draw upon both their own United Methodist heritage and the missional church approach to foster spiritual formation using small groups that make sense to the current, postmodern culture and are usable at FUMC. My research question was:

> *How might a participatory action research intervention which draws on the United Methodist heritage of using small groups, framed within a missional*

[2] This and all other local congregations and names of individuals who participated in the research project are identified by pseudonyms in order to protect their identity.

perspective, be used to help cultivate faith formation group experiences in FUMC?

Variables

This research question is analyzed through a number of independent, dependent, and intervening variables. Variables, according to John W. Creswell, are measurable characteristics or attributes that change during the study.[3] Independent variables are those influences that shape the effect or change. Dependent variables are what the independent variables affect. Intervening variables influence the impact of the independent variable on the dependent variables.

Independent Variable

The primary independent variable for my main research is the Participatory Action Research (PAR) itself. The group worked together to identify, select, and implement interventions that drew from their own experience as well as the United Methodist tradition of small groups framed within a missional perspective.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is the cultivation of faith formation group experiences framed within a missional perspective. The various dimensions of this dependent variable which are important for this study can be organized under the United Methodist tradition of small groups, a missional perspective of small groups, and the more specific context of a current, suburban culture. The dimensions of United Methodist tradition include

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[3] John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2009), 52.

accountability, transparency, mutual edification, understanding salvation as a sanctifying process, focusing on both "works of mercy" and "works of piety," personal sharing of one's own spiritual journey, living into a theology of grace, and the United Methodist mission to "make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."[4] The dimensions of the missional perspective include a sense of mutuality within a community, an outward perspective toward the wider community, establishing relationships that share life with one another, and a value of including the stranger. Dimensions of the more specific context of current, suburban culture include relevance, authentic relationship, and the linking of social action with beliefs.

Intervening Variables

There are a number of intervening variables that affect what takes place in relation to the various interventions. Age, marital status, family makeup, employment situation, and income levels affect a person's availability to engage in faith formation practices. Past experience with small groups, past and current participation in faith formation experiences, personality, and church involvement all affect a person's openness to engage a church-offered faith formation experience. Gender influences the value of groups and the desire to connect with others. Personality traits such as being extroverted or introverted affect the desire to be with others or to reach out to others.

[4] "Works of piety" and "works of mercy" are frequent terms used by John Wesley throughout his writings. For example, see his sermon "Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, Discourse VI," in John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley, edited by Albert Cook Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 1:572-591. For the United Methodist mission statement, see United Methodist Church (U.S.), *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2008* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Pub. House, 2008), 91.

Reciprocal Direction of Influence

The dominant direction of influence was from the independent variable of the PAR itself onto the dependent variable as measured among those participating in the PAR. Those participating in the PAR were influenced by the United Methodist heritage and missional perspective of the independent variable. There was also a lesser influence from the dependent variable back on to the PAR. The participants, during this process, became more educated both about the United Methodist heritage and the missional perspective. This education enabled them to participate in the PAR in a more informed and shaped way.

Importance of the Research Question

Many mainline congregations struggle to find ways of engaging people in faith formation beyond the Sunday morning worship experience. The typical model is to invite people to be involved in small groups that are organized around fellowship (i.e. "The Lunch Bunch"), a task or purpose (i.e. quilting or "Meals on Wheels"), or a study (i.e. the traditional Bible study). These small groups may do good work, but they do not necessarily inspire their members to grow consistently in their own faith development. Further, such groups do not seem to be compelling for new people. Roughly the same people, for example, have been a part of small groups in FUMC over the past five years. Still further, people from the wider community, especially those who are not a part of a local church, rarely are interested in such groups. Only a few persons from FUMC's wider community have joined a grow group over the past five years. The experience of FUMC is shared by many mainline congregations: we do not do Christian discipleship well. Something else is needed.

Small groups are a recoverable vehicle for effective and compelling spiritual formation in our current context. Indeed, some churches are doing it effectively. There are many books and programs for leading small faith formation groups in churches today.[5] What is needed for contexts like mine is a way of doing small groups that makes sense in mainline church traditions, draws upon our United Methodist small group heritage, makes sense to our wider communities, and truly fosters spiritual growth.

My research project attempted to design and test attributes of small groups in an actual local church setting. Mainline churches can draw upon this research in designing small group experiences for their own traditions and settings. The wider United Methodist denomination can draw upon our discoveries in order to offer suggestions for effective small group faith formation experiences across the country. Most importantly, perhaps, this research project has begun to help FUMC to move beyond traditional small group ministry and grow in its understanding for how to host effective and attractive small groups, both for its own people and for the wider community. In turn, FUMC can better utilize its small group ministry to become more *of* the wider community rather than just being *with* or *for* the community. At a basic level, this can improve the church's ability to foster real spiritual growth. Finally, I have personally benefited from this research project as my own pastoral ministry has been enhanced in this very important

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[5] A couple of popular examples include Michael Mack, *I'm a Leader...Now What?* (Cincinnati, OH: Standard Publishing, 2007)., and, from Willow Creek resources, Bill Donahue, *Leading Life-Changing Small Groups*, Groups That Grow Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan : Willow Creek Resources, 2012). *Christianity Today* publishes http://www.smallgroups.com, a website and a subscription with a variety of resources for churches and leader to organize small groups, as well as for training, supporting and resourcing small group leaders. Another current hub of resources for small group leaders is offered at http://www.churchleaders.com/smallgroups.

area of leading faith formation groups within the churches I serve. I am a better leader for FUMC, and I will carry these learnings into the future ministry contexts I serve.

Theoretical Lenses

I used four theoretical lenses to interpret my research. These include social networking, the broader postmodern culture, open systems theory, and practice theory. Social networking is important for this study because it explores how people connect and interact. This is an essential component to understanding small group settings. It is also helpful to use postmodern theories to better understand the wider community and connect in more relevant ways. Open systems theory helps missional small groups to organize themselves so they are intentionally shaped and formed for and by those who are in the wider community. Finally, practice theory helps the missional groups to draw upon practices that can encourage faith formation.

Social Networking Theory

Perhaps the most foundational theoretical lens for this project is social networking because it studies the relationships that connect people and can provide the framework for exploring how people relate in small groups. A particularly relevant part of this research to my study is how social network theory explores the social structures of relationships and how they affect beliefs and behaviors, linking them not to the characteristics or attributes within the individuals themselves, but to the interactions and relationships between the nodes. The work of Nancy Katz, along with David Lazer, Holly

Arrow, and Noshir Contractor helps to explain these relationships.[6] Katz et al. apply social network theory specifically with small groups, studying how people naturally structure themselves within groups (explained in terms of "ties") and how the group norms are shared and enforced.[7] The work of Joseph Meyers, Edward T. Hall, and Peter Block helps interpret how people feel a sense of belonging and relatedness in small groups, as opposed to simple connectedness.[8] James W. Fowler's work in faith development theory points to the need for relational contexts for nurture that are provided in small groups.[9] The group experience provides a broader context for spiritual formation not possible when alone. Again, spiritual formation is about changed behavior.

Postmodern Culture Lenses

A second important theoretical lens is the broader postmodern culture missional small groups seek to engage. The groups must intentionally make cross-cultural missionary connections to their significantly postmodern culture. David Bosch provides an important lens that helps define what postmodernism is and how it offers a critique

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[6] Nancy Katz et al., "The Network Perspective of Small Groups: Theory and Research," in *Theories of Small Groups: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Marshall Scott Poole, Andrea B. Hollingshead (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005).

[7] Nancy Katz et al., "Network Theory and Small Groups," *Small Group Research* 35, no. 3 (2004): 307.

[8] Joseph R. Myers, *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Youth Specialties, 2003); Joseph R. Myers, *Organic Community: Creating a Place Where People Naturally Connect* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007); Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990); Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008).

[9] James W. Fowler, "Faith Development at 30: Naming the Challenges of Faith in a New Millennium," *Religious Education* 99, no. 4 (2004).

within our culture against the certitude of modernism.[10] Patrick R. Keifert's fact-value split helps explain how within our culture, the values of postmodernism are not applied consistently.[11] As difficult as it is to understand our postmodern culture, there is opportunity for churches to draw upon postmodern perspectives in order to offer small groups that make sense to and touch the deep yearnings of those in the local neighborhoods. Both Miroslav Volf and David Tracy offer intriguing suggestions that can be used to do this, particularly drawing upon the value of participation of postmodern culture.[12]

Open Systems Theory

The postmodern culture values not just participation but also generative interaction from the wider community. Or, put another way, the local church should not try to guess what is relevant for those who are not a part of it, but instead invite those who are outside of the church community to help create what is actually relevant. Open systems theory, my third theoretical lens, deliberately incorporates input from the environments. For faith formation small groups, this can mean drawing upon the input from those of the wider community to help form and shape the groups themselves.

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[10] David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series; No. 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

[11] Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992).

[12] Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, Sacra Doctrina (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998); David Tracy, *On Naming the Present: Reflections on God, Hermeneutics, and Church*, Concilium Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994).

Mary Jo Hatch and Ann L. Cunliffe trace how organizations shifted to take into account the wider environment, particularly over the past fifty years.[13] Daniel Katz and Robert L. Kahn use the concept of entropy to discuss how organizations influence and are influenced by their environments.[14] Chris Argyris and Donald A. Schön distinguish between single-loop and double-loop learning in organizations.[15] Particularly important for my study is Peter Senge's and Emerald Jay D. Ilac's work on learning organizations, referring to the learning that takes place by those who make up an organization.[16] Margaret Wheatley argues that leaders should draw upon the natural capacity of self-organization that is inherent within systems.[17] Landon Whitsitt adapts open-source models to suggest an open sourced church.[18] In true hospitality, argues Keifert, strangers new to the congregation are valued as gifts sent by God to help and impact the

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[13] Mary Jo Hatch and Ann L. Cunliffe, *Organization Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[14] Daniel Katz and Robert L. Kahn, *The Social Psychology of Organizations*, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978).

[15] Chris Argyris and Donald A. Schön, *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective (Addison-Wesley Series on Organization Development*, 2 vols., Addison-Wesley Od Series (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1978).

[16] Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, Rev. and updated. ed. (New York: Doubleday/Currency, 2006); Emerald Jay D. Ilac, "Learning Organization - Organizational Learning: What Is the Difference?," http://www.researchgate.net/post/Learning_Organization-Organizational_Learning_What_is_difference (accessed November 6, 2014).

[17] Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1999), 15.

[18] Landon Whitsitt, *Open Source Church: Making Room for the Wisdom of All* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2011).

congregation.[19] Missional small groups need intentionally to invite new people from the wider community into them.

Practice Theory

Practice theory is the last theoretical lens for my research project. Engaging in certain practices and activities is often very powerful in bringing about lasting changes in behavior. Changed behavior is the goal of missional small groups.

Pierre Bourdieu's work on *habitus* connects a person's behavior with that person's previous experiences.[20] Learned habits are reinforced by the cultural structures of groups. Sherry B. Ortner works with the connection between practice and structure.[21] People both influence and define their culture, and are influenced and defined by their culture. Small groups can serve as a part of people's defined and defining structures.

The connected work of Jean Lave, Étienne Wenger, and Seth Chaiklin explores ways that people learn within what they coin "communities of practice."[22] Learning is contextual, a reification process, a social event that happens in the practices of everyday life. Their work shows the impactful value of communities that share practices together.

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[19] Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism*, 59.

[20] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

[21] Sherry B. Ortner, "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no. 1 (1984); Sherry B. Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power and the Acting* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

[22] Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Learning in Doing (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, Learning in Doing (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Seth Chaiklin and Jean Lave, *Understanding Practice: Perspectives on Activity and Context*, Learning in Doing (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

From a theological perspective, Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass explore how theological beliefs are lived out through practice.[23] Forming practices help shape a person's behavior and beliefs. Craig Van Gelder points to how both theory/theology (*theoria*) and practice/practical wisdom (*phronesis*) shape personal and communal formation (*habitus*).[24]

The pattern of holiness is a strong value within the Wesleyan tradition. Early Methodist small groups were primarily practice-based. Shared practices reinforced by small groups helped shape people's beliefs and behaviors. They were faith-forming small groups.

Biblical Lenses

In addition to theoretical lenses, I draw upon four biblical lenses for this study. The biblical concepts of spiritual growth and discipleship as following shape how groups explore faith formation. Regular and disciplined habits show a biblical method of how actions are an important way to grow spiritually. Finally, the biblical model of building deep and personal relationships with outsiders helps groups understand the importance of making relationships and sharing life with others.

Spiritual Growth

An important biblical lens for faith formation is the biblical concept of spiritual growth. Those who commit to be in relationship with God are called by God to grow into

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[23] Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002).

[24] Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 99.

the intention that God has for them. At the foundation of this intention are God's two commands to love God and others completely (Deut 6:5, Lev 19:18, Matt 22:37-40).[25]

Growth, particularly as developed in the New Testament epistles, is a process. Paul describes this growth toward the desired perfection in love as growing to become more like God (2 Cor 3:18, Rom 8:29, etc.). Paul and the other epistle writers use the image of physical growth to describe spiritual growth (Eph 4:11-15, 1 Cor 14:20, Heb 5:11-6:1, 1 Pet 2:2, etc.). Another image for this growth used in the New Testament is the image of mature plants bearing fruit (John 15:5, Col 1:10, 2 Cor 9:10, 2 Pet 1:5-8, etc.).

This growth, as stated above, is a partnership of both the work of the individual and the work of the Holy Spirit within the individual. The Holy Spirit gifts the growth, but the individual must also engage in disciplines that develop those gifts within the individual. It is a mutual relationship of working together.

Discipleship as Following

Another biblical lens for spiritual formation is the idea of discipleship. Jesus called his first disciples to follow him (Matt 4:19, 16:24). Jesus taught the disciples from everyday life situations, helping them grow in living situations that emerged during daily life. This means that faith formation happens *along the way* rather than while *sitting aside*. This pushes the understanding of faith formation small groups beyond just meeting together in a study to actually doing life together. Discipleship as following is a form of apprenticeship. Faith formation happens in the contexts of relationships.

[25] All biblical references in this paper are from the New International Version.

Over and over again in the Gospels, Jesus sends his followers out as witnesses into the wider world. When Jesus sends out the twelve and the seventy/seventy-two, they are to learn to trust in the leading and provision of the Holy Spirit. They come back amazed at what they discovered they were able to do (Luke 10:17, Mark 6:30). It was not just for the benefit of those who heard them. They themselves grew! Spiritual growth takes place within Jesus' followers when they connect with others and practice faith sharing.

The Christians in the book of Acts were called "followers of the way" (Acts 9:22, 19:23, 22:4, 24:5, and 24:14). This phrase describes discipleship as a way of life, a form of daily living. Discipleship as following necessarily includes a change in behavior. The book of Acts shows that Jesus' followers continued to live life together (Acts 2:42-46). Spiritual formation comes from living life together, with the accountability of shared practices. Discipleship as following comes in everyday life, in what followers of the way do each day. Small groups, when incorporating these elements of discipleship as following, can be a powerful context fostering spiritual growth.

Behavior and Spiritual Growth

A third biblical lens is the healthy, holy habits that link behavior to spiritual growth. Second Pet 1:5-6 prescribes adding to faith the practices of goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, and godliness. Paul describes in Rom 5:3-5 the growth from suffering to perseverance to character to hope. Also, the early Christians in Jerusalem continued in the practices of teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42).

Often behavioral changes are seen as the result of spiritual growth. Biblically, however, there is a witness of behavior changes leading to spiritual growth. Jesus sends his followers out as witnesses into the wider world. Yet this sending does not seem to be the result of spiritual formation. Spiritual growth takes place within Jesus' followers when they connect with others, practice faith sharing, and live their lives among others.

After the Gospels, the New Testament continues to show that healthy, holy habits foster spiritual growth. Actions, practices, and patterns of behavior that the early Christians did together helped them grow in their following of Jesus (Acts 2:42-46, Heb 20:24, 1 Cor 11:1, etc.). Richard Foster helps identify and apply these spiritual disciplines, both those done individually and those done corporately.[26] Foster's corporate disciplines are particularly important for my research project as they are disciplines that can take place in small groups.

Relationships with Outsiders

The last biblical lens I use is building deep relationships with outsiders. Key biblical motifs are service to others, seeing those usually overlooked, and building relationships with new people. Strong biblical examples of this are Jesus, Paul, and the Apostles. Spiritual formation happens when believers interact well with outsiders. Missional small groups need to take seriously the engagement with people outside the church and outside their own group. This interaction, however, needs to include building deep, ongoing relationships slowly over time that share life together. Not only does this build credibility within the wider community, it also builds the faith of those in the group.

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[26] Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 20th anniversary ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

Missional small groups need to find ways of living out and about, among the wider community, sharing life together.

Theological Lenses

Finally, four theological lenses for my study are a Wesleyan understanding of sanctification, a perichoretic understanding of relationship, hospitality to strangers, and the United Methodist framework of accountable discipleship. The United Methodist understanding of sanctification holds that Christians continually grow in grace and holiness. Christians, then, must always continue to grow spiritually. A perichoretic Trinity lens can help groups learn how to be in communion together, and how to be genuinely inviting new members to join in together. Hospitality, therefore, is a key theological lens as members and groups learn to live into God's calling to be focused on the other. It is in the stranger that God can show up. Spiritual growth for those in small groups relies on engaging those outside the group. The lens of the United Methodist framework of accountable discipleship introduces into groups the dynamic of members giving permission to have other group members hold them accountable for the daily behaviors to which they have previously agreed.

A Wesleyan Understanding of Sanctification

For John Wesley, salvation is a relationship with God, a process toward loving God completely, and a partnership between God and the individual. All along the way, it is always initiated by the Holy Spirit. The individual, however, always has the responsibility to respond to God's gracious acting. For Wesley, the Christian faith was practical divinity, and therefore faith held within the heart necessarily produces in the life

of the believer actual holiness: holiness of heart and life, or, inward and outward holiness. Holiness is loving God and others, both filling the heart and governing the life.

Wesley's genius, however, comes in the small group method he implemented specifically to assist the Methodists to pursue holiness. He placed every Methodist in a small group, with the expressed purpose of encouraging holiness of both heart and life. The members utilized ongoing mutual accountability as the context for sharing their experience of how they lived out their faith in their daily lives. The class meeting became Wesley's method for behavioral change.

Perichoretic Relationships

The social relationship of the perichoretic Trinity informs the nature and interplay of the community and connectedness of faith formation small groups. Gary Simpson helps focus God's mission in the world as a relationship of *communio*, inviting people into communion with Godself.[27] Michael Welker frames this relationship in terms of people's need for intimacy with God.[28] Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile speak of the church not as imitation of the Trinity but as participation in the Trinity.[29] This means necessarily that relationships among people are changed and restored through relationships with God. Small groups, then, can be contexts in which to experience the

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[27] Gary M. Simpson, "No Trinity, No Mission: The Apostolic Difference of Revisioning the Trinity," *World and World* 15, no. 3 (1998).

[28] Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, 1st English-language ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994).

[29] Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation*, The Missional Network (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

authentic relatedness for which God created people. Missional small groups that foster spiritual formation are fundamentally about relationships.

Hospitality

The third lens, hospitality as welcoming the stranger, pushes missional small groups to authentically engage the other. Groups are to welcome the stranger to come and do life together. In an open source culture, the stranger is invited in as a forming participant and is given the authority to help design and shape the ongoing life of the group.

Hospitality becomes a way of receiving God through an encounter with the other. This means more than just friendliness. It means intentionally creating an authentic, ongoing relationship. M. Scott Boren describes the missional way of relating as ways of sharing life together.[30] Robert D. Putnam, David E. Campbell, and Shaylyn Romney Garrett speak about this kind of connection in personal relationships that can interlock even with people with different beliefs.[31]

Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk describe the importance of deep listening when talking about the missional change model.[32] The primary approach to strangers is not to share information with them but to receive the other as a gift from God. Christine D. Pohl and Gilbert I. Bond add that this also means to listen deeply to the scriptures, the

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[30] M. Scott Boren, *Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community That Makes a Difference in the World*, Allelon Missional Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010).

[31] Robert D. Putnam, David E. Campbell, and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, 1st Simon & Schuster hardcover ed. (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

[32] Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World*, Leadership Network Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

nature of the ministry focus, and the tacit understandings and practices of hospitality of the group.[33] Whitsitt's image of "open source" helps groups treat the stranger as a full, contributing part of the group.[34]

A United Methodist Framework for Accountable Discipleship in Small Groups

The last theoretical lens that helps inform this research project is the framework of accountable discipleship for small groups developed and published by David Lowes Watson and Steven Manskar through the United Methodist General Board of Discipleship (GBOD). Watson drew upon his research of the early Methodist class meetings under the leadership of John Wesley and proposed that accountable discipleship, a distinguishing characteristic of early Methodist class meetings, can be adapted for use in small groups among Methodists again today.[35] He called this adapted form of Wesley's mutual accountability, "covenant discipleship."[36]

Steven Manskar continued Watson's work in covenant discipleship, and published a number of resources to help local churches and their leaders understand better the theological and historical groundings for accountable discipleship as well as draw upon this heritage in local church settings. In *Accountable Discipleship: Living in God's*

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[33] Christine D. Pohl, "A Community's Practice of Hospitality: The Interdependence of Practices and of Communities," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002); Gilbert I. Bond, "Liturgy, Ministry, and the Stranger: The Practice of Encountering the Other in Two Christian Communities," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002).

[34] Whitsitt, *Open Source Church: Making Room for the Wisdom of All*.

[35] David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1985).

[36] David Lowes Watson, *Covenant Discipleship: Christian Formation through Mutual Accountability* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1991).

Household, Manskar proposes an accountable discipleship small group format called Covenant Discipleship Groups.[37] These small group experiences, he argues, can be contexts that both create experiences of public works of piety and mercy, as well as hold participants accountable to private works of piety and mercy.

In 2012, Manskar published *Small Group Ministries: Christian Formation through Mutual Accountability* as part of the *Guideline* resources made available to local United Methodist congregation.[38] In the booklet, Manskar grounds small groups in the United Methodist tradition on the dual foundations of grace and holiness. These two foundations bring transformation in the lives of individuals through three dynamics Manskar identifies as believing (faith belief in God), belonging (love-relationships with others), and behaving (living in obedience). These three are powerfully nurtured in covenant discipleship small groups and, when held together, lives are changed.

The theoretical, biblical, and theological lenses of this study work together to reveal insights for how churches can use small groups in a missional way. Important themes running through them all are the related connection between people, the importance of actions, and framing the other as a valuable gift of God. These lenses, therefore, also provide helpful insights for interpreting this research project.

Methodology

The methodology for my research project was a two-stage, mixed methods concurrent approach. The first stage was a simple exploratory project using qualitative

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[37] Steven W. Manskar, *Accountable Discipleship: Living in God's Household* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2000), 16.

[38] Steven W. Manskar, *Small Group Ministries: Christian Formation through Mutual Accountability*, Guidelines (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012).

interviews over the phone with leaders of seven different churches who oversaw their small group ministries. The second stage was a participatory action research (PAR) mixed methods transformative research project within my own ministry context. The two-stage process was important because the first stage was an information-gathering stage that helped inform the work of the second stage. The information learned from other churches was helpful to the PAR group during the second stage.

I used a simple exploratory method in gathering information in the first stage. I did this because it allowed a more in-depth look at a few scenarios where small groups were being used well in local churches. I wanted to understand each within its own setting and discover which differences were connected to its setting.

A mixed methods approach was beneficial during the second stage because not only did I want to engage in PAR, I also wanted to learn about its impact among the wider congregation. The quantitative part was useful in ascertaining a general impression from within FUMC of its own small group ministry. Further, by using a baseline and end line survey, I was able to analyze the changes among church leaders over the research time frame.

PAR was advantageous for the substantive part of this project because I desired to experiment with different ideas to see what might be used in small group settings, particularly in my own ministry context. As this required discernment, collaboration, experimentation, and reflection, PAR was a good fit. Further, as this project was about group experience, it was important to use a cooperative research group.

Design

My research project had two sequential stages. The first stage was a simple exploratory project of seven different United Methodist churches that were already using small groups effectively for faith formation and that engaged the wider community. I used a nonprobability purposive sampling for this interview protocol. I conducted qualitative interviews with each over the phone. The purpose of this research was to provide background and knowledge for the second stage of my project about how other churches were engaging in small group ministry effectively. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix A. I recorded these interviews digitally and then had them transcribed by a professional stenographer. This stenographer signed a confidentiality agreement, available in Appendix B.

The second stage of my research project was a PAR mixed methods transformative research project within my own ministry context. I began in mid-November 2014 by administering the same baseline quantitative questionnaire to two groups, as a baseline measure for two longitudinal panels. The questionnaire, found in Appendix C, surveyed how effectively people felt our small groups both foster faith formation and engage people in the wider community.

The first set was administered among a census of the thirty-six most active congregational leaders. The second group to receive the questionnaire was a census of the seven from my ministry context who agreed to be a part of the experimental small group experience of my PAR project. This again served as a baseline survey for a longitudinal panel.

The PAR group began meeting in late November 2014, agreeing to meet twice a month, through August 2015. The protocol we followed for interpreting our interventions is provided in Appendix D. Our interventions included practices that we each did individually when apart, as well as activities we did as a group.

I concluded by administering two end line quantitative questionnaires and by conducting one focus group in September of 2015. The first end line questionnaire was administered to the same nonprobability purposive census of twenty-eight leaders who had returned the baseline questionnaire. The same questionnaire from the baseline survey was used, this time serving as the end line measure of the longitudinal panel. The other end line questionnaire was administered to the nonprobability purposive census of the seven participants who made up the PAR small group. Again the same questionnaire was used, serving as the end line measure of the longitudinal panel.

I conducted a concluding focus group with the nonprobability purposive census of the seven participants in the PAR small group. This protocol, available in Appendix E, explored their learnings from this project, particularly if there was any perceived evidence that this small group model might be viable to be used again.

Analyzing the Data

I analyzed the qualitative data using a modified version of Kathy Charmaz's guidelines for coding qualitative data, as she describes in *Constructing Grounded Theory*.[39] As she suggests, I conducted initial coding by identifying within the data word-

[39] Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006).

by-word, line-by-line, and incident-by-incident *in vivo* codes.[40] I then used Rubin's and Rubin's suggestion to evaluate the codes not just for frequency but for meaning.[41] I then conducted what Charmaz calls focused coding by grouping first the *in vivo* codes into focused codes, and then by grouping the focused codes into axial codes.[42] At this point, I again utilized Herbert J. Rubin's and Irene Rubin's technique of theory building to explore the interplay and connection among the axial codes.[43] I explored various possibilities of how the axial codes could be interrelated, seeking the point of what Rubin and Rubin call "saturation."[44] This resulted in the theoretical coding that completed my qualitative analysis.

The quantitative data of my research project were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. I kept the longitudinal panels for the PAR group and the church leader's survey separate because I felt the PAR group would test very differently. For descriptive statistics, I found the total number of the sample (N), the number of viable responses (n), the frequency (f), the percentage (%), and the mean for Likert scale questions. For inferential statistics, I attempted to conduct cross tabulations and chi-square tests, but given the small number of questionnaires, these tests could not produce meaningful results. Therefore, I conducted paired t-tests for all the questions, looking for

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[40] Ibid., 50-53.

[41] Herbert J. Rubin and Irene Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2012), 196-199, 204-106.

[42] Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis,* 55-60.

[43] Rubin and Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data,* 195.

[44] Ibid., 63.

a p-value of 0.05 or less. Only a few t-tests identified a significance level within this range to reject the null hypothesis. As I was simply trying to understand the sample itself and not trying to make any inferences to a wider population, I did not see any need to conduct ANOVA or the accompanying *post hoc* tests. I did make some observations about the direction of change in some of the mean scores, even for the questions that paired t-tests did not indicate a change within the required level of significance. Finally, for the one open-ended question and questions that allowed for comments, I created codes using the same process as I described above for coding qualitative data.

Other Matters

Definition of Key Terms

Accountable discipleship: Within the United Methodist tradition it describes a voluntary covenantal relationship among small groups of persons seeking to grow as disciples of Jesus in which the individuals meet in order to hold one another accountable.

Covenant Discipleship: A term used by the General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church to describe a small group format in which participants have an official (oftentimes written) agreement together granting the other participants permission to hold one another accountable to what has been agreed upon together as a group.

Environment: In terms of Open Systems Theory, the environment of a group or organization is the broader context within which that group or organization is located, and with which the group or organization has interaction and reciprocal influence.

Faith formation: The development and growth of a person's connection with the Divine, including trust, belief, and the conformity of daily life. For this project, faith formation includes the initial spiritual awareness and openness to the Divine as well as

the ongoing growth and maturation. It includes spiritual growth, which is used to mean more specifically the progression along the sanctification process. The sanctification process is the journey toward holiness, toward loving God and others more completely.

Missional perspective: A perspective that the Church itself is God's sent mission in the world, and that the church exists to reach those who are not already a part of it. Mission is not something the church does; mission is what the church is.

Mutual Accountability: When people voluntarily agree to be held responsible by others to the shared commitments they have made.

Open systems theory: Understanding a system as freely interacting with other systems, both influencing and being influenced by them. A change in one system leads to a change within the other systems as well. Elements within a system, therefore, are influenced not just by its own system, but also by other systems. An open system, therefore, interacts with its wider environment, influencing and being influenced by it.

Organizational learning: A part of organizational theory that studies the way an organization learns and adapts.

Organizational theory: The study of social organizations and their interrelationship with the environment in which they operate.

Participatory Action Research: A research approach in which all participants, including the leader, actively participate in the forming and acting process through collaborative inquiry and experimenting, with an intentional purpose of bringing change to the broader system.

Perichoretic Trinity: Understanding God as a social communion. The relationship among the three persons of God is one of connection, interrelation, and interpenetration.

Postmodernism: A term used to describe the late-20th-century cultural reaction against modernism. It usually includes a rejection of truth as certitude, a general distrust of grand theories and ideologies, and an embracing of individual perspectives.

Practices: For this project, this refers to specific and intentional activities or behaviors that people do in order to affect and influence themselves, others, their systems, or their broader environment.

Salvation as a sanctifying process: A theological understanding within the United Methodist tradition that salvation is not a one-time event or decision choosing Jesus, but an ongoing, reciprocating relationship with Jesus in which both the individual and the Holy Spirit continually work to make the individual more holy.

Sanctification: In United Methodist theology, it is the ongoing process in which the individual and Holy Spirit work together toward the perfection intended by God. It is through God's grace that individuals are cleansed from sin and are empowered to respond to the Holy Spirit's continual healing and transforming.

Social network and social networking: In this project, these terms refer to the social theories that understand social structure as a set of social actors who relate in dyadic ties. These theories inform methods of analyzing the structures of the broader network as well as describing and explaining the patterns within the structures.

Transformative learning theory: A process of changing one's framing perspective that includes changes in understanding the self, one's belief systems, and lifestyle.

Works of mercy: A term used by John Wesley to describe those actions that, as means of grace, Christians do intentionally in order to help others.

Works of piety: A term used by John Wesley to describe personal spiritual disciplines that, as means of grace, help Christians to grow in their spiritual faith.

Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality was maintained for all respondents, and individuals have not been identified by name in the project's written reporting. Returned surveys were given a number, and only I had access to the number-name associations. The transcriber of qualitative research recordings signed an understanding of confidentiality. Informed consent forms were used with all interviews and focus groups. Implied consent forms were attached to all questionnaires. Both of these were drafted following Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines for content and procedure. The instruments avoided what the IRB considers sensitive questions. These documents can be found in Appendices B, F, and G.

I led and conducted my research within the ministry context of which I was serving as the pastor. I was aware that this brought bias and power issues to the project. I am personally passionate about the ministry of small groups and believe that they can play an important role in faith development for those in the groups and for the wider congregation. I asked my PAR group to help me be aware of any unhelpful influence I brought to the process. In order to solicit more authentic responses, I expressed to participants that their experiences, perspectives, and contributions were valuable and legitimate. I intentionally encouraged people to share in their own words rather than trying to use unfamiliar theological language.

I drew upon Charmaz's guidelines for controlling bias in question asking, both in the questionnaires and protocols. The qualitative protocols each began with an informed

consent form that encouraged open sharing. The quantitative questionnaires included an implied consent form that explained that their responses would be kept confidential.

All samples were drawn from adults who were over the age of eighteen and who were not considered vulnerable by IRB standards. All data were kept in a locked file drawer in the church's main office, and only the transcriber and I had access. Recordings were kept on my personal tablet, which had a secure login. Only the transcriber and I had access to these recordings. These records will be kept until May 31, 2019, and then destroyed. This study had no anticipated risks to the participants of the research project. The benefits of this study included helping the congregation grow in its missional development of small group ministry and engaging the wider community more effectively. These benefits outweighed any nominal risks from this project.

Overview of Following Chapters

The following two chapters discuss the lenses that were used to help interpret this research. Chapter two discusses the four theoretical lenses used: Social Network Theories, Postmodern Culture Lenses, Open Systems Theory, and Practice Theory. Chapter three first explains the biblical lenses used: Spiritual Growth, Discipleship as Following, Behavior and Spiritual Growth, and Relationships with Outsiders. The second part of chapter three discusses the theological lenses used: A Wesleyan Understanding of Sanctification, Perichoretic Relationship, Hospitality, and a United Methodist framework of accountable discipleship.

Chapter four outlines my research methodology, including my rationale, biblical and theological groundings, and the research design. Chapter five provides the results and data of the project. Chapter six explains the conclusions and insights that may be drawn

from the data and places them in conversation with the theoretical, biblical, and theological lenses of this project. Finally, chapter seven, the Epilogue, suggests some implications from this study that can be useful for local ministry contexts.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL LENSES

Small groups are significant in helping people grow and change. Christian churches, for example, have been using small groups for spiritual growth and faith formation since Jesus ascended.[1] Over the centuries, these groups have taken on a variety of forms and functions. Even today, the importance of accountability groups continues to receive increased attention. Yet many churches, including United Methodist churches, struggle to utilize small groups well.

This chapter presents four theoretical lenses that help congregational leaders better understand the dynamics of small groups today in order to strengthen a missional approach for spiritual formation in their contexts: social networking, the broader postmodern culture, open systems theories, and practice theories. Social networking is important for this study because it explores how people connect and interact. This is an essential component in understanding small group settings. It is also helpful to use postmodern theories to better understand the wider community and connect in ways that are more relevant. Open systems theories push missional small groups to organize themselves so they are intentionally shaped and formed for and by those who are in the wider community. Finally, practice theories inform how missional groups can draw upon practices that can encourage faith formation.

[1] See, for example, Acts 2:42-47.

Each of these lenses offers helpful frames for understanding the dynamics and possibilities of small group ministry. They explain, each in part, a bit of why small groups can be so influential in changing people's performance and behaviors. When put together, they offer a more complete picture of the power of small groups.

Social Network Theories

Introduction and Background

Often today the term "social networking" is associated with the many online forms of relating. Yet social network theory has a much longer history and is a widely developed social science approach that continues to be applied to many disciplines. Most people, perhaps, have encountered this research perspective in what has become known as Six Degrees of Separation developed by Stanley Milgram in the 1960s (actually, Milgram stated it as "two persons are five removes apart").[2] He sent one hundred letters to random individuals with instructions to forward the letter in a way that it could eventually get to a certain specified and unknown individual in Sharon, Massachusetts.[3] The study found that for those letters that reached the specified recipient, it took an average of six forwards.[4] Many people are unknowingly interpreting this research when they claim that there are only six degrees of separation between all people on earth, a claim this research project did not assert.

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[2] Stanley Milgram, "The Small World Problem," *Psychology Today* May (1967): 67.

[3] Ibid., 64.

[4] Ibid., 65.

Social network theory does focus on the relationships that connect people. Early work of the social science networking approach is usually traced back to Ferdinand Tönnies, who, in 1887, separated how people relate with one another (he used the term "social ties" or "bonds") into two categories.[5] The first, which he called *Gemeinschaft* or "community," describes the direct interactions, personal roles, informal values, and beliefs that characterize people in closer connections.[6] The other, which he called *Gesellschaft*, or "society," describes the more indirect interactions, impersonal roles, formal values, and beliefs that describe people in broader connections.[7]

Émile Durkheim, another early social network pioneer, argued in 1893 that people relate in social roles because they cannot maintain personal relationships with everyone.[8] In 1897, his work on suicide introduced the idea of anomie to describe the dissonance for when a person's or group's relationships with the community do not match the community's expectations.[9] This, and three other social structures (fatalistic, altruistic, and egoistic), he argued, shape the behavior of those who live within them.[10]

In the 1930s, J. L. Moreno and colleagues developed their "psychodrama" therapy using their work at a girls' school and formulated basic sociometric techniques for

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[5] Ferdinand Tönnies and Charles Price Loomis, *Community & Society (Gemeinschaft Und Gesellschaft)* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1957), 33-34, 242.

[6] Ibid., 37.

[7] Ibid., 64-65.

[8] Emile Durkheim and W. D. Halls, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York: Free Press, 1984), 37, 43.

[9] Emile Durkheim, *Suicide, a Study in Sociology*, ed. George Simpson, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: The Free Press, 1951), 241ff.

[10] Ibid., 145-151.

mapping the relationships among the girls.[11] J. Barnes often is credited with coining the idea of social networks, which came from his study of a Norwegian island parish in the early 1950s.[12] About the same time, Georg Simmel, who asserted the now classic statement that "society arises from the individual and the individual arises out of association," introduced the structural approach to social interactions.[13] The direct development of social network theory, however, is difficult to trace accurately due to its widespread development across many fields of study since the 1950s. Even so, Nancy Katz and others notice a waning of publications on both social network theory and group theory in the decade before the 1990s.[14]

Then, in the mid-1990s, published research in network theory exploded. An example of this is the work of Jeffrey Arnett, who in 1995, drew upon the early pioneers to propose a theory of broad and narrow socialization for social contexts.[15] His theory attempts to explain that broad contexts encourage independence and individualism, whereas narrow contexts promote obedience and conformity.[16] Network theory continues to receive much attention across most disciplines, as relationships—or ties—are valued as basic building blocks of human experience.

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[11] J. L. Moreno, *Who Shall Survive? Foundations of Sociometry, Group Psychotherapy and Sociodrama*, Rev. ed. (Beacon, NY: Beacon House, 1953).

[12] J. Barnes, "Class and Committees in a Norwegian Island Parish," *Human Relations* 7 (1954): 43.

[13] Georg Simmel, *Conflict and the Web of Group Affiliations* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1955), 163.

[14] Katz et al., "The Network Perspective of Small Groups: Theory and Research," 307.

[15] Jeffrey Jenson Arnett, "Broad and Narrow Socialization: The Family in the Context of a Cultural Theory," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57, no. 3 (1995).

[16] Ibid.

Social Network Theory Explained

Social network theory, as described in current research, is the study of how people and groups of people relate and interact with each other within a given network, and, perhaps more importantly, how these social structures affect beliefs and behaviors. Wasserman and Faust describe it simply as the set of actors and the ties among them.[17] A network is the largest unit of study, usually consisting of a selected group of individuals or groups.[18] Actors, referred to as nodes, are the smallest unit of study, and can be individuals or groups.[19] In a study of one particular small group within a local congregation, for example, the group itself would be the network, and the individuals within the group would be the nodes. In a study of all the small groups within a local congregation, by contrast, the congregation would be the network and each group would be a node. More complex social network studies analyze networks that include both individuals and groups.

There are three basic types of social networks. Ego-centric networks analyze the relationships of a single node. Socio-centric networks explore the relationships among a closed network of nodes. This kind of network has a consistent roster of participants, such as a small group of a local church. Open-system networks, by contrast, study networks in which the boundaries are not defined clearly, such as, for example, the most active people in a congregation. Each of these three networks provides helpful perspectives for my research project. An ego-centric perspective helps understand how an

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[17] Stanley Wasserman and Katherine Faust, *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Applications*, Structural Analysis in the Social Sciences 8 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 3.

[18] Ibid., 20.

[19] Katz et al., "The Network Perspective of Small Groups: Theory and Research," 279.

individual within a congregation relates to his or her small group, a socio-centric network helps explore the relationships within a small group, and an open-system network helps analyze the propensity of those who are connected with a congregation to select in and out of small groups offered through the congregation.

The defining distinction of Social Network Theory is that it focuses on the interactions and relationships between the nodes rather than the characteristics or attributes inherent within the nodes themselves.[20] Katz et al. put it this way, "a network study focuses on *relationships* among components in the group system…rather than on the *features* of these components" (italics original).[21] These webs of relationships can help predict how people will behave: "If two people behave in a similar fashion, it is likely because they are situated in comparable locations in their social networks, rather than because they both belong to the same category."[22]

These relationships are categorized into communication ties (who gives information to whom), formal ties (who reports to whom), affective ties (who likes or trusts whom), proximity ties (who is spatially or electronically close to whom), and cognitive ties (who knows whom).[23] Everett Rogers describes networks as "interconnected individuals who are linked by patterned communication flows."[24] Social Network Theory, therefore, studies the *sharing* of information.

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[20] Wasserman and Faust, *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Applications,* 21.

[21] Katz et al., "The Network Perspective of Small Groups: Theory and Research," 283.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., 280.

[24] Everett M. Rogers, *Communication Technology: The New Media in Society*, Series in Communication Technology and Society (New York: Free Press, 1986), 203.

These ties, also called links, can be also categorized by the varying degrees of closeness. John S. Granovetter of John Hopkins University divided ties into strong and weak ties.[25] Strong ties represent close relationships, weak ties represent relationships more like acquaintances. His research suggested that although strong ties are more important for support, weak ties are more important for securing outside information.[26]

Social Network analysis generally uses complicated algorithms and visualization software to map the relational structure of the nodes and their ties within a network. These social network diagrams, called sociograms, can help discover patterns of informal structure and communication within a network.[27] A node's location within the network suggests the strength and number of ties of that node.[28] A node with many ties to other nodes would be more centrally located, whereas a node with fewer ties would be mapped toward the periphery.

Social Network Research with Small Groups

Of particular interest to my research project is the work that Nancy Katz at Harvard University has led with a number of researchers in studying social network research with small groups. They note that, since the mid-1990s, there has been a surge in research on both social networks and small groups, and that their research has tried to

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[25] Mark Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties: A Network Theory Revisited," *Sociological Theory* 1 (1983): 201.

[26] Ibid., 202.

[27] Katz et al., "The Network Perspective of Small Groups: Theory and Research," 280.

[28] Ibid., 281.

connect the two.[29] These authors explain that in social network literature, groups can mean either self-selecting, fully (or nearly fully) connected networks, sometimes identified as "cliques," or a set of individuals around whom a boundary is imposed.[30] Their research has studied how norms are passed around and enforced among a group through "reputations, iterated relationships, and threat of sanctions."[31]

Katz et al. propose five categories of theories to explain why people establish and dissolve ties within their network. The first are theories of self-interest, which assert that people attempt to increase their own personal desires and interests.[32] The second are theories of social exchange and dependency, in which ties are made to access the desired resources that others possess. The third are theories of mutual interest and collective action, in which connecting with others helps achieve shared values. The fourth are cognitive theories, which include people desiring to be in relationship with those whom they think other group members will like. Finally, there are theories of homophily, in which people want to create relationships with people they think are similar to themselves.

Katz et al. also suggest a number of ways to measure the ties within a small group. One is "actor degree centrality," which measures the direct ties actors send or receive.[33] Another is "betweenness centrality," which measures the ties actors have with

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[29] Katz et al., "Network Theory and Small Groups," 307.

[30] Katz et al., "The Network Perspective of Small Groups: Theory and Research," 281-282.

[31] Ibid., 282.

[32] Ibid., 283. This paragraph draws upon material from pages 283-284, and 286.

[33] Katz et al., "Network Theory and Small Groups," 310. This paragraph draws upon material from pages 310-311.

those not directly connected within the group. Another is "closeness centrality," which measures the direct and indirect ties with actors in the broader network. Still another is "reciprocity," which measures the mutual ties between actors. A final measure is "transitivity," which evaluates "the extent to which actors who are connected to one another are also connected to the same other actors." All these relationships are at play within a small group and all must be taken into consideration when trying to understand the dynamics of the group. The researchers conclude that "there is no single formal statement of the network perspective."

Their research has suggested some important assertions for how relationships work within groups. When people work in self-formed groups, individuals are attracted to those whom they judge are similar to themselves.[34] The greater the diversity of the nodes within a group, the lower the interaction level among them. A corollary to this is that people choose to work in groups with people who are similar to themselves and with whom they have had prior ties. The more the people of a group have had prior relationships, the easier it is for the group members to express disagreement. The ties among group members have continuing influence, from ties that were established before the group was formed, to ties that continue after the group dissolves. The person with the most centralized position within the group is likely to emerge as the leader.

Katz and her group of researchers identify three important benefits that can result from applying network theory to small groups. The first is that the network perspective can help investigate phenomena that otherwise have been difficult to study, such as the

[34] Katz et al., "The Network Perspective of Small Groups: Theory and Research," 289. This paragraph draws upon material from pages 288-289.

impact of a group's external context.[35] The second benefit is the ability to explore how the relationships shared among a group's members impact the group's relationships with those outside the group. The last benefit is how network theory offers ways of identifying and exploring important features of small group interaction. They conclude, however, by raising a deficiency in how network theory has been applied to small groups. Most studies, they point out, have been using one-time "snapshots" of the network ties and lack a longitudinal analysis that comes from observing those ties over time.

Relationships of Belonging

One other area of network theory that is particularly important for this project is the study of the relationships of belonging that people experience within groups. The fact that people are connected together does not mean necessarily that they share a sense of belonging together. Joseph Meyers asserts in both *The Search to Belong* and *Organic Community* that people in today's culture tend to connect but do not necessarily belong.[36] Edward T. Hall argues that people form relationships of belonging within groups not based on size or activities done together but on space created for belonging.[37] Community, then, is something that is created intentionally.

Peter Block has been working with small groups in Cincinnati to create a better experience of community. Society, he asserts, is fragmented, and people experience

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[35] Katz et al., "Network Theory and Small Groups," 324. This paragraph draws upon material from pages 324-325.

[36] Myers, *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups*; Myers, *Organic Community: Creating a Place Where People Naturally Connect*.

[37] Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), x, 108.

isolation while longing for a sense of deeper belonging.[38] Authentic community comes through small groups where a sense of intimacy can be created and where authentic conversations can happen; the small group is "the unit of transformation."[39] He argues, "The intimacy makes the process personal. It provides the structure where people overcome isolation and where the experience of belonging is created."[40] In his work with John McKnight, Block writes that the abundant community comes from intentional relationships with others in the wider community for cooperation and shared life.[41] A community that cares for each other is created through small groups that intentionally foster a responsibility for one another.[42]

James W. Fowler's work with faith development theory helps make the connection from the wider society to communities of faith. He affirms the importance of relationships in small groups for faith formation, citing the need for "a relational nurture" for faith to develop.[43] Groups in which people intentionally care for each other and for others in the wider community are places where spiritual formation happens: "Faith development occurs where working theologies are being hammered out in practices of care for the common good, and for those in need."[44]

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[38] Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging,* 1.

[39] Ibid., 93.

[40] Ibid., 93-94.

[41] John McKnight, Peter Block, and American Planning Association., *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010), 14.

[42] Ibid., 67.

[43] Fowler, "Faith Development at 30: Naming the Challenges of Faith in a New Millennium," 413.

[44] Ibid., 419-420.

Relevance for This Project

Social network theory is an important theoretical lens for my research project. Spiritual growth, ultimately, is about changed behaviors. These behavioral changes are affected by more than an individual's own inherent attributes. There is also an important influence from an individual's relationships with others. Network theory's focus on social structures and the relationship ties among people helps explore the ways relationships can shape and form beliefs and behaviors.

This project asserts that small groups are an important component in a person's faith formation. Network theory shows that group relationships heavily influence a member's values and actions. Group structures foster conformity to values owned by the group. This can be a powerful encouragement for individuals when small groups value spiritual formation and assert the norm of spiritual growth. Groups also can provide forming contexts of meaning and belonging. In a broader culture of isolation, this can provide a nurturing environment in which people grow both into the spiritual identity they have as being a part of God's people, and also into the fullness of the plan God has for their lives.

Network theory can help congregations manage the social dynamics that arise when people join small groups. The ties that members create can take a variety of forms, can develop with different strengths, can be formed for different reasons, and can move different directions. When congregations and group leaders are aware of these ties, they can help groups form in healthy ways. Also, realizing that arising leaders have more centralized ties can help congregations and groups identify well-received leaders and then more appropriately tailor their training.

People's preference to be connected to familiar people, to people deemed to be similar, and to people with whom they have shared ties can help congregations identify why some people may not feel comfortable in certain groups, or why some people have a hard time connecting with others in a group. People often self-select in and out of groups without even being aware of why. Perhaps, in order to help groups succeed, churches could encourage groups to affirm more intentionally the commonalities and similarities shared among members, or offer ways to make personal connections and create affinity.

The relational ties linking nodes and groups to the wider network can also provide insight into how small groups connect with the wider congregation. When people see familiar people already in groups, they may have a greater willingness to get involved in a small group. How groups are portrayed by and within the wider congregation can influence the propensity of others within the network to join in a small group. The care, sense of belonging, and community that groups demonstrate can encourage new people to try them.

The early Methodist class meetings were surprisingly effective in helping early Methodists to grow consistently in their faith. Social network theory helps explain why they were so successful. The members' shared spiritual experience, their familiarity with each other, how the members balanced their identity within the group with their identity within a wider hostile culture, the desire to help one another, the use of corporate practices, and the ways leaders arose among the groups because of their connection to other group members, all demonstrate social network dynamics at play. The relationships within the groups provided a newfound encouragement for their members to continue in their spiritual growth.

The group experience provides a broader context for spiritual formation not possible to the individual. Again, spiritual formation is about changed behavior. Understanding the effects of the relationship dynamic within small groups helps access the ways those groups can influence and shape belief and behavior still today.

Postmodern Culture Lenses

The second important theoretical frame for my research project is comprised of postmodern theories of the current ministry context. My project's missional perspective means that faith formation small groups are intended also for those in the wider community. The missional church, says Van Gelder, is inherently missionary by its nature.[45] It understands that God "sends it into the world to participate fully in God's mission."[46] Local churches and their faith formation small groups, when they live into their missional identity, understand that they engage and include their local contexts.

Roxburgh and Romanuk explain that people in missional churches "function like cross-cultural missionaries," going out into their communities and making connections with the people there.[47] Missional small groups, then, must be faith formation opportunities for those who are not connected already with the congregation. The groups must intentionally include people from the wider community.

My project explores the ways spiritual formation can happen in and through small groups that resonate in my current, upper-Midwestern, suburban context. In a significant

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[45] Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit,* 16.

[46] Ibid., 85.

[47] Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World,* 13.

way, the culture of this context is postmodern. Missional small groups need to function as cross-cultural missionary connections to a significantly postmodern culture. Postmodern theories, therefore, are an important theoretical lens for this project.

Postmodern

The description of *postmodern* is widely debated and difficult to nuance. David Tracy comments, "We live in an age that cannot name itself."[48] As the term itself suggests, postmodern may be best understood for what it is not. Generally, postmodern refers to the late twentieth century reaction against what is deemed modern. Postmodern approaches usually include skepticism, a rejection of certainty, holding truth as constructed, and understanding things from a variety of perspectives, all of which are valid. Mary Jo Hatch argues that hegemony, the imposed interests of those in authority across the majority, for example, is deconstructed in postmodern perspectives.[49]

Hatch does point out, however, that postmodern perspectives can have some specific characteristics. Although language does not fix meaning, discourse can bring revelation.[50] She also lifts up the value of narrative and symbol, as well as the role people play as social constructors of reality.[51] Using symbolic perspectives to deconstruct the linguistic supports for a dominant position, she argues, can lead to real and material

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[48] Tracy, *On Naming the Present: Reflections on God, Hermeneutics, and Church,* 3.

[49] Hatch and Cunliffe, *Organization Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives,* 83.

[50] Ibid., 43.

[51] Ibid., 78.

change.[52] She suggests the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Arab Awakening, and the Occupy movement as examples of how the use of symbol brought about real change.[53]

The use of the term "postmodern" traces back to the late 1800s. Ihab Hassan identifies that John Watkins Chapman used it to describe a departure from French Impressionism, calling the new kind of work "a Postmodern style of painting."[54] He also adds, "Its origin remains unclear, though we know that Federico de Ones used the word *postmodernismo* in his *Antología de la possía española hispanoamericana* (1882-1932) published in Madrid in 1934."[55] J. M. Thompson used the term in a journal article in 1914 to describe changes in religious attitudes and beliefs.[56] Yet it was not until 1939 that the term was used to describe a historical movement, when Arnold J. Toynbee commented, "Our own Post-Modern Age has been inaugurated by the general war of 1914–1918."[57] Since then the postmodern perspective has been developed in a variety of disciplines, particularly art, architecture, philosophy, history, and economics. In 1995, Walter Truett Anderson used postmodernism to identify a specific worldview.[58]

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[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ihab Habib Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1987), 12.

[55] Ibid., 85.

[56] J. M. Thompson, "Post-Modernism," *The Hibbert Journal* XII, no. 4 (1914): 733.

[57] Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. 5 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 43.

[58] Walt Anderson, *The Truth About the Truth: De-Confusing and Re-Constructing the Postmodern World*, A New Consciousness Reader (New York: Putnam, 1995), 6-10.

Postmodernism and Postmodernity

Technically, the term "postmodernism" is used to refer to movements (such as those in arts and literature) often associated with deconstruction and post-structuralism in the late twentieth century. The Victoria and Albert Museum in London, for example, hosted an exhibition from September 2011 through January 2012 entitled *Postmodernism - Style and Subversion 1970–1990*. The museum claimed it was "the first in-depth survey of art, design and architecture of the 1970s and 1980s, examining one of the most contentious phenomena in recent art and design history: Postmodernism."[59]

The term "postmodernity" refers to the social culture that developed after modernity. Modernity, as a western social culture, had its beginnings in the European Enlightenment and was built on the certainty of universal knowledge discovered through science. Postmodernity is a rejection of that certainty and instead embraces relative truth created by the individual. Whereas Tracy describes modernity as the evolutionary development of Western triumph and superiority, he, in turn, describes postmodernity as the "reality of otherness and difference," in a present that cannot be grounded.[60] Paul Michael Lützeler uses the term "postmodernity" more specifically to refer to the social re-evaluation of Western values that took place since the 1950s and 1960s, culminating in the Social Revolution of 1968.[61]

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[59] "Postmodernism - Style and Subversion 1970–1990," Victoria and Albert Museum, http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/exhibitions/postmodernism/ (accessed November 22, 2014).

[60] Tracy, *On Naming the Present: Reflections on God, Hermeneutics, and Church,* 3-4.

[61] Paul Michael Lützeler, "From Postmodernism to Postcolonialism: On the Interrelation of the Discourses," TRANS: Internet Journal for Cultural Studies, http://www.inst.at/trans/11Nr/luetzeler11.htm (accessed November 12, 2014).

Culture

M. Scott Boren defines culture as the "sum total of ways of living built up by a human community and transmitted from one generation to another."[62] Rather than intentionally taught, it is "absorbed."[63] Culture, argues Scott Cormode, provides a "repertoire of meanings" upon which people draw to interpret their experiences and to "construct stories that make meaning."[64] These interpretations then shape people's actions and behaviors.[65]

The context of my research project is a culture that has strong elements of postmodernity. Postmodern perspectives influence the beliefs, actions, and behaviors of the people to whom the church is sent. Missional small groups, then, need to draw upon postmodern theories to understand better and engage more effectively the people of their local neighborhoods. Boren draws upon the *missionary* derivative of the word *missional*, and asserts, "we must listen to the culture with the ears of a missionary."[66] Patrick Keifert calls for "profound listening" as missional churches "attend" to their own contexts.[67]

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[62] Boren, *Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community That Makes a Difference in the World,* 29.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Scott Cormode, *Making Spiritual Sense: Christian Leaders as Spiritual Interpreters* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 23-24, 36.

[65] Ibid., 37.

[66] Boren, *Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community That Makes a Difference in the World,* 28.

[67] Patrick R. Keifert, *Testing the Spirits: How Theology Informs the Study of Congregations* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2009), 101.

Challenges by the Postmodern Paradigm

David Bosch, in a chapter aptly titled "The Emergence of a Postmodern Paradigm," identifies how the postmodern paradigm challenges seven major characteristics of the Enlightenment.[68] The first challenged characteristic is the "Expansion of Reality" beyond what reason alone can identify. In fact, rationality expands to include experience and narrative. "Prove" has given way to "probe," and images like metaphor, myth, and analogy are used to seek truth. Modernity's confidence that religion will fade away as unnecessary has been proven very wrong. In postmodernity, in fact, religious adherence has increased! Christianity and the Church no longer have places of privilege in the West, but other religions have had a resurgence in popularity.

Bosch labels the second challenge to the modern paradigm as "Beyond the Subject-Object Scheme."[69] In the postmodern paradigm, nature is no longer objectified. The current ecological crisis has driven people to think more holistically and in terms of symbiosis. The third is the "Rediscovery of the Teleological Dimension" and the search for purpose and meaning. Truth is more than what can be sensed and measured. The fourth is "The Challenge to Progress Thinking." The once norming West acknowledges that it does not know–or have–what the rest of the world needs. The fifth is "A Fiduciary Framework," with a separation of facts and values. Belief also is a source of knowledge. Sixth is "Chastened Optimism," with an honest admission that there is evil in people and

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[68] Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission,* 349-351. This paragraph draws upon Bosch's material from pages 352-354 and 363-364.

[69] Ibid., 355. This paragraph draws upon Bosch's material from pages 355-357, 359, and 361-362.

society, who make mistakes. Lastly, "Toward Interdependence" pushes people to embrace that others are important and needed, rather than overvaluing independence. A meaningful life is one that is inter-subjective, linked with others.

The Influence of Postmodern Perspectives on Culture

Postmodern perspectives heavily influence the cultural context for my research project. That does not mean, however, that it is the only influence. Postmodernity is valid in its claim that there is no one perspective that characterizes the broader culture. This also means that this is true for postmodernity itself. It is important to understand that people in our postmodern culture do not apply postmodern perspectives equally across all aspects of life. Instead, explains Keifert, people separate reality into "scientific" (or rational) and "subjective" (or irrational).[70] Faith and religious beliefs, he argues, are relegated to the subjective, or "value" category.[71] This "fact-value split," as Keifert calls it, results from the "undercurrent" of an "ideology of individualism" in our culture that separates the public from the private.[72] People seem to operate with two different "gods," one for the public sphere, reduced to "Nature's god," and one for the private sphere, such as Jesus for Christians.[73] Religion, then, is seen as a private matter.[74] The postmodern values of relativism and created reality apply to personal faith and beliefs, but not to all

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[70] Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism*, 31.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Ibid., 8-9, 32.

[73] Ibid., 34-35.

[74] Ibid., 34.

kinds of truth. William Lane Craig points to the "fact-value split" and goes so far as to claim that we are not living in a postmodern culture:

> The idea that we live in a postmodern culture is a myth. In fact, a postmodern culture is an impossibility; it would be utterly unlivable. People are not relativistic when it comes to matters of science, engineering, and technology; rather, they are relativistic and pluralistic in matters of religion and ethics. But, of course, that's not postmodernism; that's modernism![75]

The lived reality of this project's local culture is that many perspectives influence people. This must be taken into consideration when local churches, such as my own, put forward truly missional small groups. There is opportunity for churches to draw upon postmodern perspectives in order to offer small groups that make sense to and touch the deep yearnings of those in the local neighborhoods.

Miroslav Volf identifies some ideas as he documents the decline of various models of church toward the end of the modern era, though he predicts that the free church model will find traction.[76] Perhaps missional small groups can apply some of these ideas as well. He points out four factors that seem to arise out of the postmodern paradigm. The first is the differentiation of societies, in which no one society, including Christianity, is dominant. Missional small groups can operate with a sincere humility, not claiming to know everything there is to know about faith. The second is the privatization of decision in which religious beliefs are a matter of individual decision. Groups can leverage this value when they invite individuals to join the group as part of their own individual faith journeys. Volf's third factor is the generalization of values, particularly

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[75] William Lane Craig, "God Is Not Dead Yet," *Christianity Today* July 3 (2008): 38.

[76] Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, 11. The rest of this paragraph draws upon Volf's material from pages 14-15.

freedom and equality, which allows room for diverse beliefs and behaviors. Small groups can affirm the exploration of faith rather than teaching a specific understanding or set of beliefs. The last factor Volf identifies is full inclusion for all people to be fully active and participate. Groups can intentionally strive for diversity in member makeup and allow room for the variety of perspectives brought by those individuals, while affirming that all within the group are seeking a deeper relationship with God.

Tracy's reflections on the shift from modernity to postmodernity also can offer some insights that can be leveraged by small groups offered to the wider communities. The superiority enjoyed by the West in modernity has–and needed to be–opened to include those outside its own culture.[77] Groups need to value differing ways of looking at life, while still pointing to the saving and transforming work of God. In postmodernity, there is no longer one single conceptual center when orienting reality, but many centers, a polycentric orientation, pluralism.[78] Groups can draw upon this value as they encourage exploring, discerning, and interpreting God's intention for them and their world.

Postmodernity, in addition, "deconstructs" the "*status quo*" and instead heralds "*fluxus quo*" as the new reality.[79] Groups can point to God's continual inbreaking of the present reality, bringing forth a different and new future. Tracy argues that modern science, technology, industrialism, and consumerism rendered the present empty and meaningless, "bereft of memory, free of hope."[80] Missional groups can be sacred spaces

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[77] Tracy, *On Naming the Present: Reflections on God, Hermeneutics, and Church,* 4.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid., 16.

[80] Ibid., 6.

and times in which their members discover the eschatological reality that God is bringing about, even if just in part, into the present reality.

Modernity's continued push to always discover more validated itself, offering no ethic with which to evaluate if what could be done *should* be done.[81] The result of such continued progress is both marginalization and self-loathing.[82] Postmodernity has brought validation for a resurgence in religions and the search for personal and historical meaning.[83] It refutes modernity's claim of the autonomous self, adding, as Tracy so strikingly puts, the "death of self" to modernity's "death of God."[84] Instead, it asserts the importance of listening to and learning from others, especially the marginalized.[85] Postmodernity thus allows for groups to point to a new and true solidarity among all people in which the Christian faith can name before God the true nature of all people being children of God: "The true present is the present of all historical subjects in all the centers in conversation and solidarity before the living God."[86]

Relevance for This Project

It is important for missional small groups to draw upon postmodern theories as they seek ways to engage their own neighborhoods. The church is sent into the world, as

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[81] Ibid., 7-8.

[82] Ibid., 9-10.

[83] Ibid., 12.

[84] Ibid., 15.

[85] Ibid., 18-20.

[86] Ibid., 22.

stated above, as "cross-cultural missionaries."[87] Therefore, it is so important for missional groups to "listen to the culture with the ears of a missionary."[88] It is only through listening intently that groups can draw upon the other within the neighborhood when shaping the groups to be most relevant for them. After all, the goal of faith formation small groups is to bring change in beliefs and behaviors. Cormode observes that people draw upon their culture to interpret their realities, and these interpretations in turn shape their actions and behaviors.[89] Postmodern perspectives heavily influence these neighborhoods, and churches can draw upon these theories to identify and incorporate connecting points that make sense to them.

Open Systems Theories

A third lens relevant to my research project is open systems theory. Postmodern perspectives, as noted above, place value on the creative and formative input of those who participate and partake. Group members influenced by postmodern perspectives, for example, value working together participatively to develop their process and make their own discoveries more than engaging a predetermined process or learning someone else's insights. Open systems theories purposely incorporate input from the environments. For faith formation small groups, this can mean drawing upon the input from those of the wider community to help form and shape the groups themselves.

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[87] Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World,* 13.

[88] Boren, *Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community That Makes a Difference in the World,* 28.

[89] Cormode, *Making Spiritual Sense: Christian Leaders as Spiritual Interpreters,* 37.

Systems Theory

Systems theory is a foundational theory for open systems theories. Manfred Drack argues that Hungarian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy originally proposed systems theory in 1928.[90] Bertalanffy drew upon his studies in biology to develop a "system theory of life" (often referred to as general systems theory).[91] His system theory asserted that an organism is not merely comprised of the mechanisms of its parts, but rather in the order of the processes: "wholeness ["*Ganzheit*"], Gestalt, is the primary attribute of life."[92] Bertalanffy applied this insight beyond individual organisms to whole systems.

It was Daniel Katz and Robert L. Kahn, in their seminal work *Social Psychology of Organizations* (1966) who made the connection from Bertalanffy's biological concept of general systems theory to the social sciences and organizational behavior.[93] They proposed an alternative to Max Weber's (1924) bureaucracy and Frederick Taylor's (1911) scientific management in organizational behavior, neither of which took seriously the impact of the external environment.[94] Katz and Kahn developed an open-systems theory that recognized that organizations are not self-contained, that all the components

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[90] Manfred Drack, "Ludwig Von Bertalanffy's Early System Approach," Internatinal Society for the Systems Sciences, http://journals.isss.org/index.php/proceedings52nd/article/viewFile/1032/322 (accessed November 20, 2014), 1.

[91] Ludwig von Bertalanffy, *General System Theory; Foundations, Development, Applications* (New York,: G. Braziller, 1969), 225.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Katz and Kahn, *The Social Psychology of Organizations,* 18-30.

[94] Ibid., 122, 260-262.

of an organization are interrelated, and that changing one variable can have impact on many others.[95]

One theme of systems theory important for my research project is the understanding that there might be nonlinear relationships between parts of a system. Small changes in one variable might have anywhere from slight to huge impacts on another variable, and very significant changes made in one area may have anywhere from very significant to slight impact on another. This concept, of course, creates vast complexities in understanding the impact among changes within systems. Nevertheless, it can identify significant ramifications for the relationships within a small group and how influences can have a variety of impacts within it.

Hatch and Cunliffe, in *Organizational Theory: Modern, Symbolic and Postmodern Perspectives*, explain that, although there were important antecedents, formal organizational theories emerged only within the last one hundred years.[96] They then break these down into four main categories, including "Prehistory 1900-1950s," "Modern 1960s and 1970s," "Symbolic 1980s," and "Postmodern 1990s."[97] Before the modern category, they argue, organizational systems did not take into account the wider environment in which they were located.[98] These can be described as either closed or isolated systems. Since the 1960s, however, they assert that nearly all organizational

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[95] Ibid., 2-10, 122.

[96] Hatch and Cunliffe, *Organization Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives,* 19.

[97] Ibid., 20.

[98] Ibid., 32.

theories have become "open systems" in order to account for their wider environments.[99] The biological study of organisms and informational models have shaped and informed open systems theories.

Open Systems

As referenced above, according to Katz and Kahn, organizations are open systems that continually interact with their environment, influencing and being influenced by them. They explain that "open system theory emphasizes the close relationship between a structure and its supporting environment."[100] Based on entropy, the "carriers of the system … furnish the sustaining inputs."[101] Likewise, open systems also impact and "yield some outcome" into the environment.[102] The environment dramatically affects the nature and functioning of an organization. They argue that organizations are not self-contained:

> System theory is basically concerned with problems of relationships, of structure, and of interdependence rather than with the constant attributes of objects. … Living systems, whether biological organisms or social organizations, are acutely dependent on their external environment and so must be conceived of as open systems.[103]

Open systems, therefore, learn and adapt within and in relationship with their environments. The various theories that relate to this learning by systems are categorized into *organizational learning* and *learning organizations*. Ivanka Vasenska defines

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[99] Ibid., 108-110.

[100] Katz and Kahn, *The Social Psychology of Organizations,* 3.

[101] Ibid.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Ibid., 22.

organizational learning as "an area of knowledge within organizational theory that studies models and theories about the way an organization learns and adapts."[104] Argyris and Schön, who coined the phrase "organizational learning" in 1978, distinguish between single-loop and double-loop learning.[105] Single-loop learning is when a system makes changes because of the differences it has learned between its intended and actual outcomes.[106] Double-loop learning is when the system questions the values and norms that led to the actions in the first place, and then it makes changes to modify those values and norms.[107] Single-loop learning, then, is making changes to how the output is produced, whereas double-loop learning is making changes to improve why output is being produced.

Whereas organizational learning focuses on the learning of the organization itself, a learning organization, as coined by Peter Senge in his book *The Fifth Discipline*, refers to the learning that takes place by those who make up the organization.[108] Emerald Jay D. Ilac describes a learning organization as an "organization that continually develops and facilitates the learning and development of its members."[109] According to Senge, a learning organization is one "in which you cannot not learn because learning is so

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[104] Ivanka Vasenska, "Organizational Learning and Employee Empowering Increasing Tourist Destination Performance," ToKnowPress, http://www.toknowpress.net/ISBN/978-961-6914-02-4/papers/ML13-298.pdf (accessed November 2, 2014), 615.

[105] Argyris and Schön, *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective (Addison-Wesley Series on Organization Development,* 2-3.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Ibid.

[108] Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*.

[109] Ilac, "Learning Organization - Organizational Learning: What Is the Difference?."

insinuated into the fabric of life."[110] Those who are part of a learning organization are "a group of people continually enhancing their capacity to create what they want to create."[111]

Relevance for This Project

Both of these theories of learning and organizations are helpful for my research project. Churches can learn from their postmodern culture to change how small groups can be organized, structured, and run. The traditional Bible studies and fellowship groups used by most United Methodist churches today do not capture well the interest of those outside the churches. Small groups need to be changed, drawing upon both single-loop and double-loop learnings, to be relevant to the wider culture. Further, small groups can become learning organizations, in which their members are expected to learn and take seriously the input of the members themselves. Again, this incorporates a postmodern perspective. Small faith formation groups need to give ownership to those who make them up for how the spiritual learning and formation takes place.

Van Gelder asserts that churches do what they are, and that churches organize what they do.[112] Thus, what churches do and how they organize that doing needs to be reconsidered over and over again given the changing contexts of the churches. He argues that churches, therefore, need to be continually forming and reforming what they do and how they do it. Churches are called by their missional identity and by the leading of the

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[110] Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization,* 13.

[111] Ibid., 14.

[112] Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit,* 121. This paragraph draws upon Van Gelder's material from pages 122, 127, 137, 155-156 and 158.

Holy Spirit to be open systems. The output of a church into its wider system is not religious goods and services but its missional witness. In other words, a missional church engages the community in a way that incorporates it into the missional calling of the church. This means, as Van Gelder says, that for churches living into their missional calling, the journey is more important than the destination. He points to the church described in Acts and observes that, as an open system, it both grows and develops. The Holy Spirit continues to bring new input into the church, bringing about both growth and change, often in unforeseen and surprising ways.

Margaret J. Wheatley encourages a boldness to embrace the postmodern perspective of open systems for organizations.[113] She argues for leaders to draw upon the natural capacity within systems to self-organize:

> Our concept of organizations is moving away from the mechanistic creations that flourished in the age of bureaucracy. We now speak of more fluid, organic structures, of boundaryless and seamless organizations. We are beginning to recognize organizations as whole systems, construing them as 'learning organizations' or as 'organic' and noticing that people exhibit self-organizing capacity … organizations are living systems.[114]

Rather than trying to organize systems using imposed and often ill-fitting structures, Wheatley suggests allowing them to form in natural ways that evolve. To do this, organizations need to have uninhibited access to new information.[115] Van Gelder talks about this in terms of permeable membranes and feedback loops in his open systems diagram.[116] Internally, Wheatley argues that participants within organizations need

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[113] Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*.

[114] Ibid., 15.

[115] Ibid., 145.

[116] Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit,* 152.

"organizational intent and identity," along with relationally shared power that gives the freedom for them to act creatively in living out the intent and identity.[117] This allows organizations to respond organically to an ever-changing environment, drawing upon the relationships within the organization: "To become effective at change, we must leave behind the imaginary organization we design and learn to work with the real organization, which will always be a dense network of interdependent relationships."[118]

Landon Whitsitt incorporates these perspectives when he draws upon the models of open-source software and group-sourced Wikipedia and suggests an open sourced church.[119] Rather than trying to impose a structure for a church, he argues that the people be allowed ("given permission") to be a part of any ministry they conceive, create, and carry through. Further, he asserts that groups of people can consistently discern better solutions than can experts. What is needed, however, for the group wisdom to work is diversity, independence of thought, decentralization, and aggregation of collected wisdom. Leaders, then, need to function less as gatekeepers and more as unleashers. This means being truly servant leaders, navigating the hoops, and through patience ("waiting") allowing the organization to form.

Keifert, in *Welcoming the Stranger*, suggests offering true hospitality to those ("strangers") who are not a part of the congregation. Rather than seeing strangers as threats, strangers should be regarded as valuable, and even as God's presence, to the

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[117] Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World,* 39.

[118] Ibid., 144.

[119] Whitsitt, *Open Source Church: Making Room for the Wisdom of All*. This paragraph draws upon Whitsitt's material from pages 2, 68, and 129.

congregation.[120] Such hospitality requires the transformation of the self![121] Keifert therefore argues that "A profound change and reversal must therefore take place in this self-justifying, egocentric self. It must die and be reborn a self-for-the-other."[122]

This ascribed value and openness to those who are not already a part of the church and the church's small groups is an important learning from the open systems theory for missional small groups. New people, different people, other people, are valuable gifts and resources that God is bringing to the groups. Missional small groups need intentionally to invest new people from the wider community into them.

For these new people to feel truly welcomed and invested, they must be allowed the authority to shape and form how the groups can help them grow spiritually. This means allowing missional groups to self-structure, self-regulate, and self-determine. It means trusting them to form as a group in a way they themselves find most helpful. Rather than seeing new people as threats, it means seeing them as sources of valuable input for truly accomplishing the purpose and living out the identity of missional small groups. People in the wider community are not merely the receivers of ministry, they are contributors to it. Conversely, those already a part of the groups become receivers as well as contributors to the ministry. Groups become both organizations that learn, and learning organizations. Open source theories help faith formation small groups be missional by shaping them to adapt and learn from the participative relationships formed with those within and without. This incorporates the postmodern values of participative exploration

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[120] Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism,* 58.

[121] Ibid., 59.

[122] Ibid., 86.

and seeking the way forward. Faith formation small groups, when missional, shape and are shaped by both the Jesus they witness to follow and those to whom they witness.

Practice Theories

The last theoretical lens for my research project is the category of practice theories. Spiritual formation is limited when small groups apply only the cognitive learning function usually associated with Bible studies, topic discussion, and fellowship sharing. Studies and discussions are notorious for producing the learning of information while not bringing about much behavioral transformation. This project is interested in spiritual formation that results in changed lives.

There is a connection between changed behavior and engaging in practices. The classical academic education process aims to teach information mastery, grounded on the belief that students who learn this information will be adequately equipped for life. This perspective is captured in the popular saying, "information is power." Although it is true that at least some information mastery is necessary for success, it is not sufficient. Engaging in certain practices and activities is often very powerful in bringing about lasting changes in behavior.

Postmodern perspectives also challenge the classical learning system and seek to include more practices as a means of learning. Diana Butler Bass in *Christianity after Religion* notes this "great reversal" from believing leading to behaving which leads to belonging, to the more postmodern perspective of belonging leading to behaving which

leads to believing.[123] Practices and activities can be leveraged for behavioral modification.

Practice Theory

Practice theory, specifically, is a set of theories within human anthropology constructed largely within the last fifty years. The French anthropologist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is considered to be the first to write definitively on this perspective, establishing foundational terms and concepts in two major works, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972) and *The Logic of Practice* (1980).[124] He developed his theories by drawing upon his study of the Algerian wars of independence from France in the early 1960s. Practice theory explores the circular relationships between human agency and the established social structures of a culture, asserting that people both influence and are influenced by their social structure.

A key concept for Bourdieu's practice theory is *habitus*, the collective unconscious behavior of a person derived from that person's previous experiences, or, as Bourdieu defines it, "spontaneity without consciousness or will."[125] These learned habits—or practices—not only are formed by the broader culture, but are themselves shapers of that culture because people are more likely to seek out the "choices" that will help reinforce their *habitus*.[126] Groups of individuals living in similar *habitus* likewise

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[123] Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, 1st ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 199-207.

[124] Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*; Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

[125] Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice,* 56.

[126] Ibid., 60.

reinforce those similar habits as part of the cultural structure among the group, similar to a "sequence of programmed actions produced by a mechanical apparatus."[127]

Sherry B. Ortner, another influential practice theorist, explains that practice theory "seeks to explain the relationship(s) that obtain between human action, on the one hand, and some global entity which we call 'the system' on the other."[128] She goes on to state, "every usage of the term 'practice' presupposes a question of the relationship between practice and structure."[129] She sees great potential for practice theory to be helpful with twenty-first century problems, such as the struggle between power and agency.[130] Practice theory, for example, suggests restoring "the actor to the social process without losing sight of the larger structures that constrain (but also enable) social action."[131]

In a collection of essays, Ortner identifies three elements of this practice: the power shift, the historic turn, and the re-interpretation of culture.[132] The power shift refers to changing how power is understood, from the power relationships among classes to the power relationships among individuals. The historic turn, she explains, was the shift away from constructing universal theories of human behavior and instead conceiving more localized theories specific to the contexts of location and time. Finally, by the

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[127] Ibid.

[128] Ortner, "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties," 148.

[129] Ibid., 23.

[130] Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power and the Acting,* 2-3.

[131] Ibid., 3.

[132] Ibid. This paragraph draws upon Ortner's material from pages 3-4, 8, and 11.

reinterpretation of culture, Ortner means understanding that people not only are influenced and defined by their culture, but that people also influence and define their culture. Culture, then, is mobile, and not just tied to a specific geographic location.

Communities of Practice

In the fields of education and learning, Jean Lave and Étienne Wenger have explored ways that people learn within what they coined "communities of practice."[133] Wenger argues that people usually assume that learning "has a beginning and an end; that it is best separated from the rest of our activities; and that it is the result of teaching."[134] He and Lave, however, take a different tack. They consider learning as a social event that happens in the practices of everyday life. Lave and Seth Chaiklin, therefore, argue that "learning is ubiquitous in ongoing activity, though often unrecognized as such."[135] Or, as Wenger asserts that people engage in all kinds of activities, and as they do, they interact with each other and "tune our relations with each other and with the world accordingly."[136] This is collective learning. He continues:

> Over time, this collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. It makes sense, therefore to call these kinds of communities *communities of practice*.[137]

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[133] Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*.

[134] Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, 3.

[135] Chaiklin and Lave, *Understanding Practice: Perspectives on Activity and Context,* 5.

[136] Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, 45.

[137] Ibid.

The key difference between communities of practice and other groups into which people gather is that communities of practice involve a shared practice.

Wenger identifies three distinguishing characteristics of communities of practice: the domain, the community, and the practice.[138] By domain, Wenger means that those in the community have a shared interest and commitment. The community means that those participating intentionally build relationships through joint activities and discussions that foster joint learning. By practice, Wenger means "members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems–in short a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction."

Learning in these communities is contextual, a process of "reification."[139] These communities have "permeable boundaries" through which members can move into their wider community as they learn who they are as individuals and as interplayers in the wider community.[140] Individual education, then, is a communal endeavor, one that requires the investment of both the individual and the community around that person:

> Education thus becomes a mutual developmental process between communities and individuals, one that goes beyond mere socialization. It is an investment of a community in its own future, not as a reproduction of the past through cultural transmission, but as the formation of new identities that can take its history of learning forward.[141]

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[138] Étienne Wenger, "Communities of Practice. A Brief Introduction," Wenger-Trayner, http://www.ewenger.com/theory/ (accessed November 16, 2014). This paragraph draws upon Wenger's work from this article.

[139] Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity,* 55-71.

[140] Ibid., 145-163.

[141] Ibid., 263.

Practice and Faith Formation

From a theological perspective, Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass compiled a series of essays applying how theological beliefs are lived out through practice.[142] Practical theology, they argue, is a "way of life;" practices connect thinking and doing in concrete, specific things.[143] Dykstra and Bass define Christian practices as "things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world."[144] Practices are important because they honor the body, but they also honor others by allowing grace to flow from the individual to others.[145]

Serene Jones' essay identifies practices as linking justification with sanctification. Forming practices help train people in the way of life that is the Gospel.[146] The pattern of holiness lived out through practices unleashes the "forming graces" in their lives, forming them by the power of the Holy Spirit (sanctification) into the form (justification) God intends. Sarah Coakley's essay looks to the mystics to see how practices help people grow in their beliefs, concluding that "practices will re-modulate beliefs." Practices, then, not only shape the person's behavior, they also shape the person's theology.

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[142] Volf and Bass, *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*.

[143] Ibid., 2-3.

[144] Ibid., 18.

[145] Ibid., 22, 28.

[146] Ibid., 54-55. This paragraph draws upon Jones' material from pages 54-55, 55-57, and 86.

Kathryn Tanner's essay points out that theologians usually assume that beliefs lead to practices.[147] Yet she notes that Christian practices often are not well thought out and are performed in chaos. People who do them are constantly discovering why they do them! In fact, because practices are so fluid and ambiguous, Tanner asserts that people need to think theologically about why they do what they do.

Relevance for This Project

Theories of practice are important for my research project because practices can be an important way that people shape their behaviors. Rather than approaching spiritual formation in small groups using only the learning of information, missional groups can draw upon the power of practices to shape faith. Older paradigms assume that people's beliefs need to be shaped first, which then, in turn, lead to changes in behavior. Yet practice theories show that this is not necessarily the case and that people often engage in practices scantly shaped by their beliefs.

Practice theories, therefore, help small groups change what they do to shape spiritual growth. They can incorporate practices as a powerful tool to change long-term behavior. As Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile assert, "we behave our way into new thinking, even as we think our way into new behaving."[148] This suggests the cyclical relationship that practice theory identifies between individuals and their culture. Individuals, through their ongoing *habitus*, can help shape their culture, even as that culture helps shape them.

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[147] Ibid., 229. This paragraph draws upon Tanner's material from pages 229, 231, and 232.

[148] Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation,* 5.

Missional small groups can be formed in ways that allow this cyclical relationship to take place. Groups can utilize the postmodern value of open-source and be structured so the members are invited to engage creatively as communities of practice in which they shape the community, and, in turn, that community helps shape their own behaviors. It would be important that the group members come together in a commitment to help grow each other, so that they can then create their own *habitus*, and, when they live out these practices individually and together, they will help each other grow spiritually. This is a new kind of small group that can be offered with the wider community.

It is important, however, to consider how people in the wider communities no longer find significant value in joining small groups through churches. Grace Davie observes that people in the broader postmodern culture still continue with spiritual practices, but they tend to no longer do them within a church context; he calls them "believing non-belongers."[149] John Travis' article, "The Last Great Frontier," notes that people are often a part of small groups in their community but not in a church.[150]

One reason for this lack of interest in groups offered through local churches is that the information-based study groups offered by churches do not capture the interest for many in a postmodern culture. Missional groups that incorporate the communities of practice model and utilize practice theory's contextual learning can provide an alternative small group experience that may provide a compelling way to grow spiritually for the

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[149] Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*, Making Contemporary Britain (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), 93.

[150] John Travis, "The Last Great Frontier," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (October, 1998).

believing non-belonger. Doing something together, rather than just listening together, makes sense in today's culture.

The United Methodist Wesleyan heritage of small groups incorporates much of what has come to be known in practice theories. John Wesley's primary method of discipleship development was to call the Methodists to apply their faith in practice. He mandated that every Methodist be in a class, a small group that focused not on beliefs but on practices. Those in the classes agreed to live by three general rules: (1) do no harm, (2) do good, and (3) attend the means (practices) of grace.[151] When the classes met together, their primary focus was to hold one another accountable to both what Wesley defined as "works of piety" and as "works of mercy." The early Methodist faith-forming groups were primarily practice-based. Wesley's genius was to structure the reality that people behave their way into new transformed lives.

Conclusion

My research project could be enhanced by applying many other theoretical lenses. The limited scope of my project, however, has placed the focus on these four: social network theories, postmodern theories, open systems theories, and practice theories. Each of these offers helpful perspectives that inform how churches can use small groups for spiritual formation in ways that make sense not only to those who are already a part of a local congregation, but also to the wider communities within which they are located.

Social network theories focus on the social structures and relationship ties among people in groups, and how those relationships can shape and form beliefs and behaviors.

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[151] "The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies in London, Bristol, Kingswood and Newcastle upon Tyne," in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley,* 9:69-73.

Small groups can be a compelling and powerful way for people to grow spiritually. Postmodern theories can help churches better understand the culture of their contexts. What churches may have done in the past may no longer be relevant in the postmodern culture of today. These theories can help identify adaptations that make sense to the wider culture that missional groups strive to engage. Open system theories suggest that creative involvement by those who are within churches, and, crucially, those who are in the wider community, can improve the way churches and their groups operate. The stranger is not only the intended focus for missional groups, the stranger is also an important asset and component for those groups. Finally, practice theories draw upon the behavior-changing influence of communities who covenant to practice a different way of life together. Regular activities, both those done intentionally by the individual and those unconsciously absorbed from the larger community, can shape long-term behaviors. Transformation happens one activity at a time.

These theoretical lenses also complement the biblical and theological lenses of my research project discussed in the next chapter. Further, these theoretical lenses help explore the United Methodist heritage of small group ministry. My project attempts to draw upon that heritage to inform how local churches today can offer small groups that work. Wesley's "accidental" small group structure worked well in his day.[152] The challenge for my research project is to discover what from that heritage still is useful and to apply it in a way that makes sense now.

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[152] Wesley admitted that the actual beginning of the class meeting was virtually by accident. See "On God's Vineyard," in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3:509.

CHAPTER 3

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL LENSES

I draw upon four biblical lenses and four theological lenses to help frame this study. The biblical concepts of spiritual growth and discipleship help shape how the groups explore faith formation. Regular and disciplined habits show a biblical method of how actions are an important way to grow spiritually. Finally, the biblical model of building deep and personal relationships with others as a way to connect and share faith together help this study explore how group members can make relationships and share life with others.

The four theological lenses are: a Wesleyan understanding of sanctification, the perichoretic Trinity, hospitality to strangers, and the United Methodist framework of accountable discipleship. The United Methodist understanding of sanctification holds that Christians continually grow in grace and holiness. Christians, then, must always continue to grow spiritually. The perichoretic Trinity lens can help groups learn how to be in communion together, and how to be genuinely inviting new members to join in together. Hospitality, therefore, is a key theological lens as members and groups learn to live into God's calling to be focused on the other. It is in the stranger that God can show up. Spiritual growth for those in small groups relies on engaging those outside the group. The lens of the United Methodist framework of accountable discipleship introduces into groups the dynamic of members giving permission to have other group members hold them accountable for the daily behaviors to which they have previously agreed.

Biblical Lenses

Spiritual Growth

An important biblical lens for faith formation is the biblical concept of spiritual growth. Those who commit to be in relationship with God are called by God to grow into the intention that God has for them. At the foundation of this intention are God's two commands to love God and others completely.[1] Those who choose to take these commands seriously, then, grow in this love for God and others over time, striving toward loving completely.

This process of growth is particularly developed in the New Testament epistles. In 2 Thess 1:3, for example, the author affirms that their faith is "growing more and more" and their love for each other "increasing."[2] James encourages Christians to consider their trials as beneficial because they can produce perseverance, which is a maturing process that grows them toward spiritual completeness (Jas 2:2-4). After discussing the Day of the Lord, 2 Pet concludes with the exhortation for his listeners to continue to grow in their spiritual maturity: "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen." (2 Pet 3:18) There is an increase in faith and love, maturing in faith, a growth in grace and knowledge.

Paul describes this growth toward the desired perfection in love as growing to become more like God. In 2 Cor 3:18, Paul speaks of Christians "being transformed into [the Lord's] likeness with ever-increasing glory." Then, in Rom 8:29, Paul specifically

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[1] Deut 6:5, Lev 19:18, Matt 22:37-40.

[2] All biblical references are from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

states that Christians are to become more like Jesus: God's people are "predestined to be conformed to the likeness of [God's] Son."

For Paul, it also means a growing away from the way people are: becoming more like Jesus means becoming less like the way the rest of the world operates. In Rom 12:2, Paul speaks of this growth as transformation: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." God's grace has appeared, and, as it says in Titus 2:12, it "teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age."

This is a command that Paul gives for his readers to do. They are to work at this growth, to strive for it. Yet he also describes it as a work of God within them. In 1 Thess 3:12, he prays "may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people." Again, in 2 Cor 3:18, he states this "ever-increasing glory" "comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." Or again, in 1 Thess 3:12, it says, "and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people." Finally, Phil 1:6 says "that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

The epistles of the New Testament also draw upon the image of physical growth to describe spiritual growth. This is developed in Eph 4:11-15:

> So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.
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> Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

Paul exhorts the Corinthians to stop thinking like children and instead to think like adults: "Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults." (1 Cor 14:20) In 1 Pet 2, those who are new to the faith are encouraged to "long for the pure spiritual milk," so that "by it you may grow up into salvation" (1 Pet 2:2). Hebrews uses the contrasting images of infants consuming milk and the more mature eating solid food. Those following Christ are to grow beyond the childish teachings about Jesus and growing up into righteousness, discernment, and maturity. Hebrews 5:11 - 6:1 says,

> We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity.

Another image for this growth used in the epistles—indeed all of the New Testament—is the image of mature plants bearing fruit. Jesus sets up this image in John 15 in terms of the vine and branches. When his followers remain in his love, they are able to "bear much fruit" (John 15:5). Paul also draws upon this image in Col 1:10, linking bearing fruit with doing good work and gaining godly knowledge: "you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God." In 2 Cor 9:10, Paul uses the language of an increase in "the harvest of your righteousness."

Paul also talks about the fruit that the Holy Spirit develops in people. He lists "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal 5:22-23). Second Peter talks about very similar

attributes, urging the readers to add more mature elements to their faith in increasing measures:

> Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." (2 Pet 1:5-8)

The image of fruit, including what is borne by the follower of Jesus and what is given by the Holy Spirit in Galatians and 2 Peter, shows that the growth and maturation is intended for the whole person. It includes actions, behaviors, beliefs, attributes, sentiments, knowledge, etc. It is not just a maturing in faith as belief. It is not just an increase in cognitive faculties like knowledge. It is intended to be a change in the whole person, and this study particularly notices the change in behaviors.

This growth, as stated above, is a partnership of both the work of the individual and the work of the Holy Spirit within the individual. The Holy Spirit gifts the growth, but the individual must also engage in disciplines that develop those gifts within the individual. It is a mutual relationship of working together.

Discipleship as Following

Another biblical lens for spiritual formation is discipleship. Jesus charges his followers in The Great Commission to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matt 28:19-20) Making disciples, then, is based on the missional element of the church going out into the wider communities, interacting with others, and forming relationships. Other people, through baptism, are invited into the identity of the

Trinity. Discipleship includes sharing, witness, and instruction, as new people are taught to live in obedience to Jesus' way of life. Finally, it is Jesus' presence in the Holy Spirit that empowers this going, baptizing, and teaching.

The three-fold way of making disciples—baptism, teaching, and obedience—shapes belonging (identity), belief (intellectual learning), and behavior (obedience). The spiritual growth of discipleship, therefore, includes all three of these. Many of the small group experiences in churches focus on just one or two of these important components. Fellowship groups, for example, tend to affirm the participant's identity as part of God's family. Studies, such as the classic Bible study, tend to focus more on teaching knowledge through intellectual learning. Missional small groups, however, can be a powerful way to make disciples as they intentionally incorporate all three of these aspects. Missional small groups seek changed behavior.

Further, this Commission also suggests that faith formation as discipleship is formed in the context of relationships. Discipleship is about building relationships, both between people and God and among people with each other. With the first disciples, these two relationships happened together.

Jesus called a number of his first disciples with the invitation to follow him (Matt 4:19, 16:24). Following means a dynamic relationship, one that included movement. These disciples physically followed Jesus around. Faith formation happened *along the way* rather than while *sitting aside*. Jesus taught his disciples from everyday life situations, helping them grow in living situations that emerged as they lived life together. Discipleship was almost an apprenticeship for a new way of living.

There were times when Jesus imparted information and teaching while his disciples *sat aside*, such as the Sermon on the Mount. Not all of his disciples literally followed him around, either. Yet even when Jesus taught in stationary settings, he used typical life situations, common household images, and parables that involved normal people doing normal things.

Discipleship as following is a powerful way to frame faith formation. The Christians in the Book of Acts were called "followers of the way" (Acts 19:23, 22:4, 24:5, 24:14). This phrase describes discipleship as a way of life, a form of daily living. This is very different than the intellectual assent and creedal proclamation that are sometimes used to define what it means to be a Christian. Discipleship as following necessarily includes a change in behavior.

Under Jesus' leadership, his followers grew spiritually as they lived life together. After Jesus returned to glory, Acts shows that his followers continued to live life together (Acts 2:42-46). Spiritual formation that comes from living life together is often missing in many churches today. Studies and fellowship groups, or even groups centered around acts of service, can be missing this important component. It is important for small groups to encourage their members to come together to intentionally share life together and to share from their lives together.

To understand discipleship as following means that spiritual formation includes the three-fold formation of belonging, belief, and behavior. It includes behavioral change. Understanding discipleship as following also means that faith formation happens in relationships of shared life together. It also comes in everyday life, in what followers of

the way do each day. Small groups, when incorporating these elements of discipleship as following, can be a powerful context fostering spiritual growth.

Behavior and Spiritual Growth

A third biblical lens is the healthy, holy habits that link behavior to spiritual growth. Spiritual growth that leads to changed behaviors, as stated above, is the focus of this study. After all, the biblical model of spiritual maturity is often expressed in terms of behaviors. *Agape* love transcends feelings and convictions and manifests in self-sacrifice. In the parable of the sheep and goats, the Son of Man separates people based on their actions of feeding the hungry, providing drink for the thirsty, inviting in the stranger, clothing those in need, looking after the sick and visiting those in prison (Matt 25:35-36). The bearing fruit described above, here is put in terms of actions of service. Or again, James 1:27 explains, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

Often spiritual transformation and growth are understood to bring the result of changes in behaviors: belief determines behavior. While this is certainly true—and the Bible does speak to such flow—it is only part of the reality. The Bible also speaks about how behavior changes lead to spiritual growth. Or, put another way, behavior determines belief. This is a key Wesleyan model that is developed below. Here, this model is explained as a biblical model.

As noted above, Jesus did not sequester his disciples away from the world in order to teach them how to follow him. He called them to follow along with him in everyday life, growing spiritually through everyday behaviors and activities. Then,

surprisingly, Jesus sends his followers out as witnesses into the wider world. He sends out the twelve early on (Matt 10), and then he sends out the seventy (the KJV says seventy-two) not long after (Luke 10). He sends the healed Gerasene demoniac back to his own people as a witness (Mark 5:1-20). In The Great Commission and at the end of John's Gospel (John 20:21), the resurrected Jesus sends his followers out into the wider world.

This sending does not seem to be the result of spiritual formation. Jesus does not wait to send his followers out as witnesses until after they are well prepared and have had a lot of instruction. In fact, Jesus seems to send them out as part of their training. They learn to live as "followers of the way" as they live missionally in everyday life, engaging people and practicing a different way of life "among the wolves" (Matt 10:16). When Jesus sends out the twelve and the seventy, they are to learn to trust in the leading and provision of the Holy Spirit (Luke 10:4). They come back amazed at what they have discovered they were able to do (Luke 10:17, Mark 6:30). They were sent out not just for the benefit of those who heard them. They themselves grew! Spiritual growth takes place within Jesus' followers when they connect with others, practice faith sharing, and live their lives among others.

After the Gospels, the New Testament continues to show that healthy, holy habits foster spiritual growth. The early Christians in Jerusalem continued in the practices of teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer (Acts 2:42). In Rom 6:17-18, Paul describes how obedience to the patterns of behavior lead to a freedom from sin and growth in righteousness: "But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your

allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness." Paul also describes how suffering hardships lead to perseverance, character, and to hope (Rom 5:3-5). In 1 Pet 1:13-16, the journey to holiness begins with action:

> Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

This pursuit of holiness is not just something the individual does in isolation. Like it is described at the end of Acts 2, part of the purpose of the church is the mutual spurring on of one another to spiritual maturity:

> They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. … All the believers were together and had everything in common. … Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts. (Acts 2:42-46)

Hebrews 20:24 puts it this way, "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds." Paul appeals to this mutual encouragement when he urges in 1 Cor 11:1, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ." Christians follow Christ's example in deeds, in how they live.

Richard Foster, in his book *Celebration of Discipline* lists some of the biblical disciplines that encourage this growth and maturing.[3] He lists the internal disciplines of fasting and study. He includes the external disciplines of simplicity, solitude, submission, and service. Then he identifies as corporate disciplines those that are completed within the body of the church, as confession, worship, guidance, and celebration.

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[3] Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. This paragraph draws upon Foster's material from page v.

Foster's corporate disciplines are particularly important for my research project as they are disciplines that can take place in small groups. Small groups can be places where spiritual growth takes place. Spiritual growth is one part of the biblical idea of sanctification, and biblically it includes the concepts of development over time, a maturation that is the work of both the individual and the Holy Spirit, and progress that can be developed in a small group setting. Again, these disciplines are exemplified in the description of the early church at the end of Acts 2.

Relationships with Outsiders

A fourth biblical lens is building deep relationships with outsiders. Churches and groups often have the inclination to become self-contained. This may, in part, be evidence of Network Theory's claim that generally people prefer to be with familiar people. Even so, The Great Commission sends Jesus' followers necessarily out into the wider communities. Missional small groups take seriously this connecting with those who are not already a part of the group or church.

As discussed above, spiritual growth is encouraged by behaviors of self-sacrificing love, witness, and service to others in the wider community. Serving others is as important for the spiritual growth of those who serve as it is for the benefit of those served. So, too, is creating relationships with new people. Jesus sent his disciples out into the wider communities, compelling them to create relationships with strangers, particularly those who were not yet believers. The suggestion in the text is that they were to *do life* with the people they met: eat with them, work with them, live with them (Luke 10:7). Not only was this important for gaining credibility for their message, it also was important for their own spiritual growth.

Jesus demonstrates this in his own ministry. He travels from village-to-village, interacting with new people on a daily basis. He even heads into foreign areas, such as the Decapolis and Samaria, building relationships with individual people there.[4] Jesus invited himself into Zacchaeus' home (Luke 19:1-10), took a personal interest in people he didn't know (Mark 10:49-52), and ate with strangers (Luke 5:29-30).

Paul also demonstrated this in his ministry. He was continually pushing to new areas, cities, peoples. Yet it was not just his calling to go to new places and new people. When in new locations, his method was to build relationships with the people there. For example, when he was in Athens, he met *daily* in the Areopagus to visit with the thinkers in Athens (Acts 17:16-34). He stayed in peoples' homes (Acts 18:18, 21:8), and he invited anyone to come visit him in his home (Acts 28:30).

Philip, in his interaction with the Ethiopian eunuch, engages in a personal dialogue, inquiring into a topic that was currently relevant with the eunuch (Acts 8:26-40). The author of Colossians explicitly urges believers to act and speak well with outsiders: "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone." (Col 4:5-6) Here both actions and conversations are highlighted; behavior is key to the witness with outsiders.

In scripture, spiritual formation happens when believers interact well with outsiders. Missional small groups need to take seriously the engagement with people outside the church and outside their own group. This interaction, however, needs to

[4] For example, Jesus travels through the Decapolis (Mark 7:31), connects with the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1-20), and strikes up a conversation with a woman at a well in Samaria (John 4:1-26).

include building deep, ongoing relationships slowly over time that share life together. Not only does this build credibility within the wider community, it builds the faith of those in the group. Missional small groups need to find ways of living *out and about*, among the wider community, sharing life together.

Theological Lenses

Four theological frames also help to interpret my research project. These include a Wesleyan understanding of sanctification, a perichoretic understanding of relationship, Christian hospitality, and a United Methodist framework of accountable discipleship in small groups. These theological frames complement and interplay with the biblical and theoretical frames also used in my research project.

A Wesleyan Understanding of Sanctification

A Wesleyan view of sanctification places sanctification within an overall understanding of salvation as a relationship and as a process. For John Wesley, salvation is a relationship in that it is simply choosing to love God as revealed in Jesus Christ.[5] It is a process in that each one who chooses to love God is on a journey toward loving God completely.[6] Wesley also describes this journey as being restored in the image of God.[7] Salvation, then, is not an event but a process wherein sinners are perfected in love

[5] "The Way to the Kingdom," in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley,* 1:221, 223.

[6] In "The Scripture Way of Salvation," Wesley says that salvation is "the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul till it is consummated in glory." Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 2:156. In "On Working out Our Own Salvation," Wesley says salvation "begins the moment we are justified, in the holy, humble, gentle, patient love of God and man. It gradually increases from that moment … till in another instant the heart is cleansed from all sin, and filled with pure love to God and man. But even that love increases more and more, till we 'grow up in all things into him that is our head', 'till we attain the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.'" Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3:204.

[7] "The One Thing Needful," in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 4:354.

through discernable stages. People begin asleep to God, are awakened to knowledge of self and God, are justified and regenerated when they accept Christ, and then begin the (often long) process of sanctification, eventually culminating in entire sanctification (or Christian perfection).

This salvation journey is a partnership between God and the individual. All along the way, it is always initiated by the Holy Spirit.[8] The individual, however, always has the responsibility to respond to God's gracious acting.[9] This is true while moving along the stages as well as the growth that happens during the sanctifying process. If a person does not react to God and "work out his [or her] own salvation in fear and trembling," God will stop working salvation in that person.[10] Yet against any accusations of works righteousness, Wesley early on explained that "without the Spirit of God we can do nothing but add sin to sin."[11] It is God who makes the person's response possible.

Wesley describes this relationship and process very practically. The response that God requires from individuals is growth in both inward and outward holiness: "the essence of it is holiness of heart and life."[12] Wesley was fond of calling Christianity "practical divinity" and "experimental religion."[13] Richard P. Heitzenrater comments, "in an ecclesiastical world where theological debates can only be divisive, Wesley says the

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[8] "On Working out Our Own Salvation," in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3:202.

[9] Ibid., 3:203.

[10] Ibid., 3:208. Also Phil 2:12.

[11] "The Circumcision of the Heart," in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 1:403.

[12] "Thoughts upon Methodism," in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley,* 9:529.

[13] For examples, see "An Extract of the Rev. Mr. John Wesley's Journal," in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley,* 20:407 and 22:101, November 19, 1751 and September 2, 1767, respectively.

Methodists are interested in one basic question, 'Do you love and serve God?' This is the basis of Wesley's practical divinity."[14]

As practical divinity, Wesley asserted that the Christian faith held within the heart necessarily produces in the life of the believer actual holiness. This holiness is not just in the inward life of the believer, but in the outward life as well.[15] True Christianity is "the religion of the heart, faith working by love, producing all inward as well as outward holiness."[16] Wesley says holiness is to imitate Christ in all things:

> By Methodists I mean, a people who profess to pursue (in whatsoever measure they have attained) holiness of heart and life, inward and outward conformity in all things to the revealed will of God; who place religion in an uniform resemblance of the great Object of it; in a steady imitation of Him they worship, in all His imitable perfections; more particularly, in justice, mercy, and truth, or universal love filling the heart, and governing the life.[17]

When Wesley described what a Methodist looks and acts like in "The Character of a Methodist," he concludes by saying that a Methodist is "a Christian, not in name only, but in heart and life.[18]

Holiness, then, is loving God and others. God works within the person "every holy and heavenly temper," particularly "lowliness, meekness, gentleness, temperance

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[14] Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 129.

[15] "A Short History of Methodism," in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley,* 9:369.

[16] "A Short History of the People Called Methodists," in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley,* 9:438.

[17] "Advice to the People Called Methodists," in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley,* 9:123-124.

[18] "The Character of a Methodist," in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley,* 9:41.

and long-suffering."[19] Holy living is actively living out one's love to God and other people through these tempers.

Wesley is careful to articulate that holiness is universal love both filling the heart and governing the life. He draws upon Jesus' images of branches that bear fruit (John 15:1-17) and the mustard seed (Matt 13:31-32), asserting that saving faith is that "which is first sown in the heart as a grain of mustard seed, but afterwards putteth forth great branches, on which grow all the fruits of righteousness, every good temper, and word, and work."[20] Holiness is in heart, mind and actions. Methodists

> insist, that nothing deserves the name of religion, but a virtuous heart, producing a virtuous life: A complication of justice, mercy, and truth, of every right and amiable temper, beaming forth from the deepest recesses of the mind, in a series of wise and generous actions.[21]

Wesley understood holiness as the purpose of salvation. He preached that "without holiness no man shall see the Lord."[22] Therefore, as D. Michael Henderson claims, "'holiness' was the grand doctrine of Methodism which God had providentially entrusted to the Methodists."[23]

This theological understanding of sanctification and holiness is not unique to Wesley. Wesley's important contribution, however, is in the small group method he implemented specifically to assist the Methodists to pursue holiness. Every Methodist,

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[19] "On the Wedding Garment," in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley,* 4:147.

[20] "Upon Our Lord's Sermon Mount, Discourse XIII," in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley,* 1:690.

[21] "A Short Address to the Inhabitants of Ireland," in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley,* 9:283.

[22] "The General Spread of the Gospel," in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley,* 2:489.

[23] D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Pub. House, 1997), 115.

insisted Wesley, had to be a part of a small group called a class meeting. The class meetings were designed for the expressed purpose of encouraging holiness of both heart and life. He structured them as weekly meetings of about a dozen people who met together for discussing honestly how they were doing in their pursuit of holiness, and for "watching over one another in love."[24]

The basis for these meetings was what Wesley called the three General Rules of the People Called Methodists. In 1743, Wesley published "The Nature, Design, and General Rules, of the United Societies" indicating the normative value of the first two precepts of the natural law (avoid evil; do good) as well as the importance of the means of grace such as praying, reading the Bible, and receiving the Lord's Supper.[25] These rules were offered not as the basis of justification, but as a guide, an illumination along the way, for those who were seeking the deeper graces of God in holiness.

Wesley grouped class meetings into larger societies. John Simon, a chronicler of the Methodists under Wesley, notes,

> the 'sole design' of the Societies was 'to promote real holiness of heart and life,' and it is clear that the pursuit of holiness was conducted with the intelligent enthusiasm of practical men [and women], who were ready to adopt methods which had been proved effective by experience.[26]

The members utilized ongoing mutual accountability as the context for sharing their experience of how they lived out their faith in their daily lives.

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[24] "The Nature, Design, and General Rules, of the United Societies, in London, Bristol, Kingswood, and Newcastle-upon-Tyne," in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley,* 9:69.

[25] The General Rules Wesley published in 1743 can be found in Appendix H.

[26] John Smith Simon, *John Wesley and the Religious Societies* (London: The Epworth press, 1921), 14-15.

Wesley's method of the small group was grounded on his understanding of sanctification as a relationship and a process. The Methodists under Wesley helped one another grow in their inward and outward holiness through small groups. The class meeting became Wesley's method for behavioral change. The members met together for mutual accountability to both works of piety and works of mercy. The General Rules served as the guidelines for what this change in behavior looked like and how it could be measured. The members practiced their practical Christianity in daily life, but it was their small group experience that helped keep them focused, on track, held accountable, and going on to perfection.

A Wesleyan understanding of sanctification lifts up the importance of continual spiritual growth toward inward and outward holiness. It is both a theological and methodological grounding for spiritual growth that leads to changes in behavior. United Methodist local churches can draw upon this heritage to renew their priority for using small groups intentionally and to inform how those groups can provide the contexts that foster spiritual growth. It is a reclaiming of the method of the Methodists!

Perichoretic Relationship

The second theological lens is a perichoretic understanding of relationship. Small groups, of course, are built on relationships. The social relationship of the perichoretic Trinity informs the nature and interplay of the community and connectedness of faith formation small groups.

Van Gelder explains how a missional approach draws upon both the Western and Eastern perspectives of the Trinity.[27] The Western focus on the one substance of the Godhead emphasizes the *missio Dei* and the sending nature of God.[28] God is on a mission in the world, and sends the Son, the Spirit, the Church, and all of God's people into the world for this mission. The Eastern focus on the perichoretic interrelating of the persons of God emphasizes the social relationship of God.[29] Gary Simpson explains that God's mission in the world is *communio*, inviting people into communion with Godself.[30] This communion, he explains, is a "reciprocal dependence" that characterizes the relationship of the persons of God.[31] God has created people in God's image, and part of that *imago Dei* is the need for sharing in the perichoretic relationship of God.

Michael Welker frames this relationship in terms of people's need for intimacy with God.[32] This intimacy is characterized by free self-withdrawal, participation in God's glory, and the enjoyment of eternal life.[33] People are drawn into this intimacy by the Holy Spirit: "The Holy Spirit brings about intimacy with God. Indeed, the Spirit of God is this intimacy." Yet the individualism of those drawn into this community of God is not lost.

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[27] Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit,* 87.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid., 88.

[30] Gary M. Simpson, "A Reformation Is a Terrible Thing to Waste: A Promising Theology for an Emerging Missional Church," in *The Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry*, ed. Craig Van Gelder, Missional Church Series (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2007), 80.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Welker, *God the Spirit,* 331.

[33] Ibid.

The Holy Spirit creates a community in which a differentiated and polyindividual diversity is maintained.[34] The unity of the Spirit is a cultivated diversity of true pluralism.[35]

Thus Van Gelder and Zscheile note a key insight from the perichoretic understanding of the Trinity: "The mission implications become clearer if the church sees its own life not as an *imitation* of the Trinity but as a *participation* in the life and mission of the Trinity."[36] When people choose to live for God, their relationships with God are restored, and they are invited to share in the community among the persons of the Trinity. This restoration with God, however, also brings people into a restored perichoretic relationship with each other. The mission of God, then, becomes something that affects how God's people are related. This, in turn, affects how humanity itself is understood. Rather than being identified by individual independence, being a person involves being in relationships with others. Personhood, Van Gelder and Zscheile explain, fundamentally incorporates "relationality or communal embeddedness" with one another.[37] Participating in one's new identity in God becomes something that happens "between"—between the individual and God and between the individual and other people.[38]

This perichoretic understanding of the Trinity frames missional small groups in terms of the interconnected relationships that enable people to participate in the Trinity.

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[34] Ibid., 23.

[35] Ibid., 25, 27.

[36] Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation,* 109.

[37] Ibid., 121.

[38] Ibid.

The groups are contexts not just to learn information but to experience the authentic relatedness for which God created people in the first place. God sends small groups, as part of God's church, into the world with the mission of drawing new people into the life-giving community with God and others. Missional small groups that foster spiritual formation are fundamentally about relationships.

Hospitality

A third theological lens is hospitality, or, more specifically, welcoming the stranger. This lens correlates directly with the biblical lens of relationships to outsiders. In terms of this study, welcoming the stranger provides a corrective to the inherent tendency for small groups to become self-focused, closed, and like a clique. The calling to the other (*missio Dei*) is not only part of the identity of missional small groups, it is also important for the spiritual formation of its members themselves, especially when understood from the Wesleyan perspective of sanctification and holiness.

As noted above, Keifert identifies the new person (the "stranger") not just as someone to whom the church must show God, but also as someone through whom God is seen.[39] Hospitality becomes a way of receiving God. The group members grow spiritually by encountering God in the stranger, as well as through those practices of engaging and serving the stranger.

Yet engaging the stranger means more than just acts of welcome. It means a deeper engagement on a personal level. It means intentionally creating an authentic, ongoing relationship. This requires people to invest in new people in a fairly significant

[39] Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism*, 58.

way. It is an openness and inviting of new people to share in the everydayness of life. Boren describes the missional way of relating as extending beyond welcome in order to find ways of sharing life together: "Missional Engagement together requires that we actually do life together"[40] Missional small groups need to find ways of inviting new people to become fully enmeshed and connected in an everyday-life sort of way. Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell speak about this kind of connection when they suggest that hospitality be grounded on interlocking personal relationships, even with people who believe differently.[41]

One key way to truly enmesh the new person is to listen to that person deeply. Roxburgh and Romanuk, when talking about the missional change model, describe the importance of awareness, especially as it comes by listening to understand and engaging in dialogue with others.[42] This enables new ways of behaving and being in relationships. Likewise, Boren considers all Christians to be missionaries.[43] Missionaries, he says, always begin by listening first: they listen deeply, they listen well.[44] A missional perspective that truly welcomes the stranger allows space and platform for that new person to share. A theology of welcome also means that it is in that listening that God is encountered. This is a corrective for the assumed belief that engaging the wider

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[40] Boren, *Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community That Makes a Difference in the World,* 131.

[41] Putnam, Campbell, and Garrett, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us,* 548.

[42] Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World*.

[43] Boren, *Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community That Makes a Difference in the World,* 64.

[44] Ibid., 112.

community primarily means sharing information with others. It primarily means receiving the other as a gift from God.

Christine D. Pohl identifies important practices for groups pursuing Christian hospitality. It is important, she says, for groups to reflect and think deeply on both the scriptures and the nature of their ministry focus.[45] The group then needs to intentionally organize around the single practice of hospitality, or else hospitality will get eclipsed in the busyness of other practices. This does not mean, however, that hospitality should eclipse other practices. In fact, a priority on hospitality actually encourages and connects with other Christian practices. With a focus on hospitality, the group will engage in theological reflection from the practice of hospitality and from the perspective of the wider community. In turn, this will encourage those engaged in other practices and those in other communities to think theologically about what they are doing as well. Since an intentional focus on hospitality helps both the group and the whole community to grow in their missional identity, small groups that focus on hospitality can help the local church and the wider community also become more missional. The small group becomes a missional agent.

Gilbert I. Bond, in the following chapter in the same book, explores how local congregations articulate their formal statements of hospitality, but also enact their tacit understandings of hospitality.[46] Formal practices of worship, he argues, show how the community encounters those who are on the edges. Even when the intention is to be

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[45] Pohl, "A Community's Practice of Hospitality: The Interdependence of Practices and of Communities," 122. This paragraph draws upon Pohls' material from pages 129, 132, 134, 136.

[46] Bond, "Liturgy, Ministry, and the Stranger: The Practice of Encountering the Other in Two Christian Communities," 137. This paragraph draws upon Bond's material from pages 138, 153, and 156.

welcoming and extend community to outsiders, how worship is done can create barriers unintentionally and keep people separated. Again, self-reflection on the practice of hospitality is crucial. A ministry of hospitality keeps the relationships personal. Rather than a general goal of accomplishing the ministry (getting people fed), a personal perspective must be maintained that sees people as individuals (helping each person get food). Bond suggest that one way to help this happen is to maintain the dignity of referring to all people by name. This can be as simple as introductions by name each time people meet or engage together. Another simple tool, like wearing name tags, empowers people to call each other by name. All these are ways that people remain people.

Whitsitt's image of "open source," referenced above, is a way of describing how people in today's technological culture desire to be contributing to and designing of those things in which they are involved.[47] To truly invite strangers in, then, means more than just extending the invitation for them to join in what is already predetermined. True hospitality means extending them the invitation to help create and control what they are invited to be a part. Whitsitt identifies four conditions that create an open source environment: diversity, independence of thought, decentralization, and aggregation of collected wisdom.[48] Missional small groups need to incorporate these conditions in their very makeup in order to involve people who value open source.

Missional small groups, when applying a theology of hospitality, incorporate the value of including others. Strangers are to be received for who they are, treated as individuals, and listened to deeply. This means building relationships in order to do life

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[47] Whitsitt, *Open Source Church: Making Room for the Wisdom of All*.

[48] Ibid., 68.

together. It means seeing the other not as a goal or a project, but as God showing up among them. It means allowing new people to help create who the group becomes.

A United Methodist Framework for Accountable Discipleship in Small Groups

The last theoretical lens that helps inform this research project is the framework of accountable discipleship for small groups that the United Methodist General Board of Discipleship (GBOD) has developed and made available through its publications. The United Methodist Church as a denomination has agencies that "provide resources and services that equip local congregations and provide a connection for ministry throughout the world. These organizations (councils, boards, commissions, committees, divisions or other units) can be found at all levels of the connection (churchwide, regional and local)."[49] The agency that supports and provides resources for spiritual formation to local churches is the GBOD. This general board "provides leadership and resources in the areas of spiritual growth and development, devotional literature, curriculum resources, Christian education, evangelism, worship, stewardship, and ministry of the laity."[50]

David Lowes Watson served as the Director of Wesleyan Leadership on the GBOD until 1999. In that position, he reintroduced through the GBOD's resources, a Wesleyan approach of accountable discipleship for small groups. He drew upon his research of the early Methodist class meetings under the leadership of John Wesley and proposed that accountable discipleship was a distinguishing characteristic of early

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[49] "Agencies," The United Methodist Church, http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/agencies (accessed November 8, 2015).

[50] "General Board of Discipleship," General Board of Global Ministries, http://www.umcmission.org/learn-about-us/the-united-methodist-church (accessed November 8, 2015).

Methodist class meetings.[51] Further, he proposed that it could be a distinguishing characteristic in small groups among Methodists again today.

Mutual accountability is the concept that class participants agree to hold one another accountable during their class sessions for behavior changes in their lives outside of class time. In 1991, he published *Covenant Discipleship: Christian Formation through Mutual Accountability*, a definitive book in which he uses the term "covenant discipleship" to describe Wesley's model of mutual accountability modified so it is usable today.[52] He explains, "A Covenant Discipleship Group consists of two to seven people who agree to meet together for one hour per week in order to hold themselves mutually accountable for their discipleship. They do this by affirming a written covenant on which they themselves have agreed."[53] The participants give expressed permission to the other participants to hold them accountable. They pledge to share openly about how they are growing in discipleship, with an intentional sharing time at each session when they provide an update to the whole group how they had conducted their lives along the goals by which they had committed to live. The group covenants to support and encourage each other in their spiritual growth.

Also, in 1988, the class meeting was reintroduced in in *The United Methodist Book of Discipline* after a fifty year absence.[54] This prompted the GBOD to offer resources and materials for small group leaders based on Watson's book, *Forming*

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[51] Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance*.

[52] Watson, *Covenant Discipleship: Christian Formation through Mutual Accountability*.

[53] Ibid., 97.

[54] David Lowes Watson, *Class Leaders: Recovering a Tradition* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1991), xv.

Christian Disciples: The Role of Covenant Discipleship and Class Leaders in the Congregation.[55] A key grounding of leadership formation was what the *Discipline* called The General Rule of Discipleship: "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."[56] Watson, who penned this rule, teaches small group leaders intentionally to structure their small groups around the General Rule of Discipline, with accountability to the acts that demonstrate this discipleship.[57]

The concept of covenant discipleship soon became a shaping influence for the GBOD's resources. Watson's position title was also changed to Director of Accountable Discipleship and Wesleyan Leadership. Under his leadership, the GBOD continued to offer a variety of small group resources to local congregations based on the covenant discipleship model.

In 1999, Steven Manskar replaced Watson as the Director of Accountable Discipleship and Wesleyan Leadership on the GBOD. He produced a number of user-friendly works to help local churches and their leaders understand better the theological and historical groundings for accountable discipleship as well as draw upon this heritage in local church settings. His most comprehensive publication, *Accountable Discipleship: Living in God's Household*, came out shortly after he joined the GBOD.[58]

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[55] Ibid.

[56] United Methodist Church (U.S.), *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2008*. ¶1118.2.

[57] Watson, *Class Leaders: Recovering a Tradition,* 130.

[58] Manskar, *Accountable Discipleship: Living in God's Household*.

Manskar begins by explaining some of the core understandings of accountable discipleship. "Accountable Discipleship," he says, "is a distinctively Methodist way of Christian formation."[59] It was a fundamental building block of Wesley's class meetings. "The purpose of class meetings," argues Manskar, "was to 'watch over one another in love.'"[60] The GBOD's updated version of these class meetings for use in United Methodist churches today are called Covenant Discipleship Groups. "The purpose of Covenant Discipleship is accountability, which is where people come to give an account of their daily walk with Christ. It is where people listen, ask questions, and support and help one another as they are formed as disciples of Jesus Christ."[61] It is not a time of gossip or judgement. The covenant lays an expectation that the honest sharing creates the space for mutual support and encouragement.

> The accountability of Covenant Discipleship is simply giving an account of how one has lived his or her life in light of a covenant created by his or her Covenant Discipleship Group. Telling others how your week has gone, what you have done, and what you have not done helps one check in with the group, with themselves, and with the one who counts most, Jesus Christ.[62]

Accountability, argues Manskar, "is how we make sure our discipleship happens."[63]

Manskar also asserts that the General Rule of Discipleship was penned by David Lowes Watson as a "contemporary restatement" of Wesley's General Rules.[64] He further

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[59] Ibid., 15.

[60] Ibid., 16.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid., 16-17.

[63] Ibid., 23.

[64] Ibid., 25-26.

links the small group experience as a way of better living out Wesley's call to both works of piety and works of mercy.[65] Placing these along a continuum, and divided by an axis of public and private, creates quadrants of actions that are compassion (private acts of mercy), justice (public acts of mercy), devotion (private acts of piety), and worship (public acts of piety). Small groups can be places that both create experiences of public works of piety and mercy, as well as hold participants accountable to private works of piety and mercy.

Further, Manskar tries to show how Wesley's General Rules, the General Rule of Discipleship, and the works of piety and mercy correlate to the Great Commandment (Matt 22:34-40).[66] Love is the connection to God, and works are the way we evidence that love. The following table is my attempt to categorize the parts of these theological concepts that Manskar argues are correlated.

Table 1. Manskar's Correlation of Wesley and the Greatest Commandments

Three-fold Wesleyan way of growing spiritually:			(Source:)
Love God	Love self	Love neighbor	(Greatest Commandments)
Works of	Piety and	Mercy	(Wesleyan heritage)
Stay in love w/God	Do no harm	Do good	(Wesley's "General Rules")

Perhaps the most influential publication that Manskar has provided has been his *Small Group Ministries: Christian Formation through Mutual Accountability*.[67] This is the booklet on small groups that is part of the United Methodist's packet of booklets for local church leaders, called *Guidelines. Guidelines* are booklets of introduction,

[65] Ibid., 26.

[66] Ibid., 47.

[67] Manskar, *Small Group Ministries: Christian Formation through Mutual Accountability*.

explanation, and guidelines for every area and position of ministry in United Methodist local churches. This booklet, therefore, perhaps has the widest readership among United Methodist church leaders.

In the booklet, Manskar grounds small groups in the United Methodist tradition on the dual foundations of grace and holiness. He suggests that churches call their small groups "grace groups."[68] Grace creates participants' connection in small groups through accountability and discipline:

> Wesley clearly understood that Christian formation (disciple making) does not happen by accident, but by intention and with discipline. Discipline, for Wesley, is simply a habitual practice of the means of grace (or Christian spiritual disciplines, known as "works of piety' and "works of mercy") supported by weekly accountability in a small group. He knew that Christians are formed by initiating persons into a new way of behavior shaped by the teachings of Jesus Christ. Christian discipline is summarized by three words: believing, behaving, and belonging.[69]

Believing is a relationship of trust based on love. Behaving is Wesley's brilliant insights that discipleship must evidence in changes of behavior and that practices can be important ways that Christians grow in their belief. Belonging suggests the Methodist conviction that discipleship formation happens best in small groups.

As asserted above, Wesley's theology of sanctification understands the Christian life as growing in inward (personal) and outward (social) holiness, or holiness of heart and life. Discipleship, then, is the growth in holiness that is evidenced in fruit (actions) and leads to changes of behavior (habits). I expanded Table 1 above, adding in Wesley's understanding of holiness and Manskar's identification of discipleship in the concepts of

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[68] Ibid., 14.

[69] Ibid., 10-11.

believe, behave, and belong. Table 2 shows this more robust theological grounding of accountable discipleship.

Table 2. A United Methodist Theological Framework for Accountable Discipleship

Three-fold Wesleyan way of growing spiritually:			(Source:)
Holiness of	Heart and	Life	(Wesleyan heritage)
Love God	Love self	Love neighbor	(Greatest Commandments)
Belong (love)	Believe	Behave (obey)	(Steven Manskar, GBOD)
Works of	Piety and	Mercy	(Wesleyan heritage)
Stay in love w/God	Do no harm	Do good	(Wesley's "General Rules")

A United Methodist framework for accountable discipleship in small groups is grounded in Wesley's theological concepts of grace, holiness, practice, behavior change, and good works. It is woven into the biblical understanding of love as expressed in the Greatest Commandments of loving God, others, and self. Watson and Manskar have expressed this framework for small groups in terms of accountable discipleship and covenant discipleship. Covenant discipleship groups are built on mutual accountability and discipleship through practice and behavior change. It means the interplay among belonging, believing, and behaving fosters spiritual growth in small groups.

Conclusion

The biblical and theological lenses interplay with the theoretical lenses of the previous chapter. The Bible lays out clear expectations, guidelines, and descriptions for growth toward Christian maturity: continual growth in love for God and neighbor. Small groups that take on the purpose of spiritual formation have a strong biblical foundation. Groups need to incorporate all three of the ways of making disciples: belonging, belief, and behavior. This happens when life if shared together, in routines of daily life. Discipleship happens as following Jesus. Spiritual growth leads to changed behaviors.

Faith-forming small groups must include the expectation of growth in healthy, holy habits. Yet changing behaviors can also be a very effective method to bring about spiritual growth. The old paradigm of believing one's way into new behavior can be reversed into behaving one's way into new beliefs. Finally, serving others outside the group is a key way for group members to themselves grow spiritually. Missional small groups need to find ways of living among the wider community.

Four theological lenses complement these biblical lenses. Small groups can draw upon a Wesleyan understanding of sanctification as growth in relationships of love and as a process toward inward and outward holiness to incorporate accountability to behaviors. The perichoretic relationship of the Trinity becomes the basis for how group members can share deeply together, with intimacy that honors diversity. Groups become a way of experiencing true community, and this community brings about spiritual growth. Thirdly, hospitality as welcoming the stranger pushes missional small groups to authentically engage the other. Groups are to welcome the stranger to come and do life together. In an open source culture, the stranger is invited in as a forming participant who is given the authority to help design and shape the ongoing life of the group. Finally, a United Methodist framework for accountable discipleship asserts that small groups that provide the context for spiritual growth include sharing openly and honestly about participants' daily faith walk, about their daily practices, and their growth in love and grace. This is the United Methodist way of holding each other in love.

There are a number of common themes provided by these lenses. Spiritual growth is important and expected in the health and life of the believer. This spiritual growth is manifest in changes of behavior. Healthy, holy habits, fostered in the context of a small

group, provide an effective method encouraging this growth. Also important is engaging those within the wider environment. Connecting with these others not only provides opportunities to practice the behaviors that lead to maturity, it also provides life-changing encounters with the Christ whom members are trying to follow. Relationships with God are experienced in relationships with others. Missional small groups need to find ways of authentically engaging the wider community. The next chapter shifts from these conceptual groundings for my project to its practical implementation.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

My research project is based on the conviction that small groups offer a viable vehicle for effective and compelling spiritual formation in the local church setting today. More specifically, my project explored ways of doing small groups that make sense in mainline church traditions that draw upon the United Methodist small group heritage, that make sense in the wider communities, and that truly foster spiritual growth. I hope that my project can help United Methodist congregations draw upon both their own United Methodist heritage and the missional church approach to foster spiritual formation using small groups that make sense to the current, postmodern culture.

The engine of my research project was the PAR team serving as a small group within FUMC who discerned together ways to be this kind of a faith-formation small group, develop ideas to try, and then experiment by implementing the ideas in our setting. The research question that has guided my process and my research project was:

> *How might a participatory action research intervention which draws on the United Methodist heritage of using small groups, framed within a missional perspective, be used to help cultivate faith formation group experiences in FUMC?*

The methodology for my research project was a two-stage, mixed methods concurrent approach. The first stage was a simple exploratory project using qualitative interviews over the phone with leaders of other churches who oversaw their church's

small group ministries. The second stage was a participatory action research (PAR) mixed methods transformative research project within my own ministry context.

Rationale for Methodology

The two-stage process was important because the first stage was an information-gathering stage that helped inform the work of the second stage. The heart of the second stage was the work done by the PAR group in discerning ideas for how small groups could be a vital context for spiritual growth. The information learned from other churches was helpful to the PAR group during this discernment.

A mixed methods approach was beneficial because, as Creswell notes, different forms of data "provide different types of information."[1] In order to learn about how small groups can be used better to help people grow spiritually, a variety of perspectives is helpful. I wished to learn how certain churches that were known for using small groups well helped to develop their small group ministry and what exactly they felt was successful about them. I also wanted to learn how leaders of FUMC felt about the church's current small group ministry, and what potential there might be to develop and grow it. Further, I wanted to work closely with a small group of people from FUMC to discern together, through experimentation, ideas and practices that would work well in this setting. A mixed methods approach allowed me to study this variety of perspectives.

A simple exploratory method was useful in gathering information in the first stage of my project because I desired a more in-depth look at a few scenarios where small groups were being used well in local churches. I wanted to understand each within its

[1] Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches,* 215.

own setting and discover which differences were connected to its setting. Small group ministry continually is evolving and changing as it is lived, and often it is complex and hard to explain. The interviews allowed the leaders to reflect and think through the small group ministries they were leading, at least for some of them, in ways that they had not before.

Rubin and Rubin discuss the advantages of a qualitative approach for situations just like this. They say it allows for a focus on depth rather than breadth, for exploring topics with a small number of individuals, for better analyzing of complex and counterintuitive situations, and for studying nearly invisible processes.[2] Further, qualitative interviews allow for in-depth listening that pays attention to the meaning behind the information reported.[3] They also see value in using a responsive interviewing model, as the interviewer can then ask questions to flesh out ideas and engage emerging topics.[4] This was important during my interviews, as I often asked for more detail about unique developments in what the person being interviewed was explaining about his or her small group ministry context.

The second stage of the project incorporated both quantitative and qualitative methods in a PAR transformative design. The quantitative part was useful in ascertaining a general impression from within FUMC of the congregation's own small group ministry. As Peter M. Nardi explains, quantitative exploratory research is a way to "get a rough sense of what is happening on a particular topic for which we don't yet have enough

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[2] Rubin and Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data,* 2-5.

[3] Ibid., 6.

[4] Ibid., 10.

information."[5] Questionnaires are able to gather information from a larger number of people. Further, by using a baseline and end line questionnaire, I was able to analyze the changes to the general impression over the research time frame.

An intentional part of this study was to explore, discern, and experiment with ideas that could make small groups more helpful in fostering spiritual growth in settings like FUMC. As this project was seeking to learn about ways small groups can be effective as well as creating a small group experience that could experiment with those learnings, a participatory action research project was appropriate. Further, as this project was about group experience, it was important to use a collaborative research group.

Davydd J. Greenwood and Morten Levin identify the three key elements in a PAR project. The first, *participation*, means "everyone involved takes some responsibility."[6] Those who are involved in the study are not just objects of study, or even objectively conducting the study. David Coghlan and Teresa Brannick emphasize that the conductor of the research is also an active participant in what is being researched.[7] In fact, it is the participants who actually create the research as it is being done. In the case of my research project, I convened the PAR group, but it was the group together who created, conducted, and reflected on the research.

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[5] Peter M. Nardi, *Doing Survey Research: A Guide to Quantitative Methods*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2014), 9.

[6] Davydd J. Greenwood and Morten Levin, *Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007), 7.

[7] David Coghlan and Teresa Brannick, *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), xii-xiii.

The second key element is action. *Action*, according to Greenwood and Levin, "is participatory because AR [Action Research] aims to alter the initial situation."[8] P. Reason and H. Bradbury define AR as "a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowledge in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview."[9] The outcomes of AR, note Coghlan and Brannick, are both action and research, as well as a cyclical, iterative, and collaborative process.[10] It is "research *in* action, rather than research *about* action."[11] Or, as they explain again, action learning "takes the task as the vehicle for learning."[12]

The focus of my project was not to just learn what may have been working elsewhere but to discover what could work in this context. Therefore, action was an important component of my research. Coghlan and Brannick explain that action research "is based on a collaborative problem-solving relationship between researcher and client which aims at both solving a problem and generating new knowledge."[13] They study the issues together because they experience them directly.[14] Each of the small group members was passionate about effective small groups for faith formation, and it was our

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[8] Greenwood and Levin, *Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change,* 6.

[9] Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2001), 1.

[10] Coghlan and Brannick, *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization,* xii.

[11] Ibid., 3.

[12] Ibid., 15.

[13] Ibid., 9.

[14] Ibid.

desire to use this research project to change how FUMC does small group ministry in the future.

My research project followed Coghlan's and Brannick's iterative and collaborative process: we learned together, discerned together, planned together, implemented and experimented, then evaluated together, which led to further learning, and so on.[15] We hoped the discernment process would continue at FUMC in the future through its Nurture Team and its ongoing discussion around more effective small groups. The scope of my project, actually, intended to impact the way that FUMC would foster spiritual growth for people in the future.

The third key term outlined by Greenwood and Levin is *research*.[16] This project puts experimentation and learning in the context of scientific research. We hoped that what was learned could be shared with others, incorporated into the future ministry of FUMC, and also tried elsewhere. The project sought to gather and incorporate new knowledge, but it also recorded and explained it in a way so that it could be utilized by others.

Biblical and Theological Grounding

There is no organizational structure for the church laid out in the Bible. Local churches, from the beginning, have had to experiment through trial and error, collaboration, and theological reflection in order to find better ways to organize who they were and what they were doing. This can be seen even within Scripture itself. The New

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[15] Ibid., 4.

[16] Greenwood and Levin, *Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change,* 2.

Testament, for example, shows the early church leaders gathering in a council to discuss how the church would reach out to Gentiles (Acts 15). Paul appeals to successful experiments in specific locations as grounds for changing the way the church would be organized. Earlier in Acts there is the concern of food distribution among widows (chapter 6). The twelve gather everyone together to discern what should be done. Through what might be termed a PAR model, they choose to elect seven leaders to serve in a specialized role. Similar processes can be found when the disciples choose a replacement for Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:15-26), and for how the church in Antioch was to be staffed (Acts 11:19-30).

Jesus' sending of the seventy, as discussed above, provides another model for PAR. Jesus gathered them all together and gave them instructions (learning). He then sent them out to learn how to be witnesses by actually doing it (action). He then called them back together and had them reflect on their learning (learning). Later on, the cycle continues, most notably when Jesus sends them out in The Great Commission (Matt 25).

Paul argues that the church operates like a body with many different parts, each part serving an important function, but all working in unity together (1 Cor 12:12-30). Paul calls Jesus the Head, who directs all the activities of the whole. Yet it is the Spirit who gives all the abilities and functions. This same idea is found again in Eph 4:1-16. The church as a body shares important parts of the PAR process. Individuals with a vested interest work together toward a new reality that includes them. It is not merely a reflective process. It is action: they serve, they act, they work. It is experimentation. Yet, the individual members must work together, share with each other, and interrelate.

In the Old Testament, there are many examples of a PAR-like process operating. Of particular note is how Moses organized the Israelites while wandering through the wilderness. Moses and his father-in-law, Jethro, visit and talk together about all that had been going on (Gen 18). Then Jethro observes Moses in action, as he is judging the cases among the Israelites. Jethro and Moses discuss and reflect on that activity. Out of that discussion, Jethro proposes a new course of action to try. Likewise, in Num 11:10-17, the Lord established a group of seventy elders to assist Moses as he led the people. This was a form of a PAR group, as the group continued to meet together, to discuss the issues that were important to them all, experiment with different ideas, and learn through doing.

Theological grounding for PAR can draw upon the perichoretic relationship of the Trinity. As explained above, God is three and one, working in harmony and together. This God of relationships invites people into the relationships shared within God. The church is called to join into the social relationship with God. Nevertheless, this God is also a sending God, who sends the church into the world as witness. There is a gathering and sending dynamic at play. The church goes and acts. It experiments. It tries new things. Yet the church also gathers together a community within the leadership of the Trinity. The church reflects, discusses, communicates, and discerns together—inspired directly by the Trinity—toward action and experimentation. There is a continual gathering for discerning and sending for action cycle.

This dynamic plays out whenever the church lives into its perichoretic identity. Each local church and ministry needs to function like a PAR group. Discernment is done together. The action comes out of the connection. Each person serves in important ways, but all are governed by the unity held under the headship of Jesus Christ. The local

ministry is influenced by the context. As the members engage the wider community, they learn and adapt. They bring these learnings and adaptions into the discerning process so that new experiments can be risked. There is a continual gathering for discerning and sending for action: participatory action research!

A historic example is the way the young church used ecumenical councils. Drawing on the example of the council in Acts 15, the church gathered the leaders together to discuss, reflect, discern, and devise action. At the Council of Nicea, for example, many issues of organization and polity were decided. The church leaders then separated to go live out the decisions. Over the next centuries, the church leaders gathered together again and again to discern and discuss, each time going to live out the decisions.

The deciding of the New Testament canon also included a PAR-like process. In the fourth century, Athanasius conducted a survey throughout the churches of the Roman Empire documenting which books were being read, copied, and shared. These books, he argued, were the books that local churches found were being used by the Holy Spirit to guide, inspire, and form Christians. It was a test of application, of praxis, of experimentation. The early church argued that it was these books that God was using. Thus, the setting of the New Testament canon in C.E. 381 at the Council of Carthage included a PAR-like process of discernment, action, and communication.

Local churches continue to function with this same process. Members gather, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, to reflect together, to discuss what God is up to in the world, to discern where God is active, and to agree to work together in different ways. Then all members work individually and together. The cycle continues: all members are gathered

and sent. All members experience God and experiment in the world. The church is led by the Spirit and is present in each person.

Research Design

Context

I conducted my research project with a PAR group in a small United Methodist congregation in the outer suburbs of a metro area in the upper Midwest. The congregation's average weekly worship attendance is 115 in one worship service a weekend. For employees, the church has a full-time pastor, one full-time Worship Director, a half-time Director of Children's Ministry, a half-time Office Administrator, and a half-time custodian. Contract-for-hire persons and volunteers make up the rest of the leadership positions.

The congregation has fairly traditional small groups, including Bible studies, fellowship groups, women's groups, men's groups, activity groups (quilters, knitters, praise team, handyman, etc.), and age level groups (youth group, young adults). The congregation is not quite fifty years old, and it has embraced a path toward intentional revitalization. It is growing into a better self-awareness of its missional identity.

My research project was intended to help FUMC pursue its own revitalization of faith formation small groups. The results of this project were intended to help FUMC evaluate how it can more effectively implement a small group ministry that (1) draws upon the United Methodist heritage of faith formation, (2) draws upon the missional approach, and (3) engages well those who are outside the congregation. This project was embraced with the hope of shaping small group ministry in the years ahead.

Design

My research project had two sequential stages. The first stage was a simple exploratory project studying seven different United Methodist churches that were already using small groups effectively for faith formation and that engaged the wider community. I used a nonprobability purposive sampling for these interviews. In October of 2014, I asked my bishop and district superintendents for recommendations of churches denomination-wide that had strong faith-forming small group ministries and that were located in suburban contexts, similar to my own congregation. They provided me with ten congregations to contact. I went to each of their web sites and sent an email to the pastor or staff person in each church who served as leader of their small group ministry.

Leaders from four of the congregations responded that they were willing to participate and able to do so before Christmas. In November and December of 2014, I conducted qualitative interviews with each over the phone, inquiring: (1) how their small groups facilitated faith formation, (2) what about their small group ministry drew upon the United Methodist heritage, (3) in what ways their small group ministry was informed missionally, and (4) how their small group ministry connected with those outside the congregation. By March of 2015, I conducted three more phone interviews with other leaders who were available after the beginning of the new year. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix A. I recorded these interviews digitally and then had them transcribed by a professional stenographer. This stenographer signed a confidentiality agreement, available in Appendix B.

I desired to share findings from these interviews with my PAR group in the second stage of my research. Therefore, before I transcribed and coded these

transcriptions, I drew upon my notes taken during the interview to share descriptive information of what other churches were doing, and why. I kept the interviewees and the churches confidential by using pseudonyms.

The second stage of my research project was a PAR mixed methods transformative research project within my own ministry context. I developed a quantitative questionnaire, found in Appendix C, to survey how effectively our small groups were believed to both foster faith formation and engage people in the wider community. In October 2014 I field-tested the questionnaire among five United Methodist clergy in nearby towns. Their feedback was largely positive, and resulted in a few minor structural and wording changes. These five clergy also field-tested the other interview protocols I had developed for both stages of my research.

I began in mid-November 2014 by administering this questionnaire as a baseline measure among two different groups for two longitudinal panels. Both were supplied paper copies with a detachable cover letter and a numbering system that maintained their confidentiality but also tracked the respondents for the longitudinal panel. I received the questionnaires back over the next three weeks, by the deadline of December seventh. In June of 2015, I entered the data from these questionnaires into SPSS.

The first group among whom the questionnaire was administered was a nonprobability purposive census of the most active congregational leaders. I distributed questionnaires to the thirty-six people I determined to be the most active leaders of the congregation. These are the group with whom I regularly work and who oversee the regular operations of the church. I received twenty-eight questionnaires back, making a return rate of seventy-eight percent.

The second group to receive the questionnaire was a census of those who agreed to be a part of the experimental small group experience of my PAR project. This again served as a baseline survey for a longitudinal panel. I initially formed this PAR group with those who had been serving as my doctoral program journey partner team (JPT) and the grow group coordinator of the church. In October, after I explained the PAR process to my JPT, three of the seven members asked to leave the group. I replaced these three people with three others from the congregation willing to serve. I had identified in these three new people a passion for spiritual formation through small groups. Two were retired pastors who had led small group discernment processes before, and the third was the committed leader of a fellowship group. The final number was eight people, including myself, who are very active in the congregation and who have a passion for our small groups to be more effective.

I had the PAR group in place by early November 2014. We began with a planning session in late November 2014, served with dinner at my house. After getting acquainted, I explained how PAR worked, outlined the process, and introduced the research design we would follow (provided in Appendix D). We agreed to meet monthly.

The PAR group met for the second time in mid-December, again with a meal at my home, and began following the research design. At our third meeting, in early January 2015, we met over a meal at the home of two of the participants. We were only able to get through half of the protocol in two hours. We decided to meet twice a month from then on, as we agreed ample discerning time together was very important to the process. We also agreed to no longer eat together. We felt we had done sufficient bonding, and the meal time now tended to distract our conversation. From our fourth meeting on we met

twice a month, following the PAR group protocol divided over two sessions each. We generally met twice a month from January through September, 2015.

Our process included me sharing the findings from the interviews I conducted in the first stage of my project, reading and discussing together Boren's book, *Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community that Makes a Difference in the World*, and reading and discussing United Methodist resources that I provided on small groups from the United Methodist General Board of Discipleship. A list of the resources I provided is included in Appendix I.[17]

Our process for the first meeting of the month was to discuss the activities we had done since the last time we met, discern together any key learnings, engage our text and other resources as time permitted, and then, have an open discussion time of what we saw as most relevant. We agreed that before the next session, we each would reflect on our discernment time together to hear what God may be speaking to us. Our second session of the month began by sharing any insights we had since our previous meeting, again engaging the text and resources as we had time, and then spending time together discerning and agreeing upon the actions we would do over the next two weeks. Each time we strove to situate our selection of activities within the United Methodist heritage of small group ministry, make connections to faith formation, and widen our perspective to the wider community.

I digitally recorded each of these PAR meetings and had them transcribed by the same stenographer as noted above. I also gathered data by taking notes at the group

[17] Boren, *Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community That Makes a Difference in the World*.

meetings, by journaling, and by writing memos during this ten-month process. The coding and interpreting of these data are described in the next section.

I concluded by administering two end line quantitative questionnaires and by conducting a focus group, all in September of 2015. The first questionnaire was administered to the same nonprobability purposive census of twenty-eight leaders who had completed the baseline questionnaire. I chose not to include the eight leaders who had not returned the baseline questionnaire. When I had attempted to follow up with them to return the baseline questionnaire, they indicated to me a distain for taking surveys and told me they would not participate. I felt it was pointless to approach them again for the end line survey. The same questionnaire was used, this time serving as the end line measure of the longitudinal panel. Surprisingly, I received questionnaires from all the twenty-eight leaders!

The other end line questionnaire was administered to the nonprobability purposive census of the seven other participants who made up the PAR small group. Again the very same questionnaire was used, again serving as the end line measure of the longitudinal panel. As with the baseline survey, the questionnaires were provided in paper copies, which I then entered using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) the end of September. Both times I used the same numbering of the paper questionnaires to link each respondent's end line questionnaire to that respondent's baseline questionnaire, keeping the integrity for the longitudinal panel.

The ending focus group was with the nonprobability purposive census of the eight participants (including myself) in the PAR small group. This protocol, available in Appendix E, explored their learnings of this project, particularly if there was any

perceived evidence that this small group model might be viable to be used again. As this served as our final PAR time together, we met in one of the participant's home and shared a meal together. Again, I recorded this interview digitally and had it transcribed by the same professional stenographer.

It can be observed, then, that I conducted two end-of-project explorations with the PAR small group. One was the end line questionnaire, and the other was the concluding focus group. I chose this in order to utilize both quantitative and qualitative methods of engaging the learnings of the PAR group. The quantitative survey was intended to assess how the members of the group themselves grew spiritually. The qualitative focus group was intended to assess how the members of the group felt the process had functioned in discerning usable practices and activities for small group faith formation in the future.

Analyzing the Data

There were a number of qualitative components to my research project. In the first stage, there were the transcriptions of seven phone interviews with leaders of United Methodist congregations with vital small group ministries. In the second stage, the qualitative data included the seventeen transcriptions of the regular PAR group meetings, the transcriptions of the end line focus group, my own journaling of the PAR process, and the many memos I wrote with insights and reflections.

I analyzed this qualitative data set using a modified version of Charmaz's guidelines for coding qualitative data, as she describes in *Constructing Grounded Theory*.[18] As she suggests, I conducted initial coding by identifying within the data word-

[18] Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*.

by-word, line-by-line, and incident-by-incident *in vivo* codes.[19] I then used Rubin's and Rubin's suggestion to evaluate the codes not just for frequency but for meaning.[20] The research I had done to engage the literature as outlined in chapter two helped identify important framing words and ideas.

I had an exceptionally large qualitative data set, with over 1,000 pages of transcriptions. I had over 1,200 *in vivo* codes that I felt pertained to my research objective. Some of these *in vivo* codes were nearly identical, with only inconsequential variations in word endings, word sequence, and the use of synonyms. I chose to compile these nearly identical *in vivo* codes to create a little over 600 *in vivo* codes. After listing these codes again, I felt I could combined the codes that were still very similar and seemed to say very similar things. I did this, resulting in just over 300 what I call representative *in vivo* codes.

I then conducted what Charmaz calls focused coding. I first grouped the representative *in vivo* codes into sixty-four focused codes. Again I added a coding step by putting together focused codes that I felt were very similar. This resulted in forty-three what I called representative focused codes. These representative focused codes I clustered into twelve axial codes.[21]

At this point, I again utilized Rubin's and Rubin's technique of theory building and drew upon the wider body of literature engaged above to explore the interplay and

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[19] Ibid., 50-53.

[20] Rubin and Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data,* 196-199, 204-106.

[21] Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis,* 55-60.

connection among the axial codes.[22] Charmaz calls this theoretical coding.[23] I explored various possibilities of how the axial codes could be interrelated, seeking the point of saturation, when no other theories seemed plausible. I identified three systems of interplay among the twelve axial codes. I offer results from this analysis in the following chapter.

The quantitative data of my research project were collected from the questionnaire that was administered among two different groups, administered both as a baseline and as an end line measure. I analyzed this quantitative data set using both descriptive and inferential statistics, entering the data from the questionnaires into SPSS. For descriptive statistics, I found the total number of the sample (N), the number of valid responses (n), the frequency (f), the percentage (%), and the mean for Likert scale questions.

For inferential statistics, I attempted to conduct cross tabulations and chi-square tests, but given the small number of questionnaires, these tests could not produce meaningful results. Therefore, I conducted paired t-tests for all the questions, looking for a p-value of 0.05 or less. Only a few t-tests identified a significance level within this range to reject the null hypothesis. As I was simply trying to understand the sample itself and not trying to make any inferences to a wider population, I did not see any need to conduct ANOVA or the accompanying *post hoc* tests. I did make some observations about the direction of change in some of the mean scores, even for the questions that paired t-tests did not indicate a change within the required level of significance. Finally,

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[22] Rubin and Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data,* 195.

[23] Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis,* 63.

for the one open-ended question and questions that allowed for comments, I created codes using the same process as I described above for coding qualitative data. Again, I present results from this analysis in the next chapter.

Conclusion

The data for my research project were collected from varied and somewhat complex interactions of sources. There were the two stages of the project, and the second stage utilized mixed methods. There were qualitative sources of interviews, the PAR group meetings, a focus group, and my journaling and memos. There were also the quantitative sources of a questionnaire administered among two different groups, both as a baseline and end line survey. Some value comes from merely the gathering and reporting of the data on what seven different churches were doing with small groups, as found in the first stage of the project. The analysis of the data in the second stage, however, proved to be challenging. Nevertheless, I have identified some important and perhaps guiding results that are of wider interest. These are described in some detail in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of my research project, which has been described in previous chapters. I begin with a summary of my research question and design. Then I describe the qualitative results from the first stage of my project. The second stage incorporates both quantitative and qualitative research approaches. I present the results from the qualitative participatory action research (PAR) group work before showing the pertinent results from the quantitative surveys. Finally, I discuss the implications bringing all of these various strands of research together to inform the whole.

Summary of My Research Design

My research project explored ways that United Methodist congregations can draw upon both their own United Methodist heritage and the missional church approach to foster spiritual formation using small groups that make sense to the current, postmodern culture and are usable at First United Methodist Church (FUMC). My research question is:

> How might a participatory action research intervention which draws on the United Methodist heritage of using small groups, framed within a missional perspective, be used to help cultivate faith formation group experiences in FUMC?

My research project had two sequential stages. The first stage was a simple exploratory project interviewing leaders of seven different United Methodist churches that were already using small groups effectively for faith formation and that engaged the

wider community. I conducted a phone interview with a leader from each of the churches who had direct oversight of that church's small group ministry. My desire was to discover how they organized and ran their small group ministries, what role their small groups served in providing a context for spiritual formation within their churches, what their values and priorities were for their groups, and what sources and resources they drew upon to sustain them. I summarized my learnings and presented them to the PAR group in the next stage of my project.

The second stage of my research project was a PAR mixed-methods transformative research project within my own ministry context. I began and ended this stage with a quantitative study seeking to measure how FUMC leaders believed small groups within the church effectively foster faith formation and engage people in the wider community. I administered the questionnaire in mid-November as a baseline measure for two longitudinal panels, using the same questionnaire for both. The first group was a census of the thirty-six most active congregational leaders. The second group was a census of the members of my PAR team. In late September 2015, I administered to both groups the same questionnaire that I had used as the baseline questionnaire. This time the survey served as the end line measure for the panels.

In between these two surveys, a PAR project was conducted by a group of seven people plus myself. Three of these people had been serving on my doctoral program journey partner team (JPT). I also added the grow group coordinator of the church and three others who were not serving in positions of leadership within the church but who were active in the congregation and who had a passion for our small group ministry.

The PAR group began meeting in November 2014. From January onwards, we tried to meet twice a month, as it took two sessions to get through one cycle of all that we wanted to do together each month. The first session of the month we spent time in fellowship and group building, listened and shared around a passage of Scripture, shared from the activity we had agreed at the previous meeting to, discuss any insights and takeaways, and prayed together. The second session of each month we again spent time in group building, Scripture reading, and prayer, but we spent the bulk of our time discussing the various texts that were informing our work and selecting an activity (intervention) for us to try before we met again. The discussion included identifying practices that may be worth trying to incorporate into the future small group ministry of FUMC. We met a total of eighteen times; the last session was in September 2015. On the last session, I conducted a concluding focus group with the PAR team reflecting on their learnings of this project, particularly if there were any learnings from the group experience that might inform the future small group ministry at FUMC.

The end line survey of the wider leadership was designed to measure any influence that the PAR group may have had on the leadership of the church. The end line survey of the PAR group was intended to assess how the members of the group themselves grew spiritually. The qualitative focus group was intended to assess how the members of the group felt the process had functioned in discerning usable practices and activities for small group faith formation in the future.

First Stage

The first stage of my research was a simple exploratory project conducting phone interviews of the small group ministry leaders of seven different United Methodist

churches that I had discerned were already using small groups effectively for faith formation and that engaged the wider community. The purpose of this stage of research was to gather information for how other United Methodist churches ran their small group ministry intentionally to promote spiritual formation.

As the table below shows, all but one of churches were located in suburban contexts similar to FUMC. All had a larger number in weekly worship than FUMC, with five being significantly larger. Only two were in Minnesota, and only one did not have at least a part-time paid staff person devoted to small group ministry. I chose to give each church a number rather than a pseudonym because I could then number them in the order of how many people they have attending small groups.

Table 3. Churches Demographics of Interviews

Church Number	City State	Setting	Worship Attendance	Group Attendance	Number of Groups	Group Oversight
1	Saint Paul, MN	Urban	170	40	7	Pastoral
2	Minneap-olis, MN	Sub-urban	270	140	18	Staff - Half
3	Nash-ville,TN	Sub-urban	1,000	400	27	Staff - Half
4	Sioux Falls, SD	Sub-urban	2,000	500	60	Staff - Half
5	Dayton, OH	Sub-urban	2,000	1000	80	Staff - Full
6	Des Moines, IA	Sub-urban	2,000	1,200	70	Staff - Half
7	Kansas City, MO	Sub-urban	9,000	4,500	450	Staff - Full

Although my phone conversations with the leaders from these churches primarily were for information gathering, a qualitative approach helped me discuss and understand the particularities of each location. I was then able to relay my learnings to the PAR group to help inform our discussions. Much of what I shared with my PAR group was

simply describing how these other churches conducted their small group ministries. Table 4 below offers a summary of a number of these learnings.

Table 4. Description of the Small Groups of the Churches Interviewed

Ch #	Group Atten-dance	Groups Named	GBOD Mater-ials	Meeting Location	Child Care?	Curric-ulum	Multiplication
1	40	Disciple Groups	Yes	On site	No	Self-chosen	Grow and split, but didn't!
2	140	Small Groups	No	On site, Coffee shops, Homes	Yes	Self-chosen	
3	400	Offer Groups	No	Homes, Off site	Yes	Self-chosen	Don't split. Create new groups with new people.
4	500	Connect Groups	No		No	Self-chosen	Grow and split, each into 3 groups
5	1000	Life Groups	No	Mostly homes	No	Self-chosen	Grow and divide
6	1,200	Small Groups	Rarely	Mostly on site	Yes	Self-chosen	
7	4,500	Small Groups	No	Variety	Yes	Self-chosen	Grow and split, and create new.

Ch: Church, GBOD: General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church

Four of the churches have special names for their groups. Only one had even tried to use the United Methodist curriculum on small groups offered by the General Board of Discipleship (GBOD). Most groups met either weekly or twice a month, but some met monthly. Most offered child care during group time, and all let each group choose their own curriculum for study. Respondents were divided over the question of whether groups should be closed for the course of their time, or if groups should grow and split. There was intentionality around both of these, and both seemed to work in their settings.

Focused Codes

The qualitative style of my interviews also allowed me to explore more deeply some themes and ideas beyond the categorical data gathered above. As I asked the questions on my protocol, I noticed some reoccurring themes that arose across the interviews, although each time they presented in a variety of ways. I applied Charmaz's grounded theory analysis to the transcripts in search of deeper understandings.

The first level of analyzing the data, according to Charmaz, is to identify *in vivo* codes. *In vivo* codes are words and phrases actually used by the people interviewed that summarize the meaning of what is said.[1] I did this by going through the transcripts of the interviews and coding word-by-word, line-by-line, and incident-by-incident.[2] I then used Rubin's and Rubin's suggestion to evaluate the codes not just for frequency but for meaning.[3] I then conducted what Charmaz calls focused coding by grouping first the *in vivo* codes into focused codes, and then by grouping the focused codes into axial codes.[4]

Table 5 below lists the focused codes, divided into categories of those shared by five or more churches, those shared by three and four churches, and those unique to individual churches or shared by just two churches. Following each code is the number for the church or churches that identified that code.

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[1] Ibid., 50.

[2] Ibid., 50-53.

[3] Rubin and Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data,* 196-199, 204-206.

[4] Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis,* 55-60.

Table 5. Focused Codes for First Stage Interviews

Consistent: Among 5-7 churches (Church #s)	**Shared: Among 3-4 churches (Church #s)**	**Unique: 1-2 (Church #s)**
1. Clergy/Staff oversight (all) 4. Chaotic inception (all) 5. Still need more training (all) 6. Relationship building (all) 7. Study of Scripture (2,3,5,6,7) 9. Prayer (all) 10. Service component (all) 16. Training, resources, and support for group leaders (all) 20. Let groups form organically (all) 21. Invitation by pastor, leader, members, social media (all) 22. Offer options: size, how often, where, topic, style, makeup (all) 23. Continually start new group (2,3,4,6,7) 28. Primary means of spiritual growth/discipleship (all)	2. Developed without a plan (4,5,6,7) 3. Part of church inception (4,5,6) 8. Application to life (2,3,5,7) 12. Designed around core values (2,3,6,7) 13. Accountability (1,3,7) 15. Oversight by trained coaches (3,5,6,7) 17. Assigned reading (1,2,4,5,7) 18. Modeling of small group format (3,4,5,7) 19. Leaders are hand chosen (1,4,5,6,) 24. Offer groups with defined period of life (2,3,4) 25. Each group chooses their own curriculum (3,4,5,7) 26. Core value of the church/ expected (1,4,5,7) 32. Help people to go deeper spiritually (1,3,5,7) 33. Share life together (3,5,6,7)	11. Follow assigned format (1,3,7) 14. Oversight by Development Team (6,7) 27. Missional - Bring in new people (1,7) 29. Leadership formation (2,7) 30. Offer Christ to each other (3) 31. Continuum between personal holiness and service (3) 34. Entry point to the church (4,6) 35. Brings change to lives (4) 36. Train, equip, and send people (7)

Categorizing the focused codes this way suggested a couple of important insights. First of all, the list of those codes that were shared by five or more churches began to reveal a list of best practices and values shared across churches that were using small groups effectively. This list alone may be useful for churches who wish to develop effective small groups. Secondly, it seems that as the numbers attending small groups increase (in the tables, the churches are assigned numbers in ascending order by number in groups), the more complex the small group organization and oversight became. Thirdly, there also seems to be more use of paid staffing among churches with higher numbers attending small groups.

Axial Codes

Analyzing the data into axial codes is the second level of abstraction. I began to see relationships among the focused codes, as certain focused codes seem to correlate and go together. I grouped the focused codes together and then gave each group an axial codes. Table 6 shows the focus codes categorized into axial codes. I retained the designation of each focused code to the specific churches by listing the church number in parentheses after the focused codes.

Table 6. Axial Codes with Supporting Focused Codes

Axial Codes	**Focused Codes (Church #s)**
Developing	1. Clergy/Staff oversight (all) 2. Developed without a plan (4,5,6,7) 3. Part of church inception (4,5,6) 4. Chaotic during inception (all) 5. Still need more training (all)
Designing	6. Relationship building (all) 7. Study of Scripture (2,3,5,6,7) 8. Application to life (2,3,5,7) 9. Prayer (all) 10. Service component (all) 11. Follow assigned format (1,3,7) 12. Designed around core values (2,3,6,7) 13. Accountability (1,3,7)
Supporting	1. Clergy/Staff oversight (all) 11. Follow assigned format (1,3,7) 14. Oversight by Development Team (6,7) 15. Oversight also by trained coaches (3,5,6,7) 16. Training, resources and support for group leaders (all) 17. Assigned reading and online library reading (1,2,4,5,7) 18. Modeling of small group format (3,4,5,7) 19. Leaders are hand chosen (1,4,5,6)
Entering	20. Letting groups form organically (all) 21. Invitation by pastor, leader, members, social media (all) 22. Offer options: size, how often, where, topic, style, makeup (all) 23. Continually start new group (2,3,4,6,7) 24. Offer groups with defined period of life (2,3,4) 25. Each group chooses their own curriculum (3,4,5,7) 26. Core value of the church/expected (1,4,5,7)

Table 6. Continued

Axial Codes	Focused Codes (Church #s)
Valuing	6. Relationship building (all) 27. Missional - Bring in new people (1,7) 28. Primary means of spiritual growth/discipleship (all) 20. Leadership formation (2,7) 30. Offer Christ to each other (3) 31. Continuum between personal holiness and service (3) 32. Help people to go deeper spiritually (1,3,5,7) 33. Share life together (3,5,6,7) 34. Entry point to the church (4,6) 35. Brings change to lives (4) 36. Train, equip, and send people (7)

Axial coding helped me understand some of the dynamics of interplay within each of the axial categories. In the Developing code, for example, I saw that the paid staff had an instrumental role in developing small groups. Even so, the groups seemed to arise somewhat organically and chaotically, and staff had to work hard to organize what was happening. All churches felt that their small group ministries were still works in process and needed more training among the leaders to foster a better small group ministry.

In the Designing code, I can see a fairly consistent employment of the components of relationship building, caring for group members, studying of Scripture, application to daily life, prayer, acts of service, and connecting with the wider community. The Supporting code shows paid staff are instrumental to the ongoing support of the small group ministry, along with ample resourcing for group leaders, such as online sources and materials. Regular training that includes raising up volunteer coaches, the modeling of small group experiences, and checking in with leaders is common. The Entering code shows a widely-shared expectation to be in small groups, promoted from the senior staff and in worship settings, establishes a culture of being involved in small groups. Options and variety among small group times, locations, topics,

and formats also seem to be very important. Finally, the Valuing code suggests that although there are a wide variety of perceived values for small groups, by far the most important is that these groups are seen to be the primary pathway of spiritual growth within the churches.

Theoretical Codes

The third stage of analyzing these data was to create theoretical codes. This is not another level of abstraction of axial codes but, according to Charmaz, a way of understanding how the axial codes relate to one another.[5] What emerged to me was a dynamic flow present in all of the seven churches of how their small group ministries were designed, developed, and supported. This flow is dynamic in that it is not a simple linear movement from inception through sustaining the ministry. It is a continual process of creating and recreating, of ongoing interplay among the developing, designing and supporting components. The small group participants are drawn into the small group ministry, but also affect and help recreate it. They themselves are formed and re-formed as they grow in spiritual maturity and community by being involved in small groups. Figure 1 below attempts to diagram this organic and dynamic flow of the small group ministries. Spirals represent the dynamic interplay among the components and a dotted arrow through the middle to represent the participants of small groups.

[5] Ibid., 63.

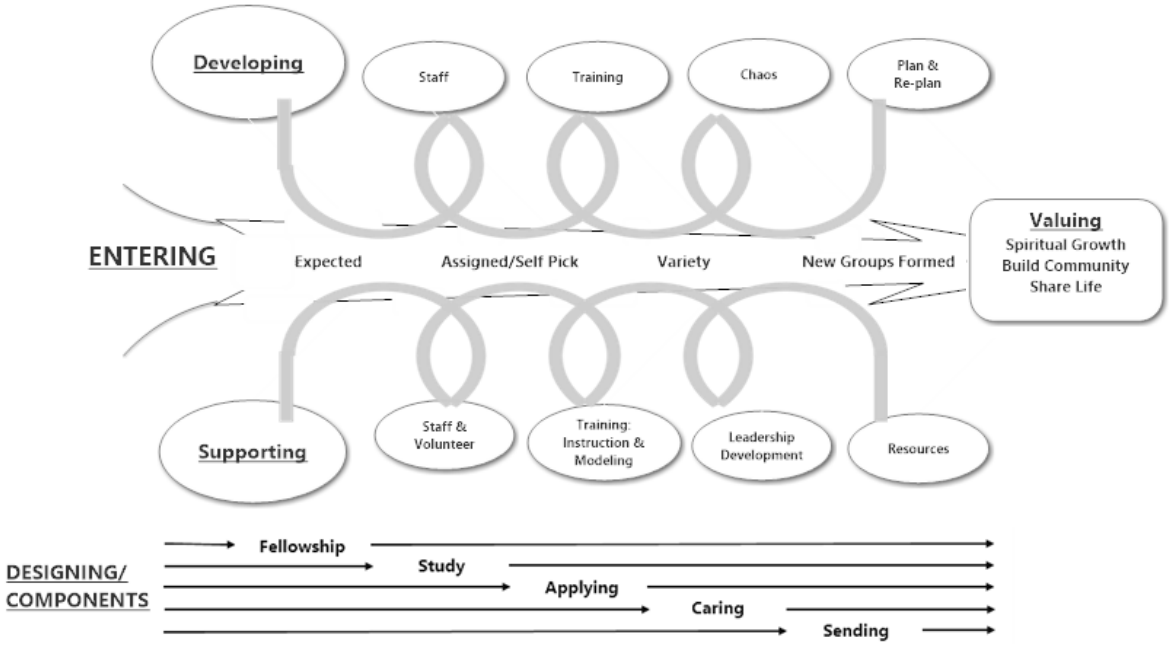


Figure 1. Development of Small Group Ministry Diagram

The diagram represents the development of small groups from the perspective of those who join them. The Entering code on the left represents those who are drawn into the culture of expectation, are invited, are assigned or self pick into a group, and the variety and the continuously forming new groups that are available. The intended purpose, or valuing code, is listed on the right. Spiritual growth, building community, and sharing life together express the overall intention by congregations for those who engage in the small group ministry. The spiral along the top represents the cyclical nature of how church leaders develop the small group ministry. It is a continual process in which staff train leaders in an often chaotic development through planning and re-planning. The development is never done, but continues to shape and form.

The spiral along the bottom represents the cyclical nature of how church leaders continue to support and maintain the small group ministry. Staff and volunteers invest heavily through continual training that couples instruction with modeling, through the

intentional development and support of small group leaders, and through providing a wide variety of resources and materials to leaders and participants. Across the bottom of the diagram are key components that make up small group experiences in the seven churches. There may be some chronological flow of these, as groups tend to spend a lot of time on fellowship early on, and only feel comfortable to share applications to their personal lives and deep sharing after trust and safety are established. Serving components, which may be named as a priority from the beginning, may not actually be added until the group feels comfortable working together.

The diagram attempts to express how small group ministries were continually being formed and reformed in the seven churches I interviewed. As the congregations learned what seemed to work, they adapted those learnings into their small group plans. As interest grew in the groups, the congregations added more options and variety, not only to accommodate the needs of those joining, but also to accommodate what the congregation was able to do well. In all of my interviews, no matter what their small group ministries looked like, the leaders expressed in some way the need for doing a better job of organizing and supporting the small groups and their leaders. Small group ministries are always organic, cyclical, and continually developing!

Second Stage

PAR Project

The second stage of my research was a PAR project framed by two quantitative longitudinal panels. These two panels are discussed later in this chapter. The PAR project was a group of eight, including myself, who generally met twice a month. The expressed purpose for the group was to be a small group that shared life together, to experiment

through interventions with different small group components, to engage in learning about dynamic small group ministries, and to identify possible learnings that could be incorporated into the small group ministry of FUMC. Table 7 lists the members of the PAR group.

Table 7. PAR Group Members

Member	Why on PAR	Years at FUMC	Gender	Age	Role at FUMC
A	JPT	5	F	40s	Small Group Leader
B	JPT	7	F	30s	Staff
C	JPT	46	F	60s	Church Leader
D	Researcher	5	M	40s	Pastor
E	Passionate about small groups	1	M	60s	Retired clergy
F	Passionate about small groups	1	F	60s	Retired Clergy
G	Passionate about small groups	27	M	50s	Small Group Coordinator
H	Passionate about small groups	13	F	60s	Small Group Leader

JPT: Journey Partner Team

PAR Group Process Design

The original intention was for the group to meet once per month for eight months. By the second meeting, however, it became clear that our discussion was so rich that we needed more time to get through all of the parts of our group meeting. The group decided to meet twice each month and spread the discussion over those two meetings. This also allowed us to insert a time apart to reflect on the insights that had been shared together.

Table 8 shows the difference between the original design and the modified dual meetings design.

Table 8. Original (One) and Modified (Two) PAR Meetings Each Month

Original: One Meeting Each Month	Modified: Two Meetings Each Month
	First Meeting:
Gathering and Sharing a Meal Together	Gathering and Sharing a Meal Together
Guiding Scripture	Guiding Scripture
Guiding Question (added at a later time)	Guiding Question (added at a later time)
Sharing around experiment/assignment that we agreed upon at the last meeting	Sharing around experiment/assignment that we agreed upon at the last meeting
	Agree to spent time in reflection
	Closing prayer
	Second Meeting:
	Gathering and fellowship
	Guiding Scripture
	Guiding Question
	Sharing reflections on previous discussion
Identifying potential practices for other groups	Identifying potential practices for other groups
Discussion around readings/interviews	Discussion around readings/interviews
Selecting an experiment/assignment to engage in before the next meeting	Selecting an experiment/assignment to engage in before the next meeting
Closing prayer	Closing prayer

The two meetings per month became the cadence we tried to follow, although we did not adhere to it perfectly. It allowed a lot more time for sharing among the group members, which the team came to value greatly. It also added the ability to spend some time apart reflecting more deeply on what had been shared during the session together. The modified design for the first meeting was to begin by reporting on the intervention we had done (which the group preferred to talk about in terms of *experiment*) and then reflect on it together. We then had time to reflect on our discussion between sessions. We then came back together for the second session, at which we identified insights and learnings that we felt were important. This reflection period allowed time for the Holy

Spirit to work in each of us and help us discern what was truly valuable and what practices might be worth trying in other small group settings.

In addition, the group didn't feel ready to disband at the end of the originally proposed length of eight months. We agreed to continue to meet during the summer, even though we had a harder time of all getting every participant to every meeting. Our final meeting was held in September, for a total of eighteen sessions over eleven months. Appendix J summarizes each of the PAR group sessions.

The PAR group experience was designed to serve two purposes. The first purpose was to be a small group together. The design of our small group experience incorporated some of the guidelines suggested in Boren's text, including sharing deeply, holding each other accountable, applying our learnings to our daily lives, and sharing life together.

The second purpose was to serve as a task force of sorts to discern together ideas and learnings that could be incorporated into small group experiences and ministries in other contexts, such as at FUMC in the future. We did this through engaging sources, trying interventions (experiments), reflecting on what we were learning, and sharing feedback and insights during group time together. Important sources were the interviews from the first part of my research project, the interviews I had conducted with leaders from seven other United Methodist churches that were using small groups effectively. At different sessions I shared summaries from these interviews, and the group was able to ask questions and discuss intriguing ideas. Table 9 shares the components we incorporated into our small group, separated into what was intended for our small group experience and what was supposed to help us discern ideas for other small group contexts. Table 10 identifies the texts that we read and discussed together as a group.

Table 9. Components of the PAR Small Group Experience

Intended for Our Small Group Experience	Intended for Discerning Ideas to Use with Other Groups
Meet together monthly/twice a month Shared meals together for the first three and last sessions Met in homes and at church (as the group decided for convenience) Met at various dates and times (as the group decided) Built relationships, trust, and respect among the group members Shared deeply from personal experiences and journeys Shared life together - connected outside of group time about personal lives.	Reflected on bigger pictures and vision for small groups Read and discussed Boren text Read and discussed Manskar texts Reported from the interviews I conducted with the seven churches Divided group sessions to create time for individual discerning and listening to the Holy Spirit Shared insights and discernments that may be useful for other groups

Table 10. Texts Read and Discussed Together as a PAR Group

Boren, M. Scott. *Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community That Makes a Difference in the World*. Allelon Missional Series. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010.
Manskar, Steven W. *Accountable Discipleship: Living in God's Household*. Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2000.
———. *Small Group Ministries: Christian Formation Through Mutual Accountability*. Nashville, TN: Cokesbury, 2012.
———. *The United Methodist Rule of Life.* Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2008
———. *A Wesleyan Model for Small Group Ministry*, Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2008.

PAR Group Process Interventions (Experiments)

One of the great values of the small group experience was having the opportunity to try out different ideas that the group felt may be useful and important for small group ministries in other contexts. During group sessions we would draw upon our own personal life experiences, the knowledge we each brought as group members, the texts we had been reading and discussing together, and the reports I brought from my seven interviews, and we would discuss together what we thought may be helpful ideas. Some of our interventions (experiments, as we called them) helped us get a better understanding

of what people outside our group may find helpful for spiritual formation, while other experiments we tried for ourselves. Table 11 lists the sixteen interventions/experiments that we decided as a group to do, separated into the four we did together as a group and rest that we did on our own between group sessions.

Table 11. Experiments Decided on by the Group

Together as a Group	On Our Own, between Group Sessions
1. Guiding Scripture: Using the same passage every time, read it aloud (usually twice), time of listening, then time of sharing	2. Attend a FUMC group and discern their self-understanding of purpose
8. Draft "guiding questions" to encourage small groups to share deeply	3. Talk with people outside of FUMC and listen for their life issues and dreams
10. Incorporate a guiding question at our sessions	4. Each of us were encouraged to pursue a life group outside of this PAR group
13. Write up "ground rules" for small groups	5. Talk with someone new to our church and listen for life issues and dreams
	6. Reflect on your own personal experiences of when we grew spiritually to discern and share what enabled/encouraged that growth.
	7. Cycles of *worship plus two*" (W+2)
	9. Use a guiding question in other groups attended
	11. Cycles of *worship plus two* (W+2)
	12. Take the next step on being a leader in another small group
	14. Continue to work on establishing your own small groups
	15. Share in an email how this small group experience has helped each of us to grow spiritually
	16. Continue to work on your own small group ministries

A number of these experiments were repeated. For example, we chose to engage with people and groups outside our PAR group a number of times in different ways. Again, the purpose was to gain a better understanding for how others grow spiritually and how small groups could be helpful for them. These conversations engaged people within the church, groups within the church, and people outside the church. This is represented in the table above as 2, 3, 5, and 9.

Another repeated experiment is the *worship plus two* (or W+2) cycles. This idea came out of one of the conversations from experiment 5 from someone whose previous

church had encouraged spiritual formation among the congregation using this idea. The easy-to-remember title reminds people that each week they need to be engaged in three intentional practices. One is corporate worship. The *plus two* refers to two different practices, one practice of personal devotion that grows the individual's inner piety, and one act of service that touches the life of another. We saw this correlate with the three parts of Wesley's exhortation to "holiness of heart and life" as discussed in Chapter Three. The idea is that people grow spiritually through regular engagement in these three kinds of practices. One of our group members put these three components in a memorable way: "One for God, one for me, one for you!" (C, PAR7) We experimented with W+2 on two separate occasions, which can be seen in the table above as experiments 7 and 11.

A third repeated experiment was our decision early on that as individual group members we would either start a new small group or pursue some form of engaging our learnings in another group setting. This is 4 in table 11. We held each other accountable around this and came back to it a number of times. We even made it part of our experiments to continue to take steps doing this. This is seen in 12, 14, and 16 in the table above. Table 12 below explains how each participant engaged in this intervention.

Table 12. Participants' Experimenting with another Group

Participant	**Other Group Experiment**
A	Co-started a new sharing-life small group July 2015 Introduced learnings to another existing group Worked on idea of spiritual formation retreat
B	Introduced learnings to another existing group
C	Begin to pull participants together for a new group
D (Researcher)	Co-started a new sharing-life small group July 2015
E	Started a new sharing-life small group September 2015
F	Worked on idea of spiritual formation retreat
G	Begin to pull participants together for a new group
H	Introduced learnings to another existing group

For my part in this experiment, I pulled together a group of four couples (three others and my wife and I) that were not already a part of small groups within FUMC, who all had children who would need child care, and who were interested in doing a sharing life group. I personally—and in person—invited four different couples, and presented to them the idea of being a part of a different kind of small group. Three of them wanted to join the group. Table 13 below outlines the seven characteristics of the new group that I presented to each of the couples.

Table 13. Characteristics of the Experimental Small Group

1. Group members "share life together" through a bond of trust and deep sharing
2. We discuss the real, day-do-day activities and issues we live with
3. We pray for and with each other
4. We engage in some consistent outreach service activity
5. We would meet in homes, perhaps rotate to different hosts
6. Child care will be provided no matter where we meet
7. We will continue for a set period of months and then reconsider

Appendix K outlines each of the first six small group sessions, along with the seventh one that has been scheduled. It shows the general flow of the group sessions, along with the consistent pieces. The other group members themselves proposed that we share a potluck meal together each time. I was surprised that each of the group members were willing to pray out loud by the second and third sessions.

I incorporated into the formation of this group learnings from our PAR group sessions. I personally invited each group member to be a part of the new group. I framed it as a sharing life group where we would discuss how our faith applies directly to our daily life. We met in homes and shared a meal together in order to build relationships. I made sure child care was provided on site each time by having two teenage girls available. At our first session, we established ground rules that fostered trust and deep

sharing. Each time we used a grounding question to prompt the sharing, and we used the *lectio divina* style of engaging Scripture in order to encourage personal sharing. I also tried to establish the pattern of using the same passage over time for gleaning deeper insights. We have broached the idea of incorporating service into the group, and although we have all agreed to this as a desire, we are just now, in the fifth and sixth sessions, finding the opportunity to talk about it realistically. Group bonding and building relationships has taken the bulk of the time and attention of the first number of sessions. Finally, we prayed with and for each other at the close of our time together.

As of the end of the research process, none of these participants were ready to discontinue our small group, and the feedback continues to be positive. I tried inviting new couples into the group, and although the current group members all have said they are open to this, we have yet to have new couples join. I would like to be able to withdraw from the group and let it continue under different leadership, or even invite each of the couples to start a new group of their own. In this sense, our group time together models what a new kind of small group can look like.

Some of the ideas that we discussed in the PAR group sessions did not materialize into actual experiments, at least during the duration of this study. One important example was the idea of a retreat. Early on a spiritual retreat was proposed in order for the group to get away and spend some sustained time together. This idea developed into the proposal to host a retreat for the wider congregation, for the purpose of awakening the spiritual hunger in the wider congregation. This would then be a natural catalyst for starting new and different kinds of small groups with new people. Two of the group members agreed to put together and lead the retreat. At first the retreat was proposed for

May 2015. After some reflection and discussion, it was suggested it be held in late September. Then, in August, the congregation hired a part-time Director of Spiritual Formation. The vision was to have this new staff person spend four months assessing the current small group ministry of FUMC. This would also be a time of preparation and the development of leadership training. Then, new groups would be launched in January. Because of this, our group decided it was a natural fit to move the retreat to early January in order to serve as a catalyst for the new groups starting then.

PAR Group Process as a Task Force

The last few PAR sessions focused more on reflecting about what our group had experienced together and trying to distill out of that learnings and suggestions for what could be incorporated into other small groups, such as in FUMC starting in January. Figure 2 below attempts to represent the way the PAR group served as a task force to discern ideas for how small group ministries can be designed and carried out. The central circle of the figure is the dynamic, discerning work of the PAR small group. A circle of arrows seeks to represent the creative dynamic of the group. The group drew upon the inputs, represented by incoming arrows on the left, to form, shape, and energize the group's discussion. The ideas and takeaways that we discerned might be valuable and potentially helpful are represented as flowing out on the right. This is a very dynamic process, with a lot of shaping and reshaping happening during the small group sessions. Finally, a gathering of the group's thoughts and ideas, compiled over the last three sessions together, can be found in Appendix L.

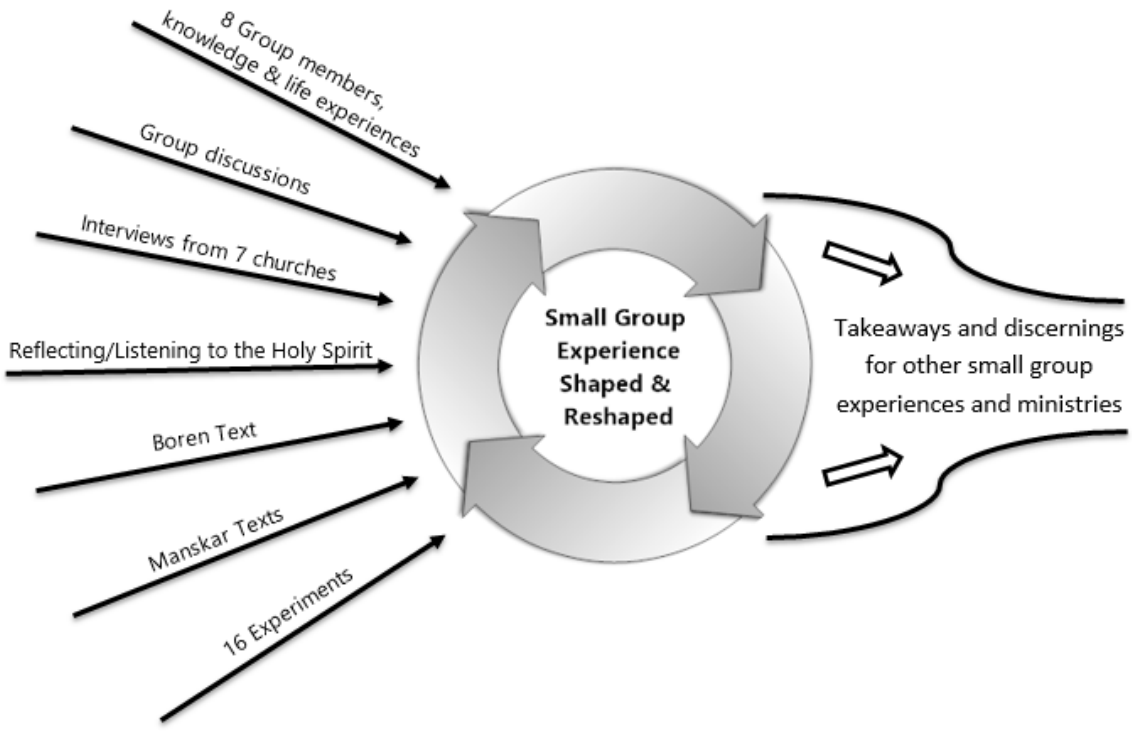


Figure 2. The PAR Group as a Task Force Generating Small Group Ministry Ideas

Focused Codes

There was substantial qualitative material over the eighteen, two-hour PAR group sessions. My first step was to separate the material into the personal sharing of the participants as a life group, reflections on the texts we engaged and the individual experiments we tried, and reflections on our group process and the insights we felt may apply to other small group ministries. I chose not to code the personal sharing portions of our group time as I felt this was very personal in nature and unnecessary for the scope of this study. It is important to note, however, the depth of these conversations and how quickly the group participants felt comfortable to share so vulnerably. I did include in the coding of the reflections on the group process comments that were made during the sharing from life portions that referenced spiritual formation or connected to our group

process. Subsequently, I coded two bodies of material, one was our engagement with our resources and interventions, and the other was our group's reflections on the learnings our group identified that may be useful for other small group ministry settings.

The first body of material, including the discussions of the resources and interventions, amounted to a large quantity of data in and of itself. For this reason, in the following section, I chose to code this material around eight important group discussions. The second body of material, including the group's discussions on our reflections and learnings, I chose to code around two group discussions.

I again applied Charmaz's coding analysis to both of these bodies of data in search of deeper understandings. The first level of analyzing the data was to identify the *in vivo* codes, applying Rubin's and Rubin's suggestion to evaluate the codes not just for frequency but for meaning. Across all my qualitative data, I compiled over 1,200 *in vivo* codes! When I compiled these codes, I noticed that many had slight and inconsequential differences, such as "leaders are important," "leaders are very important," "leaders are essential," etc. I combined the codes like these and still had over 600 *in vivo* codes. Due to this large number, I took an intermediary step and combined very similar *in vivo* codes under representative *in vivo* codes. These representative *in vivo* codes, I believe, were still different ways of saying same thing. This combining resulted in just over 300 representative *in vivo* codes. These representative *in vivo* codes I groups into sixty-four focused codes. Again, due to the large number of these focused codes, I added another level of abstraction and groups these sixty-four focused codes into forty-three of what I called representative focused codes. I then clustered these forty-three representative

focused codes into twelve axial codes. Finally, during my theoretical coding, I identified three systems of relationships among these twelve axial codes.

Focused Codes for Discussions on Texts and Interventions/Experiments

For the first body of material, the group reflections and discussions around the texts and experiments we engaged, I kept the *in vivo* and focused coding in eight clusters around different activities that the group engaged. We engaged some of these activities across a number of group sessions, so I combined the coding for those different sessions. For example, we discussed the Boren text over three different sessions, and, as mentioned above, we reengaged some experiments a number of times.

Table 14 provides the focused codes for the group discussions around the Boren text we read together. We read this over a number of weeks and discussed it at three different group sessions. A list of representative *in vivo* codes associated with each of the focused codes can be found in Appendix M.

Table 14. Focused Codes for the Group Discussion around the Boren Text

Behavior	Missional	Time
Forming Community	Perspective	Trust
Listening	Structure	Wider Community

Table 15 presents the focused codes for the largest body of discussions. Over a number of sessions the group experimented with various ways to learn from those outside the group to understand them better, to hear what was important to them, and explore what might help them grow spiritually. This, we felt, would help us understand how people grow spiritually, and what role small groups might be able to play in that. We wanted to stop trying to speculate and ask people directly. We engaged other groups within the church, people new to the congregation, people—both churched and

unchurched—outside our congregation, and people with whom we had little or no previous contact. This was an organic series of interventions, as each group participant was free to engage groups and people as they chose. As this is the largest body of material, this is also the longest list of focused codes. A list of representative *in vivo* codes associated with each of the focused codes can be found in Appendix M.

Table 15. Focused Codes around Engaging Others outside the Group

Accountability	Inviting	Practices
Behavior	Leadership	Prioritize
Caring	Life groups	Real
Community	Listen	Reflection
Components	Longing	Relational
Contagious	Mindfulness	Share life
Deep sharing	Missional	Serve
Fellowship	Modeling	Spiritual gifts
Go out	Ninja	Trust
Growing	Organic	Wider Community
Hunger		

Also over a number of group sessions, I presented my learnings from the phone interviews I had conducted with the seven other United Methodist churches that were using small groups effectively. Table 16 shows the focused codes from the discussions that ensued. A list of representative *in vivo* codes associated with each of the focused codes can be found in Appendix N.

Table 16. Focused Codes around Interviews with Seven Other Churches

Entry point	Leadership	Relationships
Growth	Listening	Start new groups
Hunger	Organic	Trust
Invitation	Real	

We had been discerning together in group sessions how spiritual growth actually happens. This prompted the discussions with other people summarized in Table 15 above. This also caused us to ask how we, ourselves, grew spiritually. So, we agreed to reflect on those times of our lives that we noticed we had grown spiritually in significant ways,

and think about what was happening in our lives at those times and what may have been prompting that grow. Table 17 shows the focused codes from this discussion. A list of representative *in vivo* codes associated with each of the focused codes can be found in Appendix N.

Table 17. Focused Codes around Discussion of Times Participants Grew Spiritually

Big events	Leaders	Sharing
Fellowship	Mistakes	Time apart
Hard times	Perspective	
Joy of others	Serve	

The second largest body of coding is the interventions we did to practice the *worship plus two* cadence explained above. This idea arose out of one of the interviews with a new person at church. Her previous church had framed the routine way they expected people to grow spiritually by engaging in three weekly activities: an activity of worship, an activity of devotion, and an activity of service. Our group thought this may be an engaging way of communicating the United Methodist path of sanctification, which John Wesley had described as "holiness of heart and life."[6] We agreed to live this cadence in our own lives for four different cycles. Table 18 lists the focused codes from our group discussions on these experiences. A list of representative *in vivo* codes associated with each of the focused codes can be found in Appendix O.

Table 18. Focused Codes around Discussion of *Worship plus Two*

Accountability	Fulfilling	Reflection
Alive	Hunger	Relationships
Aware	Listening	Share life
Behavior	Ninja	Spiritual gifts
Contagious	Practices	Time
Conversations	Prioritize	Trust
Deep sharing	Real	

[6] "Thoughts upon Methodism" in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 9:529.

During our group discussions we discussed what would enable groups to share authentically from their lives. Key components seemed to be emerging, including trust, time, reflection, listening, and deep sharing. We discussed how many groups get stuck in the pattern of sharing lightly and superficially. Although this may be meaningful for some, it does not touch the spiritual longings of others. We discussed how groups could move the discussion quickly toward deep, meaningful sharing. An idea was for the groups to agree together to share deeply and then have a guiding question that calls them to deep discussion. Our group reflected on this for a time and brought back suggestions for guiding questions that groups could use to prompt deep sharing. Table 19 lists the guiding questions we compiled at our ninth group session on April 8, 2015.

Table 19. Guiding Questions for Use in Small Group Sessions

Proposed by:	Guiding Question Proposed:
A	"What *more* have you learned about God?" "What *more* have you done for God?"
B	"Let us speak of the deepest things right away." (Drawing on Marcia Mcfee.)
C	"How does [this topic] apply to living your life?" "What have you done today to [apply this topic]?"
D	"What are the *words of life* spoken into/through you lately?" "So what?"
E	"How have you been a *light* in the darkness?" "What makes you really *feel alive* lately?"
F	"How is it with your soul?" (Drawing on John Wesley.)
G	"How are you or this group living out God's purpose in your life?" "How does God support you or how do you rely on God during the peaks and valleys of your life?"
H	"What have been the *divine appointments* in your life?"

The group decided to use one of the proposed questions at each of our future sessions together. For the remaining nine sessions we used a question within our time, and then reflected on how that question worked and felt. We also agreed to introduce one of the questions in other group settings in which we participated.

Much of our group's reflection on these questions revolved around why a particular question would or would not work in certain and various settings. Three questions seemed to cause struggle. They were, "How is it with your soul?," "How are you or this group living out God's purpose in your life?," and "What have been the *divine appointments* in your life?" Each time the struggle came around the meaning of particular words within the question. The group was concerned that people may struggle to understand what the questions were really asking. Table 20 shows the focused codes on our group reflections around the use of these questions. A list of representative *in vivo* codes associated with each of the focused codes can be found in Appendix P.

Table 20. Focused Codes around Discussion of Use of Guiding Questions

Deep	Life application	Reflection
Intentional	Real	Time

As mentioned above, the *worship plus two* way of talking about a weekly cadence of engaging in three spiritual growth practices arose out of the earlier intervention of having intentional conversations with people outside of our group. The creativity begun by that conversation continued! Out of our reflections together about our *plus two* experiences grew another idea for an intervention. Some of our participants were finding creative ways of doing acts of mercy and service that did not draw attention to themselves or even let the recipients of their actions know who had done them. We talked together about random acts of kindness, and this led to exploring the idea of small, quick, and inconspicuous acts of blessing. Participant A called this kind of blessing a "ninja blessing." She explained, "It's operating in stealth mode. You sneak in, deliver your blessing, and get out quick before you draw any attention to yourself. Ninja blessing!" (A, PAR8) We agreed to try to do "ninja blessings" during our next cycle of *worship plus*

two. Our reflection around this activity was within the context of the *worship plus two* discussion, but I felt a few comments deserved their own coding. I list them in Table 21 below. A list of representative *in vivo* codes associated with each of the focused codes can be found in Appendix P.

Table 21. Focused Codes around Discussion on Ninja Blessings

Conversation	Lead to more	Relationships
God encounter	Ninja	

One of the ways our group tried to extend our understanding of how small groups can be formative for spiritual growth was to encourage each of our participants to either start or engage in another sharing-life style of small group. As stated above (Table 12), each participant either started a group, began putting a group together, or engaged an existing group using a component we had discussed in our group sessions. This became an ongoing intervention that continued throughout the last half of our PAR group experience. The bulk of our discussion around these outside group experiences focused on how to start such a group as well as the components we felt were important for deep, life-sharing groups that fostered spiritual growth. The components are summarized in Table 13 and Table 14 above. In the later PAR discussion, however, there were a few times of reflection on the groups that had begun to form. The focused codes from this time of reflection are in Table 22 below. A list of representative *in vivo* codes associated with each of the focused codes can be found in Appendix Q.

Table 22. Focused Codes around Discussion on Starting New Groups

Application	Intentional	Stages
Deeper	Retreats	Start own
Hunger	Service	

The last set of focused codes are from the discussions around the materials I provided from the United Methodist General Board of Discipleship (GBOD). These were

all written by Steven Manskar, who is the GBOD's resource on small groups. These are listed above in Table 10. I had distributed these texts early on in our group sessions (Session 4, Jan. 18, 2015), but they got eclipsed as our excitement was occupied by our various experiments. As we neared the end of our group sessions (on Session 15, July 27, 2015), we took them up again because they were a source that helped us understand the United Methodist heritage of small groups and spiritual formation.

Much of our discussion was on identifying ideas and concepts that we had been working with already. Also, this discussion helped provide theological grounding for the ideas and learnings the group was pulling together to inform other small group settings. I take this up in the next section as the work of our small group as a task force. There was, however, some reflection and discussion on these texts that could be included in the coding. I present this coding in Table 23. A list of representative *in vivo* codes associated with each of the focused codes can be found in Appendix Q.

Table 23. Focused Codes around Discussion on Manskar Texts

Components	Hunger	Our groups
Go out	Leaders	Real

I did consolidate all of the focused coding from the above tables to produce one comprehensive list of focused codes from our group's discussions on the texts and experiments we engaged. I present them in table form in the Representative Focused Codes section below. I continue here, however, identifying the focused codes for the group discussion around its work as a task force.

Focused Codes for Discussion as a Task Force

The second body of qualitative material is from the latter sessions of the PAR group. For these last sessions, the PAR group functioned more as a task force exploring

ideas and learnings that could be adapted to inform other small group ministries, such as the needed redesign of the small group ministry at FUMC. We spent three sessions discussing what we had learned up to that point, trying to identify ideas and guidelines that could be used in the future.

During those sessions, we drew on the discussion around the Manskar texts identified above. This helped clarify the United Methodist theological grounding framing spiritual growth. Remarkably, we also saw that the *worship plus two* phrasing complemented this nicely. Table 24 below shows the summary of this theological organizing. The fuller understanding was incorporated in detail in the summary document we compiled for future use at FUMC.

Table 24. United Methodist Theological Groundings for Spiritual Formation

Spiritual growth, in the Methodist tradition:			
Uses small groups for sharing, accountability, and encouragement			
Is displayed in terms of personal behavior change			
Three-fold Wesleyan way of growing spiritually:			(Source:)
Holiness of	Heart and	Life	(Wesleyan heritage)
Love God	Love self	Love neighbor	(Greatest Commandments)
Belong (love)	Believe	Behave (obey)	(Steven Manskar, GBOD)
Works of	Piety and	Mercy	(Wesleyan heritage)
Stay in love w/God	Do no harm	Do good	(Wesley's "General Rules")
Worship +2:	One for you	One for others	(PAR Group)
Successful pattern for behavioral change and spiritual growth is activity. Practices (not knowledge) are the better starting point for life changes. Yet both knowledge and practice are needed and must be kept together.			
"Behaving your way into believing," not "believing your way into behaving"			

The three discussions were rich and diverse, consolidating a lot of the work we had done until that point. We found the process daunting, and we finally put large sheets of poster paper on the walls to help us think out loud together. We used different color markers as we compiled and listed all of the valuable learnings. Slowly, key ideas and concepts began to emerge. The focused codes from these discussions are compiled in

Table 25. Many of the focused codes have only one or two representative *in vivo* codes. The reason for this is that we were holding these discussions while writing ideas on the papers hanging on the wall. Once an idea was mentioned, it was written up on the paper, and group members did not feel the need to restate the ideas in different ways. Also, by these sessions, we had begun to name our ideas using similar and consistent language and words. A list of representative *in vivo* codes associated with each of the focused codes can be found in Appendix R.

Table 25. Focused Codes for Discussion around Ideas and Learnings for Future Use

Accountability	Do life together	Others
Application	Food	Prioritization
Aware	Go out	Real
Behavior	Growth	Reflecting
Change culture	Holy Spirit	Relationships
Caring	Hunger	Repetition of Scripture
Child care	Inviting	Respect
Community	Leader	Time
Components	Listening	Trust
Contagious	Mentoring	Value
Conversations	Options	Variety
Deep	Organic	W+2

Our last group session was an ending focus group following the protocol in Appendix E. We had just completed three sessions of summarizing our learnings and ideas, therefore this focus group went very well. The group found the protocol helpful, and many commented that they were surprised that something written before the eleven month PAR project even started could be so applicable and relevant! The focused codes for this focus group are in Table 26. Again, as we were summarizing our thoughts together, participants seemed to refrain from restating named ideas in other ways. A list of representative *in vivo* codes associated with each of the focused codes can be found in Appendix S.

Table 26. Focused Codes for Ending Focus Group

Application	Invite	Service
Behavior	Leadership	Staff
Contagious	Listen	Time
Culture change	Missional	Trust
Deeper	Prayer	Variety
Go out	Real	
Hunger	Relationships	

Participant G, our church's Director of Small Groups, continued to call for a small group plan or strategy that drew upon all of the work we did throughout these last four sessions together, which, of course, drew upon all the previous work we had done as an experimental small group, and that the leaders of FUMC could use to shape and form a reinvented small group ministry in the near future. He and I met together near the end of our group sessions and compiled a five-page narrative summary of groundings, learnings, and concepts we felt could help the leadership of FUMC. This summary, which includes the information from Table 24 above, is attached in Appendix L. We provided this summary to our newly hired Director of Spiritual Growth as the first stage in adapting some of our learnings into the small group ministry of FUMC. We will be in discussion with her in the weeks ahead as we draft a plan, with the hope of implementing it starting January 2016. We also will draw upon the findings from the remainder of this research project.

Representative Focused Codes

The number of focused codes I was working with had grown to a number difficult to manage. I began by combining the codes from the nine lists of codes I had created for the discussions around the texts and experiments of our PAR group (Tables 12 – 21 above). I combined in a way that marked how frequently each occurred throughout the

weeks of various discussion. After combining these lists of codes, I then counted how many different *in vivo* codes were associated with each focused code. Table 27 below shows the focused codes ranked first by how often the focused code occurred across the nine discussions, and then by the number of *in vivo* codes associated with each focused code. This ranking was helpful in that it suggested that the codes of higher ranking may be more important and prominent than the codes of lower ranking.

Table 27. Focused Codes by Occurrence from Discussions on Texts and Experiments

Number before Focused Code: The number of times that focused code appears across all nine of the focused code sets
Number after Focused Code: The number of *in vivo* codes associated with that focused code

5 Trust 16	2 Practices 8	1 Start own groups 5
5 Real 13	2 Wider Community 7	1 Life groups 4
5 Hunger for more 7	2 Conversation 6	1 Modeling 4
4 Deep sharing 24	2 Fellowship 6	1 Caring 3
4 Relational 16	2 Missional 5	1 Fulfilling 3
4 Time 13	2 Organic 5	1 Help 3
4 Leading 8	2 Prioritize 5	1 Longing 3
4 Listen 8	2 Applying to life 4	1 Retreats 3
3 Behavior 20	2 Contagious 4	1 Structure 3
3 Sharing life 11	2 Go out 4	1 Entry point 2
3 Ninja 9	2 Spiritual gifts 4	1 Mistakes 2
3 Reflection 8	2 Accountability 3	1 Stages 2
3 Growing 6	2 Perspective 3	1 Alive 1
3 Serving 5	2 Intentional 2	1 God encounter 1
2 Aware 11	1 Mindfulness 7	1 Joy of others 1
2 Inviting 11	1 Big events 5	1 Lead to more 1
2 Forming Community 9	1 Hard times 5	1 Start new groups 1
2 Components 8	1 Our groups 5	

I applied the same ranking on the two sets of focused codes for the discussions around the summarizing of our group work and identifying helpful learnings for future group work. A number two in front of the focused code means that it appears in both sets of coding. Those that do, perhaps, suggest important and influential ideas and concepts.

This is especially true, I feel, for those that have higher numbers of *in vivo* codes (represented by the number following the focused code). Table 28 provides this list.

Table 28. Focused Codes by Occurrence from Ending Reflections

Number before Focused Code: The number of times that focused code appears on both the focused code sets
Number after Focused Code: The number of *in vivo* codes associated with that focused code

2 Components 15	2 Hunger 2	1 Child care 1
2 Trust 8	2 Real 2	1 Community 1
2 Going out 7	2 Time 2	1 Conversations 1
2 Inviting 6	1 Aware 5	1 Do life together 1
2 Contagious 5	1 Growth 5	1 Food 1
2 Deep 5	1 Holy Spirit 4	1 Mentoring 1
2 Behavior 4	1 Accountability 3	1 Missional 1
2 Leader/leadership 4	1 Options 3	1 Others 1
2 Variety 4	1 Organic 3	1 Prioritization 1
2 Application 3	1 Respect 3	1 Reflecting 1
2 Change culture 3	1 Value 3	1 Service 1
2 Listen 3	1 Caring 2	1 Staff 1
2 Relationships 3	1 Prayer 2	1 W+2 1

I next combined the two lists in order to create a master list of all the focused codes from all the discussions over the eighteen sessions of the PAR group. Again, the rationale for doing this is that the higher focused codes on the list may suggest the more important, more prominent, and more frequently discussed ideas and concepts. Table 29 provides these focused codes in three columns: the one on the left for focused codes occurring in both the discussions on the texts and experiments and in the summary discussions, the middle column for focused codes only occurring in the discussions on the texts and experiments, and the one on the right for focused codes occurring only in summary discussions.

Table 29. Focused Code Occurrence in Texts and Experiments and Reflection Data

Number before Focused Code: The number of times that focused code appears across all the focused code sets

Number after Focused Code: The number of *in vivo* codes associated with that focused code

In Both Data Sets	**Only in Texts and Experiments Data Set**	**Only in Ending Reflection Data Set**
7 Trust 24	3 Ninja 9	2 Variety 4
7 Real 15	2 Practices 8	2 Change culture 3
7 Hunger for more 9	2 Wider Community 7	1 Options 3
6 Deep sharing 29	2 Fellowship 6	1 Respect 3
6 Relational/Relationships 19	2 Spiritual gifts 4	1 Value 3
6 Time 15	2 Perspective 3	1 Prayer 2
6 Leading/Leadership 12	2 Intentional 2	1 Child care 1
6 Listen 11	1 Start new groups 11	1 Food 1
5 Behavior 24	1 Mindfulness 7	1 Mentoring 1
4 Components of groups 23	1 Big events 5	1 Others 1
4 Inviting/Invitation 17	1 Hard times 5	1 Staff 1
4 Sharing Life / Doing life together 12	1 Our groups 5	1 W+2 1
	1 Start own groups 5	
4 Going out 11	1 Life groups 4	
4 Growth/Growing 11	1 Modeling 4	
4 Contagious 9	1 Fulfilling 3	
4 Reflecting/Reflection 9	1 Help 3	
4 Application/apply to life 7	1 Longing 3	
4 Serving/Service 6	1 Retreats 3	
3 Aware 16	1 Structure 3	
3 Community 10	1 Entry point 2	
3 Conversations 7	1 Mistakes 2	
3 Organic 8	1 Stages 2	
3 Accountability 6	1 Alive 1	
3 Missional 6	1 Joy of others 1	
3 Prioritizing/Priorities 6		
2 Caring 5		
2 God Encounter/Holy Spirit 5		

The over 300 representative *in vivo* codes I abstracted into sixty-four focused codes. This many focused codes, however, were difficult to manage. Therefore, I again added a level of abstraction in which I combined focused codes that had similar enough ideas to be represented together. From the list of sixty-four focused codes in Table 29, I

combined them into forty-three of what I called representative focused codes. I list them in Table 30 below.

Table 30 Representative Focused Codes for All the Qualitative Data

Number before the Representative Focused Code: The number of times that focused code appears across all the focused code sets

Number after the Representative Focused Code: The number of *in vivo* codes associated with that focused code

In Both Data Sets	**Only in Texts and Experiments Data Set**	**Only in Ending Reflection Data Set**
7 Trust 24	3 Formative Times 13	2 Variety 7
7 Serving/Service 16	2 Start New Groups 13	2 Change culture 3
7 Real 15	2 Modeling 9	2 Mentoring 2
7 Hunger for More 12	2 Practices 6	1 Fulfilling 6
6 Deep Sharing 29	2 Spiritual Gifts 4	1 Prayer 2
6 Relational/Relationships 19	1 Our Groups 5	1 Child Care 1
6 Time 15	1 Help 3	1 Food 1
6 Leading/Leadership 12	1 Mistakes 2	
6 Listen 11	1 Alive 1	
5 Behavior 26	1 Joy of Others 1	
5 Wider Community 18		
5 Reflecting/Prioritizing 15		
5 Contagious 11		
4 Components of Groups 23		
4 Inviting/Invitation 17		
4 Community 16		
4 Doing Life Together12		
4 Growth/Growing 11		
4 God Encounter/Holy Spirit 11		
4 Organic and Intentional 10		
4 Application/Apply to life 7		
4 Missional 7		
3 Aware 23		
3 Caring 8		
3 Conversations 7		
3 Accountability 6		

The codes at the top of this listing do represent very important ideas and concepts for small group ministry. This ranking alone, however, does not truly represent the more important concepts. It was important for me to incorporate Rubin's and Rubin's

guidelines for evaluating the codes not just for frequency but for meaning.[1] As I sorted and combined the codes, I went back to the texts we had used as a group together to identify major themes and ideas to help prioritize the codes. For example, modeling only occurs twice, in the discussions around the texts and experiments. It has nine *in vivo* codes, but these do not represent its importance well enough. Modeling is a key concept in the training and equipping of small group leaders, as four out of the seven churches I interviewed in Part 1 of my research use it intentionally. It is also a key concept in the texts we read together as a group, which, incidentally, is where the *in vivo* codes supporting modeling arose. I would speculate that it did not occur as frequently among the focused codes because as a small group we have not experienced this method of training and do not understand its value very well yet.

Practices also were only in one data set (middle column). The very thrust of this research, however, identifies it as a very important code. I have suggested that spiritual growth is evidenced in behavior change. Behavior is an important code. The same is true for variety. This is also identified as important in the interviews from Part 1 and in the texts we had been reading. In this case, the fact that it was listed in the summary discussion suggests that it may be more important because it was identified by our participants as they reflected over the work of our group sessions as a whole.

Spiritual gifts, God encounter/Holy Spirit, and prayer all appear on the lower end of the lists. Theologically, however, I consider spiritual groundings for small group ministry to be a very important priority. When I combined these together they did suggest a stronger importance, but I considered them *very* important.

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[1] Rubin and Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data,* 196-199, 204-206.

Axial Codes

I clustered the forty-three focused codes into twelve axial codes, assigning a gerund form for each. I started with the focused codes that had the highest occurrences on the integrated list and worked down. By the time I had sorted down to those with a combined occurrence of four or more, I had assigned eleven clusters of axial codes. I then worked with the focused codes from the discussions on the ending reflection data. I worked with these codes next because they were codes from the summary discussions and therefore have a higher level of weight. I was able to assign most of these into the eleven clusters I had created.

I then added the focused codes from the discussions around the texts and experiments. Again, most of these fit naturally into the eleven clusters I had created. I then went back and reassigned a few focused codes to different clusters as the identity of each cluster became clearer. As I assigned the remaining focused code from each of the three categories, I created a final cluster with Changing the Culture as its main theme. This one only had two focused codes assigned to it, but its idea was distinct and strong: the desire to use small groups to change the spiritual formation culture of the congregation. Table 31 lists the twelve axial codes I assigned, along with the associated representative focused codes. I retained the prioritizing numbers in the table for each focused code to help explain the strength of importance assigned to each cluster.

Table 31. Axial Codes with Supporting Representative Focused Codes

Number before Focused Code: The number of times that representative focused code appears across all the focused code sets

Number after Focused Code: The number of in *vivo codes* associated with that representative focused code

Axial Code	Supporting Representative Focused Codes	
1. Going Deep	7 Trust 24	6 Listen 11
	6 Deep Sharing 29	5 Reflecting/Prioritizing 15
	6 Time 15	
2. Longing	7 Real 15	7 Hunger for more 12
3. Applying/ Acting	5 Behavior 26	4 Application/Apply to Life 7
	4 Doing Life Together 16	2 Practices 6
4. Relating	6 Relational/Relationships 19	3 Caring 8
	4 Community 16	
5. Leading	6 Leading/Leadership 12	2 Mentoring 2
	2 Modeling 9	
6. Going Out	5 Wider Community 18	3 Conversations 7
	4 Missional 7	
7. Inviting	5 Contagious 11	4 Inviting/Invitation 17
8. Designing	4 Components of Groups 23	2 Variety 7
	4 Organic and Intentional 10	1 Child Care 1
	3 Accountability 6	1 Food 1
	2 Start New Groups 13	
9. Growing	4 Growth/Growing 11	1 Mistakes 2
	3 Formative Times 13	1 Joy of others 1
	1 Fulfilling 6	
10. Serving	7 Serving/Service 16	1 Help 3
	3 Aware 23	1 Alive 1
11. Encountering God	4 God Encounter/Holy Spirit 11	1 Prayer 2
	2 Spiritual Gifts 4	
12. Changing the Culture	2 Change Culture 3	
	1 Our Groups 5	

Theoretical Relationships

Theoretical coding is not another level of abstraction that clusters or summarizes the axial codes in some way. Instead, it explores the relationships among the axial codes and tries to understand the connections and interplay among them. This process includes exploring all the conceivable relationships and connections among the axial codes to the

point which Rubin and Rubin call "saturation."[2] Then, the researcher evaluates all the possible relationships and chooses the one that seems to make most sense in the context of his or her research project.

When I explored the possible relationships among the axial codes of this project, I began to see two main systems emerging. One system of axial codes seemed to relate to how individuals grew spiritually around the central practice of being involved in a small group. The other system seemed to relate to how churches could create and sustain a small group ministry that helped people grow spiritually. The axial code of encountering God seemed to interact with both of these, and indeed even provided the basis for them both. Table 32 shows these three systems of axial codes.

Table 32. Three Systems of Axial Codes for Theoretical Relationships

System	Axial Codes	
Pathway of Spiritual Growth for Children of God	1. Going Deep 2. Longing 3. Applying/Acting 4. Relating	6. Going Out 9. Growing 10. Serving
Pathway of Spiritual Growth Offered by Local Congregations	5. Leading 6. Going Out 7. Inviting	8. Designing 9. Growing 12. Changing the Culture
Relationship with God	11. Encountering God	

These three systems seem to interplay with each other. The Relationship with God system naturally provides the broader context for the other two. The system of Pathway of Spiritual Growth Offered by Local Congregations creates the context for the Pathway of Spiritual Growth for Children of God, and the Pathway of Spiritual Growth for Children of God, in a local church setting, happens within the local church's Pathway of Spiritual Growth Offered by Local Congregations. Even so, the Pathway of Spiritual

[2] Ibid., 63.

Growth for Children of God can also rest independently from pathways created and offered by local congregations.

In addition, these three systems each seem to have their own interplay within them. The Pathway of Spiritual Growth for individuals seems to have a system of relationships around fulfilling the longing of God's children as well as a system of relationships around how spiritual formation is sustained for those people. The Pathway of Spiritual Growth created by local congregations seems to have three systems at work: one around the importance of leadership, one around the designing of small groups, and one around the culture of the congregation for small groups. These interplaying systems seem to suggest the theoretical relationships that best make sense for this data set. Table 33 shows these three systems and the six theoretical relationships that seem to emerge, along with the axial codes that associate with each theoretical relationship.

Table 33. Theoretical Relationships, Their Axial Codes, and the Three Interplaying Systems

Theoretical Relationships:	**Axial Codes:**	
System: Relationship with God		
A. Encountering God	11. Encountering God	
System: Pathway of Spiritual Growth for Children of God		
B. Longing for More	1. Going Deep	2. Longing
	3. Applying/Acting	4. Relating
	9. Growing	
C. Sustained in Groups	4. Relating	6. Going Out
	9. Growing	10. Serving
System: Pathway of Spiritual Growth Offered by a Local Congregation		
D. Small Group Context	5. Leading	9. Growing
E. Designing of Groups	1. Going Deep	2. Longing
	3. Applying/Acting	4. Relating
	6. Going Out	8. Designing
F. Sustaining of Groups	6. Going Out	7. Inviting
	12. Changing the culture	

The theoretical relationships that emerged seemed to describe a dynamic interplay among the axial codes. Each system was dynamic, and the three systems interacted dynamically. Diagraming this interplay is helpful to see how the theoretical codes interrelate.

Spiritual growth is an organic and living process, one that perhaps is more compellingly represented using organic images from nature suggesting growth. Further, a narrative describing how the theoretical codes build and relate undoubtedly would be helpful to explain these systems to leaders in a local church setting. The following is my attempt to show these systems in an organic way, along with a supporting narrative that hopefully will help make these concepts and relationships more easily shared and taught.

The first system diagramed is the Relationship with God. Although this only has one theoretical code supported by only one axial code, its importance is preeminent. Everything about spiritual growth and faith-forming small groups all happens in, with, and because of a living and personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Figure 3 uses the image of the sun to represent the relationship with God.

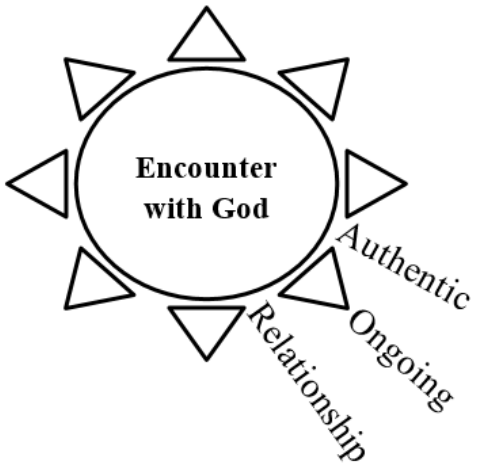


Figure 3. Organically Represented System of the Relationship with God

The sun shines on all living things, giving light and life. Plants have a dependent relationship with the sun, and their lives strive and reach to the sun. A living and personal relationship with God through Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit is the blanketing, purpose, and goal of spiritual formation. Spiritual Growth is always an encounter, and a result of that encounter, with God. People receive light and life from God, and we strive and reach to God. The human hungering for more is answered in an authentic, ongoing relationships with God.

The system of the pathway for Spiritual Growth for the Children of God is built around two theoretical relationship. The theoretical relationship of Longing for More describes the dynamic interplay of how individuals grow spiritually with the support structures offered through small groups. The theoretical relationship of Sustained in Groups describe the dynamic interplay of how small groups help individuals sustain their spiritual growth. Figure 4 attempts to diagram the dynamic interplay of and within these two theoretical codes, again using the organic image of a plant.

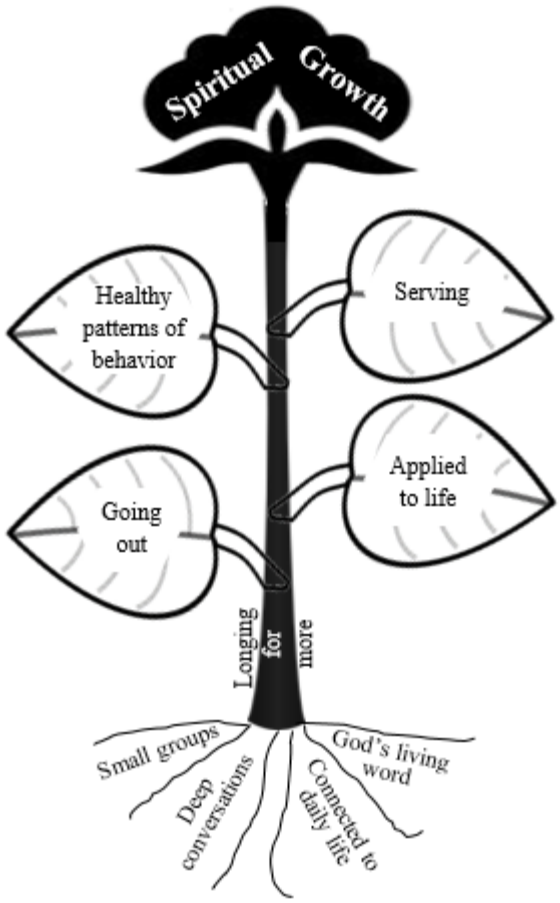


Figure 4. System of the Pathway of Spiritual Growth for the Children of God

The pathway of Spiritual Growth for the Children of God begins with the personal longing and hungering for more in life. In the figure, this longing is represented in the figure as the roots that nourish the growing plant. The longing within each person is touched when people are related into authentic small group communities. That longing is touched when in these communities the participants engage God's living Word. That longing is touched when God's living Word is engaged through intimate and deep conversations that connect with what is most important in life. That longing is touched when the deep conversations apply to daily life and call the participants to better behaviors and healthier ways of living. That longing is touched when the better ways of

living are sustained over time with the help of the small group community and develop true spiritual growth in the person.

The growing plant, representing the person whose longing are being nurtured by the roots of connection to others, God's Word, and daily life, is sustained by same small group environment that helps the individual connect to his or her longings in the first place. The group context continues to offer authentic and deepening relationships with others, an intentional focus on making application to daily life through changed patterns of behavior, and going out to connect with and serve others beyond the local group. These are represented in the figure by the leaves of the plants, for they not only serve to define the plant when observed by others, but also help the plant grow through the nourishment they provide.

The system of the Pathway of Spiritual Growth Offered by a Local Congregation is structured around three theoretical relationships. The theoretical relationship of Small Group Context describes how the church, through its leadership and intentional visioning, structures its small group ministry. The theoretical relationship of Designing of Groups represents the interplay of all the components that individuals need for sharing-life, faith-forming small groups. Of course, many of these axial codes are also found in the theoretical relationship of Longing for More above. Finally, the theoretical relationship Sustaining of Groups describes the culture of group participants going out and engaging others, participants inviting those others to join, and those others who join, in turn, also going out. Figure 5 uses the image of the ground to diagram the dynamic interplay of these three theoretical relationships.



Figure 5. System of Pathway of Spiritual Growth Offered by a Local Congregation

The local church can provide the context for vital small groups that help sustain spiritual growth. Excellent and well-trained leadership is crucial to design and support vital groups. This context of leadership and design is represented in the figure organically as the ground that supports plant growth. The small group ministry can be designed to: 1. Be a community that offers authentic relationships, shares life, and goes deep, 2. Make sense to those the congregation is trying to engage, 3. Touch their inner sense of longing and make connections to their daily lives, and 4. Offer options to connect in a variety of ways over time. This theoretical relationship of designing is represented in the diagram organically as the nutrients within the soil that feed plant growth. These characteristics that can be designed into small groups feed the individuals who are growing spiritually.

There needs to be a culture (perhaps even a culture change) within the congregation that sustains the ongoing small group ministry. It is a culture of expectation for people going out to engage those who are not a part of small groups. It is a culture of expectation that all people within the church personally and enthusiastically invite those who are not a part of a small group to join one. Thirdly, it is a culture of expectation that these new people, in turn, also go out to engage those who are not a part of small groups. This culture of expectation is represented organically in the figure as creating the hole in the soil in which new plants can begin to grow. It creates the room, the space, for more people to grow.

The value of these diagrams increases when they are put together in an attempt to show the interconnectedness of all the theoretical relationships. Each theoretical relationship can be seen interacting with all the others. Figure 6 is the consolidated diagram of these three systems and the twelve theoretical relationships.

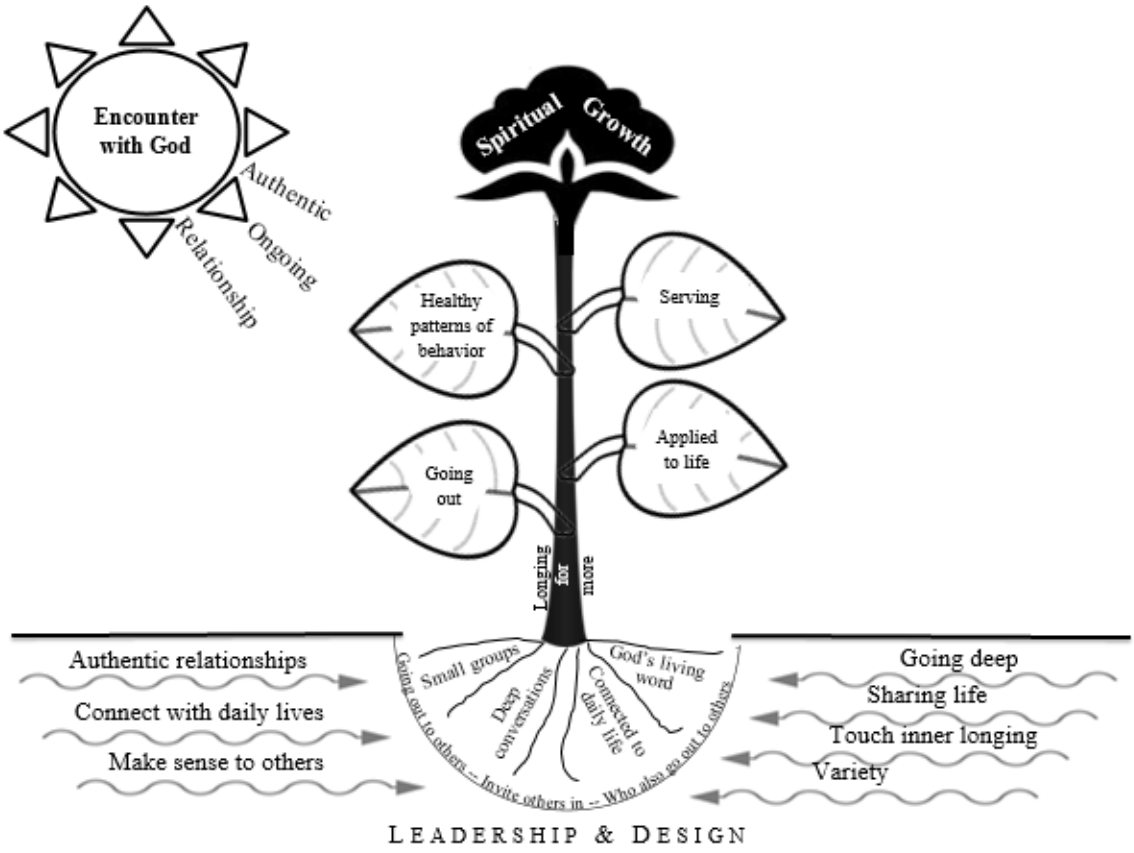


Figure 6. Consolidated Diagram of the Three Systems and Theoretical Relationships

Spiritual growth that takes place within the context of small groups is an organic process of life. Using these organic images helps convey the concepts of life, growth, and change. Just as a plant grows and thrives when well supported and richly nourished, so can people who are well supported by vital small groups and nourished richly by small group characteristics identified in this research project. Ultimately, spiritual growth is a relationship. It is a relationship of individuals to God, of individuals to others in the communities in which God places them, and of individuals to themselves as they grow.

The one limitation of this figure is that it shows only a single plant, giving the impression of a lone individual. In the diagram, however, the relationships with others are present; they are represented in the soil and roots. In life-giving small groups, it must never be imagined that individuals grow alone. Relationships with others are paramount.

Summary for Stage 2 PAR Group Process

The value of the qualitative part of this research project is to come to some insight and understanding of how vital small groups can provide a context that fosters spiritual growth. The PAR group really benefited from the consistent interaction afforded by the high number of sessions. There were a number of times when we commented to each other, "We are really being a small group!" We were each able to experience the kind of sharing-life group we were hoping to explore and understand.

There was some confusion felt at times by members of the group between our roles as being a small group and being a task force exploring ideas for future small group ministry. Some members of our group felt comfortable in the small group experience and were able to enjoy it for what it was. Others became anxious to get to the problem solving components of being a task force. These two purposes felt very different in the small group setting. We kept reminding each other of the two purposes and encouraged each other to participate fully in both roles.

The experiences we had being a small group really helped us understand the kind of small group dynamics we were trying to explore. The other inputs of the Boren texts, the Manskar texts, the summaries of the phone interviews, and the experiences of the experiments all added perspective and context for our reflection on how small groups could work. Yet it was our interactive discussions that really provided the rich

perspective that culminated in the last part of our qualitative research. We were able to draw upon all of this rich material as we discerned together what learnings and insights we felt were really significant and worth incorporating into other small group ministry settings. Again, the synthesis of our work together as a task force is found in Appendix L. Figure 3 – 6 above of the theoretical relationships, it seems to me, provide a helpful visual representation of the main ideas of the summary in Appendix L. The summary in Appendix L and the figures from the theoretical relationships can be excellent resources for congregations seeking to pursue a small group ministry that intentionally fosters spiritual growth.

These provide the concepts and ideas of what *could* happen. They do not necessarily represent what actually *will* happen. It is only through carefully trying to implement these ideas and learnings that we will see if they can actually work.

The last part of my research project attempts to provide at least some perspective to this question. It is two quantitative longitudinal panels trying to measure any changes experienced by the leaders of FUMC over the course of the PAR project. One survey was conducted among the most active church leaders of FUMC. The other survey was conducted among the PAR group participants. Did the small group process work? We turn to the next section to find out.

Quantitative Project: Two Longitudinal Panels

I began and ended the Stage 2 of my research project with two quantitative longitudinal panels. One panel was a census of the seven other members of the PAR group. The other panel was a census of the thirty-six most active leaders of the congregation. I administered the same questionnaire among both groups, and I used the

exact same questionnaire for both the baseline and the end line surveys. I distributed the baseline questionnaire among the church leaders on November 13, 2014, most of them individually and in person. The rest I handed out in person during that week. I asked for them to be returned to me by the end of November. Four were turned in late, on December 7. I received back twenty-eight questionnaires, which was a seventy-eight percent return rate. All my follow up with those who did not return the questionnaires proved unsuccessful, and I learned that they were very unlikely to return *any* questionnaire. The other baseline questionnaire I distributed among the PAR group at our meeting on December 7, 2014, and all seven returned theirs to me before they left that day. All the questionnaires for both baseline surveys, then, were returned by December 7, 2014.

I handed out the end line questionnaires to the PAR group participants at our last session, September 20, 2015. I asked for them to be returned to me within two weeks, by October 4. The last questionnaire was turned in late on October 11. On September 27, 2015, I handed out the questionnaires in person to most of the twenty-eight leaders who had returned the baseline questionnaires. During that week, I either handed out in person or mailed the questionnaires to those who had not received it on September 27. I asked for all of the questionnaires to be returned to me by October 11. I chose not to offer the end line questionnaires to those who had not returned the baseline questionnaire among the leaders survey. I was concerned that I might irritate them if I were to approach them about filling out the questionnaire. Surprisingly, however, I received all 28 of the questionnaires back from those leaders I did give it to again, the last one on October 18.

Subsequently, all seven questionnaires of the first end line survey and all twenty-eight questionnaires of the second end line survey were returned to me by October 18.

Descriptive Statistics

The questionnaire that I used for both the baseline and end line surveys can be found in Appendix C. There were twenty-eight questions broken down into five sections. Although personal information was asked for in the last section, I start with those questions here in order to describe the participants.

Personal Information of Survey Participants

There were eight questions asking for personal information from the participants. There were five questions asking for more general information, namely the year of their birth, their gender, their household makeup, marital status, and employment situation. Table 34 shows how the participants answered these five questions in both the baseline and end line surveys for both the PAR group and the church leaders.

Table 34. Questions 22-26 Baseline and End Line Reponses for PAR and Leaders

N = 7 PAR, N = 28 Leaders

Question	Survey	Rubric	Baseline #	%	End Line #	%
22. Year of birth	PAR:	Before 1950	4	57.1	4	57.1
		1960-1970	2	28.6	2	28.6
		After 1980	1	14.3	1	14.3
		n	7	100.0	7	100.0
	Leaders:	Before 1950	11	39.3	11	39.3
		1950 – 1959	6	21.4	6	21.4
		1960-1970	5	17.9	5	17.9
		After 1970	6	21.4	6	21.4
		n	28	100.0	28	100.0

Table 34 Continued

Question:	Survey:	Rubric:	Baseline: #	%	End Line: #	%
23. Gender	PAR:	Female	5	71.4	5	71.4
		Male	2	8.6	2	28.6
		n	7	100.0	7	100.0
	Leaders:	Female	14	50.0	14	50.0
		Male	14	50.0	14	50.0
		n	28	100.0	28	100.0
24. Current household makeup	PAR:	1 Adult	1	14.3	1	14.3
		2 Adults	5	71.4	5	71.4
		1 Adult + Children	1	14.3	1	14.3
		n	7	100.0	7	100.0
	Leaders:	1 Adult	3	10.7	5	17.9
		>1 Adult	19	67.9	16	57.1
		1 Adult + 1 Child	0	0.0	1	3.6
		>1 Adult + Children	6	21.4	6	21.4
		n	28	100.0	28	100.0
25. Marital status	PAR:	Married	6	85.7	6	85.7
		Widowed	1	14.3	1	14.3
		n	7	100.0	7	100.0
	Leaders:	Never Married	1	3.6	1	3.6
		Married	23	82.1	22	78.6
		Widowed/Divorced	4	14.3	5	17.8
		n	28	100.0	28	100.0
26. Current employment situation	PAR:	Part-time	1	14.3	1	14.3
		Full-time	4	57.1	4	57.1
		Retired	2	28.6	2	28.6
		n	7	100.0	7	100.0
	Leaders:	Unemployed	2	7.2	1	3.6
		Part-time	3	10.7	4	14.3
		Full-time	10	35.7	10	35.7
		Retired	13	46.4	13	46.4
		n	28	100.0	28	100.0

Three questions inquired about more personal information. Two asked about the respondent's religious affiliation: one was how long they considered themselves a

Christian, and the other how long they had been a part of FUMC. Table 35 shows how the participants answered these two questions in both the baseline and end line surveys for both groups.

Table 35. Questions 20 - 21 Baseline and End Line Responses for PAR and Leaders
N = 7 PAR, N = 28 Leaders

Question:	Survey:	Rubric:	Baseline: #	%	End Line: #	%
20. How long a Christian?	PAR:	>20 Years	7	100.0	7	100.0
		n	7	100.0	7	100.0
	Leaders:	6-10 Years	0	0.0	2	7.1
		11-20 Years	3	11.1	1	3.6
		>20 Years	24	88.9	25	89.3
		n	27	100.0	28	100.0
21. How long at FUMC?	PAR:	<6 Years	3	42.9	2	28.6
		6-10 Years	1	14.3	2	28.6
		11-20 Years	1	14.3	1	14.3
		>20 Years	2	28.6	2	28.6
		n	7	100.0	7	100.0
	Leaders:	<6 Years	3	10.7	3	10.7
		6-10 Years	3	10.7	3	10.7
		11-20 Years	10	35.7	10	35.7
		>20 Years	12	42.9	12	42.9
		n	28	100.0	28	100.0

The third question asked the respondents to rank how they thought others might describe them along a continuum between introverted and extroverted. The question used a Likert scale of six options. Table 36 presents the means of these four surveys. The PAR group is more extroverted than the leaders set, and the leaders set mean is quite close to the center (3.5) of the scale range.

Table 36. Question 27 Baseline and End Line Mean of Responses for PAR and Leaders

N = 7 PAR, N = 28 Leaders

Introverted: 1, Extroverted: 6

Question	Survey	Baseline Mean	(n)	End Line Mean	(n)
27. Rank how most others might describe you.	PAR:	4.43	(7)	4.29	(7)
	Leaders:	3.81	(27)	3.57	(28)

These data reveal that the typical respondent among the 28 leaders is an over 60-year-old (39.3%), either male (50.0%) or female (50.0%), married (85.7%), living with a spouse at home with no minors (57.1%), and retired (46.4%). The typical respondent has been a Christian for over 20 years (88.9%), and has been at FUMC for over 10 years (78.6%). Finally, this respondent is described as balanced between being introverted and extroverted (3.57).

Impressions

The first six questions of the questionnaire inquired about the impressions of the respondents regarding the variety of small group experiences offered at FUMC. A Likert scale of five options was used for all six of these questions. Four of the questions asked the respondents to rank how strongly they disagreed or agreed with statements. The first two of these asked about the respondent's attitudes regarding small groups offered at FUMC. Question four asked if small groups helped people mature in their faith; question six asked how easy they felt it was for new people to join a small group. Table 37 reports the means for these four questions in both the baseline and end line surveys for both groups.

Table 37. Questions 1, 2, 4, and 6 Baseline and End Line Means for PAR and Leaders

N = 7 PAR, N = 28 Leaders

Strongly Disagree = 1, Strongly Agree = 5

Question	Survey	Baseline Mean	(n)	End Line Mean	(n)
1. I feel that small groups are a crucial part of FUMC.	PAR:	4.17	(6)	4.29	(7)
	Leaders:	3.71	(28)	4.35	(26)
2. I feel that FUMC needs to offer a wider variety of small groups	PAR:	3.71	(7)	3.71	(7)
	Leaders:	3.62	(28)	3.78	(26)
4. I feel that small groups are very important in helping people mature in their faith:	PAR:	4.71	(7)	4.71	(7)
	Leaders:	4.19	(27)	4.52	(27)
6. New people to FUMC find it easy to join small groups:	PAR:	2.00	(6)	1.86	(7)
	Leaders:	2.38	(21)	3.11	(19)

It is important to note that for both the PAR and leaders surveys, the overall answers are on the high side. Since 3.0 marks the center of the scale, all the means for questions one, two, and four are well above the center of the scale. This suggests that overall the leaders of FUMC believe that small groups are crucial, that more variety in small groups needs to be offered, and small groups are held as quite important in helping them mature in their faith. These are good indicators that FUMC leaders have a high value of small groups and their role in spiritual formation.

The responses of the PAR group remained fairly constant. The leaders survey, however, showed an increase between the baseline and end line surveys for all four questions. The lower numbers for question six suggested that the participants among both the PAR and the leaders feel it is not easy for new people to join small groups.

Questions three and five also used a Likert scale, but they asked for an answer among two different kinds of ranges. Question three asked how many people they know at FUMC, ranging from a few to most, are involved in a small group. Question five asked how often, ranging from rarely to often, they have heard people share stories about how their small group experiences have impacted their behavior in their daily life. Table 38 presents the means for both PAR and leaders for both the baseline and end line surveys. Question five shows an increase in the means for both the PAR and the leaders survey, suggesting that people are noticing stories being shared more.

Table 38. Questions 3 and 5 Baseline and End Line Means for PAR and Leaders

N = 7 PAR, N = 28 Leaders

Question	Survey	Baseline Mean	(n)	End Line Mean	(n)
3. How many of the people you know at FUMC are involved in small groups? Few: 1, Most: 5	PAR:	3.67	(6)	3.14	(7)
	Leaders:	3.21	(24)	3.56	(25)
5. How often have you heard people share stories of how their small group experiences have impacted their behavior in daily life? Rarely: 1, Often: 5	PAR:	3.00	(7)	3.57	(7)
	Leaders:	2.68	(28)	3.25	(28)

Involvement

The second section of the survey asked the respondents about their own personal involvement in small groups. There were five questions in this section. The first asked if the respondents were currently in a small group at FUMC. Since some of the PAR responses were *no* in the baseline, it seems that at least these respondents interpreted this as referring to groups other than the PAR small group experience. Table 39 reports responses to question seven. According to the end line survey, all the PAR group

members were in another small group, and two-thirds of the leaders were (eighteen out of twenty-seven).

Table 39. Question 7 Baseline and End Line Responses from PAR and Leaders

N = 7 PAR, N = 28 Leaders

Question:	Survey:	Rubric:		Baseline:	%	End Line:	%
7. Currently in a small group	PAR:	Yes		4	57.1	7	100.0
		No		3	42.9	0	0.0
			n	7	100.0	7	100.0
	Leaders:	Yes		18	64.3	18	66.7
		No		10	35.7	9	33.3
			n	28	100.0	27	100.0

Question eight was a list of sixteen different kinds of small groups. The respondents were asked to indicate which ones they had participated in within the last five years. Table 40 lists the answers, in descending order of frequency from the end line survey among the leaders of FUMC. This table suggests that most leaders have experienced many of these small group types within the last five years. In the leaders panel, the top half of the categories in the end line survey show only a difference of four participants!

Table 40. Question 8 Baseline and End Line Responses from PAR and Leaders

N = 7 PAR, N = 28 Leaders

8. Which of the following kinds of small group experiences have you attended three or more times within the last five years?

	PAR:		Leaders:	
Studies that…	Baseline	End Line	Baseline	End Line
Do service projects together	6	6	24	22
Everyone shares/lots of discussion	6	5	21	22
Meet weekly	5	5	22	21
Provide fellowship and friendship	3	4	24	20
Have high trust and confidentiality	4	5	21	20
Anyone can “come and go” over time	3	6	21	19
Keep the same people over time	4	7	21	18
Discuss how to daily live faith	6	6	18	18

Table 40 Continued

	PAR:		Leaders:	
Studies that…	**Baseline**	**End Line**	**Baseline**	**End Line**
Study the Bible	6	5	19	17
Go do something for someone	5	3	23	16
Meet monthly	4	3	11	15
Provide strong Christian teaching	5	4	19	12
The leader does most of the sharing	2	0	9	10
Discuss current events	3	4	15	9
Discuss Christian books	5	3	8	9
Provide accountability	3	4	5	7

Question nine was a Likert scale question asking to what degree small groups offered through a local church were important during the times in the respondents' lives when they were growing most spiritually. Table 41 presents the means of the responses to these questions. The response means changed only slightly from baseline to end line. The PAR group's mean actually decreased slightly, while the leaders' mean increased slightly.

Table 41. Question 9 Baseline and End Line Means for PAR and Leaders

N = 7 PAR, N = 28 Leaders

Not at all instrumental: 1, Very much instrumental: 5

Question	**Survey**	**Baseline Mean**	**(n)**	**End Line Mean**	**(n)**
9. Reflect back on the times in your life when you were growing spiritually the most. How instrumental were small groups offered through a local church to that growth?	PAR:	4.43	(7)	4.29	(7)
	Leaders:	3.72	(25)	3.96	(26)

The data on question nine are important in and of themselves. Since the center of the scale is 3.0 (for a continuum ranging from one to five), the end line mean of the responses to both the PAR and leaders survey are surprisingly high (4.29 and 3.96). This is important for my research project because it suggests that the leaders of FUMC have

noticed that during times of strong spiritual growth in their own lives, small groups were very important to that growth. This alone may suggest support for the assertion of my research project that small groups can be powerful contexts encouraging spiritual growth.

Question 10 asked the respondents to rank how important various characteristics of a small group are to them. Again, a five point Likert scale was used for each of the parts of this question. Table 42 shows the results.

Table 42. Question 10 Baseline and End Line Means for PAR and Leaders

N = 7 PAR, N = 28 Leaders

10. Rank how important the following would be if you were in a small group because you wanted help growing in your faith:

Not Important: 1, Very Important: 5

Survey Characteristic	Baseline		End Line	
PAR:	Mean	n	Mean	n
I know everyone in the group	2.71	7	2.57	7
Occasionally new people join the group	3.67	6	3.43	7
We share from our own personal struggles	4.57	7	4.71	7
We learn how God's Word/Bible applies to our lives	4.57	7	4.71	7
We do service projects together	3.86	7	3.67	6
We invite new people to join our group	3.86	7	3.86	7
The leader encourages us to "go deeper" personally	4.57	7	4.71	7
The group commits to mutual confidentiality	4.57	7	4.29	7
I get to build new relationships with people	4.43	7	4.00	7
I am friends with everyone in the group	2.71	7	2.86	7
We hold each other accountable for the faith commitments we make together	4.00	7	3.86	7
Leaders:				
I know everyone in the group	2.75	28	3.14	28
Occasionally new people join the group	3.42	26	3.18	28
We share from our own personal struggles	4.26	27	4.18	28
We learn how God's Word/Bible applies to our lives	4.56	27	4.33	27
We do service projects together	3.41	27	3.65	26
We invite new people to join our group	3.82	28	3.81	27
The leader encourages us to "go deeper" personally	4.00	26	3.86	28
The group commits to mutual confidentiality	4.74	27	4.61	28
I get to build new relationships with people	4.29	28	4.29	28
I am friends with everyone in the group	2.75	28	3.00	27
We hold each other accountable for the faith commitments we make together	3.78	26	3.78	23

The respondents seemed to indicate that every one of these characteristics are fairly important. The center of the scale is 3.0 (for a scale from one to five). Most mean scores are above the center!

Observing which characteristics have the highest means may suggest which characteristics are considered most helpful for faith-formation small groups. For the members of the PAR, sharing from personal struggles, applying biblical teaching to daily life, and leaders encouraging participants to go deeper, all tie for the highest mean score in the end line survey. Others that come close are committing to mutual confidentiality, building relationships with new people, and inviting new people to the group. Among the leaders, the six highest means in descending order are mutual confidentiality, applying biblical teaching to daily life, building new relationships with people, sharing from personal struggles, leaders encouraging participants to go deeper, and inviting people to join the groups.

Interestingly, the same characteristics appear among the top six characteristics for both the PAR and leaders surveys. This may suggest top characteristic priorities for small group ministries in other settings. These would include sharing from personal struggles, applying biblical teaching to daily life, leaders encouraging participants to go deeper, mutual confidentiality, building relationships with new people, and inviting new people to the group.

The last question in this section asked preferences for logistics of small group meetings. The options were about how often the group meets, how long the group meets, how many sessions the group meets, and the kind of people who make up the group. I asked respondents to answer only once per line, which purposely make them choose a

preference among two different, possibly compelling, options. This may explain the large number of people who checked "Don't Know" in these answers, resulting in a lower number of valid responses. Table 43 shows these results.

Table 43. Question 11 Baseline and End Line Responses from PAR and Leaders

N = 7 PAR, N=28 Leaders

11. The kind of small group that I feel would help me grow spiritually

Option	**#**	**%**	**#**	**%**	**#**	**%**	**n**	**Total %**
a. Meets how often	Weekly		Monthly		Occasionally			
PAR Baseline	5	71.4	2	28.6	0	0.0	7	100
PAR End Line	5	71.4	2	28.6	0	0.0	7	100
Leaders Baseline	13	65.0	7	35.0	0	0.0	20	100
Leaders End Line	14	56.0	9	36.0	2	8.0	25	100
b. Meets for	1 hour		1.5 hours		2 hours			
PAR Baseline	1	14.3	2	28.6	4	57.1	7	100
PAR End Line	2	28.6	3	42.3	2	28.6	7	100
Leaders Baseline	12	52.2	7	30.4	4	17.4	23	100
Leaders End Line	10	41.7	8	33.3	6	25.0	24	100
c. Duration	<5 times		5-12 times		Ongoing			
PAR Baseline	2	28.6	4	57.1	1	14.3	7	100
PAR End Line	3	42.3	4	57.1	0	0.0	7	100
Leaders Baseline	0	0.0	10	41.7	14	58.3	24	100
Leaders End Line	0	0.0	6	30.0	14	70.0	20	100
d. Meets with people	I know		I like		New to me			
PAR Baseline	4	57.1	1	14.3	2	28.6	7	100
PAR End Line	3	42.3	0	0.0	4	57.1	7	100
Leaders Baseline	9	56.2	4	25.0	3	18.8	16	100
Leaders End Line	4	40.0	5	50.0	1	10.1	10	100

Compiling these data in this way may reveal insights for effective small group ministries. Most prefer a weekly meeting over monthly or occasionally. At this point I wish the questionnaire had given a "twice a month" option, as I suspect that may have been a popular choice as well. The PAR group seemed to prefer a longer meeting time, an hour-and-a-half or two hour meeting, whereas the leaders seemed to favor the shorter time of an hour length. The PAR group favored a group that meets for a limited number

of sessions (five to twelve times) whereas the leaders seemed to favor ongoing groups. For both panels, meeting less than five sessions was least preferred. Also for both panels, meeting with people they know is the highest scoring category over people they like or are new. Yet among the leaders survey, this was also the least answered option!

Invitation

The third section of the questionnaire asked five questions about engaging and inviting new people, particularly in relation with small groups. The first four were Likert scales of five options asking respondents to answer between strongly disagree and strongly agree with questions beginning, "It is important to my spiritual growth that I …." All these questions showed the PAR group heavily favoring the agree side, and the leaders survey responses seem to slightly favor the agree side. Table 44 shows the results. These response means across the four questions did not change substantially between the baseline and end line surveys for both sets of surveys.

Table 44. Question 12-15 Baseline and End Line Means for PAR and Leaders

N = 7 PAR, N = 28 Leaders

Strongly Disagree = 1, Strongly Agree = 5

Question	Survey	Baseline Mean	(n)	End Line Mean	(n)
12. It is important to my spiritual growth that I meet in small groups with new people:	PAR:	3.57	(7)	3.29	(7)
	Leaders:	3.15	(26)	3.08	(25)
13. It is important to my spiritual growth that I invite new people to small groups:	PAR:	3.29	(7)	3.57	(7)
	Leaders:	3.54	(24)	3.40	(25)
14. It is important to my spiritual growth that I make relation-ships with the unchurched:	PAR:	4.43	(7)	4.57	(7)
	Leaders:	3.80	(25)	3.80	(25)
15. It is important to my spiritual growth that I visit regularly with my neighbors:	PAR:	3.43	(7)	3.29	(7)
	Leaders:	3.24	(28)	3.25	(28)

Again, the center of the scale is 3.0 for these questions. The lowest actual mean was 3.08 among them. This may suggest that for all these four questions, the respondents in both surveys felt these characteristics to be important. Now, it is likely that there is an artificial inflation of scores here due to the nature of the survey and the overall tone of the questions asked. Respondents may be inclined to answer these questions higher than the way they actually behave. Each of these categories sound like noble ideas, for example, in and of themselves. Still, this may suggest insights for future small group ministry. The respondents to the questionnaires in both surveys, it could be argued, believe that it is important to their spiritual growth that they meet in small groups with new people, that they invite new people, that they make relationships with new people, and that they visit regularly with their neighbors.

All of these suggest that among the leaders of FUMC, there is a priority around reaching new people. This is supported by the responses to the next question as well. The mean scores cannot be compared directly, however, in that the previous questions had a one to five scale whereas the next question had a one to six scale.

The fifth question in this section, question sixteen, asked the respondents to indicate where they thought FUMC should place its primary focus by choosing a dot along a six-dot Likert scale between “help me grow spiritually” and “reach out to new people.” Again, this question was framed intentionally with an even number of choices so the respondents simply could not choose the middle. Table 45 presents these results. Both in the PAR group and the leaders survey there is a noticeable shift in the response means, but in opposite directions! We take a closer look at this shift in the inferential statistics section.

Table 45. Question 16 Baseline and End Line Means for PAR and Leaders

N = 7 PAR, N = 28 Leaders

Help me grow spiritually: 1, Reach out to new people: 6

Question	Survey	Baseline Mean	(n)	End Line Mean	(n)
16. Indicate along the following continuums where you think FUMC ought to place its primary focus:	PAR:	4.86	(7)	4.17	(7)
	Leaders:	3.43	(28)	4.07	(28)

Impact

The fourth section of the questionnaire explored components the respondents felt should be a part of small groups offered through FUMC to help people grow spiritually. The first of these, question seventeen, asked respondents to again place their priority between six pairs of characteristics along a Likert scale of six dots. Table 46 represents the means of these surveys.

Table 46. Question 17 Baseline and End Line Means for PAR and Leaders

N = 7 PAR, N = 28 Leaders

17. Indicate along the following continuums where small groups that help people to grow spiritually should place priority:

Survey	Characteristic (Value = 1)	Mean (n) Baseline	Mean (n) End Line	Characteristic (Value = 6)
PAR:				
	Fellowship	3.86 (7)	3.86 (7)	Accountability
	Discuss about topics	4.57 (7)	4.14 (7)	Discuss about personal lives
	Helping myself	4.57 (7)	4.86 (7)	Helping others
	Allowing participants to remain anonymous	4.71 (7)	4.43 (7)	Asking participants into accountability
	Stressing personal devotional life	4.00 (7)	3.57 (7)	Stressing doing good to others
	Making me feel comfortable	5.14 (7)	4.71 (7)	Making new people feel comfortable

Table 46. Continued

Survey	Characteristic (Value = 1)	Mean (n) Baseline	Mean (n) End Line	Characteristic (Value = 6)
Leaders:				
	Fellowship	3.32 (28)	3.46 (28)	Accountability
	Discuss about topics	3.33 (27)	3.40 (27)	Discuss about personal lives
	Helping myself	4.21 (28)	4.18 (28)	Helping others
	Allowing participants to remain anonymous	3.75 (28)	3.85 (27)	Asking participants into accountability
	Stressing personal devotional life	3.48 (27)	3.64 (28)	Stressing doing good to others
	Making me feel comfortable	4.50 (28)	4.18 (28)	Making new people feel comfortable

The center value of the mean across these scales, which range from one to six, is 3.5. Nearly all of the means for this question are over this. I set up the question with what I believed to be the kind of characteristics of more traditional study groups to be listed on the left (lower numbers). This suggests that the higher the mean, the more in line with what our PAR group learned were characteristics of vital small groups that shared life together and brought changes in daily behavior. Although the numbers fluctuated some, none of the means fell below 3.32. This seems to suggest that across these characteristics, the leaders of FUMC tend to favor those that describe the kinds of vital groups that we are hoping to create at FUMC. Of course, this does not mean that the characteristics listed along the left are unimportant. Even so, the answers seem to suggest that the characteristics on the right should be given priority in future small groups.

Question eighteen asks the respondents how easily they felt they could explain a biblically-grounded understanding of God's grace to someone new in a group. The answer grid was a continuum from one being "Not at All Easy" to five being "Very Easy." The higher the answer, the easier respondents felt they could share. The reasoning for asking this question is an attempt to gauge how comfortable the respondents felt about

talking theologically with others. The concept of God's grace is a core United Methodist doctrine. It is also a key idea I feel should be shared with new people. Respondents who chose lower answers may struggle with an understanding of this doctrine, speaking theologically, and speaking to new people. Lower answers may indicate barriers for those people to have theological discussions in small groups. Table 47 presents these results.

Table 47. Question 18 Baseline and End Line Means for PAR and Leaders

N = 7 PAR, N = 28 Leaders

Not at All Easy: 1, Very Easy: 5

Question	Survey	Baseline Mean	(n)	End Line Mean	(n)
18. How easy would it be for you to explain a biblically-grounded understanding of God's grace to someone new in a small group?	PAR:	4.14	(7)	4.57	(7)
	Leaders:	3.25	(28)	3.14	(28)

Again, the center of this scale from one to five is 3.0. It is encouraging to see that both means are well above 3.0. This suggests that on the whole, the leaders of FUMC think they have a reasonable capability of explaining grace to others. This may indicate a strength among FUMC leaders that can be drawn upon when its small group ministry is revamped in the year ahead.

The third question in this section asked the respondents to rank how important they felt five different components are for creating a good group dynamic. A higher number indicates the respondents felt it is more important for good group dynamics, and vice versa. Table 48 reports the mean for question nineteen.

Table 48. Question 19 Baseline and End Line Means for PAR and Leaders

N = 7 PAR, N = 28 Leaders

19. Rank how important to you the following are for a good group dynamic:

Not Important: 1, Very Important: 5

Survey	Characteristic	Baseline Mean	Baseline n	End Line Mean	End Line n
PAR:					
	Accept participants where they are at on their spiritual journeys	4.86	7	5.00	7
	Encourage people to grow spiritually	4.86	7	5.00	7
	Have patience with other group members	5.00	7	5.00	7
	Support participants when they admit failure	5.00	7	5.00	7
	When a participant shares an important struggle, the group suspends the agenda to discuss the issue	4.14	7	4.57	7
Leaders:					
	Accept participants where they are at on their spiritual journeys	4.86	28	4.82	28
	Encourage people to grow spiritually	4.74	27	4.63	27
	Have patience with other group members	4.82	28	4.68	28
	Support participants when they admit failure	4.89	28	4.79	28
	When a participant shares an important struggle, the group suspends the agenda to discuss the issue	4.43	28	4.30	27

The mean scores are quite high. This is all the more true because this is a scale from one to five, with the center of the scale being 3.0. The lowest mean among both panels is 4.14! This suggests that all of these characteristics are very important for a good group dynamic. This seems to be the case even if we expect some false inflation of answers in this question, due to the positive sound of these options, the nature of the questionnaire, and the fact that this question comes toward the end of the questionnaire. The surprisingly high numbers show a very strong commitment. Among the PAR group's end line survey, for example, four out of the five questions had each respondent answer "Very Important" each time! Like question seventeen, I crafted these options using

characteristics of vital small groups that encouraged people to grow spiritually, encouraged the sharing of life together, and led to behavior change. These data suggest that FUMC leaders value these characteristics highly for small groups.

Qualitative Data from the Questionnaire

Four questions of the questionnaire had space for written responses. Question numbers eight, twenty-four, and twenty-six each offered a space at the end saying, "Other – please explain." Further, the last question of the questionnaire was an open-ended question asking if there was anything else the respondent would like to share. No comments were made on any of the questionnaires from the PAR group. There were comments, however, on a few of the questionnaires from the survey of leaders. These responses were in written form, so I treated them as qualitative data. Most of the comments were explanations of answers, suggestions for the church to try, or expressions of irritation over having to choose between the characteristics in various questions. I provide in Table 49 the more meaningful comments.

Table 49. Written Comments by Respondents on the Questionnaire

Question #8:
Baseline: "Are team meetings small groups?"
End Line: "I've been out of groups for a while."
"Inspired to initiate small groups in the community separate from FUMC."
Question #24: None
Question #26: None
Question #28:
Baseline: "Balance is needed between outreach-new member/person focus and strong classes that build church attendees. It is important that the church take care of spiritual growth for existing members, otherwise you invite in new members and at some point they stop coming because the church does not meet their needs. At same time groups must be inviting and welcoming to all, newer and long time members alike. On the other hand if you are not reaching out to others sooner or later the church will decline. It is hard to be the visible love of God if you are not visible outside the walls of the church."

Table 49. Continued

Question #28:

Baseline: "How do we make small groups flexible, creative, relevant? It is a challenge to get people to commit to leading/facilitating and attending small groups."

"I haven't been involved in a small group for several years."

"In many of the questions, both are needed as in questions 16 and 17."

"Not all people gain from small groups. Not all small groups are a fit for people that like small groups."

End Line: "Confirmation class for adults."

"Hard to answer many of these without discussion."

"I am not a small group person so many of the questions were hard to answer."

"It is important to meet the needs of new people and longtime members in our small groups. Being inclusive and inviting and making disciples for Christ is our core mission. But once people are in the door you need something to help them grow."

These comments are enlightening in that they show a number of the respondents are really grappling with some of the concepts of small groups that reach out to others. There is a call for balance between reaching out to new people and being substantive for those already part of the congregation. There is also an understanding by a couple of the commentators of the core mission of FUMC to make disciples of Jesus Christ, both among those who are and those who are not yet a part of the congregation. There are some comments that show a lack of value around small groups, and at least one respondent felt that not everyone finds small group experiences helpful. The comment that really caught my attention, however, was the one that said in an end line survey that he or she was "inspired to initiate small groups in the community separate from FUMC." This suggests that at least one person has been impacted in such a way as to be inspired to form a small group outside of the church's groups.

Inferential Statistics

I next analyzed the data with inferential statistics. First, I attempted to conduct chi-square tests along the different categories of the categorical data. With a sample size of twenty-eight, even questions with four or three categories almost always had some categories with fewer than the required number of expected frequencies for the chi-square test to be reliable. The same concern appeared when I conducted correlation tests. What complicated these tests was that many of the leaders shared similar demographics, such as older, married, no children still at home, length of time being a Christian, etc. I attempted to combine the categories to make large enough expected frequencies, but when I did so, I had to combine so many categories that it diminished the usefulness of conducting the tests.

T-Tests

Instead, therefore, I conducted t-tests to compare the end line survey results with the baseline survey results. T-tests compare the means of two different categories in order to determine if there is a significant change between them. In the case of this research project, I was looking to see if the PAR project over the eleven months had any direct influence on the PAR group participants, and then if there was any indirect influence from the PAR project on the wider leadership of the congregation. A t-test assumes that there is no difference between the two groups (supporting the null hypothesis) unless it can be rejected by a ninety-five percent probability. Therefore, I sought a t-test p-value of 0.05 or smaller ($p \leq 0.05$) in order to be able to reject the null hypothesis and accept that there was indeed a significant difference between the groups.

Both of the baseline and end line surveys had the exact same respondents. This was true for the PAR group because the group remained consistent over the course of the study. Then, as I said above, I chose to give the end line questionnaires only to those leaders who had completed the baseline. Those leaders who did not return the baseline survey, I discovered, were reluctant to do so even when I followed up with them. A number of them expressed a distaste for doing questionnaires, and I felt I could irritate them if I were to approach them again with the end line questionnaire.

This means, then, that I was able to conduct paired t-tests on both the PAR group and the leaders surveys. The t-tests conducted across all of the questions of the PAR group panels did not show any significant findings. As there were only seven questionnaires in both the baseline and end line, and as these leaders were inclined toward the value of small groups initially, I was not surprised by the lack of significant change.

The t-tests conducted on the questions of leaders group panels revealed only four questions with a p-value of 0.05 or less. Again, with such a small pool of respondents, it was unlikely that many questions would show significant change. Table 50 lists these questions and their t-test results.

Table 50. Questions with t-Test Results 0.05 or Less on Leaders Survey

N = 28

Question:	**Baseline Mean**	**End Line Mean**	**t**	**df**	**p**
1. I feel that small groups are a crucial part of FUMC	3.71	4.35	-2.588	27	**.007**
5. How often have you heard people share stories of how their small group experiences have impacted their behavior in daily life?	2.68	3.235	-2.588	27	**.015**

Table 50. Continued

Question:	Baseline Mean	End Line Mean	t	df	p
8. Which of the following kinds of small group experiences have you attended three or more times within the last five years? Studies that: Provide strong Christian teaching.	1.27	1.40	-2.911	24	**.007**
16. Try to indicate along the following continuum where you think FUMC ought to place its primary focus: [between] "Help me grow spiritually" and "Reach out to new people."	3.43	4.07	-3.012	27	**.006**

Question one showed a significant change among the leadership toward a stronger belief that small groups are a crucial part of FUMC. This is a fairly important result for this research project. The research project was initiated from my belief that FUMC needs to explore ways it can enhance its small groups so that they are a more effective way to help people grow spiritually. Then, the PAR group had been meeting for eleven months experimenting on how a setting such as ours could enhance their small groups. It seems that the PAR's work has had some influence on the wider leadership of the congregation to value small groups as an important part of the congregation's life and ministry.

Question five also shows a significant increase in the means between the baseline and end line surveys. This question asked how frequently the respondents heard stories shared about how their small groups had directly impacted their behavior in daily life. The shift away from the "Rarely" category toward the "Often" category may suggest a cultural shift taking place among the leadership. People may be sharing more about their small groups and the direct impact their groups are having on their own daily lives. People also may be more attentive to hearing the stories being shared. In either case, this

may suggest a cultural shift toward a greater valuing of the sharing about people's small groups and how they are impacting their daily lives.

Question eight showed a decrease in the respondents' attendance in small groups that "provide strong Christians teaching" within the last five years. On one level, this may suggest that the leaders have shifted away from information-based studies, or studies that focus more on Christian teaching, and sought out other kinds of groups. Another interpretation may be that FUMC has not offered groups that provided strong teaching more recently. It helps, however, to put this part of question eight in the context with the rest of the question. Table 51 re-presents the responses to question eight from above, but bolds the part of the question that shows the significant p-value change.

Table 51. Question 8 Baseline and End Line Responses from PAR and Leaders

N = 28

8. Which of the following kinds of small group experiences have you attended three or more times within the last five years?

	PAR:		Leaders	
Studies that…	**Baseline**	**End Line**	**Baseline**	**End Line**
Do service projects together	6	6	24	22
Everyone shares/lots of discussion	6	5	21	22
Meet weekly	5	5	22	21
Provide fellowship and friendship	3	4	24	20
Have high trust and confidentiality	4	5	21	20
Anyone can "come and go" over time	3	6	21	19
Keep the same people over time	4	7	21	18
Discuss how to daily live faith	6	6	18	18
Study the Bible	6	5	19	17
Go do something for someone	5	3	23	16
Meet monthly	4	3	11	15
Provide strong Christian teaching	**5**	**4**	**19**	**12**
The leader does most of the sharing	2	0	9	10
Discuss current events	3	4	15	9
Discuss Christian books	5	3	8	9
Provide accountability	3	4	5	7

The table shows that overall there were fewer responses to most kinds of small group by the leaders in the end line compared to the baseline. This might suggest that leaders are attending fewer small group experiences as a whole, or perhaps fewer kinds of small groups. Or, it may be that by the time of the end line survey, the involvement in these kinds of groups is one more year in the past and may have become more than five years ago. No matter what the reason for the decrease, it seems less important for that one category when it is put in context with all the others. "Provide strong Christian teaching" decreased by seven responses, but then again, so did "Go do something for someone." "Go do something for someone," however, started out with four more in the baseline. On the whole, I am more interested in the reasons for the overall decline in attendance for nearly all kinds of small groups than I am with this one particular category.

The fourth question that showed a significant change in means was question sixteen. This question asked respondents to indicate along a continuum between the group focus of "Help me grow spiritually" and "Reach out to new people." Table 52 lists the responses for each point along the continuum.

Table 52. Question 16 Baseline and End Line Responses for PAR and Leaders

N = 28

Question:	**Rubric:**	**Baseline: #**	**%**	**End Line: #**	**%**
16. Where do you think FUMC ought to place primary focus between "Help me grow spiritually" and "Reach out to new people"?	Only help me grow	1	3.6	0	0.0
	Mostly help me grow	1	3.6	0	0.0
	Some help me grow	15	53.6	5	17.6
	Some reach out	7	25.0	18	64.3
	Mostly reach out	4	14.3	3	10.7
	Only reach out	0	0.0	2	7.1
	n	28	100.0	28	100.0

Of great interest is the movement of answers from a baseline preference toward "Help me grow spiritually" to an end line preference toward "Reach out to new people."

True, the greatest numbers hover around the middle options, but there is a marked changed from "Some help me grow" to "Some reach out." To me, this suggests an important shift among the leaders toward valuing the need to reach out to new people. Again, both components are important, but this shift may suggest a movement away from the more traditional small groups as studies that have so dominated FUMC's small group offerings. At least it suggests a valuing of using groups to reach new people.

Direction of Change in Some Responses

The small number of questionnaires and the similarity of so many of the respondents make it unsurprising that running the t-tests did not produce more indications of significant change. Even so, the direction of the changes in the responses from the baseline to the end line surveys across a number of questions seems meaningful. Among the leaders survey, one of the questions that shows this kind of change in the actual responses is question four. This question, which asks the respondents to rank along a Likert scale how strongly they disagree or agree that small groups are very important in helping people mature in faith, shows an increase in the highest category, "Strongly Agree," by five responses. Table 53 shows these responses and the means.

Table 53. Question 4 Baseline and End Line Responses for Leaders

N = 28

	Rubric:	**Baseline: #**	**%**	**End Line: #**	**%**
4. Small groups	Strongly Disagree	0	0.00	0	0.00
are very important	Somewhat Disagree	0	0.00	1	3.70
in helping people	Neither	7	25.93	1	3.70
mature in faith	Somewhat Agree	8	29.63	8	29.63
	Strongly Agree	12	44.44	17	62.96
	n	27	100.00	27	100.00
Mean		4.19		4.52	

This question strikes to the heart of my research project. The direction of increase toward more strongly agreeing that small groups are very important in helping people mature in faith suggests that leaders have a higher value of small groups than before. This, coupled with the increase in question one discussed above that small groups are crucial to FUMC, seems to suggest that the leadership of FUMC has a more favorable view of small groups and their role in spiritual formation.

Among the leaders survey, there were also slight increases in the means of the parts of question seventeen. The means increased from 3.32 to 3.46 toward "Discuss about personal lives," from 3.75 to 3.85 toward "Asking participants into accountability," and from 3.48 to 3.64 toward "Stressing doing good to others." Each of these I would consider are movements, albeit slight, toward a small group experience that encourages personal growth that is evidenced in behavioral changes. The other questions had no compelling change of mean scores.

Among the PAR panel, there were also a number of changes between the means of the two surveys worth noting. Question five, again which asks how often people have heard others share about how their small group experiences have impacted their daily lives, increased from 3.00 to 3.57. Question sixteen, however, which asked respondents to place between "Help me grow spiritually" and "Reach out to new people" where they think FUMC ought to place priority, showed a *decrease* in the mean from 4.86 to 4.17. This is the opposite from the leaders panel, which *increased.* To be honest, I am not sure how to explain this. I find this decrease among the PAR respondents to be puzzling, as it seems to be inconsistent with their responses to other questions regarding reaching out to new people.

Then again, it is curious that there were many questions within the PAR survey where the means either didn't change much, or even decreased slightly. This may reflect a more optimistic attitude in the beginning of the PAR journey, and a more realistic attitude at the end. As we met together in our sessions and learned more what being a vital group for spiritual growth looked like, there may have been some reaction against this radical calling. Although I was hoping for more documented increases, wrestling with the concerns and needs of small group ministry and the wearing off of the initial excitement of the project may have actually caused the PAR members to be less idealistic in their responses.

Summary

The results of my research project provide helpful insight in three broad ways. The first is understanding better the components and characteristics of vital small group experiences that help people grow spiritually, lead to behavior change, draw upon United Methodist traditions, are missional in nature, and make sense in settings similar to that of FUMC. The second is that it helps describe the current attitudes and approaches that the leaders of FUMC have toward small groups, as well as suggests potential fruitful directions for its future small group ministry. The third area of helpful insight is the PAR testing of these ideas as an actual small group to see if some of the components and characteristics did produce spiritual growth among the participants.

An important part of the two-stage research project was to define and describe the components and characteristics of a small group experience that helped people grow spiritually and brought about changes in their behavior. The interviews with the seven other United Methodist churches identified important components that had been proven

helpful by experience. These included intentional and paid staff to organize, oversee, equip, and resource the small groups and their leaders, a congregation-wide culture of valuing small groups, offering variety of group experiences in kind and in frequency, and the need to continually form and re-form the small group design and structure. Components shared by the small groups of these other churches suggest a core list of key components. These include relationship building among the participants built on fellowship, trust and caring for each other, engaging God's Word through Scripture and open discussion of how it applies to their daily lives, praying for and with each other, and having an outward focus through service and invitation to others not in the group. A key learning is that for these churches, small groups are the primary path of discipleship and spiritual formation.

The PAR group experience built on the learnings from the other churches. Our engagement with the Boren text identified the need for groups to break through shallow sharing and get real by having deep conversations about how the participants live out their daily lives. It raised the importance for building personal relationships among the group members as they shared life together. It also pushed for engaging the wider community through listening deeply, engaging in acts of service, and intentionally inviting people into small groups. A clarifying focus of small groups, Boren asserted, was to lead to changes in behavior.

The engagement of the Manskar texts brought the rich Methodist heritage of small groups as we designed what vital small groups were to look like. The three-fold focus of holiness of heart and life provided a balancing of the various components that are so important. Small group experiences are about encountering God personally. They are

about developing individual discipleship. They are about reaching out to others and building those relationships. The Methodist way of spiritual growth is to gather regularly in small groups. The Methodist way is having deep conversations about how the participants live out their lives on a daily basis. It is building relationships within the group of trust and accountability. Spiritual growth is driven by practices and actions that are informed by learning. The Methodist way is for people to behave and belong their way into believing.

The PAR group's interventions (experiments) added significantly to our growing understanding of vital small groups. People have a longing to touch the deepest and most important parts of life. Our group suggested a guiding question may help the conversation move quickly to deep sharing. People have a longing to build relationships and be in authentic community. Our group suggested paths of fellowship around food, establishing ground rules of respect that build trust, and praying for and with one another. People are apprehensive about religious groups and struggle to find small group experiences that fit. Our group suggested a church culture of small groups, of going out to engage the wider community, and of intentional and personal invitation. People have a desire to do good and make a difference in the world. Our group suggested that each group include a component of service and outreach into the wider community. Ideas like "ninja blessings" and "worship plus two" may encourage churches and groups to continue a healthy balance of group components. People desire to encounter God. Our group suggested that small groups may be the way that makes the most sense in contexts like ours for people to get to know God better in a real and personal way.

The two longitudinal panels also helped identify the makeup of effective small groups. They suggested that small groups are crucial for spiritual growth. They also suggested key components of small group experiences to be sharing from personal struggles, applying biblical teaching to daily life, leaders encouraging participants to go deeper, mutual confidentiality, building relationships with new people, and inviting new people to the group. Variety in group styles, structures, and offerings is also important for people to be able to take advantage of small group experiences. The surveys suggested that essential group dynamics include meeting people where they are, encouraging them to grow spiritually, having patience with members, supporting them over time, and discussing life issues. Balance between serving the needs of group participants and reaching out to new people, however, may be difficult to maintain, but is important. The surveys indicated that respondents felt that small groups are very important in helping people mature in their faith.

All of these insights for small groups from these various contexts begin to create an image of what vital and missional small groups may look like. So many of these components and characteristics continue to surface. The summary in the previous paragraphs may be a helpful listing and description of important small group characteristics. Again, an attempt to put all of this together in a way that may be useful for local churches is found in Appendix L. This, along with figures two through ten above, may be very helpful in describing small groups that foster spiritual growth.

The second broad area of insights from this research project suggests how the leaders of FUMC understand and value small group ministry. The leaders involved in the PAR group were leaders that I believed valued strongly the importance of small groups

and desired our church's small group ministry to be more effective in helping people grow spiritually. They were open, and some perhaps even eager, to bring change to the way our church offered small groups.

The PAR experience kept them focused on and thinking about small groups for almost a year. They were fully invested in the process and were passionate about how small groups can help people grow spiritually. As they engaged the wider congregation in conversations (part of the PAR interventions) they reported hearing a longing and hunger for more: to grow spiritually and to engage in relevant and meaningful small groups.

Both their baseline and end line surveys reveal that the PAR group participants began with a strong disposition favoring small groups and nearly all of the components we would soon identify together as important elements of vital, missional, and relevant small groups. Their mean scores across the whole questionnaire were very high, and their answers suggested that they are leaders who are eager for our church to introduce sharing life groups.

The means of both the baseline and end line surveys of the wider group of leaders also showed a disposition favoring small groups and most of the different characteristics we were exploring, albeit not to the degree of the PAR group. T-tests showed a significant increase in this group's opinion that small groups are crucial to FUMC, that more stories are being shared about how small groups have helped people change their behaviors, and that FUMC ought to place more focus on reaching out to others.

During the course of this project, I have been sharing with the staff and senior leadership of FUMC that we need to be changing how we help people grow spiritually. We agree that small groups are a key way that people grow spiritually, but we have been

unclear about what our small group ministry ought to look like. There is a growing awareness among our senior leadership that we need to invest in real ways in the future of our small groups. I am excited that this past summer our leadership voted unanimously to take the bold and risky step to add a paid, part-time staff position to help foster our small group ministry. We created this staff position as the Director of Spiritual Growth. This is creating a growing awareness and excitement among our whole congregation for small groups. I am excited about the possibilities this will bring in the year ahead.

I sense the culture at FUMC is changing around small groups. The congregation has had a long history of offering traditional small groups built on information sharing, such as Bible studies, topic studies, and discussion groups. There is an awakening of desire for groups that meet to discuss daily living and how the participants' Christian faith affects them and changes how they live. There is a strong desire to have a place where meaningful relationships can be grown, and life can be shared with others. I think FUMC is ready for a new way of doing groups. It would be wise, however, that the new sharing life groups be offered in addition to the groups that are currently offered. Some find these traditional groups very helpful, and others may need seasons of being involved in such a group. Again, the importance of variety suggests to add new group possibilities rather than discontinue what is currently offered.

The third broad area of insights comes in attempting to answer the question if the characteristics and design of a sharing life small group that we identified during our PAR work actually did result in the spiritual growth of those who tried them. This is largely a question for the PAR group. We had identified what we felt were key components of an

effective small group, and then we practiced a number of those components to test their effectiveness.

The group discussed this question directly a number of times throughout the PAR group work. The responses were enthusiastically in favor of their value and effectiveness. The participants shared how the components encouraged them and compelled them to be more intentional about their behaviors and mindful about how they lived. They experienced Christ during group times together and felt God's care and support in the relationships of the group. One participant, for example, explained that this group has really made a difference in how she is facing some big changes in her life: "With all the changes happening for me at this time, my future retirement and moving to a new home and new community surroundings, the whole idea of small group has taken me to a new way of thinking about what is going to be happening" (H, PAR#14).

The longitudinal panel, however, showed little indication of spiritual growth among the PAR group responses. This could be because the group had such high scoring during the baseline survey that there was not a lot of room to show marked growth on the end line survey. It could also be because the group members were fairly mature in faith and predisposed in favor of small group ministry, and therefore there was insufficient time to manifest large changes in their responses by the end line survey. One member, for example, observed "I have not grown in big strides, but I have grown in small, and not necessarily always in discernable, ways" (C, PAR#14). Finally, it could be that the group started out with an overly optimistic view of small groups and their potential, and over the course of the PAR work they began to realize how involved and how much time these

changes require. This is perhaps the fatigue that was demonstrated in some of the end line mean scores.

It is hard to answer, then, if the PAR group experience did affirm that the small group characteristics that we tried were effective in fostering spiritual growth among the group members. The longitudinal panel showed no conclusive evidence. The reflections by the group members themselves, however, enthusiastically affirmed their value and effectiveness. The real test will come when these ideas and learnings are tried in other settings in the future.

In the next chapter, we take all of these results and place them in dialogue with the lenses described in chapters two and three. This helps us evaluate to what degree the learnings of this PAR project can be translated and relevant to other settings. It also helps us see perspectives, corrections, and adaptions that may make these learnings more useful.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Summary of the Results

The results of my research project, presented in the previous chapter, provide helpful insights in three areas. The first area strikes at the very purpose of this research project. I set out to explore components and characteristics of small groups that help people grow spiritually, lead to behavior change, draw upon United Methodist traditions, are missional in nature, and make sense in settings similar to that of FUMC.

Characteristics of these vital small groups include: a congregation-wide culture of valuing small groups that is expressed in an expectation for everyone to be involved in a small group; staff that organize, oversee, equip, and resource the small groups and their leaders; offering of a variety of group experiences in kind and in frequency; and by the continual forming and reforming of the small group design and structure. Important components of these groups include relationship creating among the participants built on fellowship, trust, and caring for each other; engaging God's Word through Scripture and open discussion of how it applies to daily life; praying for and with each other; and having an outward focus through service and invitation to others not in the group.

The relationships and deep sharing enable people to talk plainly about their real struggles and issues in daily life. Accountable discipleship, held within mutual confidentiality, is built on trust, as well as engaging in practices and actions together that are informed by learning. Components of effective small groups may include using

guiding questions that help the discussion go deeper more quickly, sharing fellowship around food, establishing ground rules of respect that build trust, and praying for and with one another.

Small groups need to break through shallow sharing and get real by having deep conversations about how the participants live out their daily lives. Group participants need to move past acquaintance and even friendship and share life together. Learning and discussions need to go beyond just learning about the Bible or some topic. They need to help participants apply what they learn to their daily lives and lead to changes in behavior. There is also the need to break through the temptation to remain insular in order to engage the wider community through listening deeply, engaging in acts of service, and intentionally inviting people into small groups. Balance between serving the needs of group participants and reaching out to new people may be difficult to maintain, but is important.

In addition to identifying and exploring these important small group characteristics and components, this research project helped provide insight into the current attitudes and approaches that the leaders of FUMC have toward small groups. It also suggested possible ideas that FUMC can incorporate into its future small group ministry. Most importantly, it reveals a desire for spiritual growth within the leadership of the congregation and a growing hunger for them to engage in relevant and meaningful small groups. There are important leaders who are eager for our church to introduce life sharing groups. There is a growing opinion that small groups are crucial to FUMC, that more stories are being shared about how small groups have helped people change their behaviors, and that FUMC ought to place more focus on reaching out to others.

The culture at FUMC around small groups seems to be changing. The congregation has had a long history of offering traditional small groups built on information sharing, such as Bible studies, topic studies, and discussion groups. There is an awakening of desire for groups that meet to discuss daily living and how the participants' Christian faith affects them and changes how they live. There is a strong desire to have a place where meaningful relationships can be grown, and life can be shared with others. I think FUMC is ready for a new way of doing groups. It would be wise, however, that the new sharing life groups be offered in addition to the groups that are currently offered. Some find these traditional groups very helpful, and others may need seasons of being involved in such a group. Again, the importance of variety suggests that FUMC should add new group possibilities rather than discontinue what is currently offered.

The third area of insight afforded by this research project was the testing of the identified characteristics and components of sharing life small groups. The PAR served as an experimental small group that tried out a number of the ideas that we identified, in a desire to see if they did actually result in spiritual growth evidenced in behavior changes.

The group participants shared that they believed that the components they tried encouraged them and compelled them to be more intentional about their behaviors and mindful about how they lived. Even so, the longitudinal panel showed little indication of spiritual growth among the PAR group responses. This was likely because the group had such high scoring during the baseline survey that there was not a lot of room to show marked growth on the end line survey. One member, for example, observed "I have not grown in big strides, but I have grown in small, and not necessarily always in discernable,

ways" (C, PAR#14). The real test will come when these ideas and learnings are tried in other settings in the future.

Engaging the Theoretical Lenses

This research project draws upon four theoretical lenses that help congregational leaders better understand the dynamics of small groups today in order to strengthen a missional approach for spiritual formation in their contexts. The previous chapter clearly pointed out the importance of leadership in effective small groups. These frames not only affirm the importance of leaders, but also help identify the roles and work of those leaders.

The four theoretical frames are social networking, the broader postmodern culture, open systems theories, and practice theories. Social networking explores how people connect and interact. This is an essential component in understanding small group settings. Postmodern theories help explain the wider community and identify ways to connect that are more relevant. Open systems theories push missional small groups to organize themselves so they intentionally are shaped and formed for and by those who are in the wider community. Finally, practice theories inform how missional groups can draw upon practices that can encourage faith formation. Each of them explains, in part, a bit of how small groups can be so influential in changing people's performance and behaviors. When put together, they offer a more complete picture of the power of small groups.

Social Network Theories

Social networking (here *not* referring to online forms of communication) is a social science theory exploring the relationships that connect people. People, to an

important degree, shape and are shaped by their relationships (referred to as ties or links) with others, both more locally (community) and more broadly (society). Social network theory, as described in current research, is the study of how people and groups of people relate and interact with each other within a given network, and, perhaps more importantly, how these social structures affect beliefs and behaviors.

Small groups are both networks and nodes. They are networks for the individual group members, and they are nodes within the wider network of local congregations. Perhaps the most informative aspect of social network theory is its focus not on attributes of the nodes themselves but rather on their interactions and relationships. These webs of relationships can help explain how people behave.

Small groups are for the most part voluntary, or what social network theories call self-formed groups. Theories of homophily, which describe how people want to create relationships with people they think are similar to themselves, may help explain how people tend to self-select into groups that have participants of a similar age, demographic, or stage in life. Here we see the value of small group ministries offering a diverse range of small groups, as identified in the results chapter. In a church with a culture of small groups, group leaders need to anticipate how people self-select groups and offer openings in such groups. Further, homophily can help explain why people may express a desire to be involved with groups of diversity but often do not willingly choose such groups. Diversity of group participants was identified as a value in the results of the previous chapter. This is something that group leaders may need to help the group name and then intentionally invite people unlike themselves to join.

Another value identified in the results is the going out and connecting with others outside the group. The social network theory of betweenness centrality, which measures the ties participants have with those outside the group, can help small groups think through how they reach out to others not within their groups. It would be important for group leaders, who seem to have the most effective invitation to those in the wider community, to cultivate intentionally their betweenness centrality.

Much of the effectiveness of vital small groups, as identified in the results chapter, hinges on the meaningful and deepening relationships formed among group members. The social network theory of transitivity helps explain how trust is built and relationships are deepened among participants, but also how those not in the group may find those strong ties hard to breech. Social network theories identify an inverse relationship between diversity of the participants (nodes) within a group and the interaction level among them. The greater the diversity among the participants, then, the lower the participation level among those participants. The longitudinal panel among the church leaders of this study affirmed this. Respondents indicated a desire for more diversity, but yet they showed preference for groups that were familiar and made up of other people they liked.

One learning from this theory would be the need for small groups and their leaders to identify the similarities shared among participants who do not share obvious similarities. For example, part of the invitation to new people, or even during the relationship-building times of the small group, may be to name what that new person has in common with others in the group. This could be a passion around a certain cause, a hobby, or even being fans of the same sports teams. Another idea this theory suggests is

that group participants should be encouraged to invite people they know, as those people will have the benefit of knowing at least someone in the group.

This research has identified the United Methodist teaching on small group relationships in terms of believing, behaving, and belonging. These three continue to influence each other. Belonging to committed relationships helps encourage a consistent change in behavior patterns over time.

Social network theories separate belonging from being connected, and this helps small groups understand how people who may be connected in a congregation or even a small group may not have a sense of belonging. Belonging, identified in the results as deep relationships that share life together, does not necessarily come from people being together and doing things together. Instead, it comes when intentional space is created to cultivate belonging. Again, this is something that small groups and their leaders need to craft as an intentional part of the group experience. Further, creating this space for belonging also will help groups appeal to others outside the group; rich community is something people are hungering for who are not connected with churches.

Authentic community is created intentionally where authentic conversations can happen. This is a value identified in this research project. Social network theories also identify this is crucial in order to create true community. Small groups that foster rich, personal sharing can help people overcome their sense of isolation and create experiences of belonging and shared life.

Caring for one another is not only a value of effective small groups, it is also part of the group's faith witness to others outside the community of faith. It deepens the ties among the group members. Also, others who see the group care for one another in

tangible and real ways are drawn to the commitment group members have for each other and for others not in their group.

Social network theories also point out how changes to behavior are influenced by more than the individual's desire to change. An individual's relationships with others, particularly those of a small group, are also important. There is a great deal of influence leveraged by others in trusted and deep relationships. This comes in the form of shared values that are reinforced among the group, such as the values of growing spiritually and staying committed. Small groups can provide the healthy relationships that, in turn, can influence positive behavior changes.

Network theories help congregations understand the social dynamics that arise when people join small groups. The ties that members create can take a variety of forms, can develop with different strengths, can be formed for different reasons, and can move different directions. When congregations and group leaders are aware of these ties, they can help groups form in healthy ways. Also, realizing that rising leaders have more centralized ties can help congregations and groups identify well-received leaders.

The United Methodist heritage of small groups in the form of accountable covenant groups rest squarely on social network theories. The participants' shared spiritual experiences, their familiarity with each other, how they balance their identity within the group with their identity within a wider culture, the desire to help one another, the use of corporate practices, and the ways leaders arise among the groups because of their connection to other group members, all demonstrate social network dynamics at play. Group experiences that incorporate these kinds of dynamics can provide encouragement for their members to continue in their spiritual growth.

Postmodern Culture Lenses

The second theoretical frame is comprised of postmodern lenses of our current culture. An important finding of my project is the value of small groups that engage the wider communities around the congregation. It is also important that groups make sense to people living in our current culture. Often small groups are structured around what has worked in the past and what makes sense to those who have been a part of small groups for many years. In order to reach the wider community and the next generations not involved in small groups, congregations need to offer small group experiences that engage people who live in a postmodern culture.

The previous chapter identifies a number of learnings and insights that engage this frame directly. These learnings suggest a very different kind of small group. Traditional small groups of the modern era often focused heavily on content and learning information. They were often groups of study, such as Bible studies, topic studies, or book studies. Leaders, outlines, study guides, or videos typically helped participants learn the correct way of understanding the Bible or Christian teachings. It was up to the individual to apply those learnings to his or her daily life.

A notable exception to this kind of study were early Methodist class meetings. They did not meet to learn information. They met to share life together, talking about how they were doing at living out their faith in their daily lives.

This research project highlights the value of characteristics more like the early Methodist class meeting and less like the traditional study group. These characteristics also align better with a postmodern culture. One of the most important of these may be the movement away from content learning and toward sharing from one's life.

Groups with the characteristics identified in the previous chapter are not primarily study groups. Although there is usually an important component of Bible study, the bulk of group time is spent discussing life issues and how the participants' faith affects their daily lives. This connects well with the postmodern priority of sharing from life rather than learning information. The value comes in the exploring together, the discussing out loud, the reflecting with others seeking to make sense of daily life. Narrative is a powerful form of sharing that makes sense in a postmodern culture, particularly narratives that describe the real situations of the tellers of the narratives.

The group format is an excellent format to uncover meaning and value behind information. Postmodernity's fact-value split can be handled well in small groups. Together groups can explore their evolving faith rather than a predetermined set of beliefs, their understanding of meaning rather than learning information, and their experiences rather than ontological facts. Rather than be a place where answers are provided, groups can be safe places for participants to ask questions.

Other values of postmodernity are expressed in the kind of small groups that focus on sharing life together. One is the value of other viewpoints. The sharing around the group is not interpreted as either right or wrong, but as honest and real experience. Sharing deeply opens up new ideas and perspectives that can be helpful for other group participants.

Missional small groups must listen first to those who are not a part of the group. In order to engage those who are not in the group, participants listen to others and value their input as real and authentic. Learning can come from listening to others, and this is a strong postmodern value. Including those who may feel marginalized, and valuing their

input, is an important way for missional small groups to make sense in the wider, postmodern culture.

Finally, postmodernity connects beliefs and behaviors. When participants share about how they live out their faith in daily life, their behaviors are shaped as well as their beliefs. Groups that draw upon United Methodist traditions not only make the connection that changes in behavior evidence spiritual growth but also that beliefs can be formed and changed through behavior. The postmodern lens affirms the value of small groups seeking behavior change through practices.

Open Systems Theories

The third theoretical frame is open systems theory. *Systems* theory recognizes that organizations are not self-contained, that all the components of an organization are interrelated, and that changing one variable can have impact on many others. *Open systems* theory takes into account the wider environment in which organizations are located. Open systems continually interact with their environment, influencing and being influenced by them. Learning organizations continually develop and facilitate the learning of their members, encouraging them to incorporate those learnings into the organization's life and structure.

This lens connects with a number of the findings from this research project. One of the findings is that small groups need to be continually formed and reformed as they adapt to remain relevant and meaningful for those who both are and those who are not yet participants in the small group. Another way of saying this is that groups need to be open sourced. Rather than sticking to an imposed model of operating, groups can explore among themselves what practices and components are helpful and meaningful. As

learning groups, they must learn from those who are in the groups, but also learn from the wider environment, those who are not yet in the group.

Although groups would benefit from guidelines and values provided by the church leadership, ownership of the group can be given to those that participate. As long as groups operate within general structure guidelines, include key components that are desired for all groups, and commit to the purpose of spiritual growth, participants can be invited to craft and structure their group in a way that best suits them. Small groups, in this way, can be open sourced. This was identified in the findings that, among those churches that are already using small groups for faith formation effectively, the development and structure of the small groups continued as the groups were developed, and continues still.

Further, faith formation small groups value going out and engaging those not within the group. This is done through acts of service, engaging in listening and conversations, and inviting others to join small groups. Open systems theory helps groups understand how important it is to listen first to those they engage, to learn from the postmodern culture they are trying to engage, and to see others in their wider environment as valuable contributors to their ministry rather than just receivers. When they are invited to become a part of small groups, they are invited to become owners and contributors to how the groups function and behave. Small groups need to be open to new people, not just in making room for them to come in and conform to the group, but more in terms of inviting them as formers and shapers of the group experience.

The difficulty is for the groups to keep a healthy balance between maintaining the groups within the guidelines and organization of the local church while allowing groups

and their new members the authority to craft their own group experience. There is often the temptation to close the groups and only allow how those who are already there want things done. Yet, if missional small groups take seriously the calling *to go*, they will need to go with an openness that allows new people to help craft the group experience.

Practice Theories

The last theoretical lens is the category of practice theories. A key concept in practice theory is *habitus*, or the collective unconscious behavior of a person derived from that person's previous experience. These learned habits, or practices, are formed by the broader culture, and are, in turn, shapers of that culture. Groups of individuals living in similar *habitus* likewise reinforce similar habits as part of the cultural structure of the group. The idea of communities of practice draws upon the understanding that rather than a strictly cognitive exercise, learning is a social event that happens as people interact with others in ongoing practices. Communities of practice are groups of people with a mutual commitment who build relationships and share learning through joint activities or practices.

Important results of this research project are informed by the lens of practice theory. Predominant, perhaps, is the insight that behavior can be changed when practices are combined with learning. Small groups can be places where people join together to grow spiritually through learning about Christian discipleship and then put those learnings into practice through group practices and activities. Over time, those sustained practices become formative in the participants' lives, resulting in long-term changes of behavior.

Groups can offer a shared experience, mutual encouragement and accountability, a pervading set of values and ideals, and the motivation of doing things together. It is a combining of the believing, belonging, and behaving that is so powerful. These three components are essential for faith-forming, behavior-changing, life-sharing, missional small groups. These three components are found in communities of practice. Being involved in a group over time provides the ongoing reinforcement needed for sustained change.

Forming and deepening relationships built on time, trust, mutual commitment, and shared values is a key component of both practice theories and vital small groups. Learning happens together, while relationships are built, as people engage in practices together. That learning, in turn, opens up new possibilities of practices that can lead to new learning. The iterative cycle continues, producing growth.

Learning practices can be both activities that the group members do together, and activities that the participants do apart from the group, but share with the group in which they are held accountable. In the United Methodist tradition, these are described as works of mercy and works of piety. They are the practices that Methodist groups have found encourage spiritual growth and behavior changes.

Formative practices, however, are not just those that the group members do with one another or do individually and then report back to each other. Transformative practices also can be those that group members do to care for and serve each other. This can mean how group members are cared for in the needs of their lives, as well as the practices of how group participants treat each other with respect, dignity, support, and accountability during group times.

Acts of service and outreach, identified in the results of this project as important for transformative small groups, are ways that practices help participants grow. These can be done either individually or together as a group. Serving the wider communities is an important way that practices keep the group from being self-focused, from staying in the conceptual, and from becoming irrelevant to the wider environment.

Practices also are a way for people to talk about their daily lives. As participants act out their faith in their daily activities, connections and inroads are made into their real, lived lives. Sharing around these practices means participants share deeply about what matters to them the most. Sharing is about how they are applying the group experiences, learnings, and discussions to the rest of their time outside the group.

Finally, practice theories are at play in vital small groups in that the participants are not just influenced by the group experience, but that they also influence the group directly. Dynamic groups are ones that are open to the participants shaping the form and components of the group experience to what makes sense to them. The research results of this project indicate that this is an important value for groups offered by local churches.

Engaging the Biblical Lenses

There are four biblical lenses that inform this research project. The biblical concepts of spiritual growth and discipleship help shape how groups explore faith formation. Regular and disciplined habits show a biblical method of how actions are an important way to grow spiritually. Finally, the biblical model of building deep and personal relationships with others as a way to connect and share faith together help this study explore how group members can make relationships and share life with others.

Spiritual Growth

The biblical concept of spiritual growth is portrayed in the concepts of transformation and maturity. God's people are called into a life that God has for them of being transformed into the intention of loving completely. That transformation, in Pauline theology, means becoming more and more like Jesus. This is both a work that is done by the Holy Spirit into each person as well as a work of response done by the individual. Maturity is explained in terms of both growing up as well as becoming able to bear spiritual fruit. Transformation and maturity, then, are intended for the whole of the person, not just in knowledge or understanding. It is evidenced in the lives of God's people in the fruit of the Spirit, in actions, and in consistent behaviors.

This research project has identified that small groups can be contexts encouraging spiritual growth. The importance of relationships—being with and for each other—provides a context for growth. Christians are not called to grow and mature in isolation. The community helps each person. The relationships of deepening trust provide the accountability, the support, the nurturing that each participant needs.

Growth means change. The desired outcome of effective groups is behavior change. Sometimes groups can be interesting, fun, entertaining, supportive, affirming, and information-based, and still not produce growth. The biblical understanding of spiritual growth as transformation and maturity pushes small groups to engage those characteristics that produce growth.

This growth is a gift from God that can come in the form of the community of the small group. The Holy Spirit produces growth in those open to it. The disciplines of honesty, sharing deeply, engaging the Scriptures, Spirit-filled fellowship, and prayer

unleash the Holy Spirit's transformation. Yet the growth is also a work of the individual. Taking the small group seriously, conforming to the agreed values, and participating in the suggested components are ways that each participant can draw upon the small group experience as his or her work enabling spiritual growth. The components of the small group that are very important, then, are those components that this research project has identified that lead to change and growth.

Having a variety of small groups and experiences is also important for spiritual growth. People are at different places in their spiritual journeys. Their needs may be different depending on their place in their journeys. No one group format or style can accommodate the variety of spiritual needs of the variety of people in them. Groups may need to begin with people in similar situations and then grow together. Groups also may need to be offered for a season and then provide ways for participants to join new groups that meet their needs at that point. Further, groups may need to change the components that comprise group sessions as time goes on and the group grows and changes. Variety in small groups, as well as the need continually to form and re-form small groups, is an identified value by this research project that aligns with the biblical lens of spiritual growth.

Lastly, spiritual growth focuses group activities around those that directly impact daily life. Spiritual growth requires application. Sharing needs to deepen. It needs to be about the most important things of life. It needs to be open, honest, and safe. Discussion needs to be pushed to how individuals will make changes in the ways they live. Activities need to train participants into new behaviors. Relationships need to be real, willing to receive people where they are, but not be content to let them stay that way. Love needs to

be manifest in how the group members grow in their love for God, demonstrate their love for each other, and shown in acts of service to the wider community.

Discipleship as Following

The second biblical lens is discipleship. According to the Great Commission, disciples of Jesus are baptized, taught, and live into obedience. Biblical discipleship, then, includes belonging (identity/baptism), believing (learning what is taught), and behaving (living into obedience). Discipleship is shown in the Gospels as following Jesus. Faith formation happened *along the way*, and even times of sustained instruction drew upon life situations, common household images, and concepts from daily activities. The first disciples shared lives with Jesus, and with each other. Discipleship has a component of sharing life together.

The results of this research project are informed dramatically by this biblical lens. Small groups that lead to behavior change focus on patterns of life that the biblical frame of discipleship calls obedience. Small groups can help disciples live more consistently in obedience because of the mutual accountability, encouraging relationships, and engaging in habit-forming practices.

Discipleship as following Jesus means keeping up with Jesus! Scripturally, and still today, Jesus continues to go out into the wider communities, in the streets and homes of daily life. Missional small groups stress the priority of going out, of engaging with new people, of building new relationships, and of loving and serving those in need.

Biblically, faith formation as discipleship is also formed in the context of relationships. Discipleship is about building relationships, both between people and God

and among people with each other. With the first disciples, these relationships happened together.

Finally, the three components of discipleship—baptism, teaching, and obedience—are all necessary for vital small groups. Manskar has identified them in the Wesleyan tradition in terms of belonging, believing, and behaving. This research project has identified that often times small groups may do one, or even two, of these components well. Traditional studies and fellowship groups, are examples. Yet small groups that can be powerful influences for growth and change need to have all three of these components.

Baptism (belonging) components could include fellowship, trust-building, deep sharing, hospitality, mutual accountability, caring for each other, sharing life together, and praying for and with each other. Teaching (believing) components could include Scripture reading, reflecting on faith practices, sharing openly and honestly from one's own faith journey, agreed-upon rules and values, and deep listening. Obedience (behaving) components could include deep listening, respecting other group members, keeping confidentiality, building trust, mutual accountability, application to daily living, caring for each other, going out, being invitational, and acts of service and outreach.

Behavior and Spiritual Growth

A third biblical lens is the healthy, holy habits that link behavior to spiritual growth. These two have been identified in the previous lenses, and this third lens reinforces their connection. The biblical model of spiritual maturity is often expressed in terms of behaviors. *Agape* love is demonstrated in acts of self-sacrifice. Changes in behavior do not come just as a result of changes in beliefs, but biblically, changes in

behavior also can lead to changes in beliefs. The disciples discovered who Jesus really was and what that meant as they lived with him and followed him in their lives. They grew spiritually as they learned to trust in the Holy Spirit in their daily lives. They learned healthy, holy habits—diligence and consistency in obedience and practices—which fostered spiritual growth. Further, biblically, the community of faith encourages its people to express love and good deeds to one another.

Small groups, this study asserts, can be powerful contexts for making the connection between spiritual growth and behavior changes. Left to ourselves, people have a harder time growing in ways that lead to changes in our actions. The community of vital small groups, through covenantal commitments to each other, deep sharing, mutual accountability, focus on life behaviors, and the practices both within the group and acts of service outside of it, all live out the biblical connection of communities shaping spiritual growth evidenced in behaviors.

Groups can offer contexts to practice biblical, behavior-changing disciplines such as fasting, study, reflection, service, celebration, fellowship, confession, and prayer. Sanctification is a process that happens over time. Small groups are perhaps the best contexts in today's church life that provide the consistent communities that enable progress along journeys of holiness.

Relationships with Outsiders

The fourth biblical lens that engages the results of this research project is building deep relationships with outsiders. Understood missionally, the calling to follow Jesus is a calling into the wider communities. God is a sending God. Jesus travels out into the communities and villages. The Holy Spirit prompts God's people out. The church is sent

into the world. God's people are sent to build new relationships, share in witness and service, extend invitations to join God's people, and demonstrate the love of God to others in tangible ways.

Small groups have a tendency to become insular. It takes continual effort to welcome new people. Traditional small groups, for example, tend to be for those who already feel a part of the church community enough to show up on their own initiative, who feel comfortable enough to join in. Yet, there are a host of unseen barriers that inhibit new people from becoming a part of the group. Small groups, as this study has shown, must take seriously the biblical call of hospitality to strangers, and be invitational by their very nature and design. Here again is the need for a culture—an expectation, a consistent commitment—that new people are wanted, are planned for, are invited.

Yet others are not just the target or focus of Christian ministry. In God's missional activity, the other is also a shaping influence upon those who serve. We meet God in the outsider. We encounter Jesus in the stranger. We connect with the Holy Spirit when we connect with the least, the lost, and the left out.

This project helps understand that God unleashes this influence when people do life together with those not yet part of the group. Activities of eating together, fellowship, working alongside, connecting in multiple facets of life, serving, are ways that relationships deepen and allow God to act and move between and among all people: insiders and outsiders! Practices of service and outreach are crucial to the sanctification process, to growing in holiness of heart and life.

Engaging the Theological Lenses

There are also four theological lenses that engage my research findings. These include a Wesleyan understanding of sanctification, a perichoretic understanding of relationship, Christian hospitality, and a United Methodist framework of accountable discipleship in small groups. The first and last draw upon the United Methodist theological tradition.

A Wesleyan Understanding of Sanctification

Salvation, in the Wesleyan understanding, is a growing relationship of loving God more and more. This process of being perfected in love is a partnership of God and the person, with the person having the responsibility to respond continuously to God's gracious acting. Responding means growing in both inward and outward holiness (holiness of heart and life). Holiness, understood in Wesley's practical divinity, is loving and serving God. It is demonstrated not just in love filling the heart, but also in love governing the life. It affects the whole of life, as loving God includes how people love others.

From early on, Wesley understood that this kind of continual growth in love and holiness was best served by small groups that helped keep people focused and nurtured. A key component in these small groups was mutual accountability, housed in weekly meetings, deep and personal sharing, respect and trust, and application to daily living. These are all components that this research has found to be valued and important for faith-shaping small groups today.

Wesley's groups used the General Rules as the foundation for their discussions, and these may no longer be useful or relevant. This study found that guiding questions,

however, are very productive, and they can help groups talk about deeper things more quickly. Each group member needs the rest of the group. The group is instrumental in keeping people growing.

The organic diagram of this project's findings as a growing plant attempts to express this dynamic nature of how we are related to God, and in turn, how we can be related to others within a small group. Our relationships with God, with others, and ourselves, are all connected in our spiritual journeys of sanctification. As individuals, we need dynamic small groups to help us on these journeys. As we grow in holiness of heart and life, in love for God and neighbor, vital groups can help hold us accountable to that growth, and offer us relationships and contexts in which we can practice the demonstrations of that love and service. People are on a holiness journey over time. Small groups can be an effective way to keep people growing on their journeys.

Perichoretic Relationship

The second theological lens is a perichoretic understanding of relationship. The description of God as perichoretic Trinity highlights the relationships within God. God is not some ontological concept, or even a static being. God is fundamentally in relationship with Godself, as the three persons of the Trinity are intimately interconnected, mutually penetrating, and expressing the love that God is. God invites people into relationship with Godself, extending the perichoretic love to include people.

People are made in God's image, and being in relationships is part of what that means. People are created to be in relationships. This research study has identified that people have a longing for meaningful and intimate relationships, with others and with God. Small groups can be places of meaningful and fulfilling relationships, especially

when the group commits to build relationships with trust, to treat each other with respect and dignity, to share openly and honestly, to go deep and real about everyday life, and to share life together. Groups also can be communities in which people experience relationship with God, as group participants show God's love and care to each other, as they study, reflect, and discuss God's word in Scripture, and as they pray for and with each other.

The perichoretic Trinity shows the Christian life as not just an imitation of God, but actual participation with God. People get to experience God, not just learn about God. That participation brings life and wholeness. When people have a healing relationship with God, it, in turn, brings healing to their relationships with other people. Conversely, when people experience healthy and wholeness-making small groups, their experiences of a loving God can be healed and restored. This life-giving truth aligns with the findings of this research project.

God's image as relationships is expressed in life-sharing small groups. Groups are built on deepening relationships. They also encourage people to grow and deepen their relationships with God. Groups can be contexts where people experience God's love in and through their relationships with the other group members. This is why this study has expressed how important it is that small groups operate by godly dynamics, rich relationships, and deep caring for one another. God invites people into God's perichoretic love-relationship, and this can be experienced, in part, in the loving relationships of faith-forming small groups.

Hospitality

The third theological lens that informs this study is hospitality, or, more specifically, welcoming the stranger. This lens complements the biblical lens of relationships to outsiders. The issues are both that God calls the followers of Jesus to engage and make relationships with others, and that when followers of Jesus engage with others, it is the followers of Jesus who benefit in their own spiritual growth. Missional small groups, by definition, express the value of engaging new people and inviting them to become a part of the group.

This lens helps clarify some of the mixed responses in the results of the previous chapter. Responses to some of the questions on the questionnaire showed a variety of feelings by respondents around the question of whether new people should be allowed in already formed groups. This same concern was also brought up in the PAR group discussions. Some respondents seemed to value the level of trust and deep sharing that came from closed groups. Others suggested that deep sharing could still be comfortable even when new people joined groups. This is possible, some felt, provided the group leaders stressed confidentiality, respect, and an up-front expectation to share deeply. These components would also help to establish trust quickly even when new people joined the group. If groups were fully open, meaning that there was little consistency among participants over different group sessions, however, most felt a deep level of trust and sharing would be hard to establish.

There is some uncertainty, therefore, about whether groups should be open to new members or not. Certainly different individuals would have different comfort levels and feelings of trust depending on the variety of group members. Each case would probably

have its own set of unique specifics. Even so, the biblical calling for hospitality might be able to inform this concern. There is a natural tendency for groups to become insular and self-serving. This tendency may motivate some people's expressed desire to keep small groups closed. The biblical calling to reach out to others and extend invitations to new people may help people overcome this preference and see open small groups as a viable option.

This especially could be true if the small groups expressed value in building deep relationships with the new people who joined and worked hard to incorporate them fully into the group experience. This could be difficult work, especially as it would mean finding ways of being together with people who do not necessarily share the same perspectives, see issues the same way, or even believe the same things. Some of the components of vital small groups in this research project's findings could help facilitate groups bonding in spite of various differences. When groups are not founded on beliefs, the participants have more openness to discussing and exploring topics and ideas. Activities and practices can bond people together who think differently. The call to listen first, and to listen deeply, along with respect and affirmation can help participants to see each other as beloved children of God. Group-building components like fellowship, sharing from personal life, and looking after each other's needs, help people look beyond different beliefs and see the solidarity of a common humanity. Spiritual components like Scripture reading, discussion, reflection, discernment, and praying together can help establish a unity around a love for each other, a love for God, and a desire to learn together.

Good and effective leaders are important both in keeping groups from becoming self-focused and in creating healthy bonding when new people do join groups. Even when groups do discuss beliefs and interpretations of Scripture, leaders can point out the value of hearing diverse perspectives and how other ideas make the conversation rich and deep. Sharing must be protected in order for there to be room for everyone to share, and for all participants to feel like their perspectives are heard and valued. The leader can help the group establish ground rules of respect and inclusivity early on in the group's life that then can become part of the group's personality fabric. Leaders must help the groups to resist the temptation to simply do what group members prefer and instead keep the groups true to their missional callings. Further, there can be great value in groups learning to include new people in these ways, as it then helps groups to think through and wrestle with the values and beliefs held in the wider culture, which, in turn, helps make the groups more relevant to the wider communities and able to better connect with them.

A United Methodist Framework for Accountable Discipleship in Small Groups

The last theological lens, indeed the last of the twelve lenses, is a United Methodist framework for accountable discipleship in small groups. The United Methodist General Board of Discipleship (GBOD) has developed a small group framework based on the Wesleyan principle of mutual accountability. This framework, offered to local churches, establishes small groups of about seven participants who meet together weekly in order to hold themselves mutually accountable for their spiritual growth. Participants give express permission to the other participants to hold them accountable to acts that demonstrate discipleship, as they each share openly and honestly from their daily lives.

This design for small groups is based on Wesley's understandings of sanctification and inward (personal) and outward (social) holiness. Small groups can be places that both create experiences of the public works of piety and mercy, as well as hold participants accountable to the private works of piety and mercy. The three principles of believing, belonging, and behaving frame spiritual growth as (1) a love-relationship with God (believing), (2) as happening best in small groups (belonging), and (3) as evidenced in changes of behavior (behaving). Discipleship, then, is the growth in holiness that is evidenced in fruit (actions) and leads to changes of behavior (habits).

A United Methodist framework for accountable discipleship in small groups is grounded in Wesley's theological concepts of grace, holiness, practice, behavior change, and good works. These concepts also appear across the results of this research project. Accountability to daily life, shared within a context of deepening relationships of trust, is valued highly in vital small groups. Grace can be described in terms of groups being a safe place, receiving others wherever they are at, establishing ground rules, treating one other with respect, caring for each other, and committing to be with and for each other. Holiness is understood as the inner longing for something more in life, of desiring to change and be different, in terms of loving relationships with God and neighbors, and in the shared conviction that lives can change by the grace of God.

Practices are the activities that reinforce patterns of spiritual maturity and bearing of spiritual fruit. These are done either together as a group or individually outside of the group, but to which participants hold each other accountable. Participants experience God and God's grace through these activities, and they can become habits that lead to life changes. Changes of behavior are the markings of spiritual growth, as discipleship is

following Jesus in heart and life. Good works are practices of service and outreach that keep people going out and engaging people outside the group. They also become practices that in turn can help individuals grow spiritually.

Three Crucial Attributes

The findings of this research project, informed by the twelve lenses, seem to suggest three crucial attributes of what I call faith-forming small groups. Faith-forming small groups encourage participants to grow spiritually evidenced in behavior changes, are missionally informed, draw upon the United Methodist heritage of small groups, and make sense in contexts like that of FUMC. The three attributes can take a variety of forms and look very different in various settings, but the key, I believe, is that all three must be present for the groups to be truly faith-forming small groups.

The first crucial attribute is authentic community. Faith-forming small groups need to be communities in which people are able to be themselves, relationships grow and deepen among the participants, trust is built, sharing is honest and about real life issues, and participants share life together and care for one another in ways that may even go outside of group times together. True community is an expression of the family of God; it is what belonging to the Church of Christ is supposed to be like. Groups are not perfect as communities. It is difficult and hard work for participants to sustain this level of community. Yet, they consistently practice bonding, forgiveness, unity building, caring, and being with and for each other.

The second crucial attribute is that groups engage the presence of the Holy Spirit. Faith-forming small groups engage the Divine, particularly through the leading, sustaining, empowering, and transforming presence of the Holy Spirit. This can happen

through connecting with the Scriptures or some other text/media that helps participants connect to the reality of God in their midst and in their lives. Yet, this is not mere learning of information. It is engaging the living God as present among them, in each of them, and active in their lives. The key here is faith sharing, as group participants talk about their faith journeys, about their experiences of God, and about how God is active in their lives currently. It means reflecting together on the Scriptures, other texts and media, and experiences in their own lives to discern what the Holy Spirit is saying in and through them. It means discussing together how what they learn applies to their daily activities and life situations. It is also essential that group participants grow in their praying for and with each other. Engaging the presence of the Holy Spirit means that group members pursue a living and personal relationship with God.

The third crucial attribute of faith-forming small groups suggested by this research project, is the intentional and consistent application to daily life. It is easier to share and discuss ideas and concepts and to keep the discussion about the ideas themselves. Learning, in this sense, is learning information; it stays in the head. Faith formation that leads to behavior change, however, makes the connection between ideas and practical living. Learning becomes about how to live differently; it moves from the head to the hands, to the feet, to the mouth. The learning that takes place in faith-forming small groups is not abstract but concrete. Discussions about what is learned must connect back to the participants' daily lives. Sharing needs to be open, honest, authentic, and personal. Often groups leave the application components to the participants themselves. Faith-forming small groups make that part a central part of the group time together.

Small groups, perhaps, particularly are beneficial for helping people make the applications to personal lives. There are few other opportunities for people to do that within a church community. The safe, deepening, and caring contexts of faith-forming small groups encourage people to share honestly and openly. They also offer time and a designated place for each participant to reflect specifically on his or her own life. The healthy, mutual accountability offered in this kind of group helps people be honest with themselves and to continue in the tiring work of self-improvement. The goal of faith-forming small groups is personal transformation. It is experiencing the work of change brought about through the acting by the Holy Spirit and the responding by the individual.

The application to daily life, however, does not only refer to the lives of the participants. It also means, this study suggests, to engage the real life of the wider environment and the lives of others outside the group. Reaching out in listening, witness, caring, and serving are vital ways that a small group also must engage the reality of daily life. The temptation is often for groups to turn inward and, perhaps even unintentionally, become self-absorbed. Mutual accountability also can be accountability for the group and its participants continually to engage in acts that demonstrate God's love for all people. Jesus constantly went out into daily lives, both into the applied lives of individuals and into the wider communities around them. Jesus calls his followers to do the same. Faith-sharing small groups reach out to others in acts of kindness, service, and caring.

Engaging one other, engaging God, and engaging real life: these seem to be three crucial attributes of faith-forming small groups. Many groups do one or even two of these components well. Fellowship groups can engage one another well. Traditional Bible studies may engage one another and, if led really well, may even engage daily life.

Service groups may reach out into the wider community in tangible expressions of God's love. *Yet, I have come to believe, it is the combination of all three, held together, that seems to release the transforming power of the Holy Spirit within faith-forming small groups.*

These three attributes are expressed in the organic representation of vital small groups in the figures of the growing plant in chapter five. The ground and the faith-nurturing nutrients represented by the soil suggest the empowering context of the small group relationships. The growing plant, representing the individual's longing for more and the sustaining rhythms of the group life and practices, signifies the growth in behaviors of daily life and building connections with the wider environment. Finally, the shining sun and its life-giving light to the plant suggest the life-giving relationship with God. All three: consistent, constant, and not separated.

These three attributes also seem to overlay well with how Manskar describes the three-fold Wesleyan approach to small groups. He described it in terms of believing, belonging, and behaving.[1] Believing may correlate to the experiencing of God through the relationship of love. Belonging, it seems, correlates to the engaging of others through deepening relationships of care, accountability, and support. Behaving could be identified with the application to real life, through relationships with those in the wider communities, and by how the participants live their daily lives. This combination of holiness (believing) of heart (belonging) and life (behaving) gave life to the early Methodist societies, and if done well, can continue to do so today.

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[1] Manskar, *Small Group Ministries: Christian Formation through Mutual Accountability,* 10.

Generalizability and Limitations of This Study

The intention of this research was to explore how small groups could help people grow spiritually, lead to behavior change, draw upon United Methodist traditions, are missional in nature, and make sense in settings similar to that of FUMC. Thus the initial focus for application of this study was to United Methodist congregations in suburban contexts in today's American culture. A key component of this study was to discover *what works* in this setting. A lot of listening and reflecting was done with people in his project's immediate setting.

There may be, therefore, some important limitations in applying the findings from this study to broader settings. Other contexts may have people with very different needs, values, and ways of life. One limitation that seems obvious is the nature of the local church's setting. People in a rural or urban context, for example, may have drastically different needs and values. Communities with different income levels or ethnic makeups from this study, it seems likely, would also have different perspectives and need different approaches. I am unclear how these findings would relate to contexts outside the United States. Even within the United States, perhaps different regions would also have drastic differences. This study is imbedded within the Upper Midwest region, and even the interviews among the seven churches in the first part of the study are all in somewhat similar contexts. Finally, this study explored the heritage of United Methodism. Other denominational and local church settings have their own rich heritage from which to draw. There may be some relevance and application possible to other mainline denominations, but, it probably would decline considerably, it seems to me, in other church settings.

There are, however, a number of important findings that can be helpful to other settings and contexts. This research project, for instance, lifts up a number of foundational priorities that need to be engaged in nearly every ministry context. One is the foundational priority of spiritual growth. Followers of Jesus are called into a journey: a journey that is a love relationship with Jesus, that is displayed as following Jesus in obedience, and that is a movement of inner growth and maturity. Jesus' followers are called to grow spiritually in love, in obedience, and in the holiness that God is. Too often ministry contexts, perhaps unintentionally, do not compel people to grow but instead allow people to stall in their spiritual growth. The Bible, however, calls Jesus' followers to be growing continually.

Spiritual growth, this project also points out, needs to be understood in terms of behavior change. Growth in love and holiness means change in how people live. People can grow in knowledge of God, in understanding of God's Church, and even in inner wisdom. Yet Jesus' call to holiness expects a progression in the way people live both inwardly and outwardly. Too often, again perhaps intentionally, many ministry contexts measure growth only in knowledge and understanding. People are taught *information*. Scripturally, however, Jesus calls his followers into *transformation*. Local ministry settings need to focus on not just lives that have been changed, but also lives that are changing. Change continues as people grow following Jesus.

Another priority is the importance of community. Although this is a long-standing Christian teaching, our current culture does not seem to place great value on gathering in community in order to grow spiritually. Our culture makes one's spirituality a private matter, an individualistic journey. The biblical teaching on this, however, is unwavering.

People are called into community because our spirituality is also a community matter. We need one another in order to encourage and facilitate our spiritual growth. When we join with Christ, we are, at the same time, made a part of the relationship that is his Church. God is, by very nature and being, a relationship. God's people, made in God's image, are also created to be in relationship. We are called into relationship with God. We are also called into relationship with other Christians. Further, we are also called to engage in loving relationships with those in our wider communities. Being a follower of Jesus may have individual components, but it is never to be individualistic.

Still another priority for other ministry contexts is the value of small groups for encouraging and empowering people to grow spiritually. Small groups can provide the authentic relationships, the trust, the context for deep sharing, the environment of encouragement, the correction, the expressions of care, the accountability, and the prayer support individuals need to grow spiritually. In fact, this research, as well as the Church's broader history, has shown that small groups can be among the most helpful structures that foster spiritual growth. Small groups are no less important today than they have ever been. Local churches, the world over, must find ways of engaging in vital small groups.

Perhaps the most substantial findings of this study that can be incorporated into other ministry settings is the importance of holding together the three crucial aspects of vital small group ministries described in the previous section. Small group ministries, no matter what the ministry setting, must create authentic community, engage the Holy Spirit, and help participants make applications to their daily lives. Engaging one other, engaging God, and engaging real life: these seem to be three crucial attributes of faith-forming small groups that apply in nearly every setting. Again, often small groups do one

or two of these well. A key insight of this study, however, is that it is *the combination of all three, held together*, that seems to release the transforming power of the Holy Spirit within faith-forming small groups. Every ministry context that uses small groups needs to seriously evaluate how well they are able to maintain the ongoing combination of these three crucial aspects in their small group settings.

Beyond this core learning, other helpful ideas, principles, and frameworks also can be adapted from this study's findings for other ministry contexts. The components and characteristics listed in the summary at the beginning of this chapter, for example, have many insights that have a high potential for making sense in other settings as well. The priorities of encountering God, building community, building trust, longing for more, going deep, applying to daily life, going out, serving others, and developing leaders, all can be used to evaluate and improve a ministry's small groups. Although limited in usefulness, they can, to some degree, serve as an initial list of best practices from which to draw. Further, the organic figure in chapter five, as well as the table listing the three-fold Wesleyan heritage components, can be guiding resources for local church leaders.

It is important to take the limitations of this study seriously when seeking to adapt these learnings for a particular setting. Each local church has to do the work of discovering how small groups can best work in their own local situations. This research project helpfully points out some principles and components that seem important. Yet it does not offer a plan or system that simply can be applied to a different setting without interpretation.

That is why I have not created a list of best practices from the findings of this research. I want my readers resist the temptation to take these findings, go to their

ministry settings, and apply them in a cookie-cutter fashion. I want to encourage my readers to take seriously the need to do the hard work of interpreting their own ministry settings. Key findings of this project include the need to constantly listen to the local context, to continually form and re-form the small group ministry within the congregation's life, and for the leadership to be willing to experiment and adapt their learnings.

This probably means that how the learning highlighted by this project are applied will look different in each setting. This requires taking into consideration the culture, history, personality, values, strengths, gifts, and location of the local church, the wider community, and the individuals the congregation is trying to include in small groups. This may require trial-and-error and experimentation. It requires a tenacious commitment across the church leadership to the ongoing value of faith-forming small groups.

Ultimately, these findings must be tried in real, local settings to see if they are useful. Admittedly, they have only been tried in one experimental setting, and even then, only in part. They lack the credibility that comes from being tried over multiple times in various locations. They remain, at the point of this writing, untested hypotheses. It is quite likely that during actual implementation learnings will take place that will bring changes, adaptations, and new insights to these findings.

Generalizability and Limitations for United Methodism

This research project highlights the value of the small group heritage of the United Methodist tradition. Early Methodists under John Wesley gathered in small groups, called class meetings, which fostered authentic community, a connection to the Divine, and the application to daily life. They used deep sharing, mutual accountability,

and caring for one another. Yet, they used these attributes in a way that made sense to their time and setting. It would not work, for example, to simply restart the early Methodist class meetings as they were done in Wesley's day. The culture was very different, and the class meetings were structured to fit into that culture. They were structured on authoritarian leadership, enforced compliance, and threat of expulsion.

For example, Wesley and his superintendents personally and individually interviewed every person in the class meetings once a quarter to determine if they were indeed living up the expected way of life. If they were, they were issued a class ticket. If they were not, the ticket was withheld. Anyone without a ticket was not allowed to be a part of their class meeting.[2]

Wesley's theology influenced this way of conducting small groups. He did not understand the Methodists as a church, but rather as a movement within the Church of England in which members asked to follow his Methodist way of life. Further, his theology of salvation had strong components of being spared eternal punishment. In *The General Rules*, Wesley writes, "There is one only condition previously required in those who desire admission into these [Methodist] societies, a desire 'to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins.'"[3]

Wesley understood his role as leading people away from wrath. He was not leading a church that, biblically, was open to all. United Methodism today needs to find ways for small group ministries to work within a church context. Participation in small

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[2] For more a more complete explanation of Wesley's review process of class meeting members, see Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance,* 104-108. Also see Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists,* 121-124.

[3] "The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies in London, Bristol, Kingswood and Newcastle upon Tyne," in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 9:71.

groups may still be voluntary, but a different approach of accountability within and to the small groups is needed. Further, today's culture may understand salvation somewhat differently. Rather than fleeing from coming wrath, a more compelling theology might be the draw toward a meaningful and fulfilling relationship with God. This theology is also a very strong component in Wesley's theology, and perhaps it can be applied to spiritual growth and small groups in a meaningful way.

Components of the early Methodist class meeting structure may have worked well in Wesley's day, but they all would not work well in today's culture. Even though it may have been effective in its own time, current ministry leaders must resist the temptation simply to implement the class meetings as Wesley led them. Even the way that the GBOD has tried to modify Wesley's system as accountable discipleship covenant groups for today, as my interviews with local churches suggest, does not seem to work in many settings. Small groups today need to draw upon the authentic community, the accountable discipleship, the deep sharing, the caring for one another, the engaging the divine, and the application to daily life of the early Methodist class meetings, but they also need to know their own ministry settings well enough to structure them in ways that make sense today.

Further Research Possibilities

Further research into a number of areas opened by this study would be particularly valuable. It would be helpful, obviously, to study and explore local contexts when faith-forming small groups are implemented. Research in other demographical settings and regions would also be enlightening, as would research along other denominational heritages. Certainly other global contexts also would need their own research.

Although inherent to the study itself, I believe that further research into the role and impact of leadership is warranted. It would be helpful, I think, to study how the leadership of congregations impact the implementation, nurturing, and effectiveness of small groups within churches. I suspect it has a great deal of influence in the congregation's culture of small groups, which, in turn, likely has a direct influence on the success of small groups. Then again, another aspect of leadership research could be around the leaders of individual small groups. How important/influential are the leaders of small groups? How can they be selected, trained, resourced, supervised, removed? Finally, there is potential for some good research into the kinds and availability of resources used with leaders of churches and small groups. Do churches create their own resources? Are there resources and texts that seem to translate to different settings? How can these resources be made available in effective ways?

Further, among the data gathering components of this research study, I feel there were some limitations that could be redone. In the questionnaire, I asked people to indicate value between two different components or ideas for small groups. Further, I asked them in such a way as to not allow for a center option to be chosen between the two. Many of the respondents seem to struggle with this kind of questioning. Many left these blank, or wrote comments of frustration about them. There must be a better way to ask these kinds of questions.

I also noticed dissonance in how people answered the questionnaire between how people felt they ought to engage in small groups and how they actually were engaging in small groups. People scored very high on questions that explored the value of small groups. Yet, in other questions, people seemed to indicate that they were not actually

participating in small groups to the degree that their value may suggest. There is something about people thinking that small groups are important, yet being reluctant to actually be involved in a small group, that needs to be explored and explained.

Yet another potential and helpful study could be a simple explanatory project documenting how various churches across a variety of settings are actually using small groups—design, leadership, implementation, components, ongoing changes, etc.—effectively. I gathered information like this among the seven churches I interviewed in the first part of my study, and each of the leaders asked me what I had found other churches were doing. I think emerging churches are rediscovering the value and importance of small groups. Among those who are forging new small group ministries of their own, there may be a need to learn what others are finding helpful, useful, and successful.

Finally, further research could be helpful within the United Methodist tradition that attempts to recover from within Wesley's own understanding of salvation a theology for small groups that is compelling today. Wesley built his small group ministry on a theology of participants avoiding the wrath to come by growing in holiness. Yet, there is also within Wesley's theology of salvation a strong understanding of being drawn into a meaningful and fulfilling relationship with God. This theology of relationship with God, I believe, could provide a compelling framework for small group theology within the United Methodist tradition.

Conclusion

The Church today, in seeking to provide meaningful structures for faith formation, is again turning to small group experiences as one of the most important and

effective pathways for spiritual formation. Many local congregations continue to use small groups in a variety of ways, but there is often a discerned struggle that these small groups seem impotent in bringing about meaningful spiritual growth among their participants and within the local congregation. This study has attempted to look back across the United Methodist tradition of small groups, look into the missional perspective, and look across the current cultural landscape in order to find ways that small groups can become effective contexts fostering spiritual growth in local churches such as FUMC.

This research project found that there is a hunger within local churches for small groups to help people grow spiritually. The United Methodist tradition helps frame spiritual growth in terms of growing in holiness and changes in behavior in daily life. The PAR project identified key characteristics of vital small groups, including a congregational culture of small groups including paid staff leading small group ministry; authentic relationships built on fellowship, trust, deep sharing, mutual accountability, and caring for each other; engaging God's Word through Scripture and open discussion of how it applies to daily life; praying for and with each other; and having an outward focus through service and invitation to others not in the group. The various lenses helped to explain that these characteristics must be interpreted for each specific ministry setting and that local congregations must do the hard work of applying them in ways that make sense to their own settings.

Perhaps the most substantial findings of this project is the importance of holding together three crucial aspects of vital small group ministries. Small group ministries, no matter what the ministry setting, must create authentic community, engage the Holy

Spirit, and help participants make applications to their daily lives. Engaging one other (belonging), engaging God (believing), and engaging real life (behaving): these seem to be three crucial attributes of effective faith-forming small groups. Even so, it is the *combination of all three, held together*, that seems to release the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Local congregations must strive to keep all three attributes balanced in their small groups, but they must also do the hard work of contextualizing these three in ways that make sense in their own settings.

The figures of chapter five attempted to draw upon the image of a growing plant to help describe how spiritual growth can happen in small groups. People and communities of faith, as part of the Body of Christ, are created to grow. The plant, in order to grow, must be grounded in an environment that empowers its growth. Local churches and their leaders need to tend to the ground, to cultivate an environment in which vital small groups encourage true spiritual growth. Yet, it is the encounter with the Divine (the sun/Son) that calls up the transformation and growth.

Upward, inward, outward…

Believing, belonging, behaving…

Holiness of heart and life…

May God grow God's Church to grow small groups that grow God's people.

Veni, Sancte Spiritus![4]

[4] Come, Holy Spirit!

CHAPTER 7

EPILOGUE

I have served in pastoral ministry for over twenty years in four different settings, all Methodist. Although in each congregation there were a variety of small groups being offered, and although I have been a part of—and often led—more than I can count, I have never been a part of a faith-forming small group experience as described in this paper. To my recollection, no group of mine consistently maintained all three of the crucial aspects described in the previous chapter. I experienced, I came to believe, a small group lost-ness around what used to be Methodism's greatest strength. The United Methodist churches I served really struggled to do spiritual formation well.

Further, as I connected with other United Methodist churches, I sensed that same lost-ness around how truly to help people grow spiritually. Now, of course, many United Methodists were growing spiritually, but I failed to see how what local churches typically offered provided a context for the kind of serious spiritual growth I longed to see. I also reflected on what I needed from my own local church that would help me grow spiritually. Ultimately this puzzle, in no small way, compelled me to join this doctoral program.

I have been intrigued by early Methodism and the leadership that John Wesley provided it for quite some time. My first academic introduction to Wesley while in seminary quickened a longing within me for United Methodist congregations today to be communities of spiritual growth and service with the same passion as the early

Methodists. I continued my study by pursuing a Masters of Theology at Luther Seminary in Church History, focusing on the early Methodist movement. I came to understand that the makeup and structure of small groups was a vital component of early Methodist spiritual formation. My M.Th. thesis researched the history, role, and makeup of the early Methodist class meeting. I became convinced that United Methodism needed to rediscover how to leverage small groups for spiritual formation today.

In my current ministry context, I have become convinced that we need to focus on the way we offer paths for spiritual growth to people. We have worked hard over the past few years to revamp our worship, hospitality, and outreach so that as a church we are vital and relevant for those who are already a part of our congregation and for those who are not yet a part of our congregation. The next question has been, "So, once we connect with people, how do we help them grow spiritually?" We quickly realized that although our church has many small groups, we still do not offer intentional pathways of spiritual growth. These, I have come to believe, include small groups, and doing them in a different way.

This research project has been driven by a long quest for me to explore how local churches, like those I am called to serve, can offer intentional and effective pathways for spiritual growth. There is, of course, an unnavigable sea of materials and resources on this subject. Yet, I was looking for something more useful than a list of best practices, explanations for what worked in certain places, or even what experts think ought to be done. I wanted to find out what *made sense* in the real settings in which I ministered.

This project has helped me along this passionate quest and has formed and shaped the way I will lead small group ministry in the future. It has helped me isolate that small

groups, when done well, can be one of the most effective pathways for spiritual growth. I have been able to research local church contexts in which small groups are operating precisely in this way. It has helped me see that the way most local churches offer small groups does not effectively compel people to grow spiritually. It has helped me believe that local churches can offer small groups that do.

I will continue to put priority and focus on faith-forming small groups in my own ministry and in the congregations to which I am called to serve. I am convinced now more than ever that local churches have to find ways of getting spiritual growth right, of using small groups effectively, and of unleashing within people that transforming way of life that comes from following Jesus. Local church ministry is in a time of great change. What churches must do is develop ways of making small groups work.

My own experience of a faith-forming small group has shown me just how hard it is to maintain a healthy consistency of all three of the crucial aspects over time. The two groups I participated in, my PAR group and the new experimental small group I started, both struggled to keep these three in balance. There is great temptation and tendency to slide away from those intense components that make people uncomfortable but at the same time push people to grow. It is so much easier to fall back into what is familiar, easy, and less commitment. Working with one or two of these aspects is typical. Keeping all three together requires tenacity. Faith-forming small groups take great commitment, from the participants, who keep coming back for more, and from the leaders, who continually call the group into doing the difficult work.

Yet, I also have come to see that there is a great hunger among so many people, a yearning for more. Small groups are not for all people, and even among those who find

them helpful, not all will want to pursue earnest spiritual growth. Even so, I am convinced that there are enough who do, and this makes the focus on vital small groups so worth it. Biblically and historically, the numbers of those who adopt the way of Jesus in earnest always has been few. It is so very important to provide pathways for those who are desirous. Others who engage these people likewise may be awakened and drawn into desiring more. Faith-forming small groups can be contagious!

I further learned that those with desire and good intentions also struggle to be of one mind about the content, form, and structure of small groups. People's commitment and their desire to follow Jesus can also ebb and flow radically. It is hard to fight against all the barriers and concerns around implementing life-sharing small groups, even with a committed team of leaders. It is truly the work of the Holy Spirit whenever it works well. I have not yet had enough experience in leading the implementation of life-sharing groups to offer any great insights or advice at this point. I am committed, however, to leading it in my current church setting. I know it will not be easy, and I highly doubt it will all just miraculously take off. I will commit to making this a matter of urgent and consistent prayer, as I seek the Holy Spirit to lead me and the small group ministry.

There is so much more I need to learn! I believe this research project will help me in ways I do not yet fully realize. This project is not over. I will continue to draw upon it and build upon it throughout my future ministry. I hope you will, too. The value of this project, and its true success, will come in the lives of those who will benefit from the ministry of faith-forming small groups. One I know of for sure will be my own!

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR FIRST STAGE INTERVIEWS

For Interviewing Leaders of Six United Methodist Churches

That have had positive experiences of using grow groups for
Faith formation, and for
Engaging the wider community, including the unchurched

Introductions, explanations, and IRB requirements.

1. Please describe the small group ministry of your church.

-How many groups?

-Who is involved?

-How do people get into them?

-How often do they meet?

-What kind of oversight do the groups have?

-What kind of training is used?

2. Please describe the role that small groups play in how your church fosters faith formation.

-How does faith formation take place within the individual groups?

-What are some other ways in which your church helps those who choose not to be a part of a small group to grow spiritually?

3. What sources has your church found formative for developing, implementing, and sustaining your small group ministry?

-What books are widely read?

-What small group format/pattern/program have you drawn from?

-What kind of digital resources are used?

4. There is a long heritage of small groups in United Methodism. In what ways, if any, does your church's small group ministry draw on this heritage?

-What awareness is there among the church leadership of the role of small groups in the history of United Methodism?

-To what extent, if any, has your church ever drawn upon the United Methodist Board of Discipleship's Accountable Discipleship materials?

5. How have your small groups made connections to the wider community?

-How have your small groups made connections to those who are not part of a faith community?

-How have your small groups helped the whole church make these connections?

6. In what ways do you consider your small group ministry to be effective?

-Why do small groups seem to work well in your church?

-What about small groups is crucial to your wider church's life and ministry?

7. Please describe some of the key breakthroughs or insights that your church has discovered while using small groups.

-What about your small group ministry would you recommend to other churches?

-What about your small group ministry is most valuable to your church?

8. Please describe two or three of the key challenges your church has had in shaping an effective small group ministry.

-What would you like to change about your small groups?

-What would you do differently if you were to start over and design your small groups again?

9. What else would be helpful for me to know about your small group ministry that you have not been able to share so far?

APPENDIX B

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT WITH TRANSCRIPTIONIST

I agree to conduct my work as a transcriptionist holding to professional confidentiality in my work transcribing recordings provided by David Werner in his work on his doctoral research project through First United Methodist Church as part of his Doctor of Ministry thesis project in Congregational Mission and Leadership at Luther Seminary. His advisors are Dr. Craig Van Gelder and Dr. Alvin Luedke.

As transcriptionist of the recorded conversations, interviews, and focus groups provided by David Werner, I commit to keep strict confidentiality about the content of the recordings that I transcribe. I will not share content from these recordings, make references about who said what, or in any way reveal the positions, opinions, or ideas shared by those in the recordings.

The records of this study will be kept confidential. David Werner has explained that all people included in the recordings have given their consent to be recorded and transcribed. Any information published by David Werner in relation to this project will not identify specific persons, churches, or locations. All data will be kept in a locked file at First United Methodist Church in, MN. Only Dr. Craig Van Gelder, David Werner, and I will have access to the audio recordings. I agree to keep all recordings strictly confidential from any others, and I will destroy all audio recordings, transcriptions, and notes after I provide David Werner with the transcripts I make, or on May 19, 2019, whichever is earlier. If the research is terminated for any reason, I agree to destroy all data and recordings.

The researcher conducting this study is David Werner. I know that I can contact him at foresthills.pastor@gmail.com or 651-464-5249. I know that I can also contact his advisor, Dr. Craig Van Gelder at cvangeld@luthersem.edu or 651-641-3218.

Statement of Consent:
I agree to all the above information, I have received answers to questions asked, and I consent to serve as transcriptionist for this study.

Signature Date

APPENDIX C

SECOND STAGE BASELINE AND END LINE QUANTITATIVE QUESTIONNAIRE

Faith Formation Survey
First UMC
October 2014 and May 2015
Administered by Rev. David Werner

This survey is part of the research project Pastor David is conducting during the academic year 2014 - 2015 exploring faith formation at First United Methodist Church (FUMC) through small groups. The information received will be used to form future small group faith formation experiences at FUMC in the future.

This same survey will be given both at the beginning (October 2014) and at the end (May 2015) of the research project in order to measure any changes over that time. This survey is being given to 30 selected leaders and active attenders of FUMC. As each participant is asked to take this survey twice, it is important for the research to keep track of the respondents for both surveys. Each participant has been assigned a number which will be used to keep the participant's responses confidential. The questionnaire is available in the church office. The results of this survey will be included in the thesis Pastor David is writing for his doctor of ministry program, completed by May, 2016.

Please respond as candidly as possible to the following questions. Try to choose the answers that reflect how you actually think and feel rather than how you may think you should answer the questions.

If you have questions about the survey please contact Pastor David at 651-464-5249. Thank you for participating in this survey!

By "small group" we mean three to twenty people meeting intentionally at least once a month for a group experience that the participants consider a part of their church life.

I. Impressions: *First UMC offers a wide variety of small group experiences, including studies, fellowship groups, work teams, service teams, etc. Please respond with your impressions of these groups at FUMC.*

1. I feel that small groups are a crucial part of FUMC. (Circle one.)

Strong disagree				Strongly Agree	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	8

2. I feel that FUMC needs to offer a wider variety of small groups. (Circle one)

Strong disagree				Strongly Agree	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	8

3. How many of the people you know at FUMC are involved in a small group?

Few				Most	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	8

4. I feel that small groups are very important in helping people mature in their faith.

Strong disagree			Strongly Agree		Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	8

5. How often have you heard people share stories of how their small group experiences have impacted their behavior in daily life.

Rarely		Occasionally		Often	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	8

6 New people to FUMC find it easy to join small groups.

Strong disagree			Strongly Agree		Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	8

II. Involvement: *Please respond to the following questions about your personal involvement with small groups.*

7. I am currently participating in a small group at FUMC: _____Yes _____No

8. Which of the following kinds of small group experiences have you attending three or more times within the last 5 years?

Yes	No	Studies that…
_____	_____	Study the Bible
_____	_____	Provide accountability for my current struggles and needs
_____	_____	Do service projects together
_____	_____	Discuss how to live out my faith in my daily life
_____	_____	Go out and do something for someone
_____	_____	Discuss current events
_____	_____	Discuss Christian books
_____	_____	Provide strong Christian teaching
_____	_____	Provide a lot of fellowship and friendship
_____	_____	Have a high level of trust and confidentiality
_____	_____	Anyone can "come and go" over time
_____	_____	Have the same people over a long period of time
_____	_____	The leader does most of the sharing
_____	_____	Everyone shares and there is a lot of discussion
_____	_____	Meet weekly
_____	_____	Meet monthly
_____	_____	None of the above

Other - please explain:

9. Reflect back on the times in your life when you were growing spiritually the most. How instrumental were small groups offered through a local church to that growth:

Not at all Instrumental				Very much Instrumental	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	8

10. Rank how important the following would be if you were in a small group because you wanted help growing in your faith (mark one answer per line):

	Not Important				Very Important	Don't Know
I know everyone in the group	1	2	3	4	5	8
Occasionally new people join the group	1	2	3	4	5	8
We share from our own personal struggles	1	2	3	4	5	8
We learn how God's Word/Bible applies to our lives	1	2	3	4	5	8
We do service projects together	1	2	3	4	5	8
We invite new people to join our group	1	2	3	4	5	8
The leader encourages us to "go deeper" personally	1	2	3	4	5	8
The group commits to mutual confidentiality	1	2	3	4	5	8
I get to build new relationships with people	1	2	3	4	5	8
I am friends with everyone in the group	1	2	3	4	5	8
We held each other accountable for the faith commitments we make together	1	2	3	4	5	8

11. The kind of small group that I feel would help me grow spiritually (mark one answer per line):

a. Meets how often
_____Weekly _____Monthly _____Occasionally _____Don't know

b. Meets for
_____1 hour _____1.5 hours _____2 hours _____Don't know

c. Duration
_____4 or less times _____5-12 times _____Ongoing _____Don't know

d. Meets with people
_____I know _____I like _____Who are new to me _____Don't know

III. Invitation: *The following questions explore how important it is for small groups that help participants grow in their faith invite and include new people.*

12. It is important to my spiritual growth that I meet in small groups with new people.

Strong disagree				Strongly Agree	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	8

13. It is important to my spiritual growth that I invite new people to small groups.

Strong disagree				Strongly Agree	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	8

14. It is important to my spiritual growth that I make relationships with unchurched people.

Strong disagree				Strongly Agree	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	8

15. It is important to my spiritual growth that I visit regularly with my neighbors.

Strong disagree				Strongly Agree	Don't Know
1	2	3	4	5	8

16. Try to indicate along the following continuum (circle the dot) where you think FUMC ought to place its primary focus:

Help me grow spiritually • ● ● ● ● • Reach out to new people

IV. Impact: *The following questions explore which qualities of small groups help people grow spiritually.*

17. Try to indicate along the following continuums (circle one dot per line) where small groups that help people to grow spiritually should place priority:

Fellowship • ● ● ● ● • Accountability

Discuss about topics • ● ● ● ● • Discuss about personal lives

Helping myself • ● ● ● ● • Helping others

Allowing participants to remain anonymous • ● ● ● ● • Asking participants into accountability

Stressing personal devotional life • ● ● ● ● • Stressing doing good to others

Making me feel comfortable • ● ● ● ● • Making new people feel comfortable

18. How easy would it be for you to explain a biblically-grounded understanding of God's grace to someone new in a small group?

Not at All Easy				Very Easy
1	2	3	4	5

19. Rank how important to you the following are for a good group dynamic:

	Not Important				Very Important	Don't Know
Accept participants where they are at on their spiritual journeys	1	2	3	4	5	8
Encourage people to grow spiritually	1	2	3	4	5	8
Have patience with other group members	1	2	3	4	5	8

Support participants when they admit failure	1	2	3	4	5	8
When a participant shares an important struggle, the group suspends the agenda to discuss the issue	1	2	3	4	5	8

V. Personal Information: *Please share more about you.*

20. How long have you been a Christian?

_____Currently Exploring
_____Less than one year
_____1-5 Years
_____6-10 Years
_____11-20 Years
_____Over 20 Years

21. How long have you been a part of FUMC?

_____Less than one year
_____1-5 Years
_____6-10 Years
_____11-20 Years
_____Over 20 Years

22. In what year were you born? Please complete the year: 19_____.

23. Gender: _____Female _____Male

24. Current household makeup for the home that is your primary residence:

_____One adult and no children under the age of 19
_____One adult and at least one child under the age of 19
_____Two adults and no children under the age of 19
_____Two adults, at least one child under the age of 19
_____More than two adults (age 19+) and no children under the age of 19
_____More than two adults (age 19+) and at least one child under the age of 19
_____Other - please explain:

25. What is your current marital status?

_____Never married _____Married _____Separated
_____Divorced _____Widowed _____Other

26. What is your current employment situation?

_____Unemployed _____Part-time employment
_____Full-time employment _____Fully retired
_____Other, please explain:

27. Rank on the continuum (circle the dot) how most others might describe you:

Introverted • • ● ● • • Extroverted

28. Is there anything else you would like to share?

29. Thank you for your gift of taking this survey!

APPENDIX D

PAR FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL FOR REGULAR SMALL GROUP SESSIONS

Date of Focus Group Session:
Those Present:

Intervention Being Evaluated:

Discussion Questions:

1. To what extent did you try to implement the intervention?
    a. When?
    b. How?
    c. With whom?
    d. Were you able to complete it as you wished?

2. Reflect on the process for how it went:
    a. Struggles?
    b. Barriers?
    c. Breakthroughs?
    d. Successes?

3. Evaluate to what extent the intervention brought the intended results:
    a. What were the intended results?
    b. What were the actual results?
    c. Where you pleased with these results?
        i. Why or why not?

4. What key insights did you learn from this process?
    a. What did you notice was helpful?
    b. What did you notice was not helpful?
    c. What would you try differently next time?

5. Evaluate if you think this intervention would be helpful to be incorporated into other small groups at FUMC.
    a. With what kinds of groups would this work well?
    b. With what kinds of small group settings would this work well?
    c. With what kinds of groups and settings would this not work well?

6. What might be some barriers for adapting this intervention to other group settings?

7. What else would be helpful for us to discuss that has not yet been shared?

APPENDIX E

PROTOCOL FOR ENDING FOCUS GROUP - THE PAR GROUP

Date of Focus Group Session:

Those Present:

Discussion Questions:

1. Since November, an experimental small group has met monthly and tried a number of different things and ideas in their small group. What impact, if any, have you noticed this group having on the wider church?
    a. In what ways have other people in the church become aware of it?
    b. What kind of "buzz"/discussion have you heard about this group?

2. What are some of the different ideas that this group has tried?
    a. Name specific examples.
    b. What has been your reaction to these?
    c. Have you become aware of reactions to these by others?
        i. If so, by whom?
        ii. If so, what?

3. In your opinion, how effective is our church's current use of small groups in helping people grow in their faith?
    a. What are some causes for this, do you think?
    b. What is good?
    c. What is lacking?

4. What are some suggestions for getting new people to participate in small groups?
    a. What might encourage current attenders to join a small group?
    b. What might encourage people from the wider community to join a small group?

5. Describe an excellent small group experience that helps people grow in their faith.
    a. What would need to be included in order for it to be excellent?
    b. What should be avoided or not included?
    c. What could be incorporated from the way United Methodists historically have done small groups?

    d. What might be the impact if these groups intentionally invite non-churched people?

6. Describe a small group that would be attractive to people in the wider community.
    a. What ways would this group be different than groups intended for churched people?
    b. What kind of "churchy" things would need to be avoided?
    c. What receptivity do you think there is for people in the wider community to join a group hosted by FUMC?

7. In what ways could we improve the small groups of our church within the next year?
    a. How would this look in specific settings?
    b. What benefits would these changes bring?
    c. Would this apply to all of our groups, or just to some? Which ones?

8. What is the potential in making these changes in the near future?
    a. Barriers?
    b. Limitations?
    c. Receptivity?

9. What else would you like to share that would be helpful for me to know that we have not covered?

APPENDIX F

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR QUALITATIVE PROTOCOLS

Wesleyan Missional Small Groups

I would like to invite you to be part of my research project exploring how United Methodist churches can use small groups more effectively for spiritual formation. You were selected because I believe you are someone with a passion for and an interest in small group ministry. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

I am conducting this study as part of my Doctor of Ministry thesis project in Congregational Mission and Leadership at Luther Seminary. My advisors are Dr. Craig Van Gelder and Dr. Alvin Luedke.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to explore ways that United Methodist churches today can draw upon both the United Methodist heritage of small group ministry and the missional perspective in order to develop a way of leveraging small groups more effectively to encourage spiritual formation in local churches.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to be a part of a 45 minute, one-on-one conversation (by phone or in person) based on the attached questions. I am looking for your honest responses.

For those who agree to be a part of my ongoing research team, you will meet with the team once a month for two hours, each month discussing together ways small groups can be used to encourage faith formation in small groups. This ongoing research team will meet monthly from October 2014 through May 2015. I agree to hold as confidential and will not disclose to others outside the team any information received in the course of the research team meetings.

For those agreeing to be a part of a focus group discussion, we will meet together one time in August of 2015 for one hour to discuss observations, share insights, and identify learnings related to the research I have conducted, along with my research team, during the months previous. I agree to hold as confidential and will not disclose to others outside the team any information received in the course of the focus group interview.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:
There are no risks involved in this study. Any inconvenience only comes from the time taken to participate. There are no benefits to you for participating other than your responses being used to help form and shape small group ideas for local churches.

Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be kept confidential. If I publish any type of report, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. All data will be kept in a locked file at First United Methodist Church in MN. Only my advisor, Dr. Craig Van Gelder, and I will have access to the data and any audio recording. If the research is terminated for any reason, all data and recordings will be destroyed. All raw data including audio recordings, transcriptions, and notes will be destroyed by May 19, 2019. While I will make every effort to ensure confidentiality, anonymity cannot be guaranteed due to the small number of participants in this group.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with First United Methodist Church, Luther Seminary, or the Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:
The researcher conducting this study is David Werner. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me/us at [email address] or [phone number]. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Craig Van Gelder at cvangeld@luthersem.edu or 651-641-3218.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information or have had it read to me. I have received answers to questions asked. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature _____ Date_____

Signature of investigator _____ Date_____

I consent to be audio recorded:

Signature _____ Date_____

I consent to be video recorded:

Signature _____ Date_____

I consent to allow use of my direct quotations in the published thesis document.

Signature _____ Date_____

APPENDIX G

IMPLIED CONSENT FORM FOR QUANTITATIVE QUESTIONNAIRES

November 1 - 30, 2014

Dear church leader,

You are invited to participate in a research project exploring how United Methodist churches can use small groups to encourage faith formation. My hope is that this project will help identify ways that our church can improve how we use small groups to help people grow spiritually.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are either a leader in our church or one who is regularly active in church ministries.

If you decide to participate, please complete the enclosed survey. Your return of this survey is implied consent. The survey is designed to assess how First United Methodist church currently uses small groups for faith formation. It will take about 20 minutes. No benefits accrue to you for answering the survey, but your responses will be used to help our church leverage small groups more effectively for faith formation. Any discomfort or inconvenience to you derives only from the amount of time taken to complete the survey.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will not be disclosed.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with First United Methodist Church, the Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, or Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.

If you have any questions, please ask. If you have additional questions later, contact me at foresthills.pastor@gmail.com or 651-464-5249.

Thank you for the gift of your time.

Blessings,

Pastor David Werner

APPENDIX H

"THE NATURE, DESIGN, AND GENERAL RULES OF THE UNITED SOCIETIES."

1. In the latter end of the year 1739, eight or ten persons came to me in London, who appeared to be deeply convinced of sin, and earnestly groaning for redemption. They desired (as did two or three more the next day) that I would spend some time with them in prayer, and advise them how to flee from the wrath to come; which they saw continually hanging over their heads. That we might have more time for this great work, I appointed a day when they might all come together, which from thenceforward they did every week, namely, on Thursday, in the evening. To these, and as many more as desired to join with them, (for their number increased daily,) I gave those advices, from time to time, which I judged most needful for them; and we always concluded our meeting with prayer suited to their several necessities.

2. This was the rise of the United Society, first in London, and then in other places. Such a society is no other than "a company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation."

3. That it may the more easily be discerned, whether they are indeed working out their own salvation, each society is divided into smaller companies, called classes, according to their respective places of abode. There are about twelve persons in every class; one of whom is styled the Leader. It is his business, (1.) To see each person in his class once a week at least, in order to inquire how their souls prosper; to advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort, as occasion may require; to receive what they are willing to give toward the relief of the poor. (2.) To meet the Minister and the Stewards of the society once a week; in order to inform the Minister of any that are sick, or of any that walk disorderly, and will not be reproved; to pay to the Stewards what they have received of their several classes in the week preceding; and to show their account of what each person has contributed.

4. There is one only condition previously required in those who desire admission into these societies, a desire "to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins:" But, wherever this is really fixed in the soul, it will be shown by its fruits. It is therefore expected of all who continue therein, that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation,

First, by doing no harm, by avoiding evil in every kind; especially that which is most generally practised: Such is, the taking the name of God in vain; the profaning the day of the Lord, either by doing ordinary work thereon, or by buying or selling; drunkenness, buying or selling spirituous liquors, or drinking them, unless in cases of extreme necessity; fighting, quarreling, brawling; brother going to law with brother; returning evil

for evil, or railing for railing; the using many words in buying or selling; the buying or selling uncustomed goods; the giving or taking things on usury, that is, unlawful interest; uncharitable or unprofitable conversation, particularly speaking evil of Magistrates or of Ministers; doing to others as we would not they should do unto us; doing what we know is not for the glory of God, as the "putting on of gold or costly apparel;" the taking such diversions as cannot be used in the name of the Lord Jesus; the singing those songs, or reading those books, which do not tend to the knowledge or love of God; softness, and needless self-indulgence; laying up treasures upon earth; borrowing without a probability of paying; or taking up goods without a probability of paying for them.

5. It is expected of all who continue in these societies, that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation,

Secondly, 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;

To their bodies, of the ability which God giveth, by giving food to the hungry, by clothing the naked, by visiting or helping them that are sick, or in prison;

To their souls, by instructing reproving, or exhorting all they have any intercourse with; trampling under foot that enthusiastic doctrine of devils, that "we are not to do good unless our heart be free to it."

By doing good especially to them that are of the household of faith, or groaning so to be; employing them preferably to others, buying one of another; helping each other in business; and so much the more, because the world will love its own, and them only: By all possible diligence and frugality, that the gospel be not blamed: By running with patience the race that is set before them, "denying themselves, and taking up their cross daily;" submitting to bear the reproach of Christ, to be as the filth and offscouring of the world; and looking that men should "say all manner of evil of them falsely for the Lord's sake."

6. It is expected of all who desire to continue in these societies, that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation,

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; family and private prayer; searching the Scriptures; and fasting, or abstinence.

7. These are the General Rules of our societies; all which we are taught of God to observe, even in his written word, the only rule, and the sufficient rule, both of our faith and practice. And all these, we know, his Spirit writes on every truly awakened heart. If there be any among us who observe them not, who habitually break any of them, let it be made known unto them who watch over that soul as they that must give an account. We will admonish him of the error of his ways; we will bear with him for a season: But then if he repent not, he hath no more place among us. We have delivered our own souls.

JOHN WESLEY,
CHARLES WESLEY.
May 1, 1743.

Wesley, John. "The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies in London, Bristol, Kingswood and Newcastle upon Tyne." In *Works*, 9:69-73.

APPENDIX I

RESOURCES PROVIDED TO THE PAR TO ENHANCE DISCERNMENT

Boren, M. Scott. *Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community That Makes a Difference in the World*. Allelon Missional Series. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010.

Manskar, Steven W. *Accountable Discipleship: Living in God's Household*. Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2000.

———. *Small Group Ministries: Christian Formation through Mutual Accountability*. Nashville, TN: Cokesbury, 2012.

———. *The United Methodist Rule of Life.* Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2008.

———. *A Wesleyan Model for Small Group Ministry*, Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2008.

APPENDIX J

PAR GROUP SESSIONS, NOVEMBER 2014 - SEPTEMBER 2015

Date	**Description**	**Components**	**Interventions/Experiments**
Nov. 9 2014	1st meeting All present At parsonage Meal together	Welcome Overview of process Assign reading	Share meal together Begin using Guiding Scripture
Dec. 7 2014	2nd meeting All present At parsonage Meal together	Guiding Scripture (GS) Discuss Boren text Assign reading	1) Attend FUMC group and discern their understanding of purpose 2) Talk with people outside of FUMC and listen for their life issues and dreams
Jan. 4 2015	3rd meeting All present At member's Meal together	GS Protocol~assignment Decided to meet twice per month	Reflect on question #4 in the protocol to discern what comes to the surface over time of our sharing
Jan. 18 2015	4th meeting All present At church (AC) Sack lunches (SL)	GS Shared fr reflections Discuss Boren text Discuss Manskar texts Discuss my church interviews	1) Take the next step (whatever that means for you) to pursuing a life group 2) Talk with someone new to our church and listen for life issues and dreams
Feb. 1 2015	5th meeting All present AC, SL	GS Protocol~assignment Discuss Boren text Assigned reading	Reflect on the retreat idea and on the discussion and discern what God is trying to show us.
Feb. 22 2015	6th meeting G,H missing AC, SL	GS Shared fr reflections Identified learnings for small groups	Reflect on a time when you grew spiritually and discern what encouraged that growth. Also: "Where do we see the Holy Spirit already active at FUMC?"

Date	Description	Components	Interventions/Experiments
Mar. 8 2015	7th meeting E,F,G missing AC, SL	GS Shared fr reflections Identified learnings for small groups	Do two cycles of *worship plus two* (W+2)
Mar. 29 2015	8th meeting H missing AC, SL	GS Protocol~assignment Shared fr reflections	Each draft guiding questions (GQ) to help groups to share deeply Reflect on discussion to discern what may be helpful for small group ministry at FUMC.
Apr. 8 2015	9th meeting All present AC, SL	GS Protocol~assignment Guiding Question (GQ) Shared fr reflections	1) Use a GQ in your groups 2) Use a GQ at our sessions 3) W+2
Apr. 22 2015	10th meeting All present AC, SL	GS, GQ Protocol~assignment Identified learnings for small groups	Reflect on our conversations and sharings today to discern what may be helpful for small group ministry at FUMC.
May 5 2015	11th meeting B missing AC, SL	GS, GQ Protocol~assignment Discuss my church interviews	Take the next step on being a leader in another small group.
May 19 2015	12th meeting A,B,G missing AC, SL	GS, GQ Protocol~assignment Identified learnings for small groups	1) Write "ground rules" for groups 2) Continue establishing your own small groups Reflect on our experiences so far as a small group
June 9 2015	13th meeting A,B,G missing AC, SL	GS, GQ Protocol~assignment	1) By email describe how this group has helped you grow spiritually 2) Continue to work on your own small group ministries
July 6 2015	14th meeting B,E,F,G missing AC, SL	GQ Protocol~assignment Handed out Manskar texts	Read through Manskar texts to discern what may be helpful for small group ministry at FUMC.
July 27 2015	15th meeting B,E,F,H missing AC, SL	GS Discuss Manskar texts	Reflect on discussion and discern what God is trying to show us.

Date	Description	Components	Interventions/Experiments
Aug. 25 2015	16th meeting All present AC, SL	GS, GQ Protocol~assignment from June 9	Decided to pick up the discussion next time.
Sept. 8 2015	17th meeting B,H missing AC, SL	Discussed Manskar texts, Identified learnings for groups	
Sept. 20 2015	Final meeting B,H missing At member's Meal together	Protocol for Ending Focus Group Expressions of appreciation	

A - H: Group members, AC: At church, SL: Sack lunch, GS: Grounding Scripture, GQ: Guiding Question, W+2: *Worship plus two* experiment, FUMC: First United Methodist Church.

APPENDIX K

NEW SMALL GROUP SESSIONS

Tues., July 7. Small Group #1. Couple #1 hosted. 5:30 - 7:30 p.m. Child care. Potluck meal together. Lots of fellowship. Established ground rules. *Lectio divina*, using Matthew 11:25-30. Reading, listening, sharing. Chose and discussed a deepening question. We pray with and for each other – One person prayed.
Tues., July 28. Small Group #2. Couple #2 hosted. 5:30 - 7:30 p.m. Child care. Potluck meal and fellowship. *Lectio divina*, using Matthew 11:25-30. Reading, listening, sharing. Sharing: Women: How you met and got married to your husband. Men: What your career path has been, and any deep God moments in your life. We pray with and for each other - Men prayed.
Tues., Aug. 4. Small Group #3. Couple #3 hosted. 5:30 - 7:30 p.m. Child care. Potluck meal and fellowship. Shared a photo or story about a time recently when you felt fully alive! *Lectio divina*, using Colossians 3:12-17. Reading, listening, sharing. Finished sharing time left over from last time. Share deeply around the question: "What makes you really feel alive lately?" We pray with and for each other – Women prayed.
Fri., Aug. 27. Small Group #4. Couple #4 hosted. 5:30 - 7:30 p.m. Child care. Potluck meal and fellowship. Sharing: "How have you seen God in your life this summer?" *Lectio divina*, using Colossians 3:12-17. Reading, listening, sharing. Share deeply around the question: "Where do you often see God active in your life?" Briefly discussed the desire to have/do an outreach focus as a group. Pray with and for each other - Prayed for the person on your right.

Sun., Sept. 13. Small Group #5. Couple #1 hosted. 5:30 - 7:30 p.m. Child care. Potluck meal and fellowship. Sharing: Along the sermon superhero theme: "What is your Kryptonite?" *Lectio divina*, using Colossians 3:12-17. Reading, listening, sharing. Share deeply around: "What weaknesses do you need help to handle right now?" Discussed having an outreach mission to adopt as a group. We pray with and for each other – Each prayed for his or her spouse.
Fri., Oct. 23. Small Group #6. Couple #2 to host. 5:30 - 7:30 p.m. Child care. Potluck mean and fellowship. Sharing: Along the theme of Halloween: "What are you really afraid of?" *Lectio divina*, using Colossians 3:12-17. Reading, listening, sharing. Share deeply around: "What fears do you need to take to God lately?" Discussed having an outreach mission to adopt as a group. Pray with and for each other – One member volunteered to pray.
Thurs., Nov. 5. Small Group #7 *planned*. Couple #4 to host. 5:30 – 7:30.

APPENDIX L

COMPILATION OF THOUGHTS AND IDEAS FOR SMALL GROUP MINISTRY BY

THE PAR GROUP

Pathways for Spiritual Growth

Importance of Spiritual Growth

The church is God's mission in the world: God's people called
- to grow closer in love-relationship with God and
- to invite others into that communal relationship with God

God invites all people into an ever-deepening love relationship with Godself.
- Bible describes this as following Jesus, discipleship, spiritual growth, maturity

First UMC strives to be a community where people are caught into
- Loving radically God and others (worship)
- Growing passionately in love-relationships with the Triune God (discipleship)
- Serving zealously the wider community as an expression of God's love (mercy)

First UMC seeks to provide contexts and relationships that help people grow spiritually

United Methodist Tradition

Spiritual growth, in the Methodist tradition:
- Uses small groups for sharing, accountability, and encouragement
- Is displayed in terms of personal behavior change

Three-fold Wesleyan way of growing spiritually:

			(Source:)
Holiness of	Heart and	Life	(Wesleyan heritage)
Love God	Love self	Love neighbor	(Greatest Commandments)
Belong (love)	Believe	Behave (obey)	(Steven Manskar, GBOD)
Works of	Piety and	Mercy	(Wesleyan heritage)
Stay in love w/God	Do no harm	Do good	(Wesley's "General Rules")
Worship +2:	One for you	One for others	(Journey Partner Team)

Successful pattern for behavioral change and spiritual growth is activity. Practices (not knowledge) are the better starting point for life changes. Yet both knowledge and practice are needed and must be kept together.

"Behaving your way into believing," not "believing your way into behaving"

Vision for Small Group Faith Formation

Faith formation through small groups becomes a core value of FUMC (part of "DNA")

All people–those who are a part of the church, those who are new to the church, and those who come to know the church–are encouraged to be a part of a faith-forming small group

People who are a part of small groups will seek out groups that help them grow deeper spiritually

Behavior change is a key outcome measuring the effectiveness of small group spiritual formation

FUMC has a lot of studies and fellowship groups. We need groups that help people go deeper into their own personal live and lead to behavior change.

FUMC needs to develop more sharing life groups

Current small groups will be allowed to continue

They may be meeting the spiritual needs of those who are a part of them

They can be encouraged to adopt more intentional spiritual formation practices

New groups will be started that are intentionally sharing life groups

FUMC's Values for Small Groups

Variety - in kind, location, times, duration, etc. Yet offer as many as we can with quality.

Oversight - either volunteer (Grow Groups Coordinator) or staff (Director Grow Group)

Quality - both those that happen organically and those under the church's oversight

Leaders - are crucial; need to be trained, resourced, and supported

Kinds of Small Groups Currently at First UMC

Variety of groups offered at FUMC can be categorized by:

Grace Group I Types: Where people learn what it means to be a Christian

Study (Friday Morning study, Sunday morning studies, Financial Peace Univ.)
Program (UMW, Rebecca Circle, Sarah Circle, UMM)
Ministry (Sanctify, ministry teams)
Service (MMM, Community Care, Car Care)
Activity (Quilting, knitting, exercise)
Fellowship (MMM, Adult Fellowship, ROMEOS, JULIETS)
Administration (Administrative teams)
Support Group (Grieving Loss, Long-term Medical Struggles)
Interests (Book club)

Grace Group II Types: People begin to grow in accountability and discipleship

Life Sharing (Eat.Pray.Love Circle, David's experimental group)
Accountability (?)

Grace Group III Types: Goal of perfection in love

(?)

Variety can also be understood as the variety of "texts" groups engage. Texts can include:

A written text, such as the Bible, a study or a book
Media, news, and cultural behaviors/norms
Speakers who share from their perspectives and learnings
A service project or acts of outreach
The personal lives of the members

Pathways for Getting Involved in a Small Group

All people involved with FHMC are to be encouraged to join in a small group
- Individuals not a part of a small group will be intentionally invited into a group
- Times, locations, type and leaders of open groups will be communicated regularly
- Often the best way to involve new people is to offer new groups

Concerted effort to creating ways new people to FUMC can be naturally connected

Expected path of connection at FUMC:
- New person comes to a FUMC function
- FUMC hospitality
- Conversation with the pastor
- Handed off to: Belong: learn of the importance of small groups
- Receiving (to individuals, or a group)
- Invited to a small group to experience it modeled

Design of Small Groups at FUMC:

There is value in having a variety of design and structures for small groups.

Duration:
- Some groups need to be long-term groups, especially life-sharing groups. This is important for bonding and trust to build slowly over time.
- Some groups need to be short-term groups, especially topic or studies. This is important to allow for the topics to change as well as the group makeup. Many opportunities for entry are needed in order for new people to feel like they can join in a small group.

Makeup, Diversity and Shared Similarities:
- There is value in trying to make groups as diverse as possible, in order to make new people feel there is room for them.
- There is value in some groups sharing member similarities, in order to more deeply engage similar life situations (married, single, kids), perspectives (male, female), and experiences (grief, medical struggles, emotional trauma)

Makeup, Open and Closed:
- There is value in having some groups be open groups. This allows new people to join.
  - Current members need to be intentional about inviting other people into the group
- There is value in having some groups be closed. This allows for deeper trust and sharing.

Makeup, Splitting and Remaining Intact:
- There is value in having groups grow and split into new groups that grow again. This allows for continual new group formation and creates a culture of invitation.
- There is value in having groups stay intact, and then disband rather than split. This allows for continuity within the group and deeper bonding.

Frequency of Meeting:
- The decision for how often to meet should be determined by the leader and group members
- In our busy culture, families with young children often find monthly a good frequency

Where to Meet:
- Meeting at the church building is convenient, but not very intimate or comfortable
- It is usually better to meet in homes

Child Care:
The church will commit to providing child care wherever and whenever needed
Groups are asked to consider availability of child care when determining when to meet
Covenant: Groups should come to an accountability understanding early on it their lives

Support for Small Groups:
Group leaders need to communicate with the Director of Spiritual Growth details about the group
Group leaders need to communicate with the church office about when and where the group meets
Director of Spiritual Growth will make sure there is adequate ongoing support and training
Group leaders should gather together quarterly for training, discussion, and idea sharing

Group Leader Training:
Small group leaders are among the most important determinants of the success of a small group
Group leaders need regular training and support
Training should be provided for by paid staff and/or volunteers with leadership training skills
Group leaders should be trained through modeling; experiencing a small group while trained
Leaders should be provided with resources, tips, and texts on the church web site
Leaders need training around values and expectations of small group process and sharing

Texts and Curriculum
Groups and leaders are encouraged to choose their own curriculum
Chosen curriculum needs to be proposed to the Director of Spiritual Formation for approval to ensure it aligns with the Christian faith and our Wesleyan tradition
The Director of Spiritual Formation will provide a list of suggested studies and texts
The Director of Spiritual Formation will list available studies and texts on the church's web site

Key Components Desired for All Small Groups at FUMC
Groups pursue Christian spiritual growth in some way
Members agree to a covenant of treating each other with respect and love
Members are encouraged to share more deeply, perhaps around a guiding question
Groups share prayer together
Groups adopt a service component in some way
Find ways of being missional, engaging and inviting the wider community
Child care be provided if requested
Meeting dates and times are communicated with the office
Leaders are provided training and support

Key Components of Small Groups that Are Focused on Behavior Change:

Mutual covenants for safe sharing, deep trust, and community building
Commit to "Do life together" - Sharing life together.
Get into deeper sharing around life issues
Preferred size: 8-15 people to allow for good sharing
Use "guiding questions" to help get to deep issues of life
Sharing around group members' own life situation
Promote W+2 (*worship plus two*): worship plus something for yourself and something for others
Meeting in homes makes connecting easier
Sharing a meal together helps build community
People must be invited individually - creates a sense of special invitation
Sharing prayer concerns and praying for and with each other is powerful
Building community takes time: early sessions are needed simply to build the community
Pursuing Holiness of Heart and Life evidenced in behavior
Prayer time: Time for sharing prayer concerns, and praying for and with each other.
Incorporate works of service/outreach, both by the group as a whole and by individuals
    This can begin individually outside of group time, perhaps around the discussion the group has when relating how they are doing at the Worship +2.
    Attempt to match passions with service.
        As people share works of mercy that are energizing, perhaps the group can identify group-wide service and outreach projects to do.
Covenants expressing commitment, treating others with respect, and caring for one another

Starting a Small Group:

Can organically form by people who come together as a group.
If started under the leadership of the church, a leader needs to be identified and assigned to the group
The leader needs training and equipping in order to start the group well
There should be a core of four members committed to a group before a group is considered viable
Leader needs to personally invite members into the group
There must be an up-front commitment to sharing real issues from member's own personal life
The group should from the beginning understand the purpose and design of small groups
    -Purpose of the group is for spiritual growth
    -Commitments to respect, build trust, sharing deeply from personal life
    -Praying for and with each other
    -Outreach and service within the wider community
A few sessions will be needed simply to build community and trust.
    Perhaps sharing meals together.
    Perhaps meeting in people's homes.
Conversation needs to be led intentionally cultivated to be deeper sharing
Leaders of new groups provided a template for starting a group, including an outline of a typical group agenda

Develop Life Stages for New Groups:

Phases of group life: Expectation of the group to transition through different stages:
Early on: Fellowship and trust building - Building community
After that: Deep sharing and accountability - Building trust
Later: Add service/outreach component - Building a connection to the wider community

Time Line for Small Group Ministry 2015-2016

Summer 2015:

- Pastor David launches experimental small group using sharing life model
- PAR finalizes their work
- Amelia Buschena is hired as part-time Director of Spiritual Formation

Fall 2015:

- Current small groups continue
- Louis James reconvenes his Bible Study Sunday mornings
- Jim Roe beings new class using practice and sharing life model on change
- Paulette beings Financial Peace University
- UMW moves Rebecca circle to the day time and launches new evening circle
- Amelia meets with all current group leaders
- Amelia begins to compile support resources for small group leaders to be on the web site
- Amelia and Jan plan the Winter Spiritual Retreat
- Current leaders are acknowledged, thanked and shown appreciation (Amelia)

January 2016:

- The importance of being in a small group, and encouragement for all to do so, promoted during worship serviced and in regular communications of the church
- Spiritual Retreat led by Amelia and Jan
- Launch new small groups based on sharing life model (Amelia, Greg, others?)
- Amelia leads first of quarterly trainings for small group leaders
- Worship plus 2 model promoted Sunday mornings

APPENDIX M

FOCUSED CODES AND THEIR REPRESENTATIVE *IN VIVO* CODES

Focused Codes for the Group Discussion around the Boren Text

Focused Code:	**Representative *in vivo* Codes:**
Behavior	Changing behavior
Forming Community	Getting along, eating, extended family
Listening	Listening first, missional
Missional	Learning the language, going out, translating
Perspective	Reshaping our understanding, changing your perspective
Structure	Spirit needs form, rituals help us reinterpret, forms of our religion
Time	Margin, availability, prioritize, simplify
Trust	Be intimate, share openly
Wider Community	Going out, the world, backyard, missionary field, missional

Focused Codes around Engaging Others outside the Group

Focused Code:	**Representative *in vivo* Codes:**
Accountability	Hold each other accountable, need accountability
Behavior	My own call to do justice, next steps I should take, changed the way I acted, my faith compels me to do it, acts of social justice, W+2
Caring	Needed others, couldn't do it myself, other people
Community	Others help me clarify my experiences, spending time together, priorities, maintain connection, smaller church within the church, resource for each other
Components	Groups need more than one focus to be faith growing, one focus can preclude others, eclipse accountability
Contagious	Start something others want, that excites me
Deep sharing	Storytelling, deep sharing, conversations tend to fizzle, easier to share light stuff, grow beyond initial relationships, dig deeper, not forced, asking, shared journey, not problem solving, being connected
Fellowship	Safe feeling, sharing around food, share from our lives, get connected

Focused Code:	**Representative *in vivo* Codes:**
Go out	Outside the church, in the community, make a human connection
Growing	Ask questions, place without all the answers, growing with your group, spiritual growth, can struggle with what you believe, encourage others that they've grown
Hunger	Hunger for more, want to go deeper, 10% of people want more
Inviting	Draw others in, open group, new people, must invite, happen naturally, welcoming, making room at the table
Leadership	Leaders develop community, good leaders needed to attract
Life groups	Sharing from your lives, Different than friends, experiences of life important, community and who you are as a person
Listen	Listen first, People share their stories, Listen in the community
Longing	People are longing for more, wider community has longing, jobs aren't always fulfilling
Mindfulness	Being mindful, intentional, looking, seeing, hearing, conscious, taking the time, being aware
Missional	Goal of groups, stems from who you are
Modeling	Show, what it looks like, part of the sell, see it more clearly
Ninja	God encounter, opportunity, mindfulness
Organic	Naturally develops, just happens, also need intentionality
Practices	Apply to what we are trying to do, clarity of purpose, counter culture, in the home, faith driven, sharing faith
Prioritize	Focus on what is really important, important, get real
Real	Prioritize, incorporate reality, where I am now
Reflection	Discernment, reflecting, thinking about, thinking deeply
Relational	Relationships, supportive relationships, going beyond just relationships, intentionally develop, reach out to others, having safe relationships, deepening relationships, bonding in the group
Share life	Do life together, grow together, bring healing, bring hope, lived and shared, share stories, stand for you, support, walk with you
Serve	Do good, together as a group, help others, learn to help, we are helped so we can help others
Spiritual gifts	Gifts not used, unfulfilled, community has gifts
Trust	Safe feeling, safe relationships, close bonds, trust groups, time to build, time together
Wider community	Go out, others who are not part of the group, neighbors

APPENDIX N

FOCUSED CODES AND THEIR REPRESENTATIVE *IN VIVO* CODES

Focused Codes around Interviews with Seven Other Churches

Focused Code:	**Representative *in vivo* Codes:**
Relationships	Groups provide relationships, relational leads to spiritual growth, Jesus included those who didn't belong
Entry point	Groups, people go in and out of groups
Growth	Taking the next step, growing together
Hunger	Hungry people out there
Invitation	Personal invitation, specialized invitation, individual invitation, people want to be invited
Leadership	Groups train leaders, Groups need strong leader, hire staff person over groups
Listening	Danger of being told too much, abused
Organic	Groups don't receive direction from leadership, start organically, without structure
Real	Get real, personal
Start new groups	Always starting new groups, variety
Trust	Safe, accepted, built trust, safety net, doesn't need to take long, leaders make it possible, community

Focused Codes around Discussion of Times Participants Grew Spiritually

Focused Code:	**Representative *in vivo* Codes:**
Big events	Camp, birth of children, selling home, accidents, travel
Fellowship	Relationships in small groups, Intentional fellowship
Hard times	Life is going lousy, hard times, "soil" to mature this, low times, see need for God
Joy of others	When others are blessed, my joy doubles, contagious
Leaders	Guide a group, raise up leaders within the group, leaders invite
Mistakes	Humbled, slapped into reality, need God
Perspective	See God's hand on you forever, what's important
Serve	I get more out of it, I grow when I help others
Sharing	When share from my life to bless others
Time apart	Camp, small groups, retreats, mission trips

APPENDIX O

FOCUSED CODES AND THEIR REPRESENTATIVE *IN VIVO* CODES

Focused Codes around Discussion of *Worship plus Two*

Focused Code:	**Representative *in vivo Codes:***
Accountability	Develop patterns, know you have to do it
Alive	Feel so alive in those moments, identity, made to do this
Aware	Paying attention, noticing, own neighborhood, being open, own family, vigilant, see people, engage people, mindful to see, looking and seeing opportunities
Behavior	Added Scripture to the day, made room, helped others, added prayer to my day, doing deeds make Scripture come alive, changing my life, transformation, joined another group, develop habits, group has been molding me, intentional, read Bible on vacation
Contagious	Got feedback, got more excited, wanted to do more
Conversations	With spouse, with family members, with strangers, probed, deeper conversations
Deep sharing	Share deeply, inspire each other, need brought by someone made us go deeper
Fulfilling	Helping others is fulfilling, rewarding, ends up being most meaningful part of the day
Hunger	People are parched, need connection
Listening	Give support, focus on the other
Ninja	Little blessing, little but powerful, quick blessings
Practices	Memorize verses, devotions with child and rich discussion
Prioritize	Clarify purpose, time
Real	Take the masks off, takes more time
Reflection	Contemplate W+2 actions
Relationships	With others, out there, time, grow in understanding them
Share life	Mentor others, about them
Spiritual gifts	Using gifts from God, made to do this
Time	Listening, carving out time, available, God shows up and becomes richest time of the day, Margin to help others, surplus resources, accountability to keep margins
Trust	Developing trust, over time, learning to trust God's leading

APPENDIX P

FOCUSED CODES AND THEIR REPRESENTATIVE *IN VIVO* CODES

Focused Codes around Discussion of Use of Guiding Questions

Focused Code:	**Representative *in vivo* Codes:**
Deep	Going deep, scratch below the surface, beyond fellowship, God's purpose (big) and living into the small (identity), need to think, useful, important, shared how were transformed, talked about the weather, didn't work
Intentional	Purposeful, resistance to structuring conversation
Life Application	Apply to your life, talk about what is real, important
Real	Getting real, going deep, applying to life, what life's all about, drawn into God's future
Reflection	Reflect, see deeper meaning of life, see God's hand
Time	God shows up and best part of day, time away from fellowship, discussion needs time to get deep

Focused Codes around Discussion on Ninja Blessings

Focused Code:	**Representative *in vivo* Codes:**
Conversation	Conversation ensued, happened naturally
God encounter	At the checkout, I experienced God
Lead to more	Can lead to longer relationships, connection led to other connections
Ninja	Little blessings, powerful, bless and get out
Relationships	Ninja doesn't allow to build relationships, that connection led to further connections

APPENDIX Q

FOCUSED CODES AND THEIR REPRESENTATIVE *IN VIVO* CODES

Focused Codes around Discussion on Starting New Groups

Focused Code:	**Representative *in vivo* Codes:**
Application	Group helps with applying learnings to life, it has to relate, so what?
Deeper	Asked deeper questions, use "plants," guiding questions, expectation from the beginning, leader needs to be intentional
Hunger	Retreats create a desire for more, some people want more, work with those who are hungry, contagious
Intentional	Steer to deeper questions, expectation from the beginning, mutually agreed, leader keep focus, start that way
Retreats	Change culture of the church, desire for more, next steps after, launch groups, catalyst, create hunger
Service	Ready to add, natural development, early focus more on fellowship, later focus more on service, keep group invested, centering
Stages	Start out more fellowship and trust building, later add service, group may progress through stages, patience, don't lose focus over time
Start own	A and D have, B and H are adding to an existing group, C and G hope to, E will in the fall.

Focused Codes around Discussion on Manskar Texts

Focused Code:	Representative *in vivo* Codes:
Components	Need all 3 in a group, Behave, belong, believe, Holiness of heart and life, God's mission, we focus on service so need all three, important to sustain over time
Go out	How do groups with non-group people? Entry point, reach the unchurched, invite
Hunger	Want change and strive for more, work with those who want to, call to more
Leaders	Need leaders of the small group, training, so important, excellent leadership

Our groups	FUMC's groups, assess them, church leadership needs to be determined, how apply these ideas to our small groups?, we focus on service so need others
Real	Holiness is key to abundant living, authentic, talk about life, transformational

APPENDIX R

FOCUSED CODES AND THEIR REPRESENTATIVE *IN VIVO* CODES

Focused Codes for Discussion around Ideas and Learnings for Future Use

Focused Code:	**Representative *in vivo* Code:**
Accountability	Back to the group, check back in with group, help you grow
Application	Apply to life
Aware	Challenge made me intentional, noticed opportunities, mindful, looking, aware of roles
Behavior	Groups affects what you do, put actions to our words, call to action
Change culture	Do groups more, culture of spiritual growth
Caring	Caring and sharing, affirming
Child care	Provide it, necessary!
Community	Keep plugged in
Components	Balance free conversation and helpful, allow God to show up, Holy Spirit, food, listening, mutual sharing, openness, participation, all members valuable, real, deepest concerns of life, rituals, trust
Contagious	Make it sound exciting to others, marketing, create buzz, call others
Conversations	Interchange while together
Deep	Good question to ask, deep things of life, add pieces to existing groups to go deeper
Do life together	Share lives
Food	Create fellowship and relationships
Go out	Send people out, fill and send, expectation to go and do, go and do
Growth	Grow in groups, sermons, mission trips, group tasks provided means of growth, more effective when in group
Holy Spirit	HS moves people, experience God, listening to God, drawn to God
Hunger	Some want more
Inviting	Friends inviting friends, invitation to join
Leader	Most important to keep group on track
Listening	Relationships form slowly
Mentoring	Need to mentor others
Options	Options and choices, different kinds, variety
Organic	Natural doors open, more real, also need structure but not too much

Others	Need others to know more about what God is doing "out there"
Prioritization	Centering
Real	Focus on life issues
Reflecting	Think deeply
Relationships	Being for one another, make new relationships
Focused Code:	**Representative *in vivo* Code:**
Repetition of Scripture	Surprisingly helpful
Respect	Rules, privacy, respectful behaviors
Time	Takes time to get to the good stuff
Trust	Can disagree, leaders important to keep trust, sharing personally, vulnerable, know each other better, trust building
Value	See how I can be used by God, self-awareness, see small growths
Variety	Start more groups, offer options
W+2	Idea could really work well at church

APPENDIX S

FOCUSED CODES AND THEIR REPRESENTATIVE *IN VIVO* CODES

Focused Codes for Ending Focus Group

Focused Code:	**Representative *in vivo* Codes:**
Application	Not left to apply on own, not just head knowledge
Behavior	Do W+2
Contagious	W+2 seemed contagious
Culture change	Church hired Director of Spiritual Formation
Deeper	Can go to silliness rather than go deeper, Friday studies got deeper
Go out	Don't use church knowledge, needs of the community, understood
Hunger	Some want to go deeper
Invite	Staff needs to announce, advertise, promotion, invite neighbors
Leadership	Train leaders, trust changes with leadership changes, training groups
Listen	Meet "thou", listen and come back to discuss
Missional	Some groups more missional
Prayer	Pray over group ministry, invite God
Real	Applies to my personal life
Relationships	Conversations with groups
Service	We as a group didn't do this piece!
Staff	Need to be on board to launch groups
Time	Busyness
Trust	Ebbs and flows under leadership changes, say things openly
Variety	When offered, styles, locations

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