



Things I Would Change in Discipleship Ministry

by Dr. James Hicks

Discipleship is a lifetime passion. The first time I presented the gospel to a stranger was between the sixth and seventh grade. After the conversion, I did not know what to do, so I invited the person to come to my house for dinner, which was a surprise to my Mom! That event initiated my first attempt at intentional discipling.

Recently, I retired after pastoring and teaching discipleship for 47 years. In that time, I have discipled those with a minimum of church background and those who were advanced in their spiritual journey and had a desire to disciple others. At this stage of my life, I'm asking myself what I would have done differently if I were to start anew today. Here are some of my reflections.

- 1. I would meet with my discipleship facilitators at least weekly.** Frequent meetings provide support and increased motivation for disciple facilitators. The meetings are a crucible for shared learning. These meetings also provide crucial insight into the situations that are affecting each family and provide a launching pad from which those needs can be prayerfully addressed. Experience has taught me that meeting with my leaders, or not meeting with them, directly impacts not only the life of the groups but also the overall ministry of the church. For me, effective group leader meetings are essential to the church's mission as much as effective church board meetings.
- 2. I would be more sensitive in deciding how long a class or group should meet.** It is always good to make expectations clear from the very beginning. I discovered that it takes eight months for the average group to bond and develop trust with one another. In my last church, our best discipleship groups met from nine months up to one and a half years. Typically, a group that

began with 15 to 20 people finished with closer to 10. While the loss of people from the group is discouraging, the benefits have been significant. Over the years, many full-time pastors and godly lay people have come out of these groups. The time and effort is worth the investment.

3. **I would have a greater variety of groups.** Ministering in a large university town where a variety of world religions promotes doctrinal confusion, our church primarily provided Bible classes, book studies, and doctrinal training. For a while, we had other kinds of classes, which would last a shorter length of time and did not require as much group bonding. These classes included subjects on marriage, parenting, life's disciplines, etc., and lasted approximately six to eight weeks. As I look back, I am thankful for our church's dedication to serious discipleship; however, I wish we had taken advantage of ministering to people in a greater variety of ways.
4. **I would be more sensitive to the balance of time spent with the groups.** Over the years, it seemed to me that group leaders tended to spend class time favoring one of the following areas: fellowship, study, or prayer. Personally, I am a strong believer in prayer, and I enjoy fellowshipping with class members. However, when I look back, I have favored the study time to ask questions, initiate thinking, and direct opinions to a spiritual conclusion.

I love the ebb and flow of group dynamics and the idea of building strong bonds. Nevertheless, I need to remember, all three areas are critical for the total health of the group. Some groups may need more time for fellowship, study, or prayer, so prayerful flexibility on the leader's part is crucial. In any case, over the lifetime of the class, these three areas should be balanced.

Final Reflections

Leading small groups is like parenting. When you look back, you realize you made the best decisions with the information you had at the time. In surprising and miraculous ways, you planted or watered when you could, but God always brought the increase. Furthermore, you realize looking back is never enough. You must always look forward for the next person God will bring across your path. Then once again, it will be your joy to point the way, teach the truth, and walk along with someone else toward the life more abundant.

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