

Sabbath Home Fellowship Orientation



BETH TIKKUN
MESSIANIC FELLOWSHIP

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A Word on Discipleship

The three characteristics of a disciple of Yeshua:

#1

John 8:31 Yeshua therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, “If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine.”

Disciples _____ .

#2

John 13:35 “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Disciples _____ .

#3

John 15:8 “By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.”

Disciples _____ .

Being a disciple of Yeshua is not just *following* Him but *stopping following other things*.

♪ Kevin Geoffrey

Definitions & Responsibilities

Host

You set the tone for any gathering in your home. After all, it is *your* home and it is *your* household's personality that is revealed. And it is *your* hospitality that makes this gathering possible. You are walking in the steps of our father Abraham, who rushed to welcome angels into his tent, not realizing who they were. You are walking in the steps of our mother Sarah, who rushed to fulfill her guests' needs simply because they were her guests. You are the living embodiment of the *mezuzah* displayed on your door. You realize that your home is an outpost of God's kingdom.

Your responsibilities are:

- To keep your home free of spiritual pollution during the week so that it has a holy atmosphere
- To pray for those who will enter your home each Shabbat, knowing that they are seeking rest (when you may not have had enough, yourself)
- To model Sabbath peace as guests enter your home. If you are flustered and overwhelmed, your guests will feel like intruders
- To provide a neat and welcoming environment for God and his children to meet together
- To be vulnerable enough to not worry if your home is not perfect, or large, or as beautiful as those of others – remember, God lived in a tent for many years!
- To have Mary's attitude while doing Martha's work. (Luke 10:38-42)

Facilitator

You set the tone for all discussion that takes place during the gathering. *Your* personality, the *shalom* in *your* heart, and *your* love for God and His Word will permeate the meeting. *Your* love for each member will powerfully impact each one in ways you cannot imagine. You are the thread that weaves together the personalities, histories, and potential of each member. You have the glorious job of making yourself invisible so that people can see God ever more clearly through you.

Your responsibilities are:

- To pray daily for each member of your group
- To recognize the gifts each member has and seek ways to incorporate them in the meetings
- To begin the meeting on time (as best you can) and to transition it through its phases and maintain the pace of the times of prayer, sharing, discussion, and study

- To review the Boundary Stones as often as necessary until they are part of your groups DNA
- To pray for discernment so that you know your members in ways that they do not even know themselves
- To pause or interrupt the study should it be necessary to do so
- To never dominate the group, but to serve it in both humility and assertiveness
- To prevent discussion from wandering off course and fix it when it does
- To take a side those who need gentle correction

Host & Facilitator

You will grow to love your home fellowship group more than you could imagine. But you must never forget that, like Yeshua had to do for His disciples, you must let them go in due time. It is not your job to hold onto them but to help grow them and release them to be hosts and facilitators themselves! You cannot hold onto them, but you may certainly enjoy them while you have them.



Boundary Stones

*of the Beth Tikkun
Sabbath Home
Fellowships*

Discipleship (through prayer, study and fellowship) is the Primary Goal of this SHF. Anything we discuss should be a means to that end and that end alone. (In other words, if we are focused on that goal, no divisive conversations will take place.)

Defend this sanctuary in time from any and all destructive behaviors (such as condescension, gossiping, shaming, or cutting sarcasm) if you feel it building within yourself.

Prepare your hearts and minds in prayer before you arrive, and come with a spirit of expectation as we enter into God's perfect shalom.

Humbly worship, pray and minister to God and one another with the desire that the Ruach HaKodesh guide each of us in an orderly and honest way.

Give love and respect to each and every individual in the group, and know that you are loved and respected by each and every individual in the group.

Value each other—and your unique gifts and talents—equally, as God does, by giving each other more attention than you seek for yourself.

Respect the host's authority over who and what enters their home by always seeking their blessing before inviting a guest or initiating an activity.

Our door is open, and it is guarded by wise gatekeepers who will not hesitate to direct to leave those who operate in pride, the flesh, or darkness. Our sacred time and space are sustained and protected by this essential separation. Likewise, stand guard at the door of your hearts and minds, turning away anything that would destroy you.

Entrust one another to God's guidance and give each person room to grow by never pressuring others to accept your beliefs, convictions, or traditions.

Honor Adonai and one another by fiercely defending each other's ability to be vulnerable. Confidentiality is a requirement, and what is shared safely within the boundaries of our fellowship remains within them.

"You shall not move your neighbor's boundary mark..." (Deut. 19:14)

"Cursed is he who moves his neighbor's boundary mark."
And all the people say "Amen." (Deut. 27:17)

Getting Started

- Pray for the people on each contact card before you call or email them.
- Before calling, you may want to email the individual to introduce yourself and ask what the best time would be to call.
- Expect people to say NO. (Record the reason on the back of the contact card.)
- Expect people to say YES. (Make sure all of their contact information is correct.)
- Provide your contact information and the meeting time and date of your first meeting.
- Encourage them to arrive on time.
- Start your meetings on time. (Do not punish the prompt!)
- Identify potential leaders in your group and pray for them.
- Set a goal of expanding into two groups within 6–8 months.

Send to each member of your group:

- A copy of the **Boundary Stones** guidelines
- Information concerning food, if applicable
- A list of what to bring: Bible (not a phone or tablet), notebook, *Siddur* (if applicable), toys for children, etc.
- A list of other attendees

Xenos Christian Fellowship

Christian Ministry 3: Moving Into a Ministry Lifestyle

Week 1: A Lifestyle of Self-Giving Love – The Big Picture

Introduction

The purpose of this unit is to introduce you to a life of Christian ministry. “Ministry” means service, and the Christian life is to be a life of service to God and others. But before we begin to describe this way of life, we need to understand the main biblical dynamic that undergirds and motivates it.

The core dynamic is love. We are to pursue lives of radical love motivated by God’s radical love for us. We are to live a lifestyle that revolves around receiving God’s love for us and giving his love away to others. To the extent that you embrace this core dynamic, you will live a fruitful and fulfilling Christian life; to the extent that you don’t do this, you will live a sub-Christian life.

Many, many New Testament passages teach this way of life.¹ Let’s look at Jn. 13, where Jesus made this the final lesson that he modeled for his disciples.

- **THE SETTING (13:1,2):** Jesus knew that the time had come for him to be betrayed and arrested and unjustly condemned and beaten and crucified. He was having his last meal with his disciples, and Jewish tradition dictated that a household slave should wash the feet of the guest rabbi. If there was no household slave, tradition dictated that the least of his disciples should perform this task. But Luke tells us that Jesus’ disciples were all trying to avoid this task, so they began to argue which of them was the greatest.
- **JESUS’ “KNOWLEDGE” (13:3):** We will come back to this later . . .
- **JESUS’ SERVICE (13:4,5):** Jesus assumed the role of the household slave and washed his disciples’ feet. And when he got done, their feet were clean and all their filth was now on him.
- **JESUS’ CALL (13:12-16):** Now that he had gotten their attention, Jesus made sure they understood the lesson he was teaching them. Jesus is our Lord and Teacher, and at the heart of following him is the *call* to a lifestyle of washing others’ feet—humbly serving other people who don’t deserve to be served. This is the measure of true greatness.
- **JESUS’ PROMISE (13:17):** “Blessed” (*makarios*) means “truly happy.” It describes not so much an emotional feeling as a deep-seated awareness of how fortunate you are. How counter-intuitive! The way to true happiness is giving yourself away in service to others!

¹ See for example Jn. 4:34; 6:1-13; Mk. 8:34,35; Rom. 12:1-15:14.; 1 Tim. 1:4,5; 1 Jn. 4:7-21.

We will come back to this passage—but first I want to show you another place where Jesus teaches this same lesson in a more pointed way. In each of the four gospels, Jesus makes this same statement in slightly different ways—read Matt. 16:25*. The last half of this verse states the same positive lesson we learned in Jn. 13:17—you gain your life (attain true happiness) by losing your life for him (by following him into giving yourself away others). But Jesus also states this same lesson negatively in the first half of this verse. If you try to save your life (by serving yourself), you will lose your life (you will forfeit true happiness and instead experience emptiness and misery). Jesus says these two ways of life—self-serving or self-giving—are two totally different paths that lead to two totally different outcomes.

2 different ways of life: self-serving or self-giving

Which of these two paths are you following? One way you can tell is to see which questions you tend to focus on concerning the following areas:

As we think about the KEY PEOPLE in our lives:

The SELF-SERVING path focuses on: “Are they treating me the way I want to be treated?” We focus on this question because we believe that this is a necessary ingredient for our happiness.

The SELF-GIVING path enjoys being treated well, but it is focused on a very different question: “Am I learning to love the people that are in my life—especially those that don’t love me well?” (Lk. 6:27-38)

As we think about our FREE TIME that we have:

The SELF-SERVING path focuses on: “Do I have enough time for myself to do what I want to do? If not, how can I get more of this?”

The SELF-GIVING path also values free time and uses some of it for enjoyable pastimes—but it focuses another very different question: “How much of this time am I using to creatively serve others?” (Eph. 5:1,2,15,16)

As we think about GOODS & SERVICES:

The SELF-SERVING path focuses on: “Am I getting all or most of the goods and services that I desire?”

The SELF-GIVING path is able to enjoy goods and services. But it focuses on a very different basic question: “How can I become more financially generous—to relieve others’ suffering, help them develop, etc.?” (1 Tim. 6:17-19; Eph. 4:28)

As we think about our LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES (the above plus physical health; job conditions; etc.):

The SELF-SERVING path focuses on: “Are my circumstances going the way I want them to? Am I getting the breaks? How can I get them going my way?”

The SELF-GIVING path is thankful for pleasant circumstances, but it is more focused on a different question: “How can I develop as a servant in every circumstance?” (1 Cor. 10:33; Col. 3:17ff.)

The question is not: “Which set of questions do you ask?” As fallen people, we are “curved inward,” so we naturally ask the first set of questions. The real question is: “Do you have a category for the second set of questions—and are you increasingly making decisions based on your answers to them?” If the answer to these questions is “No,” then this tells you something. It tells you that (regardless of your formal beliefs) you believe that Jesus was *wrong* about this crucial issue. You believe that the SELF-SERVING life is the path to true happiness, and that the SELF-GIVING life is the path to disappointment and misery. But is this the case? Or is it that because we are fallen, “our hearts are in love with that which will ultimately destroy us”?²

2 different outcomes

If you reflect very much on your own life, then (like me) you have probably already spent enough time following the SELF-SERVING path to know that it doesn’t deliver what it promises. If you observe others over a long time, you will realize the same thing (EXAMPLES). But those who (even imperfectly) embrace the SELF-GIVING path testify that Jesus is right about where it leads.

The SELF-SERVING path leads to *increasing dissatisfaction and disappointment*. You may experience a temporary sense of happiness when you get some of the above (KID ON CHRISTMAS MORNING)—but it is fleeting, so you need more the next time to get the same lift. This leads to a deepening sense of discontent.

The SELF-GIVING path leads to *increasing contentment* with what you have in the above areas—because you know that’s not what makes your life full and meaningful anyway. You often experience short-term joy from giving to others—and you definitely experience a long-term deepening sense of satisfaction.

The SELF-SERVING path leads to *relational failure*. Those who seek happiness through goods and services don’t build close relationships, or they neglect them. Those who do build relationships expecting the other person to love them the right way never seem to find the right person. So they cycle through relationships (“SERIAL MONOGAMY”), or they settle for negotiated selfishness and parallel lives, or they become cynical about close relationships and live increasingly isolated lives.

The SELF-GIVING path leads to *greater relational success*. When even one person becomes committed to self-giving, it radically changes the dynamics. And when both people focus on how to give/serve (Rom. 12:10b) rather than on

² Michael Horton, *The Gospel-Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), p. 75.

expecting/demanding, the relationship ripens into something that, while not trouble-free, becomes more and more stable and enjoyable as the years go by.

The SELF-SERVING path leads to *a sense of slavery and victimhood*. Because your happiness depends on people treating you well and/or circumstances being favorable, you are at the mercy of these external factors that are beyond your control. This leads to a growing sense of helplessness and anger or fatalism.

The SELF-GIVING path leads to *a growing sense of freedom*. Because you can always move toward happiness by serving others, you feel less and less controlled by your circumstances or how others treat you. This leads to a growing sense of empowerment in the proper sense of the word.

The SELF-SERVING path leads to *increased emotional problems*. Because your happiness depends on things you can't control, this leads to a lot of *anxiety* about losing the things you have, lots of effort to control people and circumstances to get a sense of security, *anger* and *bitterness* when people or circumstances disappoint you. Over time, this often leads to *chronic depression* which worsens as people get older.

The SELF-GIVING path leads to *growing emotional health*. Because we are fallen, none of us is ever completely free from emotional problems. But we can experience growing peace and hope (vs. anxiety, control neuroses, bitterness and depression) as we live increasingly self-giving vs. self-serving lives. Lots of secular research bears this out.³

What is the outcome of the self-giving path? It is description of what Jesus calls being “blessed.” Now at this point you could make a big mistake. You could decide to pursue happiness as a goal in itself. You could set out to become a more self-giving person, checking your “happiness meter” regularly to see whether “it’s working.” Some people call this “enlightened self-interest,” it is really another form of SELF-SERVING that turns Jesus into a positive psychology life-coach. But Jesus is the Lord who calls us to not only turn away from a SELF-SERVING life, but to turn away from seeking happiness as the ultimate goal of our lives. He says that true happiness isn’t the goal; it’s the by-product of following him by receiving God’s love and giving it away to others. As Martin Luther said, you must become like a “tube opened downward”—by faith receiving God’s love into your soul, and then by faith passing his love through you to others⁴ (see also 1 Jn. 4:16-19). Like the “elusive butterfly,” if you seek happiness as your goal it will always elude you. But if you turn away from this goal and focus

³ See the “Positive Psychology” movement, including Peterson & Seligman, *Character Strengths & Virtues A Handbook & Classification* (New York: Oxford Press, 2004).

⁴ Nygren loosely quoting Luther: “‘For such love is not a natural art, nor grown in our garden.’ Christian love is not produced by us, but it has come to us from heaven. The subject of Christian love is not man, but God Himself, yet in such a way that the Divine love employs man as its instrument and organ. The Christian is set between God and his neighbor. In faith he receives God’s love, in love he passes it on to his neighbor. Christian love is, so to speak, the extension of God’s love. The Christian is not an independent center of power alongside of God. The love which he can give is only that which he has received from God. Christian love is through and

instead on receiving God's love and giving it to others, happiness will come to you.⁵

Receiving God's love

As John (Jesus' disciple) said in one of his letters, you have to "know and rely on" the love that God extends to you through his Son Jesus (1 Jn. 4:16). We cannot conjure up love within ourselves; we must receive love as a free and undeserved gift from God. We must know that God loves us and rely on his love in order to pass his love onto others.

This is exactly what Jesus did in Jn. 13. Read 13:4,5—how could he love his disciples like this in the midst of his situation? He could do this because he *knew* something. What did he know? Read 13:3. He knew who he was (he had come forth as God's Son), he knew where he was going (he was returning to his Father), and he knew what his resources were (the Father had given all things into his hands). It is because he knew this that he could rise from supper and wash his disciples' feet (13:4 "so"). And it is because he knew this that he could do what this foot-washing symbolized—dying on the cross to take the filth of our sins onto himself.

And because Jesus served us in this way, we can now know that God loves us in the same way that he loved Jesus. We can know who we are (God's adopted sons and daughters whom he approves in spite of our sins). We can know where we are going (to eternal life in God's kingdom even though we deserve to go to hell). And we can know what our resources are (Jesus' full authority is with us to protect us and to guide us and to empower us in spite of our weakness).

Do you know this? This knowledge *begins* by receiving Christ as your Savior. But you need to *continue* to grow in your understanding and trust in God's love. You have to focus on God's love for you like Jesus did in Jn. 13. Day by day and situation by situation, you have to personally look up to God and affirm with him that because of what Jesus did for you, you know who you are, you know where you are going, and you know what resources you have.

through a Divine work . . . The real subject of Christian love is not man, but God Himself . . . In relation to God and his neighbor, the Christian can be likened to a tube, which by faith is open upwards, and by love downwards. All that a Christian possesses he has received from God, from the Divine love; and all that he possesses he passes on in love to his neighbor. He has nothing of his own to give. He is merely the tube, the channel, through which God's love flows . . . The stream of love must be directed downwards . . . From above His love comes down to us, and it must pass on through us to our neighbor." Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), pp. 733-736.

⁵ "Today's (Americans live in) a cultural climate that preaches the self as the center of a life. But . . . fulfillment is a byproduct of how people engage their tasks, and can't be pursued directly. Most of us are egotistical and most are self-concerned most of the time, but it's nonetheless true that life comes to a point only in those moments when the self dissolves into some task. The purpose in life is not to find yourself. It's to lose yourself." David Brooks, "It's Not About You," *The New York Times*, May 31, 2011.

Giving God's love away

And then you have choose by faith to give God's love away to others (1 Jn. 4:11). Just as Jesus "washed" because he "knew," so must we choose to act on our knowledge of God's love by "washing others' feet" in whatever practical expression of love is needed. This means that:

You can't *hoard* God's love for yourself. If you try to hoard it, it goes stale inside of you and you will wind up going back to the SELF-SERVING path. You have to trust that he will keep on loving you, and the main way that you trust this is by giving it away to others. You have to give it away *daily* to others in order for it to stay fresh in your soul.

You can't wait until you *feel* God's love before you pass it on to others. You have to trust his love and "get up and wash the feet" of those whom God puts in your path even when you don't feel his love. He will engineer specific situations where you feel empty, and call on you to give yourself away (as we'll see). As you do this, you will freshly experience God's love, and your capacity to experience his love will gradually increase.

You can't *dabble* in this way of life, trying it once in a while and insisting on immediate results that meet your requirements. You have to trust God's promise and sell out to this as a way of life. This is what leads to increasing confidence and satisfaction over the course of your life.

Jesus is saying: "You know I am real and you know that I love you—I have proved this to you. And no matter what happens, I accept you and promise you eternal life in my kingdom. But I have a role for you in my mission, a special role in showing and sharing my love with people I love. And I want you to abandon your life to me and my role for you. I want you to lay down control of your life and give control to me. I want you to make following me the #1 priority of your daily life from now on. I know you won't do this perfectly, and I'll restore you when you stumble—but I want your whole life (BODY; MIND; TALENTS; MONEY; POSSESSIONS; PLANS; RELATIONSHIPS; etc.). I want you to know up front that this decision will result in some pain and suffering (e.g., FLAK FROM FAMILY & FRIENDS; ALTERED PLANS FOR YOUR TALENTS; GIVE UP UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS; PAINFUL TRAINING LESSONS). I make no apologies for this, because I am the Messiah and it is a privilege to have a role in my mission, and to suffer for it. When you suffer in my service, I will be with you to comfort and strengthen you, and I promise you that you will never regret making this decision, that it will be more than worth it in the long run. What do you say? Will you give your whole life to me and to my mission?"

[You may continue this study at:

<https://www.dwellcc.org/classes/christian-ministry-3>

and:

<https://www.dwellcc.org/GetFile.ashx?guid=999E8937-4E3A-4A64-8BF7-33A8ED57E43C>]

Families

(Used by permission – Xenos Christian Fellowship/Dwell Community Church)

“As a father who, with my wife, have raised three kids to adulthood, I have found that home church presented no significant barrier to being a good parent. All of my kids are well adjusted, love the Lord, and look back at their experiences with home churches with happiness. Indeed, they are all leading home churches or cells of their own today.” - Dennis McCallum, Lead Pastor

Nobody knows what the early church did with kids during their meetings. During the Jesus Movement, many groups favored holding meetings with the kids mixed into the adult group. Naturally, such meetings were noisy, disorderly, and not real popular with adults or especially with kids.

While many churches feel attracted to the notion of home churches, this question of what to do with kids often becomes a deal breaker.

To help families with children Xenos leaders initiated a move away from home churches at one point in our history. We suggested families go to smaller groups, more like cells in other churches, and perhaps meeting every other week. Over thirty small groups were formed at that time, and the smaller format served well for groups who needed it.

But surprisingly, as time has gone on, we have seen most of our small groups revert back into home churches. Today, only a handful of small groups are left. The reason seems to be that people who have experienced both, prefer the atmosphere of a home church to that of a small group. But home groups with many children have to be creative and flexible in how they handle the challenge. We've seen a number of options:

- Some groups have another house near the one in which they meet, where some parents will care for and even teach the kids. The parents take turns handling the children's house.
- Some groups stay small enough to keep the number of children manageable. Then they have kids brought to the house where the home church meeting is, and they go to a special room or basement recreation area during the meeting.

- Some groups prefer to get baby sitters during home church, or drop kids off at the in-laws. Those groups generally meet only every other week. During the off week for a home church, such groups have cell groups—the women's cell at the home of one of the mothers, where others bring kids as well, and the men's cell at one of the dad's home. Very young kids usually go to bed before the cell group begins and couldn't care less that mom or dad are having a meeting downstairs. We have found that kids that grow up used to sleeping at other's houses for the sake of Christian meetings are unharmed by the experience. In fact we prefer that our kids have the flexibility to sleep in other places than their own bedrooms, and we like the idea that they are learning to prioritize Christian fellowship over personal comfort.
- Some home churches have a cooperative arrangement where parents who meet one night watch the kids of parents who meet on a different night. Those parents return the favor on the other night. Kids typically look forward to home church night as their favorite night—the night when they get to stay over with their friends!
- Regardless how they handle their own kids, most home churches have at least some kids in the house on home church night. Non Christian guests are encouraged to bring their kids to the meeting, where they are cared for by the volunteers for that evening. Kids learn that they will often have a chance to meet new kids and have a ministry of their own as they welcome their new friends and help to reach the whole family.
- As kids get older, most families who have a teenage kid have the oldest watch the younger kids on home church night. Many teenagers make their incomes watching kids for other families.

However we do it, we know that God wouldn't have called on us to build body life if it weren't possible to do so while being good parents. Home churches become a community where children make friends and share outings, travel, and weekend evenings. Far from harming families, we find that families well-rooted in a home church are stable and healthy. Xenos even went to step further and formed a school system which begins its day at 9:00 instead of 7:30 like some of the city schools in our area. That becomes a big help to families who are out serving others on school nights.

Eleven Reasons Why Home Fellowship Groups Usually Fail

By Dennis McCallum

(Used by Permission – Xenos Christian Fellowship/Dwell Community Church)

The need for effective small-group ministry is implied in the New Testament. If the local church is to develop the spiritual gifts of its members, mobilize the terrific power of the Holy Spirit to work through a trained and experienced laity and facilitate true relationship-based community, it will need to organize smaller groups.

Dwell Community Church, an independent fellowship in Columbus, Ohio, has centered around lay-led home church ministry since beginning in 1970. Using this focus, Dwell has grown from a handful to roughly 5,000 today. Home churches have also resulted in good morale among the hundreds of lay leaders, all graduates of a two-year graded training course.

Because of this success, pastors often call Dwell staff to consult regarding how to establish or manage small-group lay ministry in their own churches.

Through these consultations, we have discovered that small-group ministries are not a novel idea at all. In fact, most evangelical churches have tried to establish a network of small groups at one time or another. Yet most of these efforts are disappointing to some degree. Leaders often ask us, “What have we been doing wrong?”

Problems sometimes include a lack of participation and interest from members. Sometimes a minority struggles along, unwilling to admit failure in the program and developing a “faithful remnant” theology which justifies, on theological grounds, the lack of growth and participation by others. Church division is also a possibility, although we have not seen very many cases where this occurred.

We think these frequent failures are not the result of divine opposition to the idea of small groups or because, “our kind of people aren’t right for this sort of thing.” Instead, we think there are a number of good theological and practical reasons why these groups usually fail.

1. They are often not based on New Testament theory

Both New Testament example and principle argue for home-sized groups as a key feature of the local church. In the area of biblical example, Acts 2:46 states that the Jerusalem church met “in the temple” and “from house to house.” Concerning the meetings in the Temple, we know that Solomon’s portico was probably quite large and could have accommodated even the several

thousands that were part of the Jerusalem church. Thus, in Jerusalem, they held both large and small meetings.

Clearly, they did not feel the large meetings were enough by themselves. It should be obvious that an impersonal atmosphere will result if we only hold only very large meetings. The local church should encourage a network of close relationships because real community must be based on them. Smaller formats such as those described in this passage would be ideal for fostering them.

In another case, Paul reminded the Ephesian elders that he had exhorted them both “publicly and from house to house” (Acts 20:20). In this passage, “publicly” probably refers to the school room of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9). But Paul did not limit his speaking ministry to the large meeting place, even though one was available. He also worked “from house to house.”

Paul refers to several home churches in the city of Rome (Romans 16:4, 10, 11, 14, 15). In 1 Corinthians 14:35, he mentions “churches” in the plural, after having already referred to “the church of God which is at Corinth” (1 Corinthians 1:2).

It seems clear from these and other references that operating a cluster of home churches in each city was common practice. These home groups continued to work together under the same elders. It is probably significant that no church buildings have been found from the earliest period of the church (33 to 150 A.D.), and even those from the second century were homes with a large room built in.

Every church with a building faces the challenge of resisting people’s tendency to view the building as the church. At Dwell, we have refused to build or to expand our building until we see a high degree of involvement in home groups. Otherwise, by expanding the building, we would only worsen the problem of superficial involvement. Currently, Dwell elders desire to see 100 percent involvement in home groups. At times, we have even exceeded that goal, having higher attendance at home groups than at our big meetings.

New Testament principles surrounding body life and spiritual gifts cannot be effectively practiced in a large group setting. Real spiritual ministry is the business of every member in the local church (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12, 14; Ephesians 4:11-16; Colossians 2:19). The church must provide smaller settings where relationships can grow between members so they will be able to discover each other’s needs. Only then will they be able to meet those needs on an individual level.

Unfortunately, when churches attempt to initiate a small-group ministry, they sometimes fail to teach and persuade their people that the purpose of the meeting is to practice these biblical principles. The result is sometimes a wrong impression on the part of most participants. Members often feel that the meeting is primarily intended as a social gathering, a support group or a place where “my needs can be met,” rather than “a place where I can develop a ministry.”

The first order of business in beginning this kind of ministry is to launch a teaching offensive in the church. The goal would be to establish an understanding and a vision of the New Testament model and the spiritual goals associated with lay mobilization in the minds of the participants.

2. The wrong criteria are sometimes followed for the selection of leaders

The Bible teaches that spiritual criteria must be used to select leaders. The [qualifications of a deacon](#) (1 Timothy 3:8-13) would serve well for the initial selection of leaders of home fellowship groups. Too often, however, the church will designate men and women for leadership on the basis of secular abilities, job status, levels of financial giving or seniority in the church. The result is usually a meeting that is not very spiritually edifying or appealing.

After leaders have been selected on the basis of character and knowledge, they should also be evaluated on the basis of actual function, or role. When Jesus says, “my sheep hear my voice” (John 10:27), he is giving us a basic way to recognize a good shepherd. A Christian’s leadership cannot be authenticated until someone is willing to follow him or her.

In many of our churches, it may be very difficult to determine our authentic leaders. This is because they have not had ample opportunity to try their hand at leadership. In these cases, we will have to pick leaders on the basis of the best criteria possible. Later, when lay-led groups are in place, it should be possible to evaluate the effectiveness of the work done by the more committed members of the group. Other things being equal, the more effective workers should be the first to be promoted.

3. Frequently, insufficient authority is given to the leaders

If the home fellowship is to be fashioned after the biblical examples, then group leaders should be allowed to run them the way the leaders of the New Testament house churches ran theirs. Since the New Testament instructs readers to respect their leaders and to follow their lead in the running of the home church, we can assume those leaders had many decisions delegated to them (1 Corinthians 16:16; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:14).

Sometimes churches impose a structure upon the small group that is too restrictive. This structure may include a preplanned curriculum for study and a long list of policy restrictions. The effect is usually to stifle initiative and sap motivation. The leaders realize very quickly that they are functioning as agents for the existing leadership of the church, but that they themselves are leaders in name only. When the church requires the home group leaders to check in on virtually all decisions, it clearly suggests that they are incompetent to make their own. Sometimes they are incompetent, but the church must see the challenge in this, rather than accepting the status quo.

Similarly, preplanned curriculum often scripts the meeting and requires little creativity or expertise on the part of group leaders. Indeed, the main reason for scripting the meeting is

usually the feeling that group leaders have no expertise of their own. Such lack of expertise points in turn to a weak equipping ministry in the church. Failure to train leaders to a sophisticated level results in leaders who must be led by the hand at all times. When this happens, leaders (often highly competent and educated at their secular jobs) realize that anyone could follow the simple script, and consequently, they are not challenged. They lose interest in leading, and begin to call on the leadership to be passed around the group. They fail to take possession of the role of home group leader as a worthwhile life goal.

We believe churches are often too impatient when trying to move from a program-based model to a home group model of church life, and therefore they grossly underestimate the level of training and equipping needed to develop effective leaders. Impatience may also signal lack of commitment, because in-depth equipping is expensive in both dollars and man-hours for the church's leaders. (See reason No. 7).

We don't believe the central leadership of the church should forsake all control over the actions of home fellowship leaders, because lay leaders are usually not as well trained as seminary graduates, or as experienced as the church's top leadership. Therefore, it is necessary to carefully weigh which areas are left to the discretion of the home leaders, and which areas need to be cleared with the higher authority of the church. The point in making this decision is to arrive at a balance that will prevent serious errors from occurring (even though we never have a guarantee that all problems can be prevented), while delegating real decision-making authority to the home fellowship leaders.

4. The groups may have an unhealthy inward-focus

Small groups are often set up with the ultimate goal of fellowship or personal support rather than [evangelism or mission](#). While quality fellowship and support are rewards of small-group ministry, it is an inadequate basis. If we have only fellowship as our goal, the group is corporately self-focused. Thus, it's no surprise that such groups are prone to division and discontent. This is because outreach and mission are the natural context within which fellowship should occur.

When a group of people occupy themselves with each other to the exclusion of the outside world, discontent is sure to follow. We should be unwilling to consider the option of handling outreach at the large meeting and limiting small groups to a fellowship role. The group may not engage in outreach at its weekly meeting, but they have to work together and pray together on some shared mission.

Acts 2:46 says that the Jerusalem church was “breaking bread from house to house” but does not mention evangelism. However, this is a moot point, since the passage does not mention where evangelism did occur. On the other hand, in 1 Corinthians 14:24, 26 and 34, Paul clearly contemplates “unbelievers” entering an interactive meeting — apparently a home church.

5. There is often no provision for church discipline within the small group

In cases where home fellowships are set up with no provision for church discipline, a very distressing and familiar pattern emerges. Some people are attracted to small groups for the wrong reasons. There are those who come to exploit others, or simply to use the group to become the center of attention.

The impact of such people is greater in a small group than it would be in a large meeting. As a result, the whole character of the group can be altered to such an extent that it becomes difficult to attract new people, or even to hold the interest and loyalty of the productive members.

The New Testament provides a solution to this kind of situation. Those members who are willing to damage others or themselves are to be confronted in love about their attitude and actions (1 Thessalonians 5:14; Matthew 18:15). If they are not responsive, a legitimate amount of pressure can be applied — even to the point of removing them from the group.

According to the Bible, this kind of discipline in love should be normative ([I Corinthians 5](#)). The application of discipline should be gracious and suited to the needs of the individual and the group. In order to prevent abuses or legalism, the eldership should be consulted in cases where an ultimatum may be issued.

Churches worry about angering people if they practice discipline. This concern is legitimate. But while we will anger some by exercising discipline, we endanger all by failing to exercise it. Worst of all, those being disciplined miss out on one of the important provisions for growth in the New Testament.

Small-group attendance is a privilege in the church. Participation should have conditions attached, such as no antisocial or disruptive behavior. Otherwise, the small groups become soft, unruly and unappealing.

6. All groups may be the same, rather than diversified and matched to their members

For some reason, churches generally devise and execute a plan for small groups that features only one kind of group. We did this, too. But not anymore! Now we see that family-aged people need a different type of group than students or singles, etc.

Why should a large church (or even a small one) have only one type of group? Creativity on the part of leaders and planners could result in a number of models featuring different sizes, different formats, different purposes and different commitment levels. Every church should be different.

7. There may be no adequate equipping offered to would-be leaders

The Bible does not allow the local church the option of telling its people to go away for their training. According to Ephesians 4:11-12, it is the responsibility of the leadership of the local church to provide quality training in Christian work (“the work of service”) to its own people. When the leadership of a church decides not to have a small-group ministry because its “laymen” are too ignorant, this is not an excuse — it is an admission of guilt!

For many churches, the first step toward a successful home fellowship ministry would be to establish a full [year-long course](#) of in-depth theological and practical ministry training for the proposed leadership. We find that most churches try to get by with a five- or 10-week training series, which is inadequate for sophisticated leadership responsibilities. People will take longer training courses if they can break up the training into modules, and if they view taking these classes as fun. This is why we need to put our best communicators and leaders in as teachers in this training.

If a church already has an adequate supply of leaders who have some biblical knowledge, it would be preferable to hold this training while small groups are in progress, so they can immediately use the knowledge they learn. This prevents the accumulation of “dead knowledge” and also avoids creating the impression that Christian work is more difficult than it really is.

At the same time, we should be clear that completing the training course will not necessarily result in an assignment as a home group leader. That decision will have to also depend on other considerations such as character development and a record of self-sacrificing service to others.

Finally, aside from classroom training, each home group should develop its own program of personal discipleship and ministry training (Matthew 28:18-19; 1 Timothy 2:2). The classes should be viewed as supplemental to the grassroots discipleship practiced at the home group level.

8. The church may set no multiplication goals, and may have no good plan for multiplying home groups

In many cases, a home fellowship’s existence is viewed as an end in itself. As mentioned earlier, this lack of mission-mindedness has a negative effect. In order for groups to be spiritually healthy, they need a purpose greater than themselves. On the other hand, good small groups tend to grow. Thus, when a house fills up with people, much of the interactive character of the group is lost. Outreach tends to dwindle because there is no room for new people.

In cases like this, it is natural to divide the group in order to preserve the small size of the group, while at the same time reaching more people.

Unless the church propagates a vision and a plan for planting new groups — which encourage outreach, discipleship and equipping — home fellowships tend to resist multiplication. The status quo is always more comfortable than the change and risk that come with growth.

We should establish ground rules that help to insure success for both newly planted groups, with a minimum of disruption to the relationships that have been developed. Otherwise, the system will tend to stifle initiative and punish success. In other words, the view of the leaders might well be, “The faster our group grows, the sooner we get to part ways with the close friends we have made so far.”

Good planning should make it possible for close friends to stay together most of the time, thus minimizing the disruption involved in planting new groups.

9. Small groups are sometimes viewed as peripheral rather than central to the life of the church

In some churches, the large worship meeting and teaching meetings are viewed as essential, but the home group is considered an option — helpful to some, but not necessarily normative for healthy involvement in the local church.

As pointed out earlier, this view ignores biblical teaching that the local body depends on the individual function of each and every member (Ephesians 4:15-16). We need to resist the temptation to dilute this teaching — for instance, teaching that giving money on Sunday or serving as an usher could fulfill the intent of this passage. If we allow this kind of superficial understanding of church life to predominate, there will be no strong motivation to exercise real spiritual gifts or to make small-group ministry succeed.

If the church fails to establish a vision for full involvement in the minds of its members, the result will likely be a very poor level of participation in the home fellowship program. Often, only those with little to do will spend the time it takes to become meaningfully involved. To obtain the help of our most gifted members, we will need to teach that involvement in home mission and fellowship is an exciting opportunity to finally realize the full extent of normal Christian experience.

The leadership in the local church must cultivate a consensus to place appropriate emphasis on this kind of ministry. Such a mentality can be created without resorting to legalism. The leadership must truly believe in the concept themselves, and be willing to teach and practice it in their own lives.

10. They are sometimes viewed as a threat by the pastor(s) of the church.

Pastors might fear home groups for several reasons. False teaching is always a danger, but this is why the Bible teaches the need for “overseers” or elders. The elders should also train the

workforce so that it will be able to teach sound doctrine. Pastors also worry that a small-group network may not be effective, thus leading to lower morale in the church. The record of home fellowships in recent years has been mixed and somewhat disappointing. But we can see from this list some reasons why.

Some leaders may prefer the control that they have when they are the only leaders in the church. This feeling is understandable, especially when a pastor is already having trouble controlling the situation in the church. However, we need to see at this point, that a quality small-group ministry would not increase the workload of the pastor in the long run. The key to maintaining quality ministry even for a growing church is to delegate work to other members. Pastors who succeed in establishing a successful and vital small-group network do not see their own leadership eroded at all.

The man or woman of God must pass judgment on his or her own attitude, admitting that a willingness to inhibit others' ministry for the sake of establishing his or her own is most censurable. The fact that we may feel threatened in our position in the church is no excuse! We have been placed where we are in order to facilitate others' ministry, not to inhibit it.

11. Home groups are often introduced in a programmatic, not a natural way.

One church after another has reported that they formed a plan, presented it to the church, started a dozen home groups and got dismal results or even strong resistance from the congregation. We suggest not approaching home groups this way, because it is unnatural. Home groups should grow in an organic way, not be thrown into existence through a massive program. Instead, the best way to introduce home groups in our opinion is:

- Identify a handful of people who understand and hunger for the vision of home fellowship. This could take some time, as leaders may have to persuade some that this approach is biblical and exciting.
- Once that group is identified, the leaders of the church should begin meeting with them in the first home group. Usually, a single home group is preferable, as the future opinion leaders in the church need to get on the same page about what a home group is and how it works. Plead with the senior pastor to be a part of this group. Planning meetings are not the answer here. Only meeting together and trying different formats and approaches will lead to the consensus you need.

Group members should be encouraged to share with non-members their experiences and vision for these groups. If the group is full and others are unable to join, their frustration will actually serve as motivation later when more groups are available. Calling on people to wait will not hurt the project, especially if you make it clear that you are eager to work them in as soon as possible. Keep a waiting list.

- During this first year, the leaders should devise and implement a series of courses for future home group leaders. People waiting to join a home group should be urged to take

advantage of the classes while they wait. If you have a lengthy waiting list, explain that those who take classes will be the first to qualify for participation in home groups.

During this period, the church should come to realize that participation in home groups is not a duty or an added burden, but a privilege.

- When the first group is full and people are ready (this could take months or a year or two), the group should divide and plant another group or groups. Then others can be again invited to join.
- We believe the natural pattern for adding members to existing groups is personal relationships, not geography. Churches that base home groups on geography usually find that the groups lack cohesion because people don't know each other. Allow people to invite their friends and relatives to their own group, regardless of where they live.
- At first, the leadership may want to supervise additions to home groups. Later this will be unnecessary. The point is to try to assure success by getting the best people into home groups in a promising mix. Avoid filling groups with only hard cases.
- Using a system of collegiate review, allow and encourage groups to plant other groups when they are ready. Group leaders should participate in some type of oversight system. Avoid pressuring groups to move too fast, but also refuse to accept a mentality that says, "We're satisfied staying the way we are."
- Through multiplication of home groups, you can see large numbers of groups formed within a few years. The larger congregation will naturally want to participate in something they hear others are enjoying. Have members of successful groups share their testimonies at your worship service and elsewhere. Build excitement gradually for the project. Give people a sense that they have arrived once they get to join a home group.

The lesson learned at Dwell is that the New Testament model is not only theologically preferable — it is also capable of yielding New Testament results! (Used by permission.)