

Redemption Hill Bible Church – Small Groups

***Taken from 9Marks Ministries**

A lot of churches these days are building their ministries through small groups. How do we employ small groups at our church?

OUR VISION FOR SMALL GROUPS

We view small groups as a means of allowing the congregation to shepherd and disciple each other, within the bounds of pastoral oversight (Eph. 4:11-13). They facilitate relationships for mutual edification.

They are not support or counseling groups, and they are not pure study groups. Rather, they are used to cultivate spiritual fellowship together, a fellowship informed by Scripture and pursued through prayer, study, and interpersonal reflection.

In a very real, but informal way, small group leaders are tasked with an extension of the elders' pastoral ministry—the encouragement, exhortation, and building up of a particular group of people in the church.

WHAT ROLE DO THEY PLAY IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH?

In thinking about discipleship, it's helpful to think of a spectrum, with the whole congregation at one end, one on one relationships at the other, and small groups in the middle.

CONGREGATION — SMALL GROUPS — ONE ON ONE RELATIONSHIPS

On the one hand, our church attempts to prioritize the gatherings of the whole congregation, because that's where the primary teaching is done and where the entire body, with all its diverse parts, most reflects the gospel of Christ. On the other hand, we recognize how effective individual discipleship can be. In between these two ends of the spectrum, we have small groups working to connect the benefits of our ministry to the whole congregation and the ministry going on between individuals. Small groups provide the context in which what the church is learning as a whole can be applied more individually and deliberately. It's the context in which members can pray and spur one another on to evangelism. *It's the context for facilitating discipleship relationships.*

Very often in churches, community is seen as an end, or goal, and small groups are the means to achieve that end. We understand community to be both a by-product of and a means to foster individual discipleship. Therefore, we have tried to think of small group ministry not as a ministry to groups with the aim of producing good groups. Instead, we have approached small group ministry as a ministry to individuals, in the context of community, with the aim of producing faithful Christians.

We take care to ensure that small groups are neither a substitute nor a competitor with the church as a whole. Rather, they are an extension of it, a particularization of the whole community. This is particularly important in today's church culture, where many Christians are accustomed to thinking of the small group, rather than the church, as their primary spiritual community. **It's possible to be a biblical Christian without belonging to a small group. It's impossible to be one without belonging to a church.**

In short, small group participation is encouraged, but not required. Furthermore, if someone indicates that he or she is able to participate in either a small group or the church-wide Bible study, but not both due to the constraints of time, we would encourage that person to join us for a church-wide study.

HOW ARE SMALL GROUPS STRUCTURED?

Currently, RHBC small groups are structured based on location. Because of the limited number of groups, proximity to the host home generally determines which one to join.

Small groups are limited only by the capacity of the meeting place and the ability of the leader. Groups generally have a leader and co-leader, the former discipling and preparing the latter for leadership. And groups typically meet weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly, depending on the schedules of its members.

Small group leaders are given a lot of freedom in deciding how to use the time. They might choose to study a book of the Bible or a book on Christian living. There are a number of books that our church constantly recommends as good for Christians to read, which our leaders often use. Or leaders might decide to use the time to review and make more individualized applications from Sunday's sermon. Whatever they do, we simply ask them to get elders approval first—and to be open to his suggestions.

As a church grows, small group leaders increasingly do important ministry and pastoral care. Less and less is it possible for staff or elders, to know everyone in the church. It's tempting to think that all the small group leaders put together could know everyone. But even they can't. Rather, small group leaders have the privilege to help facilitate and equip the only group in the congregation that *can* adequately shepherd the whole congregation, and that's the congregation itself.

By Michael Lawrence
Adapted for RHBC

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DISCIPLESHIP RELATIONSHIPS

Discipling is critical for our Christian growth as individuals as well as for making the gospel visible in our life together as a church. So we do everything we can to cultivate a culture of discipling in our church.

1. What do we mean by “discipling”?

In one sense, almost everything we do as a local church is about being and making disciples. The songs we sing, the prayers we pray, and certainly the sermons that are preached all aim to grow us as God-glorifying disciples.

But for this handout we have something more specific in mind when we use the word “discipling.” We are thinking particularly about individual relationships. More formally, we are talking about the **intentional encouragement and training of disciples of Jesus on the basis of deliberate, loving relationships.**

Jesus tells us to pursue one another like this: “ My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you” (John 15:17). How did Jesus love his disciples in ways that could be imitated? He loved them intentionally, purposefully, humbly, joyfully and normally. Let's think about these descriptions.

Intentional: “You did not choose me but I chose you...” (John 15:16a). Jesus did not merely stumble across his disciples; he took loving initiative. He chose them. Christ-like love is not passive; it takes initiative. Loving other Christians like Christ love us means taking the initiative.

Purposeful: “...and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last” (John 15:16b). Christ's love for his disciples is purposeful. He called them to bear fruit for God's glory. In other

words, his love is not merely sentimental, but has a wonderful, God-glorifying agenda. If we are to love one-another as Christ has loved us, surely we will share Jesus' goals for one another, namely, the spiritual good of our friend and God's glory through their joy in the gospel.

Humble: Jesus says, "As the father has loved me, so have I loved you," (John 15:9) and "Instead [of slaves], I have called you friends" (John 15:15a). Jesus condescends to be our friend, even though he is infinitely far above us in majesty, holiness, and honor. Surely, then, we must relate with all humility to our fellow fallen brothers and sisters. We treat them as friends whom we love, not as "projects" or "lessers." We don't lord it over, we honor and cherish.

Joyful: "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:11). Jesus commands us to love one another so that we would know his joy. Setting out to care for other Christians, encouraging their growth in grace, can be hard work. But it is wonderful work, and Jesus says it is joy-producing work!

Normal: Jesus makes this kind of loving discipling his basic command to all his people and, thus, normal for all Christians. Listen again: "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you." Not surprisingly, you will find talk of basic Christian discipleship throughout God's Word:

- "But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness" (Heb. 3:13).
- "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves" (Rom. 12:10).
- "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing" (1 Thess. 5:11).

The New Testament is filled with such exhortations. Jesus and the apostles did not mean for discipling between Christians to be exceptional, but normal.

As part of our church, we want you to be intentional, purposeful, humble, and joyful as we work together at making these kinds of one-on-one relationships normal.

Do this by letting people get to know you. Do this by working to know them. Really, it is all of our work to cultivate a culture of discipleship in this place.

2. What do we mean by a "culture of discipling"?

Most dictionaries define a "culture" as something like "the shared values, goals and practices that characterize a group." That is pretty much what we have in mind when it comes to discipling at our church. We don't want just a program, we want mutual love and encouragement to be a value, goal, and practice that increasingly characterizes all of us.

Formal programs are not necessarily bad, but we want to make sure we do not fall short of the biblical ideal. And the biblical ideal, is to become a place where it is normal to take initiative in doing one another spiritual good. You don't have to sign up for anything or get permission before loving fellow members this way. Nor do you want a church where discipling only happens when the staff sustain it. That's not a healthy church! No, we want you to pray and think about how you can jump in. And talk to an elder or some other member about your unique opportunities and stewardships.

3. What should I do in a discipling relationship?

The most significant aspect of any discipling relationship, often, is not exactly what you do when you meet, but that you build a relationship with biblical truth at its core. As such, there is no "set program" for discipling relationships in our church. Here are a number of things:

- Meet weekly to discuss the prior Sunday's sermon, a book, or a book of the Bible.
- Have coffee and discuss specific application in one another's lives.
- Invite families into your home to discuss the things of the Lord
- Accompany mothers with young children as they run errands.
- Help dads with yard work and ask them for counsel.
- Schedule "play dates" for kids and talk about the Sunday sermon or what you have been reading from God's Word.

Examples abound, and the venues are flexible. **What's important, again, is that you pursue something, something were you have time to relate to another member with the intentional aim of encouraging and being encouraged by the truth from God's Word.**

So be creative! But be intentional about loving one another in the best, the highest, the most biblical way—by aiming to do the other person spiritual good.

4. How can I get into a discipling relationship?

There are three ways to establish a discipling relationship at RHBC. **First, take the personal initiative** to try to work out a discipling relationship with any other person from RHBC (of your same gender, please). No staff permission needed! Instead, show up to church early. Stick around late. And start getting to know other people. Over time we hope you will begin to build the kind of relationships where these things happen naturally.

Second, talk to your small group leader for suggestions and assistance if you happen to join a small group (which is not required). They may not be free to meet up with you regularly, but as they get to know you, chances are they can help connect you with another member who would.

Third, if neither of these avenues results in a regular discipling relationship, feel free to contact the church for help. There are always a number of people in the church who, because of schedules, geography, or other reasons, find it difficult to connect with others one-on-one. In those cases the church is happy to help.

We do encourage you to start with your own initiative. It just might cause you to flex and even develop the discipline and evangelism muscles that will serve you and others for years to come. You might find that doing so becomes one of the most satisfying experiences of your life as a Christian. And you might find yourself understanding more clearly what Jesus meant when he said, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).