

Safe Places for Open Heart Surgery

by Eddy Hall

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Three years ago when Shawna* came to Hilltop Urban Church she would sit in the back and slip out quickly after service. Though the church was small, she hardly knew anyone. She was, in her words, “a very private person.”

Today Shawna sings in the praise team. She is among the first to enthusiastically welcome visitors. She and her husband shepherd a house church where they help create a safe environment for heart-level sharing by sharing deeply out of their own lives. This sea change in Shawna’s life is a window into the “extreme church makeover” that our church has gone through these past three years.

Small group guru Lyman Coleman talks about three levels of sharing--mouth-to-mouth, head-to-head, and heart-to-heart. Small talk about the weather, sports, cars, plus most small-group ice breakers are mouth-to-mouth. When a group studies a book or Scripture together and discusses, “What do you think this means?” it moves to the head-to-head level. Most groups get this far, but many reach the deeper heart-to-heart level only rarely.

Why head-to-head isn’t enough

Our leaders have worked hard to develop this new DNA where heart-to-heart sharing is safe and normal. And it’s not just because we want closer relationships; it’s central to how we make disciples.

You’ve probably read the polls about how Christians behave no better than everyone else on a wide range of ethical issues. Obviously, something is fundamentally wrong with the way American Christians have been trying to make disciples. We have mostly operated from a head-to-hand model of discipleship, assuming that intellectual understanding leads to obedient action. That may work sometimes, but evidently not often enough to make a dent in the polling data.

What is missing? Heart transformation. We have come to believe that the heart of the discipleship process is not “Christian education,” but rather *creating environments where it is safe to routinely do open-heart surgery*.

Rhythms to create safe space

At Hilltop, we have woven several habits into our DNA to constantly remind us of the

centrality of relationships and create space for heart-to-heart sharing.

- *Eating together.* We are almost fanatical about eating together to nurture community. Every house church begins with a shared meal as do our leadership training meetings and most ministry team meetings.
- *Happy/sad.* In house church, as soon as we sit down to the meal, a kid will usually blurt, “Can I start happy/sad?” We focus the meal conversation with a simple question: “What is something that happened this week that you felt happy about and what is something you felt sad about?” Each person gets a chance to share a two-minute answer before anyone shares twice. The happy/sad question is safe enough that a newcomer can answer at the mouth-to-mouth level, while old-timers can respond at the heart level, creating space for others to share heart-to-heart.
- *“What do you need Jesus to do for you today?”* In our small groups we don’t ask, “Does anyone have a prayer request?” because this so often leads to “safe” requests: “Pray for Aunt Matilda’s toe.” Instead, we ask, “What do you need Jesus to do for you today?” This helps us focus on our own need for God and keeps it immediate. It lets people share at their comfort level while creating space for vulnerability. Our ministry teams ask this question just after the meal and before digging into planning. In our house churches, this question guides our closing prayer time. In larger groups, such as church retreats or leadership training meetings, we do this in threes.
- *House church sharing questions.* Our house churches all follow a basic format that includes several sharing questions. The first two questions are:
 - Where is God speaking to me and how do I think I can live it out?
 - Did God speak to me from this week’s verses? How?
 Notice these are heart questions. We intentionally avoid “head” questions such as, “What do you think this verse means?” While this won’t fit every church, our house churches are laboratories for figuring out how to live out the Scripture taught during Sunday’s sermon.
- *Group safety guidelines.* After the meal, each house church transitions to a time of deeper sharing by reading together a preamble that includes a prayer, our church’s mission statement, a confession, and the following meeting ground rules.

To Make It Safe

I will share my own story and listen to others’ sharing without commenting, giving advice, or trying to fix anyone. (“No cross talk.”)

What is shared in the group stays in the group unless someone threatens to harm themselves or others.

I will avoid inappropriate joking and flirting.

Conflict and correction, unless a group matter, will be handled privately, not in the group.

Most of these are standard operating procedure for most healthy groups. Our “no crosstalk” rule, however, which we borrowed from the twelve-step movement, is not common in church-based small groups. It has taken time for many of our people who are used to giving advice and “fixing” others to learn to do this and understand its value. Yet, clearly, this ground rule is a huge part of why most of our groups have become safe places to do open-heart surgery. I can share my sins, my addictions, my struggles, without fear that someone will try to fix me. When this rule is violated, people visibly pull back and some don’t return.

This doesn’t mean that no one can ask for advice; we just don’t give advice during house church meetings. Even if someone asks a house church shepherd for advice outside the meeting, our shepherds are being trained to ask questions to help the person hear from God for himself or herself. Occasionally, giving advice is appropriate, but it is becoming rarer. We are finding that when people hear from God for themselves, their hearts are far more likely to be transformed.

Leading with weakness

These regular times for heart sharing that are built into the rhythm of our body life don’t, by themselves, make it safe for people to share their hearts. What makes it safe is when we as leaders use these opportunities to share our own pains, struggles, and sins. Our best leaders are those who most openly share their weaknesses. When leaders don’t share vulnerably, heart-to-heart sharing in our groups is rare.

Our leaders model vulnerability not only in our small groups, but also in our preaching. At Hilltop we have a preaching team made up of about a half dozen people. The team meets every two to three months to plan sermon topics and decide who will preach which weeks. We often ask people not on the team to share stories from their lives as part of the sermons.

While we work hard at accurate exegesis, most sermons aim at heart transformation and include vulnerable sharing. As people hear our pastors and others regularly share their junk, they feel safer sharing their own. The authenticity people witness on Sunday mornings carries over into most of our small groups through the week.

Living without masks

Maybe the most striking thing about our church these days is the authenticity. More people are living without masks. Visitors are struck by this. Leaders from other churches have been amazed when our shepherds have shared what God is doing in our house churches, but many have not been willing to pay the price of leading with vulnerability so God can do the same thing in their churches. That’s not surprising. James 5:16, “Confess your sins to one another and

pray for one another that you may be healed,” is central to how we are making disciples these days, but in the American head-to-hands model of discipleship, making group confession the heart of the disciple-making process is almost unthinkable. Leading with weakness, however biblical it may be, sounds like an oxymoron.

We are learning to be a church where we are not surprised by sin--our own or anyone else's. Where we expect to be confessing sin regularly, and expect others to do the same. Where confession is safe because we, sinners ourselves, are quick to extend forgiveness to one another. But this doesn't translate into complacency about sin.

These past three years we have seen more leaders developed, more broken lives being put back together, more relationships reconciled, and more spiritually hungry people coming into our body than in the previous 20 years combined. It's not because of programs; we actually have far fewer programs than we did three years ago. It's because the very heart of our life together is these operating rooms where we see constantly see God transforming our own hearts and the hearts of our brothers and sisters in this safe place of radical grace.

* Name has been changed.

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