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Introduction

Unfortunately, disciple-making has become a bit of a mystery in American churches. Many definitions are proposed for what attributes a disciple will have. This lack of clarity appears to have impacted the ability of most churches to see a healthy culture of disciples who make disciples. Small groups are recognized as a way to connect people to the Church and can aid people in moving toward becoming disciples.¹ This paper will review ten common small group models and explain how the writer's local Church utilizes these models and how the Church is working to strengthen its discipling process in order to align with the strategies that Jesus used to disciple others.

Small-Group Models

Church leaders have recognized the value of having small relational groups where their members interact with each other and minister to those who are not connected to the Church. There are several ways that churches have built their small groups to address the needs of their church body. A website called SmallGroups.com, hosted by Christianity Today, provides a summary of the ten most common small group models.² These models reflect the core values of the church leadership that births and hosts them. These ten models are summarized in Table 1 on the following page.

The Church where this writer serves uses a blend of the Host Group Model\Neighborhood Model\Sermon-Based Model ("HGNSB"). The Church attempted a Closed Group Model/Free Market Model for several years but experienced a lack of participation and a fragmentation of the church body as groups became toxic based upon their on-going

¹ Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is . . .* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2013), p.280.

² SmallGroups.com. "Small Group Models." Christianity Today, June 22, 2020. Accessed on June 23, 2020, from <https://www.smallgroups.com/build/models>

discussions. This lack of cohesion led to three significant bodies of individuals leaving to join other churches or forming other churches. A key issue was that the small group leaders were not sufficiently trained or

Table 1

Model	Description	Advantages	Disadvantages
Open Small Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome new members • Birth at a specific limit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outreach friendly • Evangelistic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower intimacy • Can grow too big • Can have lower commitment
Closed Small Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited size • Time-based 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High discipleship and spiritual growth • Deeper intimacy • High commitment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower relational evangelism • Inward focus • Limited flexibility
Cell Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Considered basic unit of the Church • Essential items are worship, edification, relational evangelism, discipleship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intentionally create disciples supports strong discipleship culture in the Church • Strong relational evangelism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cell groups can lose cohesion with the church body • Lacks flexibility • Focus on evangelism can limit trust and intimacy
Free-Market Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groups form around specific affinities • The goal is to move a group from interest group to spiritual group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formatted for fellowship; • Effective for relational evangelism • Vision arises from group leader rather than Church 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definition of the group hard to quantify • May never become spiritually oriented • Temporary in nature and limited intimacy
Neighborhood Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographically based • A mix of ages and social affinities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy access to the region • More time to gather with less travel • Focus on relational evangelism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can lead to lack of diversity if grouped by affinity • Provides fewer choices due to region limitation
Purpose-Driven Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on fellowship, discipleship, ministry, evangelism, and worship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Builds discipleship • Easy development of leaders • Time together builds intimacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administratively burdensome • Campaigns cause turnover of groups • New leaders can cause issues for leadership
Sermon-Based Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groups who study material related to the most recent sermon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeated exposure to biblical topics helps to reinforce concepts • Easy for leaders to present • Creates a sense of unity in the body 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The pastor must prepare sermons earlier to allow time for distribution • Lack of choice of curriculum • Bible study focus rather than relational focus
Organic Small Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community emerges naturally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly relational • Provides leaders ways to use their gifts and passions • Growth metric not used to determine success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can feel chaotic • Lack of programming can lead to a lack of accountability
House Churches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each gathering considers itself an independent church body 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members “do life together.” • Intergenerational • High intimacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can have poor teaching • Fewer financial resources available • Leaders have less training available
Host Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hosts are not expected to be spiritual leaders of the group but are to run a great gathering 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New groups easy to form; • An easy way for leaders to be established 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk of poor leaders • Curriculum may be poor • Great volatility in attendance

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Success depends on the quality of the curriculum 	
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supervised, and the quality of their support to the groups was less than orthodoxy.

The HGNSB model was instituted as the church leadership committed to making small groups a primary focus. As ministry goals were established for the year, the leadership declared that they would not change their focus from small groups until they had achieved eighty percent participation of the body in small groups. As this effort began, only fifty-three people were active in a small group. The staff who had been working in this area were re-assigned, and new leadership was established. This team began to interview the small group leaders and listened to how they had experienced the small groups. The small groups team learned that these leaders had gravitated to closed groups and used a master teacher method. The groups were at their perceived capacity and were not open to new members joining. Also, they did not have any individuals identified as apprentice leaders.

The church leaders recognized a lack of connectedness among the body. As a Church that was moving from an attractional model toward a hybrid model, the Church had demonstrated a remarkable ability to gather large numbers of unchurched people; however, the back door was wide open, and many of these new individuals would leave after a season when they did not find meaningful relationships. The new model was based on recruiting leaders who understood the need for building relationships. The small groups team also highly encouraged the leaders to move away from Bible studies and prioritize building trust relationships and focusing on praying for each other's needs. The small group leadership team published a simple list of questions after each weekend's sermon that were distributed to the small group leaders to utilize in guiding a discussion about what was most recently preached from the pulpit. Each

small group leader was asked to quickly identify a person who they could train as an apprentice. The Church operates on three campuses, and these groups are located in the respective regions around these campuses. The small group leadership encouraged the Hosts to invite their neighbors as a way to promote relational evangelism. By lowering the leadership requirements for Hosts, many more people were willing to attempt to lead these small groups.

The small group leadership team published weekly videos that are distributed to the Hosts. In addition, community leaders were put in place to support these Hosts. The videos provided announcements about church initiatives as well as simple training to reinforce key concepts of leading small groups and restating the vision for the small groups. The small groups leadership team has seen the number of small groups grow from five to more than one hundred ten, with over nine hundred people in attendance regularly.

As these groups become more and more effective at raising apprentices to Hosts, the Church leadership plans to bring a discipling process to the groups. The concept is that the Hosts would identify those who seem hungry for learning more and specifically invite them to another gathering that would consist of only a Host and three others. The Church leadership is writing a curriculum that will aid the Host in guiding these individuals to become mature disciples.

Strengthening Disciple-making

As the Church becomes effective at reaching and connecting new believers, the focus of leadership is moving toward becoming adept at developing mature disciples. A healthy Church will be one that consistently raises mature disciples.³ The church leaders have envisioned a three-tier strategy to aid people as they pursue discipleship. The first tier is a series of videos

³ Rod Dempsey, *Presentation: Healthy Church and Small Groups*, (Liberty University, November 23, 2015), Retrieved on June 23, 2020, from https://learn.liberty.edu/webapps/blackboard/content/listContent.jsp?course_id=_621246_1&content_id=_39428164_1.

that can be delivered via cellphone. These videos explain seven concepts that the Church will teach those who seek to grow in their knowledge of and service to God. These concepts are built around seven words: Saved, Healed, Set Free, Discipled, Empowered, Equipped, and Serving. These videos are taught by the lead pastor and are around seven minutes each. This tier is intended to explain the discipleship process to a new believer and inspire them to begin the journey.

The second tier is a set of studies that have been written about each of the seven words. These studies are meant to be led by mature individuals in a small format consisting of a leader and three students. The leader is encouraged to become heavily invested in the participants and help them to process and integrate the concepts that are taught in each topic. Each study guide takes about eight weeks to complete.

The final tier is constructed to meet the need for people to continue to grow in their knowledge and effectiveness. The lead pastor teaches that each of us should move from being “littles” to becoming “middles” and finally becoming “biggs.” Those who have moved from tier one to tier two will be encouraged to join the Bible college that has been established to pursue more training in God’s Word and practical ministry. The college is provided online, and currently has seventy-six students. The leadership team is writing a curriculum that is focused on using current resources to cover the topics traditionally covered in Bible colleges and seminaries. The courses are written to enable working adults to take up to two courses per eight-week term, with a reasonable demand upon their time. The courses focus on reading related books and are supported by teaching videos prepared by ministry staff. Students can attain associate’s and bachelor’s degrees after completing the degree requirements. The cost to participate in these courses is set very low to remove the cost barrier. The intent is that these

courses will help individuals know more about God and His Word, as well as giving them best practices in areas like money management, prayer, discipleship, biblical counseling, and purposeful engagement in ministry. The Church desires that this knowledge would assist them as they become “bigs” and help disciple others.

Disciple-making Like Jesus

The Church’s disciple-making plan is based upon the idea that disciples make disciples, with leadership having a firm belief that seminars do not make disciples. The desire is to begin to align the “bigs” in the congregation to the concept of disciple-making and to gain their agreement to participate in the process of helping others become disciples. The “bigs” will be challenged to have on-going engagement with others in discipleship. The past needs of the Church had been focused on evangelism and connectiveness. The “bigs” had been tasked to support those efforts and simply had not been trained to pursue disciple-making. In view of that lack of training, there is currently not a shared understanding of what a disciple “is” or how to make them. The church leaders intend to help people understand that close relationships are required to aid a person to become a disciple, as well as a focus on learning the commands that Jesus gave so that followers can obey them. The disciplers will need to model a lifestyle of obedience as well as discussing what it means to follow the Lordship of Jesus. Once these ideas and behaviors are “caught,” as Putnam describes, disciples will be established and understand their need to disciple others.⁴

⁴ Jim Putnam, “A Better Way to Make Disciples”, (Outreach Magazine, September 5, 2013), Accessed on June 23, 2020, from <http://outreachmagazine.com/features/4838-jim-putman-needed-shifts-in-making-disciples.html>

Conclusion

The local Church where this writer serves desires to become a church where the lost find salvation and the body of Christ then aids the new believer to grow to the point that they become a mature disciple who has a passion for investing in reaching the lost and growing disciples. The leadership team of the Church continues to build systems that aid the members in engaging with a disciple-making culture. Life-giving relational small groups are a vital part of this strategy as well as a clearly defined growth path for new believers. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be an easy way to immediately change from current practices and put everything that has been envisioned in place to achieve these goals. The church leadership is determined to forcefully yet gently move these thoughts forward and see the vision they have for such an amazing Church be realized. The plans that have been proposed are open to change as the Lord reveals His desires for this local outpost of His Kingdom.

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