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What are the Traits for Foundational Fellowship – Part II

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Last month we discussed the first three traits for the foundation of fellowship in your small group. This month we continue looking at fellowship as a foundation to build the other biblical purposes in your group. Do your small groups possess these four qualities?

Is courtesy happening in your groups? What is courtesy? As an action it is something done out of politeness or consideration for another person. We are taught this in kindergarten, but often lose this trait as we become adults. Love, listening, and respect are evidence that courtesy is being fostered in your groups. The ultimate act of courtesy is graciously allowing someone to express an opinion different than yours without feeling the need to react or feeling threatened by their actions or beliefs. This doesn't mean you agree with them, just that you don't feel the need to force your opinion upon them. Sometimes people say things to get a reaction or see if you will truly love them. Again, I want to stress, being courteous doesn't mean you change your belief system to accommodate others. I love what Romans 14:1 says in the Message Bible, "Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do. And don't jump all over them every time they do or say something you don't agree with—even when it seems that they are strong on options but weak in the faith department. Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently." Don't look at how far people have to go, but rather how far they have come in their spiritual journey. When you listen to people, really listen, you will get a glimpse into their heart.

Is sympathy happening in your groups? Who has supported you when you needed it? How did they do it? The answers to those two questions will give you what sympathy can and should look like in your small groups. Everyone's support system will look different in different situations. Also, depending on the makeup of that individual, what and how they need support may be a growth area for them. Encourage your small group leaders to model providing sympathy to the members of their small group. Many times it doesn't require anything than just your presence. When a friend in our group was going through an adoption we were all excited so excited about their new baby. At the last moment, the birth mom decided to keep the baby. They were beyond devastated! When I got the news, I just went to them and sat with them. I offered no great pastoral words. I just spent the day with them. Years later when they reflect on that terrible day, they comment on me just being with them.

Also, if you are feeling awkward in that moment, just say, this is an awkward moment and I'm not sure what to say, but I just want you to know I care for you. I have had times in my life where something has happened with someone in my small group that was so awkward it would have been easier to avoid it.

But that is never the right answer. It is always better to deal with the issue. This can be as easy as saying something like, "I'm not even sure what to say, and to be honest, this is awkward for me. I just want you to know, though, that I care for you. I don't have all of the answers, but I don't want this hurt to go unnoticed." Being "heard" is huge. Praying about it is even better. Let your leaders know that they don't have to have all of the answers. The important thing is to model sympathy for the rest of the group members. God already has the answers. Galatians 6:2 (NLT) says "Share each other's troubles and problems, and in this way obey the law of Christ." Sympathy is not only an act of obedience to Christ, it is foundational to fellowship.

Is humility happening in your groups? Humility is the quality of being modest, reverential, even politely submissive, and never being arrogant, contemptuous, rude or even self-abasing. 1 Peter 5:5 (NIV) says to "...clothe yourselves with humility toward one another..." I think most of us understand what humility is, but how do we make humility happen in ourselves and our small groups. Here are three things to get you started:

1. Accept the weaknesses of others. There will always be people ahead of you in life and those behind you in life. A dangerous place to be is looking down on those behind you. I have found through life, just because I think I am ahead of someone, doesn't always mean I am. We see this all the time in sports. When the underdog upsets the clearly better opponent, humility wins. Respecting those who you feel don't deserve it, might be your best learning that day. Ephesians 4:2 (NCV) says "Always be humble, gentle, and patient, accepting each other in love."

2. Point credit to others. Realize that what makes you great is a team of others. Sometimes in the speed of life, we forget those who support us behind the scenes. No matter who you are, there are a cast of characters who support your successes. No one becomes who they are (good or bad) in isolation. Get the right cast of characters behind you and then make sure you give them credit. Philippians 2:3-4 (NCV) says it best, "When you do things, do not let selfishness or pride be your guide. Instead, be humble and give more honor to others than to yourselves. Do not be interested only in your own life, but be interested in the lives of others."

3. Accept suggestions and corrections. I don't know why this is so hard, but since the fall of man, it has been. Granted, you need to spend the time, before you can build the trust, to say the truth in an individual's life. But even then, it is hard for us to hear suggestions and corrections. Jesus even said it in Matthew 7:3 (GN) "Why do you look at the speck in another's eye, and pay no attention to the log in your own eye? Take the log out of your eye first, and then you will be able to see and take the speck out of your brother's eye." We are quick to give suggestions and corrections, but slow to receive. Work at having those close in your life that you trust to bounce statements that come your way to ask them, honestly, is this true? Do I need to accept this and work on it? Got a spouse? They tend to be a good window to your heart. Proverbs 15:31 (NIV), "He who listens to a life-giving rebuke will be at home among the wise." These three simple statements will bring humility to you and your groups.

Is honesty happening in your groups? “Thoughtless words can wound as deeply as any sword, but wisely spoken words can heal.” Proverbs 12:18 (GN). How do you speak wisely? If the honesty is good news, then you need no coaching. But if the honesty is in correction, think through these three things first. First, always compliment in public, correct in private. I know it is more satisfying to do it the other way around, but it isn’t wise. Second, Correct people when they are up not when they are down. When someone is down, they don’t need another thing to deal with. Plus, they won’t even be able to hear or act upon it. This also applies to the time of day. Don’t wait for the end of the day when people are tired to be honest in correction. Catch them at a fresh part of their day. For this to happen, know if they are a morning or night person. Then thirdly, never offer correction till you are open to it. Simply put, if you can’t remember being corrected, then don’t be looking to correct.

Being candid and connected go together in group life. As your group get more honest with each other, I can guarantee something else—conflict! It’s human nature. When people have real community, conflict is present. It’s nothing to be afraid of, it is just a natural part of communication. Since we aren’t perfect (only Jesus was), then we are going to mess things up. And the way we know we miscommunicated is conflict results.

Conflict is like the warning light on the dashboard of your car. When the oil light comes on, it is just saying, your car is low on oil. No real big problem, unless you ignore it. Conflict is the same way. When conflict happens, it is the warning light on your human dashboard saying communication is low. No real big problem, unless you ignore it! Conflict is the road to deeper community. Embrace it and talk about it, don’t hide it. Keep Matthew 18:15-17 in mind as your group develops community. Always go to the person you have an issue with first, then if that doesn’t resolve the issue, bring someone else along; then if that doesn’t work, bring a pastor from the church into it.

Next month, I will be discussing the remaining three ingredients for deep fellowship; mercy, confidentiality and unity.