



# More Than We Can **IMAGINE**

Tennessee-Western Kentucky Annual Conference 2025  
The United Methodist Church

**Annual Conference Bible Study & Sermon Series**

# **DISCIPLESHIP RECLAIMED**



**Walking the Way of Jesus**





# Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Week 1: Mental Health and Well-Being	5
Week 2: Professions of Faith	12
Week 3: Culture of Call	19
Week 4: Spiritual Leadership	25
Week 5: Disrupting and Dismantling Racism and Discrimination	31
Small Group Leader Guide	38
Sermon Series Information	40
Contributors	41

# Introduction

The Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference of The United Methodist Church has entered a new season of discipleship shaped by deep listening, spiritual reflection, and a shared desire to grow in faithfulness to Christ. Following a thoughtful and prayerful period of listening, five key discipleship priorities have been identified to guide our conference's collaborative ministry from 2024 to 2028. These priorities call us to live more fully into God's vision for the church and the world. Each priority addresses both the heart and the practice of discipleship, helping us approach our lives and ministry with understanding, faithfulness, and purpose.

This Bible study was put together to help individuals and communities of faith reflect on the five priorities through scripture, holy conversations, and spiritual formation. It offers an opportunity for us to delve deeper together, discerning how God is leading us personally and collectively. Whether you're clergy, a church leader, a new disciple, or someone discerning whether to begin a relationship with Jesus, we believe God has something meaningful to say to everyone in this season.

*The weekly topics are:*

### **1.) Mental Health and Well-Being**

We will explore God's desire for us to flourish spiritually, emotionally, and physically and consider how we can support one another in the hard work of ministry and life.

### **2.) Professions of Faith**

We will reflect on the call to bear witness to the love of Christ and reclaim the mission to reach new people with the good news of Jesus.

### **3.) Culture of Call**


We will explore how God calls us to serve and how the church can nurture a community where all callings are honored and discerned.

### **4.) Spiritual Leadership**

We will consider the kind of leadership the Spirit is forming in us and how we can equip ourselves and others to serve with integrity, courage, and wisdom.

### **5.) Disrupting and Dismantling Racism and Discrimination**

We will engage scripture's call to justice, reflect on the brokenness in our world and church, and envision how to live into God's Beloved Community where every person belongs.



In addition to this study, a sermon series prepared by the pastoral staff of The Vine UMC will accompany and enrich the weekly themes. In the weeks leading up to Annual Conference, we invite you to engage both the Bible study and the sermons as tools for transformation.

Each session will include written reflections, spiritual practices, John Wesley sermons, Charles Wesley hymns, and questions for reflection, all intended to nurture a greater understanding of discipleship rooted in our Wesleyan heritage. May this time of learning and reflection not only strengthen our faith but also deepen our shared commitment to making disciples for the transformation of the world.

# Mental Health and Well-Being

## Week 1 of Discipleship Priorities

We will explore God’s desire for us to flourish spiritually, emotionally, and physically and consider how we can support one another in the hard work of ministry and life.

Scripture	1 Kings 19: 1-9a <i>CEB</i>
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Written Reflection	Rev. Dr. Cynthia Davis
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John Wesley Sermon	“The Means of Grace”
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Charles Wesley Hymn	<i>And Are We Yet Alive</i>   UMH #553
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Spiritual Practice	Examen
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# Mental Health and Well-Being

*Rev. Dr. Cynthia Davis*

Have you ever felt so overwhelmed that you just wanted to lie down and sleep forever? Have you experienced physical and emotional symptoms of life being too much that you had headaches and backaches; you ate too much or too little; you slept too much or not enough? Have you ever wondered what it would be like if you didn't have to deal with this anymore?

Elijah was a man, a human just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again, he prayed, the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced crops (James 5:17- 19). Elijah was a man of fervent prayer who heard from God and followed God's commands with all his heart.

Elijah, a conduit for God, performed miracles that only God could do. With boldness and God's confidence, he called for the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah to see whose God would answer by fire. Confident Elijah taunted the prophets because there was no response from their God, even though they shouted and stomped and danced and cut themselves until they were bloody, but there was no response.

Elijah prayed after repairing the altar of God, cutting up the bull and erecting the stones that represented the Twelve Tribes of Israel, filled the trench with four large jars of water, and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob answered by licking up all the water, the stones, and the sacrifice.



## Mental Health and Well-Being

One would think Elijah would be on a spiritual high after all these accomplishments performed through him by God. Sometimes, our greatest challenge may come after our greatest victory, sermon, presentation, board meeting, or job promotion. We quickly forget how God just used us for God's glory, and the devil gets in our ears and whispers, "You can't do this!" Whose voice are you going to listen to?

Elijah ran because he was afraid. He feared Jezebel would take his very life. His fear overwhelmed him in his exhaustion, and he felt life was not worth living anymore. How do we go from exhilaration to exhaustion and feelings of defeat?

Elijah found himself under a broom tree, a reminder of God's provision and sustenance. God was indeed Jehovah Jireh for Elijah because God provided what he needed most: rest, assurance, hope, food, and water. Sometimes, we can fall into despair when exhaustion, weariness, fatigue, and burnout consume us, regardless of our calling, occupation, or profession. Despair can lead to overwhelming depression. "Take my life" sounds like someone who has given up hope. What does depression look like? Depression looks like feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, sadness, low mood, loss of interest in pleasurable activities, and a change in sleep patterns, among other things.

## Mental Health and Well-Being

- 1.) People of God do get depressed.
- 2.) Attending church as a regular worshipper, singing in the choir, serving on a committee or multiple ones, chairing various ministries, or presiding over the sacraments does not exempt you from experiencing mental health challenges like depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorders, schizophrenia, obsessive-compulsive, or post-traumatic stress disorders.
- 3.) Mental health disorders can be treated with a variety of treatment regimes.
- 4.) We CAN lead healthy, faithful, complete lives with medications and therapy if needed.
- 5.) Getting a diagnosis is NOT the end of the world; it is hope for healing.

Remember our text. Elijah was a faithful disciple and prophet of God who could do extraordinary miracles because of his faith and obedience to God. Yet, he cried out for his life to be taken. It can happen to any of us at any time, and sometimes, we don't see it coming.

We see the doctor for our blood pressure, diabetes, cancer, kidney disease, arthritis, and other physical illnesses. The brain is an organ that needs attention, too. Call for help while you are still in the shallow water. It is okay not to be okay.

Everyone should have at least three people they can call in an emergency. Call them if needed. They will be glad you did. Look at the bridge that got you over in past challenges and recall the tools you used to increase your resilience. Help and hope are available.

## Mental Health and Well-Being

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

- 1.1 in 5 adults in the U.S. experience mental illness each year
- 2. 47% received treatment in 2021; 65.4% with serious mental illness received treatment.

As people of faith, we generally turn to a pastor first. Sometimes, we also engage a spiritual director, therapist, or Christian counselor. They can provide guidance and solace, offer community, comfort, network, and emotional support to help individuals find hope through their religious beliefs, giving them agency through prayer and rituals. Help is a phone call or a click away.

### Questions for Reflection

- 1.) What is your go-to scripture when life is hard? Why?
- 2.) When was the last time you ran because you were fearful?
- 3.) What does good, appropriate, healthy self-care look like for you?
- 4.) How would you describe your mental health over the past three months?
- 5.) What are three things you would hope a therapist, counselor, spiritual director, or journey partner could offer you?

# The Means of Grace

[John Wesley Sermon](#)

Wesley emphasizes the regular practice of spiritual disciplines such as prayer, scripture reading, and communion as channels through which God nurtures our souls, offering divine grace.

[Read The Means of Grace here.](#)

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# And Are We Yet Alive

[Charles Wesley Hymn / UMH #553](#)

This hymn offers praise to God for sustaining believers through trials and bringing them together again. The hymn invites worshippers to reflect on their spiritual journey, renew their commitment to God, and rejoice in the fellowship of the Christian community.

[And Are We Yet Alive](#)

# Examen

## Spiritual Practice

A prayerful review of your day in God's presence, helping cultivate awareness, gratitude, and emotional health.

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### *For Individuals*

- **Find a quiet space.** Breathe deeply. Invite the Spirit to guide your reflection
  - **Give thanks.** Name 2-3 moments you're grateful for today.
  - Review the day. Walk back through the events, interactions, and emotions of your day.
  - **Notice consolation and desolation.**
    - *Consolation: When did I feel close to God of fully alive?*
    - *Desolation: When did I feel disconnected, drained, or anxious?*
  - **Confess and release.** Acknowledge any regrets or missed opportunities.
  - **Look Forward.** Ask, "*How might I live more aware of God's presence tomorrow?*"
  - **Close with Prayer.**
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### *For Small Groups*

- **Set aside 15-20 minutes**
  - **Invite silence.** Play instrumental music or light a candle.
  - **Use the steps above** to guide a communal reflection.
  - **Invite 1-2 people to share insights.**
  - **End by reading** an encouraging Psalm together.
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# Professions of Faith

## Week 2 of Discipleship Priorities

We will reflect on the call to bear witness to the love of Christ and reclaim the mission to reach new people with the good news of Jesus.

Scripture	Acts 8: 26-38 <i>CEB</i>
Written Reflection	Brady Banks
John Wesley Sermon	“The Scripture Way of Salvation”
Charles Wesley Hymn	<i>O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing</i>   UMH #57
Spiritual Practice	Testimony and Faith Sharing

# Professions of Faith

Brady Banks

"Could I... do it here? Would you be the one to do it? This would be crazy!" Kelly had a smile rise on her face. She imagined doing something she'd never done and wondered if she had the courage to step towards it.

Kelly had jumped into the middle of our vocational discernment pilgrimage cohort for college students without any particular faith commitment. The pilgrimage cohort focused on what gifts a student had to offer, digging in on what they felt God might be calling them to do with their lives and considering what legacy they hoped to leave behind for themselves, their communities, and the world.

But this was all pretty new to her. She'd had experiences with people who had faith commitments, but most of those experiences hadn't been particularly good ones. Growing up with a single mother in a rough neighborhood, life felt like it was one hardship after another. Kelly's life had been full of difficulty, struggle, and hurt. Faith hadn't been a central concern in her family. She had shared all of this boldly and vulnerably, with tears in her eyes, while her peers' eyes were set on her in our pre-pilgrimage sessions. When her time came to share some of her life story, her natural authenticity and her inner strength burst out, outsizing her small stature.

As we unloaded from our van, I mentioned that if anyone had not been baptized, they could make a public profession of faith today in the place we were visiting and join the movement of Jesus. It wasn't required, but I wanted to extend the invitation

## Professions of Faith

because of the space we were visiting. I had spent lunch that day talking about God's love for everyone, how everyone was a part of God's Story, and how everyone was a beloved child of God who didn't need to earn God's love. All they needed to do was simply receive it. Kelly was surprised and couldn't believe her ears. "Everyone? I never knew that!" Her curiosity was growing. On the outskirts of ancient Philippi, at the traditional site where it is believed Paul baptized Lydia, Kelly found herself beside a burbling brook asking, "Could I get baptized here?"

The story of God is full of short stories about God and God's people on a journey. It is the dominant framework for the entire biblical narrative. Think about it: Adam and Eve, Noah, Joseph, Moses and Miriam, Ruth and Naomi, Elijah, David, and Jonah. And that's just the Old Testament!

Young adult spiritual formation—especially among those who are 'spiritual but not religious'— is a neglected space in our faith. Some might say it's a desert place. We rarely go there. But in my work around young adult spiritual formation, vocation, and pilgrimage, I have gone there, asking the great questions of life: 'Why am I here?' 'What am I seeking?' and 'Where am I going?' These and other spiritual questions have become powerful tools for opening up young adults' eyes to the possibility of becoming part of the movement of Jesus. On pilgrimage, we come alongside them, identifying what gifts they bring to the story and exploring what part they are being invited to play. And these young people are ready to join in the movement of Jesus.



## Professions of Faith

In the story of Phillip's strange journey to visit the Ethiopian eunuch, Luke wanted to be sure we knew that Gaza was a 'desert place.' I wonder if this short phrase is in the narrative to suggest that no one thought that anyone should ever go to Gaza. But then, Phillip rises and responds to the Spirit. He finds a eunuch on a dusty road, thirsty for understanding the scriptures. He doesn't find the eunuch in a synagogue, a temple, or a tabernacle. He goes to a desert place to be avoided or ignored, where presumably nothing is happening. There, Phillip walks alongside the eunuch, mentors him, and leads him to the living waters of baptism.

Sometimes I wonder if we have forgotten that every place and every face is a sacred creation; that each person we meet, no matter where we meet them, where we have to go to meet them, or what their life experiences might be, is a sacred vessel ready to be filled with living water. In every place we go (and those we may avoid but shouldn't), some are thirsty for understanding, meaning-making, purpose, love, and, I say, spiritual adventure. They long for teachers, mentors, friends, and honest companions to join them on their journeys. Most of all, they want to be genuinely themselves, shine their inner light, the one God has lit in their hearts, and participate in the Story of God. It is their story, too.

But how will those people who don't know what God has done and is doing through Jesus ever know unless we rise up and go? How will they know they have a part to play unless we share with them? What if we never make the greatest invitation because we don't go to deserted places?

## Professions of Faith

God is faithful and invites us to rise up, leading us on a strange journey to unusual places where hearts have been prepared to receive the good news and join the movement. But we—disciples of Jesus—have to listen and respond. We must boldly open our mouths to share the good news (sometimes clarifying what the good news is) and invite others to follow Jesus and continue his mission. We are, after all, a people with a mission, a message, and a movement.

That day in Philippi, Kelly chose to receive the invitation, profess her desire to follow Jesus and enter the baptismal covenant. I thank God for allowing me to respond and play a small part in offering the invitation.

### Questions for Reflection

- 1.) How does Jesus define the good news? What scriptures can you identify where Jesus is sharing the good news?
- 2.) Who first shared the good news with you and invited you to follow Jesus? What was that experience like?
- 3.) What obstacles keep us from going to the 'desert places' to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others?
- 4.) As you look around your community, where might we go to build relationships, serve, and share the good news with those whose hearts are ready to hear it?
- 5.) What would it look like for you and/or your congregation to emphasize inviting others to join Jesus' movement of disciples to transform the world? What would have to change?

# The Scripture Way of Salvation

[John Wesley Sermon](#)

John Wesley explores the scope of salvation as revealed in scripture. This sermon outlines the journey of salvation as a journey that includes prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace.

[Read The Scripture Way of Salvation here.](#)

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# O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing

[Charles Wesley Hymn / UMH #57](#)

Wesley's powerful hymn expresses praise for the redeeming love and saving power of Jesus Christ. The hymn celebrates God's grace, the forgiveness of sins, the breaking of spiritual bondage, and the call for all people to worship together.

[O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing](#)

# Testimony and Faith Sharing

## Spiritual Practice

A practice of witnessing God's love through your personal story, encouraging others to follow Christ

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### *For Individuals*

- **Pray for insight.** Ask God to bring to mind key moments of your faith journey.
  - **Write your story with three movements:**
    - *Before*
    - *My Turning Point*
    - *Now*
  - **Pray again** and ask God with whom to share this story.
  - **Practice telling your story** aloud in 2-3 minutes.
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### *For Small Groups*

- **Invite one member each meeting to share their testimony** (5 min)
  - **Allow time** for affirming responses.
  - **Reflect together** on how stories open others to faith.
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# Culture of Call

## Week 3 of Discipleship Priorities

A practice of witnessing God's love through your personal story, encouraging others to follow Christ

Scripture	Mark 10: 17-31 <i>CEB</i>
Written Reflection	Russell Casteel
John Wesley Sermon	“The Circumcision of the Heart”
Charles Wesley Hymn	<i>A Charge to Keep I Have</i>   UMH #413
Spiritual Practice	Discernment and Mediation

# Culture of Call

Russell Casteel

Jesus never minces words: You lack one thing. Ouch. Jesus often tries to make a clear point in a dramatic and story-filled way. But what does this fellow lack, exactly? Of course, there's all kinds of irony here because, in the end, by society's standards, he lacks nothing. The story is frustratingly ambiguous, making reducing this text to a far too simplistic message tempting. So, let's take Jesus literally. We do have too much. We need to give it away. So, we are eager to stand behind Jesus' injunctions against rich people. There is a clear message: wealth seems to steer our glance inward, stoke our individuality, and set our sights on abundance.

Beyond the fact that the rich man has too much, there's another more important part of the rich man's problem. "What must I do," he asks. He cannot recognize that abundance may be found outside the wealth and riches he has stored up. Now, he is not sure what to do with his life. Many of us have been there. Now, what, Lord?

Jesus loves the rich man first before requesting him to do anything. Loving allows us to see and then focus on the mission. Sure, statistics tell us that fewer people are answering a call to ministry right now than in any other generation. So, church: are we loving these young people? Are we sharing that Christ loves them, as they are? The culture of call will never change unless we do the hard work of love here first.

## Culture of Call

In camping ministry, I have the privilege to connect with over 100 TWK churches each year. As such, I get a seat to listen to their stories. Everyone has the same challenges! Families are busy. Money is tight. It seems like we get a new pastor too often. Some of our most important members have passed away in the past few years. We cannot compete with sports. Young people don't want to come to church anymore, and we have nothing for families.

My first summer at Cedar Crest, a girl came to camp knowing she'd have to leave during the week to play in a softball tournament. She told me she didn't want to go, but it was "important not to let her teammates down." Big words from a 9-year-old! She was inconsolable when her mom and dad came to pick her up. She wanted to stay and cookout with her family so as not to miss Bible study. When I said goodbye and that I'd see her later that night, she gave me a look that said, there's more going on here than you know. My phone rang 20 minutes later, and her father said, "Well, we're coming back."

When she got out of the truck, it was clear that there had been tears, but she was all smiles as she ran to meet her counselor. When I checked in with her parents to ensure everything was okay, they laughed. They explained that immediately after getting in the truck, she said, "I want to stay!" Giving her the chance to explain herself, she added, "I know that sports are important, and I know that my team is important. But you always tell me that growing in my faith is important. I'm learning about Jesus and how to be a Christian, and I want to choose to do that. Camp is fun, and I want to choose to do it. God loves me, meaning I must learn to love others." Her dad looked at me and laughed, saying, "Well, who can argue with that?".

## Culture of Call

Again, Jesus called the rich man to look inward to find his next move outward. The point of giving all we have is so that others might find what we can share in the love of Christ. For those of us who feel we could never overcome the obstacles that keep us from seeing and uncovering our gifts, let us remember the words of Jesus to the disciples, who could not fathom giving more. For God, nothing is impossible. This scripture that we like to quote with no verse actually references the possibility of what we might do with God's help. May this great calling bring us the opportunity to call others. May we as a church see our gifts and give those back to a world in need. God loves us first before asking. Thanks be to God.

### Questions for Reflection

- 1.) Where do you locate your abundance? What about your church?
- 2.) Lack takes on many forms in our life. This story asks us to ponder how we might complete the sentence, "What do I need to give away to inherit the Kingdom?"
- 3.) When was the last time you asked someone: Now what? Who should you ask that of now?
- 4.) Ask someone whose faith and gifts you admire about their call story. What about their story tracks with your own? What is different?
- 5.) Imagine a way to get your church or your area of ministry to highlight the stories of how people are answering their calls. Now, wonder to yourself and a neighbor: How can you ask those who have not been asked yet? Now what?



# The Circumcision of the Heart

[John Wesley Sermon](#)

In this sermon, John Wesley outlines his doctrine of holiness. Wesley explains that true faith is not about outward rituals or appearances but about an inward renewal by the Holy Spirit.

[Read The Circumcision of the Heart here.](#)

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# O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing

[Charles Wesley Hymn / UMH #57](#)

This hymn expresses the believer's commitment to serve God faithfully, fulfill a divine purpose, and live a holy life empowered by God's grace.

[A Charge to Keep I Have](#)

# Discernment

## Spiritual Practice

A practice of listening deeply to God and others when exploring purpose, vocation, or spiritual nudges.

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### *For Individuals*

- **Sit in silence** and breathe deeply to center yourself.
- **Ask discernment questions:**
  - *What brings me deep joy or burden?*
  - *What is God calling me to give away?*
  - *Where do I feel God is inviting me to step forward or let go?*
- **Journal** and read your thoughts aloud
- **Close with the prayer:** *“God, give me the ears to hear, courage to follow, and peace to wait.”*

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### *For Small Groups*

- **One person volunteers as the focus for the discernment circle**
  - **They speak for 5 minutes** about something they’re discerning
  - **The group listens**, then asks open-ended questions (10-15 min)
  - **End with a short prayer**
  - **Repeat this exercise** with another volunteer as the focus and continue as time allows
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# Spiritual Leadership

## Week 4 of Discipleship Priorities

A practice of listening deeply to God and others when exploring purpose, vocation, or spiritual nudges.

Scripture	Isaiah 43: 19 <i>CEB</i>
Written Reflection	Amy Moritz
John Wesley Sermon	“On Zeal”
Charles Wesley Hymn	<i>Soldiers of Christ, Arise</i>   UMH #513
Spiritual Practice	Lectio Divina

# Spiritual Leadership

Amy Moritz

Let's explore spiritual leadership alongside three leaders, a young pastor, and two lay people of a small church in Delaware. The church began in the 1940s in the growing suburban area southwest of Wilmington. Its membership reached over 400, but today, worship consists of about 25-30 people. The three leaders refer to their congregation as nostalgic. Every time they invite the aging congregation to imagine ministry today and into the future, congregants remember and long for the past until a few weeks ago. The leaders' humble and curious persistence facilitated a small breakthrough with the congregants. Instead of continuing to long for a summer VBS and ministries of the past, the congregants saw themselves as they are today and realized that God might be inviting them into a new thing – a ministry that could support people through grief and feelings of isolation. And with this new insight has also come a potential collaboration with a sister church in the next neighborhood. The two congregations will begin taking steps toward collaboration in just a few weeks!

A nostalgic church is not unusual. I could have been telling this story about any number of churches in the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference, maybe even about your church. So, what does spiritual leadership look like in this context? I want to offer three attributes I see in the leaders above that are critical to our future.

## Spiritual Leadership

### *Humility*

In times of uncertainty, what we thought we knew and how we used to do things are no longer useful. Many of us are great problem-solving leaders, but the future of the church is not a problem to be solved. Instead, the church's future can feel a bit mysterious to us. How do we embrace mystery? One way is to let go of our need for immediate answers. No single one of us has the answer. Therefore, spiritual leaders develop skills for inviting the wisdom of the room. This is what I saw from the three Delaware leaders. Their thoughtful questions, their agendas that invited every voice, and even their attention to the design of the meeting space helped release the wisdom of the gathered whole.

### *Curiosity*

When I led a UMC-affiliated organization in Memphis, the board of directors and the staff often asked, "What if?" The board got curious often, and always with the belief that God had some role for them to play in pursuing God's dream for our community. Seeking to be curious from a place of humility, they spent time with the people they sought to bless, listening to them, and with the belief that those closest to the problem are also closest to the solution. In the Delaware church example above, I saw spiritual leadership at work as the congregation was invited to respond to, "What if?" The church's response: What if God's dream for people experiencing isolation in our church and community is that they feel supported, connected, and no longer alone?

### *Collaboration*

Over the past 15 years, I have journeyed alongside over 50 small membership churches (each with less than 50 worshipping members), from a rural and frontier congregation in Texas to urban churches in my hometown of Memphis.

## Spiritual Leadership

They all discovered impactful community ministry in collaboration with others – the sheriff, the library, the local youth theater group, the food bank, the mayor, other churches, etc. Many leaders believe we must collaborate with partners to bless the community because we find ourselves in smaller, aging churches with fewer financial resources. But what begins as a necessity can become transformational if we allow the partnership to shape our character, spirit, and actions, whether a small or large congregation. As the Delaware church above caught a glimpse of what God might be inviting them to do, the church also gained fresh eyes to see the partners God provided for collaboration.

The good news is that you possess these three qualities. You don't have to attend leadership training to gain them. You need to cultivate what is already inside of you, other leaders, and your congregation. What will be your next most faithful step as you reflect upon humility, curiosity, and collaboration?

### Questions for Reflection

- 1.) Where do you see yourself in the story of the Delaware church?
- 2.) What could help you and your church overcome the need for immediate answers and embrace mystery?
- 3.) As you think about your church and your community, how do you answer this "what if" today? *What if God's dream for \_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank with a specific group of people or part of creation that tugs at your heart) is that \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank with what it looks like when God's dream comes true for them).*
- 4.) As you think about your "what if," what potential collaborators come to mind?
- 5.) What will be your next most faithful step as you reflect upon humility, curiosity, and collaboration?

# On Zeal

[John Wesley Sermon](#)

The sermon addresses the often misunderstood concept of "religious zeal." John Wesley defines true zeal as fervent love, love for God and neighbor expressed through humility, meekness, patience, and a deep commitment to holiness.

[Read On Zeal here.](#)

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# Soldiers of Christ, Arise

[Charles Wesley Hymn / UMH #513](#)

In this hymn, Charles Wesley urges believers to engage in spiritual warfare, being strong in the Lord and equipped with the full armor of God.

[A Charge to Keep I Have](#)

# Lectio Divina

## Spiritual Practice

A slow, prayerful reading of scripture that opens us to the Spirit's direction for life and leadership.

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### *For Individuals*

- **Choose a short scripture related to leadership or calling.**
  - **Read (Lectio):** Slowly read and notice what word or phrase stands out.
  - **Reflect (Meditatio):** Why did this word/phrase stand out? What is God saying?
  - **Respond (Oratio):** Pray and speak to God about what you heard.
  - **Rest (Contemplatio):** Sit silently, resting in God's presence
  - **Close with prayer or journaling**
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### *For Small Groups*

- **Choose a short scripture related to leadership or calling.**
  - Guide the group through the four steps: **Read, Reflect, Respond, and Rest**
  - **Allow silence** between each reading
  - **Invite** people to share their reflections
  - **End with a prayer.**
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# Disrupting and Dismantling Racism and Discrimination

## Week 4 of Discipleship Priorities

We will engage scripture's call to justice, reflect on the brokenness in our world and church, and envision how to live into God's Beloved Community where every person belongs.

Scripture	Isaiah 58 and Matthew 25 <i>CEB</i>
Written Reflection	Rev. Billy Vaughan
John Wesley Sermon	“Catholic Spirit”
Charles Wesley Hymn	<i>Love Divine, All Loves Excelling</i>   UMH #384
Spiritual Practice	Confess, Lament, and Restoration

# Disrupting and Dismantling Racism and Discrimination

[Rev. Billy Vaughan](#)

A vast and growing number of amazing resources are focused on disrupting and dismantling racism. In our Signposts groups, we use a book by Jemar Tisby titled [How to Fight Racism: Courageous, Christianity, and the Journey Toward Racial Justice](#), along with easily accessible videos, essays, and resources from the National Museum of African American History and Culture. These are a fraction of the resources available to us, which is to say those who know the sacredness and urgency of this work can easily find all the resources they need. But why? Why should TWK make disrupting and dismantling racism a “discipleship” priority? Because faithful discipleship is and always has been about justice, equity, and community:

- God called Israel to be “priests to the nations” – to, in essence, show the nations how to be a just and loving nation.
- Jesus called the church to be a Beloved Community where the dividing walls of hostility are broken down and where the most vulnerable are central to the life of the community. I’ve often wondered what would happen if our churches began every worship service and church meeting by reading aloud Isaiah 58 and Matthew 25.
- Isaiah disrupts the status quo of politics and religion, calling out Israel for their individual piety while turning a blind eye to economic and social disparity.
- Jesus confronts the nations for failing to respond to those on the economic and social margins – making it clear this is a failure to love him.

## Disrupting and Dismantling Racism and Discrimination

Somehow, these texts and their implications for faithful life in society are neglected or watered down. Most of us are even told early in ministry to steer clear of politics. After all, people in our congregations have different politics. Stirring things up will cause problems and "distract us from our mission."

I experienced this very early in my ministry as the director of a youth center in a small town. It was to be a gathering place for all the town's youth. But one Saturday night, the lead pastor showed up, called me outside, and ordered me to throw out 5 African American youth who, just two weeks earlier, had asked if they could join in as youth among youth.

When I refused, the pastor said, "You're probably right. It might be illegal." So, instead, he walked into the center and pulled the plug on the music, ordering everyone out. The message was loud and clear. When I followed the pastor to his house and argued about Jesus, the pastor, probably to get rid of me, said, "You're probably right about the morality and whether Jesus would approve, but Jesus doesn't pay the bills; the people do. The people of this church will not have it." Don't preach or teach politics? Politics, in its essence, is how we live together in church and society. If following Jesus is our vocation (not falling in line with those who "pay the bills"), preaching and teaching on politics are unavoidable. Why disrupt and dismantle racism and discrimination?

Because doing so means loving Jesus. According to Matthew 25, not doing so means calling Jesus "Lord" while failing to know, love, and truly follow Him.

## Disrupting and Dismantling Racism and Discrimination

Avoiding this sacred work of disrupting and dismantling leaves in place a status quo that discriminates against and injures many of God's children. It leaves in place, as well, a toxic status quo that does immense damage to the souls of those who, on the surface, "benefit" from the system.

This was the message Isaiah "shouted out" to leaders as they returned from exile and prepared to reestablish Israel. He warned them not to get sucked in (again) to shallow religion focused on individual piety while ignoring social and economic realities.

*"Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day and oppress all your workers."*

*"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?"*

In the end, Isaiah pleads with Israel to embrace their calling – to be signs of God's order. He promises that when they do, *"...you will be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in."*

Isaiah and Jesus plead with the nations and the church to bear witness to a social order based on love, focused on healing the breach and restoring the oppressed and most vulnerable. Why disrupt and dismantle racism and discrimination? Our church and world are crying out for springs of water and the restoration of God's true Beloved Community.

## Disrupting and Dismantling Racism and Discrimination

### Questions for Reflection

- 1.) What biblical texts come to mind as you imagine the sacredness and urgency of this work?
- 2.) Give examples of ways you've experienced, seen, read, or heard about racism and discrimination affecting, injuring, and limiting persons of color in the present day.
- 3.) When has your commitment to disrupting and dismantling racism and discrimination been tested?
- 4.) What resources and companions challenge, encourage, and sustain you in disrupting and dismantling racism and discrimination?
- 5.) Do you believe the status quo in church and society in relation to racism and discrimination is “toxic” for those who benefit via economics and privilege? If so, how?

# Catholic Spirit

[John Wesley Sermon](#)

Wesley calls believers to love one another authentically, even across differences. Wesley emphasizes unity in heart and love is more important than uniformity in belief.

[Read Catholic Spirit here.](#)

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# Love Divine, All Loves Excelling

[Charles Wesley Hymn / UMH #384](#)

This hymn honors God's transformative and perfect love. It invites the presence of Christ to dwell within believers, to purify their hearts.

[Love Divine, All Loves Excelling](#)

# Confession

## Spiritual Practice

A justice-centered spiritual practice that names harm, seeks God's healing, and moves us toward action.

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### *For Individuals*

- **Begin with silence.** Light a candle and breathe.
  - **Read** a lament Psalm
  - **Ask:**
    - *Where have I benefited from exclusionary systems?*
    - *Where have I failed to act for justice?*
  - **Confess** honestly and seek God's transformation
  - **Write one action** you will take this week to repair or advocate.
- 

### *For Small Groups*

- **Read** a lament Psalm
  - **Hold three rounds of sharing:**
    - Reflect on the questions above
  - **Close with a prayer of commitment** to serve as bridge builders.
-

# Small Group Leader Guide

This study guide is structured into five sessions, each focused on one of the Discipleship Priorities. It is designed for use in both small-group settings and individual reflection. We invite you to approach this journey with patience and grace, remembering that discipleship is a lifelong process of learning, growing, and becoming more like Jesus.

## Preparing to Lead a Small Group

- Begin your work with prayer.
- Decide if your group will meet in person, online, or have hybrid gatherings for this study.
- Communicate with your group the time, date, and location for each session.
- The study is designed to be completed with robust discussion in about 60-75 minutes for a group of five to twelve people.
- See a sample guide below.



# Small Group Leader Guide

## Sample Session Flow

### **1.) Welcome & Centering Prayer (5 minutes)**

Greet participants and create a welcoming space.

Open with a prayer inviting God's presence and an openness to grow as disciples of Jesus.

### **2.) Singing Together: Charles Wesley Hymn (5 minutes)**

Sing (or listen to) a selected hymn by Charles Wesley that connects with the week's discipleship theme.

### **3.) Scripture Engagement (15 minutes)**

Read the designated **weekly scripture(s)** aloud.

#### **Discussion Prompts:**

- What is the Spirit revealing through this passage?
- How does this connect to this week's Discipleship Priority?

### **4.) Reflection and Response (35-50 minutes)**

You are encouraged to use the weekly resources to guide the group reflection. Each week, you will have a written reflection, spiritual practice, a John Wesley Sermon, a Charles Wesley hymn, and reflection questions. You do not need to use all of the resources. All are included to enrich the readings.

# Want to Go Deeper?

To accompany this Bible study, The Vine's pastoral staff will offer a special sermon series exploring the five discipleship priorities in greater depth. You're invited to worship with us and hear how these themes come alive through scripture, storytelling, and shared reflection.

## **YouTube**

<https://www.youtube.com/@TheVineUMC>

## **Facebook**

<https://www.facebook.com/thevineumc>

## **Bluesky**

<https://bsky.app/profile/vineumc.bsky.social>

## **TikTok**

<https://www.tiktok.com/@vineumc>

## **Sign up for The Vine newsletter**

<https://www.thevineumc.church>

# Contributors

## **Rev. Dr. Cynthia Davis**

Dr. Cynthia has spent her entire life serving others in various capacities. For 24 years, she served as a nurse, nurse manager, and nurse educator in trauma and surgical units, cardiovascular intensive care units, and recovery rooms. She served students as a college counselor, freshmen experience faculty and test-taking specialist. Later, she guided applicants and students as the Manager of Admissions and Retention. After hearing the call of God to serve in a different capacity, she pastored Friendship United Methodist Church. I was asked by Bishop Wills to serve on the Memphis Cabinet as the McKendree District Superintendent. After five years of faithful service, she then became the Senior Associate Pastor and Executive Director of Congregational Care at Christ United Methodist Church. Bishop McAlilly then called Cynthia to come back on the Cabinet to serve as the Mississippi River District Superintendent. In 2022, Cynthia retired as District Superintendent, to serve a different ministry in home care. Cynthia received her Bachelor of Science in Nursing from the University of Mississippi (Jackson, MS), her Master of Science in Counseling from the University of Memphis (Memphis, TN), and her Doctor of Ministry Degree from United Theological Seminary (Dayton, OH). Her focus group was The Black Church and Public Health, and her dissertation is Promoting Healthy Dietary Lifestyles to Prevent Obesity in African American Adolescents. Cynthia has received awards too numerous to name and actively participates on various agencies and boards. She has presented extensively in local and national workshops, seminars, and conventions. Cynthia and her husband, Dr. Elvernice "Sonny" Davis, have four children: two grandsons, Jalen and Blake, and a granddaughter, Gianna.

## **Contributors**

### **Russell Casteel**

Russell Casteel has been with Cedar Crest since 2013, now serving as the Executive Director of Conference Camping Ministry, in addition to his role as Director at Cedar Crest. Russell also serves on the TWK Youth and Children's teams, the Creation Care Team, and Church and Society. Russell is a graduate of Mississippi State University as well as Candler School of Theology at Emory University. As a lifelong member of the United Methodist Church, he has over 20 years of experience in camping ministry and is certified in Camp/Retreat Ministry in the United Methodist Church. He is passionate about helping to create places where others can Experience God, grow in their faith, hear their call, and connect with God's creation. Russell is married to Callie, who is the Marketing Services Coordinator for A Greener World. They have two children, Brown and Flora. If he could be doing anything other than his job or spending time with his family, it would be fly fishing or being broken-hearted about the bulldogs or the Buffalo Bills.

### **Amy Moritz**

Amy brings nearly three decades of experience developing leaders for faith communities and nonprofits. In addition to leading multiple nonprofits in Memphis, TN, Amy has led projects across the United States specializing in community engagement and participatory processes that lead to shared ownership, empowerment, and change that is sustainable and transformative. Recent/current clients include Rio Texas Conference UMC, Tennessee Conference UMC, Memphis Theological Seminary, Austin Seminary, New Castle Presbytery, Mid-Atlantic Conference of the UCC, Agape Child and Family Services, and the Aiken and Greenville (South Carolina) Departments of Public Safety. Amy Moritz is a lifelong United Methodist. She resides in Memphis and enjoys hiking, kayaking, and biking with her husband, Brad, when they are not engaged with their first grandchild or new puppy, Spresso.

## **Contributors**

### **Brady Banks**

Brady is the founder and director of Turnaround Collective. He's guided multiple pilgrimages around the world over the years, facilitating spiritual spaces for pilgrims as they discover new spiritual territory. Brady is bi-vocational, working as a professional fundraiser, coming alongside nonprofits and faith-based organizations to develop resources to achieve their missions. Prior to Turnaround, Brady served over 15 years as a nonprofit executive management and development professional for multiple nonprofit organizations, as well as serving as an elected official locally in Nashville. He's a graduate of Mercer University, Harvard Divinity School, and a current doctoral student at the Pacific School of Religion, part of the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley. Brady is an avid backcountry hiker, reader, and music aficionado. He enjoys life with his wife, Kristin, their son, Thaddeus, and dog, Henri.

### **Rev. Billy Vaughan**

Billy is a fourth-generation Methodist pastor who served in a wide variety of appointments and ministries over 40 years with the Memphis Annual Conference (now TWK), including:

- Lambuth Memorial United Methodist Church
- Patchwork Central: a worker/priest intentional Christian Community in Evansville, Ind.
- Plowshares Chapel House in rural West TN.: a center for prayer and social justice.
- Good Samaritan United Methodist Church: an intentionally multi-racial church in North Memphis.
- The Memphis School of Servant Leadership: an ecumenical ministry for lay and clergy.
- Memphis Theological Seminary, as faculty director of Formation for Ministry

In retirement, he serves as moderator of Signposts, an initiative founded by Rev. Dr. Autura Eason Williams to address ongoing racism and work toward God's Beloved Community in the church and society. He and his wife, Joni, live intentionally and joyfully in Binghampton, one of the most economically and ethnically diverse neighborhoods in Memphis.

## **Contributors**

### **Rev. Dr. Erin Beasley**

Erin Beasley, co-author of "I'm Black, I'm Christian, I'm Methodist," is an ordained elder in the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference of the United Methodist Church. She currently serves as the pastor of The Vine United Methodist Church, a new hybrid church in the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference geared to offer spiritual guidance and pastoral care for United Methodists who have lost their church homes due to disaffiliations. Erin also serves as the chair of the Commission on Religion and Race for the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference. She has served various ministry settings in Mississippi, Georgia, and Tennessee for 12 years. Erin is a graduate of Millsaps College (2010), where she obtained a Bachelor of Accountancy degree with a minor in music. She received her Master of Divinity degree from Emory University's Candler School of Theology (2014) and her Doctor of Ministry degree from United Theological Seminary in 2020. Racial segregation in the mainline church was her doctoral focus.

### **Rev. Sean Stanfield**

Writing a bio about yourself is sometimes awkward, and you never know where to start. I have not always been a United Methodist, but it is in the United Methodist Church that I found healing, hope, and my calling into ministry. I served as a student minister in the North Georgia Conference for a few years. I also served with the Wesleyan Church to become a church planter for several years. Later, I returned to my home in the UMC and have been a part of the now Tennessee Western Kentucky Conference for about thirteen years. I have been involved with inner city ministries, Fresh Expressions, and various other conference connections. Currently, I am one of the clergy members who are a part of the Vine UMC, an online ministry of the TWK. I hold 3 degrees from Liberty Theological Seminary, one being an MDiv in Pastoral Leadership. I am an Associate Member of the TWKUMC and am blessed to serve in this conference and the UMC. I am a single dad and have three great children: Emily 27, Christopher 23, and Lindsay 15.



