



“Community Groups- Support Groups for Neighborhood Ministries”

COMMENCE PHASE FOUR >>

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The Lord used us to launch beachheads (Neighborhood Ministries) in a couple of neighborhoods in our adopted block. It soon became apparent that we needed to provide a support group for the work. Without the support there would not be the ongoing encouragement, stimulation and prayer to sustain this fruitful work in these neighborhoods. Again, I wasn't certain where we were going or what the Lord had in mind, but I knew we needed each other and the Lord's direction. I recently said to some pastors, who are starting two other missions here in our valley, "I wish I was where you are now. It would be great to start all over and know where I was going." I guess this is the nature of birthing something new.

## RESEDA COMMUNITY GROUP

At first, we only had one group, the Reseda Community Group, made up of those dear friends who started Mission: Reseda with me. The group is now led by our Door-to-Door team leader Anthony Rodriguez from Phase two. Anthony continues to give direction to the group and ministry in our adopted block. Jim Johnson is still involved with Acts of Kindness. Martha Bellamy continues faithfully interceding for Mission: Reseda along with her dear friend Jan Enright. This group supports the work going on in two of the neighborhoods in our adopted block.

We didn't have a home to meet at in our adopted block so for a time we met at Roberto and Sharon Munoz-Flores' home. It was some distance from our adopted block. Later we decided to move back into the neighborhood and meet in our church facility. We would prefer to meet in a home, but until the Lord opens a door we are grateful that we have a place to meet nearby.

As a group we began to think and pray about what God wanted us to do in the neighborhoods. Jeff Erickson came up with an idea that everyone got excited about. It was in the fall of 2008, and Christmas was approaching. Jeff suggested that we hang Christmas lights for free in the neighborhood. Someone asked, "What if they don't have Christmas lights?" Jeff said, "We will provide them." Nadine, Jeff's wife, put together a flyer asking those in the church if they would like to help us, and another flyer letting those in the neighborhood know of our intentions to hang lights. It turned out there were many in the neighborhood who wanted our services. Jeff is a real likeable guy and it was fun to watch the way he related with all of the neighbors. After we hung lights on someone's home he would say, "Come on and help

us hang lights on your neighbor's home." Before long we had a group of neighbors joining us and it gave us an opportunity to connect with them. We began to see the seeds of community being planted. We have done this now for two years and trust is building with our neighbors as they are getting to know us.

Another tradition we've done for two years is Christmas caroling in the neighborhood. The first year we caroled I was thrilled when neighbors Domingo, Juan, and Juan's daughter and grandson joined the group. Our youth group showed up en masse and there was excitement in the air as our group swelled to about 100 people. Our most recent caroling involved even more neighbors than last year, the youth group, and families from church. We ended with hot beverages and cookies at Juan's home. One neighbor had moved to Reseda from another country and said, "I have never experienced anything like this in this neighborhood. Back home we would get together with our neighbors all the time, but I have never seen it here." This neighbor was pointing out the lack of community in our city. It is our hope that we will build this kind of community one neighborhood at a time. With community there is growing trust, and with that growing trust there is a greater opportunity to share the love of God.

The Ericksons told our team that they would have to move to another city in the Valley, which at the time was very disappointing for me. Jeff would say to me from time to time, "Domingo would make a good new Neighborhood Ministry Coordinator." (By this time Domingo was attending our group meetings.) I remember thinking that Domingo was too new to the faith, but as it worked out, Jeff was right; Domingo was the perfect fit for this position. At one of our group meetings I spontaneously said, "Domingo is operating as a Neighborhood Ministry Coordinator in his neighborhood, let's lay hands on him and pray for him." Together we acknowledged what the Lord was doing in and through Domingo in his neighborhood. This was unquestionably the Lord's desire.

As Jesus said, "Find a worthy person" and we did. Domingo prays regularly through his neighborhood and he is continually connecting with his neighbors. He looks to meet their needs and takes every opportunity to share the Gospel. He has been a constant encouragement to me. We continue to carry on events in his neighborhood, like free car washes and block parties, but Domingo's personal contacts have opened doors to people wanting to know the Lord.

Domingo, Anthony and I now meet weekly at the local Starbucks with three neighbors to talk about the things of the Lord. Our times together are filled with a lot of laughter and learning. We have given them Bibles and we are slowly talking our way through the book of John. As we meet I find myself thinking, "This is as good as it gets," doing what Jesus asked us to do, making disciples, baptizing them and teaching them to obey everything Jesus commanded them to do. (As I am writing this I am looking forward to Domingo's baptism in our pool on Easter Sunday.)

#### COMMUNITY GROUP CONCEPT

After a time, the Lord made it clear that we were to have community groups in different cities in the San Fernando Valley. It was amazing how this came about. We have a family library at our church. Jacquelyn Mendoza, the lady who runs our library, just so happened to put a book in my mail box with a note that said, "I thought you might be interested in reading this." I have no idea why she felt that I might be interested but it was a gift from God. The name of the book is Making Room for Life by Randy Frazee. As I began to read it, I found myself captivated by every thought. One thing that stood out to me "...is that we move beyond commuting to small group events in search of contrived community to living in a circle of relationships with the people nearby --- the place where community can happen."

#### NORTH HILLS COMMUNITY GROUP

I knew that we needed community groups in different cities in our valley but wondered who in our church would be willing to open their home and invite people in. Initially that thought discouraged me but, while having coffee with one of our Vineyard leaders, Mike Day, the Lord nudged me to talk to Mike about a community group. He had just started a small group and welcomed the idea immediately.

God is using Mike to have a profound impact on his neighborhood. One neighbor said, "I have lived in this neighborhood for 33 years and I have met more neighbors in these last two months than I have in all the years I have lived here." Mike has initiated many things to encourage community. He has a year-round garden on the side of his driveway and believe me, you have never seen a more prolific garden. When the garden is ready for harvesting, Mike takes his ripe produce and goes up and down the street sharing with his neighbors. His garden has become the center of attention for neighbors walking by.

Mike's community group held a free car wash in his neighborhood. After the first car wash, the neighbor across the street asked if he could host the next one, which he did. Neighbors are now asking if they, too, can host a car wash.

The community group meets once a week and those participating live close to Mike's home. Once a quarter they have what Mike calls an "Agape," where community group members and neighbors join together for dinner. Everyone brings a dish and the food is always plentiful. Others from the neighborhood are now asking if they can host a meal as well.

### LAKE BALBOA COMMUNITY GROUP

Julie Herzog has started the third community group in the Lake Balboa area of the Valley. The group is taking time to get to know one another and is making plans to do similar ministry in the community. I look forward to what the Lord will produce under Julie's leadership.

Note: Currently I am talking with some people in our church about starting a fourth community group that will target yet another neighborhood in our valley. Like the parable of the mustard seed, the process is little by little for us.

### INTRODUCING COMMUNITY GROUPS

As I see it today, there are three different ways to introduce community groups into your church. I am sure there are more, but here are the approaches that I have seen work with a congregation:

#### 1. The Complete Overhaul Approach

Randy Frazee took this approach with Pantego Bible Church in Fort Worth, Texas. His congregation, by American church standards, was quite successful, a very large congregation with an extremely successful small group ministry. While Frazee was away with his leadership on a retreat, the leaders expressed their dissatisfaction, much to his surprise, with the small group ministry. As he listened to their concerns about the small groups in their church, he began to realize that there was in fact something missing with them. There wasn't true community, but a "contrived community." Frazee scrapped the small group ministry and started all over with community-based small groups. During that time he also shut down all the weekly

meetings in their building to eliminate competition and to give priority to the community groups. This daring decision promoted community among the people in his church and fostered relationships with those outside the church. They moved away from an inwardly focused church to an externally focused one.

The Complete Overhaul Approach is for the courageous senior pastor who is led by the Lord to move in this direction. It sounds like the congregation was ready for this, and Frazee's decision seemed in line with most of the people's wishes. I believe it would be a tragic mistake to force this on people if it were not their desire.

## 2. The Segue Approach

This is the approach I am taking at the Valley Vineyard. As the associate pastor, I am not in the position to close down small groups and stop midweek activities in our facility. I don't think it would even be a wise move. However, because I am in charge of small groups, I have chosen to slowly introduce the community-based small groups to our church and allow the leading of the Lord to see it become a reality with our fellowship. I have already shared a bit of our story to help you understand this process.

It seems that this approach may be the most common, but it does have its setbacks. You will find that as you introduce community groups there will be other events in your church that will vie for your time and can potentially hinder the process of building community.

## 3. The Missional House Church Approach

In The Externally Focused Church by Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, they talk about the house-church movement Mission Arlington. "A remarkable woman named Tillie Burgin started Mission Arlington. For several years Tillie had served as a missionary in Korea but eventually found herself in Arlington, Texas, working as a school administrator. In 1986 Tillie saw the needs around her and asked herself, 'Why can't we treat Arlington as mission field?' And so she did. Her mission was simple: to take the church to the people who were not going to church, 'to hang out and hover around John 3:16.'"

Mission Arlington now has over 250 community house churches with over 4,000 members serving the community of Arlington. Rather than establish a mission in another country, Tillie chose to launch this mission in Texas under the covering of Arlington First Baptist. This work is a remarkable move of God that He is blessing and He is using to bless the community. In the Multimedia DVD, you will find an inspiring video of Mission Arlington. It celebrates Tillie's 20 years of ministry and her work in the community.

People in your church who already have a value for missions would begin to start a mission in your city. I highly recommend that you get in touch with those at Mission Arlington and research what they are doing. They welcome volunteers to join them in their work and to learn from them firsthand.

Although this approach seems like a very reasonable one, there are obstacles as well. For instance, the existence of a mission's ministry in your church is crucial. If your mission's organization leaders have the gift of administration but don't have a passion and gifting to develop a local mission in community, this presents an obstacle, too.

These three approaches are offered to help you consider the best one for your congregation. Needless to say, anything new may be met with opposition. Remember, be wise and gentle as you begin to introduce community based ministry. Look for those who have a heart for this new ministry in the community; they will be essential as you move forward. Most importantly, intercessory prayer and fasting are extremely important, because you are now planning to establish outposts in enemy territory.

## DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SMALL GROUPS AND COMMUNITY GROUPS

### Inward vs. Outward Focus

Before you start community groups it is important to understand their makeup. Generally, small groups are designed with the believer in mind. Often there is a time for worship/singing, prayer, Bible study, praying for one another and possibly for social events. For the most part these groups exist to edify the believer and to worship God. Community groups, however, include what you experience in a small

group, but add a very important component: bringing the kingdom of God into local neighborhoods.

### Geographically-Based vs. Church Groups

Small home groups typically are comprised without regard for geographic location. With community groups there is much consideration given to geography for two reasons:

- 1) It builds more meaningful community for church members who live close to one another.
- 2) It builds community with neighbors who are not a part of our church (believers and unbelievers).

I am reminded of what the Apostle Paul said when he was in Athens: "From one man he (God) made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him..." Acts 17:26-27 (NIV)

### Community vs. Church-Centered Ministry

This will be a paradigm shift for most church people. We tend to see the church facility as the center for ministry. However, Jesus told His disciples to "go and make disciples" (Matthew 28:19 NIV) and while He was going through towns and villages He saw the people harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. He told His disciples, "Ask the Lord of the harvest...to send out workers into His harvest field" (Matthew 9:38 NIV), to care for those in the city. Whenever we meet a Christian for the first time, our natural tendency is to ask, "Which church do you go to?" Should we not be asking, "What harvest field are you working in?" We are supposed to be a part of a "movement," the kingdom of God, which is spreading throughout the world, not a part of something that is concerned about church attendance. Community groups focus ministry in the neighborhoods where people live.

### Neighbors vs. Church Friends

When I was a new believer I attended a student orientation gathering at a Christian college where one of the students mentioned that all of his friends were Christians. I remember thinking, "I only have a few Christian friends." Since then my circle of friends has grown to include mostly believers. However, as I have become involved in community

groups my world has broadened, once again, to include those outside our church. In Matthew 11:19 (NIV) these accusations were made of Jesus: 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners."' I pray that I am accused of the same.

### COMMUNITY GROUP MAKEUP

These groups will vary in makeup as do small groups, but they will always include relationship building and service to those in the neighborhood. Group meetings include neighbors in a potluck, barbecue or carwash from time-to-time or on a regular basis. Some in your community group may be uncomfortable with the neighbors, but the life that they bring to the party is contagious.

### LEADERSHIP FOR COMMUNITY GROUP MINISTRY

Up until now I have received counsel from those who have shared my vision for Mission: Reseda as it was evolving, but now I am establishing a team of leaders from the community groups who will help me in multiplying groups throughout our valley. These leaders will assist me in sharing God's vision, finding and discipling new community group leaders, developing new host homes, and encouraging new neighborhood ministry coordinators.

**CAUTION:** Vision and leadership alone do not move this kind of work along in the community, but only as the Holy Spirit moves it forward in His time, in His way and by His power. I remember a dream I once had when we were in Phase Three. I was riding a bike up a very steep mountain and on the back was my wife Jo and behind her was Martha Bellamy. Martha is our lead intercessor for Mission: Reseda. As I pedaled up the hill I was avoiding every crack and obstacle and when I got to the summit we began to fly down the other side. I realized that the Lord was emphasizing to me that this will all come about as we intercede to have His vision birthed in communities all over our valley.