

CASE STUDY

Life Purpose Coaching for Lay Leaders

By Tony Stoltzfus and Wendy Good

Communion Fellowship is a small-town midwestern church with a Sunday attendance of around 120. Begun in the 80's on a college campus, this younger church is composed almost exclusively of members under 45, and has focused on missions, worship, small groups and leadership development. Members of the congregation had high expectations for being developed as people—they believed that Communion Fellowship was a place to discover God's purpose for your life and begin to actively fulfill it. Members were ready to serve and to give their lives to something meaningful, but frustrations mounted: somehow it just wasn't happening for the average lay leader.

Things began to change when several members entered a coach-training program. Wendy Good had been a key part of the congregation's leadership for a number of years, serving as an elder as well as on staff in various leadership development roles. The catalyst for a new approach happened when she was about halfway through her own training as a coach.

"There were several young couples I was in touch with that were facing major life decisions," she recalls, "like moving, going into missions, things like that. I could see that they were struggling. They didn't know the right questions to ask—they weren't making those decisions out of a broader perspective of understanding their life purpose....And this is what we as a church were supposed to be about: whether or not these people leave, we want to help them engage what God is doing in their lives and equip them to pass what they learn on to others." Drawn by her own sense of call to help others find their destiny as well as her church's mission, Wendy dove in.

The first step was connecting with the three couples individually. By listening, asking some key destiny questions, and helping the couples begin to sort through their decisions, Wendy gave them a taste of what coaching could do. This was hitting them exactly at the point of highest motivation—they were hooked. Gathering all three couples together, Wendy introduced the idea of forming a coaching group to walk through a structured destiny-discovery process using materials from TLC's Life Focus track. Because their congregation offered 8-week Wednesday night classes (and child-care was provided!), she proposed meeting on Wednesday nights.

"One thing I learned from that first round was to call it a Practicum, not a class," Wendy relates. "Class sounds more like a place you just sit and listen, and I wanted them to connect with the idea that they were going to be involved and do some work." In fact, in laying out expectations Wendy made a stretch and asked for a 4-hour per week commitment (including the hour and fifteen minutes class time.) Participants would do independent self-discovery exercises, listen to taped input on destiny and meet individually or as couples with the coach during the week. 'Class' time would be used for discussion, hands-on discovery exercises and one-on-one interaction with peers.

A high point of that first vision-casting meeting was bringing in a young couple from the congregation who had just walked through the same Life Focus process for a major decision in their own lives. Their testimonial provided a real-life 'story' the other couples could relate to.

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“They (the three couples) all knew each other, they all were dealing with the same issues, so they were all excited about working on them together.” All three couples said yes.

“That first group did pretty well with keeping the time commitment,” Wendy comments, “but the group I had the second time around did better. “I think part of it was that the church put out a flyer with the different classes we were offering. I made sure to put in a good description of what the class involved and what the commitment was.” Giving participants complete information up front and asking for a decisive commitment (participants signed a coaching covenant as part of the process) helped get things off on the right foot.

One obstacle that came up along the way was paying the coach. Even though the church agreed to subsidize a third of the cost, the Life Focus practicum still cost three times what any of the other Wednesday night classes did—a necessity to cover the cost of the coach’s time and the materials. “It was a paradigm shift, but I think people were motivated enough and saw the value of it so that it wasn’t too much of an issue. There were several people before the second round who joked around with me about the cost in a way that told me there might be a little more there than just a joke, but that was about the extent of it...In the evaluations afterward everyone said it was worth it.” The positive word-of-mouth from the first group also helped overcome the cost barrier the second time around.

The first Life Focus practicums at Communion Fellowship covered dreams and dreambusters, discovering your life purpose, and developing a set of personal values. Wendy plans to add a “Life Focus II” that covers taking what people discover about who they are and developing goals and an action plan to move toward it.

The participants had a great experience: they loved the coaching appointments, and found the time to work together as a group on their own destiny questions invaluable. Often key insights came while listening to another person share something they wanted or were wrestling with. Peer appointments were also cited as important. “I had given them the freedom to do their peer appointments by phone or in person,” Wendy says, “and they really appreciated that.” Several participants traveled as part of their jobs, and liked the freedom to complete appointments over a cell phone while on the road.

Many members made significant breakthroughs as a result of the coaching experience. One couple (leaders of the children’s program) said, “We came to this church because we wanted to be developed as leaders. This gave us what you said we’d get when we came here...If we left here tomorrow, we could say, “This is why God brought us to Communion Fellowship.”

Wendy was especially gratified to see participants turn around and use what they learned for the benefit of others. One member, a woman in her twenties, was serving on a community development committee that had set out to revitalize their neighborhood. As she listened to committee members discuss what they wanted to do, she realized that they were really talking about their personal values for community development. The other members found it so helpful when she pointed this out that soon she had led the entire group through a process of identifying a set of development values and writing a mission statement to define where they were headed. The group has since moved forward to serve the community with greater unity and a clearer sense of purpose.

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When asked what she's learned from coaching lay members in finding their destiny, Wendy laughs. "I learned it works! For example, we just finished a group a week ago, and the night afterward we had a congregational meeting. Three different people from the group stood up spontaneously and shared with the church how life-changing the coaching experience had been for them. I had people accusing me after the meeting of staging it all!"

Wendy also says, "The practicum gets easier every time I do it. It has been extremely helpful to have the coach's notes for the exercises—it saves me from doing a bunch of preparation and trying to track what they are all working on." The exercise format of TLC materials made it easy for Wendy to give assignments, because she could simply hand out a sheet of paper with the exercise and the instructions already made up. This kept the group on the same page and eliminated a lot of questions and logistical headaches.

"One other thing I learned was that I assumed when people contacted me to sign up for the class that they had actually read the flyer that described it—that was a bad assumption! I had one guy that came to a first meeting who hadn't read it, and when I started talking about outside coaching appointments and the four hour a week commitment he got that deer-in-the-headlights look. I told him he could still re-evaluate joining if he wanted, but he went ahead and did it."

Their experience with coaching has been successful enough that Communion Fellowship has set out a new leadership development goal: to provide every leader in the church with a coach. Each leader will be coached through the process of discovering and moving toward their call, while team leaders receive ongoing coaching on team-building, pursuing a vision, etc. Wendy is moving into a part-time staff role as a coach, with a charge to provide coaching to the church's key lay leaders, to continue to do life purpose coaching with the congregation, and to build a team of coaches to widen what the church is able to offer. Currently the congregation has two trained coaches (one a professional counselor), while the pastor and one of the elders are just beginning coach-training.

Wendy has already begun integrating coaching into the existing leadership structure. "We have a regular leadership meeting, and now every time we meet I give the leaders a question based on one of our core leadership values or principles to reflect on for the next meeting." Every leader is responsible to think over the question and write something down between meetings. So when the team gets together they are ready for a rousing, productive discussion. And when Wendy encounters a teachable moment during one of her leadership coaching sessions, she's begun to ask permission to debrief on it with the group. "We'll talk about what happened, what the leader did and why, ask the group what they would have done in that situation. It's a great way to get at leadership principles." It also works to build openness and a sense of shared experience among the leaders, as they talk and laugh together about their successes and what God is doing among them.

Wendy filled similar leadership roles in her congregation both before and after being trained as a coach. When asked what difference coaching and coach training makes, Wendy replied, "The biggest thing is to have tools to move forward with. I know the procedure now; I know what to do when I come across a growth issue. Before I'd often have an intuitive sense that something was going on, and I'd get frustrated because I couldn't get at it. Now I know how to deal with what's going on in me internally, I know how to name the thing (which is so helpful to people) and how

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to engage it...And I'm conscious competent about what I'm doing. We have so many people in our church who know where they want to go but don't know how to get there, and so many who are doing something but don't know *how* they do it or how to pass it on. Now I'm able to train those I work with to do what I'm doing."