

Why small groups are minimally effective in many churches of Christ by Bob Young

When I talk about small groups in my consultations with churches and church leaders, I can never be sure what comes to their minds. People have a lot of different ideas about small groups and small group ministry. Some remember zone programs, others remember LIFE groups or Brother's Keeper groups, yet others remember fellowship groups—and there are several lesser known variations. Some of the ideas I encounter are realistic and others are not.

Small groups are not automatic. The most common attitude I meet is the hope that a small groups program—call it what you like—will somehow benefit the local church with increased personal connections, evangelism, spiritual growth, discipleship, commitment, involvement, and fellowship. Many church leaders think that organizing the church into small groups will automatically help the church move forward. I have bad news: *organizing into small groups will not change the DNA of the church.* Small groups are not a structural matter; small groups are the natural outgrowth of the values and practices of a church whose members are committed to the New Testament model. Small groups often make even clearer the identity (DNA) of the church. Small groups will not change the focus and thinking of the church and its members. Small groups will not automatically bring about evangelism, spiritual growth, discipleship, involvement, and deep meaningful fellowship if those are not already present.

Small groups prosper in an atmosphere of committed discipleship. Think with me. People are not spiritually transformed by sitting in a living room with a few other people, even if they are sharing prayer needs and studying the Bible. Effective churches, and effective small groups, are built on the foundation of committed discipleship that is learned and practiced in the context of the faith community, disciples who continually experience the presence of Jesus together and find true community, being thereby empowered to reach out to the lost to bring them into the community.

Effective small groups live out Jesus' presence in a setting of mutuality. The power of a group is that God is at work, working through faithful obedient Christians who together choose to recognize, honor, and praise Jesus' presence as they share their spiritual lives—shared actions that empower them toward outreach in their daily lives. Effective small groups are not artificial, they are not sporadic. They are continuous. They are the natural outgrowth of disciples who understand what it means to follow Jesus and are therefore committed to constant connections that reflect natural mutuality and shared faith. People change and heal when they commit to obeying the Word of God and supporting one another in the process. When people regularly worship and spend time praying together in personal settings, lives are changed—disciples are matured and new disciples are made. When a group works together to share the love and message of Jesus with unreached people, the power of God reigns supreme and changes lives.

Finally let me emphasize again: Small groups are not an organizational structure. Small groups are a way to live out the already-existing identity of the church. Small groups are a way to live out the values and practices of discipleship. When a biblical identity and biblical values permeate the church and drive the small groups, the groups become a natural extension of what it means to be a follower of Jesus and an overwhelming majority of the church members participate. On the other hand, when church identity or purpose is unclear and values are blurred, "average church member" has trouble understanding the nature of biblical discipleship and many members choose not to participate in small groups.