

Where Are the Men?

And is that the best question?

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DEVELOPMENT FROM THE GROUND UP

Most home fellowships, Messianic or otherwise, seem to be grown “from the ground up.” They develop out of study groups or a shared interest. They may also develop under the teaching of one gifted as a teacher. There is no previously existing structure though people usually have some kind of model from previous experience that may guide their expectations. This may be good but can also be problematic if the expectations remain unspoken and a source of conflict underneath ongoing activities or decisions.

When a small study group begins to grow and move toward becoming a larger body with mutually defined identity and goals the growing pains begin. As has been noted in earlier articles, the mode of decision-making is usually that of mutual consent. At some point, it will become evident that the group needs to trust the discernment and wisdom of a smaller group of leaders because it becomes too cumbersome for the entire group to respond to every need. We strongly advise a plurality of leadership for reasons stated earlier in this series. We also believe that a group should NOT move in this direction unless they are quite clear that YHWH, our God, has directed them to do so; that it is not just a “carnal flesh” desire for position or some other humanly based rationale.

How is that group of leaders determined? There are various decision making processes such as popularity, casting of votes or lots, credentials, or simply whoever is willing to carry the responsibilities. Sometimes people become leaders simply because a vacuum of leadership exists and they ‘slide’ into it.

Sometimes people assume that a gifted teacher, male or female, will also be able to function as a leader or shepherd. As noted in this series, leadership roles are both formal and informal. Therefore, in some groups the formal leadership resides in a man or group of men, while the informal leadership roles are with a woman or group of women. It may also be the opposite. It has been our experience that these methods usually fall short.

Our understanding is that the existence of a fellowship/community is best when that group has clearly understood and walked in the leadership of the Ruach ha Kodesh/Holy Spirit. This grounding for the group’s existence in the first place needs to be well understood by all members. Following naturally from that base, it becomes apparent whom He directs and equips in the various leadership roles. We believe that a strong variable in this process will be the maturity of the individuals involved. As stated earlier, we would question whether anyone who is at less than a parent level of maturity would be directed by God to take on a leadership role. Since there is no “higher body” other than Messiah Himself, mutual accountability before Him among leadership people requires maturity in many areas: spiritually, relationally, emotionally, developmentally. We believe this to be a model based on Scriptural understanding of governance/guidance by the elders in a family. Without individual maturity, the usual

stresses and strains of responsibility invariably result in conflict and drama; and not the entertaining kind of drama! We address one kind of drama and resolution for it in our audio teaching: “Drama Triangles for Messianic Fellowships”¹ which is available on our website. It is the second of our three part foundational teaching on relationships and leadership development.

Having expressed the ideal, we hasten to add that it rarely exists in its fullness already in place. Yet this ideal in place serves as a yardstick to measure the health and viability of the group. (This topic is further defined in an article on our website entitled: “Fellowship vs. “Social-ship”: Do you know the difference?”²) Most groups find themselves doing well in some of these aspects but lacking one or more of the others. Prayerful counsel and experience helps us work with communities to define these strengths and weaknesses so that they can be effectively addressed.

OUR EXPERIENCE

We did not initially know that we would become an equipping community though we understood through prayer that we were to develop a network of stable faith based relationships that would be strong enough to withstand the stress of helping people overcome previous trauma while encouraging growth in faith and personal stability. We have grown through the original phases of mutual consent toward establishment of an elder model of authority and support. We have never doubted that YHWH has brought us into existence and that He has directed our steps. We are strong in some areas yet continue to work toward strength and greater understanding in others. A particular challenge for us has been the issue of gender: our SAM community has always had more women than men in our 8 years as a fellowship and our leadership team has been composed of 3 women and 1 man. We understand ourselves to be an “equipping community” and have never tried to present ourselves otherwise or establish any kind of church or synagogue structure. We are an organism, not an organization. People have said to us in effect; “You’re community is great, but you need more men.” Sometimes the comment specifically concerns men in leadership. We have not objected to more men but the operative question is, “Where do you just pick them up?” Our focus has been on restoration and growth in Messiah to maturity, personally and spiritually, through whatever trials and difficulty each person has traveled; on fellowship in Messiah not just “social ship”.³ The focus is not on gender or numbers of people. It has been somewhat surprising over the years how many people DO focus on presence or absence of men. Many of them have questioned this, some overtly critical. No doubt others kept their question to themselves. There are also those who have looked at the mission statement, who we are in Messiah and what we do, and have offered support and affirmation for this difficult task of dealing with maturity.

¹ Drama Triangles for Messianic Fellowships, Audio Teachings section at www.setapartmingb.org

² Fellowship vs. “Social-ship” Do you know the difference? Barbara L. Klika, MSW Personal Life Coach, found in Articles section at www.setapartmingb.org

OUR COMMUNITY IS THE MESSAGE

As we have been engaged in consultations with various communities, Janell Schroeder and I have been amazed at the number of times we have had a similar experience or challenge to that which faces other communities. We have again been in awe as YHWH orchestrates circumstances to equip us in every way we could not even foresee.

Though not all communities will share the exact same character or calling that we have, they do all need to deal with personal, relational, and spiritual maturity.

It would seem that we as a community are the message of what growth can happen when maturity has a primary focus in a group. This message is not one to be delivered by any one person. Its fullness cannot be grasped by description alone. It can be portrayed a little more accurately when the voices of those in the community can be heard. We are preparing an audio track of our entire community in discussion of these matters which will be on our website as an introduction to our other materials. And yes, the men's voices are heard!

Our identity and leadership grew out of prayer and need rather than any kind of "election" or assignment from people. I did not "take" a leadership role in this. I was given this task of birthing SAM, I suspect, because long ago, I have said, "Hineni/Here am I; send me" though it was just as surprising to me as to anyone else. I, too, have had to grow into the fullness of the role as I was at a parent level of maturity when the call came. It has taken me outside the bounds of my professional role, challenging me to focus on Messiah and His plan, consuming any personal goals, and I continue to learn more.

Our understanding is that this fellowship is about growing every one of our members up to the place where they can exercise their own gifting and calling to become like Messiah in every way. Rather than determining leadership based on gender or ethnic background, we have attempted to honor the gifting and callings we understand in prayer for each member. We make a concerted effort to assess maturity levels and then strive to provide the support needed in areas of weakness. We look for evidence that confirms or denies these perceptions as time goes on and more experience is gained by all.

Our community puts value on maturity which we believe is in agreement with the Scriptural directive to grow up in every way into Messiah Who is our Head.⁴ We take seriously the need to remember our mother's instruction, character formation, prior to being entrusted with interpretation of Torah.

We are always delighted to find men who are mature and able to lead and teach well. There just haven't been very many in our local area who share our identity and values; men who are both emotionally and spiritually mature. Some have come and gone when they weren't immediately received as teachers. (Both men and women fit this category.) Some have left after understanding that there is a "getting acquainted" time period; and that accountability, growth and patience are required before formal leadership is granted. And some remain!

⁴ Ephesians 4: 11-16

This is the answer we have come to about finding the men. We are growing them. In some cases, we see the impact of growing maturity in Mom's who can then influence their sons, as was the case for Timothy. Sometimes, it is a matter of helping those men who are already physically grown up to grow emotionally and spiritually to the point that they are well and truly ready to take on the challenges of leadership.

We know that people, men **and** women, who aren't deeply interested in personal growth and spiritual maturity in Messiah will not likely remain in our community for long. But, oh! Those that remain and grow with us! We see the fruit beginning to shine in this, our eighth year. It has been women who have been more actively pursuing maturity but we are pleased to support those men who have also begun to personally engage in the process. Yeshua be praised! This is the stuff from which covenant relationships grow. This is the basis for *echad* with Messiah and one another.

Putting aside the personal embarrassment of acknowledging a lack of maturity usually seems strange at first, but the relief that follows has proven rewarding. We have objective tools to help evaluate maturity and the crucible of community to walk it out. As iron sharpens iron, so do we in a community determined to mature in every way into our Messiah nurture, admonish, exhort and encourage our people. Why should this process be any different for either gender? All of us have to develop our character and address anything that was missed in our actual childhood years before we can expect to go on to the meat of Truth.

Male leadership styles and female leadership styles we believe can be just as complimentary as the role of husband and wife are described to be. Taken together with dignity and respect for each one, the result should be stronger and more honoring to YHWH. Perhaps men will carry the title or the office yet will do so with humility and respect for other men and women who support them. Perhaps women will hold a title or office and do so with humility and respect for the men and women who stand together with them. Where one has a weakness, the other will step into the gap without pretense or apology, but for the purpose of lifting up and bringing the glory to our Elohim in the process.

Our community guidelines say that we will watch and get acquainted with new members for a year before they will be given any positions of leadership. Beginning with simple tasks, we observe the individual's ability to carry it out dependably and well. When small things are handled well, there is greater confidence to place larger issues in their care. In this manner, we intend to avoid the chaos of putting responsibility in the hands of one who doesn't follow through; hopefully protecting the individual from being expected to do something they really aren't ready for as well as the community from inappropriate leadership actions. We look for signs of maturity, Torah knowledge and the ability to appropriately apply it, dependability, and skill at handling emotions or conflict.

As we learn and grow, and stand with others in the same process, we continue to look to Messiah as the Great Shepherd; the One who will bring together His sheep from every place they have been scattered as we all prepare for His return.