

MAKING SMALL GROUPS EFFECTIVE

NOTES ON FELLOWSHIPS,
HOME CELL GROUPS, AND HOUSE CHURCHES
IN THE EPISCOPAL TRADITION



Arlin J. Rothauge, PhD

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IN Christian history, we have much experience with small groups, beginning with the ministry of Jesus. He called a small group, the original twelve, around him to share in his ministry. In the early church, as recorded by St. Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, we hear about small groups forming and meeting in homes. As the monastic missionary movements came on the stage of Christian history, they also organized into small hands. Many reform movements, the Wesleyan clubs were the best known, used small groups for renewal and support in the face of persecution. In the colonies of the New World, many congregations were actually small groups, a pattern that continued across the frontier as the wagon trains moved westward. In our own century, the church has experimented with the use of small groups for many purposes: mission, pastoral care, education, recovery, prayer, renewal, and committee work. In the overseas missionary ventures and indigenous churches of other cultures, we have reports of remarkable success in the use of small groups for evangelism and making new disciples.

We have learned that not all approaches to small group life have proven effective, but many have more than achieved their purposes. For the benefit of our own ministries and missionary efforts, we will assess our experiences with small groups from the vantage point of the most important observations that have emerged from our past and present wisdom.

SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

Observation One: Liturgy in Life

Our liturgical tradition provides wonderful resources and skills in holding grand celebrations for the whole congregation and for larger gatherings of many congregations. We have mastered liturgy in the public gatherings that take us away from our daily surroundings and homes for a special occasion. The next challenge is “liturgy in life,” meaning the informal gatherings of members in homes and work places. It is in these daily settings that small groups can bring liturgy to life and enrich our spiritual worship beyond the potential on Sunday morning in a large, formal service.

Ministry of the Word: Public worship in large numbers provides the classic setting for the presentation of the Word through- powerful preaching. This preaching is the ministry of one person to a multitude. In the small group experience, we are able to minister to each other with the Word of God. Scripture can be read several times and all members can share the ways in which they hear God’s message for them in the words of the passage. In this kind of Bible sharing, it is important to avoid correction or arguments. Each person is free to share as the Spirit moves them. Such interactions fulfill our understanding of what we mean Sunday morning when we refer to the “Ministry of the Word.”

Prayers of the People: In our public litanies we learn the proper substance of prayer; according to our catechism, the principal kinds of prayer are adoration, praise, thanksgiving, penitence, oblation, intercession, and petition. Also, we express our community concern in Sunday services by giving names spontaneously during the litany. In our small group life, we have the opportunity to carry prayer together another step. We are the people of God at work with our ministry of prayer. Our deep concerns, hurts, challenges, and blessing can be

shared with more intimacy and in more detail. It becomes possible to join as prayer partners and lift each other up before God continually every day. We literally encircle our brothers and sisters in Christ with our love and prayer. Sharing stories about how God answers these prayers becomes an empowering experience and builds up faith greatly. Our phrase, “the prayers of the people,” takes on the full life of the Christian community, since it is no longer limited to a public service. In turn, the intercession and thanksgivings take on added life.

The Exchange of the Peace: Considerable warmth has been added to our eucharistic celebration by the polite ritual that we call the “exchange of the peace.” This brief moment symbolizes a fundamental quality and requirement in Christian community. The peace that the Lord gives us in our daily life becomes a gift that we offer to each other. Our relationship with God is the source of our living with each other. We love God and consequently love our neighbor. In the small group experience, we can engage in this closer fellowship by sharing our stories, struggles, and special occasions. The exchange of the peace arises out of the vulnerability and mutuality of small group life. We know that we are not alone when someone laughs and cries with us over our particular stories. This is the real, deep peace of Christian community that we symbolize on other occasions by a handshake or hug.

Observation Two: The Presence of Christ

We often quote Matthew 18:20, which promises that Christ will be present where two or three are gathered. Unfortunately, the power of the promise may be lost in the rather trivial and humorous way that we sometimes refer to it. What does it mean?

The small group, no matter how small, is a sacred event. The Presence of Christ is the center of the event and the heart of the experience. Perhaps we could say that as Christ is with us

in the bread and wine at Holy Eucharist, so Christ is with us also in the faces and lives of the small group members. If this is true to any extent, then the small gatherings and meetings at church are not like other group occasions outside the Christian community. It is appropriate that we conduct the meetings differently and conduct ourselves as hosts of Christ. Do we realize that Jesus appears in the room with us?

We might ask ourselves if this perspective would change the way that we feel about little church meetings, committee meetings, board meetings, guild meetings, church school classes, etc. If these occasions are profoundly sacred events at church, then it would not seem strange to spend time in prayer, scriptural reflection, and exchanging our concerns and our peace with each other. Such gestures would be familiar and appropriate ways to honor the Presence of Christ with us. Some people will, inevitably, feel that the time spent is wasted because they are impatient about getting to the task or lesson. But is it not possible that we are considering a question of spiritual protocol rather than the comfort zones of our personal preferences?

What about size? What is a small group?

The promise of Matthew 18:20 and the ministry of Jesus give us one way to define what we mean by the size of a small group. We wouldn't have less than two or three, and the disciples numbered twelve. Two to twelve offers a wide range; we might suggest eight to ten as an average-sized small group. There are significant psychological and sociological reasons for choosing ten as a median for small group size. Using the Roman numeral for "ten," many organizers and trainers call this ideal size the "X" group with an "X" leader.¹

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Observation Three: Start with Leaders

Our first inclination is to start with groups and hope for leaders. A clergy person may function as the leader of the group, which limits the number of groups possible to the available time of a staff member. Perhaps the group does persuade one member to be the leader. It would be tempting to assume that the volunteer knows all about church leadership and small groups. But is that a fair assumption? In another situation, the group passes the leadership around, hoping for the best. This solution assumes again that the members are already leaders; in fact, it assumes all members have the gift and skills of leadership. How often is that really the case? What does the leader do for further skill development, or peer support, or accountability procedures? Who nurtures the leaders?

Most difficulties in small group life can be traced back not to the group itself but to the lack of attention given to leadership of small groups. Do we start with creating groups when we want more groups in our congregation? No, the future will be more promising if we start with developing leaders for groups.

How can we have a leader, if we have no group? Prepared and supported leaders will draw groups into being around their leadership. Of course, groups will produce future leaders out of their membership. In fact, once we have grasped the need for germinating leaders to start groups, we can conceive of a group whose members will become future leaders of new groups. Rarely would all members aspire to leadership, but finding more leaders for more groups will not be a problem if the groups and the existing leaders take responsibility for the next wave and class of leaders.

The social mechanism for such a self-perpetuating process has existed from the beginning of time: it is called the apprenticeship.

The first leader finds an apprentice, or several apprentices, and starts a small group. Members learn through the apprentice role how to take on leadership and responsibilities for the next new group. Consequently, rather than running out of leaders and volunteers, we create more for the future and for growth.

Observation Four: The Leadership Community

The leadership circle in a congregation represents more than a special ministry. It is a culture, meaning that there are norms, skills, relationships, accountabilities, and support systems that relate particularly to this specialized ministry. The clergy, or persons in charge of the congregation, need more organized ways to support the leadership circles as the membership increases in number.

Imagine a variety of group leader roles:

- in charge of a class with up to ten students and one assistant teacher
- in charge of a committee with up to ten volunteers and one associate chairperson
- in charge of a prayer circle with up to ten members and one spiritual director trainee
- in charge of a home group with up to ten participants and one apprentice leader
- in charge of a work party with up to ten helpers and co-chairpersons
- in charge of a visitation team with ten greeters and one team leader apprentice
- in charge of the ushers with ten men and ten women and two captain assistants
- in charge of a hospital team with ten caregivers and one team leader apprentice

- in charge of the church office with five staff, five volunteers, and two manager apprentices.

The leaders in this listing have groups that do not exceed ten members and each one has an apprentice. The leaders are responsible both for the mission of the group and the fellowship life of the group. The leader is pastor, organizer, and close friend to about ten members. All members in the group assume that they will care for each other, learn together, pray together, and work with each other in their particular mission. The leader is animator and facilitator of these group functions and, when appropriate, promotes the recruitment of new members to the group.

Again, imagine a variety of group leader roles. This time we will assume that the congregation has 30 or fewer members who live in a remote rural area, headers are:

- in charge of sacramental services being licensed by the bishop as “local clergy” who work with a worship team and one liturgy associate
- in charge of educational needs being licensed by the bishop as catechists who work with the catechism. and with home group leaders of Bible study and prayer groups; there is one apprentice in each group
- in charge of an evangelism team who lead home groups for new members and any other interested persons, with one apprentice for each team and each group
- in charge of an administration team and one associate manager, who care for the church finances, and a rented facility for Sunday
- in charge of outreach projects with sets of volunteers and co-leaders.

In these examples, the members in small congregations maintain a vital life together through teams and home groups. They also offer various Christian services and opportunities to others in their remote area. All groups remain a manageable size so that the leader can assist the group in their ministry and encourage the group as a lay pastor. All leaders have

apprentices. The various roles and licenses flow from differing spiritual gifts and training. In both cases, small and large, we imagine a congregation that benefits from considerable small group life and an empowered leadership community.

In order to build up and sustain a leadership community, the following components will be essential:

1. Leaders covenant to meet together regularly, such as every other week for two hours, or a monthly dinner and evening, or a quarterly retreat.
2. The meetings are conducted by the local leader who has the authority to guide the congregation or cluster, such as the senior clergy, a specialist on staff, the regional pastor, or the director. This leader articulates the **vision** of the congregation and the importance of small group life. This prominent person also gives out awards, praise, and encouragement for leadership excellence.
3. Quality and adequate time is given to **huddles** with other leaders sharing experiences in the role of small group leadership and group life. We always learn by debriefing with peers and by reflecting on our work.
4. Continuing education will be needed in the wide range of **skills** that are required in order to fulfill the heavy responsibilities of the leadership circle.
5. In larger small group systems, it will be necessary to provide the group leaders with supervisors and coordinators. Such a second-step leader could normally care for five to ten group leaders.
6. It is the responsibility of the clergy and trainers to make these sessions with leaders irresistible and invaluable. Quality, not duty, will ensure attendance.²

MINISTRY DEVELOPMENT

Small groups afford the perfect setting for the development of ministry. Groups become ministry. We use the word “ministry” constantly in church life today. The meaning varies in the context of usage. For our purpose in this discussion, we want the simplest and most direct definition.

Ministry: Keeping Vows

If we can say that doing ministry, or having a ministry, is keeping our baptismal vows, we have established justification for saying that every baptized person is a minister of Jesus Christ. Ordination can be described simply as taking another set of vows in addition to the vows that all baptized members share in common.

In small group life, we have ample opportunity to keep our vows in Christ that emphasize participation in the Christian community. Further, the support of group life helps us live out the vows in our daily place of activity. Small group gatherings function as valuable times for exploring our faith and personally reinforcing each other in living out our faith in the world.

Observation Five: The Group Charter

If the small Christian groups have any charter, it must surely be the baptismal covenant.³

1. *We will, with God's help, continue in the apostles' teach tug and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.* These phrases echo Acts 2:42 which describes the small group life of the first Christians of the first church in the first century. The breaking of bread could refer to a communal meal together as well as celebrating the Holy Eucharist. Home groups and café groups still today enjoy this special fellowship of eating together. When a formal Eucharist is not possible, still a feast is enjoyed from the

“bread of life” found in the gospel teaching and in prayers.

2. *We will, with God’s help, persevere in resisting evil, and whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord.*

The small group allows for holding each other accountable to our vision of a wholesome, God-filled life. We can be honest about failure, receive forgiveness, and return to the challenges. Such moments of disclosure happen naturally in the course of the trust and love that we feel in small groups. Confessions are never talked about outside the group circle.

3. *We will, with God’s help, proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ.*

Small group evangelism could revolutionize our outreach. It is essential to declare, as a primary reason for any small group, the reaching out for new members and the inclusion of others in the group circle. The groups that do not grow soon become inwardly focused and stale. Every group circle must always have an empty chair as a symbol and reminder. Effective groups develop a prospect list that becomes:

- a prayer list
- an invitation list

Other church members and new Christians are brought into the group by friendship evangelism. By developing sound friendships and by acts of kindness, we build up the trust that allows us to invite a new person into our Christian fellowship. As God blesses the outreach of the group, it grows and multiplies. Some small groups, like some members, are especially gifted in evangelism among outside populations. Other groups grow mainly by including new participation from the congregation.

4. *We will, with God's help, seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves.*

Effective small groups engage in mission and have a spiritual sense of discovering Christ in their work. Loving our neighbor characterizes vital small groups, whether the group gathers regularly in homes, represents a tradition committee, or commits dramatic acts of compassion. The group exists for serving Christ in all persons. Every member of the group becomes a neighbor whom we care about deeply and think of daily.

5. *We will, with God's help, strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.*

Members of small groups will fulfill this vow in at least five possible ways:

- participation in outreach projects of their local congregation
- volunteer service in community projects related to social needs
- the Christian ministry naturally following out of those daily occasions that bring us into relationship with others
- special mission projects that are planned and carried out by the small group itself
- the individual initiatives that we take as citizens of our community, the nation, and the globe.

Small groups could engage in outreach and mission at any point along the “Continuum of Community Involvement and Social Transformation.” Their growth in wisdom and compassion will cause the group to move along the continuum toward the deeper issues of systemic change and justice.

Continuum of Community Involvement and Social Transformation

CHARITY > SERVICE > ADVOCACY > JUSTICE

You focus on:	problems	persons	underlying causes	systems
You give:	your money	your time	your heart	empowerment to others
You benefit from:	immediate satisfaction	broadening experiences	deeper insight	community mobilization

Small groups, when committed to justice, peace, and dignity for all, can multiply into powerful movements that God will use to transform society and human destiny. The gospel vision anticipates nothing less. The “base communities” that were feared by dictators in Latin America were small Christian communities in action.

GROUP LIFE DEVELOPMENT

Observation Six: Group Life Stages

DEPENDENT STAGE

The first stage of group formation depends on the leader who embodies the vision and inspiration that will give birth to a new enterprise. The inspiring leader draws a following due to the vision, the values, and energy of his or her catalytic presence. If the group remains in this initial and elementary stage and no questions are ever raised, the leader simply demands obedience, and, in return, the followers receive the leader's care, direction, and protection.

under these circumstances, the leader may grow in strength, but the followers may experience limited expression and may exercise limited creativity in their participation. Loyalty in the group would grow from their relationship with the leader rather than each other.

In order to progress in group life, the leader becomes more a coach, and less a director. The members take on roles that would be reserved otherwise for the central leader only. Selecting an apprentice for the leader would be a major step forward. The power of leadership is consequently shared. Others in the group will have skills and talents that enrich and enable the group's life: hospitality, music, empathy, reflection, prayer, leading discussions, evangelism, planning and organizing, dreaming and inspiring, etc. The leader draws out these contributions and nurtures each group member in the exercise of their gifts. Progressively, as the group members become a resource to each other, dependency on a single leader lessens.

It is possible that some leaders may feel threatened by maturity in the group until it is realized that a stronger group is a primary sign of good leadership. It is also possible that

the stronger group will be more likely to challenge the most prominent leader. Members in the group, and perhaps the group as a whole, might develop a vision and a style of life that contradicts the original work of the primary leader. Again, these conflicts must be appreciated as signs of health rather than disaster and disloyalty. When these difficulties are dealt with openly and fairly, they become occasions for the group to test and to invest. They test the value of the original vision and their own personal interest in it. They invest more deeply when the vision is better understood, or when the vision is altered to reflect the membership more accurately.

Sometimes, a shared value or a vision of the group cannot, and should not, be changed; this group value or vision may well be more important than any individual in the group or the opinion of any individual member. These challenges are most troubling but, again, they can also be most constructive. The group will progressively come to understand their most central and enduring values. They will discover the essentials in their vision. The norms and demands for conformity will come from the life of the group and not simply from the authority of one leader.

INDEPENDENT STAGE

We have now arrived at a new stage in which a measure of independence and self-consciousness defines the group. The followers of a leader have evolved into being members of a group to which the leader gives support. The role change from “follower” to “member” signals more reliance on the community as a whole and more participation in the decision-making process of the community. The leader is less in charge of a new initiative and more accountable for the life of a new community. The leader increasingly shares authority with a body of rules, tradition, and stories that defines the community. This infrastructure will not be changed without conflict because it becomes the “hidden leader” and orthodoxy of the group.

“Group covenant” and “social contract” are phrases that we could use to describe the “hidden leader” who dictates the requirements for entering the group, the responsibilities to others, and the benefits derived from the group. The social contract exercises considerable power within group life, and helps us answer key questions:

- Why do formerly content groups fall into conflict?
- Why does it seem so difficult to introduce newcomers into an established group?
- Why do established groups resist multiplying and dividing up into new-start-up groups?
- Why do groups become inflexible and resist changing under new circumstances?

These questions come to us regularly as we struggle with organizing and leading small groups. Although all participants are in good health and have adequate skills for group life, perplexing problems arise. On such occasions we might consider whether or not the difficulty comes from a conflict in the social contract.

Example One:

While sharing thoughts about a passage of scripture, one member said, “I cannot accept this miracle!” The leader of the reflection period said, “Is it required that we all believe in every miracle, or is it more important that we allow everyone the freedom to share their real feelings about the passage in the Bible?” This directed the group into a discussion about their norms for membership in the group. It was finally agreed that disbelief might be disturbing but did not exclude a member. In fact, they realized that new Christians might want to raise a number of “shocking” questions.

Example Two:

A regular member of the group had brought a close friend to the last meeting. The friend reported that everyone was wonderful to her, but she would not want to return. She did not fit, in her opinion. The regular member was upset

by this response and saw it as reflecting a failure of the group to reach out. The leader asked, "Had your friend ever attended a church group before?" The member reported, "Yes, she had attended mass as a child because her family was Roman Catholic." A discussion followed in which it became apparent how different a Roman Catholic mass might be from the intense face-to-face experiences of the small group life. It was decided that the member would try again by taking her friend to a Christmas Eve eucharist.

Example Three:

Father Smith, the rector, attended all home groups in his parish, declaring that they would be required to multiply into two groups at the beginning of the new year. It was a stormy Christmas! At the next gathering of the group leaders, the majority reported considerable dismay and anger in their groups. Some threatened to do nothing, and one planned to disband. In a long and frank analysis of the situation, the leaders affirmed the principle of multiplication but realized that the norm had not been introduced consistently in group meetings, consequently the groups had not been prepared for the change. They decided to start the new year not with multiplication, but with regular exercises in having their group work in two cells for part of the evening at regular meetings. The apprentice would be in charge of one of the subgroups.

INTERDEPENDENT STAGE

In each of the above examples, the group is challenged to move into another stage of maturity in group life. They are faced not only with reshaping their social contract but also with acknowledging their interdependence with other groups and a larger context.

Example One revisited:

The group is shocked suddenly into realizing that every member cannot be a direct and perfect reflection of their standards and dreams. A social contract must allow freedom of expression and behavior to the degree that the larger sphere of human experience is not denied, but confronted and possibly transformed. Also, in the process of open relations and dialogue, the larger context may influence and change them.

Example Two revisited

The group is not the only Christian society. It is part of a greater tradition that includes, for instance, Roman Catholics. And it is part of a large society with many churched people who will not immediately understand the patterns and norms of their small group experience. This uncomfortable realization forces the group to accept some degree of relativity about their own social contract.

Example Three revisited

The small group might even forget their interdependence with the local congregation of which they are a part. The social contract of the parish has a place for including and supporting the small group. The expectations of the larger body create an important force in forming the life of the small group.

In group development, the highest stage is marked by the capacity to creatively reshape and renegotiate in response to change. New leadership, new members, and new circumstances may significantly alter the ground rules and expectations.

Observation Seven: Affinity and Multiplication

The two opposite forces of bonding and separating exist side by side in healthy small groups. Natural affinity refers to those inclinations that we discover toward others whom we seek out as our friends. It may be difficult to say why we seem to get along better with one person rather than another, but the

experience is universal. The gospel challenges us to love our neighbors and our enemies. We accept the challenge but in forming a group it is wiser to seek out potential friends than likely enemies. We can find another setting for learning to understand and care about those persons with whom we have natural conflict.

Small group life needs relational bonding which happens faster and more effectively if we take advantage of natural affinity. A leader may seek out members of the congregation or the surrounding community who appreciate being in a group under the leader's care. Members in a group may invite others into their group because they are already friends or sense that a friendship would easily develop. We see "eye to eye." We have "good feeling about that person." We like the ideas and values of the other person. We want to "get to know the person better." These phrases are ways that we talk about our discovery of natural affinity. In forming groups, it is best to use these God-given forces that draw us together.

It might be possible to stage special events for exploring our potential natural affinity with others. Parties, dinners out, coffee hours, working together on a project, being together in a short-term bible study, enjoying a sports event together are all examples of the type of occasions that give us opportunities to form voluntary natural affinities.

Be cautious about forming small groups by dictatorial methods, such as counting off, assigning numbers, grouping by geography, etc. These arbitrary methods of placing people together should be applied only when we do not really care about the presence of natural affinity in the groups because of a total task or content orientation.

It is not uncommon to find that small groups which have been formed by natural affinity become very close. The bonds become so strong that they do not want to separate, that is, multiply group life by dividing into two groups. Why should they? Evangelism would be one reason.

In many congregations and in most evangelistic movements that use the method of small groups, the primary purpose is to grow. The goal of the small group work is to involve an ever-expanding number of people, which is made possible by the multiplication of groups. A group of ten members becomes two groups of five persons with the apprentice taking over the leadership of one new group. The small groups then seek new members until they have expanded to ten again. By putting this method of multiplication into a kind of perpetual motion, a movement can grow rapidly.

Observation Eight: Small Group Evangelism

There are at least four different ways that we can employ the methods of small groups in the ministry of evangelism:

1. Home Cell Groups. This application assumes that the group will meet in the warm environment of the home of a member or the leader, or in a homelike environment at the church, such as a lounge with soft chairs and a fireplace. The group is formed primarily for support in a spirituality and in a faith search. Members will study the Word of God, prayer together, and regularly share their struggles in living out their baptismal vows in daily life. This environment will deepen the conversion of “the converted” who hold membership in a local congregation. Further, it might be possible to bring a new seeker into the group if the members will gear their language and group life to the needs of beginners in the Christian faith.

2. House Churches. The house church can create an environment that relates specifically to people who have had little exposure to the gospel and to institutional religion. Again, the setting would most likely be in a home, or some other non-threatening place. The activities might be led by Christians with exceptional gifts in evangelism ministry, and the group life would be related solely to the needs of the “unchurched population.” This house church would offer all aspects of Christian experience in a screened and graded

manner, which eventually would become a “bridge” for moving into the more complex setting of a traditional service formed around ancient literature and prescribed liturgy.

3. Newcomer Groups. We have known for some time that newcomers offer hospitality to other newcomers better than long-time members. Newcomers make friends with other newcomers more easily than with long-time members who have their friendship circles already well-established. But how do we best employ this insight? Small group formation would be an excellent application. When visitors and newcomers express interest in becoming participants in the congregation, they can be invited immediately to participate in a small group of other recent new members.

4. Mission Fellowships. In both rural areas and urban concentrations, it would be possible to use apartments, houses, and storefronts as locations for small congregations that gather in the name of Christ. We can have a new congregation of ‘a few people if that group provides its own leadership and finds inexpensive facilities. New models of rural and urban mission do not require large, expensive buildings and one fully salaried priest for every little flock.

In all of the above examples, the role of a new member becomes a primary focus of the group life. A popular symbol for the prominence of the new member is “the empty chair.” Small groups that have a high level of commitment to evangelism should always have an empty chair in their circle as a reminder that we exist to grow and multiply. In organizing and leading such small groups, it will be necessary to have a very active prospect list and to direct major effort toward hospitality and inclusiveness. Without this extraordinary commitment to new members, any small group will succumb to the forces of affinity and bonding, consequently becoming a closed fellowship.

Observation Nine: Practical Principles

Principle 1: People join groups in order to satisfy some individual need. A person's primary motivation for small group membership is usually self-focused.

Principle 2: People will remain in (or join) a small group if they find the group's goals and activities attractive and rewarding. People base their participation on personal standards.

Principle 3: People prefer to participate in small groups where other members are similar in age, attractiveness, attitudes, personality, economic status, perceived ability, and needs.

Principle 4: Total overall participation in a small group decreases with increasing group size. The larger the group, the less its individual members participate in the discussion, activities, and so on.

Principle 5: Group members usually evaluate smaller groups more positively than larger groups.

Principle 6: The smaller the group, the greater the feasibility of shared leadership. Increasing group size increases the probability of exclusive leadership focused on a person alone rather than shared leadership.

Principle 7: The physical setting in which the group meets affects members' attitudes and actions, and, consequently, helps determine group process. The meeting place either positively or negatively influences members' participation in the group.

Principle 8: A more socially and personally adjusted group member contributes to effective group functioning, while an unconventional or anxious member inhibits group functioning. A person's level of social and psychological adjustment directly affects the group process.

Principle 9: The spiritually sensitive group member contributes to the functioning of the group, while those claiming or projecting spiritual superiority inhibit group functioning.

Principle 10: Members are more highly motivated when the group possesses clear goals and an understanding of what must be done to accomplish the goals. Knowing why the group exists and how to achieve its purpose stimulates higher levels of participation.

Principle 11: Interpersonal relations are generally more positive in situations where goals are mutually derived and accepted. Shared ownership of goals builds positive interaction among the members.

Principle 12: Group performance is facilitated to the extent that members can freely communicate their feelings of satisfaction with the group's progress toward goals. Successful groups talk about and assess their goal achievement.

Principle 13: Groups whose members are heterogeneous with respect to sex and personality types function more effectively than groups that are homogeneous with respect to these characteristics. The opposite is true for age. Some degree of diversity among the members is helpful to the group's success.

Principle 14: A high-status group member (such as a pastor or priest) both initiates and receives more communications and may deviate from group norms without being sanctioned by the group. Deference usually is afforded to group members who are perceived as important by the other members.

Principle 15: Greater conformity with group norms occurs in groups with shared leadership. When the group members share the responsibility for leadership, it promotes compliance with group norms.⁴

Effective Groups

Goals are clarified and changed so that the best possible match between individual goals and the group's goals may be achieved

Communication is two-way, and the open, accurate expression of both ideas and feelings is emphasized.

Participation and leadership are distributed among all group members; goal accomplishment, internal maintenance, and developmental change are underscored.

Ability and information determine influence and power; contracts are built to make sure individuals' goals and needs are fulfilled; power is equalized and shared.

Decision-making procedures are matched with the situation; different methods are used at different times; consensus is sought for important decisions; involvement and group discussions are encouraged.

Controversy and conflict are seen as a positive key to members' involvement, the quality and originality of decisions, and the continuance of the group in good working condition.

Interpersonal, group, and intergroup behaviors are stressed; cohesion is advanced through high levels of inclusion, affection, acceptance, support, and trust. Individuality is endorsed.

Problem-solving adequacy is high.

Members evaluate the effectiveness of the group and decide how to improve its functioning; goal accomplishment, internal maintenance, and development are all considered important.

Ineffective Groups

Members accept imposed goals.

Communication is one-way and only ideas are expressed; feelings are suppressed or ignored.

Leadership is delegated and based upon authority; membership participation is unequal, with high-authority members dominating; only goal accomplishment is emphasized.

Position determines influence and power; power is concentrated in the authority positions; obedience to authority is the rule.

Decisions are always made by the highest authority; there is little group discussion; members' involvement is minimal.

Controversy and conflict are ignored, denied, avoided, or suppressed.

The functions performed by members are emphasized; cohesion is ignored and members are controlled by force. Rigid conformity is promoted.

Problem-solving adequacy is low.

The highest authority evaluates the group's effectiveness and decides how accomplishment of goals may be improved; internal maintenance and development are ignored as much as possible; stability is affirmed.⁵

Observation Ten: Typology

1. Type by Purpose and Primary Focus

Discipleship-oriented groups. The central focus is on the spiritual and personal relationships among the members. The format and content of meetings will vary. Emphasis is placed on self-discovery, the dynamics of relationships, and the processes necessary to promote spiritual maturity and ministry. Terms such as “growth group,” “caring group,” or “covenant group” are often used to describe this type of group orientation.

Content-oriented groups. This classification includes a variety of Bible study and discussion groups. The main reason for meeting is to study a biblical passage or some topic of mutual relevance. Interpersonal relationships are of concern but normally are assumed. Little if any time is spent dealing with group dynamics. The primary focus is on the content.

Support-oriented groups. The primary bond underlying this type of group is a common need among the members. Sometimes called support groups or recovery groups, the members meet together for common encouragement and understanding. The attitude and actions of the group members say, “I understand your struggle, I’ve been there myself.” Recovering alcoholics, battered women, or divorced singles are examples of a common profile in support groups.

Task-oriented groups. These are “doing” groups. The primary thrust is to accomplish a defined task, job, or assignment, which the members do together. What the group plans to do—its purpose for the meeting—is why the group exists. Relationships among the members take a secondary role and are usually not discussed unless a problem arises. Most committees and planning groups fit into this category. However, committees can be transformed into communities with more emphasis on spiritual issues and relationships.

Socially-oriented groups. These groups are parties, essentially. The participants assemble to get better acquainted and have fun together. Food and drink frequently provide the common bond. Sometimes meals might take on the character of a pre-eucharistic setting. It is useful to keep these five categories in mind. While a specific group may incorporate various orientations, nevertheless, it is usually possible to identify which of the five types best describes the group.⁶

2. **Type by Role and Place in the Congregation**

An integral part of knowing the purpose of your group is clarifying how it fits into the general life of your local church. More and more churches are making small groups an important component of their identity, programming, and function. Ideally, your group is one of many group offerings in your congregation. If this is true, it is very likely that many of the issues of organization and accountability have already been worked out by the pastors and leaders of the congregation. There are three typical postures that small groups have in the life of the congregation:

Special Program. Larger churches especially find it easy to add a new program, perhaps with a new staff member, for increasing small group life in the membership.

Unfortunately, in this situation the new groups may be competing for the attention and time of members who are already committed to a number of other programs. Watch for burnout. It is wise to encourage active members to reduce their time commitment in some other area of the church.

Spiritual Movement. It is much easier to add small groups as a new program when the type is oriented to content, task, and a particular need. It is the discipleship-oriented group that tends to become more comprehensive in the number of activities and more intensive in the quality of participation. Discipleship groups are highly process-oriented with major emphasis on spiritual

development and support in Christian living. These groups are really more renewal movements than program vehicles. The parish life is changed at the roots more often than at the more superficial level of programming.

Comprehensive Developmental Design. This posture has frequently been called “the meta-church” because the primary purpose is to transform the way a congregation operates from the core outward, finally generating a completely new mode of development. The home cell groups become the center of a member’s church life with the exception of the grand celebrations that still probably occur on Sunday as a gathering of all cell groups and all members not yet in cells.⁷

3. Type by Structure and Strategy

Traditional Fellowship Group. We are most familiar with this category. The gatherings normally take place in church facilities, and sometimes in rooms reserved for the use of the particular group. The members of such a fellowship group view the local congregation as their spiritual home. They support the local programs, such as Sunday morning worship, education, and social events. Their group usually offers a specialized opportunity to a specific constituency in the congregation. The leadership frequently rotates annually, might be elected by the group, and would represent a wide variety of approaches. The leaders and the group might report to the vestry and congregation concerning their activities but often only at the annual meeting.

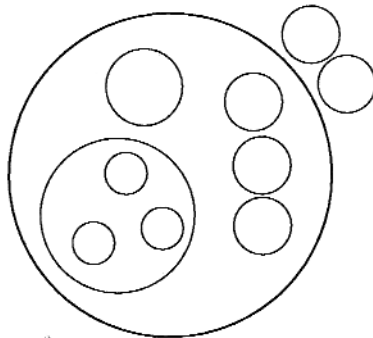
Over the years, congregational studies have indicated that it is best to have at least one fellowship group for every thirty members who attend and participate regularly on Sunday morning. This general rule of thumb assumes that 30-40% of an active membership will want an opportunity for fellowship in small groups at any particular time.

House Church. This small gathering will be distinctly different in most cases because of a preference for a facility other than the typical church buildings. Frequently, large homes, one room chapels, store fronts, and cafes have been popular alternatives. The group may be small (50 or fewer members), have no church facilities, receive only occasional support from clergy, but still the members view themselves as a full, complete, and adequate congregation. Laity usually exercise many leadership options and the members share responsibilities readily. Such congregations may be called fellowships or missions. They consider their reason for existence to be quite clear whatever the label used. They typically gather for worship separately from other larger congregations either because of distance or a particular preference in spirituality. The little congregation offers to its members all levels of church life: education, pastoral care, worship, and opportunities for outreach, evangelism, and stewardship. The accountability to other congregations and church judicatories will vary but usually a fairly independent attitude seems characteristic. Formal contracts with a clergy person, a regional body, or a mother church, will exist in some cases.

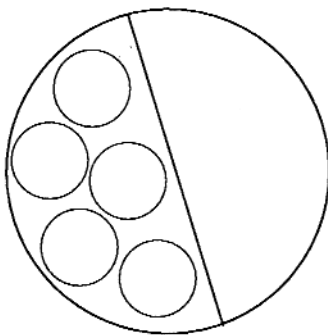
Home Cell Group. This small group experience falls under the tradition of house churches but remains identical in only one basic feature, the use of alternative facilities, particularly homes, rather than churches. In the cell group movements, the congregations may be much larger than normal sizes. Although the home group may number no more than ten, the congregation in some parts of the world can grow into thousands-2,000, 4,000, 10,000. Every small group considers itself an important part of the whole. Pastoral care, education, and outreach grow out of the ministry of the cell group but the worship in grand celebrations and public liturgy happens when the whole congregation gathers. Such a large congregation of so many small groups requires a tight accountability between the group leaders and the senior clergy in charge

of the congregation. The whole leadership circle usually operates under formal contract arrangements that spell out responsibilities, powers, and limitations. The small group life and the great celebrations constitute the two major parts of the total congregational experience. When formally traditional congregations choose to affirm this new style, we observe that about 30-40% of the congregation might become involved eventually in the home cell groups. The percentages are higher when the congregation has used cell group ministry from its early founding days.

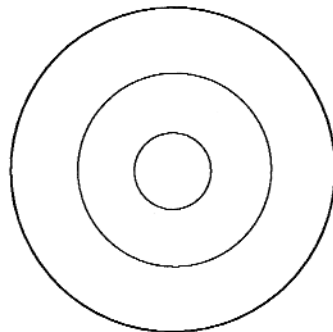
**A Summary:
Small Group Types by Structure and Strategy**



Traditional Fellowship Group



Home Cell Group



House Church Group

A Summary: Small Group Types by Structure and Strategy

Characteristic	Traditional Fellowship Group	House Church Group	Home Cell Group
Gathering Place	in church facilities	alternative facilities	alternative facilities
Ecclesiology	the church in part	fully the church	the church in part
Worship Pattern	together with whole	separate service	together with whole
Function & Activities	specialized programs & activities	general multi-level	general multi-level
Leadership & Supervision	loose accountability/ varied styles	loose accountability/ formal contract	tight accountability/ formal contract
Size & Growth Patterns	10-150 No Multiplication	50 Before Multiplication	10 Before Multiplication
Examples	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Educational 2. Social-adult classes, guilds, sex/age, gatherings for caring & sharing, dinner clubs, Bible studies, prayer circles 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Solo-independent, little affiliation 2. Satellite-local and/or regional affiliation, special mission 3. Cluster-affiliation with other house churches, perhaps in a chain of locations 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pastoral Care & Special Support 2. Evangelism & Mission Strategy 3. Congregational Structure & Membership Development

CONCLUSION

The church is a dynamic institution which has evolved continuously since its beginning nearly two millennia ago. Over the centuries many structural forms of church life have emerged, and this variety should not be surprising. Churches are social institutions which must exist and thrive in a variety of cultural contexts. As such, they have adapted to political and social settings, to differing environments and cultures, to repression and freedom, to affluence and poverty, to power and weakness, to good theology and heresy. All have affected how we worship and the structure of what we call a local congregation.

The many forms of church structure visible now and throughout Christian history may be seen as a flaw or as a sign of healthy diversity. We hold the latter view because the Bible offers relatively few guidelines concerning how churches should be organized. What we see instead in the Scriptures are tantalizing glimpses of first-century worship with advice about how to resolve problems which arose. Jesus said nothing about local church structure, and even the apostle Paul said very little that can be taken to imply that churches should be organized in any particular manner. An honest reading of the New Testament and the writings of the church fathers reveals that the church began as a loosely organized movement in which highly structured local churches as we know them did not exist.

The Christian movement evolved from an unstructured mass movement to unified collections of home meetings to a hierarchical network of local churches. It changed in necessary reaction to its growth, to the culture, to persecution, to new theological understanding, and to the needs of its people. The church has continued to change in reaction to these same forces.

House churches and home cell groups have emerged in the present era largely because of need. Just as the church changed in the first century to adjust to growth and persecution, the church today must adjust to the loss of community. This is a need which has long faced mainline churches, but in recent years it has become more acute because of the increasing pervasiveness of shallow secondary relationships. We know people but we do not really know them.

A grass-roots backlash has begun in modern societies resulting in greater and greater emphasis being placed on creating new structures where close primary relationships are able to flourish. Home-related worship is part of this larger trend. Members are no longer satisfied with their church being another impersonal institution. Either the church will provide them with structures conducive to primary relationships and true *koinonia*, or they will start their own.

Fellowships, house churches, and home groups are adaptations to a cultural problem and to a flaw in mainline churches. The need for community, for love, trust, and mutual concern among Christians has long existed. Now, however, that need has become urgent because of changes in contemporary society. A complex movement has emerged which has broken free from its initial causes: it now has a life of its own. The movement has many faces and many problems. It must be refined and managed. If this can be done, the church today will be infused with new life.⁸

NOTES

1. Carl George, *Preparing Your Church for the Future*, (New York: Revell, 1991), p.128.
2. Carl George, p.136.
3. Book of Common Prayer, pp.304-305.
4. These principles were adapted from Marvin E. Shaw, *Group Dynamics: The Psychology of Small Group Behavior* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981).
5. D.W. Johnson and F.P. Johnson, *Joining Together. Group Theory and Group Skills*, third edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1987).
6. Neal F. McBride, *How to Lead Small Groups* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1987), p. 65.
7. Carl George, p.57ff.
8. C. Kirk Hadaway, et al., *Home Cell Groups and House Churches* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press), p.239.

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