Tips for Discipleship and Social Distancing
Written by R.C. Muhlbaier and Chassity Neckers

The Coronavirus has disrupted nearly all aspects of society in recent days. Like many all over the world, churches in the Indiana Conference are looking for ways to balance being responsible members of our communities and continuing our lives of worship and growth as disciples of Jesus. In this pursuit many churches are looking to implement technology and new methods for providing worship experiences for their congregations. There have already been creative and innovative expressions of worship distributed through live streaming, Facebook, Youtube, etc. Yet, any worship experience from a distance lacks the corporate experience we enjoy when we worship together. Likewise, pastors have taken to social media to lead prayer and to teach, showing a commitment to facilitating the spiritual growth and support of their congregations. Our pastors and leadership teams are doing great ministry on the fly!

We are in an odd moment of experiencing some level of isolation, together. The longer we are in this situation, the more important it will be to counter the impacts of isolation. At some point the bombardment of content will not meet the need to be in connection. So, whatever form discipleship relationships take during social distancing, I encourage us all to work to make sure we facilitate and maintain genuine relational interactions in which we pray, study, and care for each other. Now is a great, low-risk time to try something new! Some innovations may end with social distancing, but some may be enduring tools that can benefit congregations in the years to come.

Avoiding a Consumption Mentality

One of the unintended consequences of such a heavy reliance on technology to maintain our faith connections is feeding a consumer posture to worship and spiritual growth. Many pastors are taking the initiative of leading digital prayer times and Bible studies via Facebook. These are valuable opportunities, but also can lack a relational component that will be increasingly missed over the coming weeks. Over this extended period, there is an opportunity to build healthy spiritual growth habits that can endure after the threat of COVID-19 has subsided. With this in mind, alongside or instead of one-way, presentation-style events we can facilitate interaction within our faith communities. Some suggestions are below.

How can I run my small groups online?
There are a variety of tools to keep your small group meeting while practicing social distancing. You could do a group phone call, set up a Zoom or Google Hangout video chat, take your Bible Study to your personal Facebook page by going “Live” (this is great way to invite others to engage in real time). Established small groups can create their own private group or churches can use their Facebook page or open groups to engage larger groups. Other apps like Band or Small Circle can be used in a similar way.
**Discovery Bible Study** is a simple, yet meaningful, structure for Bible study. A real benefit of this method of study is the personal application and identification of action to be taken. This type of engagement with Scripture creates natural relational opportunities for following up or checking in week-to-week. Another benefit is that this study format can be used in a variety of settings including within a Facebook group. The Scripture passage can be chosen and members of a small group can reply with their engagement with the passage as well as comment on the responses of others. Participants in **Discovery Bible Study** answer five questions to reflect on a passage of Scripture:

- What does the passage tell us about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, or their plan?
- What does the passage tell us about people?
- What does the passage reveal about my own journey with God?
- What will I do about it?
- Who else needs to hear what I have learned

**Split into smaller groups.** Currently the CDC guidance is to not gather in groups larger than 10. Those that are healthy and do not have contact with high-risk people may decide to meet together instead of the full small group. Using something like the Discovery Bible Study requires no leader preparation for groups that may not contain people with experience leading small groups. Groups can be broken up into as few as three in order to honor social distancing.

**Spiritual Friendships** are relationships between two people focused on supporting each other in spiritual growth. Neither person is a leader, it is simply two people meeting together to encourage each other on their journey with God. This is another opportunity to use the Discovery Bible Study method. The videos of **The Bible Project** are also great for conversation starters. Coordination is easy between two people and can be easily done in person, over the phone, or any of the video calling technology that is widely available. Best of all, lasting spiritual friendships may form that extend long past our current practice of social distancing.

**Mobilize for Care.** Sunday worship is the main social event of the week for some of the people in our congregations. These members of our faith communities may now be facing extended periods of isolation. Those whose other weekly meetings are on pause can use the time to connect with community members who are the most isolated. A simple check-in conversation, short time of prayer, and an offer to run simple errands over the phone can be huge for people who will not have regular contact otherwise. Creating a list matching isolated members with weekly callers is a simple task for most churches. There is also an evangelistic opportunity to reach out to others in the broader community in similar ways.