



## Transitioning to the ABF Mid-size Group Model – January 08



Grace Bible Church is a non-denominational evangelical church in the shadow of the “Big House” in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The church was birthed from a home Bible study in the early 1940s. Through the years, Grace has always had a strong reputation as a place where people could receive excellent Bible teaching from the pulpit as well as through their Sunday school classes.

About seven years ago, our Pastor wanted to shake up the traditional Sunday format and switched our worship service to 9:30am and moved the Bible Study Hour to 11:00am. Next he saw a need for a more age-appropriate young marrieds’ class to be created to meet a growing need in that age group. He enlisted a young couple, with SBC [Southern Baptist Convention] roots, to assist him. The reasons for the new class were twofold: first, to meet the need for a more age-appropriate class for these young couples and, secondly, to move away from a lecture approach to a more needs and biblical application based content.

In May of 2002, I was privileged to join the staff here at Grace as their Associate Pastor of Discipleship and Administration. Part of my initial responsibility was to assess the total ministry [take a fresh look at Grace’s ministries] and then make recommendations to the leadership. In this article are some of the recommendations made concerning the adult Sunday school ministry.

My background, prior to coming to Michigan, was serving in various positions in SBC churches in South Florida over the past 20 years. Most of what I know about adult Sunday school work has come from “on-the-job training” at churches that I’ve had the privilege to serve in over the years. To compensate for the lack of church educational training [which I did not receive in my graduate degree], I tried to expose myself to as many successful Sunday schools as I could, to glean as much transferable information as possible [underlying principles of Sunday school growth]. As great as that training was . . . it was still lacking something; it seemed to center solely around the lecture format for adults. When I was introduced to the ABF Model [by reading through Knute Larson’s *The ABF Book*], the relational emphasis really resonated with me and I didn’t see a whole lot of difference in the leadership structure with which I had been familiar. For me personally, it was an easy transition.

In the summer of 2002, I presented the ABF Model to the Elders; and the following fall, we launched a complete make-over of the traditional adult Sunday school format. It took a couple of years for all the ministry leaders to fully integrate the relational concept and complete the transition. Over the last few years, we have embraced the concept that “*the ABF ministry is the church organized to reach and care for people.*” We now have eight ABF Mid-size groups with an average attendance of nearly 200 adults. The remarkable thing about this transition has been the consistent ratio between worship and Bible Study attendance [in the 80% range].

We are still “tweaking” both the teaching and structure, trying to make it better each semester. That’s what’s great about the ABF Mid-size group model; it is flexible enough to be adaptable to the specific needs of almost any church or Bible Study Group. The principles for building a healthy relationship with God and others are easily transferable.

It’s been interesting to see the teaching format evolve over the last few years; for example, one of our ABF’s is using sermon application questions [prepared by our pastor from his Sunday sermon] for their basis of discussion this semester [this format works well because the people just came from the worship service], one ABF is comparing other belief systems to that of

evangelical Christianity and others are teaching through books of the Bible in a group discussion format emphasizing life application.

Our desire is that each ABF Leader be cognizant of the physical, emotional and spiritual needs within their ABF. We want to foster open communication between the ABF Leaders and Teachers regarding their understanding of these needs and the assignment of appropriate topics. What we have found is that most people do not need another sermon. What they need is help in understanding and applying biblical truth.

The ABF Model has been an excellent ministry tool helping us to accomplish our overarching Discipleship Strategy [the people maturing process in church ministry]. Thanks for letting me share how God is using the ABF Mid-size Group Model in our church.

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