**We are a mission-oriented family on a journey of following Jesus in the Wesleyan tradition.**

In the past several months, we have established that the reason for our existence at St. Paul’s encompasses making “disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” In order to carry out this mission, we have launched the vision that we will be a **mission-oriented family on a journey of following Jesus in the Wesleyan tradition.** We saw that being a “mission-oriented” church implies that we will be outward focused, reaching out to those beyond the walls of our church. But in looking outward, we do not neglect each other. Instead, we realize that we are a “family,” brothers and sisters who encourage and support one another.

As we reach out in mission and grow as a family, we do so in the context of following Jesus. It is the Spirit of Jesus Christ that guides in our outreach and our connection to one another. The word we use to describe the “journey of following Jesus” is discipleship.

Discipleship is vital to our mission as church. Making disciples was a central part of Jesus’ ministry, and his last instruction to his followers was that they were to also make disciples (Matt. 28:19).

One writer described discipleship as “a journey into the heart of God’s love.” Discipleship entails a life-long process of following Jesus and being made more like him. Often the church has tended to think of discipleship as something that is done with young converts. New Christians need discipling to get them started on the journey. But focusing on new Christians alone radically downplays the core place that discipleship should have in the life of all believers. Followers of Christ never stop being disciples. Being discipled is as important for long-established as for new Christians. It’s a task for life.

There are no shortcuts to maturity, to holiness. There is always something new to encounter, to learn, to give. It involves initial and recurrent points of renewal, a repeated covenant to be God’s, in times of joy and sadness, sickness and health. Christianity is life-long discipleship that begins new every day.

Martyn Adkins asserts that discipleship “designates the whole life response of Christians to Jesus Christ. Everything a Christian believes and does is an aspect of discipleship; the goal of discipleship is to grow ever more Christ-like in every aspect of life.” If discipleship encompasses growing in “every aspect of life,” then we must allow every part of our lives to come under God’s influence.

Jesus provides the classic example. His faith walk was not limited to the temple or the Sabbath. He lived distinctively as he went to homes, marketplaces, festivals, weddings, and many other gathering places. He spoke about marriage and divorce, taxes, government, wealth, work, and disease. He taught his followers to pray: “Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as in heaven.” This was a prayer that the entire planet - the whole of life on earth - would be under God's authority, just as God's will holds complete sway in heaven.

Christians are called to be part of the answer to this longing for the kingdom. We are to live out our discipleship at home, at work and in our leisure, as well as in the church. As we do so, we spread God's influence. Just as the Father sent the Son to the world and the Son has sent the Spirit to be active in the world (as well as in the church), so God calls believers to be in the world, too. They are to join the Spirit in advancing God's kingdom.

And that’s the good news. Advancing the kingdom seems like a daunting task, but we do not attempt it in our own strength. No, we join the Spirit. The Spirit empowers us for the work. Discipleship starts with opening ourselves to the transforming work of the Spirit and allowing the Spirit to form your character. It involves responding to God, living in fellowship with other Christians, and having your entire personality shaped by Jesus. Increasingly, your character should reveal more of Christ. Such character develops by:

• Living “in Christ,” as the Spirit forms us through Scripture, prayer, other spiritual disciples, and the influence of fellow Christians;

• Becoming like Jesus in our attitudes and behavior;

• Growing in the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23);

• Learning and living kingdom values, as we support God’s mission in the world;

• Dying to self in order to increasingly life a Spirit-filled life.

You can think of discipleship in terms of the individual: “What does it mean for me to become more like Jesus?” Or you can think of it from the standpoint of the church: “What can we do to help people become more Christlike?”

As the congregation of St. Paul’s United Methodist Church, there are many ways that we aim to help each other grow as disciples and nurture our spiritual lives. The following are examples:

• Weekly worship

• Holy Communion

• Prayer - including Cooperative Parish prayer meetings

• Reading and Bible Study - through our Sunday School classes, adult Bible studies, and Epic Bible Adventures

• Opportunities to use your gifts

• Engaging in mission

• Opportunities to learn more about your Christian heritage - e.g., Wesleyan Heritage Tour

• Watching the lives of other Christians

Our spiritual ancestor John Wesley taught about acts of piety and acts of mercy. Such acts exist as “means of grace” - that is, they are ways in which God’s grace is experienced. Now, God’s grace is unearned, but that doesn’t mean that we sit idly by just waiting for God to change us. No, we participate in the means of grace so that we are in a position to allow God space to work in our lives. To put it another way, the means of grace represent human practices or activities through which the Holy Spirit works with transforming power. Wesley taught that both works of piety and works of mercy are necessary in order for believers to be fully formed into the image of Christ.

Works of piety and works of mercy embrace both individual practices and communal practices. Works of piety include the individual practices of reading, meditating, and studying the Scriptures; prayer; fasting; regularly attending worship; healthy living; and sharing our faith with others. When it comes to communal practices, works of piety involve regularly sharing in the sacraments, Christian conferencing, accountability to one another, and Bible study. Works of mercy, on the other hand, incorporate the individual practices of doing good works, visiting the sick, visiting those in prison, feeding the hungry, and giving generously to the needs of others. Communal works of mercy entail seeking justice, ending oppression and discrimination, and addressing the needs of the poor.

A deep challenge is before us. We must decide, individually and together, whether we will commitment to being disciples, to being lifelong followers of Jesus. Will we allow God to renew us? Will we open ourselves to continual growth, change, and sacrifice? Will we seek the guidance of the Spirit? Will we engage in the means of grace - both works of piety and works of mercy? Will we commit to becoming like Jesus? Are you ready for the journey? Let’s get going!