

COMMITTEES OR DISCIPLESHIP GROUPS?

Should the local congregation be organized around committees or Discipleship groups? One does not have to choose between one or the other. Both are obviously needed, but committees and Discipleship groups do not serve the same function. There will always be a need for the Staff-Parish Relations Committee, the Finance Committee, and the Trustees Committee,



but most of the other work of the Church can be done by Discipleship groups focusing on specific tasks. There will also be a need for overseeing all of the activity of committees and Discipleship groups by the Council on Ministries or Administrative Council.

Purpose

While the purpose of committees is to transact business, the purpose of Discipleship groups is to transform people—both ourselves and others. This does not mean that transformation never takes place in committees or that business is never transacted in Discipleship groups. What it means is that business is the primary focus of committees while transformation is the primary focus of Discipleship groups.

Leadership

Most committees have one leader, usually called the chairperson. Some committees have co-chairpersons, but rarely does a committee have more than two leaders. On the other hand, Discipleship groups share leadership. Every time they meet, a different person leads. Members of the Discipleship group are accountable to one another, not to a single leader.

Agenda

Both committees and Discipleship groups have an agenda, but their agendas differ considerably. In the committee the agenda is usually written down and sometimes followed. In Discipleship groups, the agenda is rarely, if ever, written down, and like committees, sometimes not followed. In the committee issues or projects are discussed, sometimes debated; and members of the committee are expected to either do the work, or recruit

others to help do the work. In the Discipleship group members support one another in discovering and fulfilling their various spiritual gifts. Sometimes members of a Discipleship group focus on doing the work together, but this is not viewed as necessary as it is within committees.

The chart below describes the essential differences between the committee and a Discipleship group.

COMMITTEE	DISCIPLESHIP GROUP
Focuses on business	Focuses on transformation
Has one leader	Everyone takes a turn leading
Expects others to help	Supports others in their ministries
Asks, "What needs to be done?"	Asks, "What is my spiritual gift?"

It might be easy to see how Discipleship groups can work in the area of Evangelism, but what about Missions, Christian Education, and Caring Ministries, to name a few work areas that are traditionally organized into committees? The difficulty in organizing these areas by committee is that we tend to recruit people to do what needs to be done instead of creating ministries which are expressions of people's spiritual gifts. This is one of the major causes of burn out. People who do what they feel gifted to do and enjoy doing, do not get burned out, unless, of course, they have more to do than they can possibly do.

At first Discipleship groups seem disorganized and unable to carry out all the tasks that need to be done to make a full service congregation. That is true as long as one defines what needs to be done in terms of a list of specific activities found in the Discipline. If, however, a congregation focuses on the spiritual gifts and talents of its members and creates activities and programs in accordance with those gifts and talents, then a congregation is doing what it can do best. No single congregation needs to do everything.

Discipleship groups could be organized around common spiritual gifts and interests. Those who possess the gifts of teaching could meet together, and those who have special gifts in caring ministries could meet together. The same might be true of the other work areas, but the model that should be followed is that of the Discipleship group.

Coordination

How does everything then get coordinated? The answer is simple. It gets coordinated at the Council on Ministries or the Administrative Council.

Someone from every Discipleship group needs to attend the primary meeting where coordination takes place. The same person does not need to represent his or her group every time and it would be preferable if the same person does not, for leadership in the Discipleship group is passed around. The main point is that representatives of all the Discipleship groups are present to make their contribution and to inform others about everything the congregation has to offer.

Class Leaders or Discipleship Stewards

Not everyone will join a Discipleship Group. There needs to be a group of Class Leaders or Discipleship Stewards. The former term comes out of our Wesleyan tradition, but the latter term better defines the task and so I'll use that term. The Discipleship Steward should be a member of a Discipleship Group, but his or her responsibilities move beyond the group to nurturing those in the congregation who are not part of a Discipleship group. The task of the Discipleship Stewards is to make regular contact with persons not involved in a Discipleship Group. This group should meet on a regular basis, perhaps monthly, with the pastor(s). The purpose of this meeting is twofold: (1) to share information and concerns with the pastor(s), and (2) to suggest creative ideas for new ministries based on the information and concerns gathered.

United Methodism needs to return to its roots, which means moving away from the committee structure to Discipleship groups. The only person who can make this happen in any meaningful way is the lead pastor. The way to begin is to work with the lay leader(s) and other key persons who are capable of forming Discipleship groups. If one needs to choose between joining a committee or a Discipleship group, the priority needs to be given to the Discipleship group.

James T. Reuteler, Ph.D.
Pastor of Christian Discipleship
Grace United Methodist Church
4905 E. Yale Avenue
Denver, Colorado 80222
jreuteler@comcast.net

