

# WHERE JESUS LEADS

## Small Groups and Ministry Teams Help Create Christian Community

### A Small Group Story

I'd like you to really consider why Christian community is so important to you – why are you a “church” person today when a majority of people today are not?

- I've asked this question of hundreds of church leaders in many dozens of churches.
- Most people initially respond that they're part of the church because of what it believes or what it does (activities like worship or Christian formation or outreach). These things are the sense of meaning or purpose that church gives us.
- But when I really drill down with most people, I find that the real reason that most of us are “church people” is not just because it gives us purpose, but because we've found that our Christian communities are places where we've experienced incredibly close relationships: relationships where we're cared for and supported and relationships that help us experience God's love.
  - o Great Commandment type experiences
  - o Road to Emmaus type “Eyes opened, hearts burning” experiences
- It's not surprising that studies show that by far the first and largest motivator to be part of a Christian community is not purpose, but belonging.
- So rather than thinking about the church activities you've been part of, think about the most powerful experiences you've had with church groups. Most of us who are church people have had powerful experiences youth groups, choirs, prayer groups, Bible studies, parent groups, newcomer groups and so on. But notice that what was really important in these experiences wasn't the tasks that the groups were formed around, but the relationships that occurred.

For me, an example of one of these experiences happened a few years ago, when my wife and I decided to have a book study in our home.

- I, of course, had a couple of purposes for this small group: inviting people who didn't go to church to experience Christian community and training other church leaders to learn how to lead small groups.
- So I think we each invited a couple of people and we got started. I invited my twin sister and a former law partner who lived just down the street. And I invited a couple of leaders from my church.
- And we followed all of the processes in this handout.
- We learned that the relational practices of a small community are more important than the topic or the program or the task.
- What happened with this group?
  - o I didn't lead any session after the first one. They could meet even when I wasn't there.

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- We apprenticed everyone to duties: leading discussions, prayer, bringing refreshments
  - We followed consistent practices for developing relationships in the team and this group grew.
    - Got to 13 people in discussions within 5 weeks and split in 2 discussion groups
    - People knew they could bring anyone and they did
      - Friends, relatives, children home from college
      - The priest – just be yourself
  - Grew to more than 25 people in 12 weeks and would have split into a third group meeting in the bedroom if it had gone another week
  - Another result was that we developed leaders for 12 groups that met at the church and at homes the following Lent
- So what were the people in this group experiencing?
- They experienced people listening to and caring for them. Ask the question: “What are you going through?” (listening, caring)
  - They found deeper conversations (beyond cocktail level conversation about weather, sports, work, vacations, children to hopes, dreams, aspirations, struggles, grief)
  - They found a group that was always open to new members. Ask the question, “Who isn’t here who needs to be here?” (permeability, growth)
    - Reason many of our groups don’t grow is they are cliques
    - People feel that if you add new people the group is not safe
    - That’s not true
  - They found a group that really prayed together. Ask the question, “What do we need to pray about?” (prayer) and have time for sharing and praying for one another’s thanksgivings and concerns
    - Came together and prayer leader asked this question and wrote down concerns and offered the prayers.
    - After a few meetings, the prayer leader could simply say, “Lord you’ve heard our prayers” and people would realize they were praying and could pray
    - Even when we broke into separate book discussion groups, everyone insisted on being one big group for prayer
    - People were praying for one another’s families, children, friends and staying in touch with each other about the challenges week to week or even day to day.
    - We were praying for a young girl in our town who needed a heart transplant. On the last evening we were meeting she had been taken to Boston for a new heart and was having surgery. We later found out that she died while we were praying for her.

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- People started attending church more – just because they wanted to be with one another and see how their friends were doing.

What does this have to do with your Christian community?

- Every group you have or create can have these kinds of experiences if you focus on relationships, not just tasks.
- We're going to ask you in your discussions:
  - What groups do you already have that are doing this?
    - What groups do you have where people have deep relationships where they ask these 3 questions?
  - What groups do you already have that could do this?
  - What groups will you create that will do this?

I've given examples above of places where we as church people have experienced these relationships.

- Many of our churches have created these kinds of relationships with people beyond their walls
- We can invite new people (even non-members) into ministry teams for
  - Pastoral care,
  - Outreach (e.g., knitting ministries, community gardens),
  - Prayer,
  - Formation or conversations (small groups, pub theology, Nones and Dones, other shared activities), or
  - Specific needs along life stages of their journeys (e.g., youth, young parents, seniors, grief groups)

These are the experiences that draw people into Christian community.

- We can and do help create these relationships, with God's help

Notice that you don't have to have everyone in the church doing these. . .

- Start them wherever you can get 2-3 passionate leaders
- Start several; they won't all work
- Start different kinds for different groups (men, women, mixed, special interest)

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### How Small Groups and Mission Teams Create Christian Community

*Developing Mission Teams: Most of our committees, commissions, task forces, ministry teams, etc. focus primarily on the tasks (purposes, duties) they are trying to accomplish. Mission teams are also designed to intentionally build powerful connecting relationships (belonging) with people within and beyond the church community. We can make these connections through personal relationships or groups that create powerful experiences of belonging and purpose.*

1. A group creates essential elements of Christian community
  - a. Loving Community (belonging): a community who cares for us
  - b. Mission (purpose): a community who serves others
  - c. Discipleship (Christian formation and stewardship): a community who helps us develop and use our individual gifts
  
2. A group integrates the essential experiences of Christian community
  - a. Focus is on relationships (belonging first) and tasks (purposes and growth)
  - b. Relational connections are deep and close
  - c. Christian journey happens in the group itself (belonging, purpose, growth)
  - d. Whole experience (all these parts) happen in a few hours each week
  - e. Small group or house church or religious order
  
3. With God's help, the group supports the loving community culture its members need and sets an example they will aspire to throughout their lives
  
4. With good leadership, a group provides opportunities for ministry, formation and transformation
  - a. Responds more personally to individual gifts and needs
  - b. Helps people to grow along a spiritual path and into vocation
  
5. A group may help members bridge into a larger Christian community
  - a. But it's primary purpose is to be a Christian community
  - b. A smaller group is easier to connect with than a whole church
  - c. The experience of the larger community may not meet members' needs as well (depending on how people connect with and experience within the larger community (hospitality, welcoming, loving community, ministry, encouragement and support))

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### Which of Our Teams are or can be Missional?

These relationships can be supported in all ongoing ministries. We can invite new people (even non-members) into ministry teams for:

- Pastoral care,
- Outreach (e.g., knitting ministries, community gardens),
- Prayer,
- Formation or conversations (small groups, pub theology, shared activities), or
- Specific needs along life stages of their journeys (e.g., youth, young parents, seniors, grief groups)

This can begin in groups where two or three are gathered – not the whole church. (There can be parallel development of multiple groups and everyone doesn't have to participate.) Try to create these strong relationships within all of your groups in the congregation and beyond.

While these teams are accomplishing specific tasks, they can also help support each person's spiritual journey – if they are intentional about this. We engage in a more integrated/holistic Christian Way that all at once invites us into loving community, serves the world, and transforms our lives.

The relationships in small groups and ministry teams help the teams grow. People who are involved in small groups and ministry teams are also more active in worship and other church activities. *Evangelism, discipleship, leadership development and church growth occur primarily in small groups and ministry teams.*

### Intentionally Building Connecting Relationships

#### ***How Jesus Connects with People<sup>1</sup>***

We intentionally develop deeper relationships with others by asking:

- "What are you going through?" (listening, caring, deep conversation)
- "What do we need to pray about?" (prayer)
- "Who isn't here who needs to be here?" (openness and growth)

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Gettel, Where Jesus Leads: Helping Christian Communities to Follow (Deep River Books, 2017), 159-161.

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### ***Creating Effective Mission Teams and Small Groups***

1. Each team needs:
  - a. 3-5 members to start and a plan to grow to 9 to 12 members
  - b. To hold meetings at a regular and convenient time during the week and not less often than twice per month – so people do not lose touch with one another even if they occasionally miss a meeting
  - c. To meet outside the church – perhaps in someone’s home or a coffee shop or restaurant or library – so people who do not feel comfortable going to church may feel at home
  - d. To have fun together, to share their needs, hurts and encouragements, and to pray for one another
  
2. The most important factor for success is good leadership
  - a. Leaders provide structure and create a safe space for members to interact
    - i. Convene the group
    - ii. Make sure everyone participates
    - iii. Encourage each person to experience caring, support and growth
    - iv. Help the group develop an atmosphere of prayer, openness, faith sharing, trust, safety, honest respect, tolerance and love
    - v. Show enthusiasm and energy to attract and encourage other members
  - b. This kind of leadership is not limited to “experts” or specially gifted individuals
    - i. The subject matter, content or task (theology, ministry) of the group or team is less important than the relational connections. We too often rely on (require) subject matter “experts” (such as clergy) to lead groups.
    - ii. Leadership studies confirm that leadership skills are quite broadly distributed among people, and leadership is not limited to “natural born leaders” or people with special gifts for leadership.
    - iii. People can develop leadership skills and abilities through practice, experience and learning
    - iv. Any Christian involved in serving others will ultimately discover that the Holy Spirit provides gifts and helps us do far more than we could ever do on our own
  - c. Part of growing and replicating groups or teams is always apprenticing other members to lead them
    - i. Have designated co-leaders so the group is covered when the leader is absent and so a second leader develops to lead future groups
    - ii. Over time, select and support apprentice leaders and help them to develop leadership skills and abilities to lead teams of their own
  
3. Teams need consistent and effective practices for developing relationships in the team
  - a. Make time to greet one another
  - b. Talk with one another about the group focus and daily life. Ask the question: “What are you going through?” (listening, caring)

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- c. Encourage deeper conversations (beyond cocktail level conversation about weather, sports, work, vacations, children to hopes, dreams, aspirations, struggles, grief)
  - d. Ask the question, "Who isn't here who needs to be here?" (permeability, growth)
  - e. Ask the question, "What do we need to pray about?" (prayer) and have time for sharing and praying for one another's thanksgivings and concerns
4. To create a loving culture in the team, have a safe boundaries and expectations (a "behavioral covenant"). Some things to ask of all participants are:
- a. Be open: Make room for God to do something new in your life.
  - b. Be transparent: As you openly share your hopes, fears, successes and failures, God will use your life experiences to build faith and courage in the lives of others.
  - c. Be available: to God and to each other. Get to know other members of the group. Keep your eyes open for opportunities to encourage and pray for one another.
  - d. Create a safe environment: Make the group a community where people can be heard and feel loved (no quick answers, snap judgments or simple fixes), and keep discussions confidential among group members.
  - e. Be committed: Take this opportunity and commit yourself to make your group life a priority by attending meetings and keeping up with any tasks you have committed to.
  - f. Invite and welcome newcomers: Be clear that we are always open and welcoming and looking for people to join us on the Way. Be permeable to new members; we can always learn from others, wherever they are on their spiritual journeys, and being part of a clique does not really make us safe or help us share with one another or grow. We are committed to incorporating new people and to multiplying and dividing into new groups or teams as our group or team grows.
  - g. Keep your focus on God and your faith: Resist the temptation to make discussions a critical and intellectual theological enterprise; listen for what God is doing and wants to do in your life.
  - h. Consider becoming a group or team leader or co-leader and begin helping with leadership tasks: The strongest teams trade off responsibilities so that people can try and learn new roles. Remember, Jesus prepared his disciples to eventually go and confidently lead others. Steps of invitation, apprenticeship, training, experience and encouragement lead to success and confidence.
5. Leaders encourage and support teams with training, coaching and resources.
- a. Communities trained in pastoral care and small groups are most effective.
    - i. Programs for training in pastoral care are Community of Hope, Stephen's Ministries, or Befrienders
    - ii. The objective is not just to prepare people to provide pastoral care, but to enable them to create stronger and deeper relationships that share God's love with others (by listening, caring, offering prayer, deepening conversations)
  - b. Small group training helps prepare people to create strong relational connections in group settings and to lead, grow, replicate and divide group ministries.