



**Christian Conferencing in the  
digital age**  
**A Lenten message from**  
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We live in unprecedented times. Never before in humanity's history has so much information been available instantaneously to so many people living on the earth. This growth of access and data volume means that by next year, the amount of information being transmitted through mobile devices alone will be the equivalent of every man, woman, and child on Earth sending 1,000 text messages every second. I don't know what portion of all that data exchange involves content pertaining to matters of the Christian faith, but I do know there are books, sermons, worship services, prayers, studies, videos, and blogs available in mind numbing quantities – all of which can be delivered to one's phone, tablet or computer in no time at all. There's no question that the air is thick with our data, even data that relates to matters of faith – the questions that are far more significant are those that ask how well are we actually communicating with one another, encouraging each other, learning and growing in our discipleship with one another. How well are we aligning our lives with God's means of grace that's expressed through our gathering together - this experience that John Wesley called, Christian Conference?

Hi, I'm Greg Kroger, Director of Ministries for the Dakotas Conference. This week in our Lenten video series we're covering a means of grace that may be somewhat unfamiliar to many of us. As author Steve Harper explains, "Christian Conference" was the all-encompassing term Wesley used to describe any form of corporate life. He urged Christians to gather together to confer about inward and outward holiness. This was not a substitute for attending worship in a

local church, but rather a supplemental commitment that was intended to strengthen the faith and witness of an individual, as well as bring renewal to the church.

While Wesley's formal structure of Societies, Class Meetings, and Bands may not directly fit today's context, the general principles behind their design and function are no less applicable now than over 250 years ago. Today, as then, we recognize the movement of the Holy Spirit to bring God's grace that prepares us to receive God's gift of a new life in Jesus, followed by grace that places us in a right relationship with God, followed yet by grace that works within us to bring our lives into alignment with the example and continued leading of Jesus. As Harper points out, Wesley's system of Christian Conferencing provided specific settings matched to the Holy Spirit's movement in our lives.

A key question we have started to ask of our Dakotas Conference churches and their clergy and lay leaders is, "What is the system of discipleship in this congregation?" There may be some critical elements such as new member classes, Sunday School, short-term Bible studies or on-going small groups – but most often there is an overall lack of purpose which results in a "hit and miss" approach to making and growing disciples, especially new disciples. Instead we can ask, "What would a door to core discipleship system look like?" In other words, "how does the church support the movement of a person from being a first time visitor to becoming one who is at the core of discipleship in the life of the church?" Friends, this support will not necessarily happen just because we think it will happen as the church gathers for weekly worship and other activities. Wesley knew something more was needed and we'll be true to our heritage as United Methodists as we purposefully create avenues for Christian Conferencing.

Harper shares several significant observations about how we can effectively apply key principles from Christian Conferencing in

Wesley's day to our own. First of all, the foundation of small groups and ministry in smaller community is the principle of voluntary association. Spiritual formation in groups works best when interested people voluntarily associate with one another.

Second, group size, constituency, and purpose can be different. Different persons are at different points on their faith journey. No one type or size or structure of group will fit everyone. This is the principle of variety.

Third, to overcome the temptation of groups to become inward focused there is a need to unite group dynamics to ministry concerns. As groups form within a church they should be challenged to look beyond themselves for service projects.

Fourth, while avoiding legalism or phony-baloney spirituality there is a place for spiritual discipline. Groups will never develop their capacity to support maturing disciples if there is little or no accountability for the life and witness of the group members. Growth will not take place without members being stretched and challenged in their faith and not having opportunity to share with others the state of their soul along that journey.

Fifth and last, Christian Conferencing applied in our day means that more vital lay ministry will be developed as engaged laity live into the gifts that God has provided for their Kingdom service. In many places we are too reliant on clergy to "do" the ministry while the laity watch. We can reclaim what it means to be a priesthood of all believers.

What would it look like for your local congregation to apply intentionally in increasing measure the means of grace of Christian Conferencing? What would it mean for your own life to have the support, challenge, encouragement and opportunity of a closer-knit group of people around you in your journey of following Jesus?

There's no shortage of information about our faith, you can pull up more material than you could ever read, right on your smartphone, but that's no replacement for the experience of being formed as disciples in the strength of community.

***May you and your church discover the extreme bandwidth of God's grace through Christian Conferencing. And through God's grace, may it be so. Amen.***

