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The Water Is Wide and Deep

Wesleyan Small Groups Serve as a Tool for Deeper Engagement

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I can't name a specific moment when I began to take seriously the question, "Am I brave enough to say this out loud and over coffee with a friend or colleague, just as I am to post it on Instagram?"

Like many of us, I continue to learn all the time about how to navigate the weird and connecting world that is social media.

Social media is the space where boundaries in space and time are made invisible; where we are drawn closer to one another in shared stories of struggle, joy, and celebration. It is also a space where, in my experience, we can be pulled away like oil and water as our immense differences in life experience, religious and political affiliations, and values become condensed into faceless quips in the form of comments and angry emojis. And in the midst of a pandemic and multiple reckonings with crises around mental health, racism, and fragile democracy, these media have been our primary way to stay engaged.

I am so grateful for the moments when enlightening learning or conversation does occur on social media. I'm also simultaneously haunted by a perpetual question nearly every time I interact with it: Is this powerful tool also inviting us into deeper engagement as disciples of Jesus Christ? Are we asking tough questions about the power and influence that social media companies wield over our lives? Are we pairing our online courage (which we know can sometimes feel performative) with flesh-and-blood conversations that might ask us to be vulnerable or even uncomfortable? Are we creating and entering spaces to be in awe of one another as God's creatures—not just consumable objects?

I wonder if our own Wesleyan heritage might offer us some meaningful tools. Small groups are embedded in Methodist DNA, especially in the Methodist movement's early days in 18th century England. Small groups of about 12 people from a similar neighborhood, called classes, would gather weekly in covenant discipleship. They gathered to share their souls and to be held accountable in community to their own spiritual growth, which included not only their private devotion to the Christian life but to service and engagement in the wider community. And stuff got real: people shared their struggles in their marriages, with addictions, and in remaining connected to their neighborhoods.

Sound familiar? I wonder where our churches are already home to small groups of grace-filled accountability and Christian community such as those experienced during John Wesley's ministry. I wonder where spaces with that kind of loving honesty can dwell even more expansively; not in opposition to online community (which is vital), but alongside of it. If we affirm as Methodists that we will be made perfect in love by God through sanctifying grace, then perhaps a deepening of small group discipleship can be part of this journey. What a gift that such a tool is part of who we are.

As we journey closer to the cross in this holy season of Lent, a season that asks us to ponder God's love in our lives and to confront the ways in which we have yet to live in ways that reflect that love, I'm feeling the Spirit's invitation to ask these hard questions of myself. Create in me a clean heart, O God. Create in us hearts of courage, gentleness, grace, and mercy.