**What Should We Be Doing in Our PhD Large Group Meetings?**

*Ruminations by Carrie Bare*

GFM New Staff Training Year One

The best way to get after what our large group meetings should have in them in terms of content would be to revisit our Four Commitments:

1. Spiritual Formation
2. Community
3. Evangelism and Service
4. Integration of Faith, Learning, and Practice

One way to make decisions about content is to ensure that we cycle through these four areas, the course of a year, asking: Have we done anything on evangelism yet this year? How is our integration\*, etc?

There are many ways to explore these commitments. We need to consider our group and the context.

**Some things to keep in mind:**

1. We work with introverted folks, for the most part.
2. They hear lectures a lot during the week.
3. They like to discuss ideas.
4. They need to sometimes get outside their heads and into their hearts, bodies, etc.
5. They appreciate “specialists” and usually do not consider themselves specialists in theology or the Bible.

What are the implications?

**I would suggest that good large group meetings would include a variety of formats:**

* Lectures – but include Q&A -*or-* make it interactive.
* Worship – connect with our hearts.
* Group discussions – both large and small.
* Visiting over food.
* Strong, clear leadership from up front as to how the discussion will happen or what is coming up next.
* Interactive discussion – if questions are asked, a time period for silent thinking needs to be given before there is any expectation that anyone will voice anything! Consider asking students to jot down thoughts before asking them to speak.
* Doing something together to serve others is an excellent grad student activity (walk-a-thons, homeless shelters/cooking, tutoring, Habitat for Humanity, spring break trips to help out somewhere such as after Katrina in New Orleans).
* Films to get into questions of justice.
* Panels – can include faculty or grad students themselves or others.
* Do something with the undergrad fellowship on campus or to go attend a lecture together on campus and discuss it together afterwards.
* Sometimes it can help to mix it up a bit—have three weeks of lecture/discussion and then break for a week and simply have a worship and fellowship night.

\*A reminder: If we want Christian faculty to talk about “integration of faith, learning and practice” for our students, we need to make sure they know what we are asking them to do. We also need to explore whether they have done some work on integration in their work and lives or the talk could backfire!

Each fellowship needs to work out whether or not they will meet every week or less often, what night of the week is best (i.e. should it be on a Friday or a weeknight?). Otherwise, how will students know when large group events are happening if they did not attend the last one?

There is no one way to do this: grad students need a community for working out their lives as faithful followers of Jesus in grad school and the large group meeting component can play a key part if done well. Students need to build their social skills, develop their capacity to depend on others and not go it alone, and discover the joy of worshipping together and struggling with ideas and goals together.

Good large groups are not easy to bring about with PhD students. The typical student is not gregarious and may not be a natural leader of people! We have to work at training and helping them to lead. But the value is enormous. Sometimes our large groups grow through trial and error. Grad students may tend to point out quickly what is wrong, but not as quickly point to what is right. Providing opportunities for positive and negative feedback and cultivating a sense of ownership for the group among the members are parts of developing the community. We need to press on, knowing that we are giving them a gift they need.