

Refreshing the Vision for Discipleship Groups

The Vision for Discipleship Groups

The idea of small, local groups of church members meeting together during the week to experience growth, community and servanthood was a key element of the Cedar Ridge vision. The vision statement reads: "Imagine that community scattered throughout the region around Washington, Baltimore and beyond working as agents of love, peace and hope wherever they are; serving our neighbors, caring for the poor, helping the oppressed."

The 2007 document *A "Semi-Vision" for Community at Cedar Ridge* reads: "Cedar Ridge could become a church comprised of small groups of people, in various shapes and sizes. A few things are done centrally with high level of intention and as part of the scope towards helping people live more in step with each other in small communities as a means to nurturing their journey as disciples."

From the visioning process onwards, there has been a tension between centralized and de-centralized activities. In response to the many demands on people's time from a plethora of churchwide activities, the focus during or soon after the visioning process shifted to Sundays being "the" day for centralized activities, and leaving the rest of the week for local groups and initiatives. Centralized activities became defined as Sunday service, farm/property and Guatemala. Other activities were intended to be local.

The hope was that groups—in addition to experiencing community together—would develop their own distinct missional focus, particularly based on servanthood. (Some groups might focus on an issue such as homelessness, others on community-based projects in their immediate vicinity, etc.) Groups would also provide pastoral care to members, and would be venues to develop "disciple-making leaders."

Superimposed on this were three discipleship series per year as "growth cycles" for the groups (and therefore the church as a whole). I.e., the intention was that groups existed independently of the series, but took on the series for 18 weeks per year, and kept their distinct focus for the remaining 34 weeks of the year. Additional growth opportunities would be available through workshops and retreats.

The graphic below predates the 2006 visioning process, but encapsulates the link between the hope for small groups and the Cedar Ridge mission statement.



Current Reality

The hope for small groups has not been fully realized. Only around 120 or so people are officially members of groups, and attendance fluctuates considerably. For various reasons, little energy has gone into building the capacity of group leaders over the years, and there are no established criteria for appointing group leaders, nor is there orientation and training for new leaders. Most groups only meet during a discipleship series, rather than weekly throughout the year. Although hard to assess in any objective way, groups seem to be generally strong at caring for their members and creating a sense of community, but are (arguably) less successful at catalyzing and supporting personal transformation. Few groups regularly engage in servanthood together.

Some reasons that help explain the gap between expectations and reality are as follows:

- 1) Literature¹ claims that at best only about 30% of members at churches offering small groups will regularly attend groups. (If this is true, we are doing well!) Different people connect in different ways. There is the potential for more energy and dynamism in larger groups, and more intimacy in groups of two or three people.
- 2) Many people already have small groups of friends that provide community through work or social connections, or through their involvement in a service- or advocacy-related cause. Similarly, many people are already engaged in service that is unrelated to their attendance at Cedar Ridge. This creates the feeling for some people that they do not really need to experience community or servanthood through Cedar Ridge.
- 3) You do not get to choose your group members. Groups that only include friends who enjoy each other's company and who feel comfortable being honest and accountable with one another are likely to experience greater group cohesion and commitment. But groups generally include (and should include!) people who other group members find difficult, awkward or "needy," or with whom they do not naturally "click."
- 4) Geography is only one dimension: most of us drive an hour to work, and 20 minutes or more for church, shopping, entertainment, etc. We pass pleasantries with neighbors but do not really live locally. The causes we care most passionately about are rarely in our backyards. But our affinities with people who do not live close to us are strained by the practicalities of meeting due to work schedules, family commitments, etc.

The Rationale for Groups

The issue is not really about groups, but about how we can most effectively help people experience discipleship through growth, community and servanthood. While many of us may experience these three aspects of discipleship outside of Cedar Ridge, it is important that we also engage collectively in growth, community and servanthood since our mission (our reason for existing) is to be and make disciples in authentic community for the good of the world. We not only practice discipleship together in these three ways, but invite others into this shared journey of following Jesus.

However, participating in a small group is not essential for discipleship. Servanthood can be practiced through engagement with churchwide initiatives such as Guatemala, the farm, and Days of Service. For

¹ Meyers, J. (2003). *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups*. Zondervan.

growth and community, people need honest, accountable relationships; but these can form one-on-one, or amongst groups of close friends. Communicating that if people really want to get to know us, or really want to understand the series content, they should join a group may create a feeling of different classes of belonging—with those not in groups therefore not fully part of Cedar Ridge. In reality, there is not a clear correlation between commitment and engagement on one hand, and active membership in a small group on the other.

Looking at Jesus' model of discipleship, people can follow and learn as part of "the crowd," in a small group, or as part of an intimate group of close friends. Personality, time availability, life-stage, current stage in our spiritual journey, and a whole host of other reasons are likely to determine through which combination of these ways people choose to connect.

Communication might therefore be better framed as:

- We are committed to being and making disciples
- We do this through growth, community and servanthood
- There are a wide range of ways to experience growth, community and servanthood open to you
- Many of us have found small groups to be an effective means of experiencing growth, community and servanthood

The Way Forward

The Pastoral Team considered a range of options for groups—from strongly encouraging everyone to become a member of a discipleship group, to dropping discipleship series altogether and having a hands-off approach to small groups. The consensus was that we should do the following:

- Actively encourage a diversity of small groups
- Encourage groups to participate in periodic "growth cycles"
- Design growth cycles that challenge people to action
- Strengthen discipleship options for people not in a small group
- Take seriously our responsibility for group leaders and members

Actively encourage a diversity of small groups

Get rid of the name discipleship groups, and just talk about small groups. Support, validate and actively encourage a range of groups—co-creators, book groups, service-project based groups, women's/men's groups, youth groups, prayer groups, discussion groups, community-based groups, etc. Define the parameters and expectations for small groups at Cedar Ridge and put out a call to church members for suggestions in writing of groups they would want to lead, or at least help develop. Have a discernment process for the ideas submitted, including a meeting with those submitting the ideas to collaboratively decide whether the group should be launched. Although we could take a more organic approach to group formation, an official process will help increase our confidence when advertising and recommending people to the groups that they are purposeful and represent our community's values.

While most existing discipleship groups are expected to continue to meet, this process will legitimize a variety of ways of experiencing growth, community and servanthood. It will also allow people to create community around a common purpose, interest or other affinity. However, such small groups are likely to be more homogeneous than our current discipleship groups in terms of age, gender and/or personality type—contrary to our vision for integrated community. It will therefore be important to encourage people not to solely coalesce or identify themselves in these ways, but to also engage in

more integrated groups and activities. For example, it may be advisable for some groups to have a defined duration.

Encourage groups to participate in periodic “growth cycles”

Encourage small groups to engage with specific material for two or three growth cycles (approximately 12 or 18 weeks) a year. In order for this to be a realistic expectation, each group leader will need to have a trusting relationship with a pastoral team member or other leader in our community who regularly checks in with them and ensures the ongoing vision-alignment of the group.

If certain groups feel unable to engage with the material, where appropriate, either offer support by way of a temporary facilitator to guide them through the material, or encourage them not to meet during those growth cycles to free up members’ time to join another group that is engaging with the material.

Design growth cycles that challenge people to action

Current discipleship materials focus on questions based on the Sunday message, close with time spent in prayer, and include practices for the week. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these practices often get forgotten due to the busyness of everyday life.

For some growth cycles, rebalance these elements—study/discussion, prayer, practice, reflection—across the series to have a few weeks of discussion and prayer, followed by several weeks of putting learning into practice, culminating in a week or two of reflection. Offer a number of “challenges” to groups, (e.g., giving things away, practicing intentional silence, undertaking a racial reconciliation initiative, abstaining from unhealthy habits and engaging in healthy ones, developing a service project, etc.), or encourage groups to design their own.²

A more practice-based approach may provide a “shot in the arm” to rejuvenate groups where attendance and engagement is flagging; and it more accurately reflects our understanding of discipleship as something lived out, rather than something merely discussed. It may also attract more action-oriented or contemplative people who have not been excited by the idea of discussion-based groups, and may build a stronger sense of community within groups through shared experiences.

Strengthen discipleship options for people not in a small group

Provide other discipleship opportunities for those not in groups including growth-focused workshops, extended times of worship, and temporary groups or roundtable discussions related to life stages. Encourage various forms of community, such as pancake dinners, potlucks, local social events, and service projects followed by a meal together. Continue to provide a range of ways to practice servanthood. This will allow people to mix with a wide selection of Cedar Ridge members and attenders, potentially helping to break down cliques and barriers (generational, racial, etc.). It will also provide venues at which people can initiate friendships that could develop into honest, accountable relationships.

² Ideas for such challenges can be found in Scandrette, M. (2011). *Practicing the Way of Jesus: Life Together in the Kingdom of Love*. InterVarsity Press.

People should be challenged to think about how and where they are experiencing growth, community and servanthood through their engagement with Cedar Ridge. This may not necessarily include regular participation in a small group, but attendance at events, getting together with friends, and other interactions—in addition to time spent alone—should provide all three of these components of discipleship.

Take seriously our responsibility for group leaders and members

While not trying to impose a one-size-fits-all model on small groups, we still recognize the need for oversight of groups and training and support to group leaders.

- **Define groups**—Articulate the Cedar Ridge approach to small groups—including our philosophy of healthy groups; contribution to our vision through growth, community and servanthood; expectations of groups; and criteria for group leaders.
- **Group purpose**—Ask group leaders to articulate the purpose of the group and its connection to discipleship. Annually review the ongoing relevance of the group with leaders, help them to set goals, and assess the need for additional support.
- **Inspire leaders**—Most current discipleship leaders see themselves as discussion facilitators, with some responsibility for ensuring members are cared for. As appropriate (given the diversity of groups), challenge leaders to increasingly see themselves as having an important role to play in encouraging spiritual growth among their members.
- **Equip leaders**—The quarterly group leaders meetings should be used to provide training in specific areas such as:
 - The need to invest in members, and practical ways to do this
 - How to intentionally promote growth, community and service
 - How to reach out beyond the group and invite others in
 - How to encourage mutual accountability among members
- **Support**—Assign each group leader to an appropriate pastoral team member or other leader in our community, according to relevance and availability. This should be a meaningful, supportive and mutually accountable relationship. Develop guidelines to promote this oversight.