

Connecting People to the Church Community
The Disciple's Journey
A Travel Free Learning Article

By

Ken Kessler

Ministry Partner with The Columbia Partnership

Voice: 804.338.5058, E-mail: KKessler@TheColumbiaPartnership.org

Web Site: www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org

He was only eleven years old, but the day left a strong impression on his life. His mom and dad warned him before he and his brothers left for school that the house would be different when they got home, but he really had no idea.

When he got off the bus from school, he hurried home like always. His younger brother opened the door, and the shock occurred. There was not a piece of furniture in the house except one old rocking chair. The eleven year old ran to his room, and everything was gone there also – his bed, his radio, his books, and everything he cherished. He could hear one of his other brothers crying in another room. Mom tried to console all of the boys and reminded them that God would provide. But she was even affected. Her prized, old piano had been taken also.

Then, the boy found out the whole story. The local sheriff had come and taken everything from the house. His father's business had gone bankrupt, and the furniture and other things from the house were collateral for the bank's loan. The sheriff had to take it all and auction it off for the bank to get what they needed to pay off the loan.

The family gathered around the house that night and slept on the floor. They had a prayer together that night, thanking God for taking care of them. Somehow they knew God would provide.

And He did! By the next night, the family had a full house of furniture again. The local church where they were members had collected as many items as they could and provided for the family. The church was not large – only about 75 people came every Sunday. But they loved and cared for this family, and collected items to make sure the five young boys and mother and father had what they needed.

The whole story made quite an impression on this young boy. He watched a church body function at its best. They followed the example of the New Testament church in Acts 4 and loved this family into the church community.

This young boy was me! I will never forget it, and I will always be reminded that God provides through the example of this imperfect, small congregation in Pine Prairie, Louisiana. I long for the day when we as church bodies respond to the new people in our church like this one did for my family.

This church in Pine Prairie, Louisiana made sure that our family was connected to the community of faith. They saw our needs and responded. While I pick out this encounter because of how it affected me, I watched them nurture me and my family as disciples of Christ through various ministry connections. When we left the Pine Prairie church, we knew that part of our life was left with them.

So how does your church make connections with your new disciples and new members? What do you do to make sure new people are loved and blended into the care network of your congregation?

In many of churches, we are excited when people join. We might even encourage them to participate in a new member class so they can get to know the church. Unfortunately, though not many churches are connecting people to the care network of the congregation. People come and sit in our services, but we do little to know about the emotional, physical, and spiritual needs of our people. I have heard several church members in consultations and coaching encounters tell me that caring actions are the

responsibility of the pastor and the staff. The expectation is that all of the caring needs of the congregation can be met through the people we pay.

This type of thinking is foreign to a New Testament understanding of the care network of the congregation. Ephesians 4:11-16 reminds us that all of us as followers of Christ should be doing the work of the ministry to build up the body of Christ.

So I ask again, "What is your church doing to connect people into the care network of the congregation?" Some of the practices that I see that churches are using to connect people to the caring network include some of the following:

- Cultivate small groups to make sure that every member has a connection to care and love in the congregation. New groups are started regularly to make sure that new people have a place to connect.
- Enlist a care group for every eight to 12 members. Depending on the tradition, the care group leader is either a church leader like a deacon or a special commissioned leader who is gifted and prepared to provide pastoral care.
- Develop a lay ministry caring network like Stephen's Ministry that provides a lay counseling network for members as they are facing tough challenges.
- For churches that have multiple services, develop at least six to eight large group meetings outside of worship where people can connect with each other.
- Use Bible study classes (Sunday morning or other times) to organize care groups to make sure that every member is touched through regular contacts and visits.
- Create text message groups for people to stay in touch with people.
- Develop an encourager program which designates a person to stay in touch with every new member for two years to make sure they are connecting to the care network of the congregation.
- Create mission families that allow eight to ten families to have regular contact with each other through gatherings throughout the year.
- Develop affinity groups for people to choose connections with people who have similar interests as they do. For example, one church has a group of men who are hunters who have regular connection and contact with each other. Eight times a year, they gather for coffee and fellowship. They use the empty chair concept to remember to invite someone new to join them for the next meeting. Annually, they hold a large big game dinner for the community that allows them to invite guests and share their stories of how God is changing their lives. They hold each other accountable.

So what are you doing? I would love to hear the creative ways your church is connecting people to the community of faith in your location. There is not a right or wrong way, just a Jesus way. He loved connecting people to the community of faith – people like Matthew, Zachaeus, the Samaritan woman, and you and me!

Important Things to Know

Ken Kessler is a Ministry Partner with The Columbia Partnership. He is also on staff with the Virginia Baptist Mission Board. The Columbia Partnership is a non-profit Christian ministry organization focused on transforming the capacity of the North American Church to pursue and sustain Christ-centered ministry. **Travel Free Learning** is a leadership development emphasis. For more information about products and services check out the web site at www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org, send an e-mail to Client.Care@TheColumbiaPartnership.org, or call 803.622.0923.