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ABSTRACT

Churches and Poor People: The Impact of Covenant
Discipleship Groups in Local Churches and Their Relation to
Increased Face-to-Face Contact with the Poor

by

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This study sought to show whether Covenant Discipleship Groups are effective structures for involving the local church with the poor. The literature review examined the impact of John Wesley's class meetings upon the poor of his day. The methods of Jesus and his disciples as they had impact on the poor were studied also. Finally, Gustavo Guitierrez was read to determine present practices among the poor in Latin America. His writings showed that the small church community structures called base communities were transforming the Latin American culture by calling Christians to stand alongside the poor.

A researcher designed questionnaire was used to gather data from thirteen United Methodist churches in Virginia. Although the data of the research was drawn from a convenience sample and therefore cannot be statistically inferred to a larger population and although the research involved a single look at the subjects on a single day it would appear that some valuable conclusions may be drawn. The researcher discovered that those in covenant discipleship groups had a greater level of face-to-face contact with the poor than those not in such groups.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled
CHURCHES AND POOR PEOPLE: THE IMPACT OF COVENANT
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
List of Tables	vi
CHAPTER 1	1
Understanding the Problem	1
Statement of Purpose	8
The Research Questions	8
Definition of Terms	9
Methodology	10
Population and Sample	11
Variables	12
Data Collection	12
Delimitations and Generalizability	13
Theological Reflection	13
Overview	14
CHAPTER 2	16
Precedents in the Literature	16
Jesus Christ and Poor People	17
John Wesley and Poor People	24
The Importance of Covenant Discipleship Groups	37
Prayer, Present Practices, and Poor People	43
CHAPTER 3	57

Design of the Study	57
Problem and Purpose	57
Research and Operational Questions	57
Population and Sample	59
Instrumentation	60
Data Collection	61
Variables	62
Control	62
Data Analysis	63
 CHAPTER 4	 64
Findings of the Study	64
Research Question 1	64
Research Question 2	70
Research Question 3	71
Research Question 4	77
 Chapter 5	 87
Summary and Conclusions	87
Theological Reflection	89
Limitations of the Study	90
Future Research	92
 Appendices	
A. Instructions and Questionnaire	95
B. Conference Survey	100

Works Cited 101

TABLES

Table	Page
1. Ministries to/with the Poor Represented by Study Churches	64
2. Ministries to/with the Poor Represented by Study Churches with face-to-face contact ranking . .	66
3. Churchgoers' Degree of Participation in Covenant Discipleship Groups	71
4. Differences Between CD and Non-CD Churchgoers': Attitudes Toward the Poor	73
5. Differences Between CD and Non-CD Churchgoers': Behaviors Toward the Poor	74
6. Differences Between CD and Non-CD Churchgoers': Behaviors Toward the Poor: Collapsed	75
7. Poor Involvement in CD Groups	76
8. Differences in Prayer Frequency: Behaviors Toward the Poor	78
9. Differences in Prayer Frequency: Behaviors Toward the Poor: Collapsed	80
10. Control for Gender: Attitudes Toward the Poor	81
11. Control for Age: Attitudes Toward the Poor . .	82
12. Control for Gender: Behaviors Toward the Poor	83
13. Control for Gender: Behaviors Toward the Poor: Collapsed	84
14. Control for Age: Behaviors Toward the Poor . .	85

15. Control for Age: Behaviors Toward the Poor:

Collapsed 86

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CHAPTER 1

Understanding the Problem

By the year 2000, nearly one quarter of all the people living on the earth will be in slums and squatter settlements within large cities (Linthicum 1). One out of every five human beings will be profoundly poor and will live in cities, and half of them will be children (Linthicum 6). How will the local church respond to such an awesome need?

The roots of today's local church were among the poor. Early Christian communities consisted mainly of poorer people. Jesus Christ came preaching a gospel for the poor. He founded the church and commanded her to love those whom others reject (Luke 10:29). However, as the local church in North America is observed today, it is evident that the church has often lost sight of its mandate to reach out to the poor.

Very little in elitist, privileged Christianity attracts the cashless, malnourished, hungry, homeless, unemployed, minorities, the young and the old. The cultural practices and popular theology of contemporary Christian faith are geared to undergird the wealthy and overlook the poor (Archer 21). Yet the problem of poverty surrounds us. How will we respond to the poor who are increasing at geometric proportions? More importantly what will we do

with Christ's words: "In that you have not done it to one of the least of these my brethren you have not done it to me" (Matthew 25:45)?

In looking for answers to these questions the researcher was disturbed by the movie, "Brother Sun Sister Moon." One scene in the film depicts the church gathered for worship, and the rich are sitting in padded pews near the front dressed in beautiful clothing. The poor are gathered together in the back either standing or sitting on the floor in tattered rags. Francis of Assisi looks up at Christ on the cross and realizes something is wrong. Something does not match. He sees his crucified Lord, the epitome of poverty, nailed on a common cross. The rich of the city are worshiping him with their mouths gathered near the chancel. But the poor are the ones to whom he came to preach God's love and acceptance, and they are huddled together in the back in their tattered rags.

The picture in most of our North American churches is even bleaker than the movie scene. The poor today are not inside many of the local churches. Although there are some churches in which the poor are welcome, e.g. storefront inner city churches, this research is focused on the white middle class churches that make up most of the Virginia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. For many of these, the poor are outside, undervalued and overlooked.

They do not feel welcome. The church makes it difficult for them to participate. The poor are often seen as uneducated and lazy. However, the poor should not be a problem for the church since they are its reason for being (Greinacher and Muller 11).

The poor are those who were first called to follow Christ. When there has been a major move of God's Spirit, it has often been among the poor. It was on behalf of poor people that God spoke freedom through his prophet Moses. Jesus Christ called out to some fisherman to come and follow him. They left their secure livelihood for an uncertain future. Following him meant leaving all behind. For other would-be followers it meant selling all and giving it to the poor. For others, it meant not having a place to call home. Paul's letter to the church at Corinth reports there were not many rich or educated people who were called to make up the first ones to whom freedom came through God's Spirit.

John Wesley is an example of one who believed Christ's command was to minister to the poor. Many of the Methodist people originated from the poor of England. Wesley, drawing from the church fathers, focused his ministry among the poor (Wearmouth 211). His urban poor societies brought in 75,000 new believers in his lifetime (Grigg 217).

Wesley accomplished this great revival among the poor mainly through the structure of the class meeting. Classes

of eight to twelve people met weekly in order to account to one another how they had lived the Christian life the previous week. The class meeting was the very "sinew" of the early Methodist movement. Watson argues that the class meeting is the reason for the conservation of Wesley's evangelistic fruit (AD 13). He writes:

Discipleship meant following the commands of Christ according to the law of love, and could therefore be attempted by anyone who was willing to follow some very basic rules for daily living. This is what makes the early Methodist class meeting such an important paradigm for Christian discipleship. Yes, it was a means by which the faith of a new relationship with God in Christ could be shared in open fellowship.... There was an accountability to be exercised as well as an experience to be shared, and these weekly meetings were the occasion of both. It was the genius of the Methodist movement in Wesley's day, and is perhaps the most important contribution Methodism can make to the contemporary world church. (AD 18)

In a context of social deprivation, Methodism brought to many human dignity and a new identity (Watson EMCM 131). Watson argues that, "There can be little doubt that those who joined the Methodist societies found, in their weekly class meetings, the human relationships which provided the means of achieving their identity" (EMCM 131). The poor found a sense of self-worth through the class meeting. Wesley believed the class meeting was a way of working out the true meaning of discipleship in order to reach out to the world (Watson AD 21). Patterned after Dr. Anthony

Horneck's religious societies, the class meetings were designed to reach out to the poor by providing for their needs (Watson AD 24). These meetings also provided a regular context in which people from somewhat different social backgrounds came to know each other.

The Methodist movement for renewal within the Church of England began with direct outreach to the poor of England. The church has a mandate to set the captives free and proclaim good news to the poor. The gap between the rich and the poor in the United States is wider than at any time since World War II. The poorest twenty percent now have only five percent of the nation's income. Recently, the leaders of the United Methodist Church issued an episcopal initiative calling the church to greater involvement with the local poor.

The Initiative states, "The United States now has the highest rate of poverty in more than thirty years" (EI 2). The bishops are calling the United Methodist Church to respond to this crisis. "To respond decisively to the crisis among 'the least of these' is to share in the life and mission of the God of the Exodus and of Jesus who is making possible new opportunities for bringing good news to the poor and release to the captives" (EI 2-3).

The bishops argue that Methodism was born among the impoverished of eighteenth-century England. John Wesley and

his followers practiced ministry with the poor. The poor were the central focus of the early Methodist movement. Wesley chose the poor to lead the class meetings. He considered regular visitation of the poor a necessary spiritual discipline. For Wesley ministry with the poor was a means of grace: "Methodism in the eighteenth century was a movement of the poor, by the poor, and for the poor; and Wesley considered affluence the most serious threat to the continued vitality and faithfulness of the Methodist movement" (EI 5).

This same influence spread to American Methodism through Francis Asbury and others. Asbury warned the preachers that "faithfulness requires that they be among the poor." The bishops note,

The building of plain preaching houses and the focus on the less economically well-to-do continued until the middle of the nineteenth century.... Preaching houses, homes, and camp meetings as centers of liturgical and congregational life were replaced by more ornate buildings built on main streets. (EI 5)

In time the local church distanced itself from the poor. Our bishops tell us, "that trend has continued to this day, and the poor are seldom present in our worship and fellowship." "A Church separated from 'the least of these' is separated from the source of its identity and power, the God who is among the most vulnerable as the Crucified and Risen One" (EI 5).

The covenant discipleship (CD) group, designed after Wesley's class meeting, could provide the needed structure to enable the local church to be more intentional in its face-to-face contact with the poor.

As a pastor, I have been involved with local churches over the last six years. Both United Methodist churches I have served are faithful about giving money to a fund that helps provide emergency relief for those who need it. Most face-to-face contact occurs during the holidays as food and clothing are distributed.

A CD group has been established at Mt. Vernon UMC over the past year. I pastor this church. Part of the covenant that was designed by the group members calls them to visit the poor. Week after week that part of the covenant goes seemingly unfulfilled. Ministry with the poor requires greater intentionality than any other part of the covenant. The neglect of this part of the covenant may be due to some of the experiences and attitudes of the group members. They felt out of place among the poor community that they visited one evening. Those that volunteered to go claimed it was an uncomfortable experience. They were questioned as to why they were there by some of the people of the community. The members tried to assure them they wanted to share God's love. This action fulfills the clause in our covenant that reads, "I will share God's love with the poor, sick,

hospitalized, and inactive". Two of the members fixed a small bicycle for a young boy during the short time of the visit. Since this one visit, the group has not been back to this neighborhood, which is across the street from our church. I have felt welcome when visiting this neighborhood. However, it was difficult for the members of the group to visit the poor, to cross some of the social barriers. Therefore, they have left this part of the covenant undone.

Since 1984, David Lowes Watson has been actively seeking to resurrect the early Methodist class meeting. He is doing this through the use of covenant discipleship groups which can be incorporated into the programming structure of a local church. Over the last twelve years, many churches have used the covenant discipleship group model to strengthen their congregation's life.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine local churches which incorporate covenant discipleship groups into their programming structure. Those parishioners who participated in the groups were compared with those who did not on the basis of face-to-face contact with poor people. The following research questions were asked.

Research Question 1. Do local United Methodist churches have ministries to/with the poor?

Research Question 2. Do most covenant discipleship groups have a special focus on ministry with poor people?

Research Question 3. Do participants in covenant discipleship groups have more personal contact with the poor than non-participants?

Research Question 4. Is regular prayer for poor people associated with increased personal involvement with poor people?

Definition of Terms

Covenant Discipleship Group. A Covenant Discipleship(CD) 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 (Watson AD 56).

The Poor. These are people without the basic necessities of life. They are often overlooked, rejected or shunned by others. The poor are the forgotten of society. Poor means having little or no wealth and few or no possessions (Morris 1019). They often lack necessary social support structures.

According to the Preparatory Document for Puebla of the October 1978 meeting of the Latin American Episcopal Conference held in Puebla, Mexico the poor are weak and powerless at all levels: economic, social, political, and

human. They are the alienated, the uncared for and the elderly (Gutierrez TPOTPIH 114-115).

For this research the poor are defined loosely as those who live in the local subsidized housing and/or receive assistance from various social ministries or welfare services in order to meet their expenses. No precise definition was given in the questionnaire. It was assumed that parishioners had some shared understanding of who would be seen as a poor person.

Local Church. The word local specifies a particular place (Morris 765). The church is the company of all Christians regarded as a mystical spiritual body (Morris 241). A local church is a group of believers in a particular place. In this project it will refer mainly to the local churches selected from the Virginia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Methodology

A researcher-designed questionnaire was used to gather data to answer the research questions. A copy of this questionnaire is in Appendix A. The questionnaires were sent to churches that are incorporating the covenant discipleship structure into the programming ministry of their church. The questionnaire was set up in two parts. The first part surveyed a general group of church members regarding their participation with the poor. The

participants were asked if they had participated in a covenant discipleship group within the last two years. If yes, they were asked to answer another set of questions about whether the group was intentional or not in terms of its face-to-face contact with poor people.

The researcher measured the amount of face-to-face contact the participants have had with poor people. The responses to the questions were analyzed on a continuum of face-to-face contact with the poor as it relates with their particular local church. Church members not in covenant discipleship(CD) groups were compared with those that are in CD groups regarding the amount of their face-to-face contact with the poor. In addition, church members in CD groups that are intentional about responding to poor people were to be compared with CD group members who are not intentional about ministry with the poor.

Population and Sample

A convenience or accidental sampling method was used to gather data from the thirteen churches studied in the project (Leedy 200). The churches were selected from among the 1233 local churches in the Virginia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. A list of twenty-one churches that had one or more CD groups was generated upon the researcher's request from the Richmond, Virginia headquarters. The list was obtained through a survey sent

to all churches in the conference. The survey determined what programming structures local churches used for Christian education (copy in Appendix B). Covenant Discipleship groups were listed. One church was selected through an e-mail message sent to approximately eighty churches in the Virginia Annual Conference. These twenty-two churches were called to determine a contact person and gain permission to participate in the research. Fourteen churches agreed to be involved but only thirteen returned the data.

Variables

The dependent variables of the study are the behaviors and attitudes of the people studied. The independent variable is whether or not the people are in a CD group.

Data Collection

The data were collected by sending a questionnaire to local churches that are incorporating one or more CD groups in the Virginia Annual Conference. The leaders of these churches and groups were contacted by phone prior to sending the questions. The church was also contacted within one week after mailing the questions to learn if that church had received them. All churches were asked to send back the completed questionnaires within thirty days. When this did not occur the church was contacted by another phone call. Upon reception of the completed questionnaires, the churches

were thanked for their participation.

Delimitations and Generalizability

Disciple Bible Study and other high commitment small groups were not researched for their effect on local church members and the amount of face-to-face contact with the poor. The effect of communicating frequency (holy communion) was not studied. The level of spirituality demonstrated by the CD group leader and other members was not taken into account.

These findings cannot be used for statistical inference with a larger population since they are derived from a nonprobability sampling technique (Leedy 200). However the research did show the amount of face-to-face contact with poor people experienced by those who answered the questionnaires. In addition it did provide some insight into whether or not CD group participation is associated with an increase in the amount of a person's involvement with poor people. The project is opportune for the United Methodist Church. The Council of Bishops is calling the local church back to its Wesleyan heritage and to greater involvement with the poor in its community. This call was sounded in 1996.

Theological Reflection

The scripture teaches by word and example God's heart regarding the poor. It was to slaves in Egypt that God

spoke freedom and ultimately identity as his people. God has always had a special place in his heart for the outcast. When Sarah threw Hagar out into the desert to perish God sent a delivering angel. God reminded his people through the prophets how he wanted the poor treated. Jesus Christ came announcing the year of Jubilee. The gospel was to be proclaimed to the poor. Jesus spoke to his disciples and said, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40).

The local church as Christ's representative in its area is called to deny itself, take up its cross and follow Christ. Jesus Christ chose to become poor in order to bring redemption to others. Christians must realize that once they have been purchased they are no longer to live for themselves, but must be active in serving those for whom God called them into existence.

Wesley accomplished this mandate through the classes and bands. He organized the movement this way in order to spread scriptural holiness all over the land. This could happen again as church members watch over one another in love and accountable discipleship.

Overview

The next chapter presents the literature that informs this study. Chapter 3 describes the specific design of the

study. Chapter 4 presents the data in an organized manner.
Chapter 5 concludes the project with a summary of findings.

CHAPTER 2

Precedents in the Literature

In this chapter, the researcher reviews some aspects of Jesus' ministry with poor people. John Wesley's work among the poor is also examined. The writings of David Lowes Watson are studied to understand covenant discipleship groups. In addition Thomas Merton's insights on prayer and ministry to/with poor people and Gustavo Gutierrez's work on living among the poor are considered.

Any review of the literature on this topic must begin with an examination of how Jesus Christ and his disciples involved themselves with the poor. What structures and methods of involvement did they incorporate? How was his ministry so effective in reaching the masses of poor people?

The writings of John Wesley provide insight into the structure of the early eighteenth century Methodist movement in England. Wesley believed that the class meeting was pivotal in this mighty movement of God's Spirit. It was the very "sinew" that held the work of God together. How was it a vehicle for ministry with the poor?

The class meeting is compared with the present similar structure of the covenant discipleship group. David Lowes Watson adopted Wesley's class meeting to implement this important structure in the local churches in the 1980s.

Examination of his writings reveal the importance of CD groups. This research asked the question of whether or not those who participate in these groups have a higher amount of face-to-face contact with poor people?

A review of the related literature involves some of the writings of Thomas Merton and other contemplatives. Is prayer linked to greater face-to-face contact with poor people?

The highest level of involvement with the poor means living among them. Gustavo Gutierrez provides an excellent resource. Could his methods be adapted to the predominantly white, middle class North American churches?

Jesus Christ and Poor People

The New Testament provides insights into how Jesus Christ practiced ministry with the poor. For the purposes of this study the researcher limited himself to an examination of the three synoptic gospels; Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Most of the texts discussed are taken from the gospel of Matthew, but texts from other gospels are highlighted if they had different accounts. The reader needs to know this is not an exegetical study of these passages because that would be beyond the scope of this project. This brief study is a consideration of various passages as they relate to Jesus' practices with poor people.

Certain themes emerged as these passages were studied. Jesus chose voluntary poverty. He lived among the poor. Jesus loved those that others had forsaken. He loved the unloved. In addition, Jesus empowered the poor so that they could proclaim the gospel.

When one reads the Gospel of Matthew from a perspective of oppression and poverty, one discovers at the outset that Jesus' birth is associated with the lowly. It is implied that Bethlehem is a lowly place (Matthew 1:16). The parents of Jesus had to flee with their baby in order to protect his life (Matthew 1:13-15). He was thus identified with the original people of God who were called out of Egypt.

Jesus' forerunner, John the Baptist, was a poor prophet who lived in the desert off of the land (Matthew 3:1). Jesus proved his faithfulness to God by not being tempted by the riches of the world (Matthew 4:8). Like Moses he chose to leave it all and identify with the people that God longed to be free from bondage. The Gospel identifies Jesus with the sick and all those who are on the margins of society (Matthew 4:24). In the Sermon on the Mount, he describes as blessed those who the world would perceive to be weak and poor (Matthew 5:1-12).

Jesus' life and ministry identified with poor people. He chose to leave his riches in heaven and his high family position and identify with the poorest of the poor. A

person who chooses to be poor for the purpose of identification and transformation is different from one who is born into poverty. This was Christ's example. If we want to do what Jesus did then we will choose to share in the experience of the poor. We will set aside our security based in money and status and identify with our poor brothers and sisters, with those with whom we can bring about transformation.

Luke also portrays the identification of Christ with the poor. At the beginning the child is wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger (Luke 2:12). At the end Christ is wrapped in someone else's cloth and lying in a tomb which Joseph of Arimathea had provided (Luke 23:50-51).

God sent his son Jesus Christ to be born in a manger, to live the life of a carpenter, to preach good news to the poor, care for the sick and the needy and comfort them in sorrow; he allowed himself to be victimized by the religious and political powers, be crucified like a criminal and die in agony. But this poor man was glorified by God and raised from the dead. "Through his resurrection his offer of his Kingdom to the poor and the oppressed was vindicated" (Santa Ana xxii).

Luke's gospel proclaims Jesus as anointed to bring good news to the poor and sent to free the oppressed (4:18). Luke's sermon on the plain is even more specific about good

news for the poor than Matthew's sermon on the mount.

"Blessed are those who are poor now for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven". "Blessed are the hungry now for they shall be satisfied". "If people hate you because you are following me, then leap for joy" (Luke 6:20-23). In this passage Jesus placed a great emphasis on being poor.

Besides choosing to live among the poor and to identify with their plight, Jesus demonstrated time and again before others that he loved the unloved. Jesus practiced an attitude of service. He did not consider himself better than others, but served them out of a motivation of love. He instructed his disciples, as it was his practice, to give to everyone who begged from them. They were to love the ones that others despise. The attitude of giving is more important than the act of giving.

The disciples were not to put much emphasis on worldly possessions but were to store up treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:20). This thought is immediately followed by instruction to have a single eye or a single focus on the Kingdom of God. Jesus told his disciples that they could not serve two masters, wealth and God. They were not to worry about their food or clothes but were instead to seek God's Kingdom (Matthew 6:33). In other words their focus was to be totally on serving others, specifically others that no one else valued.

Jesus practiced living with a total focus on what God wanted him to do. He did not take any thought for what he ate or wore. He knew God would provide even as he did for the birds.

Jesus did not seem to leave us an option about the kind of obedience which takes delight in serving the outcasts, the poor. He said that those who act upon his words will be like persons who built their house upon the rock and it stood the storms (Matthew 7:24).

The following chapters of Matthew's account focus on Jesus in direct ministry with the poor. He touched and healed the leper (Matthew 8:3). He healed the centurion's slave (Matthew 8:5). He was homeless, for he had nowhere to lay his head (Matthew 8:20). He ate with Matthew, a despised tax collector (Matthew 9:13). He went about preaching and teaching in the villages and cities (Matthew 9:35).

To act upon Jesus' words means to be in ministry with those from whom the rest of society turns away in disgust. Followers must put into practice the principles he was teaching them about loving God and caring for those whom others disdain. He promised the disciples persecution when they took a radical stance like this (Matthew 10:26). But he empowered them not to be afraid of their persecutors (Matthew 10:26). They were to take up their cross and

follow him if they were to be worthy of him (Matthew 10:38). He told the rich young man who would follow him that if he wanted to be perfect he had to sell all he had and give it to the poor (Matthew 19:21).

Perhaps the most common story the writer thinks about in relation to the poor is the parable of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25:31-46). In this story Christ's followers are given a tremendous incentive in ministry with the poor. They are told that when they minister to those who are the outcasts; the prisoners, the naked, the sick they are actually doing their ministry to Christ. Their ministry is to the "least of these".

Finally, Jesus empowered the poor of his day. Shaull argues that this was one of the main characteristics of his ministry: "for Jesus the oppressed could only be liberated if they were the agents of their own liberation" (56). Jesus raised the hopes of the poor. He demonstrated to them how valued they were in God's eyes. He took a rough group of men and women, some who were poor and uneducated, and empowered them to be people who could bring transformation to the nations of the earth. He served them where they were and spoke in a language they understood (Matthew 13).

A story in the Gospel of Mark demonstrates Jesus' elevation of the lowly. A widow put more into the temple treasury than did those around her even though she only put

in one penny. While others had given from their abundance, the widow had given from her want. She went away justified for she had given sacrificially. The poor lead by example.

In the beginning of the Gospel of Luke, Mary celebrates God's work in bringing down the powerful from their thrones and in lifting up the lowly, in filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty (Luke 1:52). The Magnificat is a powerful message of God's social justice that is coming in Jesus Christ.

This gospel also provides the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29), which graphically portrays the meaning of neighbor love. The despised Samaritan was willing to go and serve the one whom others had avoided. Jesus demonstrates how God chooses to use those who are cast out for his purposes and glory. The Samaritan does not just go over and meet with the half dead stranger but puts him on his donkey and carries him to an inn. He is also willing to give what money he can to help this complete stranger. This story portrays a practice of being willing to get involved in the lives of those we do not even know. It is an example of what it means to serve God in the least of these. The gospel is proclaimed through one that is rejected by his society. The Samaritan's response is held up to others as a model of love.

There is another story in this gospel that is very

characteristic of Jesus' ministry with the poor, the parable of the wedding banquet. When giving a banquet, hosts should not invite those who can repay but those who cannot (Luke 14:13). Jesus knew that by enriching and empowering the poor in this way the Kingdom of God was advanced and modeled.

Having studied the methods of Jesus Christ and his followers in a very brief measure as they related to the poor, the focus turns to John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement.

John Wesley and Poor People

Social conditions for many in England were terrible during Wesley's generation. Boys and girls were sold like slaves to employers. They worked long hours for little pay. The rich kept them under conditions of poverty while they used them for their own gain (Wearmouth 77). John Wesley wanted his helpers to go to those who needed them the most. Most of the money for the Wesleyan Revival came from the pennies of the poor:

Poverty was no bar, no ban, to membership and to office; the poorest were made most welcome.... Wesley and his co-workers believed they had a special commission to minister to them, giving beauty for ashes and the oil of joy for mourning; emphasizing the love of God and the way of redemption, they brought into the lives of the struggling masses the message of a Father caring for his children and serving them by means of human hearts and hands. (Wearmouth 189-190)

The religion that Wesley and his followers gave to England was the parable of the Good Samaritan in living action. Wesley's open air preaching took the message of God's mercy to the poorest of the poor. The common people heard him gladly (Wearmouth 202).

In Wesley's societies the poor were empowered to serve the poor. In 1784 in London an organization of poor men decided to pay a penny a week to help strangers who had no home, no clothes, no food, no friends. They met once a week to decide who could be served in this manner (Wearmouth 212). The poor knew that poverty was not only a lack of sufficient money; not having the support of friends also made one poor. The Methodist message placed worth and dignity on the human soul, even if that soul was poor (Wearmouth 217). Members of Wesley's societies brought God's love to life, "by means of preaching, systematic sick-visiting, and social ministries, constant concern for the individual as well as the lump. Truth entered in at lowly doors" (Wearmouth 217).

The poor led the small groups called societies. These poor included women. They were the uneducated that others thought could not amount to anything (Wearmouth 223). Wesley employed women as preachers and in this way, he elevated their status (Wearmouth 227). He gave them a

greater sense of worth than did the culture of that time.

Wesley incorporated poor people into the office of steward, the one who managed the temporal affairs of the society. In addition there was the office of sick visitor, which developed because the stewards could not visit the sick when they needed them the most. These persons were chosen because of their tender loving spirits (Wearmouth 224-5).

John Wesley believed that Christianity was a social religion. He made it possible for the poorest of the poor to make contributions to social well-being. The classes engaged in weekly social exercises: they paid their pennies every week to support the distressed, poor, sick, and friendless. There were special collections taken at various times to relieve many with burdens (Wearmouth 230).

Jonathan Seville is an example of how the early Methodists employed the talents of those that were on the margins of society. He was born in 1759. His mother died when he was three and he was sent to a workhouse four years later. He was ill treated by his master's daughter and suffered a crippling leg injury. He found it impossible to work or sleep without being in constant pain. Wearmouth tells us that, "little Jonathan joined the Methodists in 1784. He soon became a prayer leader, class teacher, and local preacher" (Wearmouth 235).

Many of Wesley's followers belonged to the lowest strata of society. They were uncouth, uneducated, and undisciplined. Most knew nothing about the art and grace of living together quietly for the mutual well-being of all. Social, economic, and Christian virtues were almost unknown to them (Wearmouth 246). But through this ragged band Wesley challenged the accepted cultural norms of his day.

During Wesley's time nearly half the population was poor, and "by means of Methodism, the forsaken and forgotten multitudes entered into a two fold and transforming faith, belief in God and belief in God's purposes for mankind, beginning with themselves" (Wearmouth 266). Wesley was accused of "robbing the poor" since a collection was taken at the society meetings. He told his accuser that the opposite was happening. The poor had more money as a result of leading a more disciplined life (North 35). Wesley taught his poor followers the value of stewardship. In this sense one of his practices with the poor was personal reformation. Wesley taught the poor industry and cleanliness (North 38).

The societies continually sent funds of relief to the poor (North 64). When people were forced out of work because of an economic depression, the Methodists were the first to know about it and to try and do something (North 64). The greatest portion of their work was done among the laboring

classes in the poorer quarters of the city and in the villages and hamlets (North 64).

Wesley did not believe the poor were poor because they were lazy. He labeled that belief "wickedly, devilishly false" (2: 280). Wesley placed a great emphasis on the worth of the individual regardless of whether one was rich or poor. He taught his followers to be involved in the lives of those to whom they ministered. This sense of being loved and accepted brought many of England's poor into Wesley's societies. There were many special efforts made to aid the poor that were in the societies (North 64). One example came in 1772 when Mr. Wesley found the society at Colchester "hard beset with poverty." He stated, "Few of our societies are rich but I know none in the Kingdom so deplorably poor as this" (3: 482). At such times Wesley went out and begged for money from house to house.

There were many times when the need for the poor in the societies was greater than the assistance which could be given. At such times Wesley would have sermons and special offerings taken to relieve the poor. Once Wesley preached a sermon on charity and gave the offering to one poor family (2: 442-443).

The winter season was always severe on the poor. In February of 1744 Wesley made two collections that brought in about eighty pounds, which was not enough. He then proceed-

ed to go out and beg for the rest. This increased the fund to a hundred and seventy pounds, which supplied clothing for three hundred and thirty poor. For those that were left over he made another special collection on Good Friday of twenty-six pounds. Wesley not only prayed for the poor, he did what he could to organize the societies to care for their needs (2: 211).

Wesley kept this service to the poor up in the later years of his life. When he was over eighty he spent a week in Bristol begging for the poor and raised ninety pounds for their relief (4: 261). In 1785 Wesley trudged through the slushy streets of London raising alms for the poor. He did this for five days and was able to beg two hundred pounds to clothe the poor (4: 358).

Wesley went further than emergency relief. He used the employment scheme and the lending fund (North 67). One time the London society selected twelve of the poorest and put them to carding and spinning under the direction of a teacher. They did this four months during the winter. Wesley came under slanderous attack for this venture. He was accused of hiring runaway servant girls and of immoral practices (North 68).

The lending fund met with greater success. Wesley collected money from his well-off friends and then he lent this money out to the poor with some conditions. They could

not have above a certain amount and it had to be paid back week by week within three months. Within the first eighteen months of this project more than two hundred and fifty were helped. Wesley then enlarged the fund (North 69). Many of the poor were brought to financial stability through this fund.

On December 31, 1772, the society made special prayer on behalf of the poor, and then on the eighth of January there was a day of fasting and prayer "on account of the general want of trade and scarcity of provisions." The attention of Parliament was drawn to this need and the tide was stemmed (3: 486-487). Five or six years later Wesley found these societies in much better circumstances. Unemployment had dropped from thirty three percent to between five and ten percent (4: 115).

The Methodists also provided institutions for protection and instruction for the poor in the form of poorhouses and schools (North 76). Mr. Wesley established a poorhouse in London for the widows who were no longer able to take care of themselves. He rented two small houses for this purpose and used weekly collections to support it. He also established a school in his home. In 1748 sixty children attended but only a few could afford the tuition; most of the parents were too poor to pay. Children who needed it were clothed and all were taught reading, writing, and

arithmetic as well as the principles of the kingdom. The rules provided for attendance at the morning sermon and ten hours a day at school with no play days (North 86). The Methodists also built an orphan house to better serve their poor. The house was to provide regular instruction for poor children (North 88). The Methodists provided these same institutions in Ireland (North 102).

Boys and girls in Methodist Sunday Schools went out and visited the poor and sick. They exhorted, comforted, and prayed with them. Many of them had come from the ranks of the poor (North 107).

Wesley wrote,

How much better it is to carry relief to the poor than to send it! And that both for our own sake and theirs. For theirs, as it is so much more comfortable to them, and as we may then assist them in spirituals as well as temporals; and for our own, as it is far more apt to soften our heart, and to make us naturally care for each other. (3: 28)

He saw direct ministry with the poor as spiritually beneficial for those involved. This was especially true for the wealthier society members who easily grew hard hearted. Early Methodism did not look down on the poor. It empowered an entire class of society to help its weaker members (North 115).

Methodism was a religion of the common people, a movement of and by the poor (Sherwin 35). The laboring poor

were looked down on as untrustworthy, careless of their own welfare. They were told they had a mean, sordid, indecent spirit (Sherwin 43). Woodrow Wilson has well said: "The church was dead and Wesley awakened it; the poor were neglected and Wesley sought them out; the gospel was shrunken into formulas and Wesley flung it fresh upon the air once more in the speech of common men" (Sherwin 47).

"I love the poor," Wesley said. "In many of them I find pure genuine grace, unmixed with paint, folly, and affection...The poor are the Christians" (Sherwin 49). "Put yourself in the place of every poor man, and deal with him as you would have God deal with you" (Sherwin 129). Wesley saw himself as "God's steward for the poor" (Sherwin 130).

The Wesleyan Revival brought a social tone of moral enthusiasm (Sherwin 190). His movement depended upon that class of inarticulate and neglected citizens commonly regarded as the dregs of society. To them Wesley offered unlimited social opportunity, fostered aggressive initiative and self respect, provided discipline, incentive, guidance (Sherwin 191). Wesley helped to establish a strong sense of self worth in the individual.

Like Jesus, Wesley empowered the poor. He gave them a gospel they proclaimed triumphantly. He provided relief for those in desperate need by raising collections and special

offerings among the poor societies. Wesley ministered to the ones that his culture had rejected. Like his Lord he loved the unloved. Finally, John Wesley chose to live among the poor. He could have amassed great wealth but instead gave it all away many times. He died among the poor and they carried his casket to its resting place.

Perhaps the greatest tool that John Wesley left the church to enable its outreach to the poor was the class meeting. This meeting was held once a week. Those that attended it watched over one another's souls in love.

This rich heritage of the class meeting and being accountable for one's discipleship should be recovered in the church today. Albert Outler claims that class meetings provided a networking of small groups, taprooted in the church, consciously dependent upon the means of grace which only the church catholic can supply. Yet they were also free to develop appropriate patterns of spiritual discipline and service and courage for Christian prophecy in society (Watson EMCM x).

"These weekly meetings, a subdivision of the Methodist societies, were regarded by Wesley as the 'sinews' of the movement" (Watson EMCM 2). He believed the purpose of the church was to reach out to others with the gospel (Watson EMCM 5). Wesley further believed that true faith cannot be separated from a good life. "It was this present purpose of

living which prompted the social works of the Oxford Holy Club, the group which Wesley later described as the 'first rise' of Methodism" (Watson EMCM 43). Says Watson:

Their visiting of the prisons, helping the tenants of the workhouses, providing education and, in many instances, the basic necessities for destitute families, were a genuine outreach to the victims of an age of social displacement and savage penal retribution, toward whom the established church was largely indifferent. Yet this outreach was not to the exclusion of a pursuit for inward holiness. (EMCM 43).

Obedience was the key for accountability in the class meeting. Response to God's grace enabled that obedience. Through the structure of the class meeting obedience to God's grace could be sustained. This weekly meeting answered the critical question of how to maintain the type of discipleship Jesus requires of his church, how to permit God's grace to foster a maturity of constant obedience, so that sanctifying grace might work with an unimpeded love (Watson EMCM 64)?

The class meeting was the distinctive pattern of Methodist polity. Dependent on strong lay leadership, it was "the expression of an inclusive concept of salvation in which men and women participated with freedom and responsibility, and of a supportive structure for discipleship grounded in the realities and the common sense of worldly living" (Watson EMCM 91).

The leaders of the class meetings played a key role.

They not only received the contributions for the poor people but they watched over the souls of their brothers and sisters. When the classes met each week they advised, reproved, and encouraged as needed (Watson EMCM 93-94). Wesley saw the task of the class leader as one who implemented an accountable discipleship among the society members.

The leader needed to see each person in the class at least once a week. The class leader asked how it was with the member's soul. Counsel and correction were given as needed, and money was collected for the needs of the poor people. It was also the responsibility of the class leader to meet with the minister and stewards once a week. Thus the minister knew if any were sick, or walking disorderly and unwilling to change. The leader also gave the steward what had been collected with a list of what had been given by each (Watson EMCM 98).

Although the class leader focused highly on the inward holiness of those in the group there was a commitment to the community at large. Class meetings were tempered by the grist and grind of daily living. The classes remained very much in the world (Watson EMCM 102). There had to be evidence of the desire for salvation in the doing of outward and visible good works. Watson asserts, "These were at once a manifestation of faith, and a condition of continuing in

it" (EMCM 108).

The structure of the weekly class meetings was a source of strength and identity for those who joined the early Methodist societies (Watson EMCM 131). It was through the structure of the class meeting that Wesley empowered poor people. They were given a sense of dignity and of self-worth. They could now change some of the circumstances which entrapped their lives.

The chief purpose of the class meeting was to spread scriptural holiness across the land. It also functioned as a means of evangelism and conservation, the recruitment and assimilation of new members (Watson EMCM 136-137). It was a supportive affirmation for the alternative lifestyle offered by the gospel. Watson states:

There is no doubt that the seriousness with which the early Methodists took their discipleship made an impact on society: directly through their participation in traditional forms of philanthropy such as charity schools, hospitals, and the maintenance of a 'lending stock' by the societies; and indirectly through the pervasiveness of their presence in the industrial cities of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. (143)

Since they took the three-fold emphasis of the General Rules seriously, many were singled out in the towns and villages where they lived and worked as people to be watched, and often persecuted (Watson EMCM 143). It was not unusual for the Methodists to have their homes torn down by angry mobs (1: 452).

Through the tool of the class meeting the early Methodists watched over one another in love. True faith in Christ could be sustained only by obedient discipleship in response to grace. God's grace moved through their lives and made an impact on their community because of their discipleship which was sustained through the accountability of the weekly class meetings (Watson EMCM 144).

The class meeting was the genius of the Methodist Movement. The equivalent of the class meeting today is the Covenant Discipleship group. The researcher is attempting to examine this structure in the local churches of the Virginia Annual Conference and see if it makes a difference in the amount of their face-to-face contact with poor people.

The Importance of Covenant Discipleship Groups

As the literature has been reviewed it has become apparent how important it is to be intentional in ministry with the poor and how tied it is to Christian and Methodist identity and practice. John Wesley believed that our final relation to God depended on our relation to the poor (Jennings 130). Because such commitment to poor people is at odds with the values of the larger society, it is often difficult to carry out. Accountability and support are necessary to sustain commitment. The covenant discipleship group provides such a context for contemporary believers.

There are differences and similarities between the class meeting and the CD group. While class meetings had up to twelve members, CD groups are limited to seven members, which allows the meeting to be completed in one hour. Each member, beginning with the leader, must be accountable to each clause of a covenant during this time. Accountability is the main purpose of this time.

Covenant groups share the role of leader and foster a mutual accountability whereas the class meetings were formed around a leader (Watson AD 107). Most of the members that are in CD groups are familiar with the Christian faith. Therefore CD groups share the leadership role from week to week. Because of our Christian heritage Watson believes it is not necessary to have the Wesleyan sub-pastor role of the class leader. Since our culture is becoming increasingly sub-Christian it would be good to rethink this position. Many of our church members do not know the basics of the Bible or the faith.

Another difference is that CD groups draw up a written agreement. The early classes knew and lived by the General Rules of the societies. Today much of this is covered in the required clauses of the covenant.

CD groups have similarities to the class meetings as well. The membership is limited. It is for those who are willing to make a firm commitment to an agreed pattern of

Christian discipleship. "The covenant which the group formulates and agrees to adopt is based on the three components of Wesley's General Rules: avoiding sin, doing good, and availing oneself of the means of grace of the church" (Watson AD 109).

Like the classes before them the format of the CD group meeting is catechetical. The leader for that week shares and then asks the other members in turn how they have done on a particular clause of the covenant. "The dynamic of the group like that of the class meeting, is not one of spontaneous sharing, but of guided dialogue" (Watson AD 109).

Weekly attendance at the meetings is required. Absences are followed up with personal contact during the week. The commitment to the group is open-ended. It is for life because Christ calls the church to costly, accountable discipleship for life. If a person moves they must continue their accountability.

Finally, CD groups are structured within the larger church and are accountable to the ordinances of the church. Watson states, "This larger accountability is exercised, not only in affirming the necessity of the means of grace, but also in relating at certain critical points to the wider life and work of the local congregation" (AD 109-110). Wesley saw this structure of ecclesiola in ecclesia as

providing the freedom and accountability for an authentic discipleship, and he recognized the significance of giving them equal emphasis (Watson AD 23).

It is important to understand the structure of the CD group. People in the church who have a desire to be accountable in their discipleship form into groups. The first task of the group is to formulate a written covenant which each member signs. This covenant has required and optional clauses. The required clauses incorporate Wesley's General Rules. This covenant consists of no more than ten clauses that provide means of grace for those involved (Watson AD 67). These means of grace consist of the traditional works of piety and mercy. Wesley's General Rules which the class meetings followed were a combination of works of mercy and works of piety (Watson AD 39).

In order to be a member in good standing of a society or local church one needs to do outward and visible good works. Members are to avoid evil, to do no harm, and to do all the good they can for as many as possible (Watson AD 40). These are the works of mercy. It is in this area of the covenant of the CD group where a clause could be incorporated that deals with face-to-face contact with the local poor. Most of the groups studied had a clause that related to a justice issue or ministry with the poor in their community. This accountability provides the members

with a weekly check on their intentionality with poor people.

The members of Wesley's classes also were to attend upon all the ordinances of God. These were: public worship, ministry of the Bible either read or expounded, the Lord's Supper, private and family prayer, searching the scriptures, and fasting or abstinence (Watson AD 40). These were the works of piety and are also incorporated in the present day CD group covenant.

The optional clauses consist of a worthy spiritual goal (i.e. memorizing scripture, exercising fifteen minutes daily, etc.). These are useful in the covenant and could be individualized but they are not to take the place of the required clauses. It is within the required clauses that the members can make commitments to increase their face-to-face contact with poor people. CD groups in Methodist churches may need to be intentional about including such a clause because of contemporary Methodism's widespread middle class status and social distance from the poor.

Covenant discipleship provides accountability to the means of grace and the costly discipleship portrayed in the gospels. It is a structure that calls the church back to its roots. Those roots are comprised of God's grace. It was Wesley's doctrine of grace that led the early Methodist movement and challenged the culture of the time. Watson

believes, "When there are some who open themselves more fully to God's gracious initiatives, then grace moves more freely and efficaciously through the body as a whole" (AD 106).

The means of grace show a way to be given a heart for poor people. The contemplatives have realized that through the practice of the spiritual disciplines, their hearts become more committed to poor people. They have developed this commitment through silence, prayer, and study of the scriptures.

Being a part of a CD group is important for availing oneself of the means of grace. It provides a way to practically love one another. It may also be a structure within which to develop a greater intentionality in one's face-to-face relations with poor people.

Gordon Cosby, of the Servant Leadership School in Washington, DC, recognizes the importance of small group structures that serve the poor. A structure that grows out of biblical vision will dramatically proclaim a solidarity with the poor, with those who suffer most deeply at the margins of society (O'Connor 86). Says Cosby:

These structures will not isolate the poor while serving them. They will recognize that the poor are the true leaders and work alongside them in their struggle for a more just world. They will provide an opportunity for the privileged and deprived, the rich and the poor to be together to break down the dividing wall of partition which

separates. (O'Connor 86)

Prayer, Present Practices, and Poor People

There must be an inner transformation in people before a local church might be willing to become highly involved with the poor. Spirituality would be an important part of transformation. Contemplatives of our time can teach us about our relationship with God and our ministry with the poor.

Thomas Merton writes, "No man or woman who ignores the rights and needs of others can hope to walk in the light of contemplation" (NSOC 19). The paradox of the mystical life is in giving yourself for others (NSOC 64). Those whom the world would consider social recluses actually receive God's heart for the poor and are effective in ministry with them. When this thinking is extrapolated past the individual to the community of believers one sees the importance of spirituality and its effect on ministry with poor people. They are directly related to one another. Without the means of grace being utilized through CD groups the church will not be effective in its ministry with the poor. Without identifying with poor people, the church is unable to love others the way they are loved by Christ.

The true fruit and the true purpose of solitude is love for others (Merton Thoughts 124). Solitude is a large part of spirituality, a spiritual discipline. It is only as we

are quiet before God that we can hear the still small voice, which is speaking constantly. Our love for others will move us to seek God's word of freedom and deliverance for those who are poor in the community. We will learn that in God's eyes we are all poor. When we understand God's love for us we will not be afraid to go to God in all our poverty, weakness, spiritual wretchedness, and infirmity. As Merton says, "Indeed when we understand the true nature of His love for us, we will prefer to come to Him poor and helpless" (Thoughts 36). It is through our relationship with God that we experience our own poverty and are then able to relate more with the poverty of those around us.

The CD group helps to bring this to focus. There could be a clause based on the discipline of silence. The group in which the researcher is a member shares a time of silence in the concluding moments of the hour. More importantly, as members come together week after week discussing their shortcomings in living up to the covenant they realize their poverty before God. It is hoped this will give them a heart for others who are even physically poor.

True solitude is in our hearts. As Merton argues, It is in the loneliness of solitude that the deepest activities begin: "It is here that you discover act without motion, labor that is profound repose, vision in obscurity, and, beyond all desire, a fulfillment whose limits extend to

infinity" (Seeds 59). It is in our quietness before God that we as a people of God will hear the call to be deeply involved with those who are marginalized around us.

Henri Nouwen's book, The Living Reminder, offers some good insights into the importance of prayer for the spirituality of the church. He believes that prayer is a direct link with service. In other words the more the church is in prayer the more it is equipped for service. For Nouwen prayer and service are inseparable (12).

Susan Muto's work also informs this segment on spirituality. Muto argues that spiritual exercises provide the strength needed for service to the poor in the community when enthusiasm is depleted: "If we neglect our spiritual exercises or grow lax in faith, hope, and love, we run the risk of becoming depleted when the first blush of enthusiasm in our service gives way to the sober reality of routine" (175). Muto is confirming what Merton says about our deepest activities coming from our time alone with God. It is in this spiritual exercise of faith that we are given divine direction and sustaining power for the task to which we have been called.

Thomas Oden writes that in early Christianity, "the relief work for the poor was closely associated with the worshipping community" (270). The early church believed that the nearer the neighbor was to them the greater their

responsibility became to meet those needs of the poor (Oden 279). They also believed strongly in voluntary poverty (Oden 287). They would sell what they had and give to the poor as Jesus had commanded his followers.

How do Christians behave toward the poor? The church tends to respond to the poor as does the culture of the nation, judging people according to how much money they have. Often, our charitable giving is self-serving. Jennings observes that we give a lot but it goes to the middle-class rather than the poor(22). This is true when one considers the local church budget of many Methodist churches in the Virginia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. Most of the budget goes to the building and the pastor. Both of these serve the mainly middle class church. We think that if we give some money we have done our part and we tend to lose sight of the deeper issues which need to be addressed regarding poverty (Jennings 23).

According to Jennings the representative human being in America is not found in the suburbs but in the slums (72). The high standard of living of some of us is directly proportional to the poverty of most of us, say the social scientists (Jennings 73). Jennings argues that, "To a remarkable degree the black pastor or the white clergyman working with the poor in America are the counterparts of the radical priests or pastors working with the poor of Latin

America or other parts of the Third World" (86). For this reason Christians of America have some listening to do, for the poor on our doorsteps are telling us much about ourselves and our world (86).

One of the reasons for a lack of involvement with the poor is the lack of conversation and relationships among the pastors, parishioners, and poor people. Jennings states, "Action on behalf of the poor means that we do not do so much for the poor as with the poor, and when we do ministry with the poor we increase the chances for interpersonal relationships" (104-105).

Richard Shaull believes that the poor of North America will be instrumental in changing the structures that have oppressed them. He further believes that Christian faith and community will be at the center of such a transformation to the degree that the church is involved in the lives of the poor (5,22).

This is happening in Latin America. The discovery of the poor together with the rediscovery of the Gospel has produced radical changes in the lives of many Christians. Priests and nuns have left monasteries and convents in wealthy sections of a city and have moved to the poor barrios. Their houses are no better than those around them. They share the same life and hardships of the poor.

They desire to serve in any way they can. Priests,

lawyers, doctors, and teachers have chosen to use their professional training to serve those who need it the most. This has caused them to change the way they live and think. The cause of the poor has become their cause; they have shifted their loyalty from the class to which they belonged to solidarity with poor people (Shaul 86,87).

Shaul writes,

This, more than anything else, has aroused the fear and anger of the wealthy and powerful. In one country after another those who have chosen this path have been harassed and persecuted, and some of them have been killed. Those who have undergone this transformation speak of it as a conversion experience, a "second conversion" to the poor. (86,87)

This has made them aware of the suffering around them and brought them to the point of being willing to lay down their own lives for the sake of the gospel. But this has not been a burden to them; instead it has brought them great joy and a sense of doing the will of God. The number who have chosen this path may be small but they are a powerful witness of God's love for the least (Shaul 86,87). The basis of this liberation movement is found in the small Christian communities of the poor (Shaul 137).

It is only by living in Christian community with poor people that one can truly hear the call of God's Spirit to be in solidarity with the poor, for the community shows us our need for one another and our need for God. Through this commitment to God and one another our hearts are opened to

the plight of the poor. We realize that the poor are us. Gustavo Gutierrez has long been involved with the plight of the poor in Latin America. He believes the only way the gospel of Jesus Christ can fully be proclaimed is if it is first proclaimed to the poor and then the poor proclaim it to others. Like Merton, he believes our reaching out to the poor is motivated through our silence with God. In fact, for Gutierrez the only way to know the mystery of speaking about God authoritatively is through contemplative prayer and solidarity with the poor (Lefebuce 28).

Foundational for Gutierrez is the fact that, "our relationship with God is expressed in our relationship with the poor" (TPOTPIH 8). If we know God, then we will do what God says to do. The concept of justice in the Bible is the uniting factor between one's relationship with God and one's relationship with the poor (TPOTPIH 9-10). Further, according to Gutierrez, "the sign of the arrival of the Kingdom of God is that the poor have the gospel preached to them...the poor are the Christians who retell and reclaim the true word of Christ" (TPOTPIH 21).

Vatican II proclaimed that, like Christ, the church must carry out its work of redemption among the poor and the oppressed: "God's Kingdom and social injustice are incompatible", says Gutierrez (TPOTPIH 30,32). The episcopal conference at Medellin may represent for the Latin

American church what Vatican II was for the whole Catholic church (TPOTPIH 34). Christians have been discovering how exploited Latin Americans are. They are now being involved in new ways with them. This is causing a new way of living and thinking about their faith. They have become the assembly of those called into mission (TPOTPIH 38).

Gutierrez writes that, "to know God is to do justice, is to be in solidarity with the poor person.... There is no authentic worship of God without solidarity with the poor..... All this entails entering a different world" (TPOTPIH 51). Latin American Christians have undergone a process of change in their face-to-face contact with the poor. First, the religious communities cried out for reform. Their spirituality was centered on a life of poverty and contemplation. This spread to other types of religious communities. Then, broad sectors of Christian laity began to give a more radical witness to poverty. They saw that certain kinds of poverty were not compatible with the gospel and such poverty was calling the whole church to an account. They learned that solidarity with the poor leads to a reinterpretation of the gospel (TPOTPIH 53-55).

This rereading of the gospel comes as a result of being in community. Gutierrez' experience is relevant for US churches in suggesting that we must create Christian communities. CD groups are a small community of committed

disciples in the local church. They could be the means to awaken the larger church community to greater face-to-face contact with poor people. These communities could then strike at the root of poverty, says Gutierrez (TPOTPIH 67-71). They could be intentional about living among the poor and empowering them for the work of ministry. This could be costly ministry because it may result in persecution, as it has for Christians in Latin America.

Many of our North American churches are in a different context from their Latin American counterparts. Ministry there is mainly among the poor since most of the population is poor. Churches in the third world nations have placed ministry to/with the poor at a higher priority level. Therefore churches in North America will need to be more intentional in their ministry with poor people. Just because the need is not as prevalent does not mean North American middle class United Methodist churches should be less involved.

Covenant discipleship could be the covenantal catalyst needed to encourage this kind of sacrificial ministry among the less fortunate of our communities. When Christians are willing to step out into this kind of costly ministry experience there will be repercussions. Followers will be showing others both in and out of the church the kind of obedience God desires for his people. The researcher

believes this persecution could mean that Christians are moving closer to living the gospel. As Gutierrez writes, "these Christians--these farmhands, laborers, priests, bishops, university students, nuns--are not jailed for their "religious ideas" but for their social praxis--their evangelization" (TPOTPIH 88).

Gutierrez believes God loves the poor simply because they are poor. Therefore in order to know and love God one must seek to know the poor. For God reveals who God is through the poor. God's power is perfected in weakness as St. Paul has said. Because Latin American Christians are choosing to live among the poor they are experiencing God's life and love in new ways. They have become an example for the local churches in this nation to follow Jesus. These Latino Christians, whatever class of society they come from, all share a clear identification with the interests of the oppressed in Latin America. This is the main thing that is happening in the Christian community of Latin America, says Gutierrez (TPOTPIH 169).

The Latin American church needed to change if it was going to make an impact on the oppressive structures and to construct a more just society. The first way it did this was through being a prophetic voice that denounced the rampant injustice (mainly the bishops were called to do this). This vocal repudiation "of injustice implies the

rejection of the use of Christianity to legitimize the established order" (ATOL 114-115).

The second way the Latin American church needed to change was to be involved in conscientizing evangelization (ATOL 116). This meant the church would preach the gospel to the poor by going to the poor and learning their needs. Then, by reflection and reading the Scriptures, a realization would come of God's preferential treatment of the poor. The poor would not only hear good news, they would in turn be the better bearers of the message.

The third way the Latin American church changed was to become a poor church, or a church that welcomes the poor. Creating a church the poor would feel comfortable attending led to the fourth change, altering the church structure to be more accommodating to the poor. However the biggest need for structural change was with the clergy. Priests needed to be free to live among the poor. Consequently, clergy became the fifth necessary change. (ATOL 117-118).

Gutierrez points out:

Poverty is an act of love and liberation. It has a redemptive value. If the ultimate cause of man's exploitation and alienation is selfishness, the deepest reason for voluntary poverty is love of neighbor. Christian poverty has meaning only as a commitment of solidarity with the poor, with those who suffer misery and injustice.... It is not a question of idealizing poverty but rather of taking it on as it is--an evil--to protest against it and to struggle to abolish it. Solidarity must manifest itself in specific action, a break with one's social class. Christian poverty is an

expression of love. To be in solidarity with the poor in Latin America means to run personal risks and even to put one's life in danger. (ATOL 300-302)

Is it possible that the North American churches are a decade behind the Latin American churches with respect to solidarity? CD groups could provide the structure for small communities that are involved with poor people. The groups will need to be intentional about incorporating the poor in order to know their needs and be challenged by their lifestyles. Wesley incorporated the poor in leading some of the class meetings of his day and perhaps we could do the same in our day.

Mother Teresa is a prime example of the way Jesus calls his disciples to serve and live among the poor. She is one who sees Jesus in the poor: "The message was quite clear: I was to leave the convent and help the poor whilst living among them.... I felt intensely that Jesus wanted me to serve him among the poorest of the poor, the uncared for, the slum dwellers, the abandoned, the homeless"....Jesus invited me to serve him and follow him in actual poverty, to practice a kind of life that would make me similar to the needy in whom he was present, suffered and loved" (7).

Mother Teresa describes the young women that God sends to her to help in this ministry of serving the poorest of the poor. They are from high, middle, and lower socio-economic classes. They are very anxious to live a life of

poverty. She believes that if we really want to know the poor we must know what poverty is and believe that whenever we help and touch the poor we are helping and touching Christ. Mother Teresa states that, "it is very beautiful to see our young people so fully devoted, so full of love for God's poor, who are the poorest of the poor, covered with dirt and with maggots".... All our sisters are full of joy. They are the most striking examples of living faith with joy" (14-16).

Mother Teresa believes that, "we show our love for God by putting our love for him into living action through serving the poorest of the poor" (18). We take one poor person at a time. That one is Jesus, and that is why the poor become the hope of salvation for mankind" (20). We have to thank God that the poor people are giving us more than we are giving to them (59). Mother Teresa asserts that, "the poor are great people! We must love them not by feeling pity for them. We must love them because it is Jesus in the distressing disguise of the poor.... Those lepers, those dying, those hungry, those naked: they are Jesus!" (92).

There is a common theme in the writings of Gustavo Gutierrez and Mother Teresa. Those who are willing to leave their positions of prestige and wealth and create relationships with poor people are the ones who deeply receive God's joy in the fullest measure. It is hoped that

Christians within the accountable structure of the CD group will find ways to live among the poor. The Bible teaches that in God's presence there is the fullness of joy. It would seem from these testimonies that God is present in the poor in a special way.

This study of the related literature has helped to provide some background information for the research questions of this project. However it has not sufficiently answered these questions. Field research was needed to see if participation in CD groups was associated with increased face-to-face contact with poor people. The following chapter describes the way the data for that research were gathered and analyzed.

CHAPTER 3

Design of the Study

This chapter expands the first chapter of the study. It details the necessary steps the researcher took before collecting the data for the project and describes the methodology of the research more fully.

Problem and Purpose

The problem is to find ways the local church can be more involved with poor people in its community. The researcher studied whether or not the structure of the Covenant Discipleship group could help to solve this problem. Since it offered high accountability and a focus on prayer he hoped it would provide part of the answer.

The purpose behind this research was to examine local churches which incorporate CD groups into their programming structure. CD group members were compared with churchgoers not in a CD group to determine levels of face-to-face contact with poor people. A researcher designed questionnaire provided data based upon the following questions.

Research and Operational Questions

Research Question 1. Do local UM churches have ministries to/with the poor?

a. What kinds of ministries are there with the poor?

b. Can these ministries be ranked to determine increasing face-to-face contact with the poor?

Research Question 2. Do most covenant discipleship groups have a special focus on ministry with poor people?

a. What kind of clauses in the covenant cover being intentional about ministry with the poor?

Research Question 3. Do participants in CD groups have more personal contact with the poor than non-participants?

a. What is the percentage of people involved in CD groups compared with churchgoers not in CD groups that completed the questionnaire?

b. Is there a difference in the attitudes of churchgoers and CD group members toward ministry with poor people?

c. Is there a difference in the behaviors of churchgoers and CD group members toward ministry with poor people?

d. Is intentional outreach to the poor in CD groups associated with higher levels of face-to-face involvement with poor people?

Research Question 4. Is regular prayer for poor people associated with increased personal involvement with poor people?

Population and Sample

I chose a convenience sample. Therefore this research cannot suggest statistical inferences for a larger population. There are 1233 local churches in the Virginia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. The Division of Education sent out a survey in the Spring of 1996 from the conference headquarters in Richmond, Virginia. This survey asked the pastors or Christian education directors to check the ministries they offered in their churches. These ministries included CD groups. I contacted the office and requested a list of those churches in the conference that were incorporating CD groups. This list was provided in August of 1996.

There were twenty-one churches in the entire conference who sent the survey back that acknowledged they had one or more CD groups. This means approximately two percent of the churches in the Virginia Annual Conference that completed the survey had CD groups. Therefore a nonprobability sample was an appropriate means to collect the data for this project.

The research had to be done on those churches that have incorporated CD groups into their programming structure and were willing to participate in the survey. Since the sample of churches was so small to draw from, it was best to contact those churches directly and to use as many as

responded. Subjects were selected from among the twenty-two churches that have CD groups. These churches have a combined total of 6,424 parishioners and an average attendance of 3,246. This average was based on the previous year's attendance on Sunday morning divided by fifty-two. (Journal A1-A95). Out of the twenty-two churches that were contacted by phone and facsimile thirteen participated in the research. The 954 parishioners who completed the questionnaire became the sample population. Five of the thirteen churches gave the questionnaire only to their adult Sunday school classes.

Instrumentation

A researcher-designed questionnaire was used to collect the data (Appendix A). The questionnaire was developed in order to discover relationships between CD group involvement and contact with the poor. The questionnaire incorporated a Likert-type scale for some of the questions. The first part of the questions surveyed a general group of church members (in churches with CD groups) and asked about their contact with the poor. Those surveyed were asked whether or not they had participated in a CD group in the last two years. If so, they were asked to answer the last part of the questionnaire about whether the CD group was intentional about ministry with poor people and about increasing their face-to-face contact with poor people.

The questionnaire was submitted to the mentoring team involved in this research project at Asbury Theological Seminary. Revisions were made in order to make the instrument cleaner and more effective. A pre-test was conducted at Mt.Vernon UMC. Based on the positive response and the number of questionnaires that were completed the instrument was sent to the other twelve churches without further revisions. The instrument was developed based on a set of research and operational questions. A range of ministry that required increasing face-to-face contact with the poor was incorporated in the questions. This ranking of ministry was based on the insights of the researcher through his experience and reading.

Data Collection

The churches generated from the conference office list that are known to have CD groups were contacted by phone. Once permission was granted, the contact person of the churches was sent a questionnaire with instructions on how it was to be administered. Many of the church leaders reviewed the questionnaire before they agreed to participate in the research. Once approved, a letter was sent with detailed instructions on administering the instrument to the entire congregation (Appendix A). The instructions said for the ushers to hand the questionnaire out as the people came in the sanctuary. They were to collect them as the people

left that morning. The pastor made a brief announcement during an appropriate time for those present to take a few minutes to complete the survey. On Tuesday of the following week the pastor needed to send them back to me in packaging that was provided. There was a window of one month for giving the instrument to the congregation. Some churches gave it to the Sunday school rather than to the congregation. This procedure was approved by the ATS mentoring team. Stamped envelopes were provided for sending back the answered questionnaires. The churches were contacted if the data were not returned in a timely way. The instrument was designed so that it did not take more than fifteen minutes of the worship service to complete and collect.

Variables

The independent variable of the study was whether or not the subject was a participant in a CD group. The dependent variables were the behaviors and attitudes of the subjects. Measurement for variables was quantitative.

Control

The first series of questions asks for age, sex, socioeconomic status(occupation), and church attendance frequency. The data were run to control for sex and age groupings. What was being measured was the relation of CD group involvement with the amount of face-to-face contact

with the poor. The data compared participants in CD groups with churchgoers not in CD groups. It also compared CD groups that are intentional about responding to the poor with those who are not.

Data Analysis

The questionnaires were analyzed through the grid of the research and operational questions. The data were analyzed through frequency distributions and cross tabulations. Excel 5.0 and Word Perfect 6.1 were used to analyze the data and to display them graphically.

By the Central Limit Theorem the mean is approximately normally distributed for large samples, regardless of the shape of the population. Therefore we can assume a normal distribution for this sample. However the variances are not assumed to be equal and a two-tailed unequal variance test was chosen to show significance(Kvanli 429-439).

A student's t-Test was used to determine statistical significance for the drawn sample. The null hypothesis states there is no difference between the two groups(non-CD vs CD). The alternative hypothesis states there is a difference with the two groups with respect to face-to-face contact toward poor people. If the probability provided from the t-test is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis will be rejected and the alternative hypothesis will be accepted(Kvanli 363-373).

CHAPTER 4

Findings of the Study

Statistical inferences cannot be drawn with respect to a larger population. A non-probability sampling method provided the data. However, important and suggestive insights resulted from this convenience sample.

Research Question 1

When asked, "Are there ministries in your church that serve the poor?," 99.7% of the 954 subjects responded favorably. When asked to name these ministries, all nine possible responses were cited by 5% or more of the subjects (Table 1).

TABLE 1
Ministries to/with the Poor Represented by Study Churches
(n=954)

Ministry	Raw Numbers	%
Local mission projects	706	74
Habitat for humanity	630	66
World service	572	60
Discretionary fund	534	56
Appalachian service project	515	54
Society of St. Andrew	305	32
Inviting poor people to worship	258	27
Visiting poor people weekly	114	12
Living among the poor	48	5

Local mission projects showed the highest percentage. The study churches named several local ministries. These included: local soup kitchens, handing out food and clothes at service centers, working with children who have been identified as being at risk, providing transportation for those who need it. Living among the poor showed the lowest percentage. Approximately half of the subjects surveyed responded that their churches were involved in the Appalachian Service Project and discretionary fund giving.

The researcher asked whether the various ministries could be evaluated based on the amount of personal contact they provided with the poor. Face-to-face ministry to/with the poor was ranked on a continuum in the following way for the purposes of this research (Table 2).

TABLE 2
Ministries to/with the Poor Represented by Study Churches
with face-to-face contact ranking

Ministry	Ideal*		Actual	
	Raw Numbers	%	Raw Numbers	%
World service	48	5	572	60
Discretionary fund	48	5	534	56
Society of St. Andrew	48	5	305	32
Habitat for humanity	48	5	630	66
Appalachian service project	48	5	515	54
Local mission projects	143	15	706	74
Inviting poor people to worship	191	20	258	27
Living among the poor	191	20	48	5
Visiting poor people weekly	191	20	114	12

*these values are theoretical and based on the researcher's insights

The least amount of contact but still an important ministry to/with the poor people around the world is World Service giving. The money given to this ministry supplies the needs of poor people all over the world. These needs are determined by the General boards and agencies of the United Methodist Church. People give to this by designating it on their offering envelopes. It is actually a part of the church budget and is automatically contributed to on a monthly basis. The treasurer of the local church sends in a check each month to the conference headquarters. Therefore there is little contact directly with the poor by the people in the church.

Discretionary fund giving comes next. This is a fund that most churches have for people who come to them by foot or phone to request help for immediate needs. Paying all or part of a power bill is an example of this fund. Some give to this directly through a communion Sunday offering left at the altar. Others give indirectly by giving to the church budget. Regardless of the way, only the person administering the fund has any face-to-face contact with a poor person. This help is given to poor people within the local community and has a higher chance of face-to-face contact than the World Service giving which is sent to a central office for distribution.

Since the Society of Saint Andrew is a ministry of gleaning the produce farmers have left behind, it comes next after the discretionary fund. Potatoes and other crops are harvested by church people and given to food banks to be distributed among the poor. There is more chance for face-to-face contact than with the discretionary fund. This ministry offers a teaching component. Participants learn about the needs of the hungry as well as visit ministries that are directly involved with the poor.

Habitat for Humanity builds homes for those who cannot afford them. The church person may work alongside the one for whom the home is being built. Appalachian Service Project repairs homes lived in by the poor. There is a much

higher rate of contact with the family as the home is being repaired. "Other" was included as a category in the questionnaire to learn of additional ministries the church was doing in relation with poor people. Since a variety of answers could apply it was dropped from the statistical analysis.

Local mission projects are listed next on the continuum since they can involve direct contact with the poor on a regular basis. Local mission projects include soup kitchens, providing homeless shelter, Bible studies in poor neighborhoods, and many other outreach ministries.

Inviting poor people to worship would require one of the highest levels of face-to-face contact. The poor must be spoken with in order to be invited. Living among the poor would come next since it is possible to live nearby someone and never get to know them. Theologians like Gustavo Gutierrez view living among the poor as involving the greatest face-to-face contact but this is with the understanding that a person has chosen to leave security and position to be an advocate for the poor and live among them. It was likely that most of the subjects in this research would not understand "living among the poor" in the way Gutierrez describes.

Greatest contact for middle class parishioners may well involve weekly visits with the poor. Wesley stressed this

kind of involvement with his followers throughout his ministry. He considered weekly visitation with the poor a means of grace and received that grace in his own life as often as possible.

By ranking these questions I hoped to show that ministries with poor people can involve more or less face-to-face contact. Greater face-to-face contact is valued highly because the potential for transformation of persons is greater.

By comparing these two lists, knowledge of where the church is involved with the poor and the ranking of face-to-face contact, some interesting questions arise. Where were most of the ministries with the poor thought to be in the thirteen churches? The largest percentage was in local mission projects. These came near the middle of the face-to-face contact continuum. A very low percentage of subjects reported that their churches were involved at the higher levels of face-to-face contact with the poor, i.e. inviting, living, visiting the poor on a regular basis. Inviting poor people to worship came closest to the ideal set by the researcher.

The lower involvement in areas of highest face-to-face contact may show that congregations generally choose to assist poor people through ministries that require limited personal contact and initiative with poor people.

Research Question 2

When asked, "Do most covenant discipleship groups have a special focus on ministry with poor people?," 90.82% of those in CD groups said their group was not intentional about ministry to/with the poor. Only 7.14% said their group was intentional. The expected response of CD group intentionality with the poor was not observed. Perhaps the covenants are not specific about ministry to poor people. However it was interesting that even though the members did not think they were intentional in their covenant with the poor they nevertheless report involvement in ministries with poor people.

The operational question for research question two asked: What kind of clauses in the covenant cover being intentional about ministry with poor people? The data came from question eighteen of the survey which asked CD group members only, "Does one of the clauses of your covenant require ministry with the poor?". If they answered yes they were asked to write out that clause. Most CD group members were not sure of whether or not they have this clause in their covenant. Those that did respond gave bits and pieces of the clause they could remember. Their responses were not sufficient to aid in the answer of this question, though their incomplete responses suggest that this has not been an articulated priority in most CD groups.

Research Question 3

Research question 3 asked, "Do participants in CD groups have more personal contact with the poor than non-participants?" The answers came from four operational questions.

Operational question 3a asked, "What is the percentage of people involved in CD groups compared with churchgoers not in CD groups that completed the questionnaire?"

Question 16 provided the needed data, which showed 10.3 percent of the subjects that returned the questionnaire had been involved in CD groups within the last two years (Table 3).

TABLE 3
Churchgoers' Degree of Participation
in Covenant Discipleship Groups

Involved in CD Groups	n	%
Yes	98	10.3
No	843	88.4
Not Applicable	13	1.3
Total	954	100.0

Operational question 3b asked: Is there a difference in the attitudes of churchgoers and CD group members toward ministry with poor people? Questionnaire questions 10-15 provided data that answered this question. The questions

are listed.

10. I believe that ministry to/with poor people is an important part of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

11. I would be willing to give some money to poor people regularly.

12. I would be willing to deliver food to poor people regularly.

13. I would be willing to teach life skills or employment skills to poor people in my community.

14. I would be willing to visit poor people in my community on a regular basis with the hope of developing an ongoing friendship.

15. I would be willing to live among poor people of the community in order to minister with them more effectively.

These questions used a Likert-type scale to measure the attitudes of the subjects. The attitudes of CD members and Non-CD members were significantly different.

TABLE 4
Differences Between CD and Non-CD Churchgoers'
Attitudes Toward the Poor

Ministry to Poor	CD Churchgoer		Non-CD Churchgoer		t	p ≤ .05
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Belief about poor	0.81	0.27	0.73	0.31	2.696	0.008
Give money	0.63	0.36	0.46	0.38	4.554	0.001
Deliver food	0.53	0.38	0.33	0.41	5.066	0.002
Teach skills	0.38	0.48	0.29	0.42	1.708	0.090
Visit poor	0.36	0.41	0.14	0.40	4.992	0.002
Live among poor	-0.04	0.51	-0.23	0.41	3.480	0.001

Table 4 showed a statistical difference in the attitudes of the two groups. Teaching life skills was the only category that showed no statistical difference. The attitudes toward poor people for CD churchgoers and Non-CD churchgoers showed a difference in all the other categories. Those in the CD groups had a greater level of commitment.

Operational question 3c asked: Is there a difference in the behaviors of churchgoers and CD group members toward ministry with poor people? To answer this question significance testing was done on questions 8 and 16 (Table 5). It was important to learn whether a person's behavior toward the poor was affected by membership in a CD group. The research showed not only a significant difference in the

way people felt toward ministry with the poor but also a significant difference in what they actually did to be in ministry to/with poor people.

TABLE 5
Differences Between CD and Non-CD Churchgoers'
Behaviors Toward the Poor

Ministry to Poor	CD Churchgoer		Non-CD Churchgoer		t	p ≤ .05
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
World Service	0.36	0.48	0.14	0.35	4.335	0.0001
Discretionary Fund	0.44	0.50	0.16	0.36	5.364	0.0001
Society of St. Andrew	0.32	0.47	0.12	0.49	3.849	0.0002
Habitat for Humanity	0.30	0.46	0.11	0.31	4.005	0.0001
Appalachian Service Project	0.14	0.35	0.08	0.27	1.725	0.0872
Local Missions	0.63	0.48	0.26	0.44	5,000	0.0001
Inviting to worship	0.17	0.38	0.05	0.22	3.157	0.0021
Living among poor	0.05	0.22	0.01	0.12	1.620	0.1083
Visiting poor weekly	0.09	0.29	0.02	0.12	2.579	0.0113

The rows of the table are ordered from least to greatest face-to-face contact with poor people. A behavioral difference was observed between the two groups. The Appalachian Service Project and living among the poor did not show a significant difference. This may be due to the

fact of the popularity of the ASP ministry among United Methodists. Most of the subjects probably believed living among the poor meant being in close proximity to where the poor lived. Therefore each group would be somewhat similar.

The nine ministry categories were collapsed into three (Table 6). The two categories that dealt with money were collapsed. These were also at the low end of the face-to-face contact continuum. Next the missions both local and not so local were collapsed. Finally, those categories that were ranked the highest in face-to-face contact were collapsed.

TABLE 6
Differences Between CD and Non-CD Churchgoers'
Behaviors Toward the Poor
Collapsed

Ministry to Poor	CD Churchgoer		Non-CD Churchgoer		t	p ≤ .05
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Money	0.54	0.50	0.23	0.42	5,000	0.0004
Missions	0.72	0.45	0.39	0.49	5,000	0.0002
Face / face	0.21	0.41	0.07	0.25	3.505	0.0007

When collapsed all three categories showed a significant difference between the two groups. The study showed a difference in what the subjects did as well as how they felt toward poor people.

Operational question 3d asked, "Is intentional outreach to the poor in CD groups associated with higher levels of face-to-face involvement with poor people?". Data for the question were gathered by asking CD group members the ways they were involved in ministry with the poor. Six categories were provided and have been ranked in table 7 based on greater participation of the poor in leadership responsibilities within the CD groups. The "other" category has been dropped again since its support for this research was minimal at best.

TABLE 7
Poor Involvement in CD Groups
n=97

Ministry	Raw Numbers	%
Bible study	14	15
Local Missions	29	30
Visiting poor	12	12
Inviting poor to CD group	7	7
Inviting poor to lead CD group	0	0

The table shows local missions as the highest percentage involvement with the poor for those in CD groups. Bible study to learn about responses to poverty was next in importance. Only 12% were involved with the poor by

visiting them. A smaller group invited poor people to participate in CD groups. None had invited poor people to lead the meeting. This showed the sample of CD groups to be comprised of those who would not be classified as poor, whereas Wesley's class meetings were made up mainly of those who would be considered poor. The fact that none of the groups had the poor leading perhaps shows that poor people were not welcome in these predominantly middle class North American churches. As the poor become more involved in CD groups another study in this area will need to be conducted.

Research Question 4

The final research question asked, "Is regular prayer for poor people associated with increased personal involvement with poor people?" Data were gathered from questions eight and nine in the questionnaire (Table 8).

The analysis shows a difference between people who prayed often for poor people and those who never, rarely, or sometimes prayed for them. This was true for eight of the nine categories of ministry. The greatest significance was found in world service giving and inviting the poor to worship on a weekly basis. These categories had higher T-scores than the others. This indicates that people who pray often for the poor are more likely to give to World Service and invite them to church than people who do not. This may

indicate that those who pray for the poor from a global point of view are willing to give more to world service giving than those who only pray rarely. Those who pray for the poor within their local communities are more willing to invite the poor to worship than those who pray only occasionally for them.

TABLE 8
Differences in Prayer Frequency
Behaviors Toward the Poor

Ministry to Poor	Pray Often		Never, rare, seldom		t	p ≤ .05
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
World Service	0.26	0.44	0.11	0.31	5,000	0.0004
Discretionary Fund	0.24	0.43	0.15	0.36	3.322	0.0009
Society of St. Andrew	0.21	0.69	0.10	0.31	2.806	0.0052
Habitat for Humanity	0.15	0.36	0.11	0.31	1.741	0.0821
Appalachian Service Project	0.14	0.34	0.05	0.23	4.019	0.0007
Local Missions	0.36	0.48	0.26	0.44	3.524	0.0005
Inviting to worship	0.12	0.32	0.03	0.17	4.806	0.0002
Living among poor	0.03	0.18	0.01	0.09	2.437	0.0152
Visiting poor weekly	0.04	0.21	0.01	0.10	2.945	0.0034

Habitat for humanity showed no significant difference in relation to frequency of prayer. Whether one prayed often

or seldom for the poor did not affect whether a person participated in the Habitat for humanity ministry. The researcher was puzzled by this finding. Why would that be any different from the Appalachian Service Project?

Table 9 collapses the various ministry areas into three categories. These are money, mission, and personal face-to-face contact with poor people. Significance was seen in all three areas. The greatest significance was in the highest level of contact areas: inviting, living among, visiting. The T-score was significantly higher in the face-to-face contact category.

TABLE 9
Differences in Prayer Frequency
Behaviors Toward the Poor
Collapsed

Ministry to Poor	Pray Often		Never, rare, seldom		t	p ≤ .05
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Money	0.35	0.48	0.21	0.41	4.582	0.0005
Missions	0.49	0.50	0.38	0.49	3.191	0.0015
Face / face	0.15	0.35	0.04	0.19	5,000	0.0002

It was also important to run some controls on gender and age for the data that were gathered. This shows whether the statistical difference that was observed was really a factor of whether one participated in a covenant discipleship group or not.

First controls were run on whether being male or female caused any difference in the attitudes of ministry to poor people. Table 10 shows the results of the student t-Test

for questions 10-15 of the questionnaire based on difference in gender.

TABLE 10
Control for Gender
Attitudes Toward the Poor

Ministry to Poor	Male		Female		t	p ≤ .05
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Belief about poor	0.69	0.31	0.76	0.30	4.657	0.0004
Give money	0.46	0.39	0.48	0.38	1.646	0.1003
Deliver food	0.36	0.39	0.34	0.42	1.078	0.2813
Teach skills	0.36	0.38	0.26	0.44	1.816	0.0697
Visit poor	0.20	0.39	0.15	0.41	0.480	0.6315
Live among poor	-0.13	0.38	-0.26	0.45	0.222	0.8246

The only significant difference was observed in question 10, which asked if being a disciple of Jesus Christ had an impact on ministry with the poor. It was observed that women believed it had more of an impact than men did. The other questions that analyzed attitude showed no significant difference between men and women.

Next, controls were run to determine if age was a factor. The researcher chose to break age into two groups. Those who were forty years or older and those who were under forty years of age. No difference was observed in four of the six categories of attitude. The factor of age showed significance in the belief that Christians were to be involved with the poor and in giving money to the poor on a regular basis (Table 11).

TABLE 11
Control for Age
Attitudes Toward the Poor

Ministry to Poor	≥ 40 Years		< 40 Years		t	p ≤ .05
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Belief about poor	0.75	0.30	0.67	0.32	3.620	0.0003
Give money	0.51	0.37	0.40	0.40	3.814	0.0002
Deliver food	0.36	0.41	0.32	0.40	1.634	0.103
Teach skills	0.28	0.42	0.33	0.43	1.141	0.2544
Visit poor	0.17	0.40	0.16	0.40	0.437	0.6621
Live among poor	-0.20	0.43	-0.25	0.42	1.162	0.2457

The same process was carried out for gender and age controls related to the behavioral aspect of the research. Did these factors affect actions toward the poor? Two categories showed a significant difference in behavior toward the poor between males and females. The Society of St. Andrew and local mission projects show the women to be slightly more involved than the men (Table 12).

TABLE 12
Control for Gender
Behaviors Toward the Poor

Ministry to Poor	Male		Female		t	p ≤ .05
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
World Service	0.17	0.37	0.16	0.37	0.753	0.4516
Discretionary Fund	0.19	0.39	0.19	0.39	1.184	0.2369
Society of St. Andrew	0.10	0.30	0.17	0.57	2.519	0.0119
Habitat for Humanity	0.15	0.35	0.11	0.31	1.073	0.2835
Appalachian Service Project	0.09	0.29	0.08	0.27	0.144	0.8858
Local Missions	0.23	0.42	0.33	0.47	4.335	0.0002
Inviting to worship	0.05	0.22	0.07	0.25	1.697	0.0901
Living among poor	0.03	0.17	0.01	0.10	1.76	0.079
Visiting poor weekly	0.03	0.16	0.02	0.14	0.285	0.7755

Table 13 shows the behavior categories collapsed from nine to three. This shows a difference in the mission category. Women were more involved than men. No significant difference was observed in the other two categories.

TABLE 13
Control for Gender
Behaviors Toward the Poor
Collapsed

Ministry to Poor	Male		Female		t	p ≤ .05
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Money	0.26	0.44	0.29	0.45	1.709	0.0879
Missions	0.38	0.49	0.45	0.50	3.307	0.001
Face / face	0.09	0.28	0.07	0.26	0.064	0.9491

It remained to show whether age was a factor in ministry to/with poor people with respect to the behaviors of the subjects. Table 14 shows this data. A significant difference was observed in all categories with the exception of living among the poor. This showed that those who are forty years or older are more likely to be involved in ministry with the poor than those who are less than forty years old. These findings do not affect the fact that those who are in CD groups are more involved with poor people than those not in such groups. It shows that the majority of CD

group members within this sample are forty years or older.

TABLE 14
Control for Age
Behaviors Toward the Poor

Ministry to Poor	≥ 40 Years		< 40 Years		t	p ≤ .05
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
World Service	0.21	0.41	0.04	0.20	5,000	0.0006
Discretionary Fund	0.22	0.42	0.09	0.29	5,000	0.0001
Society of St. Andrew	0.17	0.55	0.05	0.23	4.731	0.0001
Habitat for Humanity	0.14	0.35	0.08	0.27	2.892	0.004
Appalachian Service Project	0.10	0.30	0.03	0.18	4.210	0.0001
Local Missions	0.33	0.47	0.19	0.40	4.331	0.0001
Inviting to worship	0.07	0.26	0.02	0.13	4.508	0.0001
Living among poor	0.02	0.15	0.01	0.09	1.712	0.0876
Visiting poor weekly	0.03	0.17	0.00	0.06	3.428	0.0006

The final table looks at control for age when the nine ministry categories are collapsed into three. All categories showed a significant difference between the two age groups. The category of highest face-to-face contact showed less of a difference than the categories of money and mission. Whatever age group a subject was in affected the increased face-to-face contact the least.

TABLE 15
Control for Age
Behaviors Toward the Poor
Collapsed

Ministry to Poor	≥ 40 Years		< 40 Years		t	p ≤ .05
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Money	0.32	0.47	0.11	0.31	5,000	0.0001
Missions	0.47	0.50	0.27	0.45	5,000	0.0001
Face / face	0.10	0.30	0.02	0.16	4.768	0.0001

This concludes the data analysis. The final chapter of the study deals with the researcher's theological reflections as well as points out some limitations of the study. Finally it remains to summarize some conclusions and suggest future research.

CHAPTER 5

Summary and Conclusions

All thirteen churches studied have ministries with the poor but most of that ministry focus is in local missions. There is less commitment at the higher levels of face-to-face contact with the poor.

Although all the subjects had knowledge of their churches being involved with the poor in ministry, when they were asked what they were doing in these nine categories of ministry it was seen that they were less involved. Knowledge of what the church they were a part of was doing and what they themselves were actually doing were different.

Another finding was that the people who prayed often were more involved with poor people than those who sometimes, rarely, or never prayed for poor people. This bears out some of the thoughts of Thomas Merton and other contemplatives. Prayer for poor people and ministry with poor people are associated.

Perhaps the greatest finding in this research was the contrast between those in CD groups and those not in CD groups. The data showed a greater amount of activity in ministering to/with poor people on the part of CD group participants. This was true in seven of the nine categories of ministry that were studied.

Examination of the attitudes of the two groups observed through questionnaire questions 10-15 revealed significant differences between those in CD groups and those who were not in CD groups as well. This held true as the cost of commitment increased based on the amount of sacrifice the question asked of the reader.

The observed differences in behavior showed those who participated in CD groups were more involved with poor people than the Non-CD churchgoers. Significant differences were seen in most categories. When these nine categories were collapsed into three; money, mission, and personal face-to-face contact, all three categories showed a significant difference for the sample that was drawn.

Finally, the control tests revealed the differences were not based on sex or age for most of the categories. The null hypothesis of there being no difference whether one was or was not in a CD group was not observed. Therefore the alternative hypothesis was seen for this sample, that there was a significant difference in belonging to a covenant discipleship group with respect to face-to-face contact with poor people.

The data showed that those who have a more costly and accountable discipleship also have a higher involvement in face-to-face contact with the poor. CD groups by definition involve costly, accountable discipleship. Whether they had

a clause that called them each week to serve the poor did not alter the fact that the data showed they were more involved in the lives of the poor than those who were not a part of the CD group.

Theological Reflection

Jesus Christ who is the Word in a human being demonstrated costly, accountable discipleship. He called those who followed him to do the same. His ministry was to and among the poor. As we return to costly, accountable discipleship we are given a heart for the poor. We not only pray for poor people but we also look for ways to serve them and God.

Theodore Jennings has pointed to two characteristics of a church that is involved in a personal way with the poor. The first of these is prayer. The data collected have born this out. The second is costly, accountable discipleship. This is exhibited with the CD groups and their greater involvement with poor people.

The implications of these findings perhaps point to a need to call the church back to its roots of costly discipleship and its close connections with poor people. This was already known and recorded in the eighteenth century Wesleyan revival, which came largely through the structure of the class meetings. In these meetings

disciples watched over one another in love. This research may be calling the Virginia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church back to these roots.

The First Epistle of John is very clear on what God's people are to do when they encounter someone who has a need. John writes in Chapter 3 that we are commanded to love one another. The way we can know that we have eternal life is by loving and serving the brothers and sisters God has given us. In fact if we do not love we remain in death. The way we love is by laying our lives down for others. John asked, "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?" (v.17).

Brothers are more than our immediate Christian brothers and sisters. They are the neighbors God has given us that we may show mercy. Wesley would encourage us to do all the good we can, to as many as we can, as often as we can.

The weekly structure of Covenant Discipleship reminds its members of their need to obey the commands of God to love those whom others reject.

Limitations of the Study

Since this research cannot be statistically inferred to a larger population it suggests the value of further research. It would be useful to look at CD groups, if any

exist, that have poor people as participants and as leaders of the group. I believe the involvement of the poor in the Wesleyan revival accounted in some measure for its success. Perhaps a random sample could be drawn at a later date when CD groups become more prolific and the poor are participating to a larger extent. If this sample is statistically significant it could be generalized to a larger population.

There are no previous studies concerning CD groups and the effect they have on face-to-face contact with the poor. Therefore this is information that will hopefully spark future interest in this topic.

This study is limited. Its focus was on thirteen churches out of 1233 churches in the Virginia Annual Conference. In addition the number of subjects who took the questionnaire were far fewer than the number of people in those churches on that Sunday morning. The churches were chosen because they had one or more CD groups. This was a snapshot and on another occasion the data collected could look somewhat different.

One unexpected finding was the difference in understanding about living among the poor. It seems that many who filled out the questionnaire thought of this as living near them but not actually leaving position and money to go and totally identify with their needs. Another

unexpected finding happened in questions ten through fifteen. As the cost rose the commitment dropped off. I did not realize the questions were arranged in commitment order. The relationship between cost and commitment was predictable. It was also surprising that most of the CD group subjects said that their group was not intentional about serving poor people.

This research does not make any broad claims. The most that can be shown is a small significant difference in the behaviors and attitudes toward ministry to/with the poor between those in covenant discipleship groups and those who are not. This structural unit of costly, accountable discipleship could hold the key for local church ministry with poor people. Gutierrez learned that the small base communities, which certainly experienced costly, accountable discipleship were responsible for the beginning of transformed ministry in Latin America among the poor.

Future Research

This study may be ahead of its time. David Watson, who has been promoting Covenant Discipleship groups in local churches and at theological seminaries, sees the purpose for CD groups to be that of enlightening the congregation to the need for accountable discipleship. When asked, he did not anticipate the findings of this research. He did not expect

to see a significant difference within the two groups regarding ministry among the poor. However, he was encouraged to learn of these results and suggested that in the years ahead there will be a much larger networking of CD groups within this country.

Poor people are increasing in this nation. If these trends continue, 25% of the population within our cities will be poor by the year 2000. Ministry to/with the poor has been most effective in those areas like Latin America where there is a large percentage of poor people. Perhaps the similar context in Wesley's day was why the class meetings incorporated the poor and taught them to lead that move of God's Spirit.

I would suggest that future research might be done in approximately ten years. This research would do a random sample of CD groups or groups similar to them throughout the nation and within different denominations. By using a probability sample, significant inferences could be drawn with respect to a larger population. Ten years would also provide time for the poor to be more incorporated within the CD groups. The study could attempt to show whether those CD groups that have poorer members are more involved with the poor outside their group than those that do not.

Finally it would be important to study the type of people that become involved in CD groups. A spiritual well

being test could be conducted on those who are and who are not in CD groups. This would show whether their desire to be involved with the poor was a function of their spiritual maturity or a function of participating in a CD group. I suspect it would be a function of both.

If the research shows a significant difference in the two groups studied then recommendations could be made by the leadership of the various denominational structures to incorporate these structures in all churches and intentional ministry to/with the poor may return to the church as it was in its earlier days.

Appendix A

Questionnaire Instructions

1. Appoint persons to distribute the questionnaires on the designated Sunday morning (or the questionnaires could be included in the bulletin). These persons will also receive the completed questionnaires as the congregation leave the sanctuary. Finally, they will return them to the office that same morning.
2. The designated Sunday needs to be no later than November 24, 1996. Preferably, within the next two to three weeks.
3. A brief explanation should be given during the announcements. Ask the people to take a few minutes to complete the questionnaire before leaving this morning. The researcher believes it will be helpful to the Virginia Annual Conference of the UMC. It may also be helpful to invite the persons that are in Covenant Discipleship groups to make an effort to be there that morning and to complete the questionnaire.
4. Send back the completed questionnaires no later than Tuesday of the following week in the box or envelopes in which they were received. A check to cover the return postage is enclosed. Thanks for your help.
5. **God Bless You!**

Questionnaire

Please take a few minutes to answer the following questions. Answer them to the best of your knowledge and with integrity. Your answers could prove beneficial to the United Methodist Church in the Virginia Annual Conference. Most of the questions can be answered fairly quickly. A few will require more thought. When you have finished please return the questionnaire to the usher as you leave. Thank you for your participation in this research.

1. Age_____
2. Female___ Male___
3. Occupation_____
4. How long have you attended this church?
 - a. ___ less than 2 years
 - b. ___ 2 or more years
5. How often do you attend Sunday morning worship?
 - a. ___ weekly
 - b. ___ twice monthly
 - c. ___ monthly
 - d. ___ occasionally
6. Are there ministries in your church that serve the poor?
 - a. ___ yes
 - b. ___ no
7. If yes, please name these ministries.
 - a. ___ **Appalachian Service Project**
 - b. ___ discretionary fund
 - c. ___ Habitat for Humanity
 - d. ___ inviting poor people to worship
 - e. ___ living among the poor
 - f. ___ local mission projects
 - g. ___ other (please describe)
 - h. ___ Society of Saint Andrew
 - I. ___ visiting poor people weekly
 - j. ___ World Service

8. Check each of the following ministries in which you are presently involved:

- a. ___ **Appalachian Service Project**
- b. ___ discretionary fund
- c. ___ Habitat for Humanity
- d. ___ inviting poor people to worship
- e. ___ living among the poor
- f. ___ local mission projects
- g. ___ other (please describe)
- h. ___ Society of Saint Andrew
- I. ___ visiting poor people weekly
- j. ___ World Service

9. I pray for poor people

- a. ___ often
- b. ___ sometimes
- c. ___ rarely
- d. ___ never

10. I believe that ministry to/with poor people is an important part of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

- a. ___ strongly agree
- b. ___ agree
- c. ___ neutral
- d. ___ disagree
- e. ___ strongly disagree

11. I would be willing to give some money to poor people regularly.

- a. ___ strongly agree
- b. ___ agree
- c. ___ neutral
- d. ___ disagree
- e. ___ strongly disagree

12. I would be willing to deliver food to poor people regularly.

- a. ___ strongly agree
- b. ___ agree
- c. ___ neutral
- d. ___ disagree
- e. ___ strongly disagree

13. I would be willing to teach life skills or employment skills to poor people in my community.

- a. ___strongly agree
- b. ___agree
- c. ___neutral
- d. ___disagree
- e. ___strongly disagree

14. I would be willing to visit poor people in my community on a regular basis with the hope of developing an ongoing friendship.

- a. ___strongly agree
- b. ___agree
- c. ___neutral
- d. ___disagree
- e. ___strongly disagree

15. I would be willing to live among poor people of the community in order to minister with them more effectively.

- a. ___strongly agree
- b. ___agree
- c. ___neutral
- d. ___disagree
- e. ___strongly disagree

16. Have you been a member of a Covenant Discipleship group(**this is not a Disciple Bible study group**) within the last two years?

- a. ___yes
- b. ___no

(If you have answered yes please go on to the next questions. If you have answered no, please give your questionnaire to the usher on the way out. Thank you)

17. Is your Covenant Discipleship group intentional about being in ministry with poor people?

- a. ___yes
- b. ___no

If yes please note the ways you are in ministry with the poor:

- a. ___Bible studies to learn more about Christian responses to poverty
- b. ___invitation to poor person to lead Covenant Discipleship group
- c. ___invitation to poor people to participate in the Covenant Discipleship group
- d. ___local ministry projects (please identify: _____)
- e. ___other (describe) _____
- f. ___visitation to poor people

18. Does one of the clauses of your covenant require ministry with the poor?

- a. ___yes
- b. ___no

If yes, what does the clause say _____

19. My participation in the Covenant Discipleship group has increased my desire to be responsive to the poor people around me.

- a. ___strongly agree
- b. ___agree
- c. ___neutral
- d. ___disagree
- e. ___strongly disagree

20. Have you read the recent initiative of the Methodist Bishops calling the church to be in ministry with the poor?

- a. ___yes
- b. ___no

21. Has your church discussed this initiative?

- a. ___yes
- b. ___no

Thank you for your time. Please return your completed questionnaire to the person collecting them on the way out this morning.

Appendix B

Local Church Teaching and Learning Events Survey

Please help the Division of Education to be aware of what's happening in your local church. Your responses will help us to identify settings where teaching and learning is taking place and to share that information with other churches. Complete the following brief survey and return it to Carole Vaughn at PO Box 11367, Richmond, VA 23230.

THANK YOU!

Church _____ District _____

Address _____ Zip _____

Contact Person _____ Phone() _____

Check all items that are offered in your local church:

Disciple Bible Study

Disciple One[]

Disciple Two[]

Disciple Three(projected)[]

Disciple for Youth[]

Covenant Discipleship Groups[]

Walk to Emmaus Groups[]

Other Spiritual Growth Groups[]

Please specify _____

Mentoring Programs

With children[]

With Youth[]

With confirmands[]

Weekday School Programs

Parent's Morning Out[]

Pre-school[]

Kindergarten[]

After School Programs

Latch Key[]

Creative Arts[]

Recreation[]

Study Hall[]

Children's Fellowship Groups

With younger elementary aged children[]

With older elementary aged children[]

Mission focused[]

Parenting Classes or Parent Support Groups[]

Child Abuse Prevention Training[]

Sexuality Education Classes for Children/Youth with their Parents[]

Other Teaching Learning Groups/Electives (please specify)

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