

## **May the church be the church: the threat of pseudo-community**

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Does your church have small groups? A common response is, “Doesn’t every church have small groups?” Why do you have small groups? What is the purpose of your small groups? My experience in ministry and as a consultant for small group ministry says that many churches have not clearly defined the purpose of their small groups. Indeed, it seems that some churches have small groups “because everybody’s doing it.”

Even if church leaders understand the purpose of their small groups, the challenge of communicating that purpose to the members remains. Perhaps no church activity is more susceptible to mission or vision “drift” than small groups. Members have various goals, often based on their past experiences. “We are just getting together for fellowship...we get together to study the Bible...we get together to share spiritual concerns and to pray...we get together to provide support...the group provides accountability...groups and group activities are optional in case someone needs a little extra fellowship or help.”

An important question when considering how well small groups function is frequency: weekly or monthly are two popular options. Group size is another important factor. Smaller groups are ideal, 10-15, but in churches where the small groups are not an integral part of the church’s identity, groups of 25-50 are common.

In the local church, pseudo-community is a constant threat. Pseudo-community looks, and sometimes even feels a bit like, authentic community, but the differences are as pronounced as night and day. Pseudo-community can be identified by numerous superficial relationships, cordial smiles and greetings, and superficial prayer requests—usually about physical concerns rather than spiritual. Bible teaching and discussion will carefully avoid touching matters that challenge Christian identity or seek greater faithfulness and more committed discipleship.

Pseudo-community is usually hard to recognize! Many Christians have existed in pseudo-communities for so long that they think it is the real thing. Members often respond with surprise (or indignation) when they hear that a visitor felt devalued, invisible, or rejected by their church. Superficial relationships are a part of many small groups (as well as Bible classes). Pseudo-community is the way of Facebook. It also fits in well in our society that values independence and self-sufficiency. We do not want to depend on other people. We struggle to be fully transparent. It is a risky business to let others see our hearts, and even more, to let them see our sins. We have dwelt for so long in pseudo-communities that we automatically assume that transparency probably means getting hurt. As a member of my youth group remarked a number of years ago, “If you know all about me, I am afraid you won’t like me any longer.” So, we live in isolation. What was supposed to be physical distancing was mistakenly called social distancing, and most of us have done it well! We live in our safety bubble, contacting our world virtually.

God’s plan for the church is genuine community, risk-taking, prioritizing people, investing time, growing deeper, escaping superficiality. It requires a level of caring where we constantly check on one another, being transparent and vulnerable, not masking our real spiritual needs with ambiguous prayer requests. It means getting back to one-on-one rather than many-on-many. It means being the body of Christ where each member cares for all of the other members. The world is waiting and watching for the church that understands and practices authentic community, driven by the love of Christ.