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The Growing Power of SMALL GROUPS



Seven steps for building community and growing spiritually.

I wanted something more. The greetings after church that at an earlier time had felt affirming now seemed like a superficial way of avoiding any deeper involvement. At church I helped in various programs, appreciated the worship and sermons, and enjoyed occasional potluck fellowships. I had attended an evangelical church all my life, and I'd been a committed Christian for eleven years. But my spiritual growth had plateaued and I felt alone with my problems and dreams.

It dawned on me that I needed a group of people who were committed to spiritual growth and mutual accountability before God, and who would know enough details of each other's lives to share in both the pains and the victories.

The church I attended had no such groups. I called up a few friends and acquaintances and shared my idea of starting a "growth group." About ten people began meeting, and, although there was some turnover of members, we stayed to-

Small Group Ministry Resources

gether as a group through five important years of our lives. Since then I've been involved as a member or leader of eight more such groups. I've become convinced that small groups, though not a panacea for all of our problems, do offer a powerful outlet for providing pastoral care, fostering community, and encouraging numerical and spiritual growth.

There are as many types of small groups as there are purposes for which they meet. The focus of this article is on small groups that provide people with a stronger experience of community and a supportive environment for spiritual growth—the two primary needs addressed by the modern small group movement.

In the sixties and seventies campus ministries, social workers, mental health professionals, and management trainers saw the value of small groups for personal and interpersonal development. In the past twenty years many churches began to recognize this same potential and developed small groups as an integral part of their ministries.

The small group movement has grown rapidly. In 1991, George Gallup reported that four out of ten Americans had participated in a small group that met regularly to care for and support its members; the majority of these groups were religious. Twenty-eight percent were currently involved in such a group, and at least 10 percent said they would like to be.

As important and popular as Christian nurture groups may be, healthy community, personal development, and increased sensitivity to God are not automatic. Group dynamics and structure can either nurture or negate positive results. Here are seven suggestions for promoting a good small group experience.

1 Good leaders are critical for small groups, especially in their formational stages. Leaders help set the tone, the agenda, and the norms for a small group. But because small groups are about growth and community, every group member must exercise his or her God-given gifts. As the group develops, roles and responsibilities must be shared so every member takes ownership of some leadership responsibilities. The devel-

opment of good leaders and members skilled in group dynamics needs to be an initial and ongoing commitment of any small group ministry.

2 The long-term health of a small group is best ensured when the agenda includes five basic elements: personal sharing, inductive Bible study, prayer and worship, attending to group business (including activities related to its external mission), and a time for informal fellowship with a meal or snacks. Generally, the more naturally these elements are related, the better they function. For example, a group could begin by sharing personal experiences related to the Bible text. A study on the story of the prodigal son might begin with members discussing their place in the family birth order or their memories of leaving home. Following the study, attention could be turned to prayer and thanksgiving for the people and issues that have arisen during the sharing and study. The group would then close with a dessert and a brief discussion of group business. The time and focus given to these various elements will vary from group to group and from meeting to meeting.

3 In the formative stages, a small group will spend most of its energies on its own organization and needs, but every small group should have a mission beyond itself. While mission is not the main purpose of the group (the growth of its members should be), it is a vital component in building a healthy group. The New Testament concept *ofkoimonia* means "sharing" or "having in common." *Koinonia* is the foundation of such fundamental concepts as communication, contribution, companionship, community, and communion. We share from God common blessings; we share with one another reciprocal responsibilities; and we share with those outside our company through cooperative service. The *modus operandi* of the Christian body is

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Community That Is Christian: A Handbook on Small Groups, by Julie A. Gorman (Victor Books, 1993)

This comprehensive resource for small group leaders examines the biblical foundations of community, covering such issues as the purpose of small groups, transformation, conflict, and leadership.

Getting Together: A Guide for Good Groups, by Em Griffin (InterVarsity, 1982)

The author focuses on three types of groups: task groups which have a job to do, relationship groups which meet our need for community, and influence groups which help people change. He covers such topics as conflict, deviance, persuasion, expectations, leadership, and how to have a good discussion.

Good Things Come in Small Groups: The Dynamics of Good Group Life, by Steve Barker and others (InterVarsity, 1985)

This book will guide you through the beginning of a small group through development of a churchwide strategy for growth. It also addresses nurture, worship, community, mission, leadership, group dynamics, and stages of change.

Leading Life-Changing Small Groups, by Bill Donahue (Zondervan, 1996)

This ready-reference format gives small group leaders a grasp of group formation and values, leadership requirements and responsibilities, the philosophy and structure of small groups, meeting preparation and participation, discipleship within the group, and leadership training. The author shares from his experience in developing small group ministry at Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois.

The NIV Serendipity Bible for Personal and Small Group Study, edited by Lyman Coleman (Zondervan, 1989, revised 1996)

This Bible includes study questions in the margin. "Open" questions initiate discussion, "dig" questions focus on the details of the passage, and "reflect" questions encourage application to daily life. The revised version will be released this fall.

People Together Series, by David Stark and Patrick Keifert (Church Innovations)

Use the leader's, manager's and

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training guides to launch a new small group ministry or strengthen an existing program. The guides include specific principles and proven methods of small group ministry design, training, start-up, management, and evaluation. The *People Together Series* identifies four distinct types of small groups. Special manuals for each of these groups have been developed to assist leaders to prepare for the unique aspects they will encounter in the group: *Being Together* (hosting a relationship-building small group); *Caring Together* (creating and guiding a safe, Christian support group); *Learning Together* (educational ministry through small groups); *Working Together* (leading a task-oriented small group). Order directly from Church Innovations, 800-456-1293.

Small Group Idea Book: Resources to Enrich, edited by Cindy Bunch (InterVarsity, 1996)

The creative ideas in this book will help in the development and evaluation of four components of healthy small group life: community, worship and prayer, nurture, and outreach.

Small Group Leader's Handbook: The Next Generation, by Ann Beyerlein and others (InterVarsity, 1995)

Recently updated for a new generation of small group leaders, this book includes the basics of small groups: starting with a biblical foundation, building in four key components of group life, creating good communication, handling conflict in the group, and developing leadership skills.

A Training Manual for Small Group Leaders, by Julie A. Gorman (Victor Books, 1991)

Eight training sessions help small group leaders develop and enhance the skills they need to nurture group members to maturity.

Turning Committees into Communities, by Roberta Hestenes (NavPress, 1991)

This book includes principles to help transform traditional church committees into more caring communities.

Unless otherwise noted, items are available for purchase through Covenant Bookstore, 800-621-1290. Special orders may be placed for items not in stock. For additional small group ministry options, call the Covenant Resource Center, at 800-338-IDEA, or e-mail your request to COVRESCTR@aol.com. □

that it receives from the Lord, ministers to its members, and reaches out to care for others (Galatians 6:10). I have been in groups that occasionally planned parts of the worship service, sponsored meals for church newcomers, prepared food pantries, helped with weddings and relocations, etc. Having a realistic mission beyond itself will help keep a group from becoming self-absorbed.

4 Small groups need an established period to allow for change: this might include adding members, allowing members to leave, re-negotiating ground rules, or birthing a daughter group. But groups also need periods when the group is committed and closed. During an open period, a group will spend a lot of time forming, integrating new members, and adjusting to the departure of others. But it is in the closed period that stability, trust, and confidentiality are best developed. It is during these times that members can address more serious issues and also reach out by providing stable leadership in a chosen area of ministry.

5 A small group needs an intentional strategy for sharing life experiences and challenges. Many small group books and guides include sample questions which can help start and structure meaningful sharing. At the beginning, the leader needs to be sensitive to the fact that people are still getting to know and trust one another; later, questions can invite deeper sharing. Sometimes groups need to be taught how to listen and properly respond to the stories, needs, and blessings that group members share.

6 The setting for small group meetings is important. Holding regular small group gatherings in a home rather than a room in the church provides a warmer atmosphere and promotes more openness to looking for God in everyday things. Special activities also require

special settings. A group can take a large step forward when it makes time for such events as an overnight retreat, a pool party, or a watch (extended prayer through the night). Making sure that the setting is appropriate creates an atmosphere that fosters deeper bonding and understanding. Younger family members and friends can often be included in these events.

7 How small is small? Between six and ten people seems to work best. Meaningful sharing and study takes time—a rule of thumb is that a group needs to meet about one hour for every four persons. When a group gets too large, attendance sometimes becomes sporadic since members may feel that they won't be missed. If the group is larger, it can split into smaller groups for parts of the meeting that involve personal sharing.

Gathering in small groups with fellow believers and seekers is not merely a fad.

Believers in the early church shared a common life—meeting in homes for teaching, prayer and fellowship, even giving up their possessions for the good of others (Acts 2:42-45). Most modern evangelical denominations had their origins in house meetings. Conventicles were an important part of the Swedish Pietist revival, a vital part of the foundation of the Evangelical Covenant Church. The church in China is surviving and growing largely through small groups. Christians throughout history have found that gathering with a small group of people has been critical to meeting needs for community and growth.

Whenever possible, involvement in a small group should be an integral element of one's Christian life. Small groups may be the vehicle God will use to prepare and equip the church for a new understanding of the community that our churches and nations so desperately need. □

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