

Workshop Guide
Love Well
Michael Kelley, Presenter

Opening Activity: Each table should have a pile of Lego bricks on it. The groups at the tables are instructed to use as many pieces as possible, and only the pieces on the table, to build the sturdiest tower they can in two minutes. Once the two minutes have elapsed, the leader provides the following explanation:

Lego are easy to build with; they're essentially snap and lock blocks that fit together. While some people prefer the kind of free-flowing building you just experienced, others like a specifically designed plan so they know exactly what piece to put where and in what order to attach them.

Now imagine if you had come to your table and instead of blocks, you found a few seeds, a cup of water, and a pile of dirt and you were told to grow something. The process is not nearly as quick, simple, or clean. Further, there would be some essential ingredients missing in order for that to happen.

Unfortunately, most of us think of discipleship more like Lego than farming; that is, we tend to think that if we had the right modules and components and plan, we can simply snap things together and complete disciples will emerge. But disciples aren't constructed like this; they are grown.

Ask a volunteer to read John 15:5-8:

"I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me. If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown aside like a branch and he withers. They gather them, throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you want and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this: that you produce much fruit and prove to be my disciples" (John 15:5-8).

Then ask for feedback on the following questions:

- *What do you think Jesus was trying to communicate about discipleship by using this agricultural metaphor?*
- *What would you say are some of the main differences between seeing discipleship as construction and seeing discipleship as farming?*
- *How do you imagine our methodology might change if we began seeing discipleship through more of a farming kind of lens?*

Continue with the following explanation:

When we make disciples, we aren't putting together cars or assembling furniture. Of course, there is a process, but it's a process that involves human beings. Human beings doing the discipling, and human beings being disciplined. For that reason, we must be careful that we don't put too much faith in a process and too little faith in the God who sits over the process.

There are twists and turns. There are emotions and feelings. There are circumstances of great joy and terrible despair. All these things come together, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, to move us toward Christlikeness. As we seek to love one another in groups, then, we must make sure that we are organized, logical, and above all intentional - but we must not be overly rigid. For that rigidity can indicate that we have replaced faith with procedure; that we have supplanted the work of the Holy Spirit with the ingenuity of man; that we are trusting in our own ideas rather than in God's formative work.

We must have the field in mind when we approach loving one another in groups, lest we create a system without a soul.

Allow the group to discuss the following questions:

- *What are some of the characteristics we would need in our groups for them to be more like a field?*
- *Is that kind of ministry harder or easier than a rigid system? Why?*
- *Think about your own experience. Have you been in a discipling relationship that felt like a field? When, and what was it like?*

After some discussion, move into the next portion of the workshop by explaining that you will describe three important principles for creating groups like these. Be sure that those present have the supplies to take notes since they will be asked to complete several activities regarding their group based on these principles.

Principle 1: Create opportunities for relationships.

Ask the group to recount an experience from their past:

- *Can you remember a particularly bad meeting (of any sort) that you have been a part of?*
- *What happened in that meeting? What made it so unenjoyable?*

After a few people have had the chance to share, continue with the following explanation:

One of the hallmarks of a truly bad meeting is a lack of structure. The structure is the organization of that environment; it helps to set the expectations and provides a sense of security for those who are a part of it.

As we have been describing the group as a field, It would be a mistake to think that an unstructured and purely organic group would be a field for the creation of relationships; it would instead serve the opposite purpose as people would likely stick together in small, previously formed relationships and eventually stop coming all together.

Much like the boundaries laid on a field provide the kind of environment for true growth and health to happen, the structure we put on our groups can have the same purpose if we are thoughtful about it.

Now ask the group to consider the proper structure that should be in place for the group, if one of the goals is to facilitate relationships:

- *If one of the goals of the group is to facilitate relationships, what kind of structure would need to be in place?*

At this point, give the group several minutes to outline the structure of a group meant to facilitate relationships. Give them the constraint of a one hour time block, and ask them to allocate how the time in that group would be spent.

After several minutes, invite one or two people to share how they structured their group, then offer the following commentary:

There is actually a great deal of freedom in how a group can be structured, and much of it depends on the people that are in the group. A group of senior adults will likely be structured differently than a group of young parents. Even so, there are two key points that should be present in any group: dialogue, and prayer.

Ask the group to consider the point of dialogue through the following questions:

- *Is it harder or easier to structure a group around dialogue or lecturing? Why?*
- *Which is more effective for learning? Why?*

After some discussion, continue with the following explanation:

Lecturing to your group does little to encourage the development of relationships. Further, doing so is often a less effective learning methodology than a more experiential kind of environment. When groups are centered on the receiving of content rather than participating in learning, group members subconsciously understand that their role in that group is not to contribute, but only to receive which in turn fosters the permission to remain isolated.

One application of this is in the choosing of both teachers and curriculum. When choosing both teachers and curriculum, the group should make sure that both are intentional about encouraging conversation not only prior to and at the end of a group, but during that group as well. Leaders

should be skillful at the forming and asking of questions, directing conversations, and encouraging dialogue rather than dispensers of content only.

Now ask the group to consider the point of prayer through the following questions:

- *Based on your previous experience in groups, how would you say we treat prayer in those environments?*
- *How can prayer actually be a means of developing relationships?*
- *If we are to make prayer an essential component of the group, how must our time be structured?*

After some discussion, continue with the following explanation:

Sometimes we approach prayer as a necessary ending to that group instead of as a core piece of the vitality of that group. Prayer is not only the means by which we bring each other's needs before God; it's also an opportunity for relational development as we share those needs with each other and continue together in seeing how God responds to the supplication of the group. For that reason, the "content" of the group must be planned to intentionally leave room for extended periods of prayer and sharing with one another. Groups should also set the expectation in the area of prayer to keep in regular contact with one another (outside of the group gatherings), to pray together, and to inform each other of the fact that prayers are being made on their behalf.

As you move into the second principle, ask the participants to discuss the following questions:

- *What is the closest group you've ever been a part of?*
- *Can you think of a particular story about that group in which you cared or provided for one another during a time of need?*

Allow a few people to share, and then continue with the second principle.

Principle 2: Cultivate an environment of care.

What should our groups be known for? They should of course be known for biblical faithfulness, a welcoming spirit, and a connection point in the church. But in the midst of those characteristics, our groups ought to be known as caring environments. If we want the field of groups to grow disciples, then they should be the smaller groups where real ministry takes place in the church.

Having introduced this principle, ask the group to consider:

- *Often we want to be a caring group, but what are some of the practical steps we can take to actually get us there?*
- *How can care be done in an organized and replicable way?*

Then explain that as in the first principle of relationships, there are practical and actionable ways we can create an environment of care. Emphasize that this won't happen by accident, but also emphasize the caution of over-programming and overplanning this aspect of the group. Then continue:

One of the most basic things we can do in our group is assign roles to volunteers. The old adage is that if something is everyone's job, then it's nobody's job. The same thing is true in group structure. Of course, it is everyone's job to care for one another, but someone must lead, organize, and maintain those intentional efforts. The first step to that end is empowering a specific group member who knows that their primary responsibility in the group is to know, better than anyone, what is going on in the lives of group members. This knowledge will enable practical components of care to happen, such as providing meals, hospital visitation, and other tangible expressions. Chances are when one person takes the initiative in this respect, more and more people will take their own degree of ownership in the group.

Ask the group to consider this role more closely:

- *What are some of the characteristics of the person you would want to assign to be the care coordinator of the group?*
- *Describe someone you know that you think would do well in a position like this. What about them makes them suited for this responsibility?*

After some discussion, continue with the next practical component of creating an environment of care, which is time management. Explain:

The group leader must be able to shift the focus of the group when it comes to care. The leader must not be so committed to the content they are bringing to the group that they cannot abbreviate it specifically for the purpose of care. They must be willing and able to manage the resource of time to take advantage of pivotal moments in the life of the group that warrant a special extended time of listening or prayer. A willingness to do this is an expression to the whole group that we truly care for one another and are committed to one another's good.

Pause again and ask the group to think more deeply about time management through the following questions:

- *Why is this difficult for some leaders?*
- *What are some practical ways you might equip a leader to embrace the responsibility of managing time for the sake of care for their group?*

After you have had some discussion around these questions, introduce the final principle of culminating the group in an ongoing lifestyle.

Principle 3: Culminate in an ongoing lifestyle.

Nothing grown in the field is ultimately meant to stay in the field; the field is only the beginning stage. In the same way, groups must understand that the “end game” is not what happens during the confines of the group, but rather what happens *between* group meetings.

Ask the group to think about this principle:

- *Why is it important to consider what happens between group meetings?*
- *Is that a challenge for you? Why or why not?*
- *How can what happens between group meetings impact what happens during the actual group meeting?*

After discussion, continue to explain this principle by emphasizing two applications that should be integrated into the leader’s mindset. Explain that the first application is pressing for practicality, then continue:

It’s possible for a group to have a very lively and enjoyable discussion and yet that group meeting was unsuccessful. For it to be successful, each member must leave the group knowing how the truth they encountered in God’s Word and through others changes them on a day-to-day basis. The “scorecard” for group success, then, must go beyond whether the group is enjoyable; it is instead measured in the day to day lives of the group members.

Ask the group to further consider:

- *What are some of the other “scorecards” we might gravitate toward as group leaders?*
- *How can you, as a leader, press for practicality as a part of the group environment?*

Explain that no group should end without some articulation of how the group members will think or live differently in the coming week. Furthermore, a group can begin with reviewing how those practical applications were implemented into individual’s lives over the last week. Emphasize the next application, which is working to form even smaller groups:

Groups are a subset of the larger church. However, to foster an environment in which gospel truth is lived out, these groups must get even smaller. That means members of the group must commit to communicating, socializing, and praying with each other between meetings. One of the clearest signs of success is that gospel conversations occur not just inside the constraints of the official meeting, but outside of them and between group meetings. These between times are what gives richness to the time the group meets together. Laying this expectation out early, by way of example from the leaders, is a key first step.

Invite the attendees to reexamine their initial outline of time allocation against these three principles. Ask them to outline a second group meeting, tweaking their initial outline with these principles in mind.

After several minutes, invite one or two people to share how their outline changed if it did at all. Then conclude the teaching time with some statement like this:

While it's true that field growth is not nearly as clean, efficient, or even measurable as factory growth, it's ultimately much healthier. This kind of group - one that is built on relationships, care, and forging an ongoing lifestyle - is how disciples are grown, and then grown again.