

Small Groups Are Key in Fulfilling the Great Commission

By Bob Young

When US churches hear about mission churches that are experiencing great success in sharing the Good News, teaching and baptizing multitudes, the difference in the success of those mission churches and the lack of evangelistic success in US churches is often attributed to greater receptivity in the mission field. Other explanations may cite a lack of interested persons in the US compared with greater interest in the mission field, the lack of need in the US in contrast to people with great needs in the mission field, that there are more prospects elsewhere.... The list of reasons given at times seems endless.

In my observation, the greatest difference in the results on the mission field and the results at home is whether the church is focused on evangelism as a primary goal. Churches that are focused on evangelism have several common characteristics. (1) Evangelism is the center of the teaching, prayer life, and activities of the church. (2) Christians are talking to others about the gospel in their daily lives. (3) The church has organized efforts designed to seek souls and to teach those who are interested in the gospel. (4) The church works hard to assimilate and include new Christians in its work.

Allow me to share some examples.

A church in Peru has a daily “leadership class” that is designed for outreach, strengthening new Christians, and facilitating evangelism. People from several different faith backgrounds attend the class. The result is baptisms, spiritual growth, and continued evangelism.

As I travel in Latin America, I often hear prayers that are focused on evangelism. After I presented a seminar in the Dominican Republic, the congregation was ready to close in prayer. Before the prayer, the brother who was to lead the closing prayer asked for prayer requests. In a church of about 50, five Christians asked for prayers for Bible studies they were teaching with friends, neighbors, or family members. In that small church, at least 10% of the members were actively sharing the gospel. The church was being asked to come alongside in prayer.

Here are other examples from the mission field. Churches in several countries have divided their cities into sectors, with teams of evangelists in each sector. One church has six sectors—four in the four quadrants of the city plus two more in surrounding suburban towns. Another church has identified eight sectors in their city. A church in Venezuela has divided the city into 16 sectors. The details vary but the process is the same.

In each sector there are teams of evangelists. Seldom are these “evangelists” paid. They are members who have the gift of evangelism. These members support themselves with their own jobs. On average, there are three or four evangelists per sector. The goal of an evangelist is to have at least three Bible studies with prospects every week.

In many churches, there is at least one small group meeting in each sector each week, meeting in someone’s home. These meetings are attended by members who bring more prospects. The evangelists meet together for study and to coordinate their work. Other small group meetings are used to strengthen new members, encourage all church members, pray together, and train for evangelism.

You can do the math: 16 sectors x 3 evangelists x 3 studies weekly = about 150 studies each week, 8000 studies per year. Thinking of a smaller organization: 4 sectors x 2 evangelists x 3 studies = about 25 studies each week, 1300+ studies per year. One does not have to look very far to understand why such churches grow: 500, 350, 400 after 10 years, and they are multiplying by planting and establishing more congregations.

In the work of the local church, to be involved actively in God’s purpose to seek and save the lost and to grow in a healthy way, a focus on evangelism is essential. Small groups is one the easiest and most effective ways to do this. Consider this illustration. When you are sick physically, something is wrong with some of the cells in your body. Said another way: you are only as healthy as your cells! If you have sick cells, you will be sick. The same is true of the church. The cells of the church are the various small groups in the church. Your church cannot be healthier than your groups. Especially is this true of your cell groups.

Small groups are a primary means to accomplish God’s purpose in the church. Small groups can insert God’s eternal purpose into every Christian and every ministry. Soon after Pentecost, the early church had small

groups that enabled them to grow spiritually, to grow in the Word, to worship, to share, to minister to one another, to fellowship, and to evangelize. Unfortunately, in many churches with small groups program today, the purpose of the groups is limited to one or two dimensions of the church—usually fellowship, and sometimes worship or study. When worship or study are included, they are usually a small part of the group activity. Generally absent is any focus or talk about spiritual growth, sharing, serving, mission work, or evangelism. When the cells of the spiritual body are not functioning in a healthy way, it is not surprising that the church is also unfocused and unhealthy.

Perhaps you are among those who ask, “Where is the Bible basis for small groups?” The list of possible group activities in the above paragraph came directly out of Acts 2. Jesus started his ministry by forming small groups—one group of three persons, another of twelve persons. Do you believe Jesus could have done his work without help? Jesus used small groups to train and mobilize. Small groups are the natural place to mobilize the church to fulfill the Great Commission in its own backyard. Family reunions with dozens of family members present are special, but family really occurs in smaller groups where relationships are formed and cultivated. That is what small groups do in the family of God.

Here are three suggestions to make your small group more “Great Commission” oriented and capable. Evaluate how your small group prays.

Encourage your group to pray for people who are not faithful disciples of Jesus. This could include uninvolved members as well as those outside the church. People reject our arguments; our logic may not impress them. Group members know people who do not have a relationship with Jesus. Making it a habit of your group to lift these names to the Father will do several things—it helps group members think about their friends outside of Christ, it helps group members seek opportunities to share Jesus, it helps group members know what other members are concerned about. New Testament prayers such as those that seek open doors or opportunities to tell the mystery of Jesus are helpful. When we pray, God sends opportunities. Prayer makes us soul aware. Soon, your group will be seeing more opportunities, and that opportunities are everywhere about us.

Evaluate how open your small group is to inviting non-Christians and engaging non-Christian friends

Encourage your group to build relationships with non-Christians. Since sermons tend to focus on “closing the deal” and asking people for commitment to Christ, it is good if small groups adopt another important function: In spurring small groups toward outreach, we focus on how to mobilize groups to plant and water—to love non-believers through the weeks and years it often takes to build trust and overcome misconceptions about Christianity.

Evaluate how your small group can serve outsiders together

Encourage your small group to participate in local mission projects together. Or a small group can plan to share a mission trip, or simply to pray for mission work. Every Christian should have a global mindset—so should every small group. Small groups are the best way to get the church involved in God’s mission around the world.

Your church’s worship services are the mouth of the church, preaching the gospel and explaining the nature of faith. This is your worship together as a body of believers. Developing a corporate understanding and actions that come from shared faith occurs in the Bible classes. But the heartbeat of the local church is found in the small groups. The cells of the church determine its health. If the small groups are not balancing all five purposes of the church from Acts 2 (evangelism, discipleship, fellowship, worship, and service), your church will not be successful in balancing the purposes of the church. Your church will not be healthy.

Said another way, healthy churches have small groups that engage non-believing friends and take the message of Jesus around the world.

*These suggestions were compiled from various sources.