

Romans 12

We who are many are one body in Christ.

Produced by the General Board of Discipleship of The United Methodist Church to communicate effective principles and practices demonstrated by congregations that are actively making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

These congregations are marked by:

- Clarity around the mission and vision of the congregation.
- Practice of spiritual disciplines, both corporately and individually.
- Nurture in growth in discipleship through mutual support and accountability.
- Cultivation of intentional and mutual relationships with the most vulnerable—the poor, children, the imprisoned, the powerless.
- Consistent concern for inviting people into relationship with Jesus Christ, combined with wise practices for initiating them into the body of Christ.
- Connectional relationships that facilitate participation in God's mission of global transformation.
- Shared clergy and lay leadership.

In the Good Ol' Summertime

Mt. Zion United Methodist in Mechanicsville, Maryland, goes outside in the summertime. The congregation offers Backyard Bible Study for four to six weeks each summer. Laity host the study groups in their homes or a meeting place in the community. Occasionally the groups meet at the church. Members of these groups intentionally invite friends and neighbors who are not currently involved in the congregation to participate in these summer gatherings.

The groups generally meet for about two hours and often include a meal or refreshments. Each group decides what the focus of their study will be, and participants share leadership of the meetings. If the group meets in the evening, childcare is provided. These small groups provide an informal, relaxed atmosphere for learning and for getting to know one another. Leadership is learned through modeling, observation, and practice.

After several years of this ministry, the congregation has learned the following valuable lessons:

- Neighborhood gatherings provide entry points for meeting and getting to know people in the community.
- Informal gatherings during the summer feed the congregation's system for intentional faith development. Participants in the summer small groups often continue to meet together or join a new small group, such as Disciple Bible Study, later in the year.
- Relationships within the congregation grow and deepen, moving beyond a once-a-week gathering on Sundays.
- New leadership emerges. People who have participated in the Backyard Bible Study serve as leaders of a small group at other times of the year.

Questions for Discussion

- Where could you hold a small group gathering in your community to reach people not currently involved in your congregation?
- What entry points for new people does your congregation provide? How effective are they?
- How do you adapt ministry for various times of the year?

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