

Philosophy of Community Group Ministry at Red Mountain Church (01-July-2007)

Part 1: So What Gives? (or A Basic Theology of Church and Community)

The Purpose of the Church: Christ has given us the Church for the gathering and perfecting of the saints. That means the Church is to be the means or vehicle for people to repent and trust in Jesus for the first time (the gathering of the saints), and is then to be the means for them to grow in that repentance and trust of Christ (the perfecting of the saints). (See Eph. 4:11-13).

The Purpose of Community Groups: Since Community Groups (CGs) are a ministry of Red Mountain Church (RMC), and RMC is a local expression of the Church universal, then the purpose of CGs is the same as the purpose of the Church—to create an avenue for people to see for the first time their need for repentance and faith in Christ (gathering), and then to increase and grow in that repentance, faith and new obedience (perfecting).

This is another way of stating RMC's purpose: "to embrace and embody the gospel in the Church and among all the people of Birmingham with the hope of seeing the joy and peace of Christ's kingdom come to our city." As we live our lives together in community and grow together in the gospel, people will be brought into the Church, and the restoration of God's kingdom will spill out from the Church into our neighborhoods and city. (See Eph. 1:7-10; 2:11-21; 1 Cor. 12:4-7)

The Church and Community Groups Together Are:

A Worshiping Community (Hearing from God): God is to be the center of *worship*. We worship God because of his mercy to us as shown in the gospel. As we are drawn to worship God, we experience his grace, joy, and freedom and are drawn *together as a community*. We put a great deal of trust and reverence into worship as we believe it is the place where God meets with his people. The value of worship is not determined by our own experiences or feelings. Rather our hope is that God meets with his people by the simple means of grace (preaching, sacraments, prayer, etc.) that he describes in his Word. (See Acts 17:22-27; Ex. 20:4-6)

A Welcoming Community (The Magnetism of the Gospel): CGs do not try to distinguish between the reaching and the equipping of the saints. Both will happen as Christians love God and each other. When people are believing and living out the gospel, others will be drawn to the CG. People will be open about their failures, faults, and sin, because they have peace and hope enough in Christ to refrain from covering up those failures. This makes a group *welcoming and inviting*. Since there is no sinner or sin that is too much for God to handle, there is no sinner or sin too shocking for a Christian community to come alongside. (See Rom. 6:5-6; Eph. 4:15-16).

A Growing and Serving Community (The Outward Face of the Gospel): The Church fosters and encourages people *growing* in the grace of Jesus as they break bread together, worship, hear God's word, and pray. It is out of this growth in grace that people will begin to *serve* sacrificially to bring justice and mercy to their CGs and neighborhoods.

As people grow in their faith and serve others, the Church will grow outwardly by establishing local churches throughout our cities, nations, and the world. Growth will not always be numerical, but can also be qualitative as Christians are growing in the grace of Christ and becoming more faithful in the small things of daily life. (1 John 3:16-18; 1 Thess. 5:11, 14; Matt. 28:16-20; Luke 16:10).

Part 2: So What's Next? (or Practical Outworkings)

Loving God and Loving Each Other in Gatherings: CGs are a place where we come together in homes to fellowship, worship, pray, hear God's word, and minister to those in need (a.k.a. The Five Elements of CGs). We put a great deal of trust in these five elements because of our foundations (see Part 1: Basic Theology of Church and Community). This should create a place that takes into account various stages of faith: those who are investigating Christianity, those who are beginning to believe, and those who have trusted Christ for a while. We are not ashamed of the gospel, but we recognize and resist the tendency to act and speak in ways that assume our audience is Christian (or that everyone is of the same denomination).

Neighborhoods: As much as reasonably possible, members and leadership will attend a CG in the neighborhood in which they live. This physical proximity will lend itself to an increase in sharing, familiarity, and common mission in each others' lives. It will also tend to discourage the formation of CGs along lines of affinity or cultural similarities (age, marital status, career, children or lack thereof, etc.).

Leadership: Leaders and apprentices of CGs are members of RMC (or at least in the "queue" to become members) who have agreed to formally take responsibility for three aspects of a particular CG: organization (greeting new people, emailing, organizing meals, childcare, etc), facilitating meetings (leading discussion), and shepherding (keeping up with group members and their lives). Leaders are encouraged not to actually do all parts of all three aspects themselves—simply to make sure these things are happening. Delegation of these responsibilities is strongly encouraged.

Leaders are not alone in their efforts. They can expect the officers (Elders and Deacons) in their respective neighborhoods to help with the oversight, shepherding, care of church members, and pastoral issues that arise.

Community Group Members: Anyone who joins a RMC Community Group. CG members are assigned by the CG Coordinator or invited by a friend who attends the group. CG members do not have to be RMC members or even regular attenders of RMC. However, all RMC members are expected to be formally part of a CG (even if they are unable to attend consistently due to work, health or other considerations). Children of group members are also considered part of the CG and are welcome to attend with their parents. CGs can hire group babysitters at church expense and can also have some "no-children" evenings and events, but children should not be automatically excluded from CGs in general. RMC members are asked to attend, engage, and serve in their community group as much as they are reasonably able.

Justice and Mercy: CGs will seek to give primary attention and care to the members of their group. As the needs of our neighborhoods and cities can often seem overwhelming or too big to embrace, a CG gives a somewhat more manageable community on which to focus our care and attention. When making decisions about how to bring peace and restoration to others, it's a good idea to start with one's own CG. Leaders should consider whether there are practical needs within the group (e.g. moving, bills, childcare, employment, meals, home repair, etc), or spiritual needs (prayer, counsel, listening, exhorting, etc.). CGs are also encouraged to gather together to minister and act justly to others in their community. In all these matters, CGs are the first responders to needs of mercy and justice at RMC. But CGs are *not* expected to "fix" or carry the full burden of difficult circumstances or hardships within their group. If anything becomes too difficult for a group, CG leadership should bring these issues to the officers of RMC in their neighborhood while making all efforts to protect the privacy of those involved.