

1) Church-wide study on Compassionate Living—Heather Folliard

Report on Church Wide Emphasis/Small Group Study

Topic

I think the topic of “the compassionate life” or Social justice was very appropriate for this particular church wide emphasis for two reasons. First, the topic built on the spiritual traditions study we had done the prior year. Groups had some experience with this tradition, but had the opportunity to study it more in depth. Secondly, this topic was one that caused many discomfort and by studying on a church-wide level I believe that discomfort was eased and people were able to explore compassionate living in ways they would never have done before.

Small Group Reception

Anticipation of Group leaders

As we prepared for this church-wide emphasis at the end of 2009 I heard a lot of remarks from small group leaders about their hesitancy to participate in another study like last year. With follow-up it didn't seem it was as much the participation of the entire church that was the problem, but the study itself. Group leaders like to have some “control” over what their group does, and rightly so. They know their group and they also have particular styles of leadership that can be cramped by a uniform study.

This study was better received because the groups had more flexibility. Since this was the second church-wide emphasis I knew, better, how to approach the leaders and encourage them to tailor the study in a way that best suits their group. (I hoped to have exercises tailored for each specific group—and only had the opportunity to do a few tailored activities. This will be discussed below).

Follow Up with groups

Most group leaders enjoyed the study and felt their group gained a better understanding of “compassion” and their call to live the compassionate life. Many were glad to have the study based on a gospel account because it made clear the call that Jesus places on our lives by his example, and his teaching. I think groups were able to struggle with their understanding of Jesus' desire for us to change our way of living in response to the life he lived, sacrificed, and renewed. This remained a struggle for some—which is good. It is something for us to continue wrestling with as a church family, most specifically the kingdom of God on earth.

Connecting our Church family

The study being done in every group and discussed every Sunday morning was a great way of connecting our church body. I believe they were able to engage with one another in discussions over the study and the visible changes in our body rather than conversing over standard topics (weather, school, vacations etc...). This is a big success as far as I'm concerned—getting people talking about Jesus' call in every day conversation—because it shows a changed life. In this way, the church-wide emphasis accomplished our second purpose (place where people are made new)

Those not in a small group.

I feel that those not in a small group did miss out on this study and I'm not sure how we could have avoided this. Several members and attendees not enrolled in a small group did take a notebook to study on their own. Sadly, I didn't follow up with them as I should have and so there was not greater facilitation of discipleship for them. In the future Elders may be able to facilitate that (as can I without being in school).

Group participation in HillSong mission.

I believe small groups were more connected to, and more involved with HillSong's missions emphasis because of this study. The response to the people of Haiti and the missionaries sent from HillSong gained active support from the whole body. I think this is in part because of the natural inclination our body has for service, but I believe their approach was changed because of a better understanding of compassion. (I do pray that our church response does not always come in the form of offering help—but building lasting relationships that include service but are mostly built on mutual respect).

Study Evaluation

I think that writing the study was helpful rather than purchasing a study because we were able to tailor the study to our body, to the vision we had for our body, and tie it specifically to scripture. Because it was a Bible centered study I believe the groups were much more receptive to it—they felt they were doing a book study just as much as a topical study and therefore didn't feel pushed to study a topic they were unsure of. Of course, they did get involved in the social justice tradition and gained a new perspective. That is a huge success.

I think writing the study had financial benefits as well. We didn't have to spend money on books and teachers guides that would have been shelved following the study. The binders are reusable, and the paper for the study recyclable. Plus we have an electronic copy to refer to if necessary. Furthermore, we were able to combine many voices in each study that might not have been included in a formulated study on compassion published for profit.

The study would have benefited from the following: (1) more group specific activities and exercises, (2) fewer leading questions and more open ended discussion, (3) less "teaching" and more resources for exploration, and (4) a training session for all small groups leaders on this specific study.

Future Study

I enjoyed writing the study and think a self written study is most beneficial in using for a church-wide emphasis because it can consider who we are, where we are, and our mission. I think the first of the year is a hard time to do a church wide study because many groups have not begun and then get off track with the church wide structure. Therefore it would be good to do study just before or during lent. The first of the year can be devoted to the "missions" for the year that serve toward accomplishing the long term vision, and then the church wide emphasis can help build a specific value helpful to accomplishing our mission.