

SMALL GROUPS: Purpose, Principle and Praxis

WHY SHOULD WE GATHER IN SMALL GROUPS?

As with anything we do as the Church, we should examine it in light of the mission of God and the mission of the church.

The connection between small groups and God's mission can be found in Matthew 28:16-20.

*Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And 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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (NRSV)*

We find in this passage Jesus' strategy for carrying out God's mission of making all things new: Jesus tells his followers to "make disciples." And within scripture, Jesus gives us the blueprint for carrying this out: Jesus chose 12 people, (12 *disciples*) He invited them into his life, and Jesus poured into them. **To carry out his mission, Jesus started a small group!**

Jesus also had a large community- he would go to the synagogue regularly and participate in the pilgrimages to the temple in Jerusalem, that was important. Jesus also had his 72, his larger missional group, but the context in which we see Jesus spending the most transformative time, and in which people were most transformed, was in discipleship in that small group of 12. So why do we gather in small groups? **Discipleship! Jesus showed us the best way to be and to make disciples: by gathering, learning, and praying in a small group!**

JESUS' BLUEPRINT FOR DISCIPLESHIP

Jesus' small group discipleship strategy had **3 foundational principles** that were essential to its effectiveness. And if we're taking Jesus' strategy as a blueprint, these three principles should also be the basis of our small groups, and of the way we practice discipleship.

1. RELATIONSHIP

The first principle of Jesus' blueprint is that his small group was a place for authentic *relationship*. Jesus didn't just send an invitation to his disciples to hear him talk once a week- Jesus was with his disciples all the time! Jesus' small group of disciples *did life together* in a **genuine, authentic and vulnerable** way. Jesus allowed his disciples to have

access to his life, and the disciples allowed him and each other access into theirs. They formed deep and authentic relationships. In John 13:13-15 we see Jesus telling his disciples to emulate him, after he washed his disciples' feet. In doing this, Jesus is not only encouraged them to serve one another, but he also showed them the importance of **being real and vulnerable with one another**. To wash someone else's feet can be vulnerable, but to allow someone else to wash our own feet can be even more vulnerable! Jesus encouraged his disciples to have this kind of vulnerability with one another, which encouraged the kind of love that Jesus modeled. This kind of relationship, vulnerability and authentic connection is essential to human thriving, and foundational to Jesus' small group.

2. LEARNING

The second principle in Jesus' blueprint for small group discipleship is *learning*. Jesus cultivated a space for his disciples to *learn* with Him and one another how to be more like Jesus, and to do what Jesus did! Jesus was constantly giving his disciples lessons, both in word and in deed, and allowed them to see firsthand what life in the Kingdom of God looks like! In his small group, Jesus' disciples were able to discuss amongst themselves, ask questions, and even experiment with what Jesus was teaching them. And because of the small size of their group, they were able to learn and grow in a way that is not possible in larger groups of people.

3. GODS PRESENCE

The third principle of Jesus small group was that it was based on the reality of God's presence. In Jesus' day, there were other teachers around, with their own cohorts of disciples learning ways of being, but this one was different. Jesus' small group experienced profound transformation (and went on to change the world) *because it was centered on God's incarnate presence in their group and in their lives!* The presence of God in Jesus was the foundational transformational element in Jesus small group.

ELEMENTS OF A SMALL GROUP GATHERING

Jesus and his disciples literally lived together much of the time and were able to constantly participate in the three discipleship principles of relationship, learning, and presence. Since we don't live together as communally as they did, we have to be very intentional about what we do when we do gather as a small group! We can do this by ensuring that each small group gathering contains three components that correspond to Jesus' principles for discipleship.

1. CONNECTION

The first essential element that should be a part of every small group gathering is to have a time for CONNECTION. Not just social time when we first arrive and we greet one

another, but a time when we are focused on listening to the cares, concerns, joys and challenges in each other's lives. It is a time to share our stories with one another, and to practice the ministry of presence with one another. This time could be in the form of a check-in, a time to share "highs and lows" of the week, or any other way that the group is comfortable with. A time of connection allows members of a group to listen and support one another, and fosters an atmosphere of intimacy, trust and vulnerability. Many small groups place this time of connection at the beginning of the gathering, after an opening prayer, and should take as much time as necessary.

2. CONTENT

The second essential element of a small group gathering is to have a time to explore specifically chosen **content**. This element corresponds to the principle of LEARNING. Whatever the group decides to use as content should be something that is helping us to learn how to become more like Jesus--- to grow as a community of disciples. Content could be a worship service, discussion questions about a sermon or Scripture reading, a Bible study, a book study, or any other prepared content that is decided upon by the group. The time of content should allow space for group members to reflect, ask and answer questions, and to seek and discern what the Holy Spirit is saying to the group through the content. The purpose of the content in a discipleship small group is not to learn knowledge for the sake of knowing it, but to help us develop as disciples of Christ--to become more like Jesus in our daily lives!

3. PRAYER

The final essential element of every small group gathering is a time for prayer. Corresponding to the blueprint principle of GOD'S PRESENCE, prayer helps us become aware of and align with God's presence in our lives. Opening in prayer prepares our hearts for what God desires to show us. Closing in intercessory prayer with and for one another is a wonderful practice, allowing us to really enter into one another's lives. Of course, any of the prayers or liturgies from the Book of Common Prayer can help guide us in experiencing God's presence.