



Move over Small Groups ... Our Midsize Groups are Staying! - March 07

It would make a compelling movie plot. Hired to kill, the assassin falls in love with the victim. Five years ago I was hired to “phase out” – in reality, terminate – Adult Bible Fellowships (ABF’s) at our church in favor of small groups. At the time I began I was an experienced small group participant, naïve to the workings of local church ministry, and frankly unaware that the rationale behind terminating ABF’s might be more programmatic than it was spiritual. It only took eight months for me to realize that the initial cost of ABF termination would have a high price. Trying to do the right thing our church lost several good families when I tried to “do the right thing” by ending their Sunday morning ABF in favor of a “better” small group. I painfully learned ABF’s were intrinsically a vital interwoven component of our church’s fabric and culture. Serving as a “Velcro” ministry, the dozen ABF’s were the logical connection point for any adult looking for a next step beyond simply attending Sunday morning worship. While the number and strength of small groups have fluctuated with the intensity of intentional programmatic pushes, ABF’s are, in the best sense, a dozen congregations within our church of 1,200. While we have stayed “a church with small groups,” we are a “church of ABF’s.”

When I finally realized it made more sense to use the system God had blessed, rather than supplant it with another, the opportunities for true community multiplied. As you would expect we have pockets of amazing small group community – serving, learning and growing in every way one would hope. These folks can’t imagine a life without their small group. Interestingly, the strongest small groups developed out of individual ABF’s. ABF’s became the best feeders for small group ministry. Much of the strong teaching component provided by our dozen ABF’s is expanded beyond Sunday morning with the intimacy and accountability provided through small groups. But if there was a tip to be taken from our experience it would simply be to find the single component that is the strength of your ABF ministry and nurture, support, encourage and celebrate it. Without doubt, at our church that component is care. I’m repeatedly amazed by the sacrifice and unconditional love that demonstrates the fiber of what God’s community should be when a need is identified within an ABF community. Given my varying Sunday morning experiences I haven’t been a consistent member of an ABF for over a year, yet the daily e-mail prayer support and meals provided by a single ABF following my recent knee surgery is so typical of an ABF care response I realized that even I have taken for granted the care I observe from the third person across the breadth of the ministry. In one stroke care was no longer just “high effective” but it personally became the embodiment of Christ’s love in my family’s life.

Over time ABF’s have matured in their level of care. ABF E-mail prayer warriors have had to learn how to resist the temptation to pass along incomplete information or financially motivated requests; and balance the need to love unconditionally while not enabling the emotionally unstable or professional church scam artist. To develop the strength of our ABF ministry it became obvious that I needed to encourage the leadership of each class to have an experienced social care individual monitoring the care needs of the groups. It was obvious that this was the direction to go when we identified a licensed clinical social worker or doctor of psychology in almost every group. It was one of those “ah ha” moments when we recognized what should have been obvious.

God has given us a balance of both small groups and ABF’s that provide a continuum of care, teaching and intimacy that seems to work despite my previous efforts to scuttle it. Thank God He is bigger than me!

**Michael Brown, Pastor of Adult Ministries at Brookside Church
In Fort Wayne, Indiana**