

What If Small Groups and Ministry Teams Had An Evangelistic Focus?

It seems to me that there is a decline in small group attendance throughout many churches and the main reason is that people are too busy. Many employers have moved from wages to salaries for their staff, often requiring more flexible and longer hours. Many people have multiple jobs. People watch more TV and spend longer on websites than ever before. We have embraced a culture where we run our children around to multiple extra-curricular activities. Those that study social trends say that in our culture people don't like to commit to something for more than four weeks.

Many of our churches are becoming major entertainment centres on Sundays, bigger congregations and lower participation in ministry by members. We get our church fix on Sundays but then during the week we are too busy.

I personally do not believe that we can experience biblical community while looking at the back of each other's heads on a Sunday.

How far have we come from Dr Luke's description of the early church?

Acts 2:42-47

They spent their time learning from the apostles, and they were like family to each other. They also broke bread and prayed together. Everyone was amazed by the many miracles and wonders that the apostles worked. All the Lord's followers often met together, and they shared everything they had. They would sell their property and possessions and give the money to whoever needed it. Day after day they met together in the temple. They broke bread together in different homes and shared their food happily and freely, while praising God. Everyone liked them, and each day the Lord added to their group others who were being saved.

Family...shared... together... no one in need ... miracles...daily salvations.

Does that sound like the modern church to you?

When we consider **Psalm 133:1-3** we are not surprised that with great unity in community God would work miraculously.

¹ *How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!*

² *It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down on the collar of his robe.*

³ *It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.*

Isn't that what our hearts long for: real fellowship, real unity, real power, and natural church growth?

Jesus had a dream for His body (1 Corinthians 12), for His church. He said:

John 13:34-36

But I am giving you a new command. You must love each other, just as I have loved you. If you love each other, everyone will know that you are my disciples.

People find it hard to commit to something for a long time. Many of us also have experienced how a small group or ministry team starts with such fire and is so enjoyable for about ... six months then ... it gets a bit familiar, even boring.

We have begun to imagine three things in our fellowship;

What if every small group or ministry team agreed to meet for a defined time? E.g. only commit to a couple of months or a term at a time. And,

What if every small group was formed around their familiar passion?

Maybe there are groups of people with a passion for a certain neighbourhood, or fatherless youth, or art, or fishing, or music, or hiking, or solo parents. What if those people with a similar passion met together for real fellowship three out of four weeks?

What if every small group or ministry team had a built in outreach component? That is if about every fourth week they did something evangelistic in the area of their passion e.g. street BBQ (with testimonies), a fishing trip (with prayer and testimony), a cooking evening etc. If every group was praying for the lost and working together to do something on a regular basis to reach the lost, they would become a very tight team, very dependent on the Holy Spirit and they would grow through those who are being saved.



What if worship teams kept a door open and an eye open for pre-Christian talent? What if there was built in fun/jam time on those weeks when the team was not busy preparing for Sunday. What if there was real fellowship and support in those teams?

What if each ministry team also functioned as a close fellowship group and an outreach team?

My suspicion is we would never get bored. If we are moving with people who have a similar passion (and therefore they are likely to have God given gifts that support that passion) we would have fun and minister effectively, growing both closer together and larger in numbers naturally.

In an age where people are becoming more private, more individualistic, more isolated (even in built up communities), what if ... Jesus' dream for His church could be realised in your church in small groups and ministry teams?

Demo: in my first church at Te Aroha I believed that God's evangelistic strategy for the church was small groups. Demonstrate.. Two blank chairs. Whiteboard. Points of interest. Set goals. Accountability - red and green apples.

What About Community Ministries?

Ask yourself now, or your group. In the community ministries in your church, how many people have come to faith in the last three months?

How many hours of volunteer and paid service were put into those ministries?

Community ministry is a good thing, a biblical thing, and we clearly need to love the poor, care for the widow, mentor the orphan/fatherless etc. No debate there, but in New Zealand the energy that was once put into children's evangelism and youth evangelism is now to a large extent refocused onto the more financially profitable arena of community ministries. Huge hours are being poured into this and yet very few people become followers of Jesus Christ. It seems to me that if we take a grant from a government body or a trust many community service providers (churches) feel it would not be right to talk about Jesus or to offer a holistic ministry to the community (unless they ask for it). I want to

challenge that. We don't stop being Christians when we get a grant from any government organization or a trust. The services we offer are usually of a very professional and skilled level, no one is getting short-changed if we say a few things about Jesus or the church except the person who doesn't yet know Jesus.

Ask yourself. If getting a grant for that new van or that community service means we cannot talk about Jesus, does God want us to take the grant?

I read an old preacher's sermon some time ago with horror because in it he said that to provide community services without the gospel was to make people comfortable before they go to hell. I was shocked, maybe a little offended, but when I walked away I couldn't help reflecting that in fact he was right. There are lots of loving community groups that give out a food parcel or put on a community dinner or provide a parenting course or childcare etc. and they do it very well. But we are Christians.



We can offer them our professional support skills and Jesus. Have we become ashamed of the gospel? Have we forgotten in this politically correct generation that people need the Lord?

I do budgets for folk and deliver them furniture and teach parenting classes and thoroughly enjoy doing marriage counselling etc. but no matter what hat I am wearing, I have been bought with a price, I am His and my love for the Lord and my love for people compels me to say something.

Over the years I have supervised a lot of community workers doing PD. A huge percentage become believers because I mentioned Jesus early to them and I just supported the work of the Spirit as He did the rest.

Recently I baptized a man from a pretty rugged background. Before he went into the water I asked him to tell me his story. Some of it I knew, I had seen him around for years. In recent months I had looked him in the eyes, lovingly addressed him by name and spoken prophetically over Him that I knew God was drawing him into His family and that he would be welcome in our family.

His story went something like this. For five years he had been coming to our church for food parcels. He was struck whenever he did that he could feel the presence of God and when he left he would go away thinking about God. The people that gave him the parcels were very respectful and overtly Christian.

Three weeks earlier while he was doing a budget with one of our budget advisors I was about to baptize a lady in the auditorium (She had just come to faith. There had been plenty of words but the night before she got a personal revelation from God). As he watched this lady get baptized (something he had not seen before) God began to work in his heart convicting him strongly of his need to die to self and be raised to live for Jesus (The Holy Spirit began to turn up the heat). A week later he was getting a food parcel again when our chaplain asked him when he was going to commit his life to Jesus and be baptized (He had never been to our church before and wasn't a church goer). He walked away seemingly unmoved then returned an hour later to say to our chaplain that he needed to be baptized as soon as possible.

I said to him just before he was baptized that if he committed his life to Jesus he couldn't go back to the old sins and not even sleep with his fiancé, and that the church would put on a wedding for him free of charge if that is what he wanted. This man has got a few challenges ahead of him.

We will probably have a couple of years of very deliberate follow up to do, but he came to Jesus through community ministries as many others have.

When people come to the church for community services they expect to hear about God; after all they have come to a church. Don't be shy.

In a recent survey in NZ of pre-Christian Mainly Music mums they were asked: "When you came to Mainly Music did you expect to hear about God?" Answer – almost unanimously, "yes". Next question; "Did you expect people to take you aside and explain how to be a Christian?" Answer almost unanimously "yes". Third question; "Did those two things happen?" Answer almost unanimously – "no". How terribly sad. They were open, would not have been offended but we were too careful and they missed out on meeting the Lord. Friends, whatever your community service; invite them to special events, share your testimony, and put tracts and information sheets in food parcels. Have DVDs of testimonies and of gospel presentations at hand. Have your follow up material at hand whether you are in an op shop, food bank, budget service, child care etc. If you put on a community dinner, don't bother unless you give a devotion or testimony as well.

Jesus is the answer to their greatest needs, and they need you and me to be bold and respectful and to start throwing seed (spoken words of faith). Jesus would never feed the poor or heal the sick without pointing to the kingdom of God. You and I desire to be like Him. I was born and raised on the mission field in Papua New Guinea. It was a great childhood and I have godly parents. I understand how cross culturally it can take 4-5 years on the mission field before you see your first salvation but in New Zealand I suggest that if you don't see people start to come to church or church events within three months you are far too shy and need to man up a bit more for Jesus.

Within the next couple of weeks I believe I am going to baptize a man who used to do community service for me (PD). He has even cleaned out the baptismal pool before, so he has been in there so to speak. When I shared the gospel with him he seemed disinterested. Now, some six months later, a lady in our church spoke prophetically over him and he is so close to joining the team. He would say it was those conversations we had (where I appeared to have been rejected) that God used to bring him to a place of wanting to follow Jesus for the rest of His life.

Is it painful to have someone reject you or show no interest? It's disappointing, but it doesn't hurt. I wasn't concerned for my reputation or popularity anyway – it's about Jesus. I bear no scars from that earlier rejection but soon I will enjoy another brother on His team.

Go for it. Discuss with your community ministries teams how you can be more deliberate and prepared to speak to the folk you are serving about Jesus. They expect you to, and Jesus longs for you to!

List each community ministry and brainstorm how you can be more strategic, honest and bold for the kingdom.

One final and very disturbing thought re community ministries. Personally when I read of a nation's history and how Christians brought in the first schools, and medical services equality for women and the first orphanages etc I am inspired and proud of those that have boldly gone before us.

But ask yourself this question and then go through your Bible for the answer.

When the early church took up an offering for the poor in Jerusalem or deacons were set aside to look after widows and orphans, where possessions are shared with the poor;

Was that community service to believers or unbelievers?

To my great surprise it appears that virtually all community service was to believers, which in turn makes sense of the scriptures.

John 13:34-35

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Galatians 6:10

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

I have no doubt that community ministries are a good thing but, have we gone overboard? Has God initiated the community ministries in our church or did we just start them to get the grants or to look like a big organisation?

I say if it is not bearing tangible fruit which can be seen at least every three months then make it a kingdom ministry with evangelistic effectiveness or let the world do it!

DEMO break into small groups for 5 minutes. Pick one of the community ministries listed on the top of the newsletter insert. Brainstorm all the ways in which that could become more evangelistically focused. Post on A3 sheet in auditorium.