



## ADULT MINISTRY IN THE SPOTLIGHT

### Growing Discipleship Groups

Pastor John Herman

**At the beginning of 2004**, Peace Lutheran Church, Charlottesville, Virginia, began its first discipleship group. I asked three men to join me in a year-long weekly group. In a search for small group resources, I came across the book, *Transforming Discipleship*, by Greg Ogden, and thought his long term approach to spiritual growth in the congregation was an intriguing concept.

Through our congregational experience, I came to agree with Ogden's conclusion that groups of three to four persons are the optimal size for the discipling process.<sup>1</sup> In our experience, a group of three or four has an advantage over a larger group of 6-10 people, in its ability to form transparent, trusting relationships and mutual accountability. The larger the group, the more likely one can hide, in terms of group discussion, sharing one's life, and fulfilling the group covenant.

When a group has only three or four persons, full participation by all is both necessary and obvi-



*Peace Lutheran, Charlottesville, VA's first discipleship group began in 2004.*

ous. The fact that the discipleship groups meet together for at least a year helps to develop the transparent trust and accountability, and over the course of that time, group members will give and receive the care of Christ through life's highs and lows. The group members will be able to support and care for one another through the natural rhythm of periods of grief and difficulty as well as joys and celebrations ("If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." 1 Corinthians 12:26).

Discipleship groups at Peace Lutheran Church are groups of three to four persons (either men or women) which meet together weekly, for at least 90 minutes, for prayer, discussion about the biblical readings and workbook questions, and fellowship and care for each other. The convener calls the group together and models the leadership for a few sessions, and then the group rotates with a shared leadership. All share an equal responsibility, and no one person is the "teacher."

Within three years, the first discipleship group had expanded to thirteen groups, fulfilling the goal of multiplication, that discipleship group participants would give serious consideration to forming a new group (for a second year) after completion of their first year.

The discipleship group experience was life-changing for many. Many expressed a revitalized relationship with God. Most all expressed a

spiritual growth or growth in faith. Here were Lutherans praying and reading the Word together, and developing the daily spiritual discipline of prayer and Bible reading. Lutherans were talking about their faith with each other. Many participants were hearing God's call and stepping into ministry and leadership.

We found that participants in discipleship groups were also much more likely to participate in other spiritual formation experiences, such as women's groups, a men's group, book studies, mission trips, an annual retreat, targeted conferences, synodical learning events, and service opportunities.



*Members were more likely to participate in other group experiences.*



*At Peace Lutheran, discipleship groups meet for at least a year.*

What I heard in many informal conversations about discipleship groups and these other spiritually deepening experiences having impacted the lives of the participants, led me to complete a doctor of ministry study to determine the effects of discipleship groups on the spiritual vitality of a congregation. I'll share what I learned in future articles.

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<sup>1</sup>Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 171-72.

*Pastor John Herman has recently retired from full-time church ministry to pursue writing, teaching, and consulting about church renewal.*

## Getting Started —

**Resources:** Most of our discipleship groups used Ogden's workbook, *Discipleship Essentials*. Although not a Lutheran resource, it provides two helpful kinds of material for any Christian discipleship ministry. It begins with an orientation toward the life of a disciple, helping to develop important faith practices like Bible reading, regular prayer, and worship. It then moves into the basic beliefs of a simple Christian systematic theology.

Eventually we compiled our own discipleship group workbooks which include devotional writ-

ings by several congregational members. The series is called: *Going Deeper: A Journey with Jesus*, and the five books are available for purchase.

**Group Covenant:** A small group covenant can be a helpful way of clarifying the group's expectations as well as building accountability. A covenant should include these kinds of commitments: completing assignments, meeting weekly for a year, mutual support, honesty and confidentiality, regular prayer, and serious consideration of forming a new discipleship group for a second year.

*Adult Ministry in the Spotlight highlights successful adult ministry programs in Lutheran congregations around the country. We hope these stories generate ideas you can use.*