



Building a Stronger ABF Ministry: First Church of Christ - April 06

Our church is a large church with many great programs, yet we have sensed for a while that we needed to do a better job of plugging people into discipleship communities. While our overall numbers of adults in groups of some sort (ABFs, Bible studies, and small groups) seemed sound, we realized that only about 10% of our adults were involved in a mid-sized community. In fact, these were not ABFs at all, but rather traditional Sunday School classes. *(teaching driven with no intentional stronger group life elements and individual led)*

Today, however, all but one of our classes have transitioned to ABF communities with fully functional leadership teams, our ABF numbers are up 33%, and we have increased the percentage of adults involved in an ABF to 15%. What made the difference? In a word, intentionality.

The first area in which we were intentional was the transition itself. We began by forming a pilot team in our largest class, which gave us practical experience as well as stories to share as we started talking with other classes. We first met individually with each teacher to explain the concept, and taught it in several classes using Ephesians 4 as a text. We also taught several quarterly workshops with Steve Lizzio conducting the first one for us. Finally, we put Steve's workshop CDs into our people's hands as fast as they could listen to them. These practices allowed us to get the vision and the basics out to many people quickly. This also made it much easier to help each leader develop a team.

The other area in which we were intentional was in going after people in the congregation who were not attending an ABF. Since our church is well established, this proved harder than I first thought because most of our people are not used to staying for two hours on Sunday. Raising the visibility of ABFs and following up with personal contact has made the difference here. We run "ads" in our weekend bulletin once a month, we target certain portions of the congregation with letters, we host ABF open houses – we even developed a professional 3-minute DVD to put into our new members' hands. We have also partnered with our assimilation pastor to combine our efforts. However, most of these efforts would be useless without a phone call to each person who joins the church or requests more information on ABFs.

Steve Lizzio shares an excellent two-pronged approach to growing ABFs in his "Principles to Grow ABF Communities" audio CD workshop. The principle of prayer reminds us that it is ultimately God who gives the increase, while the principle of hard work (or law of large numbers) reminds us that growing any ministry is going to require a lot of hard work. While every "field" is different, I'm convinced that much can be accomplished through a more intentional focus on growing and strengthening our ministries.

When reduced to a few hundred words this might sound simplistic or easy, but it was anything but – as many of you can attest! Transitioning the way a church does adult education and increasing the percentage of people who are being discipled in community is a lot like trying to get a kite off the ground – there are a lot of bumps and snags before it really takes off. Knute Larson gave me a lot of hope during the 2004 ABF conference when he said, "It's amazing how little you can accomplish in one year and how much you can accomplish in five." Halfway through the process, it seems to me that he was right.

- Bill Thompson, ABF Coordinator at First Church of Christ in Burlington, KY