

Grand View Cell Groups: A Critical Part of Faith Formation

OVERVIEW OF HISTORY, PURPOSE, AND INTENT

In 2009 and 2010, the preaching and teaching was focused on helping this congregation grow in understanding that following Jesus and growing to become a more faithful and active Disciple of Jesus involved several things on our part. Specifically, much time was spent on the membership vows and promises we make to God and to the Church to give “prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness to God and others.”

Then we moved to understanding that the Discipleship system or pathway involved being active and participating in “Loving God, Loving Others, and Serving the World.” This was also articulated and communicated that the process of growing deeper in faith and in relationship with God meant active participation in “Celebrations, Small Groups, and Service.”

Building upon this foundation of expectations and understandings of what it means to be an active follower of Jesus- and how this is practiced- we launched a more organized small group ministry.

In the fall of 2010, I invited the GV congregation to consider being part of a new thing called “Cell Groups.” The original purpose and intent was given in the invitation I gave to the congregation: “If you are interested in growing deeper in your faith and relationship with God and others, meet with me on Sunday night and I will explain a new part of our Discipleship system called Cell groups.

At the first meeting over 20 people attended and I invited them to try something for 90 days:

1. Gather for one hour every week, at the best time of the week for you (6:00 Sunday evening or 6:30 Tuesday evening.)
2. Read from the Transformation Journal Cell book every day; both the scriptures and the devotional material, and respond to the questions in writing.
3. Pray for the other members of your Cell, everyday.
4. Make a commitment to not miss the Cell meeting unless you are sick or out of town. As you come to know one another, make a commitment to each other not to miss Cell unless sick or out of town.
5. At your meeting, pray to begin the time together, then share and respond to one of two questions: A. What was your experience with this weeks’ Scriptures and readings? OR B. How is it with your spirit/ your relationship and connection to God?
End with prayer.

For 90 days over 20 people gathered on either Sunday or Tuesday evening. We practiced and experimented with these rules and this format. After 90 days, we evaluated and discussed continuing the original groups and the possibilities of beginning new groups. It was an overwhelming positive response to continue Cell groups and to help other people at GVUMC experience being part of a meaningful small group. And that is what we did. We began to offer new groups at different times and days of the week and this Cell ministry grew!

The fruit produced from the Cell groups has been closer relationships with God and others, genuine loving and caring groups that worship and serve together and watch over one another and share in the highs, lows, and day-to-day parts of life together. Also, people have learned more about God from both the readings and from one another, have had opportunity to practice love and intercessory prayer, and been challenged by some of the scriptures, some of the readings, and challenged by some of the different circumstances and situations that have arisen from life in community.

The people in small groups- our Cell groups- absolutely revitalized GVUMC and are responsible for much of the health, energy, and personality of GVUMC! I used to say that Cell groups are the rocket fuel in the engine that moves GVUMC forward. Cells have influenced who we are and what we do at GVUMC more than we even realize. Of course, the secret behind the power of Cells is that there were so many people who were putting themselves in positions where God's Holy Spirit grew them and influenced them! And this, again, influenced the whole congregation.

After 9 years, I believe it is logical that I remind GVUMC what the point and purpose of Cell group is and how each Cell group is not isolated or in a silo, but is -and must be- a vital part of the whole body. Remember, these groups are called "Cells" because cells are the building blocks of the body. And we are the living, breathing, active, growing Body of Jesus Christ.

In the beginning of this ministry, I was very clear and intentional in pointing out that Cell was not a therapy group or simply a social group. Discipleship or the process of being formed into the image of Jesus as the heart and purpose of Cell and active participation in Cell was specifically an opportunity to practice loving and serving God and others. This remains the heart and purpose of Cell.

I see now that one of the other aspects of our Cells was that have been tied closely to discussing the Cell books readings and/or the Scriptures. As well, we have all benefited from the self-improvement that has come from both new knowledge and understandings about God and the Christian lifestyle and improved in our love and service to others and our relationship with God. All good! Indeed, I still believe all people benefit from active participation in our Cell groups, even if we just keep doing what we have been doing. However, now I understand that it is possible to go deeper and to build upon what we have.

I believe that there is a need for small groups to be models for how people can live the Christian lifestyle, specifically in how an awareness of God and the behavior of a Disciple of Jesus in all parts of life can really be lived-out, in community. This is to say that I believe we must find newer and more intentional ways to connect each Cell to the larger GVUMC community. This is movement from participating in Cell just for self or the others in the particular Cell group, and understanding that the members of the Cell are an important part of the whole and can have a powerful influence in helping the whole congregation continue to grow and be healthy. This has not been directly or intentionally articulated as a goal before. Thus, part of the expectations of Cell or perhaps a new expression of small groups is that the vows of membership must be upheld.

Membership vows or the promise to give "prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness" to God and to the people of the local church are absolutely all directed to living in community, not in isolation. The intention of the vows, and the expectations that members uphold them, is not just to build up or help the individual making them but it is to build and grow the whole local church or Christian community.

This leads me to believe that a new thing that can be introduced to existing Cells or can be a part of a new expression of small groups is that all members will agree to a Cell Covenant. The covenant is an expression of expectations and responsibilities, as well as a healthy and Godly way to help everyone be accountable. The Bible is built upon the Old and the New Covenant between God and people, so covenants are certainly not a new thing. The point of a covenant is not restrictions or to exclude people, but to have meaningful standards and expectations because they help contribute to both personal growth and communal growth.

The next addition or change that I think will help enhance the small group experience and help contribute to growth in faith and the practice of Discipleship is that we move a step beyond focusing on the book or talking about what we think the Scriptures mean, to telling one another our experiences with God or some of the Christian attributes pointed out in the week's readings. This is talking and listening to another specifically in the area of awareness of God, experience of God, or where we have demonstrated a Christian attribute or failed to.

The next addition to be made is to end each meeting with an invitation and encouragement time. By this I mean invitations to participate in the life and activities of GVUMC and encouragement to participate in worship, service, and generous giving of time, service, prayers, and money. This is an attempt to every week connect with the larger body that is GVUMC and over time a deeper understanding of the importance of that connection

The last addition I will attempt is that every small group or Cell will have 2 leaders. Jesus sent the Disciples in pairs. Thus it makes sense that every group have two identified and acknowledged leaders who help facilitate group time and maintain communications and connections. A weekly conversation between myself and the leaders of each Cell, then, will also be a part of this enhancement. For the purposes of encouragement and direction.





New Methods for Cell Group Time

Cell Groups are specifically designed to help all participants grow and mature in the understanding, experience, and practice of the Christian faith. There are different aspects of a cell: **social, care, love, support, encouragement,** and to **know and be known.** These aspects or benefits all are produced naturally when the group focuses upon the primary activity of reading the same scripture, talking about it, praying for one another, and helping hold one another to deeper expectations.

1. Move beyond focusing on the book or talking about new things we learned about the Scriptures

The Cell members will each read a single chapter of one book of the Bible, for 7 days. This allows for really “putting on” the Word of God and becoming very familiar with it. Then the time in Cell will be telling one another our experiences with God or some of the Christian attributes pointed out in the week’s readings. This is talking and listening to one another specifically in the area of awareness of God, experience of God, or where we have demonstrated a Christian attribute or failed to. It is suggested that the sample questions be kept with Bibles and brought to Cell meetings each week: responses to these form the basis or agenda to most of group time.

2. All members of each Cell are encouraged to Agree To Live Within a Covenant.

The covenant is an expression of expectations and responsibilities, as well as a healthy and Godly way to help everyone be accountable. The Bible is built upon the Old and the New Covenant between God and people, so covenants are certainly not a new thing. The point of a covenant is not restrictions or to exclude people, but to have meaningful standards and expectations because they help contribute to both personal growth and communal growth.

The framework of the covenant will be John Wesley’s original rules for the “Societies and Class Meetings.” Watch Over One Another in Love and Help one another to: 1. Do no harm 2. Do good 3. Attend to all the ordinances of God.

3. Final 10 to 15 minutes of Cell Meeting: Checking in with the Covenant.

The hope is that encouragement and invitation happen, as well as loving accountability- not judgment or guilt. This translates as encouragement and invitations to actively engage in Christian practices in all areas of life, which included active participation in the life and activities of GVUMC. To participate in the “ordinances of God or spiritual practices of: worship, service, and generous giving of time, service, prayers, and money. This is an attempt to every week connect with the larger body that is GVUMC and over time a deeper understanding of the importance of that connection

4. Each Cell will have 2 leaders.

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Reading The Same Chapter of Scripture a Day for a week

PASTOR TOM

What I am inviting you to practice is a variation of a very old spiritual discipline called "**Lectio divina**" (pronounced "lec-tsee-oh di-vee-nah). This is Latin for "sacred reading," "divine reading," or "holy reading," is a spiritual practice that has been in use for over a thousand years. It was originally practiced by monks who spent a large portion of their days praying and reading Scripture. While reading they noticed that at times individual words, phrases, or verses seemed to leap off of the page with a special personal importance. Have you had the same experience? These special words or verses can give a sense of encouragement, comfort, thankfulness, or conviction that often applies to present situations and can draw us closer to God.

Lectio divina is an intimate way of communicating with the Lord. All too often in prayer and worship, we talk to God but don't give him a chance to communicate back to us. Lectio divina employs God's own words to have a personal conversation with him. – *(From Biblegateway Website)*

I recommend just reading the chapter the first day and then meditating on it. And not looking for what scholars have to say about it. Do that later, which is ok. The point is to give God a chance to speak to you and for your thoughts, understandings, and experiences come first before getting someone else's opinion.

It is ok to "parse" or ask questions about what you are reading, but remember the bigger goal is not just to gain new information about the text, but for God to speak to you and for you to experience God. Take notes if possible, so that you can share insights with your group or just have them to refer to.

- Do try to read it everyday. You really will experience the Word of God- and the teaching, practices, and principles God wants you to know- finding you and then showing up in your thoughts and speech and actions throughout the week.

The **Methodist Movement** was born, and grew, from several "methods." One was **Class Meetings** or weekly small group gatherings. The other was **reading Scripture together**. John Wesley believed—as do I—that reading the Bible was not meant to be only a solo or individual endeavor. For Wesley, the Bible was a key means to salvation! Thus, reading, reflecting, talking about, and sharing experiences and understandings of Scripture was meant to be practiced in a group.

The objective is to move beyond just gaining new information and for God's Word to find you and become more real and, thus, grow you. The next objective is to move beyond just sharing information about the text with your Cell: the goal is to move to sharing personal experiences with God and the practice of the Christian faith. Overtime, these conversations will produce trust within the group because personal sharing involves degrees of vulnerability. As well, sharing parts of our individual "stories" helps raise all group participants awareness of God's activity in real life, and serves as a means to influence and impact both the perception of God's presence and activity and each person's practice and application of the Christian faith.

Here are some questions to look at everyday—all or some of them—to help move deeper into the Scripture and be more receptive to God’s Holy Spirit speaking to you and forming you:

What are my general thoughts or reactions to this Chapter?

What did I read today that was either challenging or exciting?

Is there a verse or image or teaching that seems to be grabbing my attention today?

What is God wanting me to know?

Is this pointing to something that I need to do or an area of growth for me?

Is this pointing to something I have done or experienced before in my life?

Is this something I need to share with others as a way to encourage or help them?

Other Things to consider:

Keep some writing material close to your Bible, and take notes. Or make notes of your thoughts or responses to some of the above question on your phone.

Also, try read the same chapter from several different versions of the Bible. Listen to the Chapter being read. *(Bible Gateway gives you audio of the Bible.)*



CELL GROUP

Covenant

“Watching over one another in love.”

The purpose of our Cell group is to help every member of the group grow in their Christian belief and behavior and to contribute to the health and growth of our Grand View Congregation. Signing this covenant is an intentional statement to yourself and others that you want to take more seriously your pursuit practicing—and growing—in your love of God and others. If your Cell decides to live within this covenant, all are asked to honor it lest it become meaningless.

The following promises we make to one another also serve as a map for growing in Discipleship. When we keep our promises to one another, God works through these to achieve our purpose.

With God's Help, I Promise To:

1. Join the rest of the group practicing the original Methodist Class Meeting rules, as given by John Wesley in “watching over one another in love.” Which means, be willing to both receive and give encouragement to one another in the following areas:
 - Doing no harm (to self or others)
 - Avoiding Evil
 - Attending all of the ordinances of God (giving prayers, presence, gifts, service and positive witness to God through the GV congregation. Encouragement for all group members to be actively join you in participating in worship celebrations, cell group, church activities, and giving tithes as a part of practicing faith.)
2. Be present and active at our agreed-upon meeting time. I will notify someone in the group if I will be late or absent. Group time will be a priority.
3. Come to group prepared and to contribute as able: to neither dominate the group conversation nor to remain silent.
4. Pray for the others in the group and our congregation daily.
5. Honor confidentiality: what is discussed in our groups stays within our group. The exceptions would be only if two or more members agree that Pastoral assistance is needed.
6. Honor and respect other members of the group by helping all feel that group time is a safe and caring environment, where all can be heard. Therefore, I will give thoughtful responses and be non- judgmental.
7. Avoid gossip about any member of the group or of the congregation and to immediately lead efforts to resolve any concerns by following the principles of Matthew 18:15-17.
8. Invite and encourage others to be a part of this Cell Group or another Cell Group.
9. Be aware of the witness I am giving both within the walls of GVUMC and out in the community as to how a Christian acts, speaks, and responds.
10. Be used by God as a means of grace to both build up the GV congregation and to offer Jesus Christ to those who do not yet know Him or follow Him.

Signed _____ Date _____