



### **The Beginning of Adult Bible Fellowships - June 04**

It was a quiet summer, June day, and I began my first day at the nice town church in Ashland, Ohio, with dreams of shepherding the 230 who came that first Sunday.

How would we grow?

I had a members' list, a deacons' list (each deacon was to care for more than 25 families), an electives class list, an evangelism list, and even—don't tell anyone!—a deadwood list of people who once attended. I realized I could neither manage the lists nor the guilt I felt about the commands in the Bible for me to “one another” these people—to exhort them, to encourage them, to warn them, to build them, and to get them doing these things to one another.

We were spread in so many directions. They met in one group for Sunday school, another group for prayer meeting, and another group for home Bible study.

We were in one worship service at the beginning, but even that was too big for community! We would say “Hello” and “How are you?” but not a whole lot more. Superficial. Someone could miss three weeks or five in a row and nobody would know it.

What to do?

And so the ABFs were birthed! They were the answer—combining Bible study, care, social relationships, and evangelism into one ministering unit within the local church.

ABFs brought people together so that they could know “community” with the people they were going to church with. They would connect with them in a setting where they could talk and get to know each other.

They were modeled after the good points of a small, country church, and I still remember the day I “drew” or charted what they should be and do. I read books on small groups and incorporated the virtues into what the ABF could do with a group of 15 to about 80.

I also had read that one person can truly pastor up to about 90 people, so I knew the church already was too big for me to do everything.

We assigned new people or prospects who hadn't come to the ABFs to the groups. That teaches outreach and care.

We built small groups into the ABFs so that the small groups would not have to be managed from the “headquarters.” Within eight or nine years we were “managing” more than 1,000 people through ABFs.

We quickly changed the system of electing the class president—usually the most popular one—to a system of appointing a whole team of leaders in each Sunday school class, now called our Adult Bible Fellowship.

We appointed (and still do) and disciplined a team of a teacher, a class leader to care for the opening and organization, a care leader to help with names that are given, including outreach names, and, in some, we added an outreach chairperson to specialize in that.

We also decided that a pastor would be the pastor and advisor for each ABF. At first it was one. I started a young-married class. I was the teacher and the advisor, but we appointed a really good class leader and a care leader couple, then we began.

The name was chosen to emphasize that it was for adults (many consider Sunday school to be for children), to emphasize that we really studied and applied the Bible, and to promote authentic fellowship.

When I left Ashland after 15 years, there were seven flourishing ABFs. Each had care responsibilities and outreach duties, and community was extremely well done in most of them.

Now I serve in a church where, after 20 years, there are 62 ABFs, and most of them go fairly well by the book! Not the Bible, but The ABF Book.

When I came here to The Chapel, there were four Sunday school classes, a couple classes with more than 100 people, with a total of 400 adults in Sunday school and 3,000 adults in worship. People were merely getting a second lecture.

Community was needed.

ABFs have saved the day for me two times, and I've watched this happen hundreds of times in other churches and have heard about thousands of churches where this has worked well.

May they flourish!

**By Knute Larson**