

Dialogue

Volume 1 Issue 4

Strength for the church's journey into wholeness in Christ

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The subject: Being a Circle of Hope in Jesus Christ Open to All People.

Thanks to all the writers who have offered their wisdom, opinions and care to stimulate our discussion this quarter. As you read these thoughts, we hope you'll let God broaden your horizon to see all the people he loves and see all the ways you could love them. We are convinced that God's heart is open to everyone and the way to eternity is free. But how to make that all important connection—that's the question.

Reaching across the Walls that Divide Us

We started a cell whose intent was to focus on issues surrounding race: most of us weren't comfortable with the term reconciliation at that point. This was an experiment for me. I had not previously worked with a cell that tried to tackle an issue. This group of about 6-8 adults was predominantly white, with some African-American thrown in. In the beginning we spent several months just coming to terms with where we were at individually. We received some biblical instruction on why we should care but mostly it was just us working through our feelings and hearing different points of view. For several months we operated like this and it worked because the people involved were committed and I think people were learning about themselves and others.

The idea of having a cell focus on a specific issue is a difficult one. It can be good in that it heightens the members' awareness of something of which they are ignorant or may spur some on to greater works. There are also pitfalls such as inattention to overall spiritual development or lack of inclusivity. In the end, I believe it to be a difficult one for most to try and would recommend having the issue be secondary to the basic purpose of a cell, to provide a basic Christian community and have multiple entrance points for those who don't know Jesus or don't have a community of faith.

But we were trying it, anyway. We went on as we had begun for several months and then we decided to air a broadcast about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's work in South Africa and open attendance to all who wanted to come. It worked out that basically another cell joined us, and for the next three weeks we met together. We shared some about our own journeys through race and tried to come up with an action plan, with some practical steps for Circle to take, promoting awareness of racial issues. There was much excitement and enthusiasm and then it flamed out. Since then the cell has gone through a transition and we don't focus like we used to on race. The idea now is that we want to be a facilitator within Circle of racial awareness and understanding but that we don't want the issue to dominate our times together as a cell.

Previously, I stated that I believe operating a cell focused on an "issue" is hard for most and that I would not recommend it. One exception to that is if the cell leader has a strong vision which incorporates the cell aspects along with addressing the issue. In our cell I think the leadership (that would include me) didn't have a strong enough grasp of what was going to be needed. We also had to work through our own understanding and feelings on race/reconciliation instead of coming into the cell with a clear direction. While I believe cells are made up of many leaders, and in general should operate with the cell leader being transparent, I do think this

particular type of cell needs a leader whose call and vision for the issue is clear and in the forefront.

I've also made reference to the issue being secondary or not dominating the cells' time together. By saying this I don't mean that we never talk about issues, but that it doesn't always pre-empt the sharing and prayer time people need. Our plan is to use outside activities, particularly some of the items we outlined in the document the two cells prepared, to continue our involvement in racial issues. We will also use these to include the whole congregation by making sure people know about things that are happening. In this way we want to continue to facilitate the dialogue on our particular issue, race.

These are just some of my thoughts on having a cell focus on a particular issue. The good thing about cell life is that it is so varied and there are so many avenues for people to express their giftedness. Whatever we do let's make sure Jesus is the ultimate focus and that we provide a safe community for people to grow in the faith.

Dave Valentine

A Worldly Goods Cell

As we grow in faith and numbers, and as we expect to begin a new expression of Circle of Hope in another Philadelphia neighborhood, I have been putting some prayer time into how Circle Venture will help show God's love in practical ways. This is our reason for being and I am excited about what we are doing now and how that can grow in the next year. I wanted to get us thinking about new places we can go to demonstrate Jesus and build our cells.

I spend quite a bit of time in Circle Venture's first business, Worldly Goods: Imports from around the World. This has given me the unique opportunity to meet new people and share Jesus with them. Eli is one such person. Eli works in the neighborhood, is a newlywed and also a student at Temple. He came in looking for a special gift for his pre-marital counselor, and found a vase. As we got to know each other, I discovered Eli was a committed Orthodox Muslim.

Subsequent to our first meeting, Eli kept in touch, at Worldly Goods and via e-mail. We had some great talks about God's will and what it looks like in our everyday lives. I appreciated making a new friend so different than me. And it was through Circle Venture's expression of God's love in the world that I met Eli.

As I continue to get to know Eli, I look forward to him possibly coming to my cell group. My cell is designed to be a place for people who are connected to Worldly Goods to meet Jesus and his people. We have a number of partners who help out with daily operations, planning and marketing. Of course we meet new customers all the time with whom we build relationships. The "Worldly Goods" cell group is a great place to invite new people and develop relationships with Jesus and each other.

Circle Venture has plans to start new businesses in new places and these will again be tremendous opportunities to meet new people and invite them to know Jesus and enter God's Kingdom. With new opportunities, we keep asking ourselves good questions: What are some other ways we are expressing God's love and providing creative opportunities for people to get in the Kingdom? How am I expressing my gifts to make this happen?

Chris Petersen

The World at Our Doorstep

At the end of the last century the Christian church awoke to the fact that Jesus' command to **GO!** into all the world and make disciples was not being heeded. As people became intentional about obeying the command, dollars were given to enable willing messengers of the Gospel to say goodbye to families and friends and board ships for long voyages to distant lands.

Today the command "**GO!**" hasn't changed, but the world has. What used to be a "foreign field" has come to us. That means that all of us can be involved in sharing the Good

News to people of another culture and not just a globe-trotting few. Somehow, Christians don't seem as intentional about connecting with the alien next door as they can be intentional about crossing the ocean. Is fear of the unknown a reason that we bar the "foreigner" from our friendship?

For instance, why don't take the effort to learn how to effectively communicate to the person with limited use of the English language? We use American jargon assuming the international understands. Well, he's smiling and shaking his head in assent...but in reality he often doesn't know what we're talking about.

We read in Lev.19:34 that we are to treat the stranger among us as one born among us. Becoming a friend as well as a credible messenger is OUR first step in reaching out to internationals. Sharing the Word of God with those from atheistic cultures requires special treatment. Pushing and shoving the Gospel down someone's throat is unacceptable. I often begin by sensitively studying the record of events in Genesis with my international friends. It allows them a gradual approach to the bombshell...God and Creation. Many have never seriously considered it before. Seeing this account as the most credible story of beginnings is THEIR first step in coming to understand who God is and that Jesus Christ is his fleshly embodiment.

So how do people from other countries fit into the American worship service? With difficulty! My experience with Chinese is that when their spiritual senses are awakened, they often go to the Chinese Christian church where they can hear IT in their heart language. After attending an American/English service for sometime, they may become comfortable with people who have befriended them there, but it takes a long time to comprehend church jargon with the speed it is usually spoken. Even words like pastor, minister, bulletin, sermon, congregation are new to them, not to mention salvation, justification, sanctification, etc. If internationals plan to stay in America, they may become intentional about integrating into a group. Here is where a peer group (like our cell groups) is especially beneficial. That's where they find a comfortable niche. A case in point is Li and Basanta Rizal, who are covenant members with others of Circle of Hope. They have been in the U.S. long enough to become bi-cultural. I have appreciated seeing Circle couples partner with them.

First time international visitors at Circle of Hope's worship time may feel it's sort of a twentys-thirtys-something club having a good time but not understanding the contemporary worship setting. Nevertheless, we should keep extending a warm hand of friendship with a sensitive attitude and open mind to try to hear, see and think through the international's ears, eyes and mind. Establishing a one-on-one friendship with an international is both time-consuming and rewarding. Many are looking for an American friend who can not only be a sounding board for grappling with English, but who can provide a deeper look into the American culture. What persons could do that better than Christians... maybe ones from Circle? If you need help in having an international friend with more than a casual hello in mind, let me know. Our goal for them is to find Jesus Christ in whom is eternal life through any avenue that meets their needs.

You can read more on this subject in the September issue of "Brethren in Christ World Missions Today"

Mim Stern

Reaching Out through Worship

I recently had a friend tell me that she didn't want to come to worship with my church because, "They make you do too many 'uncomfortable' things." She explained that she didn't want to be told to hug, clap, pray, stand, sing or talk. "I went to a church once where they had me hold hands with the person next to me and people shared things they wanted to pray about. Then during the singing time the person in the front told everyone to dance. It made me feel so self-conscious. I had never been to a church like that before. It made me feel uncomfortable. I won't go back there again."

This friend of mine was curious about my relationship with Jesus and we talked for a long time, but when it came to me inviting her to worship this was her response. She needed to be reassured that no one was going to make her do anything that she wasn't comfortable doing. She

also needed to know that she wouldn't feel "wrong" for not participating during the meeting if she didn't want to.

It's a difficult thing sometimes for people who have been following Jesus for a long time to remember how it feels to be on the "outside." Our desire to be with Jesus during worship is great and we meet him there. But as worship leaders there is a constant tension in being sensitive to the people who have come to worship Spirit to spirit and those who are witnessing worship for the first time. We desire to be a safe place for all. How do we do this?

First and foremost Christ must be the ultimate worship leader. In Richard Foster's book, *Celebration of Discipline*, he explains it like this; "*Genuine worship has only one leader, Jesus Christ. When I speak of Jesus as the Leader of worship, I mean, first of all, that he is alive and present among his people. His voice can be heard in their hearts and his presence known. We not only read about him in Scripture, we can know him by revelation. He wants to teach us, guide us, rebuke us, comfort us.*"

As the worship leaders genuinely rely on Jesus to guide them during worship, the body will be blessed. It will be as in 1 Corinthians 14:24-25, "*But if an unbeliever comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you!'*"

As we lead worship, bearing in mind the person who may have never been to a worship meeting helps us to rely on Jesus for his guidance. Being sensitive to his spirit means including everyone; even those who may not know how to be included. It is allowing each individual the space and freedom to do as little or as much as they wish during worship. As the unbeliever witnesses believers gathering to worship with holy expectancy coming into the presence of God, they will not need prodding. God's glory will speak volumes.

A vivid picture of this is a conversation I had with a young woman who is in the process of trying to figure out what it means to have a personal relationship with Jesus. It was her first time at worship. I introduced myself to her after the meeting. During our conversation she said, "All through the singing time I was crying. Is that normal?" Her spirit had been ignited by the divine fire. As someone who was new to the church and new to worship, she was included. Spirit had touched spirit. God had drawn her to himself as the ultimate leader of worship.

Angie Petersen

The Cell as a Safe Place to Enter In.

"Zacchaeus! Come on down out of that tree! Don't worry, nobody around me down here is any different from you. I love the fact that you are seeking so earnestly, and I want to spend time with you. Yes- you're messed up and a little quirky, but I don't mind a bit. I like it. I welcome you here in this group. I'm thrilled that you want to know me, and I really want to get to know you. In fact; I love you, friend. Welcome."

Maybe that's kind of the way the dialogue Jesus had with Zacchaeus went, or at least what Jesus communicated to Zacchaeus later that evening when they sat down together (see Luke 19). How marvelous that Jesus does not discriminate! If we want him, he wants us. He even wants us when we don't want him. Bizarre! His heart is open. His way of life defines relationship and points us to the way of building true community.

Our cell groups can be that kind of community when we are open to the people hanging out in trees. Jesus calls us to come together, to be together, to worship him together, to love each other, and to grow. They are a place for seeking — and just about the best place into which a seeker can wander. The small, sometimes intimate setting of a cell group is a safe place for someone to hang out — not to be anonymous, but to hang out and just be who they are. They are a place to encounter real life.

Jesus knew that the way to touch Zacchaeus was to spend time with him. He couldn't do that in the midst of the crowd. He honored Zacchaeus by noticing him and choosing him. The symbol of "the empty chair" in each of our cells represents that person who has yet to be touched

by Jesus. Jesus is present when we come together as believers and is ready to minister to each of us in the way that each of us needs most.

I am quite guilty of worrying more about how my friends may fit into our group rather than just inviting and praying for the Holy Spirit to do whatever work he needs to do. I also have to remind myself that while we may be fostering a safe place to experience the love of Jesus, an encounter with Jesus is not so safe. I expect that most people do not feel safe, but rather exposed. This is between them and the Lord and is part of their journey. However, the environment in the cell should be a comforting one. No matter where a person is spiritually, it is hard to join in a new group. How can we best welcome someone? How can we best help them integrate and become part of us?

1) It helps to share our stories when a new person is welcomed in. Perhaps by sharing a brief (!!) description of why we're in cell, some background info about what we do for work, or answering an interesting but non-threatening question. (Like, "What are your two favorite movies and why?" Perhaps NOT, "Do you believe in pre-tribulation rapture or not?").

2) It will help if we die to our exclusivity. If an inside joke pops out- explain the background. Update the new person on what's been going on. Someone could invite the new person to go out for coffee sometime that week. Without overwhelming a person, we should be intentional about including.

3) It would help if we evaluated if what we do as a cell is conducive to someone new joining in. Perhaps we can strategize and adapt our plans for someone new. Whatever we decide to do, it should be accessible for people at every stage of the journey.

4) It will help if we pray. If our empty chair is currently empty- we need to pray for God to fill it, and be willing as individuals to expect the person who will fill it to cross our paths. (and invite them to come).

Real life happens once we encounter Jesus. Jesus knows this. Thankfully he isn't just limited to us, but when we show up together, he shows up. And he is always ready to invite us to come down out of our trees.

Annette Jeffrey

Why It Is Hard to Build a Safe Place

We pride ourselves in being able to talk about our differences and have healing conflicts at Circle of Hope. We believe the process of dialogue (like this quarterly implies) results in a conscious, safe place for each of us to be affirmed for who we presently are, while, at the same time, each of us is challenged to become more complete as a person in Christ.

This dialogue is deep into the art of love. It is not a foregone conclusion that anyone entering into Christ can engage in it well, right away — most of us don't have an instinct for it. For instance, when one comes to know Jesus, it is hard to get used to the fact that God has loved you without having a negotiation with you about whether you deserve to be loved we find out that He just unilaterally does it. Jesus shows up at the door as "the One who loves you." At the same time, it often takes a while to adjust to the fact that knowing God is introducing new data into your life that challenges old assumptions and reveals new possibilities. Life with God is totally safe; we are saved. At the same time it is challenging; we are incomplete. When we talk to one another about our individual journeys with Christ and our life together with him, these are the two cornerstones of the dialogue. We are safe to have a dialogue, but the dialogue is always challenging. It feels good and scary at the same time when we speak the truth in love.

Most people sit down at the table with Jesus having a set of assumptions that are immediately questioned. Some of their assumptions can be sloughed off like last year's bad fashions that never felt completely comfortable anyway. But a lot of things go very deep. In our country, one of the things that often goes very deep comes directly from the political/social philosophies that run the society. For instance, have you read the Declaration of Independence lately? Here are the big lines:

We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

People believe in those lines. In the early days of the country the church balanced out thinking about “securing these rights” by calling for self-sacrifice and by insisting that everyone was responsible for the common good. That influence has obviously worn away. Today, people come into the church with views that reflect 200 years of “rights” talk. I think they tend to assume three things: 1) the protection of their rights matters more than anything else, 2) the pursuit of happiness, as they define it, is critically important, and 3) “equality” (which means “I have just as much right to be who I am as you do to be who you are”) is not to be questioned.

When we have had dialogue about certain subjects, lately, these assumptions have been brought into the process and they have stirred up the waters of our safe place. I have realized that as a church, we can’t talk about some things without getting dragged into a political discussion. It’s like the Declaration of Independence gets to judge the validity of Jesus, rather than vice versa.

For instance, if we talk about the music we use for worship, some musicians might say that they cannot play “someone else’s” music because it does not resonate with the music they have inside. In some small way that is saying, “You are violating my right to play what I want. I have a right to express myself however I choose.” The safe place replies: “Yes, we love you to express who you are. But this is more than just a safe place for you. There is the love of the others who aren’t like you, and, perhaps even more important, the challenge of hearing music from God.”

Likewise, when we talk about the Biblical parameters for having sex some people assume that their pursuit of “happiness,” when it comes to sex, is more important than a discussion of any channeling of that drive. We dread a public discussion when someone is forced to make revealing statements, but we have plenty of private discussions in which someone is basically saying, “How I express myself sexually is none of your business. I expect you to accept whatever I do as whatever I need to do to be me and find my fulfillment as a person, sexually. “ I think the safe place keeps saying, “Of course, our sexual orientation and drive is a big issue for all of us. You are safe to struggle in whatever way you struggle. But you are more than your search for sexual fulfillment. God has even more fulfilling things for you than that.”

Thirdly, when we talk about race, as we often do, our discussion can often get cluttered with a bewildering array of political philosophies and options. So-called white people sometimes protest that they feel less equal when we advocate true power sharing. So-called people of color sometimes lament that the system will never allow them to be truly equal. It often seems like we are saying, “Equality under the law and in your eyes will satisfy me.” I think the safe place replies, “Our safety comes from being in Christ, not from a perfectly just government. At the same time, both sides in the sin of racism, the dominating and the dominated, must accept the challenge to form a new humanity based on repentance and forgiveness, and on a vision of life lived in the Spirit with a real hope of glory.”

How can we ever be a circle of hope if our dialogue is filled with the divisive politics of a struggle for individual rights, personal happiness and political equality? I have been in numerous discussions this year in which I had a terrible feeling that I was going to lose a friend because Christ could not fit into their politics or into a view they had of themselves that was based more on the Declaration of Independence than on Jesus. It is too bad that “my music” or “my sexuality” or “my race” can get in the way of our love and our pursuit of fullness in Christ. But when we don’t live in our safety or accept our challenges, our self-interest is a convenient rock behind which to hide. We’ve been discovering that we need new assumptions and new skills in order to have the dialogue of love that we think is the glue of our church.

I think we may always feel like we are “getting to” the place where the threat of conflict won’t scare us into silence about the things we all hold dear. At the same time I think being devoted to the art of love is probably the most deeply satisfying thing we can do. I hope we will all hold on to the vision of getting to the place where we can assume our safety in Christ and relish the challenge of always being stretched towards completion.

Rod White