

When a Small-Group Leader is Running on Empty

Are empty tanks always meant to be filled? By Dan Lentz

There is a metaphor that we often use with each other, particularly in Christian circles. It is the metaphor of the "fuel tank." We like to say, "How is your tank these days? Is it full or empty?" Of course, we are not talking about the fuel tank on our mini-van or lawn mower. We are talking about a psychological tank that somehow monitors our physical, emotional, and mental energy.

If you have been a small group leader for long, I imagine you have gone through times when you felt like your tank was full and times when you felt like your tank was empty. I understand the concept, much like I know when my stomach is empty and I am hungry. The question is, How does my tank level impact me spiritually? What role does a "full" or "empty" tank play in our growth as a small group leader, if any?

The world certainly tells me that no need should go unmet. Fill your tank whenever you need, with whatever you need. However, are empty tanks always to be filled? Are we entitled to have our tanks full, or does that thinking come out of our affluent consumer comfort culture? What does the Bible say about this, if anything? What did Jesus demonstrate in his first small group of disciples about this issue?

There are a couple of encounters Jesus had with His disciples in Luke 9 that provides some insight. The first event was Jesus sending out the disciples to do ministry—preaching, casting out demons, and healing disease. He told them, "Take nothing for your journey. Don't take a walking stick, a traveler's bag, food, money, or even a change of clothes." (Luke 9:3 NLT)

It is recorded in Luke 9 that the disciples returned from their "mission trip" and reported all that had happened. At that point, Jesus and the disciples slip away for some rest and relaxation. Apparently, some tanks were empty after doing such intense ministry. However, the crowd found out where Jesus was going, and they followed Him. Late in the afternoon one day the twelve disciples came to Him and said, "Send the crowds away to the nearby villages and farms, so they can find food and lodging for the night. There is nothing to eat here in this remote place." But Jesus said, "You feed them." (Luke 9:13 NLT)

What happened next is known as the feeding of the 5000. Jesus wound up taking a small basket meal of some fish and bread and, with the disciples help, distributed it to thousands. They all ate as much as they wanted, and afterward, the disciples picked up twelve baskets of leftovers!

The metaphor of a "fuel tank" is hard to transfer into 1st century culture, but there is an object in both of these events, the sending out of the disciples and the feeding of the 5000, that is similar to the "fuel tank" metaphor. That object was a traveler's bag or basket. A traveler's bag, in the first century, was normally a woven basket-like container that people carried with them as they went from place to place. We might think of it as a backpack. As you were out traveling, sometimes for days at a time, having a "full" traveler's bag meant you were well supplied for the journey. You were well taken care of. Your needs were met.

The traveler's bag figures into both events in Luke 9. In the first event, where Jesus sends the disciples out, he sent them out without traveler's bags. In the feeding of the 5000, apparently, there were many without adequate provisions, without traveler's bags, many people with their tanks sitting on "E". In both of these events, from the perspective of the "crowds," Jesus met their needs. Sickness and bondage were being healed and hunger was satisfied. What about the disciples?

Going into the feeding of the 5000, their tanks were already on "E." Imagine their frustration when Jesus told them, "You feed these people!" Imagine their perplexity when Jesus had them facilitate the multitudes to get into smaller groups! Where does that leave small group leaders who are always giving but not receiving? Should Christian community always be fulfilling, or can it be draining, and is that OK?

An examination of the details at the end of these events reveals something interesting. How many baskets of food were left over? Twelve. How many disciples were there? Twelve. Each disciple now had enough food in their own traveler's bag for themselves too. Their tank was full!

What's the point? The point is that Jesus fills and replenishes us spiritually when He thinks it is best for us to be filled and replenished. The disciples left on their first ministry endeavor of preaching and healing with empty traveler's bags, and just as they were about to finish their second endeavor, they were unexpectedly filled back up again. We find that as we step out in faith to meet others' spiritual needs—sometimes in the midst of feeling very needy ourselves—Christ somehow fills us, not always in the way we desire, but in the way that will be best for our and other's spiritual growth. We receive more of the life of Christ by giving away to others what we have, even when we are empty.

Does that mean we should be involved in small group leadership with the expectation that we will get our tanks filled? I do not think so. There have been far too many small group leaders disappointed by false expectations of community life.

The truth is, we, as small group leaders, face what the disciples did in Luke 9. In relational small group ministry, you go with your group as they face the sicknesses and demons of life on earth. You even feel like you have to feed the multitudes at times. Not only that, you have other things that drain your tank: an employer to serve, children to raise, less than perfect friends and spouses, and lots of other things that drain your tank.

Here is the brutal truth about small group leadership. Sometimes in Christian community, our tanks run on empty. That is not a revolutionary announcement, but I wonder if small group leaders embrace the expectation that group leadership will always fill their tanks. When it does not, do they think small groups are a failed ministry for them.

It is interesting that a little later in the book of Luke it says this: "Then Jesus asked them, 'When I sent you out to preach the Good News and you did not have money, a traveler's bag, or extra clothing, did you need anything?' 'No,' they replied. 'But now,' he said, 'take your money and a traveler's bag, and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one!'" (Luke 22:35, 36 NLT)

What is Jesus saying to us as small group leaders? I believe Jesus miraculously steps in and heals and feeds our groups, and at times our tank is even full at the end of the process! But sometimes our tank is not full at the end of that process!

When there does not seem to be a miraculous basket of bread left over in your carrying bag, that might mean you need to have a plan for what to do when your tank is on empty, besides cutting and running from small group ministry. That might mean you need to plan to take breaks from time to time as Jesus often modeled. That might mean we need to develop outlets for fun and enjoyment that are God honoring. That might mean we need to lean on apprentices and other leaders in our small group. We might need to make arrangements for filling our own traveler's bag.

That might mean, if we are coaching other small group leaders, we might need to help them endure and walk a little further with their tanks on "E" and celebrate with them when they are on "F." Disciples and small group leaders need to do all these things from time to time.

Through it all, full tanks and empty tanks, Jesus' disciples came to understand the timing of when their traveler's bags would be filled was unpredictable, but they understood that regardless of their tank level, God could and would use them to change the world.

The time we spend together in Christian community can re-energize us, but the real outcome of following Jesus is changed lives and obedience and love and service and growth. That can happen regardless of whether our tank is full or empty.