

Executive Summary
Focus on God's Word
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Christ's final directive to His disciples before His ascension was for them to "...make disciples of all nations" (*Matthew 28:19*). Discipleship should be at the core of all the Church aspires to accomplish. For many, however, true discipleship is a vague concept. It has become a cliché term attached to the back end of any efforts the Church undertakes. When someone hosts a bible study, that's labeled as discipleship. When a student minister plans a weekend retreat, that's discipleship. While both statements CAN be true, it is not necessarily so that both these instances ARE ALWAYS true. True discipleship has a clearly defined biblical standard derived from the words of Christ and demonstrated by the ways of the early Church. The goal for this discussion is to clearly present a biblical idea of discipleship and provide concepts and methods local churches and student ministries can employ to establish a culture of effective discipleship within a system of small group ministry.

REMEMBER YOUR PURPOSE

It could be argued that the first form of Christian ministry was small group ministry. Jesus spent three-and-one-half years with twelve Jewish men. He led them to understand truths about God, their Heavenly Father, and he also demonstrated to them the right way to live as members of God's eternal Kingdom. Small group ministry is the lifeblood of student ministry in the church, and it is often the first steps of discipleship for new believers or for maturing Christians. Without small groups, the need for a student ministry becomes somewhat nullified. The overwhelming majority of churches gather at least once weekly for corporate worship. In this setting, all age groups of the church are represented, engaging in the same activities under the same leadership. There can be exceptions to this standard practice in larger church settings where multiple pastors are tasked with shepherding multiple congregations. There are also worship settings where style of music or other factors might allow for the participants in worship to group themselves according to preference (traditional services, contemporary services, etc.). However, the fact remains that in each of these settings the makeup of the congregation is mixed in age range and walks of life.

Student ministry, however, is by definition a segmented population of the church at large. So it is a smaller grouping of the congregation in total. If this is so, it stands to reason that effective small group ministry is an ever-important function of the student ministry (and every age-based ministry) of the church. Sadly, however, most of the emphasis in student ministry often mirrors the consumeristic mindset of the outside world. The desire for numbers and attendance overrides the foundational spiritual needs of the church and the individual students, so extravagant group events and expensive trips often drain a bulk of the resources and attention, leaving little to offer in terms of investment and development of effective small group ministry.

For a student ministry to be effective in its small groups endeavors, there must be a clear understanding of the primary purpose(s). Effectiveness can only ever be measured in relation to the manner with which one achieves or helps others to achieve the stated goals of the group. Unfortunately for some, there is never a clearly defined, stated purpose or goal. In most cases, groups meet regularly and discuss a selected curriculum covering a particular biblical

passage/theme. Then they dismiss with prayer. Studying Scripture is certainly useful, but there could be so much more accomplished if leaders embraced and pursued specific values and goals in their times with their groups. So, what are your goals? Have you ever considered setting specific criteria against which to judge the effectiveness of the efforts made by your leaders? Here are some easy-to-communicate goals that are broad enough to be applied universally, yet open enough to be explained and taught in ways that can be specific to your ministry context: Know, Show, Grow

Know (Information)

This is the most obvious of the three-tiered goal approach to small group ministry. It is commonly referred to as “Bible study,” after all. So, naturally, the purpose of sharing knowledge from leaders to learners is essential. The aim of group leaders should be to teach students to equip them to better understand the gospel and its demands for our lives. Each gathering (with few exceptions) should center around the faithful teaching of the Word of God. Selected leaders should possess a superior grasp on biblical foundations as compared to their students. This does not mean every leader should be a seminary level thinker. But it does stress the need for leaders to be capable of teaching and handling discussion. It stands to reason that the student minister or pastor who selects group leaders should also be willing to provide the necessary training to best equip those who plan to equip students.

Show (Participation, Demonstration)

In school settings, it is commonplace for a student to be taught new information, concepts with the expectation that at some point he or she will be asked to prove their mastery of the concept through some form of test. Schools test students to ensure the students are retaining important knowledge. This is a concept that, in many ways, seems foreign in our church contexts. The argument here is not asserting for “tests” to be given each week during small group gatherings. But students do need the opportunity to synthesize and put into use the knowledge of Christ and His gospel being presented. Jesus regularly questioned His disciples, allowing them the opportunity to process the information and speak concerning all they had witnessed or been taught. This was a chance for them to show Jesus how they were developing. Rather than merely nodding along in agreement with all that Jesus was teaching and doing, the disciples were able to participate in the experience, demonstrating their mastery or the lack thereof in many instances, of a particular concept.

In small group gatherings, it is essential to create ways to allow students to interact and take ownership of the process. One simple way to allow student participation is to select students to read the Scripture for the day. Consider allowing students to voice the opening or closing prayers. When the Scripture calls for individuals to emulate Jesus and show compassion on others, why not plan an activity for the week challenging students to intentionally follow the example set by Christ in that day’s lesson. These are occasions for your young disciples of Christ to demonstrate their loyalty to God’s Kingdom, and your group leaders have a front row seat to hearing and celebrating the testimonies the next week as they gather to learn more.

Aside from the specifics of the lesson itself, students can also show their participation in the group by providing breakfast once a month or selecting a restaurant for the group to eat lunch together. Though this may not seem “theologically deep,” there is deep theology in allowing

students to see the value of their friendships within the group to create unbreakable bonds that will continue with them as they mature and exit student ministry into the adult world. If these relationships are cultivated early, they have a greater retention rate later when students begin to experience all the changes that maturity and time will bring. Ultimately, students will (unfortunately) forget most of the lessons you teach. But the relationships that are built will be a primary catalyst in the third and final tier of our purposes to small group ministry.

Grow (Transformation)

Information is a tool that leads to transformation. Information is in and of itself not the primary goal but is rather a means to a greater end.

Many churches equate discipleship with knowledge. If you are a church leader with this predisposition, you believe the solution to a discipleship deficiency is more classroom time... Jesus commanded, "Go...and make disciples...teaching them to *observe* everything I have commanded" ... Jesus did not merely ask us to teach everything he commanded... The result of discipleship is not merely the *knowledge* of all Jesus commanded but the *obedience* to all Jesus commanded.¹

As small group leaders teach students, the goal is to form disciples who follow Jesus more and more devotedly. Transformation is the end goal. Less of me and more of Thee. Over a large sample size of interaction with small groups, do your leaders see students developing the habits of discipleship? Along with their increase of knowledge with regards to the WORD of God, is there also a clear demonstration of an increase on obedience to the WAYS of God as shown in the life of Jesus. Jesus' model of discipleship emphasized all three of these above listed purposes: Know, Show, and Grow. Jesus was informative, and transformative in how he allowed His followers to process their observations and live out their lives in repentance and belief of the gospel of the Kingdom. His model is the best model. His purposes are the best purposes.

RECOGNIZE YOUR PROBLEMS

While every local church possesses its own unique qualities concerning its approaches to student ministry and small groups, it is also safe to assume that these same local churches are heavily influenced by other churches in their methodologies and practices. Our current systems were not created in a vacuum. Rather, they are the result of generations of successes and failures both from within and from outside our immediate ministry contexts. There are a vast number of external influences to consider such as neighboring local churches, renown pastors and church leaders, authors, artists, and more. But whatever steps were taken in developing the current approach to your small group system, it is likely that the following descriptors can be easily applied to your ministry context. Some may land more directly than others, but all are indicative of a broken system that plagues countless numbers of churches and student ministries today:

¹ Geiger, Eric; Kelley, Michael; and Nation, Philip. *Transformational Discipleship: How People Really Grow*. B&H Publishing Group: Nashville, Tennessee. 2012. pp.18

1. The Broken System Is Ruled by Tradition The Better System Is Ruled by Needs

Whether your church was chartered 150 years ago or you are a three-year-old church plant, it is highly likely that your small group gatherings possess many of these characteristics: they meet on Sundays immediately preceding a corporate worship service (or possibly sandwiched in between two worship services); they are led by adults who have served multiple years in the same role; they meet in the same space where they've met for years; etc. Why do we structure our gatherings in this manner? We do so because we tend to operate Sunday School/small groups based upon how it has always operated. In other words, we do what we've always done. But is this helpful or a hindrance? Consider the following questions and see if you are able to provide an adequate reason why things are the way they are:

When do we gather in small groups? (Day, time, frequency, etc.)

Where do we gather for small groups? (Classrooms, homes, etc.)

Who leads our small group gatherings? (Classrooms, homes, etc.)

What happens in our small group gatherings?

If the only "why" you can provide in response to these questions is, "...because we've always done it that way," then you are clearly ruled by tradition, which is problematic if you desire to successfully minister to teenagers.

Instead of doing what you've always done, take time to consider what your students need most! Allow the NEEDS to rule the moment. One reason tradition becomes such a stronghold on our student ministries is because we lack the creativity to think of something BETTER. But you aren't called to be creative, you are called to MINISTER. So, minister to the needs of the students in your care. For example, your church may have traditionally divided groups based on school grade level. However, you may find that NOW you are better served to divide your groups by sex, having separate classes for male and female students. The availability of teachers may be a determining factor, but that, too, is a means of allowing the need of the moment to take over a previously established tradition. Look again at the list of questions above and allow NEEDS to guide your thoughts. How different will your answers be when the greatest needs rule the system?

2. The Broken System is Run by the Untrained The Better System is Run by the Equipped

Another major flaw in many small group settings is a deficiency in trained leaders. You'll be hard pressed to find any organization that appoints people to places of authority who have never been taught how to fulfill their assigned roles effectively. In the corporate world, inept leaders don't last long. But in the church world, unfortunately, inept leadership is often overlooked and, oddly enough, allowed to continue for far too long. This isn't referring to biblically unqualified leaders, those whose moral lives do not align with the biblical standards. Rather, this is a reference to those who truly love Jesus and His Church but lack sufficient knowledge of how lead well.

Do you set aside time to equip your leaders? How often do you do so? How often should you do so? All these questions ought to be at the forefront of your mind as you seek to better

your small group ministry. Equipping leaders consists of theological training, biblical instruction as well as practical training and constructive oversight. When you train leaders, you help create consistency across the board. You're able to clearly explain your expectations which will elevate each leader's effectiveness. This will also indirectly create a greater bond amongst your leaders. Remember, those who lead your teenagers have likely been taken away from their own primary small groups/age groups. Training creates community among the many different types of leaders who serve in student ministry. Consider implementing these strategies in your current ministry context:

Annual Leadership Training - Once a year, set aside time and assemble all student ministry adult leaders (staff and laypersons). Do whatever is necessary to encourage attendance: serve a meal, provide childcare, incentivize attendance with giveaways, etc. At this meeting, discuss the overarching values and goals of the student ministry and small groups ministry. Explain the curriculum. Answer any questions. Invite seasoned veterans to sit near and converse with younger, less-experienced leaders. Perhaps there is a neighboring church with a similar approach to ministry who would like to partner with you for a training event.

Semi-Annual Personal Meeting At least twice a year the primary student ministry leader should spend time in personal discussion with each small group leader. Take them to dinner (perhaps invite spouses as well to avoid any impropriety). Invite them to your office. Spend time inquiring about their life, their family, their passions, their worries. Pray for them. This not only boosts morale, but it models effective ministry that they can then employ with the teens who comprise their small groups.

Weekly Lesson Training - One pitfall in all small group ministries is the lack of weekly lesson preparation by leaders. Some are disciplined enough with their time that they always study the lesson and are prepared on Sunday to teach. Others are consistently neglecting time for preparation and study. You can help by reading ahead and preparing an overview to distribute to teachers during their week of preparation for a particular lesson. You could prepare a document and email your leaders. Or you might prefer to prepare an audio recording or video of you explaining the lesson. This personalized overview will motivate leaders to study more diligently, and it provides clarity on the big picture concepts contained within each lesson.

3. The Broken System Is Reaching the Minimum The Better System Is Removing Obstacles

We cannot be driven by numbers, but we cannot ignore them, either. Numbers represent people. But "the minimum" here does not refer specifically to the HOW MANY are in attendance as much it calls into question WHO is in attendance. Our small group gatherings are often geared toward the students who have been raised in, or are familiar with, our own church culture. Small group leaders can often assume that students own a bible, are familiar with Scripture, know Jesus, etc. In doing so, it is possible that those students who are less familiar with the ways of the church are inadvertently prevented from assimilating into the culture of the small group. Over time, if not addressed, the small group effectively becomes a fortress impregnable by outsiders. Christ reminds us in his Word that the "harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few" (*Matthew 9:37*). With such a plentiful harvest of souls available, why would

we allow our small groups to create barriers that prevent outsiders from engaging the gospel that is preached within?

Ask yourself what obstacles might currently exist in your small group system that are preventing outsiders from adequately assimilating into the small group culture in your ministry context. Here are some possible questions to consider:

Is there an explicit or implicit dress code?

Are our gathering times accommodating to our target teenagers?

Is our teaching style effective with the students who attend?

4. The Broken System Is Resulting in Loss The Better System Is Raising Up Disciples

(Here we need statistics to back up the claim)

As stated above, Jesus' system of discipleship is the model we should follow. His model was small groups. His model was informational and transformational. His model was to preach to the many and go deeper with the few. His heaviest investment during his most impactful season of life was into the smaller amount of people. This goes against all conventional wisdom. Our human reasoning would suggest it wiser to invest in as many people as possible in the hopes that maximum exposure would result in maximum opportunities for retention and transformation. But instead, one man invested heavily in twelve men (and most heavily in three of them to be honest), which resulted in the birth of a movement that continues today around the world to people of all nations and languages. The Church today exists because of the faithfulness of those original disciples of Jesus. The better system raises up disciples, who make disciples who make disciples.

REACH YOUR POTENTIAL

The term "potential" is a concept first introduced to most fourth-grade students in their science classes. Potential energy is the stored energy an object possesses. The object may appear to be inactive or not useful in the moment, but the idea of potential energy suggests that, under the right circumstances, the object or system of objects can and will become an object in motion with the capacity to accomplish a task. Your small group is brimming with potential. Even if, for the moment, you feel overwhelmed with the brokenness of your current system, there is hope. Through the power of God's Spirit, for the cause of Jesus Christ and His Kingdom, you can change the world with one simple decision. What is that simple decision?

Your success is not dependent upon your ability to perform. Christ selected ordinary men to be His apostles. He did not choose the best and the brightest of his age. He chose fishermen and outcasts. Your success is not dependent upon your creativity in developing guidelines and articulating exquisite schemes for your group leaders to follow and execute. Friend, your success in ministry is rooted in your ability to rest in Him.

In John 15:1-10, we see Jesus tell His disciples a parable that is directly relatable to you and me who seek to serve well and produce fruit for the Kingdom. Jesus says the following:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.”²

Followers of Jesus are branches. It is the branch that bears fruit, but it is not the branch that is ultimately responsible for producing the fruit. The vine is the key to fruitfulness. And it is Christ who is the true vine. Do you want to see your small group members effectively be transformed by the Word of God because of your gatherings? Then you and your leaders must abide in the true vine. And how does one do this? “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love...” This is exactly what Christ meant when he later told His disciples (as referenced earlier) to make disciples by teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

To make disciples one must be a disciple. To be a disciple, one must, by faith, submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, observing His commands. This is the key to effective small group ministry. Every lesson taught must come from more than the pages of a book/set of curricula. Leaders should move from information to transformation in their own lives. In doing so, their learners will also be exposed to information that can be a catalyst in their own transformation. All of this is examples of fruitful branches who are remaining in the true vine of Christ. Your potential relies on the faithfulness of Christ to fulfill His promises. As you remember your purpose and recognize the problems that may exist in your ministry setting, always remember that you will only ever reach your potential when you abide in Christ and glorify His name above all else.

² John 15:1-10 (ESV)