

“Groups for Friendship and Growth”

The Book of Acts gives us a glimpse into the early Church. Turn to Acts, chapter 2. Fifty days after the risen Christ returned to His Father in heaven, He sent His Spirit on His followers gathered in Jerusalem. Peter preaches that day, and over 3,000 people trust Christ and are saved. What happens next? Check out Acts 2:42: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Notice, they devoted themselves to 3 things: First, teaching /study/learning (the “apostles’ teaching”); next, fellowship (including communion). The Greek word “koinonia” is the word for “fellowship”. It’s a word that’s hard to translate into English. It means a deep and intimate sharing with Christ and with one another. Thirdly, they devoted themselves to “the prayers”. So, there is ***study...sharing...prayer***.

The next verse, verse 43, says this: “Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.” Miracles took place!

Then it says, “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44-45). These early followers of Jesus were so committed to caring for each other’s needs that they pooled their money and material resources together so that no one would be in need.

And then there are these further words: “Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (Acts 2:46-47). They would meet in the temple courts (presumably this was a larger group), and meet regularly in their homes. As a result, the church continued to grow as people were being saved.

In the early Church, *small groups of people met in homes for study, sharing and prayer*. This vital expression of Christianity *attracted others to the faith! The first century church was organized around small groups!*

In our time, there has been a resurgence of the small group movement within the Church.

Many congregations have small group ministries, where people meet regularly to study, pray for each other, and share their lives on a deeper level. Some churches try to organize themselves totally around small groups, expecting every member to be part of a small group, so that they become a congregation ***of small groups***, not just a church ***with small groups***

Numerous studies have been done to identify the characteristics of churches that are growing. One of the common elements that surfaces again and again in growing churches is that they have vital small group ministries within the congregation.

Before we go any further, it may be helpful to ask: what do we mean by small groups? ***Small groups are groups of 8-12 people who meet regularly, and whose primary purpose is to attract people to Christ and help people mature as believers.***

Small groups are not groups that meet *just to socialize*. Socializing takes place in a small group,

as relationships are formed and deepen. But what takes place in groups is more than just superficial chit-chat. It's honest, heartfelt sharing of life and one's faith journey (the "koinonia" described in the New Testament).

Neither are small groups gatherings of people who meet *just to study a lesson (as in a Sunday School class)*. Many small groups *are centered* on Bible study or some other type of study. But the purpose of small group study is *life change*, not just gaining factual knowledge. Material studied should move group members to share the joys and struggles of their spiritual journey.

So, the main purpose in having small groups in the church is to attract people to Christ and help believers mature in their walk with Christ. In fact, I know of a church that calls their small group "Growth Groups."

Let me say more about small groups within the history of the church. We've already seen that in the New Testament, churches were actually small groups of people meeting regularly in homes (house churches). There were no church buildings.

Remember, also, Jesus established a small group! He spent 3 years as the Leader of a men's small group: the 12 disciples! Jesus poured Himself into this group of men to change their lives and equip them to carry the gospel to the world!

Small groups played a major role in the history of our United Methodist Church. The roots of United Methodism go back to John Wesley, who was a priest in the Church of England during the 1700's. After he had an experience of God that reawakened him spiritually, Wesley began to preach with power to masses of people who were largely ignored by established church, the Church of England. Such great numbers of people were being converted by his preaching that he had to figure out a way to help these new Christians grow spiritually. So he began to funnel new converts into groups called "Societies" and "Class Meetings". Societies were groups that met once a week for prayer, preaching and fellowship. But each society was subdivided into groups called "Class Meetings", consisting of 12 persons and a leader. They met regularly to study, pray, and examine their spiritual life.

Six years after the start of these Class Meetings, John Wesley commented: "It can scarce be conceived what advantages have been reaped...many now happily experienced that Christian fellowship of which they had not so much as an idea before. They began to 'bear one another's burdens' and naturally to 'care for each other'. As they had daily a more intimate acquaintance with, so they had a more endeared affection for, each other. And 'speaking the truth in love, they grew up into him in all things.'" In 1743, in the General rules of the Methodist movement, a reference was made to these small groups (Class Meetings): "The fellowship of the class meeting was undoubtedly one of the most precious things in the lives of the first two generations of Methodists. Their love for the little circles to which they belonged led them to endure all kinds of physical hardship that they might enjoy it."

Let me say more about the benefits of small groups in the church today. For one thing, ***small groups provide friendship, a place of belonging.*** Deep down, we all need friends and long for meaningful relationships. In many ways, our lifestyle today tends to produce loneliness and isolation. We are a mobile society, a people on the go! It's a rare thing anymore for three generations in one family to stay in the same town or city. The great number of divorces and second or third marriages have decreased a sense of stability for many people – many people are not sure where they belong. We just don't have those generational ties, that sense of having deep roots, as our grandparents and great-grandparents did.

Small groups in the church can provide that place of friendship and belonging. We may say, "Well, can't this happen through other things the church does? Can't we find this in worship, or in the choir, or in a Sunday School class?" Well, it doesn't happen in worship services. Even if you only have 35 people in worship, that's too many. It doesn't provide the setting for us to get to know one another deeply (besides, in the church we tend to wear our "smiley masks"). It *can* happen in a Sunday School class, or a church committee, but so often these groups are so focused on a lesson, or on church business, that no time is spent sharing our joys and struggles on a deeper level, or praying for one another in the group. So, small groups can be a setting in which we really get to know one another in depth and allow people into our heart and soul.

Still another benefit of a small group ministry is that it can be a way that the church reaches out to people who are lost. When small groups are healthy and not self-centered, they will be thinking of ways to reach out and bring more people in – especially people who don't know Christ. One of the dangers of small group is that group members become so cozy with each other that they get to the point where they *don't want* anyone else in! To avoid this, some small group ministries urge groups to *multiply* when they reach a certain number, encouraging some within the group to break off and form a new group. Some small groups always have an empty chair, as a reminder to be thinking of others who could benefit from being in the group. Note, too, that many people who aren't believers will not set foot in a church. But they *may* be willing to come into someone's home to be part of a small group.

Here are some FAQ's (Frequently Asked Questions) about small groups.

1. What' the ideal size of a small group? Ideally, it is 8-12 people. Once you get beyond 12, it becomes harder to share on a deeper level, and to give everyone an opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings. If there are too few people, the group can lack the richness of blending a number of different personalities into one group. Or, if some miss a meeting, you may wind up with just 3 or 4 people present, and that can become discouraging.

2. How often should groups meet? Many groups meet twice a month or every other week. If a group meets less than twice a month it lacks continuity. Some groups meet once a week – but that's often difficult because of people's schedules.

3. Do all groups have to be a Bible study group? No! Many groups focus on Bible study, but there are *many* different types of groups! Some groups are formed around a *common interest* –

like golf, or aerobics, or flower arranging, or cooking. *Any wholesome interest that binds people together can be the basis of a small group.*

There are small groups that serve as *support groups* – like groups for those who have family members with Alzheimers Disease, or people with addictions (cigarettes, overeating), or grief-support groups. Other groups are *action-oriented* groups – perhaps the group may run the church’s community food pantry, or serve as tutors in a local school, etc. And then other groups are mainly *study groups*, where members study the Bible, or Christian books.

In one church I served, in particular, we had quite a variety of types of small groups. There were groups based on *common interests*: a cooking group, a golf group, a knit one–pearl two group, a model train group, an aerobics group, a woodworkers group, a biker’s small group. We had groups that were more like *support groups*: an adoptive parents group, a young mothers’ group, a cancer support group. As I recall, we had an intercessory prayer group. And we also had a number of other groups focused on studying the *Bible or other books*.

Nancy and I have been members of a small group now for about 11 years. The group was formed when our congregation did an all church study of Rick Warren’s book, *The Purpose Driven Life*. Being in a group for 11 years, needless to say we have been through all kinds of things with one another, joyful experiences, sad times. .

4. Here’s another question that is sometimes asked: *since there are many types of groups, is there anything that should be required of groups that are part of the small group ministry of a church?* Well, each congregation should define how their small groups are organized. After a number of years in small group ministry, I’ve come to settle on just a few key elements that I think are needed in *every group*: first, honest, open sharing of one’s life experiences and spiritual journey; second, time for prayer, where group members pray for one another and others; third, that the group be Christian-oriented, and follow the teachings of Scripture.

5. *Who leads the small groups?* The answer to that question is, small group leaders! Seriously, groups are led by people in the church (not the pastor). It’s important for churches to be willing to train people who feel called to be leaders of a small group.

6. *Aren’t people too busy these days to be in a small group?* No! Sure, many people are busy. But many churches are finding that people will *make time* for a spiritual experience that will make a difference in their lives. And being part of a small group can be that experience.

Our Visioning Team has talked about starting a small group ministry in our congregation. We already have a golf small group getting started! I encourage you to consider being part of a small group, or maybe you even feel God calling you to be a small group leader.

There is a strange sign outside a disco in Mexico City. A sign on the building says, “Members or Non-members Only.” That’s who can benefit from the small group experience. Members and non-members!

