

Small Groups

Many churches are either programme structured or centred around the charismatic personality of the pastor. The problem with the former is that people responsible for running programmes are prone to burn out after several years. The difficulty with the latter, is that if the pastor dies, moves away, or loses his image, that church loses its following.

Small groups sometimes known as cell groups, do not largely depend upon programmes or personalities for their ongoing effectiveness. They are very much centred on transformation in Christ through relationships, love and body life. Many of the large churches around the world today, are experiencing phenomenal lasting growth through having a cellular philosophy of ministry. It does not matter to an attendee how large the congregation is if he or she belongs to a healthy cell. Such a group offers love, safety, comfort, accountability, openness and outreach possibilities. Everyone can find a place where they feel significant.

The small group movement is based upon the premise that relationships are of prime importance, John 17:20-23.

'My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one — I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.'

Most experiencing faith in Jesus want an authentic faith where they can live in their world with integrity, drawing people to Christ and having a meaningful relationship with God's people. Evidently this occurred for the believers in Acts 2:41-47 as they shared their lives together.

A relational chart

Intimate level 1-3 people	↑
Sharing level 5-7 people	The cell Church
Caring level 8-17 people	↓
Functional level 20-40 people	↑
Greeting level 60-120 people	The traditional Church
Courtesy level entire congregation	↓

There is a place for all those levels. In the larger gathering the majesty, holiness and exaltation of God are acclaimed. In the small group the emphasis which usually comes through is that of Christ being in our midst, our friend and Saviour. He is immanent, but in the large group He is often looked upon as transcendent. The cells need to meet regularly together in the Sunday service to celebrate the fullness of God.

There are many types of small groups. For example:

- Bible study groups
- Prayer groups
- Pastoral care
- Social groups
- Task groups
- Accountability groups
- Covenant groups
- House Church groups

Because of the needs of people and growth of cells it is recommended 70% of the cells in a cell-based church are caring groups.

Essential tasks

There are four essential tasks for normal small groups. *Firstly*, they are to care for and nurture existing believers. *Secondly*, they are to reach out to prebelievers with the gospel. Some groups have an empty chair in the room as a reminder that someone they know needs to fill that chair and experience the love of God. *Thirdly*, the development of new leaders is a high priority. And *fourthly*, there must be the birthing of a new group. It is useful to set a target date for when that multiplication will occur. Ideally a group should multiply every few months.

Nine things that happen best in a small group

1. Close family type connections are formed.
2. Sharing of life testimony.
3. Effective one-to-one pastoral care.
4. Encouragement and edification.
5. Unlimited opportunities for meaningful service.
6. Non-threatening friendship evangelism.
7. Formation of new converts.
8. Spiritual growth through Bible study which leads to its application in daily life.
9. Development of strong leadership.

The effectiveness of a group will depend upon the *size* of the group, the *type of relationships* encouraged to develop, the *benefits* that are there for all and the *frequency* of meeting together.

Whatever type of group is established it is important that there is:

1. a strong loving component in it.
2. learning component and contributing aspect.
3. a means of deciding its vision and structure.

Traditional home groups

Many home groups as we have known them have the following characteristics:

1. primarily a place for personal. nurturing of existing Christians.
2. are most frequently inward looking.
3. strongly influenced by charismatic renewal.
4. lack a direction.
5. an optional extra to church life.
6. dependent on the ability and vision of a gifted leader.
7. little continuing development of leaders.
8. often a cause of frustration, despair and burnout of leaders.
9. usually fewer than 25% of active membership involved.

Principles of successful small groups

Firstly, there must be a narrow span of control. It has been suggested that a pastor can only have effective input into only five leaders, who in turn teach others. *Secondly*, formational training for leadership is important. That is by demonstrating good leadership by example, training and support. *Thirdly* for effective caring the group should not grow beyond ten people. Otherwise, intimacy will decline.

Fourthly it is essential that an apprentice is taken alongside the leader and trained to do a similar work in a new group. Choose that person wisely.

Training of leaders

In training potential leaders look for:

1. a person with a teachable spirit.
2. someone who is growing in their relationship with Christ.
3. appropriate gifts and personality.
4. no major unresolved issues.
5. a supportive spouse if married.
6. a person willing to train others.

The leadership in the small group is probably the most important factor which will determine the success or failure of the cell groups. The senior pastor must meet with and support the group leaders. It is helpful to have meetings at least monthly. The primary purpose is to minister to the leaders by:

1. *Maintaining vision.* Reaffirm core values, focus on future direction and worship together. Share faith stories. Set long term objectives (30 minutes).
2. *Build relationships.* leaders can pray for one another, talk, listen and be listened to. Brain storm if necessary. Provide counsel (30 minutes).
3. *Develop skills.* In depth teaching to equip in practical ministry skills (30 minutes). The leader of the cell group leaders needs to ask them constantly 'what do you need to know to do your job better?'

Small group programme

These programmes differ depending on the main purpose of the group. However, a typical group will only meet for one and half hours - no longer. It is important for couples to attend together so that they will grow in their spiritual lives together.

Through that time a typical group will:

1. commence with coffee and fellowship.
2. worship.
3. study (10 minutes teaching, 10 minutes application).
4. personal sharing and prayer.
5. fellowship.

The atmosphere is such that non or new Christians are welcomed and accepted with love. The amount of worship and personal ministry time will vary.

Future planning

Never be in a hurry to implement the small group structure until the homework has been done thoroughly.

The New Testament and Today's Church

A Study in Contrasts

	The New Testament Church	The Church of today
LOCATION	Moves from house to house	Meets in church buildings
SIZE OF GROUPS	Small, intimate groups	Large groups
ACTIVITIES	Frequent fellowship, weekly worship services	Weekly worship services, programmes and activities
SUPPORT SYSTEM	Building up one another	Dependent on pastor
RELATIONSHIPS	Intimate, helping one another, accountable	Often superficial
DISCIPLING	Interaction, modelling, personal values shaped	Teaching, little modelling, programmes
PRIMARY TASK OF LEADERS	Every believer equipped to do the work of ministry	Administration of programmes and do the ministry
PRAYER LIFE	Heavy emphasis	Individual choice, limited
PASTOR'S DUTY	Model the life of a believer, equip others for ministry	Preach and do ministry
EXPECTATIONS OF MEMBERS	Ministering to others, servanthood and stewardship	Attendance; Giving; Work in the programmes
KEY WORDS	"Go and make disciples"	"Come grow with us"
TEACHINGS	Application of Scriptures to life	Knowledge of Scriptures
SPIRITUAL GIFTS	"Exercised by all believers of people using their gifts in ministry"	"What you know", Number of attenders
BASIS OF EVALUATION	"How you serve", number of people using their gifts in ministry	"What you know", Number of attenders
SOURCE FOR RECRUITING STAFF	Servant workers developed within; tested before they are set apart for ministry	Trained, professional clergy brought in from outside

(Much of this material is used with kind permission from Robert Orr's 'Developing New Groups for Care and Growth Seminar').