

## **The Transformational Tie Between Small Group Ministry and Biblical Counseling**

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**S**mall groups are the ministry that churches initially love but after they head down that path for a while, they sometimes come away disappointed. Churches and their leaders will become all excited about starting a small group ministry because of all the hype they've read in the latest book or heard at the latest conference. They come away believing that all their problems will be solved if they can just get their people connected in a vibrant small group ministry. So they spend a lot of ministry capital establishing a small group ministry, only to find out that it's not the magic elixir they'd hoped for. What's more, they end up with a whole new set of problems and concerns they feel unprepared to address. For this reason, many small group ministries are constantly in flux, with the church leadership trying to make, and then remake, the ministry over and over again.

So how does a ministry that appears to offer so much promise leave so many pastors jaded and tossing the idea of small group ministry back onto the "we've tried that before" pile? It's the high percentage of failures, along with the incessant number of small group ministry "makeovers," that compels us to write this chapter.

One of the main reasons for failed small group ministries can be symptomatically understood from the following incident that actually took place in a church (not ours, thankfully!). At the close of their weekly small group meeting, a young couple that had been attending the group hung around until everyone else had left so that they could speak with the leader couple alone. After a few minutes of nervous chit-chat, the young couple began to open up and pour out their hearts about a significant problem they were having in their marriage. The leader couple gave their full attention, listening intently and compassionately, and then they spoke a word of counsel. They said, "With issues like that, you should consider joining another group."

Right there is the Achilles' heel of the entire small group ministry movement. We're convinced a key reason for the high percentage of failed small group ministries and constant makeovers is that churches have not intentionally developed their small groups to be a place of grace and growth for all of the walking wounded who come through our front doors.

Most churches today have not structured their ministries to get down into the nitty-gritty of people's lives. When personal problems begin to surface, they are overwhelmed and ill-equipped to respond in a loving, biblical way. Too many churches don't know how to give hope or help to real people who have opened up about the struggles they're facing, nor do they have a plan for equipping their small group leaders to do so. And so the small group ministry either limps along in a superficial way or falls apart as leaders become overwhelmed by issues they were not equipped to deal with effectively.

In this chapter, we want to paint a new picture of a small group ministry that can give hope and help to those who participate in such groups. Even struggling small group ministries can be revitalized by refocusing the purpose of the small group on spiritual formation and by tying the small group ministry to the church's biblical counseling ministry. These two ministries should work hand in hand together—small groups and biblical counseling.

In fact, we would go so far as to say don't start a small group ministry without an equally vital biblical counseling ministry. Don't even think about it— not if your goal is spiritual growth and transformation. If you're happy with superficial yak 'n' snack groups, then don't worry about a biblical counseling ministry, and

don't bother with reading the rest of this chapter. Just make sure your leaders make it absolutely clear to everyone in their group that we're not here to dig into the real stuff we're all wrestling with. Keep it safe; keep it superficial.

### **The Purpose of Small Group Ministry**

So where should you start? The best place is to make sure everyone has a clear understanding of the purpose of the small group ministry. If that's unstated or unclear, then you can count on lots of confusion and a high turnover rate among your small group leaders.

So what should be the purpose of the small group ministry? Well, there are a lot of reasons why small groups exist in a church —none of them bad, but a lot of them unclear and peripheral to what's going on in the heart and soul of a church. Often the name attached to the ministry gives the reason for its existence— for example, Care Groups, Men's Bible Study, Ladies' Groups, or Growth Groups. Many churches looking for a way to meet the personal and physical needs of their people in a loving, decentralized manner will establish Care Groups. Others want their men to dig into the Bible, so they start a Men's Bible Study. Still others want to emphasize growth for the kingdom so they have Growth Groups modeled after the principles contained in Carl George's book *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (Tarrytown, NY: Fleming H. Revell, 1991).

But careful and prayerful thought should be given to the purpose of the small group ministry of any church. Don't just put some chairs in a circle and start one. A small group ministry should deliberately and directly enhance the primary ministry of the church. So before you can determine the purpose of your small group ministry, you must first answer the question, What is the primary ministry of the church? Do you know? It can be seen clearly in Ephesians 4:

Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church (Ephesians 4:11-15 NLT).

Ephesians 4:11-15 drives home the fact that God has given Spirit-gifted people "pastors and teachers... to equip God's people... [to] build up the church, the body of Christ" (verses 11-12). So the goal of building up His church is to have all of God's people to "be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ" (verse 13). Or stated another way, "growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church" (verse 15). In other words, a primary purpose of the church, depending on one's theology, is for the whole church to participate with the Spirit (see 2 Corinthians 3:18) in the transformation of God's people to be more like Christ.

So if spiritual formation is the purpose of the church, then personal transformation should intentionally be the purpose of the small group ministry. Bible study is great. Fellowship is wonderful. Evangelism is essential. But changing and growing to be more like Christ should be the purpose of the small group ministry. And believe it or not, it's possible to focus on Bible study and still not arrive at personal transformation unless the leaders are trained and reminded to be pointed in that direction.

The way to encourage such transformation is for the group to spend their time intently studying the Word of God or a theological book based on the Scriptures, with an emphasis on applying the truth to their lives. You say, "But aren't most churches and small groups focused on this already?" We don't think so. Most Bible studies are focused on knowledge with possibly some private application considered. Usually what happens is the group leader gives a mini-lecture, while the participants dutifully "spank the blanks" in their study guide or workbook. Occasionally the leader will ask some inductive questions about the text, but even then the questions are often focused on facts rather than life application.

And don't hear what we're not saying. We're not saying that Bible knowledge is irrelevant; we're saying it's not enough. And we're saying that small groups are the place to push past Bible knowledge and on to life application so that we can see people's lives transform more and more into the image of Christ. A transformational small group focuses on everyone giving and receiving hope and help from God's Word to spiritually mature in Christ.

So a small group intent on encouraging personal transformation is focused on asking questions with spiritual formation in mind. Take, for instance, a small group discussion of James 1. Because the text deals with trials, the leader would press each member of the group to think about a personal trial in their own life and to humbly share about it with the others. To spark a spiritual discussion that moves below the surface of "Hey, how ya' doin'?" the leader might ask: "Looking at verse two, what difficulty or trial are you personally facing right now in your own life?" After hearing from everyone who is willing to answer the question, a follow-up question might be: "On a scale of one to ten, with ten being the highest, what is your joy quotient right now as you persevere through this God-given trial?"

Notice how a small group leader, with the help of a series of questions, can provide fertile ground for each person to really examine his or her attitude of submission to God's Lordship in their life, which is indicated by the level of joy he or she is experiencing in the midst of the trial. Obviously, such a discussion would lead naturally into a meaningful time of prayer for each other that would rise above the prayer requests typically shared at church prayer meetings, which are usually focused on minor surgeries and the problems of other people outside of the group whom we've never met.

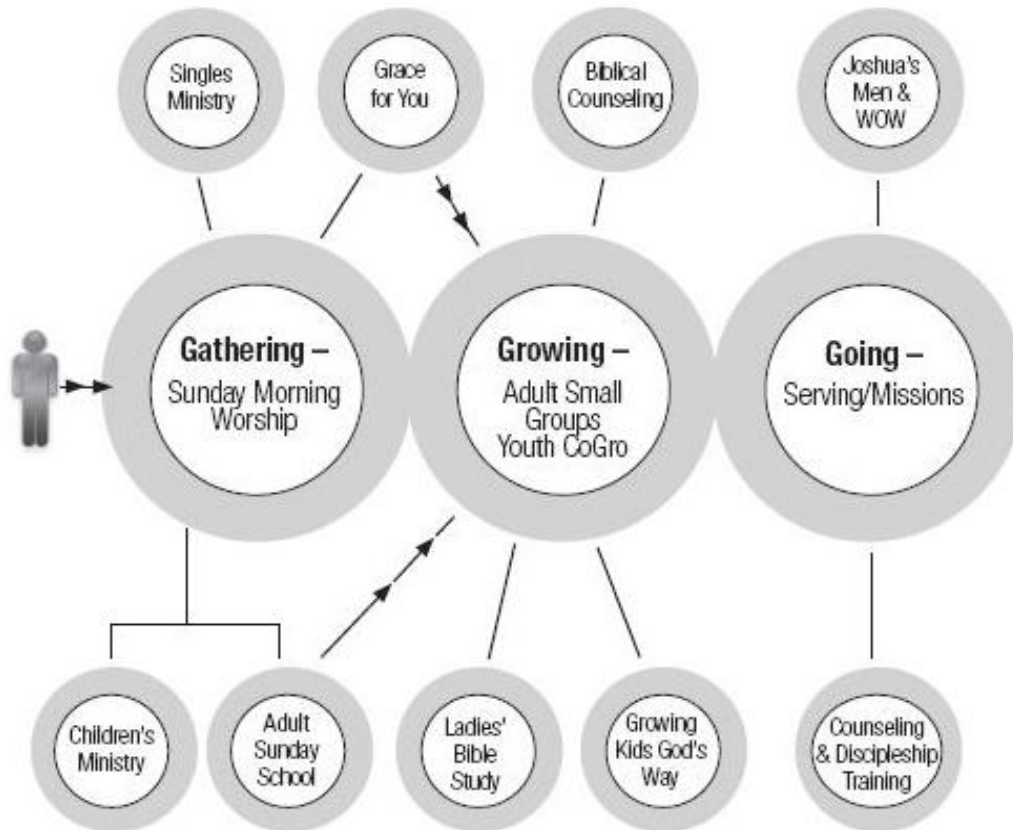
In the scenario just described, the small group leader's transformational target is to help each member of the group to move toward greater submission to God during a trial. God has commanded us to be joyful in our trials (James 1:2). So how are we doing? Of course we're not asking that someone be joyful if he or she has cancer. But a person can be joyful that in this horrendous trial, their Father's steadfast love, which endures forever (Psalm 100:5), will use even this circumstance for His glory and their good. For God's good work to be made complete in a believer, he has to "count it all joy" when he "meet trials of various kinds" (James 1:2). In other words, the passage is teaching us to not waste our trials, but to be good stewards of them. Our small group members need more than just help in understanding this. They need help doing it and living it. And that's where the small group ministry should focus.

A small group's time spent in the Word should be interactive, with everyone sharing where they are in their own lives and encouraging others in their walk. And so often, it's others around us who can see where God wants to grow us even before we see it ourselves. In a small group setting, others can see areas where we need wisdom and prayer (James 1:5). So the small group becomes a greenhouse or incubator for spiritual growth, with everyone spurring one another on to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10: 24-25), giving hope and help that enables everyone to keep moving forward, by God's grace. This, of course, is all hinged upon allowing others to speak into our lives.

### **The Place of a Small Group Ministry in the Overall Church Structure**

The leadership at our church, Grace Fellowship Church (GFC), believes that the transformational process of becoming "more and more like Christ" is the primary purpose for why God has called us together as a church. So the small group ministry focuses primarily on personal transformation for everyone who calls GFC home. For more than sixteen years now the leadership at GFC has trumpeted that "small groups are the heart of the church." And in saying that we make two things clear: first, the importance of transformation, and, second, the decision to make small groups the place or the context in which God accomplishes this. GFC's Ministry Relationships (see below) shows how transformation and small groups fit into the overall picture of GFC.

### GFC's Ministry Relationships



First, notice that the three large circles represent the three primary ministry areas of GFC for adults: Gathering, Growing, and Going. As indicated by the person on the far left of the diagram, most people are first exposed to GFC through the “Gathering” aspect, or corporate worship services on Sunday. From that first exposure to GFC, newcomers are intentionally directed into a small group where they can form personal and transformational relationships with other believers at close range. Plugging into a small group is represented by the large center circle, “Growing.” Once a person is plugged into a small group, they’re encouraged to look for ways to serve and give their life away in ministry to others, both inside and outside of our church family. This part of our church life together is represented by the third circle, titled “Going— Serving/Missions.”

We want our people breathing in and breathing out the grace of God in all three areas of ministry— Gathering, Growing, and Going. Focusing on these three areas of Gathering, Growing, and Going is our version of the simple church presented in Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger’s book titled *Simple Church* (Nashville: B& H Books, 2006). And it’s freed us up from trying to run dozens of ministries that offer dozens of programs to our people. Instead, we’re focused on the promotion and resourcing of three circles that we believe are helping keep our church moving in the right direction and focused on the right things because it all produces the right result— disciples of Christ who look more like Jesus and less like themselves as time goes on.

God has called us to more than buildings, bodies, and bucks. He’s called us to make disciples, to see people changing and growing and living out the great truths of the gospel and resurrection hope! Every church should have a yardstick that helps them to measure their effectiveness against what God has purposed for them to be. Andy Stanley, along with others, refers to this yardstick as “a win” in *Seven Practices of Effective Ministry* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004). The leadership of any church should ask themselves what has to happen for their ministry to be “a win.” We’re delighted when we hear someone say, “Oh, I love the preaching and worship” or “I have so many friends here.” But “a win” for us is when someone says, “Since being a part of this church, I have grown spiritually more than ever before in my life.” For us, that’s “a win,” and by God’s grace, we have the joy of hearing this often.

I (Brad) received an email from someone new in our church family that said, “I know you probably hear this a lot, but maybe not often enough. You, Ken, the other pastors, and the Grace family are amazing! My wife and I never felt so disciplined anywhere else. The Grace family really walks in a God-honoring way. For the first time I can truly say I feel like an actual ‘disciple’ of the Lord instead of just ‘one of the people in the crowd hearing a message’... if that makes sense. Thank you and the church for living it out and creating disciples!”

### **Training for Small Group Leaders**

Maybe you’re getting excited as you read this, but you’re thinking, Where am I going to get the people who will lead small groups that are more than yak ‘n’ snack and are focused on transformation? Won’t it be a hard sell to do small groups this way? Maybe at first, but not if the church leadership makes this one of their top priorities— and they should. For a small group ministry to be focused on personal transformation, you have to make the selection and training of your small group leaders a top priority. Your church leadership should be praying, looking, and funneling potential small group leaders into an intentional training process— you should be identifying and raising up new leaders and apprentices on a constant basis. Why? Because not just anyone can do this. We’re looking for more than just an outgoing personality and a spiritual pulse!

The small group leader needs to be equipped to carry out the vision of pushing beyond Bible information and on to personal life transformation. Certainly, the small group leader must have “a growing relationship with God and a heart for the people of God in the group.” (Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 71) In addition, the guidelines you establish for those who serve as small group leaders should make it clear you expect them to demonstrate good theological understanding, personal spiritual maturity, and the fact they are being used by God regularly as an instrument for transformation in other people’s lives. Clearly defined expectations for the leader will promote a unified and effective ministry for both the participants of every small group and the small group leaders themselves. Though rigorous, such guidelines will help toward fulfilling the goal that your small group leaders have a fruitful, long-term ministry.

Typically at GFC the leader of a small group is either a single male or a married couple. In the groups led by a couple, both husband and wife are involved in the spiritual growth and care of their people, but the husband will lead the group’s time in the Word.

The GFC guidelines for becoming a small group leader are as follows:

1. A member of Grace Fellowship Church (1 Peter 5:2-7)
2. Has served as an apprentice for a GFC small group and has been recommended by their small group leader, who completes a Ministry Referral Form (2 Timothy 2:2)
3. Has completed Fundamentals of Biblical Counseling training (Romans 15:14; 2 Timothy 2:15)
4. Has participated in Joshua’s Men (JM) or Women of the Word (WOW) leadership training in our church (1 Timothy 4:16)
5. Demonstrates being “spiritual” and being used by God to “restore others in a spirit of gentleness” in the transformational process (Galatians 6:1-2)
6. Has completed the Small Group Written Interview and it has been accepted by the director of small groups and/ or elders
7. Has been interviewed and endorsed by the director of small groups

Everyone who becomes a small group leader first serves for a time in an already -established small group as an apprentice (see guideline #2). This allows for a small group leader to disciple a potential leader for his (and her) growth both spiritually and in the ways of shepherding brothers and sisters in the small group. As time goes on, the leader will give the apprentice increasing opportunities to oversee responsibilities relating to the transformation of the other participants.

Another component of the training for apprentices is completing the Fundamentals of Biblical Counseling training. This is the initial 30 hours of biblical counseling training based on the National Association of Nouthetic Counselors (NANC) model. Having this biblical counseling background has been invaluable for our small group leaders. When a soul-care issue comes up in a small group, our leaders can know with confidence

that the Scriptures have answers. By the Spirit's power, the leader will be able to give hope and even some initial help from God's Word.

In the cases where a couple leads a small group, both husband and wife are required to complete our leadership training program. We expect our men to go through the Joshua's Men (JM) program, and we ask their wives to go through Women of the Word (WOW). JM and WOW are for training leaders in biblical theology and its practical everyday applications to one's life. For two years, JM and WOW participants meet once a month for three hours to discuss a reading assignment by sharing their written answers to questions we've provided for them.

For JM, one year is devoted to working through the majority of Systematic Theology by Wayne Grudem (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994). The second year is devoted to reading nine theological books: Knowing God by J.I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), Trusting God by Jerry Bridges (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), The Discipline of Grace by Jerry Bridges (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994), Seven Reasons Why You Can Trust the Bible by Erwin Lutzer (Chicago: Moody, 1998), Why Small Groups by C.J. Mahaney (Gaithersburg, MD : Sovereign Grace Ministries, 1996), The Heart of Anger by Lou Priolo (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 1997), Disciplines of a Godly Man by R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), The Complete Husband by Lou Priolo (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 2007), and Spiritual Leadership by J. Oswald Sanders (Chicago: Moody, 1980). Also, during this intense time of training the men and women memorize over fifty Bible verses related to their readings. These two years are an incredible time of equipping and growing! It's such a joy to see the men and women becoming "like great oaks that the LORD has planted for his own glory" (Isaiah 61:3 NLT).

### **Continual Training for a Small Group Leader**

Once the trainees become small group leaders, they are asked to participate in an advanced-level counseling and discipleship training class each year. We want to make sure the small group leaders continue to get a fresh vision for what helping people become more like Christ really looks like. We also want to keep before them the fact that, with the Bible in hand, they are more than able to jump into this kind of ministry, even though many churches are reluctant to have the laity do such ministry. Many believe that only ordained ministers and those with college degrees in biblical studies are qualified to really help people change and grow. Yet Paul assured the Christians in Rome that he was "confident... that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another" (Romans 15:14 NKJV).

### **The Necessity for a Counseling Ministry**

As you can imagine, significant personal issues will arise during the discussions that take place in transformational small groups. While GFC small group leaders are able to handle most of the soul-care issues that arise in their groups, there are exceptions. Because they are already busy providing "personal discipleship" for the eight to fifteen people in their group, people who need "personal long-term intensive discipleship"— or what is commonly referred to as biblical counseling— may need to be cared for by others. For many small group leaders, there simply isn't enough time to also do long-term biblical counseling.

Fortunately, there is a way to handle the more difficult issues that will arise in transformational small groups. The people who need more intensive personal discipleship are referred to the church's counseling center. Among the issues referred to the counseling center are life-dominating sins such as adultery, alcohol or drug abuse, pornography addiction, persistent unbelief, sexual abuse, crippling fear, etc.

Steve Viars, the senior pastor of Faith Church, Lafayette, Indiana, illustrates this by telling the story of a person floating down a river in a boat. But then the boat gets trapped in an eddy and keeps bumping into the shore, no longer making any progress down the river. General and personal discipleship are represented by the person making progress down the river or toward growth in Christlikeness. The eddy represents a life-dominating sin that impedes any spiritual growth. Not until the boat is freed from the eddy will it continue its

journey down the river. Likewise, not until a person is freed from life-dominating sin will he or she resume growing spiritually.

Sometimes outside help is required in such a situation. Someone else needs to help move the boat out of the eddy, or to come alongside the sinning believer and offer help in the form of biblical counseling, whereby the sinning believer is helped by loving confrontation and instruction from the Scriptures. The goal is for repentance to take place so the believer will get back on the paths of general and personal discipleship.

As can be seen, to have a successful transformational small group ministry requires the availability of a biblical counseling ministry that can help care for the people who require long-term personal discipleship. If long-term biblical counseling is not available, a well-intended transformational small group ministry will eventually shift its focus. Those who are still ensnared in their sin will get frustrated whenever the group talks about change and growth. They'll desire change, but without the help of a spiritually mature person who can come alongside them (Galatians 6:1-2), they will lose hope.

Eventually, a group that started out with the purpose of transforming lives will shift into more of a Bible study or a care group that focuses mainly on acquiring more Bible information or on changing people's circumstances. The leaders of a church need to ask themselves, "Is this the risk we want to take by not providing the support of a biblical counseling ministry? Would God be pleased with such a shift in emphasis in the small group ministry?"

We have seen churches start a transformational small group ministry, but for one reason or another, neglect the development of a biblical counseling ministry. Eventually they end up having difficulties. Either the pastoral staff becomes swamped with counseling requests because no one else is able to do the work of biblical counseling, or the small group ministry becomes less focused on spiritual formation and growth. Neither situation is satisfactory.

Conversely, a church that has a counseling center but no small group ministry faces problems as well. Churches that do not have small groups to help out with more ordinary kinds of personal discipleship may end up with an inordinate number of biblical counseling cases. This is especially likely in a church where there is transformational preaching and teaching. The people will become hungry to change in the direction that they have been challenged, and because they're not able to get ongoing personal discipleship via a small group, they turn to the biblical counseling ministry for help. Many of these people could be effectively cared for in a transformational small group ministry. What's more, once people have been helped with intensive discipleship through biblical counseling, where do they turn for ongoing personal discipleship if transformational small groups do not exist?

What we're advocating is that a church that desires to be transformational should consider having an interdependent biblical counseling ministry and a small group ministry. Our observations have been that this model is suitable for both small and large churches. In 1996, as a church plant, Grace Fellowship adopted this model when there were only 80 people attending the service each Sunday morning. Today, the average Sunday attendance is around 1800, and the emphasis on growing in Christlikeness has remained unchanged. We're thankful that about 75 to 80 percent of the adults who call GFC their home church are participating in a transformational small group. For sixteen years, the purpose of GFC has remained unchanged as we've recognized the need to have both a biblical counseling ministry and a small group ministry functioning in an interdependent relationship.

In fact, these ministries and their interconnectedness are needed now more than ever before for Grace Fellowship to continue being a transformational church. As a church grows larger, one of its main concerns is making sure it can provide spiritual care for all the people whom God brings through the doors on a Sunday morning. Pastors are to equip the saints for the work of ministry, but they're not called to do all the work of discipleship. Works of ministry for lay people should involve more than just volunteering in the church nursery; it should include caring for the souls of others (Romans 15:14; Galatians 6:1-2). The integrating together of a small group ministry and biblical counseling ministry fosters Ephesians 4:11-12 involvement by all the people in a church. Each small group leader will typically care for eight to fifteen people.

With this model, our pastors don't spend the bulk of their time caring for the people one-on-one. Rather, they are able to spend a greater percentage of their time assisting and caring for the small group leaders as they shepherd the people in our church family. We do have one pastor who leads the counseling ministry, and the work of that ministry is carried out largely by trained lay counselors. This fulfills the God-given mandate for pastor-teachers to help all their people be involved in ministry to their level of giftedness (Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:7).

Currently we have about sixty transformational small groups, and the counseling ministry is usually caring for thirty to forty individuals or couples involved in long-term counseling, or what we would call intensive discipleship. A team of about thirty counselors do the counseling, and fourteen of these are NANC-certified counselors. We're thrilled that the majority of the counseling cases, about 60 percent, are handled by lay counselors.

God has been actively at work among us, and we've just been trying to humbly keep up with what He has entrusted to us. When we first started out we didn't have all the details of ministry figured out, but we did start with the idea of not just doing church but of deeply desiring to cooperate with God in His work of transforming the people in His church (see 2 Corinthians 3:18). In response to our meager efforts, we've seen God do exceedingly, abundantly beyond all that we could ask or think (Ephesians 3:20).

MacDonald, James; Bob Kellemen; Stephen Viars (2013-03-01). *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling* (pp. 271-284). Harvest House Publishers. Kindle Edition.