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Introduction

The modern American Church faces a significant challenge as the leadership attempts to minister to a predominantly unchurched culture. The fundamental challenge given to the body of Christ is to spread the message of the gospel to those who do not know of God's efforts to reach them and His offer of grace to them. God's plan has always been to have His people represent His love for others by the love for each other and the people around them.

The early Church grew in a similar period when the controlling culture had no interest in the things of God. However, the early disciples demonstrated unity with each other and love for their fellow man. This love was extremely attractive to the people of their culture, and the Church exploded in growth and impact upon the Roman civilization. This paper will review the biblical support for small groups that multiply, the role of disciples to develop others into small groups leaders, the role of mentoring in leadership development, and key areas that need to be developed by the leadership of The Crossing Church to support the growth of multiplying small groups.

Biblical Basis for Multiplying Small Groups

The imperative to grow small groups is primarily based on the Great Commission that Jesus gave to His followers in Matt 28:18-20.¹ His direction was for His disciples to make disciples of others. This concept is in line with what God consistently declared to His people in the Old Testament where He said, ". . . will greatly increase your numbers" (Gen 17:2); "I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore." (Gen 22: 17); ". . . make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

and will give them all these lands." (Gen 26:4); ". . . be fruitful and increase in number." (Gen 35:11) God created mankind so that He could have a relationship with them, and He did not intend for it to be a small, exclusive group that would rebuff those who might want to be part of the Kingdom of God.

Matt 14:13-21, Mark 6: 34-44, Luke 9:12-17, John 6: 5-13, Matt 15:32-39, and Mark 8:1-9 recount the miracles of the feeding of the four thousand and the five thousand by Jesus. Dempsey and Earley describe how these miracles provide the example of multiplication. The authors stated, "It is unmistakable from these passages that multiplication was God's plan for blessing His people in the Old Testament and for expanding His church in the New Testament."²

Developing Disciples as Small Group Leaders

Each person who grows in spiritual maturity will be confronted with their need to join with God in reaching the lost world around them. As they begin to understand how God's grace has granted them freedom from sin, they realize that this gift is something that everyone they care about should also receive. The believer's journey of understanding how they have been justified before God by the shedding of Christ's blood, and are being sanctified as they live a life focused on serving Him changes their selfish motivations. They are transformed into loving people who are willing to invest in others and help them to live the abundant life that Jesus has to offer.

This journey of the new believer gives them perspective as to how to communicate to others what it means to be a Christ-follower. Those who fully commit to Him become impassioned and empowered to pursue the Great Commission. This clarity of purpose helps the

² Rod Dempsey and Dave Earley. *Leading Healthy, Growing, Multiplying Small Groups*, (Lynchburg: Liberty University Press, 2016), Location 1851

believer understand the need to work wisely to explain the gospel to others, by words and deeds, so that they too can experience the same transformation. The believer's love for others is attractive and particularly effective when it focuses on family and other close relationships. Their ability to speak to real-life issues and allow the Holy Spirit to soften the hearts of those they share with can lead to significant numbers of conversions. As these trusted friends become disciples, they gain the same awareness of what God is doing to reach a lost world and join into the process of gathering friends, sharing the gospel, and teaching them what it means to be a Christ-follower. This process of reaching, teaching, and empowering has the potential for multiplying small groups in a miraculous way.

Importance of Mentoring to Small Groups

Small group growth is affected by many factors, but a key factor essential for growth is a capable group leader. The group leader provides a vision and motivates group members to assist them in pursuing goals to reach that vision, all the while being mindful of each group member's condition (spiritual and physical) so the leader can invest energy to help the member at the correct time with the right actions. This complex set of skills needs to be developed in those who become leaders, and experienced leaders must be available to new leaders to mentor them as they begin to lead their groups. Earley asserts that mentoring can be defined as "cooperating with God in raising up an apprentice to become a highly effective small group leader."³ Earley's definition presumes that a mentor understands that God wishes for new leaders to be trained and nurtured into effective leaders. Raising up new leaders requires diligence and thoughtfulness by the mentor to successfully empower new leaders. Earley suggests that effective ministers are

³ Dave Earley, *8 Habits of Effective Small Group Leaders - Transforming Your Ministry Outside Your Meetings*, (TOUCH Publications, Inc.), Location 915.

mindful of their current spiritual condition as they seek to help others.⁴ If they are struggling with maintaining a solid relationship with the Lord, they will likely struggle with pouring knowledge and care into a new leader.⁵ Next, the mentor needs to always be on the lookout for those who look like they are good candidates to be leaders. Earley suggests giving out tasks and challenges to others to see who responds well and successfully completes those simple assignments.⁶ As a mentor works with these people, they should be assessing their compatibility and character to see if they are a good fit to interact relationally with the mentor. Earley recommends looking for attributes like faithfulness to complete tasks and develop their relationship with God, as well as how active they are in developing relationships with others. He also suggests looking for those who display initiative in ministry, are teachable, and demonstrate openness and transparency. If the potential candidate is evaluated favorably, then the mentor should work to deepen their relationship with that person by praying with them and spending time with them as they do life together. The mentor should be able to describe the vision of the small groups ministry to the person and see if they are willing to become an apprentice to them, with the goal of becoming a group leader at the appropriate time.

Comiskey also recommends that mentors start with prayer. He recommends building the mentoring process around vision ideals. He describes how apprentices can be lead to work in evangelistic projects so that they learn the methods to include those who are outside the group

⁴ Dave Earley, 8 Habits of Effective Small Group Leaders - Transforming Your Ministry Outside Your Meetings, (TOUCH Publications, Inc.), Location 961.

⁵ Ibid., Location 961.

⁶ Ibid., Location 975.

and see how to share the gospel as they do so.⁷ He also suggests that apprentices can learn to be open in sharing their life experiences in a transparent way.⁸ This transparency can lead non-believers to be open about their concerns and allow the apprentice to develop a closer relationship with them.⁹ Comiskey extolls how a mentor can suggest several methods like "meeting needs" groups, seeker sensitive groups, Alpha groups which allow non-believers to ask questions about God, and other evangelistic tactical groups that help apprentices put ministry into action and learn to lead others as they seek to do Kingdom work.¹⁰

Top Areas to Develop in Disciple Making

A Personal Spiritual Growth Assessment was utilized to assess this writer's current status and propose areas that could use strengthening and improvement.¹¹ In the section that deals with the relationship between the Father and the individual, the assessment demonstrated that there is still work to be done to enhance the closeness that should be in place between the individual and the Father. This area is key because this is where a believer can be strengthened and directed by the Creator of All. Any meaningful ministry must be based on this connection between the believer and God. As Jesus reminds us in John 15:5-7, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do

⁷ Joel Comiskey, "How to Evangelize in the Cell Group: Evangelism and Multiplication", Joelcomiskeygroup.com, Accessed on October 10, 2020 from https://joelcomiskeygroup.com/en/resources/evangelism_mult/en_effective/

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Personal Spiritual Growth Assessment," Liberty University Online, DSMN 830, Week 7: Reading and Study Materials, 2020.

nothing. If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."

The section that addressed "Love for One Another" proposed that the writer is doing a good job maintaining these aspects of a believer's life other than praying for others specifically. The press of a busy schedule and hectic life can easily move this task to a lower place in each day's priorities. However, such action removes God's power and influence from a believer's life to consider each person's needs and actions that could be taken to help them. Again, a realignment of priorities is required.

In the final section of the assessment, an individual is directed to consider how effective they are in reaching the lost. In this season, this writer has been focused on aiding other believers to become outward focused. Doing so has enabled others to be reached with the saving knowledge of Christ. The scores are low in this section due to the focus on training believers, but it is a good reminder that each believer should be part of a community that is expanding and making in-roads into the lost world. Intentional strategies can change the results of this score.

Conclusion

The early Church grew exponentially because the people within those groups were excited to share what they knew with the people they loved. The culture they lived in was not supportive of a new religion, yet the Church exploded with growth. This growth persisted for centuries, and Christianity became the predominant faith of the Roman Empire. As time has moved forward, this passion for spreading the gospel has faded and has been reassigned to the clergy, often by the clergy themselves. The sad result is that the modern American Church no longer experiences exponential growth. For a season, America's culture supported people participating in Church life and encouraged people to be part of that community. In modern

times, the culture has become hostile to the Church and actively suppresses believers' voices and opportunities to share their faith. Those conditions do make things harder, but history shows that opposition is actually a condition that aids the Church in growth. This season is ideal for believers to demonstrate God's love to others and offer them a path to realizing the freedom that comes through God's actions in their lives. Given this opportunity, mature believers must take the time to develop other believers to become active disciple-makers who can share their faith and aid new believers in their growth.

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