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Idea of the Month

Empty Nesters: The “Bounce Back” *Midsize* Community – May 07



Each Sunday Morning around 9:15 an “Empty Nester” lights the candle in the Empty Nesters Community meeting room at Hope Church in Mason, Ohio. That person also shares a favorite Bible verse and often a personal testimony with other Empty Nesters who have come for fellowship, teaching from God’s Word, prayer, and healing. On this Sunday morning, Carol Jean, who has Stage 4 cancer, shares instances in which she has felt God’s protection, in her body and in her life.

“Regardless of what is happening,” Carol Jean says, “Lord You are working!” Amens come from every corner

of the room which holds around 40 people and is nearly full and getting fuller every Sunday. There has even been discussion lately that Empty Nesters might soon need a larger meeting room. “Everyone can hardly wait to get here on Sunday mornings,” one enthusiastic Empty Nester says.” This is surely the picture of a group that is vibrant and growing.

Just two years ago, however, the Empty Nesters Community was in crisis and basically on life support. Some even suggested quietly that it should be disbanded. Sunday morning attendance at times was down to only 5 or 6 Empty Nesters. The group had dwindled from its original 20 members when it started up 6 years before. The best explanation as to what happened is they experienced a leadership crisis. In a matter of several months most of the “leaders” along with several other group members were either called out to other ministries, called away due to family issues, or called up to heaven! In the aftermath of the crisis something was obviously evident. The people who remained in this now “small” group were mature Christians who loved, and needed one another and were not going to let their group die. “When the Community started to dissolve, the remaining few were committed to each other,” one Empty Nester who was there at the time says. “We prayed, stayed focused on the purpose of fellowship and studying the Word of God and He blessed our efforts.” Another attests to their determination go get their group back on track: “Our Empty Nesters Community has a lot of seasoned saints and we are not easily deterred when the road gets a little rough. We feel we have a divine appointed mission at Hope.”

So, how did this small group of steadfast Empty Nesters “bounce back” to being the vital, healthy Community it is today? In retrospect, the first thing to happen was that their devoted leader through the crisis decided she needed to step down and let some “new blood” take the reigns. After a good deal of prayer and discussion, the new leaders chosen were a couple who were relatively new to the group. The choice proved to be a good one, for the committed husband and wife dug into their leadership roles with enthusiasm. Early on, they even ordered Empty Nester T-shirts and volunteered the group to help host a church-wide picnic.

About the same time, a church-wide series that linked Community teaching with the Sunday messages in the sanctuary provided a big boost to the number of those “visiting” the Empty Nesters. These visitors were warmly welcomed and invited back and some kept coming to Empty Nesters even when the series was finished. The use of name tags, suspended when only a few of the same people attended every week, was reinstated. (Interesting how having your own nametag can make you automatically feel a part of a group.)

As attendance began to grow and information about Empty Nesters began to spread word-of-mouth, God also brought great teachers to the group. Though most remained relatively silent at first, their knowledge soon became evident. The teaching during the crisis period of Empty

Nesters had fallen on one person. Now, not only was there one great teacher, there were many great teachers in the group. "I believe that when we began to have more in-depth teaching the word began to get out to others in the church and we began to get new members," an Empty Nester says. Another echoes that sentiment: "During our crisis there seemed to be no one to take on the teaching or class facilitating. We now have an abundance of godly men to teach us, just ordinary men, but men who were raised up to fill the role." Recent teaching series include: "The Tabernacle," "The Jewish Feasts," and programs on the Holy Land using video and discussion and, most recently, by a member who just returned from the Holy Land. Empty Nesters even recruited a member from another community to lead a series on Islam. Word of each new, exciting series brought more people into Empty Nesters.



Another very important reason Empty Nesters has grown is its strong emphasis on prayer. During our tough times, the few people in attendance took turns leading prayer at the end of each meeting. Then one Sunday, Walt, one of the new members who had signed up to close in prayer that morning, moved the group so much that he was asked to permanently lead the prayer portion each week. Prayer in Empty Nesters has become so important that the teacher for the week tries to never go over into prayer time. When Walt takes the floor after the teaching, hands shoot up to share praises and prayer requests. Once all

the requests are in, everyone stands to form a prayer circle. Everyone is given the opportunity to pray. Then, Walt closes and invites those who would like individual prayer, with the laying on of hands and anointing of oil, to join him and a few other prayer warriors in the corner of the room.

"Our prayer circle is truly a time when we storm the gates of Heaven," says one Empty Nester. We are sure that God hears and answers our requests. We're not afraid to ask Him for the impossible, for we know He delights in the prayers of children who fully depend on Him." So many prayers, including those for healing, have been answered in this group that people who can't attend send prayer requests to the group. On each Monday morning, all prayer requests and praises shared on Sunday are sent out via e-mail to Empty Nesters to remind them to keep praying throughout the week.



Along with the strong teaching and powerful prayer time, the Empty Nesters are enjoying an extremely active social life outside the church walls—a summer cook-out, Christmas party, summer outdoor concerts, and, just added, "Pasta Night" dinners-for-eight groups at members' homes. The group is also outreach oriented which expresses itself in helping needy international families within the church, providing money, clothes and other resources to an adopted regional church in a very poor area, plus, once every other month, alternating with another community at Hope, we prepare and serve dinner to the Tender Mercies inner-city mission in Cincinnati.

The Empty Nesters do not take their growth for granted. They are always making new people feel welcome in the meetings and following up by phone and with notes. If someone is absent on Sunday, they can expect a call from an Empty Nester during the week. Empty Nesters are also not shy about reaching out to ask new people to visit their group.

"One Empty Nester gives an interesting summation of what's going on in this Community. "People always come to watch a fire. Where there's a fire, there is a crowd. God's spirit is moving like fire through our group, through healings, the ministry of Helping, The Word, and genuine concern for one another."

If your group is dwindling, in a crisis, or maybe even on life support, let the example of the Empty Nesters group encourage you to NOT give up. Perseverance, prayer, and staying focused on the

Word can absolutely bring the life and the light—the “fire”—back into your group. Oh, you might also want to think about buying a candle.

Barb Kuroff, a member of the Empty Nesters Community at Hope Church in Mason, Ohio.