

Reasons Your Church Should Become a “Small Group” Church

By Bob Young

Introduction

Most churches are assembly-focused. Most of the activities of the church center around a weekly assembly. That assembly is the place of worship, fellowship, preaching, prayer, and giving. Attendance at the assembly is what is counted. Attendance at the assembly is what matters. Whether one is a reasonably active member is measured by attendance at the assembly. Is your church too assembly-focused?

What would happen if your church could be enthused with new power, greater involvement, renewed purpose, and incredible strength?

In the university, one of my favorite classes to teach was a class that dealt with small group dynamics. In ministry, I worked hard to make certain that small group structures and opportunities were a significant part of the church offerings.

I worked in two full-time ministry settings where we implemented an active small groups program. We clearly defined the dynamics of congregation, class, and cell. We knew what was supposed to happen in all three areas. I am convinced that the church that can define itself clearly in all three areas—congregation, class, and cell—will find itself better able to reach out with the Good News.

It took me a while to learn the lessons.

My experience with small group ministry

In the first church where we took small groups seriously, we encouraged (but did not demand) all of the members to be part of a small group. We used small groups for fellowship, ministry, service, and assimilation. New members were easily included in the church when they were assimilated through the small groups. Much of the work of the church was done through small groups. The small groups were the source of much spontaneous fellowship and sharing. Not all of the members participated, but a significant percentage did participate. Participation was the expectation. Evangelism, discipleship, and new member assimilation were done effectively and the church tripled in 11 years.

In the second church where we implemented a significant small group structure, several important things occurred. First, the elders were committed to making small groups an important part of the church. The elders asked me how we could increase small group involvement, and I responded that something important had to be accomplished. The result was that the elders used the small groups as a shepherding tool. The importance of participating in small groups was made clear. Second, various kinds of small groups were defined, avoiding the one-size-fits-all approach to small groups. Third, small groups research was conducted and integrated into existing research, resulting in the goal of including every member in several groups. The concept of groups was redefined. The goal was to have every member in as many groups as possible, ideally at least four. Fourth, many groups met at a time when people were expecting to do something for the church anyway. Fifth, groups were used for outreach, evangelism, and assimilation. The result was that small group attendance was often higher than attendance at other church activities. Sixth, group leaders were officially trained and a weekly preparation class (sometimes done by video) insured that they were ready. It was not a perfect system, but it represented improvement. The church more than doubled in 9 years.

Three things I have learned

- Small group ministry cannot be cloned. I spent several years trying to understand how small group ministry could work in my particular religious contexts. I visited and studied other

ministries. I read, I studied, I evaluated materials, I wrote materials. Merely duplicating the programs of others is not the most effective way forward in small group ministry.

- Small group ministry requires focus. Effective small group ministry is the focus of the church. It is the focus of the leaders. Members talk about small groups constantly.
- Small group ministry is not automatic. In small groups, you do not just announce the program and people automatically participate. Small group ministry must be purposeful; the purpose must be clearly stated and clearly known.

Two motivations for developing an effective small group ministry

- Small group ministry has the possibility for developing a multiplying ministry that can penetrate every part of the local community. Churches can double or triple every 8-10 years. Small groups can be a primary source of new contacts.
- Small group ministry is essential in any church that wants to grow in number. As long as the church is assembly-focused, the size and location of the building will always limit how many souls can be reached and disciplined effectively. A small-groups-focused church really can say “the sky is the limit.”

Two situations where small groups can be especially effective

In consulting with and working with various churches, I have observed two situations where small groups are especially effective.

- In churches that have three or four assemblies each Sunday to “collect” those already won to Jesus, the Christians who want to attend, those who are involved in the church, and a few visitors who are present, the assembly-focus puts a natural lid on what can be done. Small group ministry that includes outreach, discipling, and assimilation is a must.
- In churches whose location limits their outreach, churches that are attracting people from five or six surrounding communities so that people have to travel 30 minutes or an hour to be present at the designated location, regional and neighborhood small groups can provide belonging and also let the work of the church be done away from the church building.

Conclusion

I share this final word with church leaders, preachers, elders, and others have a role in planning the future of the church. The goal is not to “collect” a certain number of people at a location (or several locations) each Sunday. The goal is to equip people to send them into their own neighborhoods, marketplaces, and circles of influence to develop their own ministries. We are measuring the wrong things. We are measuring collections (people and money) rather than measuring ministry. We hardly understand every-member discipleship (daily devotional time, quiet time, Bible reading, prayers) and every member ministry (evangelistic conversations, evangelistic Bible studies taught, gospel presentations, people served).

If you decide to try a small-groups-focus, the transition will not be easy. It will take time, but it will be worth it. It will require good coaching. There will be opposition because what people have done and expected for years will be upset. For a time, ministry will be more difficult; shepherding will be much more difficult. You will learn more than ever before to depend on God, the Holy Spirit, and the Word. But the cost will be worth it! May God bless those church leaders who want to take the church to new heights and to places where we have never gone before—in evangelism, discipleship, and incorporating new members. Small groups is an effective way forward!