

# GOSPEL FELLOWSHIPS: THE MANUAL

AFRICAN VERSION 1.1



## 1 - INTRODUCTION

The true manual on how to form and run a Gospel Fellowship is the Bible, the Word of God. Remember that although you must keep to the timeless principles of the Bible, your Fellowship must always be adapted to your culture, your circumstances, and the gifts that God has given you. What works in one culture will not work in another; what works for one age group will not work for another. But the Spirit of the risen Christ will always accompany you, blessing and empowering you when you share his gospel, following the principles of the early apostolic church. The early church was based on small groups of believers everywhere, multiplying with enthusiasm and breaking through all kinds of barriers to bring hope to the people around them.

Please remember that nothing in this manual is prescriptive. This manual simply makes suggestions based on the model of the New Testament church. When we follow the Biblical model, then God will bless us and pour out the Holy Spirit upon us. As the work of the Gospel grows, the name of Jesus will be magnified.

## 2 - WHAT IS A GOOD NEWS FELLOWSHIP?

A Gospel Fellowship is a small group who meet together to share and to be encouraged in the gospel of Jesus Christ, following the simple model given in the New

Testament.

In the New Testament, the Christian groups numbered no more than 30 people, although from time to time they also gathered together with other Christian groups to worship. This is the model we wish to follow – small groups meeting regularly, who from time to time gather together with other small groups to make big groups for worship and evangelism.

## 3 - WHAT IS THE MODEL?

The New Testament model is found in Acts 2:42, where we are told that,

*The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community [i.e. fellowship], to their shared meals, and to their prayers.*

The four elements mentioned in this verse form the non-negotiable elements of every Gospel Fellowship:

When these four elements are present, then,

*The Lord add[s] daily to the community those who [are] being saved.*  
Acts 2:47b



## GOOD NEWS FELLOWSHIPS: THE MANUAL

### i) The Apostles' Teaching

In the earliest church, the teaching of the apostles consisted in retelling stories about Jesus – what he had done, and what he had said. Paul reveals what the focal point of all these stories was, when he writes,



*It passed on to you as most important what I also received: Christ died for our sins in line with the scriptures, he was buried, and he rose on the third day in line with the scriptures.*

1 Cor. 15:3–4.

We can retell the stories about Jesus, because they are found in the New Testament.

### ii) The Community

A Gospel Fellowship is about creating a real community with each other. This is a dynamic community that is continually reaching out in service beyond itself in everything that it does, and by growing, and replicating. A community is a group of people who share and do things together in real life.



First you need to be friends. Usually this means you have some common interests with the others in your fellowship. These could be football, school, or recovering from addiction. All of these can be platforms for also sharing and doing things together spiritually. A Gospel Fellowship is not just about the spiritual stuff in isolation from the society around them; a Gospel Fellowship is always looking for new ways to build authentic community.

### iii) Shared Meals

A Gospel Fellowship is always centred around a meal. It is clear from the New Testament that many of Jesus' greatest teaching moments were centred around meals. It is also clear that the early Christian groups ate together every time that they met.



Eating together in every culture says things like:

- We are family
- I accept you
- Let me share with you.

This is why eating together, including the symbols of the body and the blood of Jesus Christ, is such an important part of the Biblical model for Christian community.

The quality or the quantity of the food does not matter. What matters is that you eat together in community.

### iv) Prayer

When the early Christian believers remembered what Jesus had done, they weren't studying some irrelevant "doctrine." Jesus was alive! They had come together to communicate with and to share the power of the risen Christ.

That is why, together with telling stories about Jesus, prayer is so important. This is not prayer as a ritual, or prayer as a tradition, or prayer as an obligation, but direct communication with Jesus Christ.



When you pray, thank Jesus for being with you. Tell Jesus how grateful you are and ask him to help you in the problems in your life. Pray for each other.

### 4 – IS IT HARD TO SET UP AND RUN YOUR OWN GOOD NEWS FELLOWSHIP?

It is the Lord's doing. Is anything too hard for the Lord? (Gen. 18:14). It is not hard at all; it can be as easy as inviting a group of friends over to your home.

However, starting and running a Gospel Fellowship still needs to be intentional, otherwise it is easy to drift away from the New Testament model into other "church" models that people know from tradition. You have to stick to the plan!

### 5 – WHAT IS A GOOD NEWS FELLOWSHIP NOT?

*i) It is not a denomination or a church in a traditional organisational sense.*

A Gospel Fellowship is fully interdenominational and welcomes people from all churches and denominations. Although a Good News Fellowship is not a denomination or a church in a traditional sense, wherever it functions it is church in the New Testament sense.

*ii) It is not part of the Good News Unlimited "organization."*

A Gospel Fellowship is fully independent of *Good News Unlimited* and has no legal or organisational ties with

## GOOD NEWS FELLOWSHIPS: THE MANUAL

it or with other Fellowships associated with *Good News Unlimited*. The only tie that unites us is the love of Jesus and the gospel, through the work of the Holy Spirit.

A Gospel Fellowship may be called by whatever name the group decides to be known by.

### *iii) It is not a church "service."*

A Gospel Fellowship may not always "look" like a traditional church. The purpose of a Gospel Fellowship is to be as close to the principles of the New Testament church as possible within a contemporary and appropriate cultural setting. Although it may not be a traditional church "service," it is still church – the place where Jesus is with His people.

### *iv) It is not defined by a creed.*

Although Good News Unlimited has a Statement of Belief, this is not a test of Christian fellowship, and is not binding on Gospel Fellowships.

### *v) It is not a theological forum.*

Gospel Fellowships do not exist to debate theology, or for anyone to try to impose their theological frameworks on others. While some people may be inclined towards this, you must stick to the four essential elements from Acts 2:42. It is not a place for arguing.

Your Gospel Fellowship is to be positive and affirming of other Christians. It is not to "convert" other Christians to your way of seeing things. Our mission is to the world, not to the church.

## **6. BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR RUNNING YOUR GOOD NEWS FELLOWSHIP**

A Good News Fellowship basically looks like whatever you need it to look like so you can share the gospel. It should be easy, fun, and something that people will want to invite their friends to. If it's not, then you will need to change the way you are doing things.



The guidelines provided here are on that – guidelines. They are not a prescriptive recipe. Remember that every fellowship will look different based on culture, circumstances, demographics, and the gifts that the Holy Spirit has given to the group.

### *i) Why do it?*

Because you have been saved by the gospel of grace, and everyone you know desperately needs what you have received. The kingdom of Christ does not grow unless people like you take action!



### *ii) Who is it for?*

The Gospel grew from the words of Jesus and the apostles based on households (families) who accepted the truths that they shared. Today, Gospel Fellowships must also be based on households who accept the Gospel. So groups of families are a central part of what a Gospel Fellowship is all about.

Your Gospel Fellowship exists to create an environment in which the Spirit of the Risen Christ can convict, guide, teach and empower the members of your group. It is not about you. It is about sharing the gospel in its truest sense, in the way that the New Testament church did it.

Everything you do must be geared towards two things:

1. Creating a community in which the Spirit of the risen Lord can work. This means that the fellowship is for Jesus, who is truly present every time you meet.
2. Creating a community to which you can invite your friends to participate in, because Jesus is honoured when the gospel is shared and his kingdom grows.

Remember, Fellowship is for your family and friends who are not Christians or who do not go to church, or with whom you'd like to share the gospel.

That's why it is not just about reading the Bible together and praying together. It is also about eating together and doing fun things together – whatever friends usually do together.

As you do this, you will see Jesus powerfully at work in your Fellowship and in the lives of those who participate in it, and your own faith will be encouraged. BUT, if the main focus is on those who are already believers, your fellowship will stagnate and lose its purpose. Your Gospel Fellowship should not have as its goal to gain converts from other Christian churches or groups. Our Christianity must always be outward looking in nature, in fulfillment of the Great Commission of our Lord.

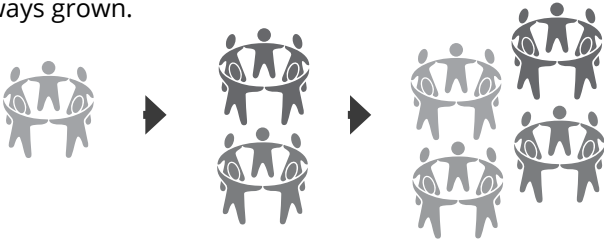
## GOOD NEWS FELLOWSHIPS: THE MANUAL

### iii) What's the aim?

The aim is not to grow your Fellowship. It should grow by itself, and you praise God for that. Instead, your aim should be to start more Fellowships!

When new people join your Fellowship, your aim should not merely stop at including them in your Fellowship; instead the aim should be to eventually help them start their own Fellowship.

In everything your fellowship does, everyone should bear in mind that the ultimate goal is replication. The kingdom of Jesus grows through replication. This is the Biblical principal, and this is how the work of the Gospel has always grown.



### iv) So how does it grow?

The example of Jesus and the early church shows us that the kingdom of God principally expands through personal relationships – people whom you already know or with whom you come into contact. You can spend all the money you have on advertising, but if the people in your Fellowship don't think that the Gospel is such great news that they want to invite people whom they already know, there will be no real growth.

### v) How many?

The early Christians spread on the basis of small groups. They mainly met in homes, and even the largest homes would not have held more than 30 people. See 1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:3–5; Philemon 1, 2; and Col 4:15. The Gospel grew from there. A Gospel Fellowship can start with as little as a few people who are committed and who are willing to be actively involved.

However, since the idea is that Gospel Fellowships divide and multiply, this means that there will be multiple Fellowships in one district. When the Gospel Fellowships come together, there will be many people rejoicing in the Lord.

### vi) Where?

In your home, by the river, in a park, under a tree, in a local hall, at your local prison... Do you get the picture? Church is where God's people get together.



### vii) When?

Whenever it works for the members of your Fellowship. The more that your Fellowship is on fire for Jesus, the more time that the people will want to spend together.

Your Gospel Fellowship should get together at least once a week, but it can be more often. We recommend that one of these days could be a Saturday, but that is up to you. All the Gospel Fellowships in your area should get together from time to time for Gospel celebrations and for public evangelistic meetings. How often that happens is up to you.

## 7 – WHAT HAPPENS AT A GOSPEL FELLOWSHIP?

Let's talk a bit more about the four essential elements of a Gospel Fellowship.

### i) Eating together

Christian life and growth is fundamentally about community, and community is fundamentally about eating together. It is amazing how often the greatest "Gospel" moments in the life of Jesus occurred while he shared a meal with his disciples or with others. So you should eat together as a central activity of your Fellowship. And when you do that, you should do what the early Christian church did: remember why you are a community in Christ by sharing the bread and the wine together that represent the Lord's sacrifice, and remembering it with a prayer.



Your meal should be simple, and done in such a way that it is not burdensome for you, and so that it does not detract from the study of the Word of God. Having everyone bringing enough for themselves and a little to share, and then having everyone pack up after themselves is ideal. Never leave a mess for your host to clean up!

## GOOD NEWS FELLOWSHIPS: THE MANUAL

### ii) Apostolic Teaching

#### Bible Discussion



This is the first part of apostolic teaching. Your only book should be the Bible, focusing especially on the New Testament, and especially on the Gospels. The New Testament church would gather together to re-tell and share the stories about Jesus with each other and their friends. That was what church did back then, and this is what church should do today. As you read the stories in the Gospels, and as we discuss them, and we share how they apply to our own lives, we are truly sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Here are some guidelines about how to do this. Again, remember that different cultures and circumstances will relate to these guidelines differently.

Point out to the group that there is to be no judgment, that there are no silly questions, and no right or wrong answers. You need to make it as easy as possible for new people to participate. For this reason, there is also to be no religious or church jargon or theological talk. We want to let the Word of God speak for itself to our hearts. This can be especially difficult for some thoroughly “churched” people to understand. You need to be able to read Scripture in your fellowship and see what it is telling us, without any theological gymnastics or jargon at all. If you invite new people to your fellowship and there is a vocal person there who is using church jargon to present complicated doctrinal ideas instead of what is clearly found in the Bible passage you are reading, you are likely never to see those new people again.

The Gospel is a story of what Jesus has done. The Gospel has spread throughout the world because of stories it is good to read through one of the Gospels, because the Gospels tell the stories about Jesus. The Gospel of Mark is the simplest and is structured around simple stories, so it is an ideal Gospel to begin with. Simply start at the beginning and read the first story. The next time, you read the second story, and so on. When you have finished the Gospel of Mark, you can go on to another Gospel. The Gospel of John is ideal. Pray before you read the Bible to thank Jesus for being there to guide you.

If possible, make sure everyone has a Bible in front of him or her in a translation that is plain and simple to

understand. But don't assume that people will have Bibles with them. Many won't. So never ask people questions that require them to have a Bible in front of them.

Ideally someone should volunteer or be chosen to read a passage from the Gospels. Be careful to ensure that they like reading, have a good voice, and that they read well! Avoid the mistake of just going “around the circle” reading, since there are many people who will be uncomfortable about this. They won't tell you that, and you may never see them again!

This should be followed by a group discussion of the passage. Be careful about who leads this discussion. The person who leads the discussion should be a respected and knowledgeable leader, and should understand how to lead a group, and how to involve everybody.

It is **very** important to keep the discussion focused on:

- 1) **Jesus** – What does this story tell us about Jesus? What is Jesus like?
- 2) **Salvation** – What does this story tell us about salvation?
- 3) **Us** – What does this story tell us about ourselves? How can you relate to this story?

Use simple questions like:

- *What do you think this story is about?*
- *What thoughts are in your mind as we read this story?*
- *What is there about Jesus that most impresses you in this story?*
- *Who do you relate to the most in this passage, and why?*
- *What can you learn about the gospel from this passage?*
- *What can you take away and apply in your life this week?*

Let the Holy Spirit Lead your discussion. The leader of the discussion should remember that they are not there to share their great wisdom or theological perspectives, but rather to let everyone in the group see “Jesus only”; from the passage that has been read.

A skillful leader will know how to keep the discussion focused on the three points listed above. Use open-ended questions and don't necessarily expect people to have the

## GOOD NEWS FELLOWSHIPS: THE MANUAL

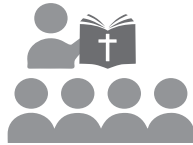
Bible in front of them to look up answers. Try to include everyone in the discussion. Don't assume any knowledge of Christianity or of the Bible story. I once led a discussion in a group that often referred to Judas, only to have one of the people there say to me at the end, "I found all that very interesting, but I don't know who Judas is." At all times, remember that the purpose of your Fellowship is to share the Gospel with those who have never heard it.

This is the basic method, however every group will have different needs. For example, if you have a number of recently-baptised people you may need to specifically teach them more of the basics of Christianity. A wise leader will be able to change this method when necessary.

### **Preaching the Word**

This is the second part of apostolic teaching. There is power when the Word of God is preached by humble servants of God.

When preaching the Word, the following points are important:



- Pray before, during, and after you preach. It is the work of the Holy Spirit; not your work.
- Keep the message simple so that even the simplest person can understand it.
- Stick only to what the Bible says. Do not use any other source as your authority.
- Present a positive Biblical message. Fill the people with faith, not fear.
- Whatever your topic, every message should focus on Jesus and the cross. This is your anchor to make sure that you are always preaching the good news of the Gospel, and not preaching your own word.
- When you preach, you should often make altar calls. Follow the example of Jesus, who was always calling people to come to him.

Some groups may choose to only have the study of the Bible and not have the preaching. This is a decision to be made by the leader of the Fellowship.

### **Praying Together**

You should pray together immediately after the Bible discussion, while the impact of the Word of God is being most felt in people's hearts. Let everyone feel free to pray.



You may teach your Fellowship that group prayer is a conversation with God, and not a ritual. So short "bursts" of prayer from various participants in the fellowship is acceptable. Of course, in some cultures this might be essential, so you must balance this with the need to pray in the way that is appropriate in your culture.

### **Building Community Together**

At some stage during your Fellowship, plan a social activity. A Gospel Fellowship is a community, and a community loves spending time together and doing things together – and not just reading the Bible and praying!

So what is it that the members of your Fellowship love doing together socially? And more importantly, what would they love to do that they could invite their friends to! Remember the good news of the gospel is not just about you; it is about those who have not heard. So plan activities where you can just be a great community and have a fun time together with your non-Christian or non-religious friends.



What does that look like? It all depends on your age and your demographic. If you are older in age, then that will determine some of your interests. If you are a group of young families, you will have some things in common with other young families and that may determine how you socialise. If you meet in a prison, that will provide some boundaries as well. If you are a group of young people, well... it's all up to you...

The idea is that you make friends first, and then you introduce them to the gospel, so your Fellowship must provide avenues for you to make friends, or introduce your friends to your community. Without being a real community, which means doing life together, and so socialising together, it is hard for your friends to see what

## GOOD NEWS FELLOWSHIPS: THE MANUAL

is so great about your fellowship. After all, this is only what Jesus did. He made friends with people first, and then he shared his kingdom with them. So purely social activities are an indispensable element of your fellowship.

Remember always that community in Christ transcends and ignores all human boundaries of gender, race, tribe, politics, and social or economic status. We have all been made one through the blood of Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:28). How we treat those whom the world considers inferior to us is how Jesus considers that we have treated him (Mat. 25:40).

This is why a very important way to build community is to see what the needy in the community need, and as a Gospel Fellowship, go together to help these people.

### **7 – PRACTICAL ADVICE**

#### ***i) Leadership***

Remember always that Jesus Christ is your leader. He is not in the tomb; he is risen! And he has promised to lead his church.

As far as our work is concerned, leadership is one of the spiritual gifts that God has promised to give his church (Rom. 12:8), and each Gospel Fellowship should have a leader.

Christian leadership is very different to leadership in the world, as we see it in our villages, towns, and cities. It is based on humbly loving and serving one another, and being always willing to put others first, and putting yourself last (Matt 20:25–28.) As Christian leaders, we are to follow the principles of the Gospel.

A person who is not humble, kind, gentle, and loving is not a Christian leader. And there will also be times when a Christian leader will need to be firm and decisive, and unwavering. A Christian leader cannot be corrupted by money or popularity, and will not be moved by family or tribal loyalties in matters of the Gospel and what it means to be a Christian.

It is good also for every Gospel Fellowship to have a council of elder people, who are spiritually mature and who have wisdom in the Lord. The leader should humbly seek advice from this council on matters about the Fellowship.

#### ***ii) Spiritual Gifts***

The New Testament teaches us that when Christ returned to his Father in heaven, he gave spiritual gifts to his church for building up the church and for the preaching of the Gospel (Eph. 4:8.) God has given his church all of the gifts that it needs, distributed to every person according to the will of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:11.) Because Jesus is risen from the dead, he is alive among us in power and authority through his Spirit!

This means that God will give your Gospel Fellowship all the spiritual gifts that it needs, distributed among different people. The leaders of the Fellowship must realize that it is not they themselves who have all the gifts, but that their job is to make sure that every person has the ability to use their spiritual gift for the glory of God and for the growth of his kingdom.

When using any spiritual gifts it is important to remember that:

- all spiritual gifts are to be exercised in a decent and orderly way (1 Cor 14:40)
- no use of spiritual gifts can take the place or contradict what God has revealed in the Bible
- we are always to “test the spirits” (1 John 4:1) to discern whether they are from God.

#### ***iii) Evangelism***

People respond well to out-door public evangelistic meetings. It is important to have a passionate speaker and Gospel Fellowships in the district who are full of energy. Different Gospel Fellowships in one district can come together to support evangelistic meetings from time to time. The people who are baptized should then be placed in the Gospel Fellowships to learn the Gospel and grow in the knowledge of the Lord.

#### ***iv) Discipleship***

We aim to develop a simple discipleship programme that will help people to learn the Gospel and grow in the knowledge of the Lord. This will be a programme that will be able to be done in the Gospel Fellowships, and that will probably be 12 weeks long. I will seek your advice in the development of this Gospel Discipleship Programme.



## GOOD NEWS FELLOWSHIPS: THE MANUAL

It is important to understand that this will not be a programme to qualify people before baptism; it will be a discipleship programme for people who have already been baptized. People in the New Testament were usually baptized the same day that they heard the Gospel. It should be the same with us.

### v) Children

In the New Testament churches, households (families) gathered together. Children should be valued and incorporated into your Fellowship. They can be involved in the various activities, and they can be spoken about, and prayed over.



If you have someone who is skilled at teaching children and organizing activities for them, then you are truly blessed. If you do not, then you must ask the Lord to send you such a person. Remember that happy children attract children, who attract families, who attract more families.

### vi) Music

If you love singing to the Lord, then your Gospel Fellowship should have a choir. If your Fellowship is too small to have a choir, then you can have a joint-choir with a Gospel Fellowship nearby. If that is not possible, then still sing, and remain faithful to the Gospel, working hard for the Lord so that he will send you more choir members!



When you have music in your Fellowship, make sure that everyone can participate; this means that you teach everyone the words for the songs, and you teach the people the new songs carefully so they can sing with energy.

Although music is very important, you must make sure that it never takes the place of the Word of God and prayer. Above all, you must keep the Word of God central!

And you must not feel that you cannot have a Gospel Fellowship if you do not have music. The reality is that that you can still have a very successful Gospel Fellowship even if you are not musically talented. There is not much mention of music in the New Testament churches, but look at how tremendously God blessed them!

### vii) Good News Unlimited Presentations

Good News Unlimited broadcasts a weekly gospel presentation live, as well as having many archived video presentations available through its website. There are also many devotionals and sermon ideas available from Good News Unlimited. These are a wonderful resource for the sharing of the gospel. You must remember, however, that these resources are in English and may need to be translated.



### viii) Divide, divide, divide!

Remember that the aim is ultimately not to grow your Fellowship, but to create new Fellowships. If your Gospel Fellowship grows too big you will face many new problems.



You can start a new Fellowship in the next village, or you can start a new Fellowship in the same town or city if it is being enough. The goal is to divide and to fill the world with Gospel Fellowships. This should be your plan. If you ever reach the point when your Fellowship has a discussion about whether to divide or not, if you decide not to, you can almost guarantee that your Fellowship will stagnate, and maybe even die.

### ix) What next?

Please stay in touch with us so that we can rejoice together with you by sharing each other's stories of what the risen Lord is doing in our lives and for his church! Through prayer, energetic work, and surrender to God, the success of the Gospel is ensured!



We hope to improve this manual over time, based on your experiences and feedback, so please let us know what works and what doesn't work, or what you think should be in this manual.

If you have more questions about how to start or run your own Good News Fellowship, please contact us, and we will answer them as soon as possible. And we might even include the questions and answers in future versions of this manual, so that Fellowships around the world can use your experiences to help them share the Gospel and grow the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

May the kingdom and the glory be His forever!

*Eliezer Gonzalez*



## GOOD NEWS FELLOWSHIPS: THE MANUAL

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***vi) How to contact us***

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