



## Ministry Sphere 5 | Small Group Discipleship

Christ had a small group of intimate followers. Those disciples in turn followed their Lord's pattern. In Jerusalem, for example, they not only assembled in the temple, but they also met in homes for worship and fellowship (Acts 4:46-47). Small groups allow for deep fellowship, interactive learning, communal ministry, and the expression of each church member's spiritual gifts. When Christ is at the center of a small group, the ministry that Jesus exercised with his twelve disciples becomes replicated once again.

Small groups are critical building blocks for the health and spiritual strength of any church. Small groups are especially needful for churches helping those who struggle with personal and relational brokenness, addictions of various types, divorce, grief, same-sex attractions, and related concerns for which healing and support are sought.

### **The Healthy Small Group**

A healthy small group meeting maintains the following priorities:

- Openness that builds intimacy between group members,
- Confidentiality that enables deep sharing within the group,
- Bible study materials to encourage spiritual growth in each person, and
- A group plan with meeting time, content, place, frequency, and duration.

It can be helpful to have the group members state their commitment to these and other mutually-agreed upon values.

A healthy small group experience includes the following elements:

- Fellowship: a time to catch up on each other's lives,
- Worship: a time to bless God and to be restored,
- Bible Study: a time to learn and grow in faith, and
- Outreach: a time to plan how to bring others into the group or to do ministry as a group

Each group and every group meeting may differ, but keeping these elements in every meeting will bring balance and wholeness to the group.

A healthy small group leader meets the following qualifications:

- A deep love for God and for people (but you don't have to be perfect),

- A love for Scripture (But you don't need to know it all),
- The ability not to talk too much (You are a facilitator, not a teacher), and
- The ability to help other people to engage in discussion (The aim is to include everyone).

It isn't about being perfect, but being surrendered to God.

A healthy small group composition strikes a balance:

- Many group members should be mature in faith
- Some group members should be newer to the faith
- Not too many group members should require special attention

A small group that is out of balance may break apart.

A healthy small group ministry shares responsibilities:

- Someone to facilitate the group meeting
- Someone to bring refreshments or to host the meal
- Someone to offer his or her home for the meeting (If it's not in the church)
- Someone to guide the time for prayer and/or worship
- Someone to \_\_\_\_\_ (you fill in the blank)

These roles can be rotated between meetings if desired.

### **How to Lead a Small Group**

Leading a small group is very different from teaching a Sunday school class. The goal is to facilitate discussion around Scripture and to foster fellowship with one another. Thus, an excellent small group leader is more of a facilitator more than a teacher.

1. Be prepared. Study the lesson ahead of time. Highlight questions in the study that will make for good discussion and that can foster spiritual insights. Pray for God to bless each of the members.
2. Be on time. You should be there to greet the members and to help them feel at home. It is important to arrange the meeting space and chairs in a circle so that all of the members can see each other.
3. Be sensitive. Note those who come to the meeting with heavy burdens or special needs. Allow people to express their concerns and to find support so that those who are burdened can find the freedom to get help and to be blessed by the meeting.

4. Be directive. Don't allow the meeting to be overwhelmed or sidetracked with any one person's needs. Coach the meeting and members along so that time in worship and Bible study isn't shortchanged.
5. Be creative. When you lead the Bible study section, rephrase questions so that they come alive and are fresh.
6. Be encouraging. When people answer questions, affirm them verbally and nonverbally. If someone is off track or out of balance, don't embarrass them. Let the group process bring truth to the fore.
7. Be committed. If you must miss a meeting, explain why and have a trained co-leader take over. Follow up on others when they miss a meeting and invite them back.

### **The Lifecycle of a Small Group**

Some churches emphasize covenant groups (groups that continue meeting indefinitely) and others encourage their small groups to disband each year and to be remade with new members. There are advantages to both models. Understanding the lifecycle of a typical small group can help a small group ministry team and the small group members to make the most out of their experiences.

### **Lifecycles**

King Solomon reminds us that there is a time for everything and that all of creation experiences seasons and cycles (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8). Our relationships go through seasons. Nations come and go. Even the earth will not last in its present state forever. It should be no surprise that small groups also experience cyclical change.

The analogy of marriage describes well the lifecycle of a typical small group. A young couple may find themselves infatuated with puppy love, which over time may grow into a marital commitment, through which they will uncover each other's personalities, warts and all, which can lead to acceptance and deepening commitment — or unfortunate divorce.

Where solid marriage counseling is offered, divorce is minimized. Likewise, if we understand the lifecycle of a small group, our groups don't need to come to a messy and painful end:

- The Initial Romance
- The Eventual Rub
- Commitment and Renewal
- Readiness to Retire
- Restoration or Restart

**The Initial Romance:** Group members are just getting to know each other during their first several meetings and don't let their weaknesses show.

The Eventual Rub: Group members begin to reveal their personalities, warts and all.

Commitment and Renewal: Group members agree to stick with one another and to love each other even though it isn't always easy.

Readiness to Retire: The group seems to be getting old and vision for the group is fading.

Restoration or Restart: The group members can recommit themselves to even deeper commitments and they can refresh their vision, or they can decide to find a restart by adding new members, by splitting into two in order to give birth to a new group, or by agreeing to disperse into other existing groups within the church.

### **The Small Group Ministry Team**

Why form a small group ministry team?

A small group ministry team can:

- Provide oversight, resources and encouragement to existing small groups in your church,
- Form new small groups within the church,
- Place members from disbanded groups into newly forming groups or into existing groups that need more members, and
- Provide opportunities for every member of the church to be in a small group.

How should we form our small group ministry team?

When you form a small group ministry team, be sure to:

- Include the pastor or a staff person or lay leader that the pastor appoints,
- Involve at least three and more ideally several people so that responsibilities can be delegated,
- Commit to meeting weekly a few months as you are getting started, then perhaps meet monthly,
- Spend time educating yourselves through good books and DVD or seminar training,
- Create a vision for your church that incorporates the four goals stated above in "Why form a small group ministry team?"

What does the ethos of our church have to do with small group ministry?

Small group ministries take shape around the style of leadership a congregation is accustomed to. Perhaps the most significant concern for the development of this ministry is control:

- **High Control:** The largest church in the world (Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, South Korea) is a church of small groups. Every member of that church is in a small group and the groups themselves are each organized with a similar structure under the guidance of a well-disciplined leadership team. Each cell group is committed to dividing and thus multiplying itself every several months. Because the church itself is all about small groups, very few other programs exist or are needed. This highly controlled pattern for establishing small groups has been so effective for deepening the lives of church members and for growing the church that Westerners have sought to copy it.

Western culture is different than that of South Korea, however. We like our independence and freedoms and don't want to be told what to do. Western Pastors who have tried to force the cell church model over their congregations have often hurt and even divided their churches.

- **Low Control:** On the other end of the spectrum, many American churches have a few small groups that have formed spontaneously and that are not being shepherded in any way by the leaders of the church. When these groups come apart, the members who lost their group experience are not cared for. If new church members want to join a group, they may feel barred from what seem to be "small group cliques."
- **Moderate Control:** Most churches in the Western world and in many larger cities around the world find a moderate level of control to be most beneficial. Such churches already have a lot of ministry programs. In this climate, a small group ministry team can be formed to shepherd and to support the churches small groups, but the church leaders will not require every church member to be in a small group. Opportunities can be made available every week for visitors and/or members to join small groups, but people will not be made to feel unspiritual if they chose to give their time and effort to other programs and opportunities for spiritual growth.

## **Types of Small Groups**

Some small groups may be geared especially for recovery from addictions, sexual abuse, and issues related to sexual identity. Chapter 15 of the book, *Turning Controversy into Church Ministry* offers an overview of the type of groups that may be formed related to such concerns and describes some of the resources available for these groups.

## **Clarify the Purpose**

The starting point for starting a small group focused on helping people experiencing sexual and relational brokenness is to clarify the purpose of the group. The three main factors involved in this determination are the needs within the church, the church leadership's outreach vision, and the church's available resources for group leadership and guidance. Ask yourself:

- What are the unmet needs of our own people? If you can identify all kinds of needs, ranging from divorce recovery to drug and sexual addiction, you might wish to begin with a group that aims on recovery in general. Ministries like Celebrate Recovery provide resources for such a group. As this ministry unfolds in your congregation, other more focused groups may develop out of it.
- If, however, you have several people who are struggling with a specific issue like same-sex attractions, form a specific group just for that concern. Focused ministry groups can generally provide deeper help for the specific needs of group participants. People who are dealing with unwanted same-sex attractions, for example, may not feel free to open up about their deeper issues in a general support group for recovery.
- What is the outreach vision of our church's leadership? If your church leaders sense God's call to reach a specific unmet need in your church or community, God will provide for them the needed tools and resources to meet that need. If there are not enough participants for specific areas of focus within your church, there may be plenty of potential participants in the larger community in which your church is situated. Combining resources with other congregations and offering services to the community can have great impact on many lives for the glory of God.
- What are the resources available for group guidance and leadership? Don't begin a small group without first determining how that group will be led. This concern is of paramount importance for groups formed to facilitate people's recovery from addictions and other types of sexual brokenness. Recovery group leaders should be experienced and equipped in the area of ministry for which the group is designed. And such leaders should ideally have a co-leader in the group to provide needed support and accountability.

### **Resources for Small Groups**

The following resources for recovery groups and for small groups in general may be helpful for your small group or for your congregation's small group ministry team.

### **Resources for Recovery Groups**

There are a variety of resources offered by Desert Streams Ministry, Celebrate Recovery, Homosexuals Anonymous, The American Association for Christian Counselors, Exodus International, New Hope Ministries, and other organizations.

### **General Resources for Small Groups**

Arnold, Jeffrey. *The Big Book on Small Groups*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992.

Beckham, William A. *The Second Reformation: Reshaping the Church for the 21st Century*. Houston, TX: Touch Publications, Inc., 1995.

Bilezekian, Gilbert. *Community 101*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together*. NY: Harper and Row, 1954.

Cho, Paul Yonggi. *Successful Home Cell Groups*. Plainfield, New Jersey: Logos International, 1981.

Donahue, Bill. *The Willow Creek Guide to Leading Life-Changing Small Groups*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996.

Eims, Leroy. *The Lost Art of Disciple Making*. Colorado Springs, CO: Zondervan, 1978.

Evans, Louis. *Covenant to Care*. Wheaton, IL: Scripture Press, 1982.

George, Carl. *Prepare Your Church for the Future*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book, 1991.

George, Carl. *Nine Keys to Effective Small Group Leadership*. Mansville, PA: Kingdom Publishing, 1997.

Gorman, Julie. *Community That Is Christian: A Handbook for Small Groups*. Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Books, 1993.

Hestenes, Roberta. *Turning Committees into Communities*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1991.

Hestenes, Roberta. *Using the Bible in Groups*. Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1983.

Icenogle, Gareth Weldon. *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry: An Integrational Approach*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994.

McBride, Neal F. *How To Build a Small Groups Ministry*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1995.

McBride, Neal F. *How to Lead Small Groups*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1990.

Neighbour, Ralph W., Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here*. Houston, TX: Touch Publications, Inc., 1994.

Nicholas, Ron, et al., *Small Group Leader's Handbook*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982.

Nyquist, James and Jack Kuhatschek. Leading Bible Discussions. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985.

Watson, David Lowes. Covenant Discipleship: Christian Formation Through Mutual Accountability. Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1996.

Willard, Dallas. The Spirit of the Disciplines. San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1988.