

Romans 12

We who are many are one body in Christ.

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

These congregations are marked by:

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

PFF—Prayer Friends Forever

First United Methodist Church in Oak Ridge, Tennessee has committed itself to incorporating small group ministry into the life of the congregation. Several years ago small covenant groups composed of people with similar life situations (older adults, parents of teenagers, youth, older children and so forth) participated in a church-wide Lenten study.

One of the children's groups consisted of fifth grade girls. They wrote and committed to a covenant that included practicing means of grace like forgiveness, praying for one another and keeping prayer journals, learning about church missions, loving God and neighbor, and extending kindness to others. Over the years, this group of girls grew from fifth grade "Prayer Friends" to eighth graders who continue to meet weekly, pray together, hold each other accountable, and keep covenant with one another.

Sheila Michel, coordinator of small groups at First UMC, has witnessed numerous ways in which the girls have grown in faith and discipleship as a result of their Covenant Discipleship group. When one member of the group noticed that a girl their age was sitting alone outside her little brother's Boy Scout meeting week after week, she talked to the group about inviting her to join them. They discussed it, and welcomed her. When it became necessary to look at and revise their covenant, they dedicated time to its revision. When one of the members of the group became the target of a bully at school, the group became a space for comfort, support, prayer, and action. These girls are living out what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

Some Questions for Discussion

- How do you nurture and support people of all ages, including children, to be accountable for their growth in discipleship?
- What opportunities do you provide for youth and children to develop meaningful relationships with peers and caring adults that will sustain them through difficult situations?
- How are you encouraging people of all ages to practice spiritual disciplines both individually and corporately?

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In 2007 church leaders throughout The United Methodist Church in the U.S. were invited to identify churches that demonstrated the vision of discipleship described in the twelfth chapter of Romans. Over 200 churches were surveyed or visited. Issue #78 © 2011 GBOD. All rights reserved. Permission is granted to copy this page for use in United Methodist congregations.