**When Only Two or Three Can Gather**

**By Ben Connelly**

As group sizes shrink, discipleship opportunities can grow.

In 2006, I was leading ministry at a local university for a church. For years, my ministry drew students off campus in large groups to hang out with their mostly Christian friends, and we hoped they would bring non-believers to church gatherings. They rarely did. Over time, our team became convinced we needed to flip the whole ministry on its head.

For the next two years, we pushed students to stay on campus. We equipped them to disciple one another and to minister to the nonbelievers in their dorm rooms and apartments who would never come to a traditional church gathering. Often this discipleship occurred when roommates reached out to their neighbors, or in the context of informal, one-on-one friendship.

God used this shift and these smaller groups of people who were present and intentional with neighbors and friends to make and mature disciples. After a few years of prayerful experimentation with this ministry model, we started a new church with a philosophy that was essentially the same. For the past 10 years, our discipleship priority at the City Church in Fort Worth, Texas, has been building smaller groups of individuals, couples, and families who have committed to discipleship and mission together. Ours is not the only church that has been working in this philosophy. A movement of missional communities stretches back for years across the globe.

The coronavirus pandemic has flipped many normal ministry paradigms on their heads. As different parts of the world start navigating various ways to come out of quarantine, we'll experience more changes. But large gatherings will largely remain off-limits, at least for the foreseeable future. Thankfully, Jesus promised that “where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them” (Matt. 18:20). Is healthy discipleship possible when that becomes the upper limit of regular physical gatherings? Yes! Over nearly 15 years of leading small, embedded communities as the primary discipleship venue for our church, I’ve picked up on a few principles that may be helpful in the ever-changing COVID scene, even when only two or three can gather.

1. Groups of Two or Three Help Each Person Become Deeply Known

Small groups may seem like a ubiquitous part of ministry in 2020. But despite annual campaigns and regular pushes for people to “get connected,” “join a group,” or “go deeper,” many churches have individuals who have not taken that step. In a season where people are barred from their offices, deprived of social obligations, and stuck at home, they have an increased felt need for others.

When our church plant grew to about 80 people, we had to make a vital decision: Was it more important that I (the only staff pastor) know everyone on a surface level or that some leader know everyone at a deeper level, even if it wasn’t me? Our decision to prioritize the latter initially pressed against my pastoral identity: I needed to be needed! But after making this change in direction, I couldn’t deny how much better our new approach was. Our elders, who oversaw 10-30 people each, carried out the actual shepherding of the flock (1 Pet. 5:2) Leaders pursued members, learning and tending to “small” needs that had been expressed, rather than letting them get buried by people wondering if they should bother a busy leader (me). Pastors and leaders addressed divisions and problems long before they became emergency counseling issues. In short, while I had to remind myself I wasn’t the chief shepherd of my church, God's people were better shepherded by equipped leaders, each caring for fewer people.

Everyone wants to be heard, listened to, valued, and cared for. Yet in any church of over 10 or so people, it’s impossible for a pastor to know everyone at that level. In many churches, it’s hard for every person to even have that kind of relationship with a church staff member or elder. But if we equip and deploy leaders well, small groups are one of the best ways to meet this need.

2. Two- or Three-Person Discipleship Can Continue When Other Programs Freeze

Over the past month, I’ve been on multiple calls with church leaders whose staffs are wondering how to manage their workdays: If bands aren’t rehearsing, teachers aren’t leading classes, and other church programs are on hold for the coming weeks (or months), how will thousands of vocational church leaders spend 40-plus hours each week? On one hand, many could likely use a season of rest, personal soul care, and dwelling with God. But that’s a topic for a different article.

On the other hand, there is no better way for ministry staffs to use this time than to be redeployed into discipleship. Per the first point, what better use of our freed-up time than having our leaders know, pursue, love, care for, and shepherd individual members of God’s flock? For example, I know some churches whose staffs are dividing up membership lists and regularly checking in with each person. The coronavirus is hitting at a time of prolific technology. Why can’t staff spend their weekdays reaching out one on one to church members through group texting apps, email, or video calls? One pastor recently told me, “The old-school pastoral house visit has never been as vital as it is now—but we must find a way to do it in a season when people won’t even open their doors!”

In our own church, some of our staff members have started new digital groups to bring two to five church attenders into discipleship relationships. After communicating a few set meeting times during the week and posting an accessible (but secure) link to video calls, these leaders are proactively pursuing these areas of discipleship, through check-ins, prayer, and sermon discussion, at a time when their normal jobs and church programs are on hold.

3. Groups of Two or Three Can Provide Connection for the Isolated

Long before “social distancing” and “shelter in place” became part of our vernacular, people have longed for the kind of connection that increases as group sizes shrink. Whether it’s attending counseling sessions or asking a neighbor for help, we often feel much safer opening up to fewer people. For some, even thinking about sharing an opinion in a group larger five triggers anxiety. Applying this general principle in our current challenging season drives leaders to create human connection for those who need it most: shut-in neighbors, people dealing with shame and guilt, people new to town, and more. Even as we’re forced to isolate, we see increased longing for human connection.

One local church leader named Bobby shared with me the story of a reclusive neighbor, whom we’ll call John. Age made it difficult for John to get out of his house, but John hadn’t responded to offers of help or prayer or even many simple greetings for the first year Bobby lived next door to him. But when an unexpected family death rocked John, Bobby learned that his attempts to show his neighbor love and care had paid off. John reached out, and after months of walking through grief and building a relationship, he joined a small group and later became a believer.

An occasional check-in from a safe distance can ease initial interactions with others in isolation. Maybe it looks like asking, “How are you doing today?” or “I’m doing a Target pickup; do you need anything?” With neighbors, it could be prayer time (from our respective sidewalks) or an invitation to a game night or happy hour (online) with folks from down the street or across the nation. Consider a phone call to an old acquaintance, or a phone number dropped in the mailbox of a vulnerable party who won’t even come to the window, “just in case you need to talk.” Any of this can mean the world to people.

4. Many Members Can Be Equipped to Digitally Disciple Two or Three People

In own my ministry experience, I’ve found that many people think they need to be expert theologians and experienced leaders (and thus feel unqualified) to lead home groups of 10 or church classes of 50. But if asked to meet regularly with one or two sisters or brothers in Christ, the “Oh, I can do that” responses skyrocket. If that's true in “normal” life, it’s even truer in seasons that feel more urgent.

In many churches, leaders are seeing congregations adopt a “wartime mentality.” Folks are eager to understand how they can jump in and do their part. They will also need equipping from church leaders to know how and where they can best serve and lead in their own contexts.

Right now, we are creating step-by-step PDFs for small groups and families with guided questions, a few pages of commentary on a given biblical text, and a list of best practices for video calls. Anyone stepping forward to lead needs personal touch points with pastors, staff, or other leaders, so they can have a weekly Zoom call with group leaders before they lead their online discussions to answer questions, pray, and encourage. And since new leaders will need some development, our church is moving all of our material for starting new groups into an online format, where pastors and staff can walk interested parties through it digitally. As people increasingly want to play their unique part in the body of Christ (Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12), it is God’s mandate to church leaders to equip them for the work of ministry (Eph. 4:11–13).

5. Groups of Two or Three Allow People to Breathe

Part of discipleship involves helping people breathe—even laugh and find joy—in hard moments. Whether in person or online, smaller, less formal meetings can create space for this in ways large formal gatherings cannot. In my neighborhood last week, six dads gathered in the street; one taped two yardsticks together to create a “social distancing stick,” which gave the others a good laugh. Chris, another local pastor, helped his neighborhood host a food truck, in part to support one neighbor’s suddenly decreased business. They provided an online sign-up for time slots so people didn’t all show up at once.

When I was on sabbatical a few years ago, I read a piece of advice from Jack Miller to a younger pastor: “Being a Christian is fun.” Miller’s words helped me, but if fun is too flippant a word for you right now, maybe we can at least agree that Christians can find joy in all circumstances; that God’s promises that are true in easier times are just as true in harder times; and that we can find peace, hope, and even rest in uncertainty. Smaller groups give space to remind our churches of these biblical truths and to put them into immediate practice.

Church leaders, church members, and the unchurched all need meaningful connections, reminders of God’s promises, and a chance to breathe and laugh—in this season as much as ever. But we also must remember the deep hope we have that surpasses any season and any ministry philosophy: The Christian faith and God’s church has often thrived in times of crisis. They have done so in part because every Christian is filled with the Spirit of God, and God has given each of us his written Word. God has always worked through everyday people. And in this season when only a few people can gather in person, I wholeheartedly expect to see people who might never find their way behind a pulpit step up as faithful leaders to disciple and care for others. Whatever a pastor’s role is during this pandemic, it includes equipping and unleashing the priesthood of all believers to do amazing works of ministry.

Ben Connelly is director of training for Saturate. After 19 years serving in local churches together, Ben and his wife, Jess, now get to serve disciple makers and planter couples across the world, as well as churches and organizations with a desire for sending.

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2020/may-web-exclusives/two-three-gathered-small-groups-ministry-covid19.html>

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This article may not be written by an Apostolic author, but it contains many excellent principles and concepts that can be adapted to most churches. As the old saying goes, “Eat the meat. Throw away the bones.”