

# Cultivating Disciple-Making Environments for Everyone!

By Reid Smith

---

If we look to the account of the Early Church in the book of Acts as our model of "church-life" today...we should have great hope that people in all different stages of their spiritual journey can indeed take their next steps in following Christ together (Acts 2:40-47, 4:4, 5:14, 6:7, 8:4-8, 25, 9:31). Historically, small groups have been a vital part of how God has built the community of His Church through every Christian renewal movement since Pentecost.

Healthy discipleship flows out of healthy relationships. It begins with Christ and continues in community with other believers. Small groups help to form the relationships that nourish our growth as disciple-making disciples. In fact, the Lord commonly uses a community of believers to bring seekers to Himself (John 13:34-35, 17:20-23; Acts 1:8; Eph 2:13-20, 4:11-13; 1 Peter 2:9; 1 John 4:12, 17). Community is also the greatest influencer in *how* people follow Christ.

In *my* work of cultivating environments that make disciples of people at different stages in their spiritual journey, I have learned to first respect *God's* work. The truth is, **God is already at work...**

- **Building His Church** – What that looks like is the building of community. So I try to respond to what He is actively doing in my church's community life and nurture the way things are already naturally moving. I do not over-engineer or complicate the discipleship process with too many steps. Community is the soil that helps people sink their roots in Christ, so I focus on planting people in the fertile ground of those who are already growing together in Christ. What is already happening in and through your church that is effectively reaching people for Christ and building up your community? Explore how you can tap into or build on that.
- **Through His Word** – God's Word is living and active so as I am facilitating bible study, I assume that biblical truth is actively transforming those who are hearing it. Instead of explaining the truth to group participants, I expose them to the truth and lean on the group's collective wisdom to discover what the Lord is communicating to each individual heart. When seekers or new believers are a part of my group's bible study, I restrain myself from going too much beyond basic contextualization and trust that God's Word will speak to them.
- **Drawing people closer to Himself** – God loves people and is more concerned about their spiritual journey than I ever could be, so I am diligent to find how He is working in a person's life. Then I am careful not to presume or prescribe too much. After all, discipleship is not really an orderly process. Just look at the Gospels.
- **Encouraging relationships** – Let God bring the people to your group that He wants to. Shepherds are to protect their flock from wolves...not other sheep. If an actual shepherd were to see a lone sheep approach his flock and

attempt to nudge itself into it, could you imagine him kicking it out? Of course not! He would probably think to himself: "Hot dog! I just got a new sheep. My flock just increased and I didn't even have to work for it!" Shepherds are to protect their flocks from decreasing, not increasing. Trust God with the dynamic of your group and the meeting space to accommodate those He wants to bring.

Small group leaders can create environments that encourage the disciple-making process for everyone by introducing elements that are favorable to the discipleship process. What is necessary to help people in all different places in their spiritual journey grow closer to Christ together? I would suggest the following:

- **Authentic leadership** – Nobody influences the atmosphere of a group – positively or negatively – more than the leader. What makes a *small group leader* successful is their love for God and love for people. The key to a successful *small group* is the authenticity of its leader. Authenticity creates common ground where people of varying places of spiritual maturity can meet together, dialogue about God's Word, and grow spiritually.
- **Healthy relationships** - Relationships are the engine of discipleship. When a person wants to connect in a small group, I do not consider the type of group, location, or even the curriculum to be the most important factors. Rather, it is the group dynamic, which is borne out of the relationships among the people in that group. If the relationships are healthy, the experience and effect of the group dynamic will be as well. Unhealthy relationships release toxins into the group's ecosystem, which can be detrimental to strays, seekers, and believers alike.
- **3-D group life** – Depth perception enables us to see the world in three dimensions. Similarly, there will be 'depth' to everyone's small group experience if they are loving God, loving people, and loving the world around them. This happens through the flexible arrangement of elements like fellowship, prayer, God's Word, ministry, and outreach. Healthy environments are always in flux, changing and growing. The same is true of healthy small groups.
- **Missional-orientation to group purpose** – Every small group has a purpose. Sometimes it is stated. Sometimes it is not. But it *does* exist. Small group leaders can cultivate the growth of disciple-making environments for everyone if they bring a missional orientation to their group's purpose. For example, there is a significant difference between discipleship and disciple-making in the mind of the "Average Joe." The former typically arises from those within the group who also happen to be the beneficiaries of this purpose (internally-focused). The latter redirects the emphasis to those beyond the group creating a more externally-focused group culture. This in turn creates an environment that helps everyone to take their next steps in growing closer to Christ. Help the group to think outwardly as they consider their plans for inward nurture.
- **Balanced curriculum** – This was deliberately put last on the list. A mistake made by many small group leaders and pastors is thinking or allowing small group curriculum to define the 'depth' of the small group. I have seen plenty

of small groups use “deep” or “meaty” bible study material and go nowhere inside or outside of their group. I have also seen plenty of small groups use material that more mature believers consider to be “milk,” but because of the leadership and relationships amongst those in the group, people have been healed, saved, delivered, and built up in their faith. “Mixed” groups tend to find more help from small group curriculum that takes them into God’s Word, helps them apply it to life, builds relationships among group members, and encourages them to share their spiritual discoveries with others beyond the small group experience.

I have always had a hard time with the idea of compartmentalizing people on the basis of what stage of spiritual maturity I think they are in. No such advice has been given in the Bible since the birth of the Church. If anything, we see the opposite. Time and again, I have seen seekers or new believers resurrect groups of ‘mature believers’ because of the healthy challenge and vibrancy they bring.[i] On the other hand, those who need more guidance and instruction as they take their initial steps in following Christ can find great help from those who have been walking closely with Jesus for many years.[ii]

In fact, “mixed” groups can challenge and energize people in ways that ‘spiritually-homogeneous’ groups do not. Consider this illustration from our natural world: A chemical compound, like  $H_2O$ , consists of *two or more* different chemically-bonded elements, which produces a substance. In this case, water – the chemical substance that is essential to all known forms of life – is created by two hydrogen atoms bonding to an oxygen atom.

We would not have water if the composition was made-up entirely of oxygen atoms. Nor would we have water if it were only hydrogen atoms bouncing around each other. Rather the chemical variance of different elements is the very thing that enables them to bond to one another and produce a substance that gives life to organisms around it. Similarly, new life comes out of people in different places spiritually who are pursuing Christ together in a small group. Then together, they can impact and impart life to their host community.

Healthy discipleship flows out of healthy relationships. Small groups are an essential way for us to give our lives to have relationship with Him so that He can give life to our relationships. Small groups are instrumental to building healthy relationships for everyone, regardless of where they are at spiritually.

Jesus’ invitation to follow Him is an invitation to have relationship with the God of all creation. So when we decide to follow Christ, we are saying that we want to pattern our lives after Him in every way. Jesus is relational. We see this in His relationship with His Heavenly Father, the disciples, the communities where He ministered, and how He relates to us all today.

I cannot think of a better way to follow Jesus and pattern my life after His than bonding with others in a small group and traveling together in our spiritual journey. We can help people of varying places of spiritual maturity come together in groups by communicating that small groups are not a ministry program. They are not something to be added to a list of recommendations for healthy Christian living. Rather, small groups are ‘the other half’ of how the Church can be the Church in all the fullness and vibrancy God intended (Acts 5:42). Thankfully, small groups provide

a strategic way for every person to grow closer to Jesus regardless of how much progress each one has made so far.

---

[i] Oftentimes, those who consider themselves more mature and want “more depth” or “more meat” are the very ones who need *more action* when it comes to putting feet to their faith (John 4:32). I have found the small groups that tend to implode are those which are made-up exclusively of more mature believers not reaching out beyond their own circle of fellowship.

[ii] People who are looking at the Scriptures with new eyes and applying it to their lives in fresh ways oftentimes see things longer-term believers have forgotten or missed altogether. Just because somebody has not been walking with Jesus for several years does not mean they cannot grasp what is being said in the Bible. Seekers are not stupid. Thank goodness for us all that the ‘deep truths’ of God’s Word are simply put: Love God, love people.

**© SmallGroups.com, All Rights Reserved.**

Printed from: [http://smallgroups.com/articles/1480/1/Cultivating\\_Disciple-Making\\_Environments\\_for\\_Everyone.html](http://smallgroups.com/articles/1480/1/Cultivating_Disciple-Making_Environments_for_Everyone.html)