

On Saturday, May 11, a group of congregation members and elders met to identify the issues involved in streamlining effective ministry to the body. The strategy was to identify what people seek in a church fellowship and what actions promote or which factors might hinder their realizing these desires.

The primary desire identified is the need for individuals and families to become involved in genuine, loving, encouraging, welcoming, trusting, non-judgmental and forgiving relationships. (Romans 12:9-21) We identified several reasons that people are hesitant to get too close to others, especially in the church context. Fear is paramount. There is always a fear of the unknown. It is difficult for most of us to enter as a newcomer into a group of people, most of whom probably already know one another. And often, the smaller the group: the scarier it can be for the outsider. Some of us fear that our biblical illiteracy might become apparent if we gather together in a small group. Maybe we'll be asked to read aloud and that's not something we do well. Some of us fear that we might find ourselves in a group whose demographic makeup will alienate us.

Some have experienced past disappointments from bad church experiences. Others identified a general lack of fervor based on the inability to identify where they might fit in, the feeling that they have nothing to offer or that they simply lack the knowledge, skills, talent, time or desire to give. Still others have already been serving in church for many years and are worn down. Often such burnout is caused when their well-meaning intentions get them too close to the problems of others only to find themselves entangled and in need of rest or rescue.

While there is not generally a lack of vision within our church, we don't always do a good job of converting our thoughts into actions. We need more leaders.(2 Timothy 2:1-2) And we need to make certain they are prepared. (2 Timothy 2:15,Col 1:28) We can't assume that those appointed as small group leaders will be up to the task unless we take measures to prepare them. Leaders should always be assessed for their suitability to serve. They must count the cost and be willing to devote the time that is required. And, they should be trained. Specific training needs include handling the Word of God, the basics of conducting a meeting, needs assessment, planning, leadership, and organizing/directing resources to meet those needs.

Logistics remain a problem in some cases. An example would be helping those who have personal mobility challenges or who lack transportation to and from meetings. Another common problem is matching young families with groups that can accommodate children.

Our image as a welcoming church body is crucial. This image begins at the front door, generally on Sunday morning. It must continue for the newcomer throughout the entire church experience. As individuals, we need to recognize those who are new to us and to reach out to them. The stereotypical view is that this is the pastor's job. While the shepherds and teachers play important roles in equipping others, the actual task of building up the body of Christ is in the hands of the saints (Ephesians 4:12).

We believe the small group is our primary means of meeting the individual and family needs articulated above. The small group is the venue where members can feel more at ease in fellowship with others, especially as personal relationships develop, and lives become more transparent and interdependent. It is up to us to sell this concept to those who are not already taking part. We must actively invite them to attend. We need to address any fears they have and help them overcome any logistical hurdles that they face.

We determined that our outreach to these folks should offer them the ability to sample the group atmosphere before they actually commit themselves. It was suggested that we can do this by providing photographic and video presentations, making them available in a variety of formats. A series of short video testimonies by members (or families) that attend growth groups or that are involved in a ministry teams might be rotated for playing during the announcement sections of Sunday Services. And alternate approach might be to include a brief video segment that depicts an actual group discussion, social get-together or meal taking place. These same videos could be posted on our Website. Photos of small group study, fellowship and bread-breaking sessions can be put up on the screens, on the Website and on bulletin boards as well.

It should be emphasized that ministry groups such as the musical worship team, greeters and the security group provide the same kind of opportunity to experience true fellowship. In fact, they may have a distinct advantage over conventional study groups because members of ministry group join with the understanding that their purpose is to serve. (Eph. 2:10) Too often, members of conventional study groups (and certainly many Sunday morning church folks) attend in order either to check the attendance box or merely to receive spiritual feeding. Too often, these people miss the joy of enjoying true fellowship through service to others.

Another idea included a "Blessing Board" that might feature short notes of testimony that highlight practical and spiritual needs met in the lives of our church family by others in the congregation.

The outreach ministry of small groups was emphasized. In addition to ideas such as assigning needy families to specific small groups for holiday sponsorship or other ministry needs, it was suggested that we might assign the different small groups to staff an information counter or to rotate through greeter team assignments throughout the year. Both concepts would become great advertisements for the team concept of the small group and would promote outreach to newcomers by members of the existing congregation.

Still another concept that was suggested would have some growth groups (or ministry teams) identifying a specific vision or mission for that group and including it in the description of the group. An example might be the worship team whose stated vision could be "Worshiping God in Song". A Growth Group might identify its ministry focus as "Feeding the Hungry", "Helping the Homeless", "Growing in the Knowledge of God's Word" or "A Ministry to Single Mothers".

By establishing a specific vision/mission identification for each growth group, members of the body may find it easier to find and join a group that is aligned with their gifts and aptitudes.