

SMALL GROUPS: THEIR IMPORTANCE AND WHAT MAKES THEM SUCCESSFUL

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ABSTRACT

The subject of small groups is an intimidating topic to many pastors. After all, pastors are not trained in how to effectively implement and manage small groups in their churches. Perhaps an even more fundamental concern is whether the pastor should even have a small group program. How does a pastor decide if he needs small groups? How does he choose from a shelf full of models? This thesis will seek to demonstrate the importance of small group ministry and shed light on the factors that promote success in small groups.

Some pastors who currently have a small group ministry may be moved to rethink or improve their small groups. Others who are considering small groups in the future may find the research and real-life testimonies helpful in deciding. This twofold thesis will first examine the importance of having (or not having) small groups and then will outline common factors that make small groups successful.

INTRODUCTION

God designed humans as social beings. Read no further than the second chapter of the Bible to learn that truth. “The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone’” (Gen 2:18 NIV11). The Almighty God created mankind with a need for social interaction. Though it is difficult to pinpoint the origin of small groups, these social organizations provide God’s most prized creation with an opportunity to meet that need.

A thriving small group program can fulfill many areas of a Christian’s life — spiritual growth, social interaction, and service opportunities. That is largely why small groups have gained popularity and become the new, trendy church movement. The problem is this: small groups are just one option. In most churches, Christians can satisfy these needs from other church programs. This thesis seeks to answer two specific questions. First, how important are small groups? Second, what makes small groups successful?

The difficulty with small groups is that no small group system is perfect. Said another way, nobody has figured out a small group program that suits every kind of pastor or every kind of church. Therefore, pastors and church staff often question their practicality and efficacy. The heart of this thesis both addresses the concern of small group importance and highlights the common traits of successful small groups.

Research was divided into both modern literature on small groups and pastoral interviews. Books and journal articles contained a comprehensive, wholistic summary of how small groups were conducted in churches across the nation. Interviews of pastors supplied much

more personal information about the power of small groups and their importance in the lives of members. The interviews were then compared with the information found from literature.

The primary goal, however, is to give the reader insight into the importance of small groups and to portray the practices that successful small groups have in common. Pastors who are currently involved in small group ministry or pastors who would like to launch small groups may find this information valuable. Commitment and willingness to learn is key.

For the intents of this paper, “small groups” will be the designated term for the study of people gathering in limited numbers. Other terms are used for this type of social gathering, such as “growth groups” or “life groups.” These other terms may be referenced later, but only in quotation or special instances.

IMPORTANCE OF SMALL GROUPS

Small groups. Some churches have them. Others do not. So, are they truly important? The answer to that question is complicated, varying from pastor to pastor and from church to church. On one side of the spectrum are those who rave about them, urging that small groups are the best thing since sliced bread. The other side either criticizes small groups or at the least has reservations about them. Which side is right? To answer that, it is necessary to study small group importance on both the spiritual lives of believers and their social, emotional, and physical lives.

For Spiritual Needs

God's people need healthy, spiritual relationships. Sin created not only a separation between God and man, but also a separation from one another. Evil, rebellion, and deception prowl around like a hungry lion, looking for someone to devour. This battle is much more challenging alone.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer confessed, "Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him."¹

God's people need weapons to combat the attacks from the world, devil, and their sinful nature. These weapons are given to us by the Holy Spirit. He girds his people with the Means of Grace. The Christian is strengthened both as he meditates on the gospel individually and as other Christians encourage him with the gospel. Who is not strengthened by the man who fights

1. Stetzer, Ed, and Eric Geiger. *Transformational Groups: Creating a New Scorecard for Groups*. (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Books, 2014), 5.

alongside him? Who is not guarded against temptation by his brother beside him? God's people need others to support them in the crosses they bear until they reach the ultimate victory in heaven, won for them by Christ Jesus.

As believers share the gospel with one another, God works through those who participate in a small group program to defend his people against the daily assaults of sin. This defense is built on the foundation of Scripture as brothers and sisters in Christ encourage one another in their sanctified living. One way that believers receive this encouragement has been through small groups. One can reflect on the value of small groups in three ways: historically, collectively, and individually.

Biblical Group History

The best place to begin discussing small groups is Scripture. Both the Old and New Testaments contain stories about real people who lived together in harmony. Consider the great heroes of faith: Noah, Moses, and Daniel. Noah and his family of seven found favor with the Lord and remained faithful to God's covenant amid an increasingly wicked world. Moses, after the ministry of shepherding all of Israel became too daunting a task, received help from his group of elders (Ex 18:17-23). Daniel stood firm in the face of persecution, supported by his cohorts, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. In each of their lives, support from fellow believers bolstered these gifted, heroic men.

The New Testament supports the idea of small groups, too. No greater example is found other than Jesus' small group of disciples. Shortly after Jesus revealed himself as the Son of God, he began gathering a small group of followers, friends, and supporters. He proclaimed the

Gospel with them, traveled alongside them, evangelized at their side, and ate and drank with them. He shared his calling with them, and they shared theirs.

What about the new believers after Pentecost? Saint Luke recorded that “they broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:46-47). Whether these gatherings were called small groups or any other name is unknown. Regardless, God’s people assembled as they served God and one another.

Remember the Apostle Paul’s ministry tactics? As he moved from city to city and church to church, he urged them unceasingly to stay close to each other. “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Gal 6:10). The body of Christ was charged with the task (privilege) of doing good works for each other.

One may encounter a plethora of examples of small groups in Scripture. The point is that God has advocated the importance of his people gathering. How they gather is not specified; yet an ample number of instances express the tradition of gathering in small groups.

Contemporary Group History

To cite exactly when and where the small group movement originated is unrealistic. Yet some scholars take note of some of the earliest models employed around the world. Scott Boren and Jim Egli claim that the roots extend back to 1964 in Seoul, Korea. They tell the story of Yonggi Cho, a man who had been pastoring 2,400 people. He collapsed from exhaustion and soon

recognized he must discover a different way to lead the church. Presently, that church operates based on a small group system.²

In 1992, Carl George proposed a different small group model known as the Meta-Church model. This popular small group movement promotes “becoming a church of small groups instead of a church with small groups.”³ In other words, this kind of church makes small groups a pillar in the foundation of the church.

America seems to have joined the trendy movement beginning in the 1960s, although few churches had significant small group ministries at that time. Wei Wang and Jim Egli remark that “in the past several decades many churches across the country have launched group ministries and rearranged their program and staffing to make these ministries a vital part of their church life.”⁴

Demonstrated In Community

Christians are trees. God uses the tree metaphor to describe the faith of his followers. These trees can either be thriving or dying. Psalm 1 beautifully portrays this truth. Those whose delight is in the Lord are blessed. They are “like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers” (Psalm 1:3). On the other hand, those who associate with the wicked, sinners, and mockers wither.

2. Boren, M Scott, and Jim Egli. “Small Group Models: Navigating the Commonalities and the Differences.” *Christian Education Journal* 11.1 (2014), 153.

3. Boren and Egli, 154.

4. Egli, Jim, and Wei Wang. “Factors That Fuel Small Group Growth.” *Christian Education Journal* 11.1 (2014), 134.

What kind of tree does God want his people to be? Obviously the former. In their book, *Transformational Groups*, Eric Geiger and Ed Stetzer persuasively encourage Christians to be like sequoia trees. Why sequoia trees? These impressive trees are massive, tall, and ageless. Their height measures in the hundreds of feet, and their age in the thousands of years. Most importantly, sequoia trees grow to such incredible heights because of other sequoia trees. They accomplish this by intertwining their roots with other trees. Though their roots do not grow deep into the ground, they are fortified by others.

Christians must be like sequoia trees, ones that grow incredibly strong by other Christians. Yes, God strengthens the church through the gospel in Word and sacrament. Still, he has blessed the church with other trees, whose roots they can latch on to, support, depend on, and trust. Therefore, prudent pastors and church leaders would benefit from inspiring their church to practice ‘sequoia-like Christianity,’ as Geiger and Stetzer have labeled this practice.

God has called all saints to “consider how they may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another” (Heb 10:24-25). Through the Apostle Paul, God admonishes the saints, “Be devoted to one another in love. Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality” (Rom 12:10a, 13). These two passages connect believers to other believers in genuine, tangible ways.

Any small group that incorporates a study of Scripture will work on the hearts of those present. God clearly and repeatedly affirms that his Word is living and active (Heb 4:12), God-breathed (2 Tim 3:16), and never returns empty (Isa 55:11). When brothers and sisters in Christ meet in a small group setting, leaders can be sure that the power of the gospel is at hand.

Through a well-prepared lesson, God's Word will work to strengthen, edify, and nurture the faith of those present.

Because God promises that the gospel empowers believers, faith then springs into action. Real stories about member's taking care of one another tug at their pastor's heart strings. Their fruits of faith are genuine. The goal of Bible-based small groups is not simply to gain understanding of God's Word, but rather to put his truths into practice.

Sanctification reveals itself in glorifying God and serving one's neighbor. God gives his people many opportunities to do so. For example, a sister who struggles with depression is reminded of Christ's love. The brother who struggles with his identity is reminded that his identity is found in Christ. The widow who struggles with grief is reminded that Christ cares about her grief and that he will wipe away her tears. Such works of faith logically and naturally occur within the small group setting.

CHALLENGES TO SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Discipleship Deficit

Commanded by the Savior himself, believers are told to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:19-20). Yet, the Savior never explicitly tells his believers how or how often. By examining today's church culture, one observes a discipleship deficit.

Every church must have a plan for discipleship. Discipleship involves teaching Christians to follow Christ and to love others as he taught. Unfortunately, too often the spiritual leaders are

either out of touch with this plan or they neglect to take discipleship seriously. Precious time and resources are spent on preaching and teaching discipleship in worship services. A well-crafted and well-delivered sermon is wonderful, and God blesses that gospel message as he pleases. Might there be additional things that can be done to encourage discipleship? Absolutely.

Can a pastor expect the Sunday morning Bible class fills the discipleship hole? Does one B.I.C. (Bible Information Class) check the discipleship box? An annual retreat? Are God's people mature disciples then? If pastors and church leaders are honest with themselves, they will admit that these one-ticket items are not nearly sufficient. The lack of discipleship is real, and it is problematic.

The Great Reformer, Martin Luther, noted that a major deficit in discipleship existed in the church. He recognized that becoming a mature believer involved daily living for Christ and learning about Christ. A subject dear to Luther's heart was the importance of discipleship in the church. Luther proclaimed, "To gather with God's people in united adoration of the Father is as necessary to the Christian life as prayer." How, when, and where the church gathers are free for God's people to decide. Yet this truth remains: God's people must gather, and when they do, they grow. In what ways might a congregation grow together outside of regular worship services? This is a question that pastor may prayerfully consider as he leads his flock to the Shepherd.

Supplying the Discipleship Deficit through Community – Its Importance

"Our church is a family." That statement is loosely tossed around in churches everywhere. The trouble is that many churches are families by name, but not by deed. Do they support one

another? Do they admonish one another? Do they hold each other accountable for their actions? The challenge is that because of our sinful nature, it is hard to *act* like a family. It's easy to say we are a family, much harder to act like one. That is where discipleship and community serve a powerful role in strengthening and supporting the body of Christ.

Discipleship simply must be the work of the whole church. A pastor cannot provide healthy spiritual relationships for hundreds of people. Therefore, it is imperative that pastors teach the church how to become disciples by discipling one another.

Recall the passage from Romans 12. Christians learn from Saint Paul that they are to supply their brother's needs. They know that truth; but they must also live it. Undeniably, many of those brothers' needs cannot be met by a brief word of encouragement after worship. Geiger and Stetzer note that "the NT [New Testament] has more than thirty 'one anothers' that cannot be lived out in weekend services."⁵

How might the church live out God's will for discipleship? One way to grow is through small groups. The goal is transformation, as Geiger and Stetzer affirm; groups are the tool. They suggest that "for transformation the culture in our churches must shift from mere classroom to community, a community that learns and processes God's Word together and encourages one another to live what they have learned"⁶

If the chief goal is to spur on discipleship in one's church, the Word of God is an essential part. Wuthnow reports:

Statistical analysis ... reveals that studying the Bible is the single activity that discriminates best between those whose faith has been influenced by their group and

5. Stetzer, Ed, and Eric Geiger, 72.

6. Stetzer and Geiger, 81.

those whose faith has not been influenced. When the effects of a whole variety of group activities (such as praying, sharing, providing emotional support, and focusing on special needs) are all considered simultaneously, studying the Bible generally has the strongest statistical effects of all. It is also the best predictor of most of the specific effects people attribute to their groups, such as answers to prayer, openness with others and with oneself, the ability to forgive others and oneself, feeling closer to God, and being able to share one's faith.⁷

These statistics support the claim that there is a direct relationship between the presence of the Bible in a group and spiritual growth. This data is not surprising since “the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Heb 4:12). Moreover, the gospel is “the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.” (Ro. 1:16) Both the law and the gospel accomplish God's will to lead sinners to repentance – trusting in Christ for salvation.

The challenge that pastors and church leaders must face is how to balance of the study of Scripture and the relational component of small groups. How much time do the groups spend reading and meditating on God's Word as opposed to application, conversation, and emotional and physical support? It is essential for each church to outline a vision for their small group meetings.

The Blessings of Christian Community

Greater Accountability

The New Man in Christ loves to do good works. Through repentance and absolution, the power of the gospel motivates him to spring to action, to let his light shine, and to walk in faith.

7. Wuthnow, Robert, ed. *I Come Away Stronger: How Small Groups Are Shaping American Religion*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans-Lightning Source, 1994), 278.

However, this desire magnifies when another Christian actively supports him. In fact, the likelihood that one carries out the good work God has prepared for him increases when someone serves as a constant reminder. He is encouraged by his brother.

Greater Commitment/Deeper Relationships

Statistics showed that people who participate in small groups reported more opportunities to show their faith. An extensive study of almost 3,000 Protestant members conducted by LifeWay Research demonstrates compelling support for the inclusion of small groups in effective disciple making. The research revealed glaring differences in the lives of Protestant members who were active in a small group and members who were not. The effect on one's prayer life and devotional life cannot be overlooked. Three 'agree or disagree' questions are worth mentioning:

1. I intentionally spend time with other believers in order to help them grow in their faith.
2. I have developed significant relationships with people at my church.
3. I am intentionally putting my spiritual gift(s) to use serving God and others.

To the first question, 22% of those who did not attend small groups agreed; 63% of those who did attend agreed. To the second, 57% of non-attenders agreed; 89% of attenders agreed. To the third, 42% of non-attenders agree; 73% of attenders agreed.⁸

In this congregational research, Christians who are involved in small groups have closer, more intentional relationships with other members than those who are not involved. They spend more time together, connect better, and serve each other more frequently. In all three questions, there was more than a 30% difference between non-attenders and attenders. The positive impact is definite.

⁸ Stetzer and Geiger, 38–41.

Group involvement also revealed a wide gap in one's commitment to Scriptural devotion and prayer. Bear in mind that this data does not include the devotion and prayers offered during the small group meeting nor in worship services. Under the category entitled "Spiritual Disciple", every single question merited a higher score for attenders. Two 'agree or disagree' questions make a strong case for the positive effects of small groups.

1. Do you read the Bible on your own?
2. Do you pray for your church and/or church leaders on your own?

To the first question, 27% of non-attenders agreed; 67% of attenders agreed. These people claimed to have read the Bible at least a few times a week. To the second question, 30% of non-attenders agreed; 64% of attenders agreed. Once again, a difference of over 30% is not paltry. As is evident, the researchers concluded that "those who attend groups act and think differently from those who do not."⁹

Greater Healing and Maturity

Where is the line between spiritual healing and discipleship? Often the two are connected. Cloud and Townsend explain that in any healthy group, these lines become a little blurry. "A group of people who want to become disciples of Christ must also deal with their hurts and injuries. At the same time, those who want to recover from habits, pasts, and relationships that imprison them must also engage in the process of growth."¹⁰ They further comment on the incredible power that small groups who combine these processes have. "When they allow the group to take them

9. Stetzer and Geiger, 43-4.

10. Cloud and Townsend, 112.

through their own hurt and brokenness, and disciple them, their ministries and organizations often grow in ways and to levels that they had never dreamed of.”¹¹

Mary Rynsburger and Mark Lamport echo this theme of healing and maturity.

Commending the relationship-centered model of small groups, they boast:

People grow best in community, not in isolation; that Christian education involves real-life issues, rather than the mere mastery of facts; and that the approach shows care for individuals in our post-Christian society who have experienced brokenness, abuse, and addiction, and seek love, healing, and acceptance in the body of Christ.¹²

Social Deficit

Every 21st century American can relate to this sentiment: Wake up Monday morning. Do the morning routine at home. Jump in the car. Drive to Starbucks. Wait in line for coffee – talk to no one. Arrive at work. Stand in the elevator – talk to no one. Chat with four or five coworkers throughout the day. Meet the family at a restaurant – talk to no one except the waitress and family. Head for home. Take the elevator again – talk to no one. Park the car. Dash to the front door, open, shut, lock.

American culture and society have become more and more individualistic. People intentionally avoid contact with others. Whether politics, social media, race, or religion have caused this vast social separation is impossible to determine. Regardless, today Americans are more removed from each other than ever. That is a problem. It creates a deficit of social gatherings.

11. Cloud and Townsend, 112-13.

12. All the Rage: How Small Groups Are Really Educating Christian Adults Part I Assessing Small Group Ministry Practice: A Review of the Literature.” Christian Education Journal 5.1 (2008): 117.

In his book *Activate*, Nelson Searcy illustrates this problem well. He explains that Americans value privacy, safety, and convenience from strangers and even neighbors. The lack of social gatherings appears after high school and college, where people have natural social spaces around them. After school, social events are lost. In the past, Americans filled this social need through activities like joining a bowling league. Now, people bowl alone. “The cultural trend today dismisses and deemphasizes community, and the same culture is working its way into the church.”¹³

Searcy is not alone in his analysis of the state of the current cultural community. Geiger and Stetzer advise that in a culture that rejects community, the church must push for an authentic community. They implore pastors and church leadership to “see community as a biblical nonnegotiable, an essential for transformation, a necessity for building lives that stand the test of time.”¹⁴ The Apostle Paul offers this encouragement: Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom 12:2). While society is shifting toward this unhealthy culture, the church must fight against this lifestyle.

Despite this social deficit in America, the desire to socialize with other people has not and will not die out completely. Searcy points out that most people in your church are looking for social relationships. They need to find casual friendships with others and to be able to then take those friendships into a more personal relationship (which people lack today as well).¹⁵

13. Stetzer and Geiger, 86.

14. Stetzer and Geiger, 2.

15. Searcy, Nelson, Kerrick Thomas, and Jennifer Dykes Henson. *Activate: An Entirely New Approach to Small Groups*. Revised and Expanded edition. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2018), 44-5.

Strength Through Others

The whole Christian church on earth has been integrated into God's family. As the Apostle Paul affirms, "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (Eph 2:19–20). In baptism, God gives men and women new life in Christ. As followers of Christ, they are all united in faith.

Is it possible for Christians to strengthen other Christians? Certainly! Yet they do so not by their own power, but through Christ. As "members of a household," Christians support and trust each other; they rejoice and sympathize with each other; they forgive and empower each other.

For the church to live out this calling, it must establish a biblical community. When God's people serve God and each other, the individual blessings that follow are unlimited.

Biblical community is where I can love and be loved, where I can receive grace and extend grace, where I can watch transformation in the lives of my friends and experience my own transformation, where other sequoias can hold me up and where I can intertwine my roots with others, and where I can experience God's glory in this life and in the life to come like never before.¹⁶

It can be challenging for Christians to emphasize, value, and grow in biblical community – even for WELS Christians. Consequently, members slip through the cracks. The devil craftily works to isolate Christians, while the world openly mocks religion. However, as Christians gather in groups, they help others navigate the storms of life. Through small groups, Christians may learn to grow and cherish biblical community.

16. Stetzer and Geiger, 19.

Martin Luther promoted fellowship among other believers. Hear his humble message in one of his sermons:

For we are not all equally strong in faith, some of you have a stronger faith than I. Therefore we must not look upon ourselves, or our strength, or our prestige, but upon our neighbor, for God has said through Moses: I have borne and reared you, as a mother does her child [Deut. 1:31]. What does a mother do to her child? First she gives it milk, then gruel, then eggs and soft food, whereas if she turned and gave it solid food, the child would never thrive [cf. 1 Cor. 3:2; Heb. 5:12-13]. So we should also deal with our brother, have patience with him for a time, have patience with his weakness and help him bear it; we should also give him milk-food, too [1 Pet. 2:2; cf. Rom. 14:1-3], as was done with us, until he, too, grows strong, and thus we do not travel heavenward alone, but bring our brethren, who are not now our friends, with us.¹⁷

Luther recognized a vital truth – that believers are strengthened through others. He shared a personal story about the strength he received from interacting with fellow Christians:

I, too, often suffer from severe trials and sorrows. At such times I seek the fellowship of men, for the humblest maid has often comforted me. A man doesn't have control of himself when he is downcast and alone, even if he is well equipped with a knowledge of the Scriptures. It is not for nothing that Christ gathers his church around the Word and the sacraments and is unwilling to let these be hidden in a corner.¹⁸

How Small Groups are Received

The practice of small groups is either welcomed or rejected. Those who support them are the cheerleaders; those against them are the opponents. The cheerleader roots for the inclusion of small group ministry, hails its benefits, and applauds those who participate. The opponent tears down any talk of small groups' value.

17. Doberstein, John W., and Martin Luther. *Luther's Works, Volume 51: Sermons 1*. First edition. (Saint Louis, Mo.: Fortress Press, 1959), 72.

¹⁸ Luther, Martin. *Table Talk*. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan. Vol. 54, *Luther's Works, American Edition*. Vols. 1–30, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan. St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76. Vols. 31–55, edited by Helmut Lehmann. Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86. Vols. 56–82, edited by Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes. St. Louis: Concordia, 2009.

While there are opposing views, it seems that most literature about small groups favors their existence in the life of the church or at least does not actively attack them. Small group *cheerleaders* are characteristically loud and proud. Lend your ears to their cheers.

Cloud and Townsend clamor, “Small groups are not an add-on, secondary concern, or fad. What happens in a good small group is part of the very work of the church itself. It is primary, and should be seen that way.”¹⁹ Their voices adamantly announce the vital nature of small groups in the church.

In their view, the ministry of the church manifests itself through small groups. They stress the importance of casting a clear vision of small groups:

They are not just culturally relevant for the postmodern world of reality and experienced truth. They are not just a way to be like the “cool” churches. They are not just for the “hurting” people. They are a valid expression of what the body of Christ is supposed to be doing on the earth. They are a structured expression of the doctrine of church. They are as big a part of what the New Testament dictates as preaching and teaching.²⁰

If these authors were to make a real cheer, they might ask their audience to give them a: P-R-I-M-A-R-Y. Small groups are primary.

Small groups pastor, Steve Gladden, offers his own passionate cheer for his small group model:

Our small group ministry is not just another program. It is an embedded and integrated piece of everything we do as a church. It’s our infrastructure. It’s where care happens. It’s our delivery system for all spiritual formation. It’s our method of balancing biblical purposes and fostering healthy lives.²¹

19. Cloud and Townsend, 28.

20. Cloud and Townsend, 28.

21. Boren and Elgi, 161.

Supporting a similar stance as Cloud and Townsend, Gladden marks small groups as an identity of the church.

Those against small groups, or the opponents, criticize their content and condemn their culture. These opponents blast the Bible study portion by asserting that it weak theologically. Another contention they have is that false doctrine frequently comes out in discussion, and it is brushed aside. A quote from Wuthnow summarizes the negative marks on small groups well. He writes:

Another limitation of small groups is that they often promote an any-thing-goes form of spirituality. In small, intimate settings it is particularly difficult for people to tell others that they are wrong. Even small criticisms of other members take more fortitude than most people seem to have. It is much easier to accept all views—or at least to find some way of affirming what a fellow participant has said. . . . Members might disagree, but they were reluctant to say that one view was any closer to the truth than another.²²

For Emotional and Physical Needs

Small groups may help to meet the emotional and physical needs of the body of Christ. Three interviews of pastors in the WELS address these issues topically. In each of the interviews, the pastor spoke of the unique value that small groups carry and shared touching stories about the Christian love that small groups displayed toward one another.

Pastor Ewart's Interview

Relaying the positive benefits, Pastor Ewart noted:

Where there are good friendships, where there are good social connections, even secular psychologists will tell you that that's good for you. That it helps, not just your spiritual health but your emotional health and your physical health as well. Because they're all interconnected.

22. Wuthnow, 358.

Speaking to the physical needs of members, he added:

When a member of a life group is sick or goes into the hospital, it is very common for the other members of the life group to help them, to visit them, to bring meals for them and support them in that way.

About mental needs, Pastor Ewart shared this story:

Yeah, another story would be we have a mental support group for people especially struggling with depression or anxiety. The leader of that group just has done an awesome job. It ended up being mostly women, not by design, but just by what happened. It has been a group that kind of just keeps meeting and keep on that same topic - helping those with depression and anxiety and mental health. They look at different books along the way to encourage and support each other. They've become just become so close.

A lady who went through a divorce two years ago was really struggling with depression. She came up to me and said, "I am doing so much better now. My group has helped me so much." [She was] just in a different mental place and two or three other people said the exact same thing.

Pastor Raasch's Interview

Pastor Raasch told a powerful story about group members supporting one another in times of need.

A firefighter was killed in the line of duty and a lot of the people in the life group were firefighters. That is who they [the surviving loved ones] went to. They went to their life group. And [at the time of the tragedy] one member called an emergency life group meeting, so that we could encourage each other and support each other during a tough time. So absolutely they are meeting those kinds of needs as well.

Pastor Solofra's Interview

Pastor Solofra shared several compelling stories. One of the most touching ones demonstrates the dedication and close bonds that these group members develop for one another.

A number of years ago a guy had been out with some friends. And when he [and his wife] came home, there was a message on their answering machine that their son had been in an accident and was in the hospital. So, they went to the hospital and called their friends to let them know what was going on. As they waited while their son was in surgery, suddenly at 2 o'clock in the morning, eight people show up.

"What are you guys doing here?"

“You never told us which hospital it was. We’ve been to six different hospitals before we found you.” It was their growth group [who showed up].

Another heart-warming story portrays the ways that these members’ spiritual and emotional needs are met by their groups. Pastor Solofra reports:

Rick Warren tells the story of when his son committed suicide. And his growth group came over to his house, and no one would leave. They just said, “You cannot be alone now.” And so they were sleeping on his couch. They said, “We need to be here.” They were there, grieving with him.

These interviews demonstrate that groups connect members in ways that are genuine and concrete. Members demonstrate their love through action. While spiritual needs are certainly met by God’s Word, small groups can be a place where that Word is used and lived out, with brothers and sisters caring for each other.

WHAT MAKES SMALL GROUPS SUCCESSFUL

Introduction

“Small groups are a lot like diets. Everybody is looking for the magic diet that will help him or her lose weight, feel great, and stay healthy. Almost any diet will work in the short term, but seldom does a diet bring the long-term results that you seek.”²³ Pastors and church leaders tackle small groups, hoping to deliver an effective blow, but understanding that they might whiff. Admirably, their goal is to provide their members with the best small group ministry available. Quickly they discover that no system is perfect. The second part of this thesis seeks to a) express that no magic formula exists, b) demonstrate that small groups require discipline c) present specific characteristics that successful small groups have in common, and d) offer general advice.

A Wide Variety of Models

An exhaustive amount of small group books and guides leaves every pastor wondering where to begin and with which model. It does not help that almost every small group author is convinced and wants to convince the reader that his model works. Geiger and Stetzer creatively call this

23. Boren and Egli, 162.

tendency to promote one's own small group model "methodological snobbery."²⁴ They chide those who adamantly teach others how to operate, arguing that doing so is neither right nor beneficial.

With this daunting task of choosing the right small group model, pastors must carefully and consciously distinguish between the various models. Small groups are like a Swiss Army Knife. There are plenty of powerful tools in the small group system. The pastor must carefully select which small group model will work best for the job. So, his priority is to determine what his motivation for running small groups is upfront.

The Big Three

Essentially there are three basic types of small group models: the relationship-centered one, the truth-centered one, and the balanced-one. The relationship-centered type is a contemporary trend that downplays the use of Scripture. Truth-centered types place too great an emphasis on the acquisition of Biblical knowledge or facts. Finally, a balanced combination of these types might be called the relationship-educational model for spiritual growth.²⁵ Depending on the needs of the individual church, a pastor must claim one of these models to begin the arduous task of establishing and maintaining a successful small group ministry.

24. Stetzer and Geiger, 75.

25. Rynsburger and Lamport, *All the Rage*: Part 3, 120.

STEPS TOWARD ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING SUCCESSFUL SMALL GROUPS

Perhaps the most prevalent similarity between the various small groups is the constant, concerted effort to adjust. One must always be asking why actions failed and how one might improve the small group ministry. Especially for those whose small group ministry may have halted, an encouraging reminder may help to revive one's zeal for small groups. "Remember: there is never a one-time, final group solution for everything. There is, however, a constant cycle of learning, trying, and changing. Transformation take time, patience, endurance, organization, and unified direction."²⁶

Step One – Identify the Purpose

How much of the small group ministry should be devoted to Bible study and how much toward application and fellowship? A detailed answer to this question is of the utmost importance. If left unanswered or thoughtlessly answered, the small group ministry is set for failure.

Geiger and Stetzer firmly hold that effective groups determine a clear purpose. Pastors who identify their small groups' purpose and who stick to that purpose build the foundation on solid ground. "Groups that are crystal clear as to why they meet and how they fit into the overall life of the church are more effective."²⁷

The purpose of small groups is hotly debated. Some suggest any combination of purposes. For example, Rick Warren broadly includes five purposes for all groups to practice:

26. Stetzer and Geiger, 9.

27. Stetzer and Geiger, 101.

worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and evangelism.²⁸ Others narrow the scope to a single purpose, maybe two.

Single Purpose

In many conservative Christian churches, the single purpose of small group ministry is to promote spiritual growth. In this type, Lamport and Rynsburger caution, “For the church adult small group, it is important that members are in basic agreement that the main goal is spiritual growth. If this is in fact not of primary importance to members, other personal reasons for participating in the group may sabotage attempts by the leader to facilitate members’ growth.”²⁹

The other single-purpose approach is to meet as a group to have fellowship. Some contend that members are strengthened simply by each other’s company. Although unscriptural, this approach contends that spiritual growth can happen in these settings even if the gospel message is not present.

Relationship-Educational Approach

In the Relational-Educational approach, both a focus on creating bonds with others and growing in the Word of God are present. “Living in community with other believers, wrestling through real issues, embracing the gospel together, reminding one another of our identity in Christ,

28. Boren and Egli, 161-2.

29. Rynsburger and Lamport, *All the Rage: Part 2*, 394.

lovingly holding one another accountable for involvement in the spiritual disciplines, and watching the way authentic Christians do life is God's transformative platform."³⁰

When asked about their small groups' purpose, all three pastors had similar responses.

Their groups involved God's Word and God's people doing life together.

Pastor Ewart answered:

Our mantra, our phrase, is doing life together. It's for our members to do life together genuinely, authentically, honestly, transparently as the church to develop and grow Christian friendships so that so that we can encourage one another, support, pray for, confess, forgive, and love one another. The primary purpose is not Bible study, yet Bible study is a part of every life group.

Pastor Raasch responded:

Our stated goal is to connect people to God into each other. And I would say you know both are important, but probably the "each other" is the dimension that worship and large group cannot do well. Our subtitle for the Life Guide is applying God's Word to life. And I would say that's a pretty important component.

Pastor Solofra replied:

Growth group is a "way that you do life together around God's Word." It is not Bible class but involves Bible study. And it is a time of worship, time of discipleship, elements of service and outreach, always be thinking of inviting others, fellowship.

Step Two – Develop a Plan

After the purpose of the small group ministry is decided, the next step is to develop a plan. How do small groups fit into the discipleship strategy? Fellowship? Outreach? As pastors shape their small group, these things must be outlined. Searcy cautions, "The single biggest mistake

30. Stetzer and Geiger, 53.

enthusiastic, well-meaning church leaders make regarding small groups is to forge ahead without sufficient planning.”³¹

Experienced small group gurus understand that forming a leadership team is a necessary component of successful groups. Searcy suggests a hierarchical leadership team, especially important for large congregations (300 or more). It consists of group leaders, team leaders, group coaches, and group managers. These people directly support and encourage each other. Small groups are heavy beasts. The pastor cannot organize, initiate, and maintain this ministry himself. He must rely upon the input of his leadership team.

Set the Calendar

People have busy schedules. To allow as many participants as possible, the scheduling must be carefully planned. First, choose dates and times that are convenient and realistic. A wise suggestion is to set the calendar with respect to the academic calendar – doing so will accommodate many people. Second, plan long term. Put the biggest dates on the calendar and then fill in the gaps. Plan to stay six months ahead of schedule. This will ensure that everything which needs to be accomplished will get done.

Set the Structure

For some pastors and leaders, this task might seem daunting. Yet Searcy notes that “a good structure doesn’t have to be complicated. In fact, the best structures are usually the simplest.”³²

31. Searcy, 120.

32. Searcy, 157.

His recommendation is to figure out what kinds of topics and studies will be offered, the demographics of groups, and a short description of each group.

Set the Goals

A small group ministry's goals should be high, but achievable. As Searcy points out, "Goal setting is an act of faith. It's natural to feel outside of your comfort zone. But don't be afraid to identify goals that will stretch you."³³

For example, one goal every small group ought to set is attendance. Searcy's goal for attendance is bold and optimistic. Ideally, Searcy hopes that every individual who attends church at least once per month would be involved in a small group. The next concern is to ensure that there are enough groups. This is done by taking that total monthly number and dividing it by twelve to determine the right number of groups. So, if 150 people attend worship in January, then there ought to be at least 13 groups.

Now you have the group goal. Searcy advises, "Never, never, never make the mistake of not having enough groups in place for everyone in your church. That is the unpardonable sin when it comes to small groups."³⁴ In addition, churches must avoid a deficit of group leaders. Searcy teaches that the number of group leaders should be more than the number of groups.

33. Searcy, 153.

34. Searcy, 141.

Step Three – Make a P.A.C.

It is time to make a P.A.C. The ‘P’ stands for Perception, ‘A’ for Attitude, and ‘C’ for Culture. If a pastor wants his small groups to thrive, he will recognize that the perception, attitude, and culture of small groups is paramount.

Perception

How every member perceives small groups directly relates to the success of small groups. If all members agree that small groups are important, they will become part of that church’s identity. In other words, they cannot be removed. No person can change their height or their ethnicity because those characteristics are part of their identity. In the same way, churches who have claimed small groups as their own now consider them part of their identity and cannot remove them.

Frankly, small groups must be seen as a major organ of the church. Lutheran pastors rightly devote many hours to their sermons on Sunday, studying the text, praying, writing, memorizing, and delivering. Often small groups take what is left. This crushes the pulse of small groups. Instead of ignoring small groups, become a church of small groups.

Searcy offers a meaningful proverb on this subject: “Great people and great organizations know that the key to success is doing a few things extremely well.”³⁵ If pastors are convinced of the power of small groups, they will make them a priority, just like their sermons.

To build this positive perception, “people need to see that it really makes a significant difference in their lives to walk in the light with others.”³⁶ A healthy perception trusts that small

35. Searcy, 72.

36. Stetzer and Geiger, 59.

groups are a comfortable, safe place to go. Most importantly, a healthy perception blossoms when members are convinced that small groups lead them to become mature disciples of Christ. As members' perception of small groups solidifies, their attitude toward small groups will soar.

Attitude

To have a healthy perception is not enough. Good leaders lead by example. That well-known motto has been proven throughout history in areas of government, business, and war. Small groups operate in similar fashion. Members will follow a group leader whose actions entirely and irrefutably prove his faith in small groups. They need to see his enthusiasm. He needs to be involved. He needs to be the loudest voice and the most spirited cheerleader.

The challenge for the group leader is to convince his people that he is convinced about small groups. Members must be constantly reassured that the leader believes in small groups. Imagine that a Ford car salesman tries to sell you a Ford, but he himself drives a Chevrolet? Research revealed a "major discrepancy between the stated importance of groups and the actual working reality of that importance."³⁷ Searcy notes that "a church's attitude toward small groups will be a direct reflection of the senior pastor's attitude."³⁸ When the perception and attitude of small groups are in sync, a positive small group culture will naturally flow.

Culture

The final part of the PAC is culture. The pastors, staff, and current small group members all contribute to building a positive small group culture in the church. The sermon, announcements,

37. Stetzer and Geiger, 62.

38. Searcy, 90.

testimonials, and personal words of encouragement help to create a culture that non-participants will want to be a part of. Establishing a healthy culture will arguably save the pastor and leadership team time, energy, and stress. This kind of culture is praised by Rynsburger and Lamport:

A group that has solid relational connections might be characterized by increasing authenticity, intimacy and trust, free-flowing communication, a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere, humor, healthy conflict resolution, acceptance and forgiveness, time spent together outside the group meeting, consistent attendance, servant-hearted meeting of each other's needs, and regular intercessory prayer for one another. Not only is such love and unity biblical and effective for promoting growth, it is essential for motivating people to participate in the small group.³⁹

Step Four – Develop Personal Qualities

As Pastors

This step focuses on personal goals that successful pastors strive to accomplish.

The first goal is to acknowledge that they cannot force relationships or spiritual growth.

This is work the Holy Spirit accomplishes alone through the gospel. The pastor commits spiritual growth to God and prays about it.

The second goal is eliminating unhealthy fear and pride. In an influential presentation, Pastor James Hein diagnoses a problem in many Christian churches — WELS included. After careful examination, he determined that most pastors want to be in control and have control over everything doctrine related. Only the pastor preaches, only the pastor teaches catechism, only the pastor leads Sunday morning Bible study. Yet, God has not given the task of making disciples to

39. Rynsburger and Lamport, *All the Rage*: Part 3, 120.

only the pastor. The diagnosis? Unhealthy pride. The remedy? Rejoice that God has given all believers the power to share the gospel and know that Christians can serve each other in small groups.⁴⁰

Pastor Hein found another symptom during his examination. Many pastors are deathly afraid that false doctrine will come out if others lead small groups.⁴¹ Yet he strongly argues that this is no valid excuse to prevent other group leaders from leading. Here the diagnosis is unhealthy fear; the remedy is well-equipped leaders.

Selecting and training small group leaders can be an intimidating task for a pastor. He wants the best for his members – leaders who are godly, blameless, knowledgeable, well-respected, etc. He hopes to find leaders who have been born and raised WELS. Even then, for some pastors, that is not sufficient. Ideally, leaders with the same theological training as the pastor would miraculously appear, but that simply does not happen.

Traditionally when choosing leaders, pastors have prioritized spiritual maturity over any other individual characteristic. While this approach properly values spiritual maturity, there is potential in permitting others to grow spiritually as the lead. Well planned oversight and communication can offer helpful support to all small group leaders, both experienced ones and newer ones. Do the risks, if any, outweigh the potential benefits? Does the protective pastor unintentionally hinder the growth of small groups by imposing strict levels of spiritual maturity?

⁴⁰ Hein, James. "Small Groups." WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?extid=SEO----&v=508461906700126>

⁴¹ The pastor and leadership team must train leaders in how they are to handle heresy (or questions they can't answer) when heresy comes out, the leaders must be able to acknowledge it. Report to pastor either way and ask him for questions the leader is unable to answer.

Perhaps. A pastor will also look for group leaders who understand how to interact with others and facilitate conversation. As a pastor seeks to choose the best people to lead, he may benefit from choosing balanced leaders who demonstrate both Scriptural knowledge and leadership qualities.

As Group Leaders

Certainly, the group leader plays a major role in the small group setting. Some small group advocates view the group leader as a facilitator. He is not a lecturer, but rather a moderator. In fact, when the group leader assumes the role of a lecturer, he often burns out. Yes, he has more authority than others and his contributions weigh more than the rest of the group. However, his motivation is to prompt discussion from others.

Strong leadership qualities are essential for one who seeks to facilitate. “Gulley suggests preferred qualities of the group leader: willingness to lead, ability to win acceptance of those led, communication skills, good listening skills, quick thinking, knowledge of the problem, understanding of group process, persistence, and respect and sensitivity toward others.”⁴² These qualities are a prerequisite, though they may be developed over time.

The group leader’s role becomes much easier when there is cohesion within the group. Group cohesion forms when the leaders “give members prestige by delegating responsibility,

42. Rynsburger and Lamport, *All the Rage: Part 2*, 395.

unite group purpose, encourage reflection on other's comments by sharing one's own personal stories, plan programs meticulously, encourage interaction."⁴³ When group members get along, conversation and communication thrive – this, after all, is what the facilitator desires.

Step Five – Build a Flexibly Rigid Structure

The fifth step encompasses small group methodology and supplies practical guidelines for building the small group structure itself. A handful of building blocks deserve mention. These blocks are chiefly drawn from Searcy's book on small groups, *Activate*.

Simplicity

Simplicity was another common feature of successful small groups. Searcy heavily supports this view. Groups that have an easy design prosper. Making groups easy to get into is essential. He points out that the longer people must wait, the less enthused they will be and the less likely they will be to go through the work of signing up.

To solve this issue, Searcy proposes a one-step process. After looking at a catalog that includes all the small group options, a new participant signs up using a connection card, an online option, or a small group booth at church. Once the participant has chosen a method of signing up, there is no further action needed on his or her part. That is the beauty and simplicity of these sign-ups. Instead of causing the prospective group member to follow up, the group leader supplies more details later.

Size

43. Rynsburger and Lamport, *All the Rage: Part 2*, 394.

The size of the small group impacts many factors, such as the groups' dynamics, discussion, and transparency. Yet, group sizes range anywhere from four to twenty people. That is a massive difference. One must ask what the right number of people is for each group. Data from the literary sources and from the interviews helped to identify this ideal number.

First, consider the data from literature. Searcy strongly proposes groups of twelve to fifteen people. He explains that most people feel more comfortable in larger groups, they are more likely to sign up for larger groups, they stay plugged in longer, and they form deeper connections and grow spiritually in larger groups. "Groups of seven or fewer people have significantly higher failure rates ... and cause everyone involved more frustration and anxiety than larger groups."⁴⁴

Searcy also notes other problems that surface with smaller groups. First, not everyone who signs up shows up. Second, the facilitator ends up speaking more. And finally, there is a risk of one person who is weird or difficult. He names this problem the "weirdo factor." To prevent such a person from hampering discussion and creating tension, more people are needed.

On the other hand, Lamport and Rynsburger suggest a smaller size of a group. Their rationale seems less popular, however. "Optimum group size ranges from five to nine members; communication is inhibited because the group is too large."⁴⁵

Two of the three churches I interviewed had success with the eight-to-twelve range of members. Pastor Ewart allows 6–12, indicating that 8–10 is ideal. Pastor Solofra's groups have

44. Searcy, 37.

45. Rynsburger and Lamport, *All the Rage: Part 3*, 121.

10–12 members. In contrast, Pastor Raasch allows for a wider range (4–16 members), though indicating that eight is the average number of members.

Length

Two schools of thought regarding the length of small group meetings predominate. The first is the traditional view, which holds meetings for a year or longer. Because it is so long, members may lose interest or simply drop out. The second limits group meetings to 6–12 weeks. Pastor Raasch's groups meet 6–8 weeks; Searcy's groups meet 10–12 weeks, Pastor Solofra's meet 10 weeks. Pastor Ewart's groups meet 12 weeks but allow taking a few weeks off.

Longer sessions require a deeper commitment and risk a decline attendance. Shorter sessions provide the members with more flexibility because of the smaller commitment. Searcy states, "This gives people the freedom and flexibility to make a commitment they can stick with."⁴⁶

Calendar

Working with the calendar is a commonality that Searcy and all interviewees shared. Time for rest is important. Congruency with the natural business and academic calendar is prudent as well. Setting a careful calendar helps to keep boundaries, take pressure off the system, keep leaders from burnout, and bring closure to each group. A well-thought calendar is also realistic.

Promotion

When does one begin to promote a new session of small groups? Searcy advocates starting as early as six weeks before. Week by week, the goal is to gradually raise excitement. He also

46. Searcy, 46.

stresses the importance of creative promotion, using the pulpit, announcements, videos, testimonials, emails, newsletters, and mailings to promote them. He even suggests targeting specific groups of people (e.g., college kids) and asking members to raise their hands in church (positive peer pressure). Pastor Solofra strongly emphasized the power of members telling stories after church as a huge motivating factor. “Nothing beats personal invitation,” he remarked.

The whole month before builds momentum. “Devote the entire promotion month exclusively to group sign-ups.”⁴⁷ Searcy expresses that these promotion months require “creative redundancy.”⁴⁸

Super-System

Pastor Ewart and Pastor Solofra have had success with a high-powered piece of software⁴⁹ designed for small groups. The two each praised the greatness of their software, discussing its dependability, simplicity, and slick features.

Competing Systems

“The primary reason most group ministries aren’t working is due to the fact church leaders are often times most passionate about running programs.”⁵⁰ Small groups suffer if a church’s other programs always take priority. One possible solution is to allocate more money, time, and resources to be spent on small groups. Allot adequate attention.

47. Searcy, 195.

48. Searcy, 233.

49. Pastor Solofra’s church uses “Church Center,” and Pastor Ewart’s church uses “Planning Center Groups.”

50. Stetzer and Geiger, 98.

Evaluation

“Evaluation is the key to success.”⁵¹ Searcy exhaustively covers a wide range of areas to evaluate about small groups. He urges readers to ask questions that will help improve small groups for the future. What went right? What went wrong? How do we keep good records and information which will help measure success? Group sign-ups, the location, the time of each meeting, the day of the week, study topics, group leaders, and more are all reviewed at the close of each small group semester.

Other Considerations

- Have food. Pastor James Hein seriously suggests eating food at small group gatherings. In his presentation, he creatively called food the “great equalizer.”⁵²
- Ask tough questions. Pastors must be transparent with their members and ask them to be transparent with them. This will help to expose blind spots. Do this because you care and because you want it to be as effective as possible.

CONCLUSION

Small Groups have the potential to bless pastors and churches in numerous ways. Their importance will differ from church to church, depending on each church’s specific ministry

51. Searcy, 122.

52. Hein, James. “Small Groups.” WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership.

plans. If, however, congregations do not actively encourage discipleship and provide avenues for it, a solid strong group ministry can fill that deficit. Small groups may also serve to meet spiritual, social, emotional, mental, and physical needs.

The success of small groups is largely based on leadership. Pastors and staff must work together to identify its purpose, choose a suitable model, develop a plan, plant a blooming culture, train group leaders, form a system, and evaluate that system.

The Interview Process/Methodology

I asked the pastors the following questions in each interview. These questions were designed to learn about how small groups operate differently in each church and to gain insight into how the pastors communicate the value of small groups. These pastors graciously gave me permission to share their responses in this thesis.

- Please tell me a little about the history of your small groups.
- Was there some initial resistance from board/leadership, and if so, how did you get over that hump?
- What is the primary purpose of your church's small groups, and what are secondary purposes?
- If you had to choose, what is the one thing that your small group system does extremely well?

- Who is on your small group leadership team, and what are his (or her?) responsibilities?
- How do you as a pastor/staff choose your group leaders?
 - How do you train them?
- Do you have a “covenant” agreement? If so, what does that entail?
- How does your church advertise for your small groups?
- How do those who want to participate in groups sign up for them?
- What percentage of your members are currently involved in a small group?
- How many members does each small group have total?
- How many members show up on an average week?
- How often do your groups meet?
- From where do you draw your material?
 - Does each group study the same material?
- What types of groups you have (i.e., young adults’ group, baking group, basketball group, musical group, etc.)?
- How important is it for a church to instill an “all-in” mentality in the people?
- What personal needs do small groups fill for those who are involved (spiritually, emotionally, perhaps physically)?
- What advice can you give a pastor who wants to start small groups, but has never done them before?
- Are there any personal stories about small groups that you’d like to share?

Areas For Further Study

My research was limited to only three pastors and their congregations. A more in-depth study would help to solidify the conclusions in this thesis or draw new ones. One might also research whether certain topics are more effective and attain more participation than others. What kinds of materials see more success than others? What kinds of discussions and questions prompt more communication and spiritual growth? One might also take a negative approach, analyzing the characteristics of small groups that fail.

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