

### 3.3 INTENTIONAL DISCIPLESHIP

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## Conventicle — Small Groups in our Covenant DNA

*The Covenant church was conceived in the midst of a powerful grassroots movement of spiritual renewal in Sweden and among immigrants in North America during the nineteenth century. This movement, broadly known as Pietism, stressed personal conversion and the active living faith of persons transformed by the gospel. Its locus was in **conventicles, small groups gathered in homes and elsewhere for prayer, worship, singing, encouragement, and Bible reading.***

Historically, the conventicle was a place where Christians gathered together for a more personal experience of the faith. These groups read the Bible and heard the reading explained. Questions like “How goes your walk?” and “Where is it written?” regularly peppered the conversation.

Many trace the roots of conventicles to the German Lutherans in the mid-1600s although the Encyclopedia of Religion indicates that this model actually reflects gatherings in the New Testament like the disciples as they met in the upper room following the resurrection. These small gatherings continued into the earliest history of the church as it assembled in homes to eat, pray, learn and remember (Acts 2:42-47). Eventually the ecclesiastical and civil authorities grew suspicious of these gatherings and began to persecute those who participated.

The conventicle became a staple in the early days of pietism. These small groups of believers gathered in homes to study the Bible and explore the practice of Christianity. The state church in Sweden and the Lutheran church in the United States saw these gatherings as threats to the authority of the established church. In fact, Sweden passed the Edict against Conventicles in 1726 because they appeared to represent a challenge to church order and a criticism of the church.

*By One Spirit*, the history of the Evangelical Covenant Church by Karl Olsson, includes the following descriptions of conventicles.

“At Frankfort a group of laymen seems to have taken the initiative in suggesting conventicles to Spener, and after a revival which shook the church in 1669, Spener began his *colegia pietatis* (gatherings of piety). Twice weekly over a period of several years the young pastor gathered his members in the manse for the reading of devotional books and the Scripture. By 1675 the study of the Bible dominated the Spenerian conventicles.”

“In a farmhouse with small windows and low roof, where the winter day comes briefly, a woman puts out

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fresh candles. The floor is scrubbed white and sprinkled with chopped spruce. All available chairs have been crowded into the room. On a little table lies the family Bible and a book of revival hymns...”

“They will come tonight to hear Anderson the colporteur. They will come from the crofts and the farms, the forges and smithies, the carpenter’s bench and the tailor’s table. They will come with heavy feet and heavy hands, stooped by work and old before their time. And they will come to hear the unlearned man speak about one thing—finding peace with God.”

*According to Thy Word*, the 1956 Covenant confirmation book, expands the picture of conventicles with these descriptions.

“Then here and there in little cottages and in clearings in the woods during the long summer twilights we began to hear another message. The messengers were sometimes State Church ministers and sometimes book salesmen—farm boys who went from house to house and sold religious books and magazines. Sometimes they were neither. A smith would get up, or a cobbler or a tailor would talk about the joy in Christ—the release—the new life. Christ came down from the stained glass windows and became ours—mine...”

“The State Church didn’t like these gatherings and tried to stop them. In fact the State church didn’t like any services outside the walls of the church. But by this time more and more people had formed ‘mission societies’ within the State Church. They met for informal services of song and testimony and they gave to missions.”

Questions to consider:

How are conventicles like our church’s small groups?

How are conventicles different from the small groups in our church?

What can we learn from recognizing that small groups (conventicles) have been part of the Covenant Church from its very beginning?