



### Successful discipleship in a 'problem' ABF – March/April 2010



By all accounts, the Bereans ABF group at our church should have dissolved two years ago.

The group's main teacher, facing an onslaught of sports activity for his teenage daughter, decided that he could no longer teach productively. In his absence, another longtime class member stepped in to lead discussion. Soon, though, his own schedule was thrown into chaos by the demands of work and pursuit of his master's degree. Another member, the principal at our local high school, took on the mantle of leadership. Temporarily. He soon felt pressure from other commitments and looked for an avenue of escape. He turned to a class newcomer who gladly agreed to help share the load by teaching occasionally. But "occasionally" turned into "full-time" in a matter of weeks...as it did for this new teacher's successor, and the next.

The revolving door of teachers in the Bereans ABF continues to this day. Their ranks are filled with people who are quite capable of guiding the group to learn more of God's truth. Yet no one wants to take the reins for long. The group has had seven men at the helm in twenty-four months. Finding individuals willing to take on the responsibilities of teaching has been more difficult than figuring out Brett Favre's retirement plans!

From an adult ministry perspective, Bereans seems like a class on the brink of disaster, a group bound for failure. As the minister in charge, I never know what is going to happen from week to week, or who it's going to happen to! Yet this precarious situation seems to be a group that God is using for good.

The group's attendance is strong; Bereans averages nearly 30 adults, our largest Adult Bible Fellowship in the church. The group's presence is strong as well. Despite the leadership vacuum, the class managed to organize a Christmas caroling event for the elderly of our community that drew over 20 couples. They rallied around needy families in our school district and provided meals for kids who were lacking nutrition.

On paper, according to my ABF system's leadership structure, this group should've shut the door long ago. But in practice, the group is being used by God to do good. Despite my desire for control – for nice, consistent, "unmessy" groups – this group shows that God doesn't require my agenda or system to accomplish his will.

Too often, those of us in charge of working with adult groups in our church look for an ideal system. We convince ourselves that if God is going to move in our congregation, He is going to do it with our schedule and our requirements and our plans. The groups that don't conform are seen as problems to be corrected, roadblocks to God's providence.

But the Bereans ABF reminds us that reality can be 180 degrees in the opposite direction.

Willing disciples are what God wants. Men and women who place Him at the top of their priorities and follow Him wherever He leads. Such disciples can be developed within our neat systems, but that is not the only place they live. Disciples can be found in groups that seem dysfunctional. Disciples can be found in groups that we think are dying. Disciples can be found in groups that buck the system. Disciples can be found in groups where our own agenda is ignored.

While we can and should do everything in our power to help groups thrive and be successful using models that have proven effectiveness, we must not do so with a blind eye to God's actions. We need to be wise in how we handle the discrepancies between our system and the way God is choosing to move. Practically, what does this mean for us?

1. Prayerfully and observantly look for disciples in your system. Make sure the metrics you use to judge "success" help you see disciples and not just bodies or compliance to a program. Christian author Joe Myers suggests using stories – anecdotes – as a way to better see the life of a group rather than just its statistics.
2. Don't be quick to dismiss the Holy Spirit's actions just because he doesn't use your template. If you see God working through a "rogue" group (a group that you didn't create or officially approve), don't let your pride get in the way. Affirm and encourage those who are following Him. Find ways to support the group members and leaders and include them.
3. Be willing to be uncomfortable. Don't give up on a group too quickly. Allow them to wrestle through issues on their own terms. God may use the chaos to move someone's heart and stir them to leadership. Sure, the uncertainty may mess up your newly printed brochure or web site info, but ministry is more important than marketing!
4. Commit to supporting those men and women who are sold out to Jesus. Great programs don't necessarily make great disciples. But great disciples will make a mediocre program great! Focus more on people instead of your system. Be in prayer for them. Model the Christian life for them. Encourage them with your words and actions and be willing to credit God for his work in their lives.

The Bereans ABF might never look like the group I envisioned. It may never fit the classic ABF structure. But God can use it, and he can use your "problem" groups as well.

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