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**“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”
John 13:34-35**

 **THE NAVIGATORS**

September 15, 2004

Greetings! This is the second *“Friday with the Ferrells”*, a series of conversations that I, Lisa Kawata, am having with Tim and Amy Ferrell on their role with The Navigators’ Church Discipleship Ministry. If you remember our first letter, Tim talked about how he coaches pastors who have a vision for growing disciples of Jesus Christ in their communities. This second conversation is about the importance of “authentic community”. This is why he dedicates much of his ministry to small groups in the Intentional Disciple-making Church.

(P.S. Although Tim’s voice has been featured in these first two letters, Amy is an active part of these conversations. You’ll hear from Amy in our next letter when she talks about the parenting course she has developed and is teaching in many communities.)

Tim, what is the purpose of small groups in a church?

God Himself is a God of community. Created in His image, we bear that same mark. We are made for relationship. When Jesus designed His church, He modeled that basic unit of church -- His small group of 12. History bears out that when the disciples planted local churches, these were basically house churches. I think that was by design for that is what they had experienced with Jesus.

So, the idea of small groups is not just the latest, greatest fad or something to help people feel cozy in the midst of a big organization, but it really flows out of the nature and character of God Himself.

John says, “We bear witness and we want you to have this fellowship, [this community] that we have with God the Father and His Son Jesus.” (1 John 1:3) The small group is where His followers gather in redemptive community for these essential functions: discipline, the confessing of sins to one another, healing, care-giving, nurturing others in the faith, sharing one another’s burdens, leadership development, and discovering and exercising spiritual gifts.

It seems that many churches had moved away from the practice of small groups and are now swinging back that way. Is the idea of small groups part of a revival in the traditional church?

There’s been a movement in the last 20 to 30 years, definitely. I think it’s a hunger and a longing for authentic community and relationship. I see more and more the breakdown and loss of that in society at large. I also think that God is doing a work of revival in His church in America, in the realization of church leaders that we’re off base and not fully accomplishing the mission to build disciples of Jesus.

What is authentic community?

When I think of authentic, many words come to mind -- transparency, honesty, integrity, whole, genuine. We have to do what it takes for us to come together and share out of the richness of that kind of a life together. I think you just know it when you see it or experience it.

How do you help a pastor develop authentic community in a church?

In any church, there are always going to be authentic relationships going on. The responsibility of the pastoral and leadership teams of a church is to create an environment where many more people can move into authentic community.

You've got to develop leaders who follow Jesus and who have the skill set for leading groups. There are several ways I might approach helping a church. One way is to have the pastor invite other potential leaders into a small group where they experience community for a year. Then, that group of leaders would multiply that experience they had with the pastor and create healthy environments for others. This way they have the natural relationship with the pastor coaching them as small group leaders -- the church leaders have healthy mentoring relationships rather than a 'programmatical' organization.

For some churches, the greater need is to work with the pastor on philosophy of ministry or larger church health issues. In that case, I would lead that prototype small group for a year until they can multiply. Or, sometimes, I help a church that wishes to launch small groups by training an initial set of potential leaders and providing them with ongoing support and coaching. Launching more quickly on a fast track is an option as well.

What help do you bring to these potential small group leaders?

First, we study about servant leadership, the profile of a disciple, how to make that disciple, and what an environment for spiritual growth looks like. Then, I teach them the nuts and bolts of how to lead a small group - how to invite friends, what to do the first few nights you meet, how to use icebreakers, how to lead a Bible discussion, and the art of asking good questions. You know, Jesus was the master of asking good questions. H.H. Horne, in his classic 1920 book Jesus, The Master Teacher says, 'Jesus came not to answer men's questions, but to ask them. He came not to settle men's souls, but to provoke them.'

What's the danger in organizing small groups as a program rather than from natural relationships?

People are so busy. Life in the "burbs" is out of control -- too hectic and too disconnected! If we don't keep geography and natural relationships in mind, the actual meeting is all that the small group has in common. Then, the small group becomes another activity in an already busy schedule. It may take more energy than one might be willing to expend to make it happen and maintain it.

Tim, can you give some practical advice for people who want to lead small groups?

Invite someone you're in orbit with already. The more natural interactions and intersections in life you have with someone the better. Some may be moving toward Jesus or perhaps are already in relationship with Christ.

The leader needs to create a safe place for people to be transparent. The way to do that is for the leader to go there first -- to share from their own brokenness and that they are on the journey with them. One thing we've lost is the practice of confession in a small group. The early church practiced this according to James 5:16, "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed ..." Sharing from brokenness yields a wonderful healing. As a leader you are trusting His Spirit for transformation.