

Small Groups: *Why Do We Need Them?*



Introduction

I can think of some good reasons and some not so good reasons for pursuing a small group ministry. First, some *not so good* reasons:

1. Small Groups ministry is the hottest new trend in church growth circles. (We are not to be driven by “hot trends”) (Ephesians 4:14).
2. Several churches that have started a Small Groups ministry have seen their attendance increase substantially. (That in itself is no reason for us to develop *any* ministry).
3. We all have too much time on our hands and need some help in filling up our empty plates. (No need to elaborate).
4. Our church staff has too much time on their hands and that is why they come up with these crazy new ideas (The church is Christ’s Bride—not a lab experiment).
5. Several have expressed an interest in seeing a Small Group Ministry. (That may be a good thing—but even that is not the ultimate basis for developing a ministry).

So *why* do we need a Small Groups Ministry?

I. Let’s start with God’s purpose in Creation and Redemption:

A. God *created* you to be in relationships.

- Since God is inter-relational and we are created *in His image*, we were created *in* and *for* relationships (Genesis 1:26).
- The worst thing you can do to a human being is to *isolate* him! It is like taking a fish out of water. It begins to de-humanize him.
- **Illustration:** Senator and former Vietnam POW John McCain describes the elation he experienced when he was reunited with fellow prisoners after having spent a long stretch of time in solitary confinement:

“I was overwhelmed by the compulsion to talk nonstop, face-to-face with my obliging new cellmate. I ran my mouth ceaselessly for four days... One of the more amusing spectacles in prison is the sight of two men, both just released from solitary, talking their heads off simultaneously, neither one listening to the other, both absolutely enraptured by the sound of their voices.” **Why?** We were made for relationships!

- Consider what happened during the great power grid failure of the summer of 2004? Relationships that had been disrupted by crowded schedules and technological distractions temporarily resumed. And new ones were pursued! Crises have a way of causing us to seek what we were made for.
- So let me ask you a question? Do you really *believe* in the Trinity? Or do you simply *give the right answers* about the Trinity? Really believing in the Trinity does not simply give you an “A” for knowing the right answer. Rather it should cause you to *live and behave as if it were so!*
- If you are trying to function apart from pursuing a vital relationship with God and *other believers*, you are ignoring the reason for which you were created.

B. Jesus came to *restore* relationships.

- He is Immanuel, the “God with us” (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:22-23).
- He came to reconcile us to God *and* each other (Eph. 2:1-22). We usually emphasize the first part—and ignore the second part.

C. Jesus prayed that your relationships with your brothers and sisters would develop into the *kind of oneness* He himself experiences in the Trinity (John 17:20-23).

- The invisible Godhead is the model community.
- We are to visibly *image* (reflect) that model to a watching world.
- So what are we going to do with these words? Do they seem far-fetched? Beyond possibility? If you think that, remember who is praying this prayer! It is a prayer that will most certainly be answered. The question is—Will *you* be part of that answer? You will if you let His prayer grip your heart.
- Whatever you do, you cannot afford to settle for “Relational LITE.” (Tastes great, less *willing*.)

D. The Spirit that Christ sent is *now working* to bring about this relational oneness. (Ephesians 4:3; 4:11-16).

Why Small Groups? Because we believe that the goals that must drive Small Group ministry are in keeping with God’s purpose in Creation and Redemption. That is the foundational reason. But there are more....Reason number 2:

II. Because the Small Group model follows the ministry model of Jesus

Our primary example for considering small groups is the ministry model of Jesus Himself. He maintained both a public ministry of preaching, teaching and healing of the multitudes on the one hand and a more intense and personal ministry to his select followers on the other. In addition, His pattern of ministry to his special followers took place in concentric circles of increasing intimacy: to the **seventy-two** (Lk 10:1), the **twelve** (Lk 6:13), and the **three** (Lk 8:51; 9:28).

In short, Jesus did not come to reach people through mass evangelistic programs. Instead, He gathered a *small group* of disciples so that He could transform *many lives* (Mark 3:7-10). The first Small Group was not a closed group of elites. It was a group that was organized expressly for meeting the needs of many.

Reason #3.

III. Because the Small Group model replicates the pattern of the Early Church

Paul describes his ministry in Ephesus as including both *public* gatherings and *private* ones in homes (Acts 20:20). This pattern matches the rhythm of large group gatherings (in the temple) and small group meetings (in homes) described in the life of the Jerusalem church:

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts... Acts 2:46 (ESV)

This rhythm of large-group/small-group meetings has continued through the history of the church. The Puritans, for example, often speak of small group meetings using terms like “private meeting,” “conference meeting,” or “society of conference.” They held these meetings in addition to their corporate gatherings on the Lord’s Day, and they included prayer, singing, biblical discussion, mutual encouragement or rebuke, and other elements.

This emphasis continued even during the revival era of massive crowds gathering to hear the gospel. George Whitefield exhorted his converts:

My brethren... let us plainly and freely tell one another what God has done for our souls. To this end you would do well, as others have done, to form yourselves into little companies of four or five each, and meet once a week to tell each other what is in your hearts; that you may then also pray for and comfort each other as need shall require. None but those who have experienced it can tell the unspeakable advantages of such a union and communion of souls.... None I think that truly loves his own soul and his brethren as himself, will be shy of opening his heart, in order to have their advice, reproof, admonition and prayers, as occasions require (quoted in Philip Ryken’s The Communion of Saints, p. 132).

Reason #4.....

IV. Because the Small Group model, rightly understood, provides the necessary setting in which the “one-another” commands can be taken seriously.

The New Testament writers place multiple “one-another” obligations upon believers that seem best facilitated in a small group setting. Here are some examples (ESV):

- Love one another (Jn 13:34-35; 15:12, 17; Rom 12:10; 13:8; etc.)
- Live in harmony with one another (Rom 12:16; 15:5)
- Welcome one another (Rom 15:7)
- Instruct one another (Rom 15:14)
- Comfort one another (2 Cor 13:11)
- Serve one another (Gal 5:13; 1 Pet 4:10)
- Bear with one another (Eph 4:2; Col 3:13)
- Be kind to one another (Eph 4:32)
- Forgive one another (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13)
- Address one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Eph 5:19)
- Teach and admonish one another (Col 3:16)
- Encourage and build up one another (1 Thess 4:18; 5:11; Heb 10:25)
- Do good to one another (1 Thess 5:15)
- Exhort one another (Heb 3:13)
- Consider how to stir up one another to love and good deeds (Heb 10:24)
- Confess your sins to one another (James 5:16)
- Pray for one another (James 5:16)
- Show hospitality to one another (1 Pet 4:9)
- Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another (1 Pet 5:5)

Reason #5....

- V. Because the Small Group model is the only way to practically achieve the goal of an “*every-member*” ministry.

Ephesians 4:1-16 enjoins all members of the body to be utilizing their gifts, serving each other. The clear implication of this principle is that the work of the ministry is the responsibility of all the members, not only the elders. In fact, the responsibility of the elders is to “*equip* the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:12-13 ESV). Taken together with the long list of one-another commands listed above, the principle of every-member ministry implies that the elders ought to provide a means for members to exercise their one-another obligations and to serve each other. What will be the result? “When each part is working properly, [it] makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (4:16 ESV).

Hebrews 10:24-25: One might argue that the one-another commands and the principle of every-member ministry can still be expressed *informally*, motivated by the good intentions of church members rather than the structure of a formal small group ministry. Hebrews 10:24-25, however, calls the church to *gather* for the express purpose of one-another ministry:

And let us **consider** how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Traditionally, verse 25 has been pressed into service as a proof-text for the need to gather for Lord's Day worship. In the context, however, the focus of meeting together is actually **horizontal** (what we do **to** and **for** one another) rather than vertical (on God). "Consider" (v. 24) means "to notice by observation or consideration." The phrase "to stir up" means to "arouse" or "motivate." In other words, this text challenges us to make a concentrated effort at carefully observing *one another* with a view to arousing or motivating each other to love and good deeds. The biblical mandate, therefore, is for the elders to call Cornerstone members *to meet together for the specific purpose of getting to know each other so that they can encourage and motivate each other to live godly and fruitful lives*. Significantly, meetings of this type should happen "all the more" as we approach the return of Jesus Christ.

C.J. Mahaney makes the following case for structuring the church into small groups:

"Genuine fellowship isn't practical in a crowd of 200 or 2,000. That's why I feel so strongly that churches must create small groups where Christians can develop intimate relationships, where they can 'know and be known.' A church following a biblical model will not just 'have' small groups. It will not merely 'offer' small groups. *Rather, it will be built **with** small groups.*" (Why Small Groups? p. 3)

Reason #6....

VI. Because as leaders, we recognize *how much Cornerstone needs this*.

There is no way we can comprehensively live out these passages simply by showing up on a Sunday for corporate worship or even in a classroom discussion in our ABFs. We **MUST** have *personal contact* with each other. There must be a **plan for** and a *commitment to* intentionally pursuing this.

Our own experience supports the case for Small Group ministry. Frankly we have come to this conclusion not only through a conviction borne out of the study of the Scriptures, but in part through the school of hard knocks.

You see, most of us were taught a model in seminary that said that pastors are the ministers. And many believers have shared the notion that pastors are supposed to be spiritual Supermen: Courageous, seminary-equipped, and all-knowing:

"Faster than a speeding nursery worker, more powerful than a church committee, able to fill the baptistry from a single bucket of water—look up at the front, it's an administrator, no it's a motivational speaker, not, it's Super-pastor! Teaching, preaching, visiting, counseling, praying, visiting, meeting with boards, speaking at weddings and funeral, visiting, singing in the choir—that's what we pay him for.

Watch him, cheer him: ‘Pastor, pastor, He’s our man—if he can’t do it—nobody can!’”

By the way, we can do the same thing with non-pastoral leaders. The point I am making is not to make you feel sorry for pastors or other church leaders. The point is that the task was never meant to be carried out *alone*. And frankly in too many cases it is not being done nor will it ever get done until we intentionally make it our passion to see all members (not even just 20%) doing the work of ministry “as—in Paul’s own words—each one does his part.”

It boils down to ...

Two ministry models

1. EMS model (Reactive) Good as far as it goes. But it simply cannot get the job done. Never was meant to.
2. “Every-member” model (Proactive) This is the model we have been looking at tonight.

We are convinced that this will not happen unless we wholeheartedly follow the Scriptural and historical model that we have looked at tonight. I close with this testimony from a couple in one of our Detroit Coalition churches in Livonia—Berean Baptist Church.

A Small Group Testimonial

From Brad & Teren Sechrist

After several years of small groups that left us...shall we say...wanting, we were convinced to join yet another small group. Unable to politely tell the leader of the group “no” after he went to the effort to solve every one of our legitimate excuses, we attended the first meeting of the group. The leader opened the group with the following Scripture:

Col. 1:9-12

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, [10] so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. [11] May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, [12] giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

He then proceeded to explain that far too often when Christians gathered together we fail to understand the purpose of our meeting. He shared that until we begin to pray for one another like Paul prayed for the Colossians, we would never understand true fellowship.

Based on Col. 1:9-12, our leader requested that the prayer requests shared within the group be limited to two things: [1]our personal spiritual needs and [2]the salvation of the

people to whom we were directly witnessing. Of course, if you had a physical need you were welcome to share it - with the understanding that while we would pray for healing if it was God's will, our primary concern would be for your sanctification in the process. In the space of those few moments we knew that we were in for an experience that was unlike any that we had ever shared together.

That evening was the beginning of amazing friendships. We cried together, laughed together and prayed together on a deep and personal level. They held us accountable for our quiet time, our relationship with God and with each other, and the spiritual discipleship of our children in a way that was filled with love and grace. We were able to do the same for those couples. In our times of need they cared for us physically as well.

We could not imagine why God would ask us to leave Colorado because those friendships meant so much to us. When God called us to Berean and we learned of the Pastors' passion for starting a new small group ministry we realized that this might have been one of the reasons that God asked us to leave Colorado. We are thrilled with the opportunity to share with you all the way that God used a small group in our *life to draw us closer to Himself and thus to one another.*