



### **Developing ABF's Into Multi-Dimensional Groups - August 06**

I'm not an ABF guru, but I've read my Bible enough to know that God wants the Christian life to be lived out in "community." With that in mind, church leaders must determine before God what that "community" will look like in their local church. Here's where it gets interesting, because there's several different ways to develop this community and many of those views may be represented within your leadership team.

My church, Grace Evangelical Church, on the south side of Indianapolis, used to take the "cafeteria" approach to group life – just pick and choose what you like and when you're tired of your current selection, choose something else. This approach appeals to our cultural mindset, but doesn't produce mature disciples who turn around and make other mature disciples. So how does a church "put off" the consumer mentality and "put on" authentic biblical community? I believe one approach is through the ABF model and making these midsize groups multi-dimensional.

At Grace we have seven "Fellowship Groups" (ABF's). Three of these groups meet during the 1st worship service and four meet during the 2nd worship service. Each of these groups is led by pastors/elders/teachers who raise up and train other leaders within the group. Some of these emerging leaders oversee our "Home Groups" (small groups). In this way, our Fellowship Groups begin to become multi-dimensional through the development of our small group ministry. FG's and HG's aren't two competing ministries – they are the same people working toward the same community goals, just in different settings - for the purpose of greater intimacy and accountability.

We've done the same thing with Men's and Women's Ministries. Both of these ministry teams have one person from each FG so that the activities being planned work in cooperation with our FG and HG ministry. There are times when it's advantageous to have men and women separated so that sensitive issues can be dealt with, such as purity, role responsibilities, etc. Once again, these ministries are an outgrowth of our FG ministry and not a competing ministry. Of course it takes a while for these principles and relationships to be built into our infrastructure and for our key leaders to communicate with each other. We've been at this for two years now and it's just beginning to take shape and work fairly well.

Another dimension that has been added to our FG's is the whole area of caring for one another. When the church was smaller, our deaconesses met most of the food needs when someone was in the hospital or someone died. Now the FG's handle this responsibility and the deaconesses take charge only when someone in need hasn't joined a FG yet. This fall, we are adding another layer of caring to our current structure. We are training our men through a ministry called, "New Commandment Men's Ministries" for the purpose of learning how to provide long term care to people in need within each FG. Instead of doing an occasional "project" for a widow or single mom or someone disabled, there will be a team of people committed to caring for the family they are assigned to. In this way, the "relationship" becomes the focus and not just the immediate need.

So as you can see our Fellowship Groups are not only our midsize groups that meet on Sunday morning for teaching, fellowship and prayer, but they become multi-dimensional groups that produce leaders and servants to meet most of the needs within the church body. As I mentioned earlier, we're still in process and learning new things all the time, but in a nutshell, that's our story for the past two years.

**- Gary Walker, Senior Associate Pastor at Grace Evangelical Church in Indianapolis, Indiana**