



PHILOSOPHY & PRACTICE

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COMMUNITY GROUP PHILOSOPHY & PRACTICE

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Introduction

Developing and communicating clear training in philosophy and expected practice is essential for an effective small group ministry. Without training for leaders, groups will not experience quality. This Philosophy and Practice Document will include a number of foundational strategies to equip you as the small group leader to succeed and enjoy the fruit of multiplied blessings. Effective small groups have staggering potential.¹ Being an effective small group leader is more than just leading a group.² These are weighty statements that accurately portrait the need for God's grace and the promise of difference-making investment in your local church. As a small group leader you have certain gifts that enable you to envision and execute the systems and spaces necessary to lead an effective group. Paul Tripp points out, "Being given a gift tells me about me in that I am not self-sufficient but rather needy and dependent."³ We are given gifts to lead small groups to bring multiplied glory to God.

What follows is a short overview that will answer frequently asked questions, along with some memorable acrostics to streamline your understanding of small group leadership. We will start where we should, with the Word of God as motivation. Then I'll invite you to set some goals and discuss your dreams when it comes to Community Groups. It is good to have dreams and goals that only God can answer. The remainder of this document will be a practical guide to beginning, leading, and multiplying your Community Group. Multiplication is the point of the Christian life. Community Groups are a gathering together of Christians, so the intended purpose of multiplied and matured disciples of Jesus is the goal.

¹ Dempsey, Rod; Earley, Dave. *Leading Healthy, Growing, Multiplying, Small Groups*. Liberty University Press. Kindle Edition. 2015. loc. 1407.

² Dempsey. *Leading*. loc. 1417.

³ Tripp, Paul David. *Lead*. Crossway. Kindle Edition. p. 75.

Motivations for Developing Small Groups

Something as significant as the Christian life must be built upon a firm foundation.

Likewise, the motivation must be compelling enough to bridge the dark nights and slow progress of developing small groups. Joel Comiskey rightly notes, “The biblical foundation must guide all we do and say.”⁴ If we are to begin with a solid foundation the Bible must be the material we build upon. The following passages will highlight the role of community (God is a Trinity), priesthood of all believers (everyone is a minister), relational evangelism (Jesus and His incarnation), discipleship (Christ’s last command), and multiplication (be fruitful and multiply) - all to the glory of God.⁵ These will be sufficient motivations for whatever may lie before us and our Community Groups. I ask that you take a few moments for each text, considering how the highlighted text could transform the way we view small group ministry and how it can motivate you to invest time, talent, and treasure into your Community Group.

“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that **they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you**, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” John 17:20-21

Jesus declared, “**Love the Lord your God** with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: **Love your**

⁴ Comiskey, Joel. *Biblical Foundations for the Cell-Based Church*. loc. 311.

⁵ Comiskey, Joel. “Biblical Values and Time-tested Principles.” Joel Comiskey Group. https://joelcomiskeygroup.com/en/resources/church_leadership/en_biblicalvalues/. 2011. accessed November 5, 2020.

neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” Matthew 22:37-40

“Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **Go therefore and make disciples** of all nations, **baptizing** them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **teaching** them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”” Matthew 28:20

“And they devoted themselves to the **apostles’ teaching** and the **fellowship**, to the **breaking of bread and the prayers**. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, **attending the temple together** and breaking bread **in their homes**, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” Acts 2:42-47

“He [Jesus] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to **equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ**, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” Ephesians 4:11-13

“And the things that you have heard me say among many witnesses, **entrust these to faithful men** who will be qualified to **teach others as well.**” 2 Timothy 2:2

“By this my **Father is glorified**, that you **bear much fruit** and so prove to be my disciples.”

John 15:8

The Trinity is the basis for loving one another.⁶ Not only is this principle theological, but also deeply practical. Dempsey observes, “The heart cry of every human is an overwhelming need for community.”⁷ This is true to experience and even those without Christ value nurturing friendships. How much more ought the family of God?

Regarding the priesthood of the believer, in Ephesians 4:11-13 we see all the “saints” being equipped for the work of ministry. No longer is there a select priesthood, but rather all Christians are referenced by St. Peter as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.”⁸ In this common call we see the principle of relational evangelism as well.

Dempsey again sets our feet on the solid foundation of Jesus with, “Perhaps the clearest argument for leading small groups is because Jesus gave us an example and we should follow His example.”⁹ The Great Commission noted above in Matthew 28:20 leaves little room to avoid confronting and comforting people with the truth of God. Jim Putnam notes, “Discipleship is the emphasis. Relationships are the method. Jesus invited people into relationships with himself; he loved them and in the process showed them how to follow God. His primary method was life-on-

⁶ Comiskey, Joel. *Biblical Foundations*. loc. 539.

⁷ Dempsey. *Leading*. loc. 269

⁸ 1 Peter 2:9

⁹ Dempsey, loc. 309.

life.”¹⁰ And again, Putnam, “We cannot separate relationships from the disciple-making process.”¹¹

We are all called to the ministry of reconciliation and relational evangelism, just as Jesus exemplified for us.

Finally, This principle of bearing fruit, or multiplication, is vital in motivating the Christian into the involved process of disciple making. Dr. David Earley notes, “The goals of being a parent concern the growth and development of our children, and the goals of being a spiritual parent (disciple-making leader) concern the growth and development of God’s children.”¹² Without a solid foundation we will never endure the demands on time and treasure to make, mature, and multiply disciples of Jesus Christ for the glory of God.

¹⁰ Putman, Jim; Harrington, Bobby ; Coleman, Robert. *DiscipleShift (Exponential Series)*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition. 2013. p.33.

¹¹ Putman, *DiscipleShift (Exponential Series)*. p. 140.

¹² Earley, Dave; Dempsey, Rod. *Disciple Making Is...* B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. 2013. p. 200.

Goals and Dreams for Small Groups

I believe in the power of God in you as Community Group leaders! Most small groups and small group leaders are sleeping giants.¹³ Satan wants to keep you that way, so he constantly whispers lies to small group leaders about what you can't do. Satan is defeated when small group leaders get a dream of what they and their group can become. Possessing a big dream for your group increases your potential to make a difference for God's kingdom.¹⁴ My dream for you and your Community Groups is that you would experience the fellowship and adventure that the Christian life promises.

My goals for our Community groups are that we would start with the intention to mature and multiply, that we would see spiritual rebirth in those we invite, and that our apprentice leaders would grow to become Community Group planters and leaders. A practical goal would be that Bethel baptist Church would be a church of small groups, actively fellowshiping, creatively participating in the community, and passionately saturating the Northwest suburbs with the love of Christ for our good and His glory. Take a few moments to quietly consider your dreams and goals for your Community Group - even if that group isn't formed yet. What comes to mind? Journal those thoughts down. Refer back to them during your personal prayer time and as you continue through this Training Manual. We now turn to discuss a number of frequently asked questions and practical strategies. Here we are specifically discussing the Community Groups of Bethel. Sunday school groups, Bible studies, and other service groups will be developed in other conversations.

¹³ Dempsey, *Leading*. loc. 1402.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Type of Small Groups

Community groups will be cell groups or “neighborhood groups.” The group typically gathers for the purpose of community building, personal and corporate growth, and ultimately, multiplication.¹⁵ Specifically, a Community Group is a group of 8-12 members of Bethel led by a qualified leader engaged in regular interaction that is transparent, Word-centered, and focused on growth in godly love and godly living. More specifically, a Community Group is led by a man or woman (for ladies’ groups) who exhibits the qualities of a faithful believer that is able to engage others in the discussion of Biblical truth based on the implementation and demonstration of truth in their lives.

The Community Groups will be focused on practically exploring ways in which the truth of God’s Word applies to daily living in a setting that provides mutual care through accountability, encouragement, exhortation, and confrontation when needed. Designed for believers to help each other take the steps of spiritual transformation that are needed at this time in their lives, a Community Group is spiritual fellowship that challenges you to grow. Regularly meeting in homes or public places, Community Groups will intentionally invite and disciple others as part of their accountability and activity.

Curriculum will be a weekly study guide based upon the Sunday morning sermon. This practice will allow for all members to be growing through the same teaching as one another. Likewise, this allows the senior pastor to be connected to all Community Group members through his teaching. Finally, this curriculum allows new members to enter into the material with minimal adjustment.

¹⁵ Arnold, Jeffrey. *The Big Book on Small Groups*. Kindle Edition. 2004. loc. 668-670.

How to Lead Small Groups

Leading a maturing and multiplying small group is no easy task. Self-awareness, Christ-dependence, and measurable goals are vital components in small group leadership. These pointers will help us start well and end with multiplied worship toward our God and Savior Jesus Christ. To do this is beyond our natural abilities. We are to prayerfully engage each of these leadership steps.

Choosing People

The first step in forming a group is to select a **host home**. The host - or host couple - does not need to be the discussion leader or facilitator. A good host will be friendly, engaging, warm and welcoming. The next step is selecting an apprentice for your group. Dempsey suggests looking for “someone who has F.A.I.T.H. This acrostic stands for someone who is faithful, is able, has integrity, is teachable and has a heart for God.”¹⁶

Disciples make disciple makers. Christians were made to multiply. The same is true with small group leaders. Successful small group leaders will make small group leaders. Brad House notes, “We ask every group leader to formally **identify an apprentice** so that they can be preparing for an inevitable plant. This not only helps us develop leaders faster, it also keeps the idea of replication in the minds of the group.”¹⁷ Beginning with a clear goal of multiplication will encourage ownership and activity within the group. Likewise, this will help clarify the willingness and dedication of the participants.

Now you can **recruit and invite participants**. There should ultimately be only one significant prerequisite for membership in your small group-willingness to be a disciple. Even

¹⁶ Dempsey, *Leading*. loc. 909.

¹⁷ House, Brad. *Community: Taking Your Small Group Off Life Support*. Crossway. Kindle Edition. 2011. loc. 2452.

evangelistic small groups need a core of dedicated disciples. If a person is not willing to grow, you will only encounter great frustration.¹⁸ Be creative and courageous in your recruiting.¹⁹ We never know who would be interested in joining a group. David Earley notes, “All of us have a relentless yearning to attach and connect, to love and be loved. This relational hunger is, perhaps, the fiercest longing of the human soul. Our need for community with people, and the God who made us, is to the human spirit what food, air, and water are to the human body.”²⁰ If we empathize with this desire for community and connection we will be bold in approaching those around us with the invitation of community.

5 W’s

We will follow the 5 W’s to help keep the group on track.²¹ **Welcome, Worship, Word, Works, and Witness** are the 5 W’s of small group. **Welcome:** Having an inviting and accepting time of welcoming is important to set the stage for meaningful fellowship. **Worship:** Worship can include silent prayer, singing, reading Scripture, or praising God. **Word:** Dempsey notes, “God’s Word is one of the most powerful tools we have at our disposal in the disciple-making process.” We do well to keep the Bible at the center of our fellowship. **Works:** Dempsey again, “Too many small group members are like the Dead Sea. They take in rich deposits of truth and have become very deep. Yet they are stagnant and spiritually dead. Why? Just like the Dead Sea, they have no outlet because they never get involved in ministry.” Every member is a minister with a spiritual gift

¹⁸ Arnold, *The Big Book*. loc. 540-541

¹⁹ Ibid. loc. 543. “Pray and seek individuals for your group, consider people from your circle of influence within your congregation, neighborhood, workplace and family.”

²⁰ Earley, *Disciple Making*. p. 70.

²¹ Dempsey, *Leading*. loc. 395. Chapter 8-14 cover these 5 W’s in greater detail than can be offered here. This should be reviewed and evaluated often by the group members. This section can be a portion of the covenant review as well.

intended to be shared with the Body of Christ. **Witness:** Evangelism is at the heart of the Christ-life. If we believe that God wants people saved more than we do we will give ourselves to building relationships with the lost. We will find motivation and accountability to share our faith with others, inviting them into the Community Groups as they come to Christ or show interest in the Christian message. There will be open communication between group members when a new convert or interested invitee becomes apparent. The following covenant will help keep the group healthy and mindful while not becoming stagnant or ingrown.

Covenants

What expectations should you have for each other as members of a Community Group?

Body life within a Community Group requires commitment to each other in the form of a member covenant. The spiritual interaction that will occur in Community Groups are guided by five core values:

- Authority: Relying on God's Word as the source of our instruction.
- Growth: Applying God's truth to daily life for our spiritual transformation.
- Care: Expressing love, concern and support to one another with words and actions.
- Accountability: Submitting to one another for exhortation, rebuke and encouragement.
- Transparency: Being honest and teachable in our relationship with each other.

The group will review and recommit to the covenant often. This reminder will help us stay on mission and allow accountability to have its effect.

How to Develop Small Group Leaders

As a Christian leader, I am here to help you grow and become all God has in mind for you to become.²² The healthier the leaders, the healthier the small group. The healthier the small groups, the healthier the body of Christ at Bethel. There are three main ways we seek to develop leaders. First is character. Second is vision. And third is development. A leader will be influential, that is the main defining quality in leadership. Rod Dempsey offers a helpful definition, “A Christian leader is a person of influence. He or she follows God’s vision for his or her life, and influences others to follow God’s plan for their lives.”²³ As you seek to develop your apprentice to be a Community Group leader focus on the following three areas.

Character

The general idea is simply this: a leader will persuade or influence other people to follow either their example or follow the stated vision by their character.²⁴ Dempsey adds, “Without character, people will question the leader’s motives and will ultimately not follow the leader’s vision.” The F.A.I.T.H. acrostic stands for someone who is Faithful, is Able, has Integrity, is Teachable and has a Heart for God. This is a good starting measure of character. Are we dedicated as leaders to faithfully praying a half hour a day for our group? Are our relationships in good order? Have we wronged anyone or are we holding bitterness toward another? Are we attending all scheduled training and equipping sessions? How much are we reading our Bible? In developing leaders we must ask these questions. Resistance to these questions is a good indicator

²² Earley, *Disciple Making*. p. 194.

²³ Ibid. p.198.

²⁴ Earley, *Disciple Making*. p.195.

that we can further engage in development process, whether the resistance is in us or our apprentices.

Vision

Seeing the road and knowing the path is critical to being a leader.²⁵ Dempsey again, “Being able to see further, farther, and clearer is an important responsibility for the Christian leader. When we spend time with God in His word and we spend time in His presence, we begin to hear His voice clearly.” Paul Tripp adds, “Fruit in ministry is the result not of our wise planning and diligent execution but of the loving operation of God’s rescuing and transforming grace.”²⁶ Vision is not to be disconnected from communion with God. Fear of man and pragmatism can become obstacles if our vision outgrows the biblical bounds and call to do all for the glory of God. At this point you may be wrestling over taking on such a task. This is the appropriate response. Please know I trust what God is doing in and through you and will be praying for you. Not only that, but there is also the last component in healthy leadership multiplication, development.

Setting S.M.A.R.T. goals for your group and your apprentice will help you measure and adjust developmental markers. This acrostic stands for Specific, Measurable, Awe-inspiring, Relevant and Timed. Growth goals, involvement goals, service goals and multiplication goals are a few areas to consider.²⁷ We will discuss group goals for growth and multiplication below. Setting S.M.A.R.T. goals, both personally and for the group will keep our development on track.

²⁵ Ibid, p.196.

²⁶ Tripp, *Lead*. p. 48.

²⁷ Dempsey, *Leading*. loc. 909.

Development

I believe the central task of the Christian leader is to encourage, equip, and empower individuals to grow and become what God intends them to be.²⁸ We will have regular check-in conversations and scheduled equipping times. We will share testimonies of successes and setbacks. Paul Tripp highlights this need for encouragement and honesty, “No matter how long we’ve been in ministry leadership, no matter how well trained, no matter how theologically mature, we are all still in need of future spiritual development. We all have blind spots. We all have areas of susceptibility to temptation. Each of us has character weaknesses. We are all still in need of the rescuing, convicting, transforming power of the gospel.”²⁹ Tripp, recounting the Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20, clarifies the source of confidence in our personal development and the development of our apprentices:

Jesus, knowing that there was both doubt and belief in the room, was about to commission this group of fearful believers to carry the gospel of resurrection life to the world. Yes, he would commission these men at this cataclysmic moment. I likely would’ve thought, They’re not ready, it’s just too soon. They need to know so much more. They need to come to a deeper understanding of what just happened. They need time to mature. But in the middle of the most amazing, confusing, and gloriously mind-bending moment in history, Jesus did not hesitate; he simply said, “Go.” I love the words that follow because they tell us why Jesus was confident to draft these men, at that moment, for his worldwide gospel mission. **He was confident not because of what was in them and what he knew they would do, but because he knew what was in himself and what he would do.** So he said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” He was saying to these men that there was no situation, no location, or no community outside of his authority and sovereign rule.³⁰

²⁸ Earley, *Disciple Making*. p. 197.

²⁹ Tripp, *Lead*. p. 83.

³⁰ Tripp, *Lead*. p. 20-21.

Our confidence is not in our own ability. Our confidence and hope of continued development is in Christ alone.

We are confident, reading Philippians 1:6, “that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” Practically, and by God’s grace, we will grow together in our ability to pray for our group members daily, invite new people to visit our groups weekly, contact our group members regularly, prepare for our group meetings, mentor an apprentice leader, plan group fellowship activities, and be committed to our own personal growth.³¹ Take a moment to consider areas you could improve. Note those weaknesses and add them to your prayer list. Also consider how others in your group may have strengths in that area.

³¹ Dempsey. *Leading*. loc. 1362.

How to Multiply Small Groups

“There is nothing better for a leader than seeing one’s group give birth.” Dempsey continues, “While there are several ineffective ways to birth new groups, there is no single “right way” to birth a group.”³² This principle of bearing fruit, or multiplication, is vital in motivating the Christian into the involved process of disciple making. As we effectively mature the group members and the group leaders, the multiplication of disciples is the natural outcome. Likewise, every group goes through stages. The stages are either healthy or they are unhealthy. It is helpful to recognize and respond to the common signs found in each stage. The remainder of this section is adapted from Dempsey’s *Leading Healthy, Growing, Multiplying, Small Groups*, chapters 46 and 47.³³ Dempsey and Earley’s experience and Christ-centered success in small group formation leaves little to recreate.

The Formation Stage

This is the initial stage for the group and lasts approximately two months. During this period, group members are getting to know one another and the members do not yet consider this group to be “my group.” During this stage, it’s important that the leader sets the tone and clearly explains the goals and mission of the group so the members can band together and achieve the goals. Talk about multiplying early and often. Talking about forming new groups from day one encourages the group members to invite and engage early in the process. Likewise, this outward focus will set the foundation for accountability and genuine covenant relationships within the group.

³² Dempsey. *Leading*. loc. 2067.

³³ *Ibid.*, loc. 2067-2154.

The Exploration Stage

This stage is where the members begin to see what group life is about. At this phase of group life, it's common for members to question the leader (and the leadership team) regarding the group's purpose. This stage typically lasts two to four months. During this time, the wise leader will reiterate the mission of the group to show his or her desire to lead the group into achieving something big for God. Regarding multiplication, do not speak of "breaking up," "splitting," or "dividing" your group. This just sounds like divorce. Instead, talk about "birthing" new groups, "launching" new groups, "multiplying" groups and "raising up and releasing" new leaders. Words are powerful. Prayer is vital.

The Execution Stage

During the third stage, the group is healthy and is interested in becoming and doing what the leader and the leadership team has been casting a vision to do. This is the "achievement stage" which occurs during months five through nine. When a group moves into this stage, the members are busy serving one another, inviting unchurched friends to the group or parties and living in biblical community. Setting a date for multiplying your group is essential in achieving the dream of multiplying your group.

The Preparation Stage

The fourth stage, like the metamorphosis of the caterpillar, is a stage of rest. However, inside the group deep changes are taking place. The group is now naturally growing and adding new people on a regular basis without a lot of extra work. The members are maturing spiritually and new leaders are being released to serve and care for the members and facilitate various parts of the meetings. This stage occurs during months ten through twelve. Evangelism and maturity mark this small group season. As it goes in the Christian life, seasons of rest are not meant to be

permanent. Times of rest and preparation are intended to bring growth and multiplication to the Christian - fruitfulness if you will - even more to the gatherings of Christians.

The Multiplication Stage

This stage can also be called “birthing stage.” As the name implies, **this is a time when the group becomes two or more groups.** Often, some pain accompanies this stage. However, the ultimate joy of reproducing a new group outweighs the struggles of birth. This stage typically occurs during months twelve through eighteen in a healthy group. The primary leader invites a handful of members to start a new group, or one of the new leaders leaves the cocoon with others and a new group is formed. The stages above describe a small group where the members rally around the goals of the group and the leader is strong, yet loving and sensitive. The leader of this group, like the butterfly, understands how important reproduction is for the survival of the species and works hard to raise up other leaders from within the group. This is a great opportunity to recast the vision for multiplying. Some churches make this a part of their worship celebration to make a visual statement of their priorities and vision.

The Distortion Stage

Unfortunately, **there is one more stage of small group life that will happen to groups that do not grow and develop leaders within eighteen to twenty-four months.** After this much time together, a group loses its momentum and the vision to multiply. If the group has been together for two years, it is in danger of dying and needs immediate attention to refocus the efforts toward growth and multiplication. The action points in this chapter are especially important. Take time right now to ponder each question and work with your coach and group to move to the next level. As you answer the questions, remember that healthy groups that multiply are as beautiful as any butterfly that you will ever see!

How to Grow and Develop a Small Group Ministry

Thom Rainer, in *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, notes, “Look at the faces of the members before the church officially died. Now look at the faces of most of the people who live in the community where the church is located. They are significantly different.”³⁴ Growing small groups is important because the life and mission of the local church depends on it. This is not to say that one or another specific type of small group is necessary; but having a focused, intentional, and healthy method of discipleship is. Brad House agrees, “Jesus has called us to go and make disciples, so when we ask if our groups are effective, essentially we are asking if they are making disciples. If our community groups are not making disciples, we are wasting our time.”³⁵ The importance of growing small groups, therefore, is more about the importance of making and maturing disciples than it is holding up programs.

Prayer

Dempsey and Earley, with decades of experience in small group methods, notably place one suggestion above all else, prayer: “Highly effective small group leaders view prayer as an indispensable tool in their ministry to others. They use it often and well. They build it into their daily schedule and make it a high priority. They don’t just pray a little, they pray a lot.”³⁶ While space does not allow for a full discussion on prayer and its effectiveness, may it suffice to say God is the One who grows the group, not the leader on his or her own power. Prayer is to be done individually and in small groups. We can pray for our own spiritual formation, specific members of our small group, future small group members, maybe someone you have invited to come to the

³⁴ Rainer, Thom S.. *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive*. B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. 2014. loc. 219.

³⁵ House, *Community*. p. 1370.

³⁶ Dempsey. *Leading*. loc. 1433.

group, or just your community. We are to be praying a lot. Paul Tripp notes, “Could it be that we have filled our time with too many things? Could it be that we are not frustrated captives of our busy schedules, but are, in fact, the heart-driven controllers of our time? Might our schedules actually portray what is important to us and gives us joy?”³⁷ Prayerlessness is a significant issue in the church today. We are cautioned to keep our upward love first in the pursuit of small group growth.

Participation in Community

Being on mission in our neighborhood and in our city are helpful suggestions when discussing small group growth. These suggestions are very reasonable. Stay outside in the front yard longer while watering the yard or intentionally walk your dog regularly around the same time in your neighborhood.³⁸ Sit on the front porch and letting kids play in the front yard. Passing out baked goods or inviting neighbors over for dinner are great ways to build bridges in your neighborhood. Pick a few restaurants to frequent getting to know the staff and regulars, or going to the same coffee shop when you can opens up doors of conversation.³⁹ We have the opportunity to invest in God’s image-bearers, hopefully leading toward invitations into the family of God.

House describes this effectiveness as bridge-building; **“Bridges are the opportunities for people to encounter the truth of the gospel through conversations and experiences with the people of God...Barriers are issues of practice, culture, or perception that inhibit the progress**

³⁷ Tripp, Paul David. *A Quest for More: Living for Something Bigger than You*. New Growth Press. Kindle Edition. 2007. p. 170.

³⁸ Reeves, Josh. “25 Simple Ways To Be Missional In Your Neighborhood.” Verge Network. <https://www.vergenetwork.org/2011/08/23/25-simple-ways-to-be-missional-in-your-neighborhood/>. Accessed 4 December 2020.

³⁹ Reeves, Josh. “10 Simple Ways To Be Missional in Your City.” Verge Network. <https://www.vergenetwork.org/2011/10/11/10-simple-ways-to-be-missional-in-your-city-part-1/>. Accessed 4 December 2020.

of the gospel.”⁴⁰ Two of the opportunities we have for growing our small groups are, first, having a clear structure for small groups and, second, boldly participating in the rhythms of life of our local community.

Opportunity Based Small Groups

The idea of “event” based small grouse, versus “lifestyle” - or opportunity - based small groups is a major obstacle for growth. House defines our terms well with, “An event-based community is one that predominantly sees the event once a week as their community group. It defines a community as a time and place. Opportunity-based community is the idea that we are always a community group whether we are together or apart.”⁴¹ When these rhythms are rigid and finite, a community group will remain event based. Rigid group rhythms often produce inauthentic and labored groups.”⁴² One of many opportunities for growth could be to schedule an open invitation for your group to meet in the community, participating in the community, allowing people to get to know each other outside of the more intense fellowship time, and opening opportunities to share the light of Christ with those outside the church.

4 M’s

Model It Ask potential leaders to watch as you do the ministry, just as Jesus did with His disciples (Matthew 9:32–38). Let them see a highly effective small group leader in action. When Paul and Barnabas were sent out to minister, Barnabas was the leader. Barnabas was doing the ministry and Paul was observing. Note how they are listed as “Barnabas and Paul” (Acts 13:1-5). **Mentor It** Ask them do a task as you watch, assist, gently correct and encourage as Jesus did with his disciples

⁴⁰ House, *Community*. p. 1680.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 1975.

⁴² Ibid. p. 1996. House’s chapter 6-7 are a must-read for this idea of rhythm and “opportunity” style groups.

(Matthew 10:1). Not long into their journey, Barnabas moved over to give Paul the opportunity to lead. Note that they now were listed as “Paul and Barnabas” (Acts 13:6). **Motivate It** Let them do the task as you encourage from a distance, as Jesus did when he sent his disciples out two by two without him (Matthew 10:5). Similarly, when Paul and Barnabas prepared for another missionary journey, Paul was ready to go on his own (Acts 15:36–41). **Multiply It** The original disciples multiplied out to a total of seventy (Luke 10:1), then perhaps five hundred (1 Corinthians 15:6). After Jesus ascended to heaven, the number of disciples multiplied to three thousand (Acts 2:41), then five thousand men (Acts 4:4). Then there were so many that the Bible simply says the number was multiplied (Acts 6:7).⁴³

⁴³ Dempsey. *Leading*. loc. 2030.

How to Transition to Small Groups at Bethel

Bethel Baptist Church has been a church with small groups for almost ten years. However, the DNA of small groups at Bethel has lacked multiplication, service, or evangelism. Arnold notes, **“If you are growing in Christ and receiving the benefits of God's blessing, sooner or later God will give you a burden for those who are not saved.”**⁴⁴ To say it another way, our Community Groups will be on mission. As a gathering of Christians, our Community Groups can naturally and dynamically affect the neighborhoods in which they exist. Praying for our neighbors, sharing Christ with them, and inviting them into a family-like setting to disciple them will lead to God glorifying results. His methods will not return void. **Our transition at Bethel will be a transition to a more intentional and evangelistic structure.** The remainder of this section forms an acrostic, “S.M.A.L.L. G.R.O.U.P.S.”, adapted from Dempsey and Earley’s chapter 50, “Eleven Steps to Transition to Small Groups.”⁴⁵ I owe so much of my maturation and ministry philosophy to both of these men. These eleven steps are my big dream and goal for Bethel Baptist Church and our Community Groups. Let’s pray, grow, and serve together for the glory of God and the good of those who do not yet know Christ.

Seek God’s Direction From His Word.

Examine passages like the Great Commandment and the Great Commission and the New Commandment and ask the questions, “Are we following the exhortations from these passages?” or “Are we developing Christians who look like these passages?” Go to Acts 2:42–47 and Ephesians 4:11–16 and ask whether or not your small group is following the example of the early church. Go to Colossians 1:28 and examine whether or not you are seeking to present “every man” complete

⁴⁴ Arnold, *The Big Book*. loc. 2083.

⁴⁵ Dempsey. *Leading*. loc. 2236-2305.

(*teleios*) in Christ. The focus is on the individual. **Are you developing every person in the body to stand before Christ and not be ashamed?**

Make Sure The Senior Pastor Is In The Lead Position.

The job of “making disciples” is for every follower of Jesus. Pastors are followers of Jesus and they should be involved in making disciples. Preaching, leading, fund-raising, counseling, marriages, funerals, are all part of making disciples. The things of the ministry should not take our focus off enabling and empowering individuals to reach their full potential related to the Great Commission. The elders and pastors of the church should be in a group or leading a group and they are talking about the importance of small group constantly. Any church that makes disciples will qualify to receive the promise from Jesus contained in the Great Commission, “I will be with you, even unto the end of the age.” If we are growing and developing disciples, Jesus has promised to “be with us.” **Using sermon based study guides is another way of keeping the senior pastor involved in shepherding every small group.**

Adopt a Model That Fits.

You have basically three options when it comes to small groups: you will become a church “with” groups, or church “of” groups, or you will develop into a church that “is” groups. Ideally you may want to become a church that “is” small groups, but you may not be able to get there, or you may not be able to get there quickly. That is okay. Just make sure that you are emphasizing the right priorities from the Scriptures. Winning people to Christ, helping them to grow in Christ and then sending them out for Christ. Form follows function. If your goal is to become a healthy church that is producing disciples who are willing to go out from the church and make disciples, then you

must develop forms and structures that allow or promote those very things. Remember “you cannot be committed to the person of Christ, without being committed to the mission of Christ.”

Leadership Training.

Leading a group is spiritual business and if done correctly, it will be opposed by the enemy.

Let’s not put people into difficult spiritual positions of leadership without some basic training in the art and science of making disciples. Basics questions like, “why should I lead a group” and “what is a small group leader” and “how do I lead a small group discussion” or “how do I handle a challenging group member?” People need answers to these questions before they start leading a group. Years ago I developed a basic training manual that has trained hundreds of small group leaders. The people who have taken the training seriously and have put into practice the principles from the training have developed into effective disciple makers for the kingdom.

Launch New Groups.

After much prayer and planning and training...eventually you will need to launch some new groups in your church. I like to launch groups in the fall after Labor Day. Everybody is back for school and their minds automatically begin thinking of a fall routine. The fall is a great time to launch a group ministry. After you launch the new groups, you need to decide whether or not the groups will meet all through the year, or on a school calendar (taking off for the summer). Either approach has strengths and weaknesses.

Grow the Groups in Quantity and Quality.

Special attention must be given to the new groups so that they will grow strong and healthy. Much in the same way of giving birth to a new born baby, special attention is given to the baby’s growth and development. Vision is cast. Meetings are called. Trainings are held. Coaching is

developed. Groups are highlighted. New groups are like new babies. As a result the parents are very concerned about every aspect of the baby's wellbeing. If the baby does not grow and develop, it could become sick and die. The same is true for the new group. Don't let that happen.

Retrain Leaders to Retain Leaders.

After the initial training we do not leave the new groups as orphans. We check on them through personal mentoring and coaching. We invite them to attend some additional training courses at the church or to attend a small group conference out of town. We could purchase a book about small group leadership and give a copy to every small group leader and discuss during our coaching clusters. The idea here is that leaders need additional training to stay focused and to improve the quality of discipleship.

Over-communicate.

Rick Warren has made this statement famous, "People are down on what they are not up on." Most ministries are guilty of not communicating enough with the people in their church. Let's make sure that small group leaders are getting enough information from the leaders of the ministry. When, where, why and how are good starting places for communicating the importance of being in and developing healthy small groups.

Utilize a Coaching Structure.

I like the 5×5 model of coaching. One pastor for every five directors. One director for every five coaches. One coach for every five groups. Just think if this model was implemented in a church and there were fifteen people in each group...one coach (5×15) would oversee seventy-five people and one director (5×75) would oversee 375 people, and one pastor (5×375) would oversee 1,875 people. This model is also from Exodus 18, where Jethro told Moses that the thing he was

doing “was not good.” The people were standing around Moses “from morning until evening.”

Sound familiar? As a result the Israelites implemented a structure based upon thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. Attention can be given all the way down to the individual in the organization if you have a structure that allows it to happen.

Pray.

Very simple, but very difficult. Joel Comiskey did a study on groups that were multiplying and he discovered that there was one common trait in multiplying groups. The common denominator in multiplying groups was that the leader of the group prayed on average one hour a day. Emphasize the importance of prayer in your groups and you will see miraculous things happen. Remember this wisdom from Jerry Falwell: “Nothing of eternal significance ever happens apart from prayer.”

See God’s Blessing.

Jesus said in the Great Commission that if we made disciples, He would be with us. We can receive the promise of the power and presence of Jesus Christ with us, if we will determine to make disciples. Small groups are the best place to make disciples, because Christianity is designed to be lived out in a context where people are loving God, loving one another and loving our neighbors in a community of believers that make up the body of Christ.

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