

## **Small Group Reflections for Churches Contemplating a Small Group Ministry**

By Bob Young

Any church that is thinking about beginning a small group program needs to carefully think through the small group ministry, with special focus on identifying the purpose of small groups. What are the goals? What does one hope to accomplish? What is one trying to do? Will the small group ministry attempt to fellowship, care for one another, worship, evangelize? How small groups are organized depends on what one is trying to do. The 'why' answers questions such as when to meet, how often, etc. Most churches need groups of various types to encourage members to be involved in numerous groups. (Some studies have shown that members need at least seven different groups to maintain a tight connection with the church. This includes groups of all kinds. For example, I am in the following groups at my church: Sunday morning Bible class, Sunday morning worship, Sunday evening worship, Wednesday Bible classes (two when I meet with the Early Bird class as well as the traditional Wednesday evening class), my small group, regular elders meetings and gatherings, my 'cleaning' group, the FreeTimers group....I trust you get the idea. I am fairly tightly involved and see a variety of people in different situations and work/task settings.

If a church plans to use small groups primarily to care for one another, to enhance fellowship, or to shepherd, a basic Brothers Keeper group structure will likely suffice. I describe these here with a fairly traditional name, but other names are also used, e.g. BASIC groups—Brothers and Sisters in Christ. Such groups usually meet once a month, but can and do have activities and interactions during the month, such as phoning, checking attendance, visiting, etc. The name suggests that every member belongs to a group. These groups are excellent for enhancing the shepherding in the congregation, and extending care beyond the elders/shepherds. Brothers Keepers groups can easily function with 20-25 in attendance per group (suggesting as many as 35-40 members of the group, since some do not or cannot attend). Brothers Keepers groups can share special activities at times other than the monthly meeting. I usually suggest that all Brothers Keepers groups meet on the same Sunday each month.

If the primary purpose of a church in organizing small group is to evangelize, the church should organize in much smaller groups (10-12, 15 maximum) which meet regularly. These probably work best at a time other than standard worship times. Several different acronyms have been used; one recent popular option is LIFE groups—Living in Fellowship to Evangelize. (Note that some churches have formed LIFE groups for fellowship—LOVE, INVOLVE, FELLOWSHIP, EDIFY, or some similar acronym). As the name suggests, there is fellowship involved but the group seeks to involve non-Christians and non-members in group activities because of the evangelistic focus. These sometimes organize around shared interests, but the common thread is usually Bible study.

When a church thinks of small group ministry, the church should not overlook regular Bible classes (which are also small groups). For Bible classes to function effectively as small groups, they should be encouraged also to share extracurricular activities.

If a church has groups at a traditional “worship” time (as many churches have traditionally done), many participants will identify the group as a ‘substitute’ and expect somewhat traditional forms of worship, Bible study, and or/fellowship.

I have found that most churches are best served to develop a variety of small groups with different emphases and foci. This is preferable to organizing so that members have a “group obligation” each week. More types of groups can be added to the list. For example, small groups may be task groups, support groups, accountability groups, prayer groups, visitation groups, etc. Such groups should meet regularly but do not have to meet frequently.

Most churches begin with a Brothers Keepers obligation one time a month, adding LIFE (evangelism) groups that met twice a month (for example, first and third weeks), and encouraging members to participate also with task groups and or specialty groups according to my interests and friendships.