



The Ins and Outs of Starting New ABF Classes – June 03

I have had the privilege over the past 8 years to serve Heritage Baptist Church in the capacity of Discipleship/Adult Ministries Pastor. One of the areas under my supervision is the ABF Ministry. It has been an incredible journey. HBC had grown tremendously from the late 80's to the present. We realized that we needed to identify and direct people to a place where they could build meaningful relationships, experience shepherding care and find a place to belong. We were convinced that this was most naturally accomplished in the adult S.S. Over a period of years, we realized that our adult classes were much more than a Sunday school for adults. We began to identify them as Adult Bible Fellowships. In 1998, our ABF ministry was placed under my care. At that point in time we were running about 1000-1200 in morning worship and 400-420 in ABF's, with a total of 11 classes. Now we are now averaging between 1200-1400 in morning worship, 700-740 in ABF's, with a total of 23 classes. On June 1st we will start number 24 and on September 7th number 25.

On the average we have been starting 3 new ABF's a year. How does one determine when and how to start an ABF? I strongly adhere to the principle that ABF's are the avenue to build fully devoted disciples of Jesus Christ. Many of our classes are started based on the needs of people. Your situation may be different from ours but here is the process we have used to start new classes.

Identify the Need

We have started classes by identifying needs in two ways. First, we have 'birthed' (a better word than split) classes out of our larger classes. When an ABF class begins averaging 40 in weekly attendance we begin 'talking up' starting a new 'ministry' (class) from that class. The class then takes ownership of the new ministry with excitement and begins to anticipate the beginning of this future class. It gives class members the opportunity to determine whether they want to be a part of the new class. Once the class begins averaging 50 we have already identified the shepherd who will lead and teach the class. When the class begins averaging 60 we have already set a target date for the new class as well as the time (9:30 a.m. or 11:00 a.m.) and place for them to meet. More times than not, we have had classes averaging over 70 before the new class begins. At present we have four classes that are averaging over 60.

Second, we start new classes by evaluating our demographics. A year ago, I was approached by several couples in their 50's in the early years of being 'empty nesters'. They expressed that they weren't getting the teaching or fellowship that they needed. As we talked with other empty nesters we realized that we needed to start a class that ministered to this segment of our congregation. I approached a couple who had just entered this arena themselves and they jumped at the opportunity to lead the class. Within a month of discovering the need, we started the class with 35 in attendance the first Sunday.

Five years ago, we had 11 couples in the Marriage Builders ABF who were expecting. They were extremely connected to the class and didn't want to leave. The class is designed to meet the needs of young married couples and engaged couples with a two-year cycle of material being taught. We ask couples to move into one of the "young married with children" classes once they begin having children. These 11 couples approached us with the idea of letting them start a new

class and even suggested an older mature couple to shepherd the class. We again started a class to meet a need.

Identify Leaders

The greatest resource any church has at its disposal is lay-leaders. We are always looking for, identifying, and equipping lay-leaders for ministry. One of the highest ministry positions a person can obtain in our church is that of ABF Shepherd. Our philosophy of ministry is based on Ephesians 4:11-13 where pastors are '...to prepare God's people for service.' There are numerous people in our church who hope that some day they can obtain to the ministry of ABF shepherd. The key to having leaders is the discipling of believers. If we continue to make disciples there will always be people waiting in the wings to lead. (We have hired all of our Associate Pastors (7), have seen God call and send missionaries, and have seen God call and send others to full-time ministry, all from out of the church.) As leaders, we need to reproduce ourselves. I am an ABF shepherd of a class of 60. Our ABF has started, or been a part of starting, 5 new ABF classes. I have three couples in my ABF that are future ABF shepherds in the process of being trained, encouraged and challenged. The goal of each ABF shepherd should be to train someone else. This is how we always have people in the pipeline of ABF ministry.

Identify Logistics

Every church is going to be different in determining when and where classes will meet. I will explain some of the challenges we are facing and what we have done to overcome them in order for our ABF Ministry to continue to grow.

Heritage is a multiple service ministry. We have three morning worship services and two Sunday school/ABF hours. We run 10 classes in the traditional 9:30 S.S. hour with those who attend these classes going to the 8:00a.m. or 11:00 a.m. Worship Service. We have 12 classes that meet during the 11:00 a.m. hour who go to the 9:30 a.m. Worship Service. Once we determine the demographics of a new class, we will place them in the appropriate hour. For example, if the members of the class have teenagers we will start the class in the 9:30 a.m. hour because our Youth Ministry meets the same hour, allowing teenagers to be in the same worship service as their parents. We also have one ABF that meets regularly on Wednesday Night.

Having multiple services allows us to have classes that use the same room during different hours. One class sets up the coffee and hot water for both classes while the other cleans up. ABF's are assigned rooms based on size of class, shepherd, and availability. We communicate to our ABF's that rooms are resources not possession. We have moved classes from one hour to another depending on the needs of the church and the class.

God has so blessed our ABF philosophy that we are beginning to run out of space to start new classes. This presents new challenges for us. With the start of two new classes in June and September, we will be out of classroom space during the 9:30 a.m. hour. We still have room to grow during the 11:00 a.m. hour but parents with teenagers do not prefer to go to ABF at this time. We are beginning to be creative in our thinking about where and when, in our total church strategy, we can offer ABF classes. Nothing in Scripture keeps us from only having classes on Sunday morning. We are beginning to look at starting some classes during our 8:00 a.m. service and at 4:30 p.m. on Sunday afternoon before our Sunday evening service. You have to be creative to accomplish the great ministry of meeting needs.

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