

Addendum for The ABF Book

1. What do most churches call their group ministries now?

Everything and anything. Many simply call them Groups. Life Groups, Acts 2 Groups, Small Groups.

Some call them Sunday Adult Bible Fellowships and Home Adult Bible Fellowships. Many make the difference between Sunday groups and home groups. Sometimes the difference is not in numbers but simply in time and location.

My concerns after minoring on “groups” in churches since 1968, when we started Adult Bible Fellowships in Ashland, Ohio, would be these:

- A. *Have strong groups* in every church.
- B. *Have two different kinds*, not six or seven—one kind to build community or relationships through Bible study and prayer (size 8-80); and another to major on true discipleship, with Bible study and candid accountability (size 3-7), and all men or all women).
- C. *Take away the confusion*. So many churches get competing groups going that have similar purposes—Sunday groups, home groups, men’s women’s electives, and more.

2. Why are the team of leaders needed more than just a teacher—as noted often in *The ABF Book on Groups*?

Because just a teacher will worry about teaching and should.

A class leader (or couple) will help people feel at home, and enjoy.

A care leader (or couple) will be sure needs are being cared for, and will help this group of from 8-80 experience pastoral care.

Some boards, especially elder or deacon boards, like to take on “care” for the whole church. One elder in a good church quoted Acts 20:28 and told me elders are to care for everyone, and that he and the others on the board each cared for over 25 families.

When I asked how they did that he admitted he “prayed for his 27 families as a group”!

That is not care.

How much better to have care (including needs during illness, rescue efforts during spiritual regression, love when there are marriage needs)) done by the caring people who study and discuss and pray with them!

And it works.

A mission captain (or couple) will help the group adopt one or two of the missionaries the church supports, and take on a job or ministry in the church, and also help with one of the local ministries the church officially likes.

No question the one leader (the teacher) idea worked fine when people did not mind one sermon at worship time and another at the Sunday school hour. But that does not fly well today.

People need community and the team of leaders help to be sure that happens!

3. What about electives, good old electives?

Great, if they have a good purpose. And one main purpose should be to trick people into liking these groups so they join one that stays together.

Short-term electives—a few weeks, or up to five—are great for a new members class, or to introduce people to the church, or to teach finances or marriage. But to keep offering elective after elective is to act like people need content more than relationships or community. Let's not think so!

4. Why do you make the difference between community or small groups and DAG groups?

Because they truly are different in purpose. A group of over nine or ten usually turns into a community group with good Bible study and a measure of challenge and discipleship. These have a very strong purpose in a church.

It becomes the place “where everybody knows your name,” as they used to say about the television bar in Boston. And you need that in a church setting.

As an aside, most people can know only about 90 other people, so when a church service gets over 90 people, you don't know everybody. There's nothing wrong with that, because the purpose is to look up to God and hear from His Word and worship Him as a group.

It's fine if they are 100 people in the room or 1,000 people or 10,000. You aren't there to hold hands or get to know peoples' names. You're there to worship.

But in a community group, when there are over nine or ten, you know names but you don't necessarily share the things you would at truly small groups, especially where there are three to six or seven men or three to six or seven women. We'll get to that, but a Sunday group of 25 is like unto a home group of 15. Think about your own experiences and see if you agree.

5. Talk more about this DAG.

Gladly. I believe in them so strongly.

Discipleship and accountability happen best when the group is small enough that everyone can participate but especially that everyone can trust everyone else.

And everyone is of the same gender.

Let me try to prove this by my own experiences. If you ask a group of 15, including married men and women, how they're doing in their marriage, you will get seven couples smiling and one single looking around to see who is smiling.

Go deeper. Ask if any of the people are watching anything pornographic on their computers. You won't see any hands raised. And you wouldn't expect it!

But now take those same seven men that were sitting there and have them go to the basement for the last hour of their home group meeting—the men always go to the basement and the women stay in the nice living room! After months of this and the growing of trust in each other, you might have the same questions asked and one man raises his hand and talks about something dumb he did last weekend and would everyone please hold him accountable so he wouldn't do it again.

Or, deeper, you might have a man admit that he's hit some spots on his computer that he knows he shouldn't and, "Would you please ask me about it every time we meet?"

That kind of a group of all men or all women that meet regularly and get to trusting each other can become a place of true accountability and discipleship. DAG!

6. Isn't there a difference between discipleship and accountability?

Often. And maybe even necessarily.

My own experience and definition of discipleship would be that it involves three to six or seven men and has a leader, who called the group together to build into their lives and his own.

This usually means—this is my experience—that the group will meet for a good 70-90 minutes at least twice a month, if not more, and for at least two years of those regular meetings.

It also means that they will study the Bible not just for facts, but for issues of character and church—I know that's arbitrary, but that's what works best—and use verses of the Bible that hit their hearts.

In accountability, you might take turns and even meet longer than two years, and have goals that are personal and that you report on whenever you meet to pray for each other and to study the Bible. Again, the best study is verses about character that hit the heart. Or verses about the church that help you know how to minister better.

7. Isn't any small group a discipleship group?

I don't think so. Any small group involves a measure of discipleship, and it is a very healthy thing to be a part of. But true "iron sharpening iron" has to be pretty personal and in a place where everyone feels like he or she can be vulnerable and honest.

8. Say more about your contention that all small groups are not discipleship or even that all discipleship groups do not disciple.

Well, some of this is semantics. I'm just delighted when people are in small groups in church. But I just want to be honest with myself and anyone who is willing to read this—just because it's a group of 10 or 12 and meets in a home does not mean that everyone is getting sharpened in their spirits and learning to love Jesus more.

But let's define discipleship as growing in very strong ways in your love of Christ and also dealing with the rough edges in your own heart—anger and pride and lust and the various subcategories of those three awful enemies that we all face.

That will not necessarily happen very well in a mixed group.

And many discipleship books are not written so that it will happen. Many of them are about content. Let me illustrate: our daughter came home from a discipleship group in her very good church. She was married and had children, and I happened to be in their home for a coaching appointment of a pastor near there.

I asked her how her discipleship group went and she said, "Oh Dad, I don't want to just discuss Bible content. I want to talk about life."

One discipleship book I have has the question, "Where did Jesus go when He left Capernaum?"

The answer is Nazareth. That will change your life!

Actually my daughter quoted the question that had been asked, "How many loaves of bread and fish were left over after Jesus fed the crowd?"

The number is interesting and shows His miracle, but it won't change your life.

True discipleship groups are best done with all men or all women, and in a very trusted environment over time as you allow the Word of God and openness to deal with real issues of life today.

9. You often make the point that people don't need to be in a community group on Sunday and another one on Tuesday evening in a home or Wednesday evening at the church or wherever. Why is that?

I just don't want people to become groupies for the church. Being in two groups that meet the same purpose seems redundant. Superfluous.

A little bit like the church activity when I grew up. You went on Sunday morning for Sunday school and church and on Sunday evening for youth group and church and Monday evening for Bible school as we called it and on Wednesday evening for prayer meeting and often on Thursday for visitation. That's a church groupie of another sort. Pray tell when do you have fun with your family or meet these neighbors you're supposed to witness to?

Now many churches have groups in the women's ministry and in the men's ministry and Sunday groups and home groups and, in many cases, they all meet the same purpose—Bible study in community, with prayer.

Why not have community groups that meet on Sunday and in homes, and encourage people to be in one of them; and then have true DAG groups either come out of those community groups or are simply formed by the staff and other leaders of the church?

10. What's the best discipleship program for a church?

As a coach of pastors, that's the second-most asked question I get, after a question about getting along with the church board.

And my answer to, "What's the best discipleship program for our church," is a question.

I understand Jesus often asked questions when people asked Him questions. And mine, "Who's in your discipleship group?"

Two out of three times the pastor does not have such a group, and I tell him that's where it starts and it's not something you announce. You simply begin and ask other staff to do this please.

As far as all those other groups, I think they should each have a purpose of community, but they should have strategic direction from the pastoral staff so that people are not becoming those groupies who have Sunday morning group and a home group and a men's group and a women's group.

And they can have all of that without any of the groups finding out that their marriage is deteriorating or their character is become blasphemous or dirty.

11. What's a good size for a community group, whether it meets on Sundays or in a home?

Well, I'm going to be candid but know that many will not agree with me: anywhere from eight to 80.

Okay, 80 may be too big for strong community, but having a mixed group of nine or ten or 19 or 20 or 39 or 40 will accomplish almost the same things.

And here's where I get arguments that are legitimate and actually fun to have if everyone can admit we're not all right.

My point is that when you have that many in mixed groups you're going to have excellent Bible study and time for questions and application and even motivation, but you're not going to get into the hard questions of personal disciplines. You will not get the very honest and open answers that are only given to a group of three to seven where you totally trust everyone else.

That's the issue that churches and church leaders have to grapple with—do you really want to call a "small group" of 15 or 25 people, your "discipleship program" for the church?

Indeed, call it your community life group and give it any name you wish. But consider that other men and women truly need honest and sometimes hard-core discipleship and even accountability.

That's the issue.

12. Many churches have dropped their Sunday groups. What do you think of that?

Indeed they have, and have gone to absolutely all "small groups," as they call them, in homes.

This is my sarcastic side: not long ago a man told me of his small group of 35 did not have enough personal questions involved. "How do you get people to be more personal?" he asked.

And I smiled and simply asked him if he really wanted to call 35 a small group.

We just need to be honest about the difference between community groups and discipleship/accountability groups. Not that people are trying to be dishonest. But simply to face the facts and the good of having a community group of 11 or 20 or 21 or 40 or 41. Have it!

But consider also having a stealth start to true discipleship of all men or all women and having just five or six or seven. It's apples and oranges.

13. Who really wants to have their community group on Sundays?

More than you think. I have seen some pastors and staff cancel all the Sunday groups and move everything to homes, immediately creating the tension with some of the people, especially seniors of some age, who don't really like to drive on a Tuesday evening in February when it's dark and often icy.

And they've been so accustomed to going to church for "two hours" on Sunday—one for their fellowship or community group and one for their sermon and worship time. Why take that away from them?

In fact, I could show you on the map where there are some churches that restarted their seniors community groups and did this much to the delight of some of the seniors.

I always urge pastors, by the way, to help to teach those groups at least once in a while if the group is not meeting during the worship hour. But that's another subject: the pastor's time with the seniors in his or her church.

14. What is a good format or rubric or time schedule for a community group on Sunday or in a home?

Of course there's no magic formula, and home community groups usually are not so disciplined by time, but both might look something like this.

The 70-minute plan for a Sunday community group:

- **10 minutes** of "meet and greet." I always encourage the churches to have the coffee and sometimes even more served in the actual ABF or group room to help the people mix with each other.
- **10-15 minutes** of what Chuck Swindoll used to call, "cheers and tears." Time of prayer for each other and news updates and planned two to three minute request for prayer or report of a special need, or introduction of new people by friends who brought them.

This is bonding time and often takes more than 10-15 minutes if someone is going through a crisis or gotten a very negative diagnosis from the doctor or been laid off of work. Some of the best moments in Sunday ABFs or home ABFs or groups have happened when the people simply join together to gather around—even literally and physically—a person or a couple to pray for them and to commit their needs to the Lord.

- **35-40 minutes** lesson with application.

No question that some groups will still have a lecture or second sermon, but leadership should try to get away from that. Nobody needs two sermons on the same day except at a conference.

The good of a community group and the lesson is to have times for application and questions and discussion.

I know this argues for having a group of 20 or 30 instead of a group of 50 or 60, and I fully agree.

- **Five minutes** at the end for any final announcement or closing prayer.

In a home, the group might be having dinner together once or twice a month. Many have built their whole first hour around food and fellowship and just enjoying each other. Great.

15. Who else likes community groups to meet in homes?

Many young couples who are not used to going to church on Sundays for two hours (and of course I mean two separate purposes) like to have home groups two to three times a month.

Immediately, that means they have to, in some cases, provide for children, and that can work. But I'm always urging churches to have home groups that can meet the community or relationship needs of their Sunday workers. Every church has those very dependable and wonderful people who serve in the nursery or the children's area and can never be a part of a Sunday group or Sunday ABF. Home groups should be for those people if for no one else.

16. What would be a good time format for a DAG group or totally not just a DAG group?

Often these are breakfast meetings—let's say 6:15 in the morning in the back room of a restaurant! Sounds a little spooky to be in a back room, but it can work in a McDonald's at the circular table in the corner. But a private room is often available at breakfast restaurants. Or the evening. Or in a home.

But back to the format:

- **15 minutes** gathering and ordering off the menu
- **15 minutes** eating and catching up on sports or fun or personal things
- Study and discussion of the verses with the applied questions that hit the heart—call that **25 or 30 minutes**
- **5-15 minutes** reporting on progress of goals or areas where you want to be accountable. This can be more and include prayer for each other about the goals and about the needs or losses.
- Then get to work if these are men or women who must get out of there by 7:30 or 8:00 to get to their employment.

Of course there are many variations for this, but many groups tend to become simply coffee klatches. Or breakfast clubs.

What's wrong with that?

Nothing. But don't call it discipleship or accountability then. Call it fun. Call it a good thing. Call it great breakfast club or social.

17. Can groups of men or women over 55 or 60 learn this kind of accountability or discipleship?

Well I'm one of them. And I went to seminary and heard the word "discipleship" many times but never was in a group or never heard of one that was being held at the seminary. A very good seminary. Very Bible-oriented.

And a few times I've been to other seminaries to speak or to teach, and sometimes I've been included in one of the discipleship groups. I would call it an ice-cream social and fellowship hour with some prayer. Was it good? In one case we actually had home-made ice-cream and it was very good. But I digress. In one case there was really good prayer for each other and the prof who was in charge was as warm as could be.

But don't call it a discipleship group, please. Call it a social or community or relationship prayer group. That's good.

But I think you get my point...

True discipleship and especially accountability must be deliberate and must have a leader.

People 55 or 60 and older are very good at care or prayer groups and at enjoying each other.

18. Who will get into these DAG groups?

Well no one if you announce it on Sunday morning. Or maybe even the wrong ones.

It's my thought that true DAG groups are going to start happening with the church staff. And maybe including other leaders or board members or strong men or women.

But imagine what can happen if the one person on staff or the two each, if they are men, corralled with joy 5 or 6 other men or women (if she's a woman) and asked them to join them for a 2-year program of iron sharpening iron and studying the Bible for your heart and hand.

And then after two years that group reproduces by starting three new groups for another two years.

I always took one of the men with me to start another group and then took the two strongest men to each start a group with another man in the group. Did you follow that? Now we have six of the men including me, going two-by-two to start three new groups of six or seven total.

And I actually say without hesitation that we almost always studied the same questions from the same passages. I never heard a complaint, and I never felt it myself for 26 years of 13 groups, that we were being redundant or something. Not at all. It never got old. Our lives were changing all the time and our

discipleship needs were different—though always dealing with spiritual growth and ministry and trying to fight off the little or big attacks of anger, pride, or lust.

That's the way this can happen.

No one among us is going to stand up on Sunday morning and announce at the worship service, "How many men in this church building would like to join a group where you get really candid and where you even discuss personal thought life and perhaps deal with an addiction or pornography or at least the tendency? Or women, would you come also, to your own group?"

I see no hands.

No, this must be done by spiritual leaders of the church behind the scenes. It just needs to get started and then be reproducing.

Let's just say it can be very good. And it certainly is very necessary.

19. What's the good of a true DAG group?

I often get the question from pastors or board members, "Where do you get new board members?"

Or, "What's the best way to disciple the men of our church so they can be leaders of the church someday?"

Or, "Do you know a good curriculum to develop leaders or board members or women's ministry leaders?"

I give you DAG groups.

20. Who should lead these groups from the staff position?

The senior pastor. He should, in one sense, lead all ministries of the church.

I know I just got your attention if you're in a church of 2,000. But I do think the pastor is responsible for making sure this group is done well by giving it to the right point person on staff.

And of course if the pastor is the sole leader of a church of 50 or 100 or 200, he must be the main pastoral leader for this.

Then the concern is to get a good manager who will care for details and carry this out.

21. You use the phrase or title, "point person," and "ministry manager" right there. Who are they?

I used them so you would ask that question.

The point person is the man or woman on staff who is responsible for that area of church life and ministry. He has to be on staff. By definition, the point person is on staff.

If he or she is a solo pastor, he or she is the point person for everything that goes on in that church. It just means they worry about it. They pray about it. They find out what other churches are doing about that area, and they help to make some of this happen.

But the key for that in any size church is the ministry manager. Call him or her anything you like, but this is the person who helps the point person get it done. Who cares about it. Who takes care of details. Who loves this ministry so much—Christ first of course—that he or she will carry out the details and allow the point person simply to help give vision.

Actually a good manager will give vision all the time also. Of course.

This is a great set-up for every one of the 30 or 40 ministries that go on in a church.

Think this way for senior care—or shut-ins. Think hospital care. Think sports.

Of course it happens in music.

The key is that the point person worries about the area a little bit (if you don't like the word "worries" substitute some other concern word. If you grew up in a church like I did, where the word "worry" is a sin, then you should change the name. I'm getting over my legalisms, so I use the word without thinking of what I've just said.).

The ministry manager gets encouraged by the point person on staff, and reports to him or her, and helps make details happen.

(Otherwise the point person becomes an administrator of this area and that area and another area and his or her time on staff—whether it's 40 hours or 52 or 60—is filled with hours that are not really anything but administration and management. All of which can easily be given to a strong lay person of the church who would love to give that two to four hour stint every week helping to carry out and make successful one of these areas of church life.)