

MentorNet #45

Coaching for Christian Body Life

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Priority of body life. What Christians do as a body during worship can prove to be powerfully influential and beneficial moments in our lives. However, “church services” can be a routine mix of entertainment, boredom and passivity for ‘hearers only.’ If you mentor church planters who work with congregations that remain tiny — whether due to government restriction or to their choice — then you must help them develop dynamic church body life and worship in which they sense the awesome presence of God. All this can and does happen without a building dedicated to divine worship, skilled musicians, expensive musical and sound equipment, a large congregation, moving messages by scholars who have spent days in preparation, and praise led by a highly skilled music team.

Advantages of smallness. If those conventional aids to worship are missing, what is left? How can leaders enable believers to sense the presence of the Almighty and be satisfied that they have really worshipped? Properly led, a small group can take advantage of its smallness by worshipping in a way that is meaningful and with a great awareness of the presence and power of the Spirit of God. They can see people come to Christ, experience heartfelt confession of sin, find healing and make edifying application of God’s Word to current needs and opportunities for ministry.

Reproductive purpose. Popular movements towards faith in Jesus, sometimes called ‘church-planting movements,’ most often spread amongst folks who have little or no experience with Christian “churches”. New gatherings of recent believers, without Western church models, are often noisy, active and fun; all participate as fully as they wish. Such groups reproduce easily and do so rapidly with leaders being coached by mentors who know that loving God and loving one another requires *active participation* and *mutually edifying interaction*.

Common challenges. If you coach recent believers who shepherd new cell groups or simple churches, then you probably face two challenges:

1. Out-dated ideas about how to conduct “church services”. Insecure church leaders who lack social respect tend towards abstract theological monologue and group control by asserting clerical privileges that have no biblical basis.
2. Lack of experience in “body life”, that is, in worshipping as a community in ways that the New Testament describes. The New Testament requires that church leaders be persons of good public reputation, who lead their wives and children competently. That is, leaders are not chosen because of their diplomas and ability to ‘speak’.

One of your tasks as a mentor is to move your apprentice leaders to adopt New Testament practices of mutual service by obedience to the New Testament “one-another” commands, and to delay formal services that lack dynamic interaction as long as you can.

Normal practices. Like the network of house-based fellowships described in Acts 2:37-47, new believers can meet together to help each other learn and obey Jesus’ commandments and to experience His Presence in their midst. Most New Testament church activities were small group affairs that could be adapted to culture groups of any religious background. You can discover these activities in the New Testament. Meanwhile, here is a provisional list of such mutual practices:

1. Prophecy one to another for mutual edification (1 Cor. 14:3; 24ff)

The apostle Paul defined New Testament prophecy not as foretelling judgment, which it often was in the Old Testament, but, as he revealed in 1 Corinthians 14:3, “One who prophesies

speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.” As believers talk together and listen one to another, their gifts from the Holy Spirit are made “manifest” through words of encouragement and works of mercy. You must coach new worship leaders to enable groups to converse and interact as 1 Corinthians 14:24-33 requires, not depending on sermons and lessons alone to meet everyone’s needs.

2. Sing together hymns, psalms and spiritual songs. (Eph 5:19)

Christianity is a singing faith. Song remains a universal means of conserving and transmitting history, ideas and values between generations and social groups in every society. In the New Testament, apostles sang in jail (Acts 16:25); Gentiles glorified God (Rom 5:19) and Christians taught one another by song (Col 3:16), continuing the expression of joy and love from the Old Testament (Psalm 5:11). Coach leaders to encourage new believers to employ their own cultural music and song; promote group singing and not *performances*. Encourage new believers to write poems of praise and sing them to local tunes, or tunes that they compose.

3. Read, teach and apply the Holy Scriptures together. (1 Tim 4:13).

Since the Bible is mostly narrative and its doctrines communicated mainly through stories, new leaders should read Bible stories with seekers and believers. New churches should discuss Bible stories and apply the doctrines that these teach. New leaders of new congregations should not be taught to teach with monologue and to preach sermons until they become very experienced. Even if new leaders can read, they should teach bible stories through a variety of methods, drama, song, pictures and story-telling.

4. Celebrate the Lord’s Supper together. (Acts 20:7)

Communion or the Eucharist can provide powerful communication. Introduce it by recounting a variety of the many biblical accounts of sacrifices. The Word along with material emblems, smell and taste help believers to remember the Lord’s death and to expect his second coming, while promoting forgiveness and unity (1 Cor 11:23-28). The Lord’s Supper has been central to Christian worship in all ages and major church traditions, providing a mystical experience of the Presence of Christ (1 Cor 10:16). New churches and leaders have few worship skills, so instruct them to have Communion often.

5. Pray for one another, for authorities, for enemies and for the sick.

While most faiths pray or meditate, Christians pray to the Creator through the risen man, Jesus, using his name. The Bible condones all body postures, spoken and silent prayer. In prayer, Christians confess failures, acknowledge God, express thanks, intercede for others, and, above all, make requests. God answers prayers for Christians in ways that convince them and others that Jesus is Lord. Introduce small group prayers, family prayers and spiritual warfare praying immediately in new cells and churches.

6. Praise God together. (Eph. 1: 6, 12, 14)

Christians have good cause to review God’s mighty deeds and the many answers to their prayers. God enjoys Christians’ praise and they experience joy in praising him. Praise can take many forms: personal reports, poems, songs, testimonials, reading or reciting Scriptures, showing evidence. Even seekers and the youngest of believers should have opportunities to express praise. This can be done most easily in small groups. Trainers and new leaders should model praise and help others to praise God. Wise leaders will arrange for children to act out Bible stories, briefly, that relate to the adults’ Bible studies.

7. Give to meet each other’s needs and to support workers. (2 Cor 8:2-3)

Most non-Christians give, often generously, both to meet common needs and to support their religious systems. New Christians, even the poorest of them, will give generously in response to real needs as an expression of their love for Jesus. Teach obedience to Jesus’ command (Luke 6:38) from the start to new believers and to new congregations. Introduce ways

of accounting for gifts and their use that promote honesty. Most new shepherds should be self-supported and not dependent on their flock.

8. Baptise new believers and receive them into the fellowship. (Acts 2:41)

Even if the NT presents several meanings for baptism (Rom 6; 1 Pet 3:21; Heb 10:22), its function remains the same across most traditions: to introduce believers into the Body of Christ. Jesus commanded to baptise and the early believers normally did so without delay, teaching its meaning *afterwards*. New leaders whose flocks evangelize and win others should be empowered by their trainer to baptise without undue delay, lest new believers become discouraged.

9. Feed and serve the poor and needy together. (1 John 3:15-18)

Like Jesus their Master, practicing Christians in every age and nation have been noted for their compassion and good deeds towards insiders and outsiders alike. Most new believers come from backgrounds and social groups that have huge needs. Outreach to the needy with practical help, without enabling dependence, both honours God and draws many to him. Even new believers and little flocks can find ways of serving others together and of helping others to repent. The Holy Spirit grants some believers special gifts for works of mercy and service; these will have practical ideas about how to serve others.

10. Train and send ‘apostles’ and hear their reports. (Acts 13: 1-3; 14:26-27)

The Creator is a missionary God and God’s Messiah wants his gospel taken to every people in every place (Mat 24:14; 28:19-20; Like 24:47; Acts 1:8). The gospel normally flows into existing social and family networks when new believers are empowered to share the gospel story widely. The Lord also gives ‘apostles’ (sent ones) to his church (Eph 4:11) who prove eager to carry the gospel even further. Thus Christianity remains a missionary faith and churches send missionaries.

Conclusion. We have often stressed in the MentorNet articles the importance of using a menu to choose studies that help new elders to meet the needs and opportunities of their young flocks. These ten Body life practices derive from the commands of Jesus. Your coaching menus should include these ten practices, or another list that you will make, that will help you diagnose needs, prescribe studies and devise ministry plans. Did we leave out some necessary practice? Let us know at <mentors@mentornet.ws>.

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