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The Traits of Foundational Fellowship

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Fellowship is the foundation for health and balance in any small group. True Christian fellowship, however, goes deeper than merely “hanging out”. It requires commitment and intentional focus on the part of the small group leader and members. All small groups experiencing authentic fellowship have certain traits in common. I was inspired by a sermon Rick Warren did on the topic of fellowship not too long ago. This month, based on that sermon and my own thoughts, I will begin a three part series looking at the traits of foundational fellowship. As you work to build the foundation of fellowship in your small group ministry, you need to keep these questions in mind:

Is frequency happening in your groups? Every group needs face time with each other. If you are going to build a friendship, it is going to take spending time with each other. If you are going to build a marriage, it is going to take spending time with each other. If you are going to build into your children, it is going to take spending time with each other. It is no different with the people in your small group ministry. If they are going to have authentic fellowship with each other, they need to spend time with each other. If they are not friends with each other, then frequency of meeting could be part of the problem.

The people in my small group are my friends. Getting together isn't a chore; instead, it is something I look forward to. That didn't happen immediately. When we first started meeting, it took “formal” time together build the groundwork for healthy fellowship. Formal time is the time you get together for your regular small group meeting. For my small group, that is Friday nights from 7:00 to 9:00. You might ask, do groups have to meet weekly. My answer is, it all depends on how quickly you want to build fellowship. The frequency of meeting determines not only if the group will continue to meet, but how deep that group will go spiritually.

Another strong component of frequency is the “informal” meeting times. Those are times when you get together with the people in your group outside of the formal meeting time. It might be for barbecues, coffee, dinner, special occasions, vacations, children activities, shopping, sports, etc. When you start meeting frequently for informal times, you need increases for the formal meetings. When you start meeting frequently for informal occasions, the tendency is to want to skip the formal meetings because you are already spending so much time together. This can be the death of your group. Without the formal time to study and reflect on God's word, your group can easily slip into a social group with no purpose. The formal group meetings help maintain focus and distinguishes the small group from a gathering of friends. How often do your groups meet?

Is authenticity happening in your groups? James 5:16 in the Living Bible says, “Admit your faults to one another and pray for each other so that you may be healed...” How do you promote that kind of

authenticity in your groups? Obviously frequency of meeting plays a big part in setting the stage. But there is more at play for authenticity to happen in your groups. People can hide all they want, but as Proverbs says, they become a fine glaze on a cracked pot. Authenticity happens when the inside of you mirrors the outside. When what happens in the dark, happens in the light. One of the hardest things to share in a group is your faults, why? Because this shows people you are human, you aren't perfect, and you are flawed. You think this would be easy, since there isn't one of us who would say we are perfect. But it isn't. We don't want to admit we are not perfect to other people. As the leader of the small group ministry, this starts with you. If you want group members to be authentic, you have to model authenticity and you have to encourage your small groups to be safe places for people to meet. Authenticity can only happen within a safe environment. What is said in group stays in group. This must be clearly and repeatedly communicated to every group. When people feel safe, they are more likely to share a flaw – and be authentic. Are your groups creating environments where members feel safe enough to be authentic? As the leader of the small group ministry, are you modeling authenticity?

Is support happening in your groups? This happens in three primary areas; accountability, encouragement and honoring. Accountability happens through togetherness. Accountability is like having your own personal life coach. When you are alone, you are vulnerable. Ecclesiastes 4:10 in the NLT says, 'If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But people who are alone when they fall are in real trouble.' When I had my mountain biking accident last December, had I been alone it could have been far more serious than it was. But because I had a friend with me, he was able to help me and calm me down when I wasn't sure how bad it was. It was bad, but knowing someone was with me helped. Scripture is constantly pointing out that we are always better together than alone. Accountability doesn't happen programmatically, but organically. You can't assign accountability; it has to be a desire of the person.

Real maturity happens when you realize you can't do it alone and in every facet of life you need someone to partner/coach you so you are better. No one person can support you in every situation life brings. I have different people who coach me in different areas of my life. They help me be better than if I was alone. Who are your coaches?

Encouragement has power. In Hebrews 3:13 encouragement has the power to restrain sin and in 1 Thessalonians 5:14b it can build up the weak, help people feel apart or connected. Throughout scripture encouragement is promoted to build the body up. Do you encourage your small group leaders and members? If not, why not? Does it take too much time? Are you too discouraged yourself to encourage another? Do you feel uncomfortable reaching out to encourage another? Whatever the reason you don't encourage, the Bible won't support your actions—I know, not very encouraging! Does encouragement happen as regularly in your groups as you eating? Snacks seem to be much easier than encouraging another Christian. But we need to be feeding each other in spiritual ways.

Honoring is a cousin of encouragement, but it tends to be more of a group event. Whereas encouragement happens more individually, honoring happens best through the group. What are things

your groups can be honoring and celebrating? Well it can be anything, but here are a few things you might want to suggest:

- When someone gets a promotion or finds a job
- Birthdays or anniversaries
- A kid in the group hits a milestone or an achievement
- A group member is in the paper (for a good reason)
- Anniversary of when someone choose to follow Christ or their baptism date
- A house warming party for new home owners
- Someone gets their first car
- A couple has their first baby, make it a group dedication
- A kid is potty trained
- Graduations

Any occasion is a great time to honor someone or speak into their life. How are you encouraging your groups to support each other?

Join me next month as I continue this series on the traits of foundational fellowship.