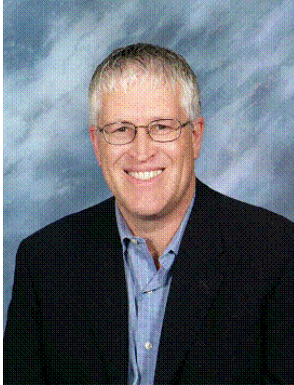




## Circles of Friendship in the Life of Christ – September 08



I sent a resume out this week and here is part of what I said. You can decide if my wife is right in thinking I may have been too blunt.

*“Dear Yada, I am sending you my resume to see if yada, yada, yada... I am looking to transition to a church where there is as high a value on relationships as there is on accomplishing tasks and objectives, a church where people are not seen as fodder to accomplish corporate mission statements, a church where people are enjoyed as precious in God's sight... I'm at a point in my life where my goal is not to find a job, but to find a community that loves God and each other and loves so naturally and so well that others are caught up in that love to want to know Jesus and to be more like Him... It just seems like it's time to stop counting success by butts in seats and bucks in baskets. What about love, joy, peace, self control, grace, patience, gentleness, and kindness? I don't mind measuring effectiveness (I actually like good qualitative data on church ministry), but my question is "What would Jesus measure?"*

I may not get many interviews but it sure felt good to lay it on the line. At some point we need to wrestle with how committed we are to transformational ministry versus settling for transactional ministry. Are those butts in the seats becoming more like Jesus? Or are they just more like the culture around us? Are we simply making church goers or are we making disciples? And how do we assess this?

The data is in (if there has been any doubt about other studies, just look at the results from the Willow Creek Reveal study). Church going does not correlate to greater love for God and others. Church activity does not correlate to more joyful lives. And as painful as it is to acknowledge church going doesn't seem to correlate to growing the fruit of the Spirit of God in the people of God. Doesn't it seem like it is time to think about doing church differently.

When we want to be like someone, eventually we will need to do the kinds of things that person does. If we want to be a great swimmer like Michael Phelps eventually we will need to stop watching him and reading about him and start to jump into some swimming pools. If we want to be like Tiger Woods, we will need to swing some golf clubs eventually. If we want to be like Yo Yo Ma eventually we will have to do the kinds of things he does with the bow. If we want to be more like Jesus, eventually don't we need to do what Jesus did? And do you remember anything about Jesus proposing that church going was his central strategy for transformation?

If you're reading this article, you're probably already committed to the place of community and group life for transforming discipleship. But have you considered the kind of group life to which Jesus was dedicated? If we want to be like Him and if we want our ministries to produce disciples like Him, perhaps it is time to assess the role of community in his transforming disciple-making. When I look at Jesus' life, I see he was committed to at least 6 concentric circles of friendships. Is this perhaps a model of disciple-making for today?

## What were the circles of friendship in the life of Jesus?

Many of us have become more and more convinced **we cannot grow like Jesus apart from committed interdependent community in a way that we share our lives together (koinonia)**. Jesus modeled and the Scriptures teach that we belong to one another as family in the Body of Christ (Philippians 2:3-5). We are invited to meet together and to encourage each other daily (Hebrews 10:24-25). If we want to model our disciple-making on the practice to Jesus, it seems clear that **commitment to community is essential to growth in the Christian life!**

Healthy growing followers of Christ can be intentional about nurturing each of the “circles of friendship” Jesus nurtured. And the reason to do so is because we see each one uniquely contributes to Christ-likeness. To miss any of these circles of friendship impoverishes a dimension of the Christ-like life. And each circle of friendship is a unique gift to the believer from the Lord.

### **The Circle of Communion** (you and the Trinity)

This is Jesus in harmony with the Father and the Spirit. Here we meet our triune God at the very center of who we are in His presence. Commitment to friendship within the Trinity has been and will go on forever. When we came to Christ, the Trinity actually invited you to enter their circle of friendship. This is a moment by moment daily abiding commitment in the life of a Christ-follower.

### **The Core Circle** (2-4 people)

The core friends for Jesus were Peter, James, and John. Our core circle consists of our closest spiritual friends with whom we partner for support, nurture, and accountability. It has to include first and foremost our spouse and family! But it should also include prayer and accountability partners who love us enough and are bold enough to ask us anything about our lives. Where two or three gather in His name Christ is there. Core friendships experience Christ together in unique ways. I encourage every Christ follower to intentionally and prayerfully develop devoted core spiritual friendships.

### **The Cell Circle** (5-12 people)

Jesus' cell was his 12 disciples. Here we meet in small groups, usually in each other's homes, for prayer and deep, profound life change. The small group circle will be the friends you will turn to in times of need, sadness, and joy. They will know your children's names and will be the ones your children will come to see as extended “aunts” and “uncles.” They will be your friends for the rest of your life. This circle is about fun and deep friendship.

### **The Congregation Circle** (25-75 people)

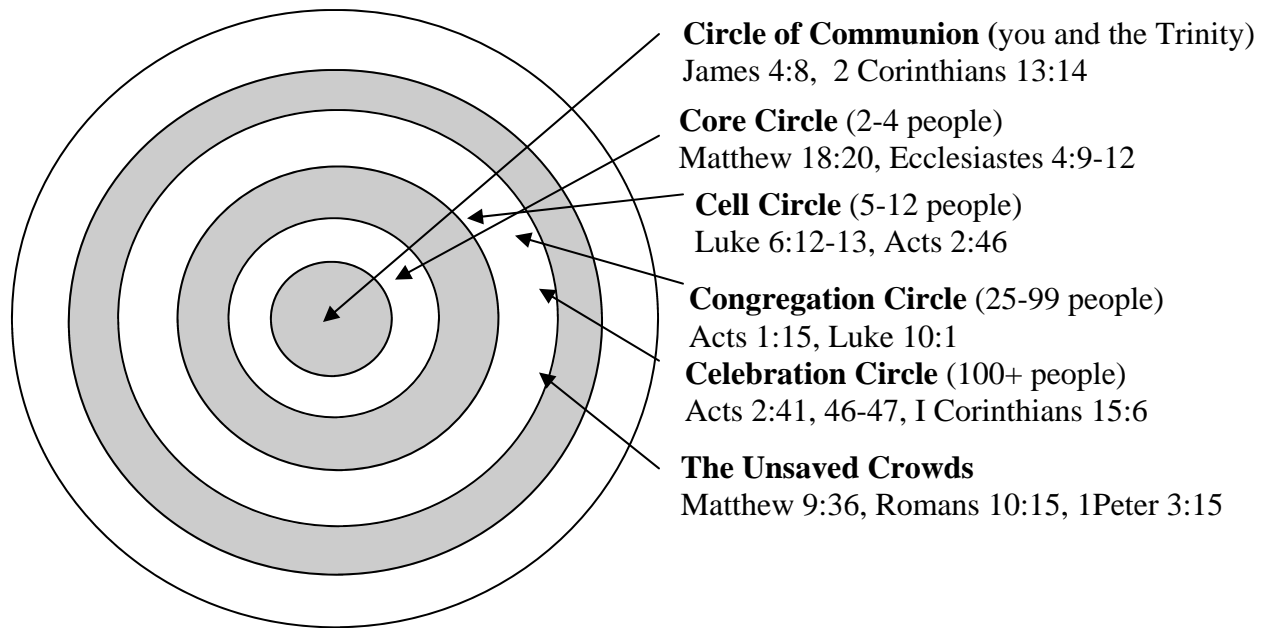
Jesus' 'congregation' (mid-size) circle consisted of the 70 disciples he sent out two by two on ministry trips. In many churches this is the ABF or Small Church ministry, but it also consists of seminar and ongoing teaching settings that include the element of authentic community together. This circle is about learning together the truths of our faith in ordered and sequential ways, it is about serving one another in love, it is about the 'one anothers' in Scripture and it is about reaching into and serving a needy world.

### **The Celebration Circle** (usually 75+ people)

Here we gather to hear God's Word preached, to pray, to worship, and to be inspired to be Christ-like change agents in the world. This was where Jesus gathered in the temple and synagogues. This circle is about being awed by God greatness, surrendering to Him, and being inspired to live worthy of our calling in Christ Jesus.

### **The Crowds** (the unconverted)

The Scriptures also invited us to be authentic living witnesses to those who don't know Christ. We are to be models of integrity, faith, hope and love before a watching world. Jesus ministered to the unconverted crowds. To be like Him, every Christian is also invited to intentionally form redemptive relationships with those who don't yet know Christ as the Forgiver and Leader of their lives. This circle is about having a Kingdom of God mindset for the unsaved across the street and around the world.



**What might our lives, our disciples, and our ministries look like if we encouraged intentional devotion to not just one or two of these circles of friendship, but to all six?**

**Submitted by Bill Johnson:** Bill Johnson is the Discipleship Pastor at Midland (Michigan) Evangelical Free Church. He will be leading sessions at the upcoming ABF conference.. yada yada yada. Bill can be reached at [billjohnson@mefchurch.org](mailto:billjohnson@mefchurch.org), or at 989-631-4411.