

Roger Walton: Disciples Together – Discipleship, formation and small groups

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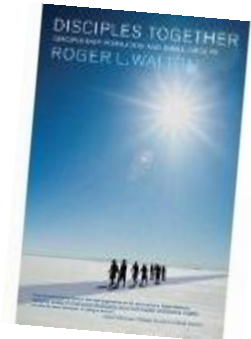
Notes Alison Morgan Sept 2014

Introduction

Roger Walton is Chair of the W Yorks Methodist District.

Research into the role of small groups in churches in the NE of England – written up in various journals, see p x. Many people join small groups with the hope of strengthening and developing their discipleship – but how does it all work?

‘My conviction, like that of the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, is that the journey of discipleship is not intended to be made alone but in the company of others. We are to be disciples together. The form this shared journeying takes is not in itself the most important point. It could be via small groups or in other forms of relationship. The key thing is that we are not alone in the journey; we need the insights, encouragement, gifts and truth-telling of others along the way.’xi



SECTION 1 : FORMATION

He suggests there are 3 primary formative agents of Christian disciples:

1. Participation in mission
2. Participation in worship
3. Participation in intentional Christian communities

1. Forming Christian disciples – Mission

Mark 1 and the description of the call of Peter and Andrew gives us it in a nutshell – to be a disciple is to be called by Jesus, to follow Jesus, to be changed, to let go of everything to engage in God’s mission. Change will occur as we engage in mission (1.15). The process starts immediately – as they witness healings and find themselves accepting the hospitality of a tax collector. ‘All this is more like an action movie than an initiation into a philosophy.’ p9. Jesus offers no structured teaching till ch4! The places into which the disciples follow Jesus and the people they meet are central to their learning and transformation.

Oscar Romero: ‘I am going to speak to you simply as a pastor, as one who, together with his people, has been learning the beautiful but harsh truth that the Christian faith does not cut us off from the world but immerses us in it, that the church is not a fortress set apart from the city. The church follows Jesus who lived, worked, struggled and died in the midst of a city, in the polis.’

Matthew also emphasises meeting with unexpected groups, in the Sermon on the Mount. Charles Elliott translates ‘blessed’ as ‘you are in the right place’ when you are with...

2. Forming Christian Disciples – worship

Luke starts differently from Mark – he takes us straight to the Temple. And in the last chapter the disciples are also found in the Temple (24.53). Luke’s account starts and ends with worship. Why is worship important in discipleship? Well, we become like things we most love and desire – worshipping God shapes us; and as we open ourselves to him he is able to meet with us and transform us. Worship engages us in a larger narrative; it engages us in meaning-making; it forms attitudes and orientation; it involves encountering difference; it opens us to God’s grace. Worship is a primary location of formation.

3. Forming Christian disciples – community

John also has his own emphasis – relationship. He starts with John the Baptist, pointing his own disciples to Jesus. He focusses on love (13, 15). The theme of loving one another continues in the letters of John. For John it is the quality of relationship which points to Jesus – and he himself is the disciple whom Jesus loved.

Communities exert huge influence over those who belong to them. Any setting (family, college, church, organisation) can be seen as a 'community of practice' in which people over time learn to participate. Like an apprentice, newcomers absorb the nature of the community, its purpose and activity by social interaction with members of that community, and by using the learning resources available within it. The community even provides language. Its life, rhythm and practices are formative for those who engage in them. Social learning theory emphasizes the way the individual changes as s/he interacts with others in a particular life/learning context, aligning himself in order to participate in it. For us the issue is not *whether* church congregations will form people (they will) but *what* they will form in people. And a problem for us is what happens when people participate in a number of different communities of practice with different values, world views and outlooks – how do they retain a single sense of self, or single view of what is ultimately true?

Almost all Paul's correspondence with the earliest Christian communities is about lifestyles, virtues and values – how to establish a context in which the good news of Jesus is demonstrated. Constant emphasis on the body of Christ, on the need to create a community that rings true with the message they have received. Bonhoeffer wrote on *Life Together* – following a structure of prayer, a pattern of communal living. The underlying purpose is to enable people to become aware of their own issues, practise serving and truth telling, confront and confess sin, rely more on the grace of God made known in the cross.

4. Forming Christian disciples – Christian education

Matthew is the teacher's gospel, structuring Jesus' teaching into 5 blocks echoing the 5 books of Moses, and using mnemonic techniques (illustrations, parables, woes).

Christian education is a secondary source for formation; it does not of itself form disciples; it may inform understanding but if not drawing on and working with the experience of disciples in mission, worship and community it will be ineffective. *Disciples cannot be formed if these primary energies are absent in their ongoing experience.*, 42. It's like swimming – you can learn what it is and why you need to be able to do it in a classroom; you can learn about principles, strokes etc – but you can't learn to do it except actually in water. 'Christian education is the planned, purposeful provision of learning opportunities to support the formation of disciples and to strengthen the life and work of the Church.' It's not just for young people.

First major task is working with the rhythm of discipleship. This includes

- helping people feel at ease with the language of faith, so they can talk about God and their own lives in the light of their faith – we live in a culture that has no such vocabulary; part of this is learning to pray
- Exploring a basic framework of belief
- Practising Christian lifestyle values

Second major task of Christian education is to build the body of Christ. Includes meeting, welcoming and connecting.

Third major task is to extend and enhance mission, worship and community by enabling appraisal, drawing on tradition and generating new knowledge.

SECTION 2 : SMALL GROUPS & DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION

Role of small groups is increasingly recognised: 'we are about discipleship, and we believe that it happens best in small groups' – Jim Putnam. Methodist church and CofE have both begun to collect statistics on small groups. So widespread that Helen Cameron identifies the small group church as a new form of church, p67.

5. The value of small groups

Small group often defined as one with fewer than 25 members. *A small group is an intentional association of between 2 and 25 people over time for a shared purpose, where meaningful interaction is expected in fulfilling the group's task.* 71.

Established uses include:

- Care and support
- Learning – pooling information, expressing opinions, gaining insights, sharing problems, sharing different abilities, learning new ways of thinking
- Achieving a shared task
- Sustaining alternative values and commitments

In a Christian context they support members in moving between worship and mission; build the body of Christ; extend and enhance worship and mission by encouraging appraisal, exploration of the tradition and generation of new knowledge.

6. Small group explosion: church small groups in the 20th century

1900-40 – setting up of study groups following the ‘1919 report’

1940-70 – house groups (added a pastoral dimension to the study groups)

1960-2000 – groups for mission and discipleship (influence of Latin America’s base Christian communities and S Korea’s cell church.) In his study in NE England, over a third of churches identified themselves as having cells or seeking to be cell churches. See Cell UK and the 4ws. Charismatic movement and new churches also adopted small groups.

2001 survey found that 37% of English churchgoers said they belonged to a small group for prayer and Bible study, and only 1% said there is no opportunity in their church to join a small group.

7. Research on Church-related small groups

His research in 2010 found high levels of satisfaction by small group members. When asked how they had helped them:

- 77% said they made them more confident in their faith
- 76% said they made them more able to connect their faith and everyday life
- 72% said it made them more accepting and forgiving of others
- 79% said it had strengthened their prayer life
- 68% said it had given them more confidence in speaking about their faith to others
- 87% said it had brought them closer to God

People value most the relationships and feeling of support.

Research also suggest that churches with small groups are more cohesive, with a stronger sense of belonging and a shared identity; small group members attend worship more frequently; small group churches are more diverse and more likely to grow.

Largest research project on small groups was undertaken by Robert Wuthnow in the 90s in the US. He saw small groups as providing faith communities with a resource for responding to significant shifts in patterns of society and the understanding of faith. He is most worried by the way secular values infiltrate members’ thought forms and lifestyles via the small group – ‘secularization from within.’

Summary p 122

- Small groups are highly valued by participants. Surveys consistently return highly positive evaluations of the experience.
- Small groups create a sense of community and provide pastoral care. Indeed at this time this may be their greatest strength as it chimes in with the wider needs of society for community and support at a time of rapid change. If a group lacks other tasks and directions it will default to a pastoral model.
- Small groups act as mediating agents in churches:
 - They offer a sense of intimacy in large and/or growing churches.
 - They provide the opportunity for people to deepen their sense of belonging and commitment.
- Small groups have a capacity to help people own and develop faith. Their slight distance from the institution gives a degree of freedom to explore and express belief combined with the authority to work out faith for themselves.
- Small groups tend to replicate the value of the church or other communities to which they belong. Thus they provide ways for people to be socialized into the values and practices of the church but can also be the means of resistance to those values in some contexts.
- Small groups borrow from and are shaped by forces in wider culture:
 - They meet the needs of people for community and friendship.
 - They are influenced by the popular models around in wider culture and particularly by the self-help group model.
- Small groups are not intrinsically missional. They are not, at least in the UK, a major means of outreach, neighbourhood involvement or an avenue to involvement with issues of justice.

8. Small groups and discipleship formation

A process for developing a small group ministry:

1. Decide what the groups are for – what do you expect to see? What values do you wish to be at the heart of your church? Cell UK and Phil Potter both suggest 5 core values – every member involvement, growth as disciples, creating community, doing evangelism, encountering God.
2. Allocate resources
3. Value leaders
4. Devolve responsibility
5. Reviewing and developing

9. Disciples together – small groups in theological perspective

There are 3 theological views of small groups:

1. The small group is church – NT churches were in effect small groups (Acts 5.42, Acts 12.12, Rom 16.14f, 1 Cor 1.16; Col 4.15, Philemon 1.2)
2. Small groups are little churches within the church – the Reformation gave strong impetus to small group gatherings; small groups can become a renewalist strand. IN the C17th Philip Spener coined the phrase *ekkesiolae in ekklesia*. Wesley saw his small groups as channels for renewal. But can lead to separation.
3. Small groups are an expression of *koinonia*

None of these offers an adequate understanding. Perhaps it's about companions on the way. Joining a small group is a symbolic commitment to being disciples together. The Church is a pilgrim people.