

Spiritual Gifts and Home Group Multiplication 2007 Xenos Summer Institute

Introduction

I have two foundational assumptions for this workshop. This workshop may not be very helpful for you unless you share these assumptions.

The first is that home group multiplication is our primary goal. New Testament churches met in homes (to build community, not just out of necessity), and they grew in number. So somehow (maybe in many ways) they had to multiply home groups.

Spiritual gifts are an important resource to reach this goal. Numerous New Testament passages emphasize that God has given special spiritual abilities gifts to every Christian so they can use them to help build the church and thereby glorify God (see especially 1 Cor. 12:7; Eph. 4:11,12,15,16; 1 Pet. 4:10,11).

Over the years, I have noticed (both in my own ministry and in our church) that it is very difficult to avoid the “pendulum effect” on this issue. At times, we have over-emphasized spiritual gifts—with certain unhealthy effects. In correcting for this over-emphasis, we have often swung to the opposite extreme of under-emphasizing them—with other unhealthy effects. It’s probably not possible to eliminate this “pendulum effect,” but we should try to reduce the size of the swings. The following six couplets of “do’s” and “don’ts” is an attempt to do this by observing tempering biblical principles and drawing on ministry experience.

DON'T structure the church around programs, and urge people to use their spiritual gifts primarily in these programs.

This is the normal mega-church model: Bring new people in through the seeker service, have people take tests to identify spiritual gift and passions, then direct them to a program that matches their gift/passion profile, and then have those people fellowship together in some way. We feel that this is a structure modeled more after the business world than the New Testament.

DO structure the church around home groups, and urge people to use their spiritual gifts primarily to help their home groups grow and multiply.

1 Cor. 14:26 clearly presumes a home group setting. Joel Comiskey says: “I . . . encourage people to use their gifts primarily in the small group. Effective cell leaders encourage everyone in the cell to use their particular gifts so that the body might be edified and non-Christians might be won to Christ.”¹ Gift-based programs (e.g., PASTORAL COUNSELING MINISTRY; CT/CLASS TEACHING MINISTRY) are OK, as long as they facilitate and supplement home group ministry.

DON'T focus people on discovering their spiritual gifts.

The New Testament passages on spiritual gifts never command people to discover their gifts or tell them how to do this. Contrast this to the many spiritual gift tests in the western church! It's not that we shouldn't educate people about spiritual gifts, or forbid them to think about how they might be gifted. But there is another focus that is more important.

DO focus people on embracing a lifestyle of serving love—and affirm spiritual gifts as one expression of this lifestyle.

There are many commands to do this, and lots of instruction on how to do this (“one another’s”). The New Testament has much more material on this subject than it does on spiritual gifts. The apostles’ presumption (evidently) is that as they focus on serving others, their spiritual gifts will become evident, sometimes very quickly and sometimes later on. Once we discover our spiritual gifts, they are not a badge of our greatness; they are a stewardship to use to serve others (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Pet. 4:10,11).

¹ Joel Comiskey, *Cell Church Solutions* (Moreno Valley, Calif.: CCS Publishing, 2005), p. 143.

DON'T promote spiritual gifts as an alternative to/substitute for evangelism, loving one another, and discipleship.

Evangelism, loving one another, and discipleship are the core ministries commanded of every Christian (PASSAGES)—and these ministries are crucial to multiplying home groups. American Christians often misuse spiritual gifts by limiting their ministry to gifted areas. This is often a form of specialist selfishness (“I’m not gifted in evangelism, admonishing, discipleship, etc.”) or a self-fulfillment focus (“I like to serve in ways that make me feel excited, confident, etc.”) that excuses people from the central work of the church.

Ajith Fernando says: “Our lopsided teaching on gifts has resulted in a lot of overspecialization, especially in the West . . . Some people spend most of their time exercising their primary gifts. So an outstanding preacher may not spend much time visiting church members and caring for the leaders of his church. The result of such specialization is a high amount of quality output by this person. But the impact of this person may be less than hoped for. To impact people we need more than technical excellence. We need depth-producing frustration that comes out of an incarnational lifestyle lived among the people we serve. We should use our gifts out of a lifestyle of caring for people. We should do a little of a lot of things and also try to give time to work on our areas of giftedness.”²

DO promote spiritual gifts to supplement and enhance evangelism, loving one another, and discipleship.

SUPPLEMENT: Urge people to build these “generalist” ministry skills and habits, and as their spiritual gifts become evident, to make *additional* contributions in these areas (1 Cor. 12:4-6).

Carl Cronje says: “Gifts must be distinguished from baseline responsibilities that all of us share equally; for example, all pray, all must give . . . But over and above the prayer that is demanded of all of us is the gift of intercession; over and above the giving . . . is the gift of giving . . . Gifts then are built on the baseline . . . (But) they are the things that make us tick, the itch that subsides only when we scratch it with involvement and commitment.”³

Ajith Fernando says: “*Christian workers must specialize out of a generalist background.* That is, while they do many different types of ministries, they also take time to exercise their special gifts. I have come to believe that if we really like about 20% of the work we do and generally find about 40% acceptable, then we can handle the 40% we do not like. But . . . the 40% that we don’t like may be vital in giving relevance and depth in our ministry. If, however, we find that in the exercise of our responsibilities, there is almost nothing that we like and feel competent at doing, perhaps we are in the wrong work.”⁴

ENHANCE: Consider how spiritual gifts can help us/others be more effective in these foundational ministry areas.

Look for ways that people can use their spiritual gifts evangelistically. They will often have more opportunities and confidence to share Christ in this context (EXAMPLES: “FINAL HOPE” MERCY WORKERS; GO-GROUPS).

Look for disciples’ gifts/potentials from the beginning, even as you focus on grounding them in the Word and helping them develop evangelism, loving one another, and discipleship. This helps to motivate them and paint a vision for them as lifetime Christian workers. It also prevents unhealthy comparison to others who are gifted differently.

² Ajith Fernando, *The Call To Joy & Pain* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2007), p. 130.

³ Carl Cronje, quoted in Clive Calver, *Alive in the Spirit*, p. 134.

⁴ Ajith Fernando, *Jesus Driven Ministry*, p. 223.

"As we train young Christians to become disciples, one of our primary objectives should be to help them discover and develop their gifts, since every believer has gifts which God holds him accountable for developing and using for the sake of the Body. In making disciples we are not trying to produce proficient technicians who are able to reproduce themselves by a prescribed methodology, rather, we are seeking to develop men and women who are disciples diligently exercising their particular gifts and abilities . . . (Therefore) it is imperative that early in the discipling process the man begin to look for his gifts and develop them . . . Whatever else the training of a disciple should include, helping him to discover and develop his gifts must be a part of it."⁵

"A common mistake is to try to guide him in the direction of some service that will make you look good and call attention to your ministry. What you must do is think of the man, his gifts, his abilities, his calling from God, and his ministry and effectiveness for Christ."⁶

DON'T prioritize spiritual gifts over character and a servant lifestyle in home group leader requirements.

1 Tim. 3 (deacons) has no gifting requirement—the requirements are godly character and being tested as a servant. Even eldership requires only teaching as a spiritual gift. Does this mistake betray conformity to our culture, which values expertise more than character? Highly gifted people who lack character are often very dangerous leaders (EXAMPLES)! Gifted people who don't have a servant lifestyle will damage the consensus of commitment in a home group (EXAMPLES).

DO urge home group leaders to use their spiritual gifts in their leadership.

Paul reminds Timothy of this (1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6,7) to correct his apparent tendency to neglect this because of his other leadership responsibilities. Home group leaders must model evangelism, loving one another and discipleship. But they should also make time/room to exercise their gifts. Why? Using your spiritual gifts as a home group leader releases God's power in a special way to build the home group (e.g., GIFTED TEACHERS TEACH MORE vs. STRICT ROTATION). It also enables you to lead/serve in other areas with more overall confidence. Home group leaders should discuss and affirm one another's spiritual gifting, and work as a "mini-Body."

DON'T try to fit every spiritual gift into a biblical label.

The New Testament lists are clearly representative only, because there are gifts on one list that aren't on other lists. Furthermore, we're not sure what some of these gifts are (e.g., "WORD OF KNOWLEDGE"). Paul implies that there is great diversity in gifts, degrees of gifting, and gift-mixes.

DO draw people's attention to where you see evidence of ministry talent.

What do you call someone who isn't a gifted teacher, but whose sharing in home group meetings is consistently uplifting? Is this the gift of exhortation? Does it matter? The point is that they edify/impact others in this way, so they should realize this and look for ways to serve others consistently.

⁵ Walt Hendrichsen, *Disciples Are Made-Not Born*, pp. 132,133,138.

⁶ Leroy Eims, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making*, p. 142.

DON'T view and promote all spiritual gifts as equally important.

All Christians have an important contribution to make, but not all contributions are equally important.

In our extreme egalitarian culture, this is politically incorrect but true nonetheless. Paul prioritized apostles, prophets and teachers among gifted roles (1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11,12), probably because these roles communicate the all-important Word of God, and because they are so foundational to church-planting. His whole argument in 1 Cor. 14 is that prophecy is more important than tongues, because it edifies others more effectively. This is why hard-working and gifted preachers and teachers were prioritized for pay over other elders (1 Tim. 5:17).

DO honor those with "unseemly" gifts.

Explain 1 Cor. 12:22-26. It is the special responsibility of those with "seemly" gifts (apostleship, prophecy, teaching?) to inhibit the tendency to view other less flashy/foundational gifts as unimportant by noting their service, showing how their service helps the overall work of the church, etc.