

#SEE ALL THE PEOPLE

“Let’s stop fixing churches and start seeing the people Christ called us to reach.”

Our General Secretary has set forth a thoroughly Wesleyan, Methodist, and historically Christian vision for the work of discipling in The United Methodist Church.

It reflects the wisdom and work of the Wesleys and the early Methodists themselves. Trying to make Anglican congregations better at being Anglican congregations in his day wasn’t likely to do much to make many more people more holy in heart and life, much less lead very many to perfection in love in this life. It just wasn’t going to work.

This wasn’t because Anglican congregations were bad congregations or had somehow “fallen” from “effectiveness.” Quite the contrary, Anglican congregations were about as functional as any other Christian congregations in the 18th century in England.

The reason fixing these congregations wasn’t going to generate many new or better formed disciples was that Anglican congregations, like nearly all Christian congregations since the sixth century, were not structured for discipling as a core function of their life together. Instead, like nearly all other congregations everywhere since that time, they were designed to support the public worship of God, the teaching of basic Christian doctrine, the provision of care for members, and to be a reliable institutional player in the life of the local community.

Discipling, or as the Wesleys would put it, helping people grow in holiness of heart and life, was simply not on the radar screen of what congregations did or had done – for over twelve centuries!

This didn’t mean discipling wasn’t being done at all. It just meant the congregation wasn’t the primary delivery system for this work. The primary delivery

system for discipling since that time had been (and still is) the religious society.

Religious societies were not congregations. They were often connected to congregations or, in the case of many monastic orders in the Western Church, to a bishop or the central authority of the church. But they were not congregations, nor did they seek to do what congregations did. Religious societies focused keenly on making disciples, teaching the way of salvation, caring for people far beyond the bounds of the parish, including advocating for justice, and connecting their members to active ministry in the world.

That’s exactly how early Methodism was structured – as a religious society. It was a gathering of persons strongly committed to watching over one another in love with the purpose of helping all society participants to grow in holiness of heart and life toward perfection in love in this life.

That’s what Methodists did and promoted through their society meetings, band meetings, class meetings, field preaching, and “trial bands.”

While the Methodist Societies were not congregations, they also actively sought to connect their members with congregations. Ordered under three General Rules, the United Societies (as the Wesleys called them) challenged and supported their members to live out the baptismal covenant of the Church of England. The third General Rule in particular required ongoing participation in the means of grace (“all the ordinances of God) observed in congregations (the public worship of God, and the Supper of the Lord) as well as those more particularly observed among members of the societies (“family and private prayer, searching the

scriptures.”) To be a Methodist meant being active in the life and work of both a congregation and the Methodist society. You couldn’t become a Methodist or long remain a Methodist with clear and evident commitments to both.

The mission of Methodism was “to reform the nation, particularly the Church, and to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land.” The method of Methodism to reform the church wasn’t to fix Anglican congregations or even expect them develop discipleship systems within them. Instead it was to #SeeAllThePeople, especially the vast majority of people at the time who had little or no active connection to any congregation, and work intently in small groups with any who would respond to the call to “scriptural holiness.” These people were then vitally re-connected to the whole of the experience of church through the society, including congregational life. And through this vital connection in their own lives with both Methodist societies and Church of England and other congregations, both the nation and these congregations began to experience dramatic reform and new vitality.

The results of Methodism in Britain within one century of its beginnings in the 1730s are astounding.

Methodists led the way to found hospitals, end debtor’s prisons, abolish slavery, start the labor movement, create better systems for the care of children and orphans, and revitalize religious life not only in England, but through England across the whole of the British empire.

In other words, they made disciples of Jesus Christ who literally transformed the world.

We can be part of the same world-transforming outcomes beginning in our generation.

But only if we remember that focusing on #fixingchurches doesn’t generate the outcome of disciples of Jesus who transform the world.

#SeeAllThePeople does.

If we #SeeAllThePeople, not just or first our congregations, and focus intently on discipling them in the way of Jesus, and, as did the early Methodists, also connect them to congregations, we will equip and unleash and multiply disciples of Jesus who will be empowered to transform the world in our own day.

So **#SeeAllThePeople**.