

Evangelism and Small Group Ministry in the 21st century

By Bob Young

Smaller groups of Christians, throughout the life of the church, have been a basic element in pastoral care, discipleship, and the growth of the church. They are still important and an efficient strategy for evangelism—especially in the context of the modern impersonal urban settings of our world. Nevertheless, due to the models of church which we have inherited, it is not always clear whether or how a congregation should put small groups into practice. Despite the difficulties, small groups are a key to the extension and expansion of the kingdom of God.

I grew up in a small rural church of 40-50 members which was its own small group. Since those early years, I have been a member in rural churches where attendances ranged from 35 to 300, churches in small urban areas (population less than a million) where attendances ranged from 150 to 600, and in churches in urban areas of a million or more with attendance ranging from 250 to 1200. Our nation and our world is moving to the city. The city brings problems of poverty, security, traffic, violence, promiscuity, public disorder, and illness. Inhabitants of the cities are often disoriented and confused.

A massive evangelism program will not resolve the problems of the great cities— anonymity, dehumanization, need, and tension. Urban churches which are obsessed with size and growth have considered too seldom the danger of impersonalization which this option carries. Christian communities must promote a shared life for participants, concern for one another and for the human beings all around them, and faithfulness to God's plan for his church. In this atmosphere, disciples like those described by Jesus in Matthew 28 are produced.

In the first century, the house (Greek, oikos) was the evangelistic pivot. The home was the nucleus of the Greco-Roman social system. The family was of primary importance and many of the activities described in the New Testament occurred in homes. These homes were places of evangelism (Acts 10, 16), teaching (Acts 20), hospitality and fellowship (Acts 2, 16), and prayer (Acts 5, 12). Acts 2 indicates that they ate and shared fellowship and praised God in their homes. The homes were an important part of the spread of the gospel. The basic thrust of New Testament evangelism was not the evangelism of individuals, nor the masses, nor children (as is often the practice today), but the evangelism of family units through the homes.

Through Christian history, this emphasis was lost and redirected toward ritual and public assemblies. When individual reading of Scripture was prohibited, the use of homes as centers of prayer, instruction, and fellowship was logically limited. Thus has developed an institutional model of church. Ralph Neighbor shares the following comparisons:

Description	Church of NT	Church Today
Location	House to house	Buildings
Size	Small groups	Big, impersonal gatherings
Activities	Daily	Weekly
Support system	One another	Pastoral/professional

Relationships	Intimate, transparent	Remote, distant
Discipleship	Personal, direct	Classes, books, preaching
Task of leadership	Equip for ministry/service	Run the programs
Prayer	Daily, personal, emphasized	Limited
Leadership actions	Model/mentor for believers	Preach
Expectations for members	Minister to others; serve	Attend, give, program work
Vision	Centered in small groups	Congregation, Organization
Key words	Make disciples	Church growth
Teaching	Apply Bible to life	Doctrine, beliefs, norms
Spiritual gifts	Exercised by all	Exercised by a few
Evaluation	How do we serve	What do we know
Ministerial success	Develop servants	More clergy, professionals

No spiritual awakening or revival has had lasting results without small groups of some kind. John Wesley influence Britain powerfully for a long time, not through the number of converts, but in the organization of his followers in classes and societies. These groups met weekly to share spiritual victories and problems, to resolve disputes, and for discussion.

One problem that churches face in trying to develop small groups at the beginning of the 21st century is that sociological changes have altered the nature of the family—displaced persons are not connected to their family of origin and are uprooted from their individual families; relatives are far away, we do not know our neighbors, the workplace has become a place of developing relationships, children grow up in homes where both parents work, children grow up in single-parent homes without fathers, the family is not valued in the traditional sense.

As a result, the development of strong, meaningful relationships is an important evangelistic strategy for reaching persons with great needs. Unfortunately, many of the efforts of churches have been focused so much on those who are just like us, that we have not begun to touch the hurts and problems of our society. The development of small groups, support groups, friends, affinity groups is essential to touching life. Such are not strictly utilitarian—another way to attain numerical growth. Small groups are a way to touch lives, to meet needs and the desire of a suffering society. Ray Bakke affirms that urban contexts provide places where groups will find strength because the only evangelistic model which is adequate is relational. Christians minister in their own worlds of relationships, families, workplace, etc.

This understanding will help expand the kingdom of God. The vision which segments life is no longer valid. The goal is not to construct Christian islands or Christian teams. This is a very different vision—a vision of the continuing penetration of society as leaven which leavens the lump.

Great differences exist between typical ministry and the small groups movement. If a congregation adopts small groups as a basic structure, its life will change notably, no longer rotating around the Sunday service and beginning to focus “outside”, toward the orphans and widows and prodigals of our society. The average believer, faced with this possibility, will no

longer sleep, resting on his laurels, supporting the programs—especially those programs that meet “my” needs. The believers will be empowered to be creative in living the Christian life.

Such represents a changing paradigm. Certainly it is not without dangers, difficulties, and questions. I frankly do not know whether most churches of Christ can make the transition from building-oriented and worship-oriented to group-oriented. I fear that too many are comfortable with the one-day-a-week version of Christianity. Further, we mostly are quite uncomfortable with any version of Christian that would allow people to be faithful without regular trips to our buildings. We are focused on “the assembly” rather than assembling (re-read Hebrews 10:25). We do not know what to do with re-definitions that would demand daily Christian involvement in the context of a small, caring group, capable of reaching out and touching others.

Further, some may not be comfortable focusing on the kingdom rather than the organizations we have come to hold dear. I am fairly confident of this--this new paradigm cannot be approached on the margins, as an experiment, or as one more program. One of the keys to the expansion of the early church was the quality of life they experienced in the Christian community, adding day by day those who were being saved. Our culture and society is awaiting such a vital, gratifying experience. They mostly do not find it when they visit our worship assemblies.