

Lesson**9****Small Group
Concept****SMALL GROUP PARTICIPATION**

For several decades the idea of small groups have been promoted by various ministries, with patchy results in the Western church but extraordinary results in the Third World and Asia.

- ♦ Yonggi Cho promoted the idea of cell groups for years, and pastored the largest church in the world in Seoul, South Korea, with a membership of nearly a million believers.
- ♦ It is said that China now has more Christians than Communists, with the majority of them meeting in small groups, often in homes. This was initiated by the Holy Spirit due to the intense persecution Chinese believers, and it has worked extraordinarily well ever since.
- ♦ In the '70s and '80s Cell Groups were promoted by US teachers such as Bob Mumford and Derek Prince. The concept was initially very popular but over time became abused by small-minded leaders with agendas to control and manipulate people instead of caring for them as shepherds. Discipleship became a dirty word and cell groups fell out of favour for several decades. The idea was right, as was much of the teaching, but it was taken to extremes and attracted disaffected believers, often with unconventional ideas and doctrines, who could not fit into a local church structure.

It has taken many years for Australia to recover from these questionable practices, but recover we must because the idea of small groups is very biblical, and works wherever it is followed faithfully by dedicated and committed Christian leaders with the best interest of those involved being held first and foremost. Isolationism and extreme theology should always be questioned, and avoided. However, whenever faithful leaders, who are accountable relationship with recognised spiritual authority and anointed senior leaders, then the risks of being led astray are greatly minimised.

I have pioneered several churches in Australia over the years. Each one began in our home until numbers grew sufficient to justify Sunday meetings in our own hall, and from there the churches were developed and established. This is what God called us to do, and it has been a effective for us. While we believe in and encourage small group meetings in our ministry, our main focus always remains on the local church as the primary corporate entity under which such groups function.

So we believe wholeheartedly in Small Groups. All churches that grow and succeed must ensure there are sufficient Small Groups meeting to involve everyone who wants to be involved in the life of the church outside the Sunday meetings. Such groups enable speedy integration of new members into the mainstream work and vision of the church, and are a great forum for fellowship, mentoring and the building and maintenance of long term friendships.

Emphasising Small Groups

Any church of any decent size that does not sponsor and encourage a small group network will struggle with connectivity in their congregation, with people not feeling like they “belong”, struggling to find an identity within the larger church.

Any church worth its salt will have an emphasis on small groups to facilitate regular contact and foster a sense of community. Ideally they will be represented by good leaders who are accountable to one another and the pastor and ministry team.

Small groups are not an end in and of themselves. They are more a part of how a diverse body of people of varying ages, gifts, interests and needs, come together to form a local body of believers, which we would call a local church, coming together corporately on Sundays to celebrate together through worship, communion, teaching and fellowship.

Small groups take various forms and can be as diverse as one can imagine. By their very nature they are groups of people meeting over common interests or for a common purpose. They may exist to reach out to non-churched or unchurched people, be spiritual in emphasis, or have a non-spiritual purpose, such as business, crafts, children, hobbies etc.

However it is important to remember that the underlying reason for a small group to exist is to promote the local church, its vision and ministry, and to care for those who consider it to be their spiritual home.

Small groups exist to encourage people in their faith and to introduce them to what being part of a local church is all about in an intimate, user-friendly, non-threatening way, and to encourage attendance at Sunday meetings.

For new people it is a way to integrate into church life quickly, through Foundations courses such as this one (which are best conducted in a small group setting). For others it is a way to be mentored in their faith, meeting regularly with a smaller group than meets on Sundays, and getting to know people more intimately in a more intimate setting of their choosing. Small groups encourage fellowship, promote teaching and study, and give us all a forum for meeting and getting to know others with similar interests.

Some years ago a senior pastor friend made a pertinent observation during a lunch meeting in Sydney. He said he didn't think the way we do church in Australia, in general terms, was working at any serious level, and that unless we made some significant changes we were in danger of becoming irrelevant to the general Australian community.

It was 2001 and at the time I thought he was onto something. I still think the same after all these years.

He said we were in serious danger of failing to fulfil the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20) in our generation, and we needed to come up with something radically different if we were going to survive, and prosper (his words) as churches in 21st Century Australia. It confirmed again my commitment to small group ministry in the church, something that had been out of favour for a couple of decades at the time due to the abuses of the so-called 'discipleship' movement.

Seven Core Values for Small Groups

Much time has passed since, but nothing has changed my views on need for small group ministries in the church. I felt it was a 'word in season' for me at the time, and nothing has happened since to change my mind.

Churches need to encourage, organise and promote small groups as a primary vehicle to train and equip the saints (Eph 4:12-16) for the work of the ministry, and to integrate people into the life of the local church.

1. Value relationship and agreement

A church must be founded on principles of relationship and agreement. Those who are willing to become a part of what God is doing will feel very much at home in such an atmosphere and culture. It is part of the core value system of a church to attempt to build deep and lasting relationships with all who call the church their spiritual home. The church should be known as a friendly and open church, which visitors feel drawn too look deeper into. This is not propaganda, but a very real outworking of God's grace on a church fellowship.

"Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?" (Amos 3:3)

Agreement with those whom God calls us to work closely with in the church is imperative. We must teach and practise agreement at every level. In general terms we need to agree with what we stand for together as a people. The vision God has given us, and the way we do things, are part of understanding our journey of faith together collectively. The higher a person rises in the leadership structure of a church the greater the need for agreement. It is a part of life that we all need to deal with our tendency to disagree (or be disagreeable) at times, and refrain from negative and divisive comments and attitudes along the way. At the same time we must understand that agreement is something worth fighting for. No matter what it costs, working towards agreeable solutions at all times must be an integral part of the DNA of a local church, or problems will inevitably arise.

The devil, Lucifer, whose name means "*accuser*", is always on the lookout for those whom he can deceive into believing that a lower standard is an acceptable one. He will try and convince you that it is not possible to walk in such agreement, but this is patently untrue. If we seek to working in agreement with others wherever possible, we have a much greater change of success in any group dynamic. It is a question of integrity, and obedience to God's Word.

"Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven" (Matt 18:19)

If two or three, in agreement, can obtain anything they ask from the Father, no wonder the devil wants Christians to believe it can't be done! Agreement is definitely worth fighting for!

"Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgement" (1 Cor 1:10)

This is not to say that we must agree on absolutely everything, like robots or mindless automatons. Churches worldwide have been guilty over the centuries (and this is no less true today) of programming their followers to believe that only their particular biblical world view is right. Consequently everyone else, by default, must be wrong. Nothing is further from the truth.

It is possible to have divergent views on a wide range of issues and even biblical interpretations and still have both unity and agreement on every level that is important, without compromising either faith or integrity.

Paul strongly encouraged the Corinthian believers to agree together. Later in the same letter we get an insight into divisions and disputes, and the reason why they must come up occasionally, even in healthy churches:

“For there must also be divisions (factions) among you, in order that those who are approved may become evident” (1 Cor 11:19)

You see, it is not wrong to be different, or to disagree, but it is wrong to try and walk together and maintain that disagreement.

There are matters of importance such as relate to church vision, direction, leadership style and function, and how we go about relating and caring for one another that it is important to agree with, otherwise you might just be in the wrong church! If you prefer hymns to more contemporary worship music, we may never agree. The same goes for the ones who enjoy church liturgy and religious ceremony. That sort of doesn't fit so well into a charismatic/Pentecostal style of service, but if you enjoy it you should find a place where it is practised to your liking. If you do not enjoy the Pentecostal flavour and are inclined to support a more traditional approach to church and ministry, then that is where you may belong.

There is plenty to choose from in Christendom so no one should ever miss out on fellowship because of such differences. We all belong somewhere, and if we can't find a church that suits us, then we need to look closer to home. Perhaps the fault lies within. If this is your tendency, you'll need a good church with strong leadership to help you sort it all out!

The goal of the local church should always be agreement, and unity, in the power of the Holy Spirit, especially among those in leadership positions, or in positions of influence over others.

Remember, agreement is worth fighting for. This is not a contradiction in terms, but a statement of fact, and worth remembering.

2. Value godly spiritual authority

A good church will generally have some emphasis on spiritual authority, although this is very much in a relational sense rather than an autocratic or dogmatic one. Understanding spiritual authority is foundational to our faith, and such a problem to so many believers! Though this shouldn't be so but often is the case. Understanding relationships and authority structures in the church, is essential if we are to walk in agreement together (Matt 18:19-20).

Many believers are frustrated with a spiritual journey that should be a joy, frustrated by ineffective leadership in the church, and lose their way. Still others get caught up in the spiritual 'excesses' which can put other areas of life out of balance. There is much to be said for good church management, sound balanced leadership, and good, Holy Ghost inspired and directed spiritual authority.

God created us to be in good relationship to one another, and to achieve this He ordained three primary authority structures to guide us and protect us in the world. In simple terms these structures are:

- ♦ **The Government** (Rom 13:1,2; Tit 3:1,2; 1 Pet 2:13-15,18,19)
- ♦ **The Family** (Eph 5:22-33; 6:1-4; Col 3:18-21; 1 Pet 3:1-9)
- ♦ **The Church** (Heb 13:17; 1 Cor 11:3; Eph 1:22,23)

We must all learn to relate to each of these structures as God directs.

Understanding spiritual authority, especially as it relates to the church, is imperative if we are to agree together, tear down the strongholds, and see the kingdom of God established.

“Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you” (Heb 13:17)

3. Value leadership that empowers people

The local church should be led by those with leadership gifts (see ***Foundations 8 - The Church, Structure and Authority***).

The primary task of a leader is to create an environment in which people are being equipped and released to serve God and fulfil His purpose for their lives (Eph 4:11-16).

4. Value the organising of ministry around people's gifts

Every Christian has at least one gift where they can excel in serving God and their local church. Identifying and understanding such gifts determines the role each person should play (Rom 12:3-8). People will always do better in any endeavour they embark on when it is closely connected to either their passion or their gifts.

5. Value passionate Christian living

Full devotion to Christ is normal for every believer, and results in:

- ♦ A passionate desire to read the Bible regularly.
- ♦ Being committed to a active prayer life.
- ♦ Continually meeting with other believers to build each other up, not neglecting the Church family.
- ♦ Seeking opportunities to share their faith with unbelievers.
- ♦ Managing their time, talents and treasure for the honour of God who has entrusted them to us (Rom 12:11-12).

6. Value church structures that work

We believe that good organising structures in the church are those which allow ministry to be done without hindrance. The Bible, not tradition, is our guide in how we develop effective organisation. A good church should be committed to simply structure and “uncluttered Christianity” (Mark 2:27).

Sunday services should be dynamic, relevant and inspirational to the target audience at all times. Small groups should be the same. All messages should be inspirational, challenging and easy to follow and understand. We should be user-friendly and, as in most things, keeping things simple is often best.

7. Value Small Groups

Ongoing and positive life changes happen best in small groups. A lively and caring small group is one where believers:

- ◆ Are challenged to put the Bible into practice in their daily life.
- ◆ Receive encouragement and help in real need areas.
- ◆ Use their gifts to minister to others in the group.
- ◆ Work together to reach out to new people (Acts 2:46-47).

Small Group Dynamics

Jesus intends His followers to become like Him in attitude and behaviour. The church exists to save and transform people. Small groups provide the best environment for this transformation to take place. Significant relationships occur best in the context of a small group gathering.

A small group of believers who love and care for one another can experience the life Christ promised at the deepest level possible. Connecting people in a group like this is not an optional sub-ministry of the church - it is the church in its smallest organised unit. Without this connection people may attend meetings but they aren't truly participating in church life as it can and should be experienced.

The biological cell (the small group is based upon the concept of 'cells') is a basic building block of life. Each new cell looks identical to the original cell because the DNA branded nucleus multiplies itself before the cell reproduces. In this way, the first cell is as healthy and productive as the newest cell formed. The cells work together to make the body function as a true miracle from God.

A small group is similar to a biological cell in concept. We gather together to edify one another and increase kingdom effectiveness by sharing our experiences and encouraging others to attend. Sometimes a group grows and multiplies, forming a new group or groups. More often a small group meets a specific need and remain stable over a long period of time. Both models are viable in a local church setting.

Small Group Meetings

Small group meetings are held in various locations where people are able to get together around a common interest or activity, usually in an informal environment, but not exclusively so. Meetings focus on several priorities, depending on the reason for the Small Group's existence in the first place.

Some are outreach oriented, while others cater for the needs of the new believer. Other small groups are spiritually inclined with Bible study, discussion or prayer as their main focus. Yet others are topical, allowing people with common interests to gather and invite friends along. Such wide reaching special interest (topical) groups include all facets of youth and young adults, worship and music teams, women's and men's meetings, business networking, and other special interest groups. These can cover everything from spiritual issues to social occasions with dinners, movies, fashion shows and the like.

Every church member is strongly encouraged to become involved in a small group that meets their particular needs and suits their particular interests.

Small groups really help people to integrate into the life of the church. It is our way, as born-again believers in Jesus Christ, of helping to fulfil the Great Commission found in Matt 28:18-20 and reaching out to a community that largely doesn't know, and consequently doesn't care, much about God at all.

Small Group Goals

Where possible **every person** should be connected to their fellow believers in a small group setting.

In a small group you will:

- ◆ Be cared for by a trained small group leader.
- ◆ Build strong, encouraging friendships that can last a lifetime.
- ◆ Have a safe place to develop the gifts, talents and abilities God gave you.
- ◆ Grow in your faith as you apply biblical teaching to your every day life.
- ◆ Be supported in reaching out to your friends and family.
- ◆ Be a part of actively building the church as your group invites friends or new people in church along to join them.

