



#### **ABFs vs. Small Groups and Eclecticity in Adult Ministries–November 04**

There has been ongoing debate over the last 20 years over midsize groups (i.e. Sunday School, Adult Bible Fellowships) vs. small groups. Below is my response, today ... it might change tomorrow!

#### **RESPONSE:**

I was the Pastor of Adult Ministries at Medinah Baptist Church in Chicago for nine years from 1993 to 2002 and built both a very strong ABF ministry and a solid small groups ministry. Many of our small groups came out of ABFs. Plus, we had a significant Women's ministry and an up and down Men's Ministry (I'm sure some can relate!).

I moved to Cincinnati area in July of 2002 to be the Pastor of Adult Ministries at Hope Church. In their twelve year history they experienced rapid growth (at one time up to 2,000) and tried a few different ministry formats most involving small groups (2c model). They started midsize groups called "Communities" about a year and half before I came because of ongoing assimilation difficulties and stronger discipleship issues (where does stronger Bible teaching fit?)

#### **“Eclecticity” in today’s adult ministry**

I have really embraced a more eclectic approach at Hope. We are fervently building an infrastructure for our midsize Communities (I like to call them adult “youth groups!”) plus waving the flag for all kinds of Small Groups including nurture groups, discipleship groups and more accountability smaller groups of 2-4, along with our Women's Ministries Bible studies which provide good levels of fellowship and accountability as relationships get stronger. We also are developing a strong relationship-oriented Men's Ministries with our “anchor” ministry being Men's Fraternity (Mensfraternity.com) which meets weekly during the school year for teaching on a men's issue and then breaking into accountability groups. I personally believe the wave of the future in adult ministries is “eclecticity” (My verbiage). Each of these core ministries that make up adult ministries in many churches is reaching people that the others haven't. I used to believe in theory that we should attempt to get every adult in an ABF (As meta model churches with small groups believe). I no longer believe this! I am free from my unrealistic expectations!

Outside of Sunday School in the South, we rarely ever hear of a church that has successfully discipled all of its adults with one specialized ministry (small groups or midsize groups). It might be their goal but in reality, if you get 50 to 60% of adults in any one ministry you are doing well! What about the other 40 to 50% of your adults? Are we saying too bad, fit into our one ministry program that fits all or else? A must read is Joe Myers book “The Search to Belong”. Joe takes the “community” conversation to a different level as he focuses on the “spacial needs” that adults have. (See the Idea of the Month/October 04).

#### **Small Groups are great but ....**

I too believe that significant life change can happen in a small group experience, but I believe the American culture struggles with going from ten in a small group to hundreds in worship services. It is too big a jump on the relational pyramid for many. Many churches in meta model structures are struggling with their people not feeling like they know enough people (even though they might know ten in small group intimately). I once had a meta church senior pastor (church of 2,500+) ask me how his church could reap some of the benefits of ABFs, with no philosophical plan for

midsize groups nor the space to host them. I did not have a good answer for him. Some meta churches are going to quarterly or monthly regional events to pull together pockets of people or small groups to help them experience a midsize, smaller church feel. The problem is that this periodic event will rarely result in any new even casual relationships within the church mainly because they are too infrequent and/or because they are often in worship service settings and not a “relational” setting.

I’m believing more and more that a straight 2c model (small groups & worship services) leaves many people craving for more because of the above reasons. Also, the reputation (fair or not) of some of these large, explosive growth, meta churches are that they are going a mile wide and an inch deep in relation to discipleship issues. Plus, it hit me, when I came to Hope Church (a 2c model for most of its years), I noticed a dearth of people with the spiritual gift of teaching. I am really struggling with how strong disciple-making churches can make Biblically-grounded disciples without this gift. (Leading an interactive small group setting can be frustrating for the person with of gift of teaching, most small group leaders have other gifts that come out in shepherding and facilitating).

### **Midsized and small groups working together**

I love the midsize (15-90) feel of building group/community spirit with socials, caring, prayer, service projects, outreach, etc. When built on a strong foundation with a leadership team guiding them, they provide a small church atmosphere in a larger church, especially if you vision these communities to build an adult “youth group” feel. Building midsize groups built around an “academic class” feel or just the teaching is not enough. Healthy ABFs have a balance between good group life and a good teaching ministry and they work toward a strong group identity. Then in the spirit of the ABF philosophy of synergizing ministries we create high commitment small groups out of ABFs/communities for more intimate relationships and spiritual growth.

One of the challenges is that some churches stop at the midsize level when they need to be intentional about creating “next step” smaller settings for believers to experience life-change through more intimate interactions with believers in God’s Word. Another challenge is space issues at the church building. Churches need to consider alternative options for midsize groups including meeting in larger homes, condo clubhouses, meeting at the church at other times, etc. Finally, most in church leadership do not have a grasp of what these midsize “communities” are supposed to look like, nor a clear understanding of how to build the infrastructure for their success. All they see is the recent years, out of date, behind the times, almost dead, “Sunday School” picture.

In conclusion, I am a “both and” guy. I believe the most effective disciple-making churches incorporate midsize and small groups into their ministry DNA. People plug into either or both settings and then we help them move toward their “next steps”. The leadership responsible for these ministries must have equal passion and belief in both. I hear from churches struggling with one or the other, so they consider dumping one. More often than not the reason one is struggling is because the leadership responsible either doesn’t have a real belief or passion for one or doesn’t have the leadership skill set and/or knowledge in that area of ministry to make them thrive. It is usually one or the other. The bottom line is what we in leadership are most passionate about, usually gets our best efforts.

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