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Introduction

In the last forty years, much attention has been given to small group development within the evangelical church. Many models have been proposed and attempted with a variety of results. Two authors, Dave Ferguson and Mike Breen, have written about their thoughts on building small groups and seeing explosive growth in the Kingdom of God through small groups.

This paper will consider what Ferguson and Breen have suggested and describe some of the common small group models utilized. The paper will then discuss which of those models are being used by The Crossing Church and how that church would describe itself concerning small groups.

Creating Small Groups that will Reproduce

Dave Ferguson believes that life groups are vital to creating a missional church movement that can return the church to exponential growth that looks like the growth of the early church. Ferguson describes that groups grow according to a predictable life cycle: birth, adolescence, and maturity.

Groups can be birthed by seeking affinities that are common among a group of people.¹ These common values provide a platform to create dialogues, develop relationships through shared values, and give rallying points to experience certain activities based upon the common values. The believer who organizes these events must determine the correct way to steer conversations toward spiritual matters without being seen as one who manipulates others for their personal goals. Another common value is offering solutions to a cause. Many people want to see the world changed for the better and are willing to join efforts that address meaningful

¹ Dave Ferguson and Jon Ferguson, *Exponential: How You and Your Friends Can Start a Missional Movement*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 107.

causes. The leadership that the organizing believer provides can be very attractive to those who wish to participate in a change movement.

Ferguson proposes that groups move into adolescence as they encourage people to grow in their affinity and to the cause.² The goals in this phase of growth are to solidify the community of people and to aid them in building mutual respect and concern for each other.

The last stage of a group is the move to maturity. Ferguson explains that group maturity brings a focus on celebrating who they are in God's family.³ The influence of the believers in the group has brought value to God and His Word in the eyes of group members, and rich spiritual conversations become the norm. The group is still engaged in the activities related to the interest or cause that gathered them, but they are now on a journey to build a biblical community.

Ferguson proposes that believers should be empowered with the idea that God's people are supposed to take action on what is shared in Acts 1:8.^{4 5} Church leaders should embrace a paradigm shift that values ordaining every Christ-follower to start a church. The underlying thought is that church leaders should "teach people to go to where the lost are and not just bring them back to the church building."⁶ The paradigm shift includes encouraging believers to "Go

² Dave Ferguson and Jon Ferguson, *Exponential: How You and Your Friends Can Start a Missional Movement*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 107.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

⁶ Ibid., 111.

and serve the lost, explaining who Jesus is to them.”⁷ Ferguson concludes his description of small groups by reminding church leaders to teach their people to be “incarnational and apostolic, coaching and training leaders” to create new believers who can pursue similar goals and continue to the growth and outreach of the church.⁸

Compare/Contrast Breen Concepts with Ferguson Concepts

Dave and Jon Ferguson present a model that is primarily based upon growth in numbers. They offer a concept that encourages relationship growth in the community and places a high value on groups that are designed to “connect the unconnected.”⁹ As the individual groups go through their life cycle, Ferguson explains that they need to celebrate their achievements with other groups, and also celebrate their relationship with God. The groups should also highly value their connection with each other and work to build closeness and unity among the members. Lastly, the groups should also be encouraging their members to participate rather than spectate. The leaders should help the members contribute to the on-going efforts to impact their communities. Active leadership development enables the movement to continue and spread in its influence.

Breen’s approach to group development aligns with a more spiritual approach. Breen encourages leaders to have a God-given “vision to reach and minister to others.”¹⁰ As leaders spend time with God and become certain of their vision, they are encouraged to “own and

⁷ Ibid., 104.

⁸ Dave Ferguson and Jon Ferguson, *Exponential: How You and Your Friends Can Start a Missional Movement*, 104.

⁹ Ibid., 89.

¹⁰ Mike Breen, *Multiplying Missional Leaders*, (Crowdscribed, LLC, 2014), Location 279.

incarnate the vision.”¹¹ Breen seems to value the fact that effective and long-lasting ministry is not established by brand new believers. He describes that disciples are needed to move a movement forward. Breen suggests that disciples can be described as “Disciples who are radically committed to the mission of God.”¹² His overall approach to small group ministry is to make disciples. He believes that church leaders should expand their impact by training. Breen stated that church leaders should “develop many followers and many leaders.”

Simply put, Breen is arguing that a focused effort to make disciples will result in an expansive movement occurring when enough people have become fully committed. Building disciples is hard. Breen said, “The truth about discipleship is that it’s never hip and never in style because it’s the call to come and die.”¹³

Breen explains that disciples have to be taught that although inward development is vital and important, it is pointless unless it has an outward expression. Breen states, “to be a disciple is to be a missionary, and to be a missionary requires that we be disciples.”¹⁴ Along with the training to have an outward focus, Breen describes how disciples have to remain submitted to God’s leadership and seek His guidance in all their endeavors. Breen describes this by saying, “In the Kingdom of God, success is measured by one thing: Faithfulness through obedience. God controls outcomes: we choose, through his grace, to be obedient.”¹⁵

¹¹ Mike Breen, *Multiplying Missional Leaders*, (Crowdscribed, LLC, 2014), Location 294.

¹² Ibid., Location 355.

¹³ Ibid., Location 388.

¹⁴ Ibid., Location 419.

¹⁵ Ibid., Location 478.

Common Small Group Models

As churches seek to create a life-giving community among their members, the leaders have many options to choose from as they establish those groups. These choices allow the leaders to design small groups that align with the development plans they are pursuing.

Open Small Groups

Open small groups operate with the mindset that there will always be the opportunity for new members to join. The leaders of the group are encouraged to develop assistant leaders to help with birthing new groups once the “base” group has grown to a certain size. These groups place a high value on growth in numbers and evangelism. Focused prayer for the lost is common. These groups can experience a loss of intimacy due to rapid growth and may grow so large that they no longer feel like a small group unless new leaders are available to birth new groups. These groups may also have a harder time developing spiritual maturity in group members because of the lack of personal accountability.¹⁶

Closed Small Groups

Closed small groups usually establish a limit to their size and no longer accept new members once that limit is reached. These groups tend to have members who develop close relationships and have the potential to aid members in spiritual maturity growth by holding each other accountable. These groups can also become “cliques” and turn inward by focusing on their own needs rather than developing a ministry mindset that seeks to serve others outside the group.¹⁷

¹⁶ Dempsey, Rodney. "Small Group Models". Liberty University Online, DSMN 830, Week 4: Reading and Study Materials, 2020.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Cell Groups

Cell groups are established as part of a church strategy to develop groups as the primary ministry of the church. Other ministries are diminished in importance compared to the cell groups. The leaders of the groups seek to focus on developing mature disciples. This focus upon discipleship can develop a strong culture of discipleship within the church. The cells operate in a structured manner, which aids in the propagation of new groups. The groups focus upon relational evangelism, which allows the members to reach out to their communities. New members can be a challenge for the discipling of other members. Also, the focus on cell groups to the exclusion of other ministries can lead to a lack of cohesion among the groups as they operate as a church body.¹⁸

Free Market Groups

Free-market groups are formed around a common interest concept. The leader seeks to reach members of the community by providing an opportunity to gather around a specific interest or topic. This common interest provides the groundwork for spiritual relationships to be established, as well as an opportunity for the believers in the group to build trust with non-believers. These groups are highly evangelistic. These groups can be effective in reaching the lost but are not conducive to growing individuals as disciples.¹⁹

Neighborhood Groups

Neighborhood groups are formed with the idea that members can reach their neighbors and build relational communities in close proximity to where they live. The group leaders invite friends and neighbors who live or work close by to establish meaningful relationships with each

¹⁸ Rodney Dempsey, "Small Group Models," 2020.

¹⁹ Ibid.

other. These members also are encouraged to attend the weekend gatherings of the church to participate in worship and hear the preaching of the pastors. The established traditions of the church may make it difficult for new members to integrate, as those practices might not appear relevant to unchurched individuals.²⁰

Purpose Driven Groups

Purpose-driven groups are established based on a program that was created by Saddleback Church. These groups work to develop five areas in the members: fellowship, discipleship, ministry, evangelism, and worship. The members are recruited as part of the campaigns that the church conducts, which direct individuals to groups that respond to the campaign. This method is well developed, and training materials are available to help prepare new leaders. This model requires a strong administrative effort to support. Also, there is a large turnover of individuals who go through the groups, as the marketing effort attracts many who are not actually ready to commit to a group.²¹

Sermon Based Groups

This group strategy is based on the idea that the church staff will prepare lessons related to the sermon preached at the weekend service. This allows the small group leaders to be provided with prepared materials rather than having to prepare their own. This allows them to focus on involving the group members in processing what was conveyed in the sermon and discuss how to apply those concepts to their lives. This aids in building a common experience among the church members and helps build unity within the church. This type of group requires

²⁰ Rodney Dempsey, "Small Group Models," 2020.

²¹ Ibid.

pre-planning by the teaching team to have materials prepared. It also can feel limiting to group leaders to bring in new teaching materials.²²

Organic Small Groups

Organic groups are allowed great freedom to create teaching materials and pursue development as the group leaders wish. This allows leaders and group members to pursue their gifts and passions. These groups work somewhat independently from the church leadership. This can lead to chaotic leadership challenges, and groups can go rogue from the church.²³

House Churches

House churches are created as the fundamental unit in the church. The group grows and ministers to each other as they build unity as a relational community. They do ministry together as they do life. These groups tend to be comprised of family groups, which leads to multi-generational gatherings. These groups can develop very close relationships as well as high levels of trust between members. These groups can experience poor teaching if none of the leaders have had much theological training. Because of their limited size, they will often lack financial resources that larger gatherings of believers can amass.²⁴

Host Groups

Host groups are established around the idea that the host does not have to be the leader of the group. The host focuses on providing a meeting place (usually their home) and being the relational glue of the group. A separate individual is the group leader who prepares content for teaching the group. This allows hosts to be enlisted more easily as the requirements are fairly

²² Rodney Dempsey, "Small Group Models," 2020.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

low. The hope is that the hosts will grow in ability and can be developed to become a group leader. The downside to the strategy is that some hosts that are recruited are not ready for leadership, and there can be a high turnover of hosts as they remove themselves from the burden of leadership.²⁵

Analysis of The Crossing Church's Small Group Model

The Crossing Church utilizes several of these models at the same time. Most groups are based on the Neighborhood Group concept. In addition, group leaders are recruited first as hosts (Host Group concept), and an experienced group leader is teamed with them as the group is established. Group members are recruited from the existing body of the church based upon their geographical preferences. Group leaders are provided with sermon-based lessons each week to use as they wish. From time to time, church leadership will ask leaders to teach through the content of a suggested book, which might align with a sermon series that the teaching team is presenting. Some group leaders are encouraged to create common interest groups as a means of gathering members. The group leaders are encouraged to focus on building unity and community and discouraged from becoming master teachers and teaching Bible studies. This smorgasbord of small group strategies can be confusing to new members seeking a group. In addition, these strategies tend to be inward focused, with group leaders assuming that new members will only come from within the church.

It is the hope of church leadership that the groups can become outward focused. The small groups are primarily focused on building a biblical community where people know each other and pray for each other's needs. Leadership desires that the groups will become a place

²⁵ Rodney Dempsey, "Small Group Models," 2020.

where members can easily invite their friends to participate. These groups are not meant to be discipleship solutions but are primarily a community-building structure.

Currently, the Crossing Church would be described as a church “with” groups moving toward becoming a church “of” groups. The leadership of the church desires to equip and empower the members to exercise their gifts within the context of their small groups. They also wish to create greater unity that will bind the individual small groups to other groups in the church body. By doing this well, the small groups can embrace and value the collective goals of the church and use that structure to aid them as they work to reach the community in service and outreach efforts.

Conclusion

The concept of gathering people together, building mutually supportive and caring relationships, and working cooperatively is a great groundwork for small groups. The key element that is needed is the presence and grace of God acting within the group. The small group leaders must be connected in a close relationship with God to receive the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, which makes the gathering become something life-giving. God’s presence changes a gathering of people from a fun event to something life-changing. The group’s ability to align with God’s vision and pursue His goals will allow the group to become expansive. Exponential growth without God is pointless and doomed to fail. Exponential growth that is empowered by God can change nations.

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