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One Thing Groups

by Mike Lueken

When piles of clutter are slowly eating my garage, I often try not to notice. But after weeks of mess fatigue, I'll decide it's time to clean. When I survey the magnitude of the job, however, I am often overwhelmed and don't know where to start. So I don't. I pour a cold drink and disappear into a televised golf tournament.

The same thing happens in spiritual formation. With so many areas where we are categorically unlike Jesus, it's easy to become overwhelmed and not do anything.

So we developed One Thing groups. The purpose is to experience transformation in one messy corner of life, attend to it in community with a few others, and cooperate with God's Spirit to become more like Jesus in that area. These groups help people move beyond wishing for transformation to actually experiencing it. The key phases:

Identification

A group of three to six comes together, seeking to identify one area God wants to change. Each person will likely have a different "one thing." This is better than forming a group where everyone's is the same.

This phase involves conversing with the group to identify where transformation is desired. The Sermon on the Mount is a good guide for identifying a "one thing." Anger, lust, control, prayerlessness, judgmentalism, and worry are some of the typical starting points.

Attention

In this phase, each person pays daily attention to their one thing. For example, if the issue is anger, they reflect—in detail—upon the circumstances surrounding the emergence of their anger. Where were they? What was said? Were they tired at the time? Journaling is helpful here.

It is crucial to note when the one thing arises internally, even if the actual behavior is absent. For example, when a person feels anger rising, they reflect upon the situation, even if they may not express that anger.

This process takes several weeks, and people may experience a degree of depression because they realize, like never before, how integrated this one thing is into their life.

As people attend to what they thought was their one thing, they often find a deeper level of discovery. We call this "the trap door phenomenon." As we walk with our one thing, a while, a trap door often springs open and we come to a greater understanding of what's really at work. For example, anger may actually be more about control or doubt or fear.

Several trap doors can open before finding the core one thing.

Conversation

The first two phases usually take a couple of months. The group continues with open conversation about the specifics behind the issue. The facilitator keeps the discussion centered on authentic formation and not mere accountability ("did or didn't I this week?"). The goal: to move beyond behavior modification toward actual heart change. Family-of-origin issues, one's life story, and honesty about one's pain and motivations are vital.

Planning

The Holy Spirit is the driving force in heart change. We cannot make it happen ourselves. But if we do nothing, it most certainly will *not* happen. So each person devises a reasonable plan for spiritual formation. An example:

In order to cooperate with God in the transformation of my anger, I am going to:

- spend 15 minutes in silence three times a week,
- spend an extended time in solitude and silence once a quarter,
- memorize Matthew 5:21-26,
- confess when I sin to my One Thing group,
- invite their questions and counsel,
- practice God's Presence in the transitions of my life (walking, driving, doing dishes, etc.).

Action

People in the group work the plans they have established and continue to discuss how things are going. Surprisingly, as transformation begins to occur, many discover how hard it is to live without their one thing. One Thing groups bring people face to face with their actual spiritual intentions. At times, we have to face the fact we really don't want to change.

One Thing groups have helped our people understand that transformation is a process that happens in the details of our lives. While it is an act of God's grace, it doesn't happen without intentional effort. It isn't a magic formula, but it does help people focus so they can cooperate with God in their spiritual formation.

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