

THE SMALL-GROUP LEADER

A MANUAL TO DEVELOP VITAL SMALL GROUPS



John Mallison

‘A major revision and substantial expansion of *Growing Christians in Small Groups* . . .
The most comprehensive book on the topic of which I am aware.’

EDDIE GIBBS

WITH
STUDY GUIDES

THE SMALL-GROUP LEADER

A MANUAL TO DEVELOP VITAL SMALL GROUPS



By the same author

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Guidelines for Small Groups (1976)

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Survival Kit for Christian Disciples (1979)

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Becoming a Follower of Jesus Christ (1985)

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THE SMALL-GROUP LEADER

A MANUAL TO DEVELOP VITAL SMALL GROUPS



J o h n M a l l i s o n


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DEDICATION

*To June, my loyal and loving wife,
co-leader of my greatest support group (our family),
a woman of God*



JOHN MALLISON

John Mallison's work as a parish minister in Australia has spanned twenty-seven years, seventeen of which have been spent full-time in rural, industrial and developing urban areas and ten years part-time in an experimental inner-city parish. A healthy balance between education, evangelism and social concern has been characteristic of his ministry.

He is a specialist in enabling the laity to develop their discipleship and in equipping them for ministry in their families, their churches and the world. Involved in full-time Christian education for fourteen years, he served as State Youth Director and Director of Adult Education. He founded the ELM Centre, the lay education centre of the Uniting Church in New South Wales, and was its director for four years.

He founded and facilitates the Australian Small Group Network, a national movement involving all denominations aimed at maximising the impact of small groups upon the church and nation.

He now spends most of his time involved in specialist ministries, enabling the development of discipleship and leadership for all sections of the church across Australia and overseas.

A prolific writer, his eighteen books deal with the role of small groups in the Christian community, evangelism,

nurture of new disciples, Christian lifestyle development and pastoral care. He is also the author or co-author of a number of study resources, and contributor to other books. Two of his books are published in a number of different languages.

He has special skills and wide experience in cross-cultural ministry, having conducted training events for the church in USA, UK, Eastern and Western Europe, India, Pakistan, Thailand, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and most nations in the South Pacific.

FOREWORD

Anyone with a basic knowledge of church history is aware of the significant role played by small groups across the centuries in the growth and renewal of the Christian church. Every time we read from the New Testament we need to remind ourselves that we are being exposed to a small-group movement which multiplied at an astounding pace throughout the Roman world. For the first two hundred years of its existence, the church had no large public buildings available in which to meet. During that time small groups were not an extension of the church — they were the church. When Paul wrote his letter to the church in Corinth, Ephesus or Rome, he was writing to a federation of small groups meeting in scattered locations in those cities.

When the church has great institutional strength and widespread influence and acceptance in society, the emphasis on small groups tends to diminish. It is replaced by a focus of attention on activities within church buildings where the populace is expected to rally. This occurred during the Middle Ages, and continued in Europe from the Reformation until the emergence of the Pietists in Europe and John Wesley and the Methodists in England, the Methodist focus on their small class meeting finally reaching North America, then Australia and many other countries around the world.

However, the increasing secularisation of Australasia, Europe and North America has led to the marginalising of the church from the mainstream of life. Only a small proportion of the population go to church on a weekly basis — in some countries less than ten per cent — and a shrinking periphery claim any allegiance to a particular denomination or local church. The lapsed Christian of

yesterday begets the nominal and notional Christian of today, who in turn begets the secularist of tomorrow.

At least that is how it appears on the surface. At a deeper level there remains a hunger for spiritual reality, which finds expression in various forms of folk religion. If the church fails to develop flexible and dynamic structures for outreach to these people — many of whom are asking religious questions but are not coming to the churches in search of answers — then other religions and ideologies which are making their presence felt ‘in the marketplace’ will begin to claim their allegiance.

As a consequence of this social dynamic the old methods employed by the church, of advertising worship services and developing on-campus programs and activities to which people are invited, become less and less effective. There has to be a switch from a stance of inviting to one of infiltrating. That is where the small group plays such a significant role. To be more precise, it plays two roles: one is to mature and equip the existing members in order to face the world and survive in a hostile environment, and the other is to establish small-group, commando-like task forces to undertake the ministry of Christ in the world. It comes as no surprise to discover that the overwhelming majority of churches which are making a significant impact in communities which are culturally distanced from the church use small groups as the main structures for their strategies.

This same strategy also applies to mainline churches to bridge the growing gap as society becomes increasingly secularised and the churches marginalised. There have been a number of surveys on both sides of the Pacific to show the significant role small groups play in providing

FOREWORD

support and encouragement to survive the pressures of everyday life and to compensate for the breakdown of traditional family and neighbourhood social networks.

If these observations in any way approximate to the truth of the situation faced by the contemporary church then it is evident that there is a strategic challenge facing us which has to be tackled as a matter of urgency. The problem centres on the fact that many church leaders have had little or no training in the establishing, leadership, resourcing and multiplying of small groups on anything like the scale which the present opportunities demand. The majority of ordained ministers are over fifty years of age and were trained at a time when church leaders were only dimly, if at all, aware of the significance of small groups, and little or no training was provided in our theological colleges. Consequently the majority of pastors are learning as they go, and find themselves having to 'fly by the seat of their pants'. Fortunately, some ministers have done some reading in the area and may have attended courses and obtained small-group learning resources. But overall it is a case of too little too late.

Quality materials are becoming available and there are growing numbers of experts in the field, but you have to know where to find them, and they have to be available at the time when they are needed.

John Mallison has come to the rescue over the years with his many 'hands-on' books based on extensive grass-roots experience. But here we have what he claims, with real excitement, is his best yet! I believe it to be the most comprehensive and valuable manual in the field of small groups to be written to date. There is no-one more qualified to write in this specialised field, and his

reputation stretches far beyond Australia. He writes with a breadth of vision, because he has worked with small groups not only in the local parish setting but also at training conferences in twenty-five countries as well as in the context of city and nation-wide Billy Graham campaigns. It was in connection with the last-mentioned that I first became aware of John Mallison's extraordinary gifts. He did such a great job in setting up the 2500 nurture groups in connection with the 1979 Sydney Crusades that I invited him to visit England in 1982 to help us develop a similar strategy for our seven Billy Graham missions in 1984 and 1985. The materials produced for those occasions are now being widely used in revised forms in other evangelistic endeavours in many countries around the world.

This book, which is a major revision and substantial expansion of *Growing Christians in Small Groups*, is a distillation of much that John Mallison has learnt over the years. Here is an author with unassailable credibility, because he has done, in many different settings, the kinds of things he is describing. This is the most comprehensive book on the topic of which I am aware. He describes many different kinds of groups: contact, evangelism, nurture, prayer, and recovery groups. He provides insights on how to set them up, the kind of people to select as leaders (and those to avoid!), how to resource them, how to ensure that they diversify and expand the church's ministry, while avoiding the fragmentation which can so easily result, and, as an added bonus, he includes a creative study guide at the conclusion of each chapter and a number of creative program ideas and other practical resources in the Appendices. He also stresses the

need for small groups to function as launching pads for mission, and not to become retreat pods from the world. While many churches have benefited from their contribution to nurture and growth, very few have realised their potential for evangelisation and service in the community.

Some books are worth the price we pay for a one time reading but, having read them once, we happily leave them to gather dust. John Mallison's book represents far greater value for money. Its contents cannot be assimilated at one sitting. It is the kind of volume that the busy Christian leader will want to keep within reach. The contents are helpfully organised to form the basis for developing training courses for new and established small group leaders. I would like to see *The Small Group Leader: a Manual to Develop Vital Small Groups* on the bookshelf of every small-group leader, not only in the English-speaking world, but in the countries into which this book, like its predecessor, will go translated into their language. If its contents were widely assimilated and applied, then the church would be equipped for a renewal and evangelistic outreach to rival that of eighteenth-century Methodism.

This is not a polite wish; it is an earnest prayer.

**Eddie Gibbs,
formerly Professor of Fuller Seminary, USA,
international speaker on Church Leadership and
Renewal, currently Associate Minister for
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P R E F A C E

The Christian small group is the church's most versatile and powerful structure for change.

In almost every country around the world, churches are becoming true worshipping, serving communities of love as small groups become an integral part of their ongoing life and witness. Growth in numbers and quality of life is attributed to the impact of small groups.

Through the Australian Small Group Network we are continuing to discover that the Holy Spirit is very much at work in an amazing variety of small groups, often in the most unlikely places across our country, in crowded cities and in isolated 'outback' areas.

It is now nearly forty years since I caught the vision of the great potential of small groups in serving Christ. I have constantly seen people and situations transformed through dynamic Christian groups in my parish ministry in rural, industrial, inner city and developing suburban areas, as well as in my education of Christian leaders in many countries throughout the world. Also my own life and ministry has been enriched through my ongoing membership of a number of groups in which we have shared and prayed together regularly.

Much of the material in this book is the outcome of insights gained in my own parish ministry and my leadership and membership of a variety of small groups, all refined in the workshop atmosphere of small-group leadership training courses I have conducted throughout Australia and in many other countries.

Essentially this is a 'how-to' book, emerging out of years of practical experience. The aim is not only to help readers catch a vision of the scope and possibilities of small groups, but to provide some down-to-earth, proven

guidelines to get them started and help develop their maximum potential.

Growing Christians in Small Groups appears to have been useful to many across all sections of the church in many countries. In addition to the Australian edition there were United Kingdom and Malaysian editions. It was also translated in whole or part into a number of other languages. *The Small-Group Leader* contains the best of *Growing Christians in Small Groups*, completely revised and updated, and much new material. The chapter Study Guides will make this an even more useful training tool.

I want to pay tribute to Ivan Hiscock and Gloucester Udy, respected senior ministers of the church in Australia, for their important contribution to my small-group journey. Ivan Hiscock helped me appreciate the potential of small groups to nurture new disciples in the way John Wesley used the Methodist Class Meetings. Gloucester Udy's writings expanded on this, and he constantly personally encouraged me and gave me my first opportunities to share my insights from early experiments with small groups in Port Kembla.

I am grateful to leaders and members of the small groups in my five parishes, participants in my training events in many places, and world figures in the small-group movement, for their contributions to my knowledge and understanding.

The Australian Small Group Network, which has linked together many whom God is using in wonderful ways, has also enriched my thinking. The names of a number of the key players in this Network are recognised here as contributors to this book.

P R E F A C E

Greg Davies, one of Australia's most successful small-group practitioners and trainers of small-group leaders, has given me wise guidance regarding the revision and has generously contributed from his own training resources.

Jennifer Turner, Philip Woolford, Les Scarborough, John Allison, Alan Schreiber, and Graham Beattie have all given sound advice. Tony Neylan contributed the Bible study method, 'Praying the Scriptures'.

Joy Lacey has capably undertaken the editorial work and made many practical suggestions. My faithful secretary of nine years, Mary Butler, has again skilfully and patiently typed yet another manuscript. My daughter Lynelle and son Matthew drew most of the original diagrams. Madeline Gianetti contributed a few more of her unique cartoons to add to those in the original book.

The council and hundreds of supporters of my present ministry have faithfully undergirded the project with their prayers, finances and encouragement.

Without the love, patience and prayers of my wife June, this book would never have been possible.

I offer this book in love to all who are dedicated to extending our Lord Jesus Christ's ministry of love and reconciliation.

May Jesus Christ be praised!

John Mallison
August, 1995

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A great deal of material in the small group movement is becoming common domain; ideas have originated in one place and have been varied, changed or used as a basis in others. We are indebted to such work. A small amount of material in this book has been adapted from a variety of sources on which there was no indication of copyright.

We are indebted, too, to a number of pioneers and leaders in the small group movement for their inspiration and encouragement and to those who have shared new insights and thinking on fellowship, prayer and Bible study with the church today. We have acknowledged all sources on which we have drawn, either in the text or in a list of references at the end of a chapter. We acknowledge in particular the work of William F Barclay, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Lyman Coleman, Gordon Cosby, Carl F George, Roberta Hestenes, Sara Little, Robert Logan, Thomas Merton, Keith Miller, Leslie Newbiggin, Elizabeth O'Connor, Lawrence Richards, Rosalind Rinker, Charlie Shedd, Samuel M Shoemaker, Ross Snyder, Helmut Thielicke, Walter Wink, and Paul Everett. We acknowledge also the insights shared by participants in my small-group training courses and workshops.

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Chapter 1

CHRISTIAN SMALL GROUPS – the Basic Building Blocks

No circuit (parish) ever did or ever will flourish unless there are small groups in the large society (congregation). John Wesley

The gospel must be brought back to where people live, in simple forms, and in terms of small and manageable fellowships. Stephen Neill

The small group is the basic building block of the life of the local congregation and is fundamental to the development of individual and corporate Christian lifestyle.

The small group has always been a significant force for renewal in the Christian church, but its place is being rediscovered again in our time. In the last four decades or more, what Hobart Mowrer calls 'quiet revolution' has been taking place. Around the world, one of the signs of hope in the Christian church has been the renewal being brought to individuals and Christian communities through the formation of small groups.

Throughout most sections of the church in South America, small groups play a major role in fulfilling Christ's mission in the world.

In the Base Ecclesial Communities in Latin America, small groups of impoverished Catholic Christians meet regularly to pray, sing, study Scripture and apply it to their own situations. In China, house-centred groups have been the key to the remarkable growth of the church despite the suppression and persecution of the church since the cultural revolution. Other areas of rapid church



growth, such as South Korea and Central Africa, have hundreds of thousands in Christian cells. They are also widespread in S E Asia, New Zealand and South Africa. In Eastern Europe, despite the restrictions imposed on Christian gatherings during the Communist era, networks of small groups engendered new life and hope in many churches.

There has been a dramatic increase in groups studying the Bible and sharing and praying together in the United States and the United Kingdom.

A recent significant new development is based on an entirely new vision for small groups. Rather than churches

having small groups as an appendage to an already overloaded program, they are seeing small groups as the lifeblood of true Christian community. The whole church life is built around them. These churches no longer are churches with small groups, they are small-group churches! Two models of this new movement are the Meta Church and the Cell Church. We deal with these later in this chapter.

In Australia, there is a significant small-group movement. The National Church Life Survey^a found that in 6700 congregations in nineteen denominations who responded to the survey, approximately two thirds are involved in small groups. Unfortunately the survey does not reveal the total numbers of groups in each congregation.

The Australian Small Group Network (ASGN)^b established in 1992 links together many churches from all denominations with a vision for small-group ministry. Some have seventy-five per cent of their membership participating regularly in small groups. A large Assembly of God church reports nearly two thousand in groups. The Sydney Catholic diocese has had up to forty thousand involved in its well-resourced Lenten small group program. A new ministry facilitating the formation of small groups in rural areas is emerging. In a Catholic rural parish over fifty home groups meet weekly. Women in the isolated outback of Queensland are using the radio network of the School of the Air and the Flying Doctor service for a weekly meeting. The ASGN state committees organise training events and consultations both locally and nationally. The Small Group Letter and SAILS^c leadership cassettes provide a forum for Aussie leaders to share their rich insights. Serendipity Resources^d distribute a variety of resources, including the small-group leaders broadsheet Grapevine, and organise major national conferences.

Some of these small groups, through which God is bringing a new spiritual awakening around the world, are linked together through large national movements. Others are part of local church or parish level networks, having only loose links with other aspects of the wider movement. Many are isolated groups of people, meeting out of a deep sense of need to take seriously the lordship of Jesus Christ.

These small fellowships of renewal are to be found in

factories and offices, schools and universities, and city restaurants and suburban homes. They meet at a variety of times, some over breakfast or lunch. There are morning and afternoon groups, some later in the evening. Some meet well before dawn to avoid the distractions of the daily routine. Within the church and outside the church, men and women are exploring together the deep things of the Spirit and, in many cases, bringing a new influence to bear upon society.

The witness of ministers, leaders and participants in this new movement is most encouraging. They testify that such groups have an amazing ministry to those who take them seriously. Homes and churches are being changed, lives transformed, a new sense of unity reached and a growing commitment made to a world in need.

The testimony of Scripture, the record of history and the witness of our contemporaries make it very clear that spiritual renewal does come to the church whenever a nucleus responds to Christ in depth and when they do this together in intimate fellowship. The Holy Spirit works with revolutionary power when small companies of Christians reach new levels of openness and expectation and respond to his inner promptings in obedience and faith. 'If such groups will act as a kind of spearhead of awakening, strive constantly to be humble and teachable, and let the Holy Spirit be the strategist that forms them all into "an exceeding great army" under his leadership alone, there is literally no telling what might happen in our day.'¹

However, small groups in the Christian church have not always had an impressive history. While many have been successful, many have failed. There is no magic in the small group itself. On occasions I meet people who respond to my vision of the potential of small groups in the Christian church with 'Oh, we tried them years ago and they didn't work'. Small groups in the church have not always fulfilled the expectations of the participants because they have either not understood, or not put into practice, certain basic principles which help to keep group life vital. Even a limited understanding of group dynamics would have helped some groups achieve their purpose. Many groups in the church have not developed into real communities of care and concern because it was not in God's timing or because they were launched with the wrong motives.

Many have looked upon small groups as another gimmick to get the church back on the rails again, to prop up ailing structures. Dietrich Bonhoeffer has described much of the conventional concept of discipleship in terms of what he calls 'cheap grace'. 'Cheap grace' in small-group life is Bible study without action, prayer without creativity, fellowship without care and concern, sharing without honesty and community without accountability. 'Cheap grace' is grace without repentance, discipleship without the cross, togetherness without a living, ever-present Christ.

Spiritual renewal requires our cooperation and participation, but it is essentially the work of God. 'Unless the Lord builds the house its builders labour in vain' (Psalm 127:1). God always makes the first move; if he chooses not to act, then all our organisation is fruitless in producing vital spiritual life. 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty' (Zechariah 4:6). As John Casteel put it many years ago, 'Groups come into being when the hunger, faith and determination of concerned persons are matched with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit'.

When we talk about small-group structures, 'small' suggests a size which permits and encourages face-to-face relationships. It is not so large that any will be cut off from deeply and personally giving and receiving genuine love. How large is this? Some research in group dynamics suggests that five may be the optimum number. But often groups of eight or twelve are suggested for church fellowship groups, and this range seems to have many advantages, as we shall discover later.

Simply putting eight or twelve Christians together does not make them a group. Nor will it, in itself, ensure that they will develop healthy group life. Members may, over a span of many meetings, remain strangers who share nothing more significant than what each thinks the others want to hear. A small group, which functions as the church, needs to know how to develop group life. Without initial guidance and help, or without an understanding of how the group can become an authentic Christian fellowship, a small group may move far off course.

There are three reasons which compel us to take seriously the potential of small groups in bringing new life to the individual and to the corporate life of those who are

committed to be the kind of Christian disciple Christ intended us to be. These are: the example of Christ in his strategy for ministry, the example of the early church and the history of renewal in the church.

CHRIST USED A SMALL-GROUP STRATEGY

At the heart of Christ's strategy was a dynamic small group. The genius of Christ's ministry was that he devoted himself primarily to a few people rather than the masses, in order that the masses could be more effectively reached with the gospel. Jesus deliberately concentrated his ministry on a very small number of people. Mark records, 'he appointed twelve to be with him, and to be sent out to preach and have authority to cast out demons' (Mark 3:14,15).

With the short time at his disposal, he was not given to gathering a large following with uncertain commitment. He chose to build, into the lives of a few, solid foundations that would form the basis of his kingdom and withstand the storms which would assail them.

With a whole world to save he spent most of his ministry, it would seem, in private with this little group. He set out to teach those men to love one another and to pass on the good news of God's love to others. One cannot miss the significance of the twelve in searching for ways to vitalise the church of our day.

Our Lord gathered together a diverse and most unlikely group. It was an amazing synthesis of humanly irreconcilable elements — Simon the Zealot, the fiery nationalist; Matthew, servant of the establishment; Peter, all energy and impetuosity; John, thoughtful and prayerful; Andrew, a man of shining and untroubled faith; and Thomas, the reluctant believer. The very composition of that first group of twelve is a mighty witness to the universality of Christ. This diverse group found their strange union in Jesus Christ. It was a microcosm of the diversity of character of the church that was in the making.



In the eyes of the world, they were very ordinary people. They were not among the outstanding people in society. Christ chose the most unlikely people. He was more concerned about availability than ability. Not that he neglects outstanding people. But the message of the first small group was that Christ does not overlook ordinary people, and some emerged as significant leaders.

It is surprising that most of the apostles were probably in their twenties, John most likely a teenager, when they were with Christ. Here was a group full of the idealism and enthusiasm of youth. Christianity began as a young people's movement.

He called this group 'to be with him'. The time which Jesus invested in these few disciples was so much more by comparison to that given to others, that it can only be regarded as deliberate strategy. He ate, talked, slept, walked, sailed, fished and prayed with them. He spent more time with them than with anyone else in the world.

'To be with him' suggests a number of things. Firstly, on the human side of his nature, Jesus felt the need of human fellowship and support. 'For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin' (Hebrews 4:15).

'And often when the world outside had been showing itself callous and hostile and contemptuous, he would turn back at nightfall with a great relief to these twelve men who for all their faults and bungling, did love him and did believe in him. As Jesus himself expressed it, one day when the end was near, "It is you who have stood by me through my trials"' (Luke 22:28, Moffatt).

'It was not only that the Saviour felt the need of human love and sympathy. It was also his purpose to train these men by fellowship with himself. Living with him every day, watching him in all kinds of situations, listening to his private talk, being admitted to his dreams and aspirations and hopes, they would gradually come to see things with his eyes and be fired with his own authentic fire. Intimacy with Jesus is the best of all teachers.'²

He maintained a constant ministry to his disciples by having them with him. They were thus getting the benefit of everything he said and did to others, plus their own personal explanation and counsel.

His strategy for educating his disciples was learning by association. He used an apprenticeship model. This was his simple methodology right from the beginning. The truth was embodied in Christ. He was the way, the truth and the life. He was the gospel. Essentially what he said and did was his own school and curriculum. Spiritual reality was incarnate in him. He was the living lecture.

'And to be sent out to preach and have authority to cast out demons.' Jesus did not keep the work of evangelism in his own hands. He chose to share his ministry with others, not delegating in order to help him cope with the growing demands, but to develop future leaders.

Christ's life and ministry teaches us that finding and training people to reach people must have priority. Christ concentrated his efforts on a small group, training them by word and example, encouraging them, trusting them, permitting them to take risks and at times allowing them to fail, in order to develop a small group to revolutionise the religion of their day and turn the world upside down!

Many who have changed the course of history have worked on the basis that lasting change comes through dedicated small groups. Undisciplined mobs achieve little.

Fidel Castro said, 'I began my revolution with eighty-two men. If I had to do it again, I would do it with ten or fifteen men and absolute faith. It does not matter how small you are, providing you have faith and a plan of action.'

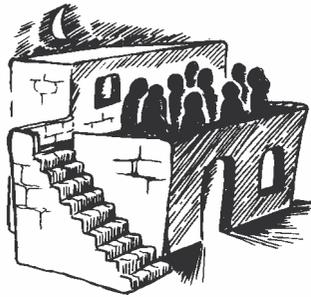
But at the heart of the group of twelve was a core group. Three cameos in the New Testament make us aware that Jesus was giving special attention to Peter, James and John. Only these three were present on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9) and were with Jesus and the parents when Jairus's daughter was raised from the dead (Mark 5:37). Again these alone were present in the garden when, in great agony of spirit, he surrendered to the Father's will (Matthew 26:37). These were key leaders in the making, taken into the inner sanctum of Christ's deeper thoughts and emotions and experiencing a greater revelation of Christ than any of the others.

Christ's ministry was more focused than most Christian ministry today. At the centre of Christ's strategy were two dynamic small groups. He committed himself to disciple a few and to do it well! Followers of Christ are

discovering again the wisdom of that strategy and allowing it to guide them in continuing his ministry in growing the church, both in quality and quantity.

SMALL GROUPS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

The second reason which compels us to take seriously the potential of small groups is the example of the New Testament church. The early church followed the model the Lord gave to them. In its infancy, the church was a small group in which believers gathered to support each other in growing in Christ and in witnessing to their Lord.



Luke, in the book of Acts, gives two important glimpses of the life of the early church which depict the early Christian community having two focal points for its gathered life: the temple and the home. 'With one mind they kept up their daily attendance at the temple and, breaking bread in private houses, shared their meals with unaffected joy, as they praised God and enjoyed the favour of the whole people' (Acts 2:46-47).

'And every day they went steadily on with their teaching in the temple and in private houses, telling the good news of Jesus the Messiah' (Acts 5:42).

The whole Christian community daily went to the temple to pray (Acts 2:46; 3:1-10). Here also was the centre of their ministry of preaching (Acts 2:14ff; 3:11ff) and teaching (Acts 4:2; 5:20,21). But from their inception, the early Christians placed the private home alongside the temple, as a focus for their fellowship together.

As the story of the early church continues to unfold, private homes are depicted as becoming increasingly centres of worship and hospitality, of Christian teaching and missionary proclamation. Luke describes homes being used for 'prayer meetings' (Acts 12:12); for an evening of Christian fellowship (Acts 21:7); for holy communion services (Acts 2:46); for a whole night of prayer, worship and instruction (Acts 20:7); for impromptu evangelistic gatherings (Acts 16:32); for planned meetings in order to hear the

Christian gospel (Acts 10:22); for following up enquiries (Acts 18:26); and for organised instruction (Acts 5:42).³

What is happening in Acts is that as the church's missionary activity takes it outwards away from Jerusalem, spurred on in this direction by persecution at the centre, the focal point of its activity becomes, increasingly, private houses. By the time Luke has undertaken to write his two volumes, Jerusalem and the temple have been destroyed and the Christian church has spread throughout the Gentile world, meeting everywhere in the houses of its members.⁴

Peter's ministry in Cornelius's house in Caesarea is one of the great turning points in the story of the early church, as the gospel is directed to the Gentiles (the Graeco-Roman world) with great effect (Acts 10).

The house and the household have become the basis for evangelistic activity in the early church . . . A similar situation is revealed in the story of the Philippian gaoler, where Paul and Silas spoke 'the word of the Lord to him and to all that were in his house', so that 'all the household believed in God' and were baptised (Acts 16:25ff).

A different situation is seen, however, in the description of events following the beheading of James and arrest of Peter. We are told that Peter was rescued from Herod's clutches and that 'he made for the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where a large company were at prayer' (Acts 12:12). The house and the household had also become the centre of liturgical activity in the early church.

A further development may be seen when Paul's evangelistic activity took him to Europe. In Philippi, where he preached on European soil for the first time, he stayed in the home of Lydia who had been baptised, with her household, after 'the Lord had opened her heart' (Acts 16:11ff). During his time in Corinth, Paul lodged with Priscilla and Aquila and worked with them in their trade of tentmaking (Acts 18:1ff). Later, he sent greetings to the 'church in their house' (Romans 16:5). The church and the household were the centre of hospitality and fellowship in the early church.⁵

There are numerous references to households in the book of Acts and Paul's letters. The households of the gaoler and Lydia in Philippi, Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth and of Cornelius in Caesarea are referred to above. To these can be added that of Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, and Stephanus in Corinth.

Paul sent greetings in his letters to household churches in the homes of Priscilla and Aquila (Romans 16:5) and Nympha (Colossians 4:15).

Paul's letter to Philemon, though primarily private correspondence, was addressed nonetheless to 'Philemon, our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house'. A similar situation is probably to be inferred in Romans 16:15: 'Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them'.⁶

It is almost certain that every mention of a local church or of a church meeting, whether for worship or fellowship, is in actual fact a reference to a church meeting in a house.

Primitive Christianity structured its congregations in families, groups and 'houses'. The house was both a fellowship and a place of meeting. The house and family are the smallest natural groups in the total structure of the congregation.⁷

Since the Good News abolished all artificial distinctions based on race, sex and class, the Christian household became the communal unit at its best. Master and slave, husband and wife, Jew and Gentile, and parents and children became a unity in Christ (cf Galatians 3:28 Ephesians 2). This new-found unity of the communal unit formed the nucleus of the earliest Christian communities.

Public proclamation and household worship and instruction were integral parts of the dynamics of the early Christian mission, with the new unity of the extended family forming the nucleus of the community.

The early church followed their Lord's example in building one another up in the faith as they gathered in small intimate fellowships. This they balanced with witness to their communities in word and deed.

SMALL GROUPS IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

A third reason for us to seriously consider the role of small groups in enriching the life and witness of the church today is the place they had in the history of renewal in the church.

In the intervening history of the church, new spiritual life has been marked by the emergence of small groups. In the Middle Ages, amid a church which had grown fat

and short of breath through prosperity and muscle-bound by over-organisation, dynamic Christians such as St Francis of Assisi gathered in small groups for prayer and study, and training and service. They kept a flame burning amid the darkness of a decaying ecclesiasticism. Various sections of the Anabaptist movement in Europe formed dynamic house-centred groups. The Hutterites in Moravia, Southern Germany, lived out a New Testament-style community life, which had a far-reaching impact. George Fox brought fresh power to the church through the clusters of small groups which became known as the Religious Society of Friends. The Lutherans also used cells for nurturing.

From among the many vivid examples of clusters which could be identified, one movement stands alone. Its influence appears to far outshine any other single cell model. Literally hundreds of thousands of people participated. The groups are those which were at the heart of the Methodist revival.

Small Groups in the Methodist Revival

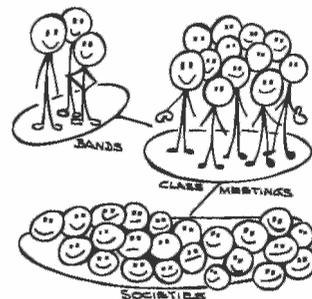
The first cell structure in Methodism was known as the **Bands**. Having seen their effective use by the Moravians, Wesley introduced them to provide opportunity for mutual confession to one another (based on the scriptural injunction of James 5:16), and to give encouragement and support in overcoming temptation and developing a Christian style of life. These weekly groups averaged about six members and generally were divided by age,

sex and marital status. Their open sharing focused on known sins committed, temptations met and dealt with and defining which thoughts, words and behaviour constituted sin or not.

Only about twenty per cent of Methodists belonged to these groups. A more intimate and searching

fellowship for those who were making significant progress were the **select bands** or **select societies**.

While membership of bands was optional, all Methodists were required to be members of a **Class**



Meeting, which built them into an on-going system of pastoral care. These were the core groups —the keystone of the movement. ‘The class meetings were not designed merely as Christian growth groups, however, or primarily as cells for *koinonia*, although in fact they did serve that function. Their primary purpose was discipline.’⁸ Each group consisted of ten to twelve people from the same neighbourhood, coming together weekly for an hour or so.

‘The leaders were lay people —some were men, but the majority were women — selected because of their high moral and spiritual character and common sense.’⁹ The leaders were accountable to the preacher. Leaders regularly reported concerning the sick and the progress, or otherwise, of each member of their groups.

‘The classes normally met one evening each week for an hour or so. Each person reported on his or her spiritual progress, or on particular needs or problems, and received the support and prayers of the others.’¹⁰

They had a clear evangelistic function, as people were converted during the meetings and those who had lapsed renewed their commitment to Christ. Wesley ‘wisely discerned that the beginnings of faith in a man’s heart could be incubated into saving faith more effectively in the warm Christian atmosphere of the society than in the chill of the world’.¹¹

These cells also served the purpose of collecting funds for work among the poor and to support the travelling preachers.

The class meetings brought many into the kingdom and established them in the faith, in an open fellowship of firm discipline balanced with grace and love. They provided a network across England, conserving the fruits of evangelism and consolidating a movement which was able to make a deep impact on the nation. The same system spread around the world, providing a similar role of evangelism and nurture in many countries.

‘Wesley discovered biblical equilibrium in at least four vital doctrines:

the acceptance of voluntary and corporate disciplines; mutual accountability; total commitment to the Lord for growth into holiness; an emphasis on the living relationships of believers to one another.’¹²

Writers such as Howard A Snyder (*The Radical Wesley*, Zondervan) and A Skevington Wood (*The Burning Heart*,

Paternoster Press), David Lowes Watson (*Accountable Discipleship* and *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, both Discipleship Resources) and models like the Covenant/Discipleship groups of the United Methodists in the USA, based on the class meeting, are helping people rediscover the genius of the early Methodist renewal groups.

The Methodist system shows the need for something more than merely prayer or study groups. It reveals the need for covenant, discipline and accountability of the group to the larger church body. It shows that some sort of committed small group structure needs to be practised for the continual renewal and vitality of the corporate church.¹³

Here then are three compelling reasons for looking again at the role small groups can play in being a significant means for the Holy Spirit to renew those who take their Christian discipleship seriously, bring new life into the corporate life of believers and empower them to be agents of change and healing in a world which has largely lost its way.

THE BASIC PURPOSES OF A CHRISTIAN GROUP

While we have learnt much about group process and techniques from the behavioural sciences and the specialists in group dynamics and the human potential movement, we need always to be aware that small groups which meet in the name of Christ will have goals which in many ways are quite different and distinctive. Frequently there will be similar purposes to those groups that are without a specific Christian orientation, but the means and the motivation of achieving them will be different. It is well to keep before a Christian group its basic purposes. These can be helpful objective criteria against which its shared life can be measured.

To worship and obey Christ

The prime purpose of all Christian community is to honour our Lord and God. ‘Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst’ (Matthew 18:20). Christ is central to each group — not to create a pleasant atmosphere or to increase the therapeutic qualities of the group, nor even to be a vague unifying factor in the fellowship. He is not there to be used, but to be worshipped and obeyed.

Our primary function is not to serve each other but to serve God. The church is not a collection of folk associated because they share a common interest in religion, but the fellowship of those whom God called into 'koinonia' (fellowship) with himself and with one another, through Christ. 'Koinonia' is a horizontal reference simply and solely because it has a vertical one.

The Lord's Prayer is a prayer for a group. Each request uses the plural, 'our'. Well we might pray when we come to 'hallowed be your name', 'may your name be honoured, made holy, in the midst of our small group and through us, collectively and individually, in our community'.



Paul's prayer for the Christians in the young church in Ephesus is a prayer for the leader of every Christian group to pray, '... that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that

you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God' (Ephesians 3:14-21).

The unique characteristic of a Christian fellowship should be the centrality of Jesus Christ. '... we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head ...' (Ephesians 4:15).

To live under the authority of God's word

'The Bible is the soil from which all Christian faith grows ... Christ meets us and speaks to us in the Bible ... Christians come from the Bible.'¹⁴

A prime purpose of Christian groups is to use all the means at their disposal to hear what the Bible is actually saying, in order to seek to discover the specific ways it applies to each individual's own situation and to support one another in helping that become a reality.

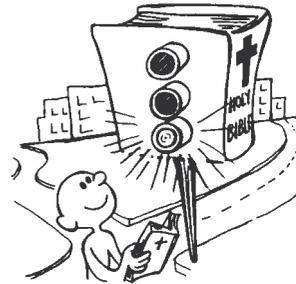
Lawrence Richards, in his discussion of such change in people, quotes from the *Handbook of Small Group Research* by A Paul Hore (p 287):

A whole series of studies shows that if one wishes to change attitudes and the subsequent behaviour of a group,

discussion and decision where all members participate as directly as possible tends to be more effective than 'enlightenment' or 'persuasion' by the lecture method.

Lawrence Richards goes on to say:

In giving this vital role to the small group I am not in the least suggesting we diminish the role of Scripture. Rather we place Scripture as central to the life of the small group. I do point out, however, that our normal method of teaching God's word (by sermon) has both communication limitations and also serious limitations on life-impact. Certainly I do not deny that the Holy Spirit uses the preached word. I only insist that he is much freer to use the word in a small group where it is studied and discussed together, and that this is one of God's purposes in creating the church.¹⁵



The whole gathered life of the group will also be lived out under the authority of the word of God. We need to seek to enrich the relationships within the group by obedience to what is learnt to be God's intention for his people as a community of faith.

Biblical data is primary for a Christian group but it is never sufficient by itself. Belief needs to be tied into experience. This book seeks to lead groups to develop sound knowledge and understanding of the Bible, but it also provides ways of helping that which is learnt to result in change.

To be havens of hope

Being structures of hope is a significant purpose of the small group. The great uncertainty of the future, at all levels of life, has produced an underlying anxiety. Thoughtful people are asking: 'Is there hope for humanity?' This is met by the cynicism of pessimists with a defeatist 'No!' But what of the Christian?

Gordon Cosby says:

... we must face the present situation and seek solutions in new global structures. As we live through the anxiety bordering on panic we must be aware of the temptations of sitting it out or to conform as much as possible or to withdraw from deep involvement with those who suffer. As

Christians we can exude hope as we remain close to our Lord. We must build structures of hope.

The social climate in which the Methodist small groups were born, in England, was characterised by loneliness, isolation, despair, alienation, changes in family patterns and rapid advances in technology. The class meetings provided refuges in which people could discover together



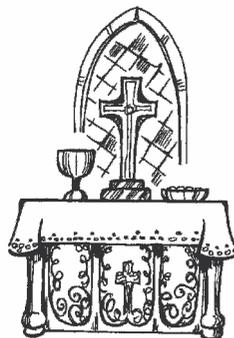
the 'God of hope' and a new confidence and strength to become 'apostles of hope' to their cheerless contemporaries.

Our present-day social climate, with its great similarities to that of eighteenth century England, provides fertile soil for similar disciplined Christian cells to again plant faith, hope and love. Small groups can be modern-day

'cities of refuge' (Numbers 35:6-28) to which the traumatised can flee to find a listening ear, an open door of acceptance and understanding, the security of a genuine caring community and a word of hope, as people explore the Scriptures with openness and expectancy in the presence and power of the living Christ.

To foster fellowship

Human beings are made for community and togetherness. However, what we are concerned about here is something special, namely that extraordinary fellowship that is spoken of and sometimes reflected in the New Testament. The Greek word commonly rendered as fellowship is 'koinonia'. It literally means the state of sharing, of being partners, of having common or mutual interests. Christians share together in Christ, in God's love through Christ, and together partake of the Holy Spirit. Because Christians participate by faith in Christ as their Lord and Saviour they are then, through the Holy Spirit



who dwells in them individually and collectively, empowered to participate in each other's lives in a deep, intimate, caring way through the benevolent, outgoing love which the Holy Spirit engenders in their lives.

This deep commitment to love each other is what Christ had in mind when he said, 'By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (John 13:25).

This distinguishing mark of true Christian fellowship will most likely not be rediscovered in large meetings, where the participants seldom have more intimate gatherings to complement these experiences. For in such situations the numbers gathered and the physical aspects of the building and seating arrangements prevent us from truly knowing each other. We cannot truly love in these gatherings in more than a relatively superficial manner because we are not able to be involved in each other's lives. In large congregations most must remain strangers. Few have opportunity to share themselves or feel free to be truly honest.

Lawrence Richards writes:

To learn to trust, and to become trustworthy — to learn to love, and to become loving — we must become deeply involved in the lives of others, to whom we commit ourselves in Christ. To develop this kind of relationship we need to share ourselves with others, and they need to share themselves with us. All of this demands time. More than this, it requires a face-to-face relationship. A relationship we can have only with a few others at one time. And thus a church is forced to move to a small group structure.¹⁶

We must reject solo Christianity as a rare exception rather than the rule. We are called to live out our Christian life in community.

It is as individuals that we enter into a permanent relationship with Christ . . . this personal relationship is lived out in fellowship with others; 'all of us are the parts of one body' (Ephesians 4:35 NEB). Group membership is not an optional extra for God's people. When a person responds in faith to Jesus Christ he is brought into relationship with others of God's people in that locality — he becomes a group member. This group, community, congregation or assembly of God's people, as it is conceived in the Old and New Testaments, is thus not viewed simply as a sociological phenomenon, for it is thought of primarily in terms of God's call.¹⁷

We are called into a special relationship with each other with privileges and responsibilities (Galatians 6:16; 1 Corinthians 16:1; Colossians 3:12-17). Mutual dependence and influence upon, and respect for, each other are required of those in 'the body of Christ'. And each small group is seen by Paul as being 'the body of Christ'. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews exhorts each believer not to avoid these opportunities for Christian nurture and worship.

... and let us think of one another and how we can encourage each other to love and to do good deeds. And let us not hold aloof from our church meetings, as some do. Let us do all we can to help one another's faith, and this the more earnestly as we see the final day drawing nearer (Hebrews 10:24,25, J B Phillips).

We are not saved in an isolated and individualistic fashion. Salvation brings us into close relationship with each other.

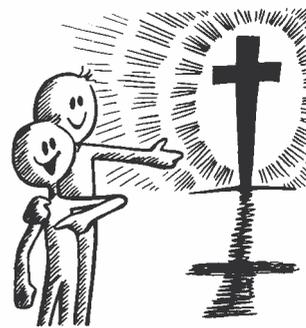
Browne Barr, in his lively and entertaining book *High Flying Geese*,¹⁸ uses a flock of geese in flight as an unusual, yet apt, metaphor of what the church ought to be. He tells how Canadian Blue Geese have been observed to fly 1700 miles in sixty hours non-stop. Part of the key to these remarkable flights is the formation flight of the birds, which improves their aerodynamic efficiency. Theoretically, twenty-five birds could have an increase of seventy per cent as compared with a single goose trying to do its own thing. Geese fly much faster in formation. It increases distance, speed and endurance.

In a framework of interdependent, supporting, caring relationships, greater degrees of achievement are possible. The Indonesian phrase *Gotong Royong*, 'carrying the load together', expresses well the aim of Christian fellowship.

To bring people to a living faith in Christ

Small groups are playing an important role in awakening and reawakening people to their need of Christ, and helping them make an unhurried, thoughtful, life transforming response to the gospel. The small, house-centred, neighbourhood group is bringing warmth and intimacy to evangelism, which was absent in most larger evangelistic gatherings in the past.

The sensitive small group committed to bringing people to faith in Christ can treat the hearers as persons,



respect their integrity, meet them at their point of present understanding, be involved long term with them and incorporate them into the group, to both give to and receive from the fellowship.

This book gives many practical suggestions, arising out of wide experience in the use of small groups for evangelism.

One way many groups keep continually before them their evangelistic purpose is through having an empty chair as an ever-present reminder that there are many as yet outside who are being prepared by the Holy Spirit to hear and respond in faith to the call of Christ. The group pray and work towards having people fill that empty chair.

The Prayer Triplet strategy, which was used with such success in the Mission England evangelism outreach, has now spread to many countries around the world. It involves three Christians meeting together regularly to pray for three of each of their unsaved friends. The aim of these Prayer Triplets is entirely evangelistic. However, as people come to faith in Christ, it also provides the framework to care for new Christians born through this intentional prayerful outreach.

To minister to each other

When the New Testament speaks of ministry in a local church, it is a ministry of all believers to each other. In the passage quoted earlier from Hebrews chapter 10, the exhortation is not to avoid gathering together, because we have a responsibility to minister to each other. When 'two or three' or more disciples are gathered, Christ is there ministering through each to the other, encouraging one another's faith. Each is potentially a minister, as well as one who also must be prepared to be ministered to by others in the group. Each is potentially a stimulator of the faith of the others, as well as a learner.

Every true Christian believer is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Peter's great Pentecost sermon climaxed with, 'Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall

receive the gift of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 2:38). Among the many aspects of the Holy Spirit's ministry, in and through each Christian, is the formation of a Christlike character ('fruits') and the equipping for ministry ('gifts'). Every true follower of Christ has at least one spiritual gift. In such passages as 1 Peter 4:9f, 1 Corinthians chapters 12 to 14 (12:4-31, 14:26) and Romans 12:4-8, the key features of ministry are that each Christian disciple has a gift, a special ability from God. There are varied gifts and accompanying ministries. These gifts are to be used for 'the common good'.

Spiritual gifts are given for ministry — to build fellow Christians up in Christ, to serve others and to bring them to faith in Christ. The Christian growth groups play an important role in helping members discover their gifts, to affirm these gifts as a group and to help in the development and use of these gifts.



Small groups provide situations in which mutual ministry can take place. Only a small number can minister in a large gathering and then only in a fairly superficial manner to each individual. The majority are denied an opportunity to exercise their ministry to the gathered church.

As we are each affirmed, instructed and encouraged in our respective ministries, we become agents of the grace of God within the fellowship of other Christians and out in a hurting world which has lost its way. Enabling each other's spiritual growth is an essential aspect of each Christian's ministry within the body. Spiritual growth is concerned with change in ideas and in belief systems. But rightly understood, it is essentially concerned with character change — transformation of attitudes, of values and of personality, which are socially anchored. They are learnt through associating with others. They cannot be developed in isolation. For this new set of attitudes, values and behaviour, Christian disciples need a social anchor. They need a viable, authentic, supportive, accepting group in which the word of God is studied and lived out by its members, individually and collectively.

An aspect of a small group's function in enabling

ministry to each other is corporate accountability. This, as we have seen, was an essential dimension of all the small groups in early Methodism. Wesley believed all Christians need to counterbalance each other (in practical ways) with instruction, support, encouragement and accountability. Many contemporary groups, to varying degrees, now have agreed covenants. Some are simple; others have exacting expectations. (We deal with this in more detail later.) Some kind of accountability is mandatory if growth is to take place. Where there is no stated expectation of growth, it is unlikely to occur. Spiritual growth is more likely to take place where there is wise and balanced instruction, encouragement, prayerful support, exhortation and rebuke, all exercised in a framework of mercy and grace.

A distinctive new emphasis in small groups today is not upon each person using the group to meet his or her own personal needs, but to make oneself accessible and available to God and to the members of one's group. That is having our gifts set free by God, to minister to the needs of the other person and the world.

To prepare each other for mission in the world

The final dimension of group function is the preparation of its members for mission in the world. A group can become ingrown. It can become exclusive rather than inclusive. One of the common criticisms of small groups is that they can so easily become 'holy huddles', 'self-righteous cliques' or 'self-improvement societies'. The group experience can be so absorbing that the needs of others are neglected. A group which is alive in the Spirit will seek together to live God's word, resulting in an overflow of love to others.

'To neglect the social is to be more "spiritual" than Jesus Christ had been . . . The core of the gospel was not that the Word became Spirit, but that the Word became flesh and this meant that the gospel had to be expressed in very human terms, in terms of social action, in terms of flesh and blood. Words alone were not enough.'¹⁹

As Elizabeth O'Connor puts it so well, we need to be



engaged at the same time in both ‘an inward and an outward journey’. The inward journey is marked by a sense of holy obedience and openness to the fresh instruction of Christ each time the group gathers. The outward journey is marked by an increasing sensitivity to suffering and to an intelligent effort to eliminate as much as is humanly possible.

The devotional experience and the social concern of the group, far from being in conflict, actually require each other in order to produce a healthy, balanced fellowship. ‘Our love should not be just words and talk; it must be true love, which shows itself in action’ (1 John 3:18). As James says, ‘My brothers! What good is it for a man to say, “I have faith”, if his actions do not prove it? Can that faith save him? Suppose there are brothers or sisters who need clothes and don’t have enough to eat. What good is there in saying to them, “God bless you! Keep warm and eat well!”, if you don’t give them the necessities of life? This is how it is with faith: if it is alone and has no actions with it, then it is dead’ (James 2:14-17).

All too often groups can replay the roles of the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan, limiting their primary interest to personal salvation and personal holiness.

Small groups can play an important role in helping us hear and respond in practical ways to the cry of our suffering brothers and sisters in our alienated, hurting world. Serious reflection at depth on social issues, both in the immediate community and on a global level, linked with thoughtful action and accountability, is an essential part of true spirituality. An unhealthy imbalance creeps into a group when either the local or the world aspects of human need are neglected.

Groups in which I have been involved lived out their mission by planned regular visitation of the sick and shut-in, and providing accommodation for the homeless, refugee and those in crisis. Others were available to undertake special projects for their local church by becoming core groups, facilitating day-care centres and an outreach coffee shop.

One parish in a new housing area had all of its groups organised to provide neighbourhood support, irrespective of religious affiliation. They welcomed newcomers who moved into their area by providing a few meals while they unpacked, and then helped them get oriented to the

area. They also kept alert to special needs, due to sickness or bereavement, providing back-up in practical ways.

Some headed up recycling programs. Others organised charity doorknock appeals for their areas. Some raised funds to support an orphan or needy child in other countries.

Field trips were made by some groups, accompanied by a person in the caring professions, to poverty areas in their own communities and centres caring for drug addicts, alcoholics and those who were homeless. They linked this with a reflective and action-oriented process.

But this local concern needs to be balanced with the global dimension of human need. Groups provide ideal situations to wrestle with the problems of injustice, poverty, the arms build-up, responsible use of our resources, and the other deep issues which cause suffering and threaten our very existence.

Some groups build into their programs times to view videos of some of these issues or hear guest speakers. Two members of one group going overseas for vacation carefully planned into their itineraries (with the help of Christian aid agencies) visits to developing countries, to observe human suffering first hand. On their return, the group struggled with the issues and their role in making adequate responses.

A SMALL-GROUP CHURCH

Most churches are churches with small groups. They give varying degrees of commitment to small groups but they are not considered the backbone of their life and ministry. Small groups are an adjunct, something added to the main program. In a Small-Group Church they are the primary constituent of all that the church does — its very heartbeat. It thinks and breathes small groups. Discipling, equipping people for ministry, intercessory prayer, pastoral care, mission are all essential aspects of the network of small groups which embrace the majority of the congregation. It also uses small-group methods in the way it conducts its committees, much of its outreach, pastoral care, and most other activities. Fulltime pastoral staff have as their sole responsibility the overseeing of the small groups and the continual development and support of the existing and emerging leadership.

With its emphasis on prayer and small-group body life, Yoido Full Gospel Central Church in Seoul, Korea, under the leadership of Dr Paul Yonggi Cho, is widely recognised as the contemporary forerunner of a new strategy of church life. In every continent, churches are increasingly turning to New Testament models and principles of small-group-based structures for equipping of disciples and release into ministry. While wide variations certainly exist, the similarities to John Wesley's 'Methodism' movement with its class meetings and nurture of leaders are quite obvious.

The **Meta Church** model is a prominent example of this way of doing small groups. This new and rapidly growing movement was first documented by Carl George in the USA, largely based on the work of Bob Logan^c, 'Meta', from the Greek, implying a changed way of doing church.

They contrast sharply with 'Mega' churches with their emphasis on big buildings, big programs, and big name preachers.

In the Meta Church the ministry is in the hands of the laity. The staff see their central role as 'equipping the saints for the work of ministry'. Small groups, rather than large gatherings, are recognised as providing the best context for transformation. The vision opens up a new flexibility and adaptability. Authentic church growth results from multiplication of the small groups through division or planting new groups. Significant emphasis is placed on the continual recruitment, training, and support of new leaders.

Another important strategy is that of the **Cell Church**. Ralph Neighbour^d, a key facilitator in this movement, has written extensively about his success with these neighbourhood cell churches, each of which takes full responsibility for its own life. Everything which happens in a church happens in a home. The emphasis is upon spontaneity to meet immediate needs of group members, compared with more programmed gatherings. Local halls and the like are used for celebrations of clusters of cells, which avoids the extensive costs of building large assembly halls. The only building requirement when the cells multiply is a resource centre for coordination and training. Many of the 'Meta Church' examples use this strategy for celebration meetings as well. Both these models reflect a strategy to base the church life on a small

group foundation. In other words, to belong to the church implies belonging to a small group. Ministry expression is discovered and exercised through a variety of small groups.

There is also a variation between these models. The Meta Church system concentrates a little more on the priority and time given to leader support and building a sense of community. In contrast, the Cell Church model proposed by Ralph Neighbour is more explicit in its mission/evangelism orientation. This may be easier to implement in a new church plant situation, where a stronger outreach ministry philosophy is possible, and perhaps necessary.

The Cell Church Model is probably a more radical way of using small groups for those in mainstream denominations. But God is using it in different forms in many countries. Its emphasis is on equipping its members through training, modelling, and encouragement to put into practice what they have learnt, enabling busy people to spend more time to minister in outreach. Inclusion of the whole family, well-organised oversight, and using existing community facilities, thus freeing up finances to invest in people, are very attractive to many who have often felt restricted through some inappropriate, high-maintenance, debt-laden buildings.

Both Meta Church and Cell Church models are well developed in areas of Australia. **Church Resources Ministry Australia**^e promote the Meta Church strategy through their staff and resources. The Australian Small Group Network includes many partners with experience in the application of these models in Australia.

A word of caution about any new strategy developed in another country and then planted in our own. Our culture is different from the cultures where these two models have emerged. The Australian church has suffered a lot from rigid transplants. The vision may be unchanged, but under the guidance of the Holy Spirit we need to enculturise the strategy. From my observations, most who are helping to facilitate these new models in our country are sensitive to our unique situation.

Both the Meta Church and the Cell Group Church are making a growing impact on the world church. However, many are locked into the mainstream church, which may preclude early or full consideration of these options. I have ministered in isolated rural, urban, and inner-city

parishes and have given half of my ministry to training ordained and non-ordained leaders in all denominations, as well as many parachurch movements, so I understand both the great possibilities and frustrations of parish ministry.

You may not be in a position to develop a small group church. However, this book can help you do much better what you are already doing, by using small groups more effectively.

Small groups represent a tremendous potential in the kingdom of our God. The modern small-group movement is no longer in its infancy — it is coming of age.

Christians are rediscovering the important place of small groups in growing the church in both quantity and quality. In small groups, people are experiencing something of the intimacy and challenge of the band of young men who responded to Christ's call to share his life and ministry.

It is my prayer that the following chapters will give some practical help to those who are open to the new quiet movement of the Holy Spirit, in which Christ-centred small groups are playing a major role in bringing new life to the church, and faith and hope to the world.

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- (16) ibid
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Notes

- (a) The National Church Life Survey, conducted in 1991, is a unique research project to assist churches in relating to the wider community by researching trends in congregational life and mission. It provides specific data for individual congregations to evaluate and plan for their own unique situation. Major publications, indicating overall trends in church life, include:
First Look in the Mirror, 1992.
Winds of Change, Lancer, 1994.
Views From the Pews, Openbook, 1995.
Mission Under the Microscope, Openbook, 1995.
- (b) The Australian Small Group Network links Christian leaders from all denominations across Australia. Its vision is to maximise the impact upon the church and nation of Christian small groups. The motto is: 'Catching the wind of the Spirit'. It seeks to identify where and how the Spirit of God is at work — sometimes in the most unlikely places — and communicate this to encourage and inform others. It is unearthing some hidden treasures! For information regarding training and resources, contact: Ray Nicholls, PO Box 410, Carlingford NSW 2118, or John Mallison, 49 Dickson Avenue, West Ryde, 2114.

- (c) SAILS is a monogram describing the purpose of the Australian Small Group Network leaders cassettes: Some Aussie Ideas for Leaders of Small groups. The cassettes are formatted in 10–15 minute segments for busy leaders listening on their own or during in-service training segments in leaders meetings. Four cassettes are produced each year.
- (d) Serendipity Christian Resources Australia: GPO Box 2944, Adelaide 5001.
- (e) Key writings on Meta Church:
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STUDY GUIDE

- 1 What has been one of God's surprises for you in a small group?
- 2 In what ways has belonging to a small group been helpful to you in your Christian growth and ministry?
- 3 If your church followed Christ's strategy for ministry by putting most of its time and resources into discipling a small number of people, how would it be different from the average church?
- 4 Christ chose a 'diverse and most unlikely' group to develop as the foundation of the church. List some of their characteristics. What surprises and encourages you about this group?
- 5 To be with him'. What were Christ's two main reasons?
- 6 In what ways did the early church follow Christ's strategy?
- 7 The keystone of the early Methodist movement was the Class Meeting. Discuss its primary purpose and leadership OR What would it have been like to belong to a Class Meeting?
- 8 Which of the Basic Purposes of a Christian Group are most and least evident in your group?
- 9 How do you respond to the section, 'The Small Group Church'?

THE RANGE OF SMALL GROUPS

‘... the growing church must build an ever-broadening array of cell groups with different focuses, different target groups, and different operating strategies.’¹

Like the well-known Swiss Army knives, small groups can be used for a variety of purposes in many different situations with great effect. Small groups can play an important role in all stages of making Christian disciples, from the initial contact right through to in-depth groups for highly motivated Christians who want to take the lordship of Jesus Christ seriously in every area of their lives.



In the main, if small groups are in any way vital they have one common factor: they exist to meet the needs of the people involved. Because individual needs differ greatly so do the range of groups which have emerged to meet these needs. In a real sense they cannot be ranked in order of importance. A group finds validity in its ability to meet the needs of the persons involved. As Carl George says in his book, *Prepare Your Church for the Future*, he believes that small groups are essentially for pastoral care despite their stated purpose.

However, in the Christian church, we have our needs met, we are pastored, we are blessed in order that we may be a blessing to others. The focus can never solely be upon our own enrichment, it must extend to others; nurture and mission are inseparable in the New Testament.²

AN OVERVIEW OF TYPES OF SMALL GROUPS

Some of the more common categories of small groups found in the Christian church are given here. In practice they have their own unique characteristics.

Task groups

These groups have a specific function to fulfil which does not necessarily involve the personal needs of its members. They are usually set up to undertake some task, eg a committee set up to plan, oversee or initiate an activity.

Friendship groups

Designed to establish relationships in an unstructured setting, these groups set their own pace and type of

activity. Generally they are self-selective and meet for fun and pleasure. They are self-supportive in a social way.

Interest groups

People meet in these groups who have a common interest in developing manual, relational, educational or social skills.

Discussion groups

These may be short or long-term programs. Generally books that consider biblical, historical, theological, sociological, psychological and other current affairs are studied to use as a starting point for discussion.

Bible study groups

Along with the traditional 'prayer meetings', these groups were common in the church prior to the emergence of the present small-group movements in the last few decades. Unfortunately many of them became purely academic in their approach, often not seeking to explore the relevance of the Scriptures for real-life situations. The form of Bible study group proposed in this book is entirely different from most of these old-style groups which generally used a didactic approach, the leader giving a lecture with little or no participation by the members.

Personal development groups

These take many different forms, but there is essentially a clear contract entered into among members and deep levels of trust and openness required. Some Yoke-Fellow groups are a good example, where individual self-evaluation forms are completed then evaluated by a clinical psychologist. This information then becomes the basis for the individual's work within the supportive framework of the group.

Support groups

These are usually for people who are experiencing high levels of stress. Pressures, doubts, fears, successes, failures, etc are shared with others who care enough to listen and offer sensitive feedback and support.

Recovery groups

Recovery groups are formed to help people regain control of their lives after experiencing extremely

traumatic experiences. They operate at a deeper level than most support groups and therefore require skilled facilitators.²

Orientation groups

Many churches gather newcomers into one-off or short-term groups to make them feel welcome and help them find their bearings in their new situation. One of the pastoral staff, an elder, and an established member are involved. The program usually includes time to get acquainted, introduction to the church's mission statement, information about the church's range of activities and key personnel, and a meal together. A sample small group experience, similar to others in the church's Small Group Network, or a visit to a regular group, is often included.

Koinonia groups

The name comes from the Greek word for fellowship or oneness, so these groups are concerned with developing authentic Christian community, where a Christian lifestyle can develop. They usually incorporate prayer, study, sharing, personal growth and outreach. Their level of depth will vary greatly. This type of group goes under many other names, such as Home Bible Fellowships, Discipleship groups, Covenant groups and Class Meetings. More recently there are developing Covenant Discipleship groups of deeply committed people prepared to submit themselves to be accountable with a demanding covenant relationship.

Evangelism groups

These groups use a variety of strategies to present the gospel and give people an opportunity to come to a personal faith in Christ. They are often part of a wider program.

Prayer groups

These have intercessory prayer as their main ministry. Well before the present extensive use of small groups the midweek prayer meeting was commonplace in many churches. Unfortunately many of those were ingrown or stereotyped, but that does not mean that all of them were ineffective.

Mission groups

These exist to serve the church and outside community in a specific way. There is a commitment to maintenance of the group life and meeting personal needs, but with the purpose of making the group more effective in coming to grips with urgent issues, with which the group becomes deeply involved.

Christian education groups

There is a wide range of possibilities for the use of small groups in a variety of learning situations. Lesson plans using inductive or reactive methods will include small-group work and plenary feedback in the learning venue at various stages to build relationships, share life experiences, gather additional information, work through issues, and explore relevance for life and work situations. Assignments, other out-of-class study, and fieldwork is often best done in small clusters.

Those attending major conferences maximise their learning through forming back-home support cells so that, prior to the conference, others can help them select electives and identify the areas in which they will seek help at the conference from conference leaders and other participants. The group helps them to formulate questions for which they will seek answers and to list the kind of resources they will review or purchase at the conference resource centre.

This cell also provides a prayer base and support for the family and other ongoing commitments. It also can assist with raising funds for the participant's costs. Following the conference the group helps in exploring the application of the learning to the back-home situation.

SOME GENERAL DISTINCTIONS

Groups form and operate in many different ways. It helps to be aware of this.

Spontaneous groups

These groups commence as two or more people become aware that they have a common need and decide to meet together to help each other address that need. A number of groups to which I have belonged commenced this way. A group of clergy, with whom I have met over an

extended time, began because one day one of the present members shared with me the struggle he was having in his ministry. My response was: 'I'm walking a similar road; let us walk together'. Over a period we discovered others who felt the same way, and we have now continued to meet over a number of years with some changeover of membership.

Single cells

The above groups, which form spontaneously, generally remain isolated cells, frequently with no official link to church structures. While this allows for greater flexibility, because of lack of accountability to a broader body they can develop in an unhealthy way, becoming introverted, isolated and having an inadequate understanding of Christian faith and practice. However, this is by no means the case with all such separate groups, as many have rescued those who have become disillusioned, overlooked or rejected by the established church.

Multi-cell networks

Clusters of groups linked together by a common purpose and loyalty are generally associated with a local church, parish or an organisation formed to provide an association of groups with common goals. In my own parishes we formed different networks of cells for youth and adults. I shared my vision with the congregations and, more particularly, with a small group of deeply committed people. This small group and I then took the initiative to awaken a sense of need and discovered those who were aware of their needs. We next took steps to develop an overall plan, select and train leaders and then gather people into a network of groups.

Covenant groups

These groups are for those with a serious commitment to the goals of the group. While the degree and extent of the covenants may vary, underlying each is a willingness to operate under spiritual disciplines which facilitate a deeper level of involvement and accountability to each other. The Bible study growth group, which is a special focus of this book, usually has an agreed covenant (see chapter 3, pages 34, 35, 36, and appendix F, for more about covenants).

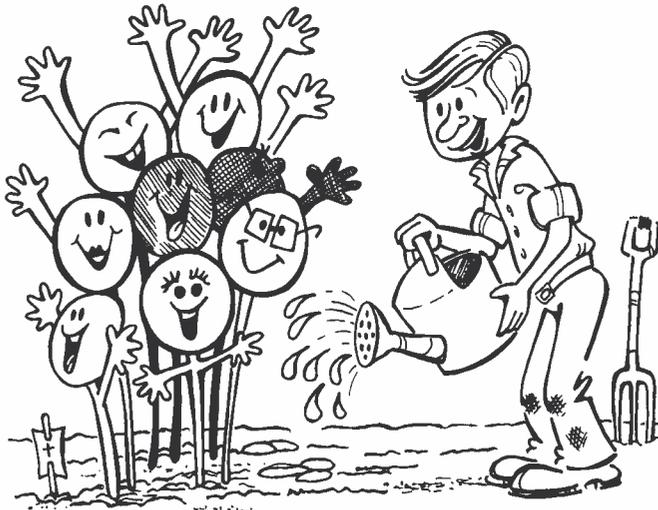
Professor David Lowes Watson^b has developed

Covenant Discipleship Groups in the United Methodist Church in the USA based on his research into the Methodist Class meeting, which had the development of disciplined discipleship as its primary purpose. Groups are trained to develop their own covenants and openly report on their spiritual progress. Support and prayer surrounds those with particular needs or problems. These have been experimented with in Australia with varying degrees of success.⁶

Non-covenant groups

These groups have no in-depth expectation of their members and are not governed by a covenant. There may be an agreement to meet regularly and to contribute to the group's life in some way but not with the same expectations of covenant groups. The friendship and social groups are examples of this type of group.

BASIC GROUPS FOR CHURCH GROWTH AND RENEWAL



This book is concerned principally with a small number of inter-related types of groups, which have proved to be foundational for the emergence of the new church in the latter half of the twentieth century.

I have itemised seven basic groups, though the Bible study growth group often fulfils the functions of many of these other groups.

Stages of spiritual growth

In diagram No. 1, the upper series of boxes represent the stages of physical life. The first, the pre-natal period from conception to birth, and the second stage, the birth experience, is followed by the short-term care in the hospital nursery. The final box relates to on-going growth, ideally in the supportive context of a caring family.

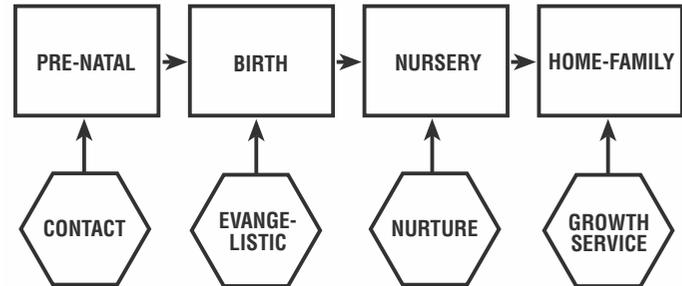


Diagram No. 1: Groups for Different Stages of Spiritual Life

This diagram can also represent the stages of spiritual life, the first being the 'pre-evangelism' stage when friendships are formed with unbelievers, during which availability and caring concern are some of the characteristics of the relationship. In addition there will be a modelling of the faith to them through a Christian lifestyle, a sensitive verbalising of the gospel at appropriate times and a genuine love, which all help the person begin to become aware of God and to take him seriously. The second refers to the evangelism stage, where people have the gospel clearly presented to them and are called to repentance and faith. Those who respond experience the 're-birth' of the Spirit. These new 'babes in Christ' need special nurture to become established in their relationship to God and to the community of faith. Continuing growth in Christ then takes place within the fellowship of other believers.

Four basic groups which relate to these phases in spiritual life are shown in diagram No. 1. The first two are bridge groups into an 'owned' faith experience, and the others provide orientation and continuing growth once a person has made a commitment to Christ.

Contact groups

Contact groups seek to develop deeper relationships, usually with unbelievers, who are contacted on a regular or irregular basis, such as neighbours, people at work, and other contacts within the community. They are low-key informal groups, for the purpose of getting to know others better. The number attending should not exceed sixteen, although more may need to be invited to attain this number. They are essentially bridge groups to offer friendship, with no strings attached. Each meeting is complete in itself, with no planned further meetings. Usually they are organised by a couple in their own home, or two or three individuals.

The emphasis is upon informality with plenty of time for unstructured conversation. Most groups use a simple non-threatening get-acquainted game, such as the game of Interviews (see appendix A), during the meeting. Anything which may make uncommitted guests feel uneasy, such as prayer, planned discussion of Christian matters or religious background music, are avoided. However, one needs to be prepared to be surprised by the issues which may arise naturally in the dialogue throughout the evening, which could lead to the related talk of things of God and opportunities for personal witness.

The groups have been held mostly in the evening with supper (coffee/tea and dessert) being served. Leaders need to be alert for expressions of interest in spiritual matters which can be followed up. More than once there has been an expressed desire to meet again, which has resulted in a continuing group exploring subjects raised during the original meeting. (See Contact Groups in chapter 8.)

These 'pre-evangelism' groups can be a stepping stone to the next type of group, with the whole group, or those who have shown an openness, being invited.

Evangelism groups

These can be isolated groups organised by two or three people, or part of a wider program. Again they meet in homes but are more intentional, being designed to permit a clear presentation of the gospel, either in the form of a brief address or two lay people sharing their faith story. In both cases the input is followed by discussion, an

illustrated explanation of how to make a commitment to Christ and opportunity to respond. (See chapter 8, 'Sharing the Good News Together', for practical ideas we have proved to be effective in these groups.)

Nurture groups

Initial help for beginners in the Christian life to reorientate their lives to a Christian style of living is provided through Nurture groups which meet for six to eight weeks. These are the kindergarten groups of the Christian community, aiming to make the members feel accepted and loved, celebrating together their new-found faith, assisting them to understand their new commitment to Christ, and giving them some basic help in surviving and beginning to 'grow up into Christ'. (See chapter 9, 'Caring for New Christians Together'.)

Bible study growth groups

I use the name Bible Study Growth Groups because of the significant place given to the exploration of the meaning and relevance of the Bible for everyday living, individually and collectively, and the concern to grow mature, dynamic followers of Jesus Christ.

This type of group covers a broad spectrum of groups which study the Scriptures, have similar goals and have different degrees of commitment. They are variously known as Koinonia (fellowship) Groups, Growth Groups, Covenant Groups, Home Bible Fellowships, Discipleship Cells. Some small house churches also fit into this category.

Some operate outside church structures, but often develop loose links with similar groups. These, despite disillusionment with the church, are committed to its renewal and loyally minister through their local churches.

They have varying degrees of commitment to developing spiritual gifts and leadership skills of their members, through involving all in different leadership roles within the group. The leaders of these groups, on the whole, see themselves as 'playing coaches' and are not solo-performers. They play a facilitating role, are resource persons with a degree of maturity, and are open to learn from and with the group.

Covenants generally play an important role in these groups, being an indication of serious commitment to the group, its goals, and the common disciplines it believes

will enable the members to meet these goals (see chapter 3, 'Keys for Effective Small Groups' and appendix F).

The following are also found with different levels of emphasis:

Praise and creative worship.

The development of active listening and in-depth relationships.

Growth in Christian discipline.

Intercession for each other and people and situations outside the group.

A desire to see people won to Christ through the group and personal witness.

A new openness to the supernatural through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Pastoral care for one another between meetings.

Availability for various forms of service within the local church.

Concern for social issues.

The groups that are playing a significant role in church growth have a clear growth to the point where they divide, usually in a twelve-month period.

These Growth Groups provide the cutting edge of a Christian community. Usually the dynamics for evangelistic and social concern and for care come from them and they are generally the seed-beds for personnel, for leadership, and for all the actions in the name of Christ which occur in that locality. The staff for the Contact, Nurture, and Mission Groups will be drawn from these types of groups. In communistic terms, these are the cadres of the Christian church. They provide the potential to develop to the point where they are comprised of disciplined, dedicated, trained people, who will provide the cutting edge for the mission of Christ in the world.

Most of the keys in chapter 3 apply to this type of group.

Growth group leaders cell

Where there is a network of Growth Groups, this leaders cell is the key to keeping the groups dynamic. While the highest goal for the Growth Groups is for them to grow to the point where they become true in-depth Christian cadres, the leaders group should model this depth of commitment to Christ and the continuous extension of his kingdom.

This cell is the hub of a Christian community. It will involve leaders of all the Growth Groups and possibly other leaders as well.

Where there are more than twelve leaders, they should meet in smaller groups but organise times for all of the leaders to meet to build a sense of unity. Frequency of the meetings varies, but most find it necessary to meet monthly, especially in the early stages of a multi-cell program. (See chapter 3, pages 42 and 43 for more on leaders groups.)

Prayer groups

While many old-style prayer meetings were dull, stereotyped experiences, today there have emerged new vital prayer cells, where people are taught to pray, creative methods are used, and short prayers and a positive spirit are encouraged. In many there is a new understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit and a dependence upon his empowering. (See chapter 13, 'Praying Together'.)

A relatively new and most effective form of prayer cell is known as:

Prayer Triplets

Prayer Triplets is a prayer strategy which was one of the most significant factors in the success of Mission England in 1984-85. Brian Mills shares his vision of this simple, flexible scheme in his book *Three Times Three Equals Twelve* (Kingsway), which is available in Australia as *Prayer Triplets* (Anzea).

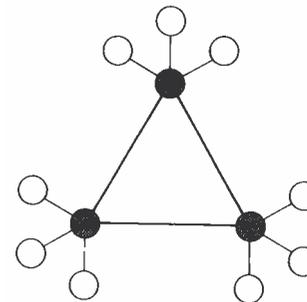


Diagram No. 2: Prayer Triplets

Prayer Triplets involves Christians getting together into groups of three to pray for a total of nine of their non-Christian neighbours and friends.

By the time Billy Graham arrived for his three-month preaching tour in England, an estimated 30 000 triplet groups had been formed, praying by name for a staggering 279 000 people.

Triplets met in colleges and schools, in places of work and in institutions. Some were neighbourhood based,

others were church based. All ages were involved. It is reported that three eight-year-old boys formed a Prayer Triplet! Those involved became part of the answer to their own prayers, as they felt encouraged and supported to share their faith with those for whom their whole group prayed regularly. Many of these prayer groups turned into nurture groups, as those won to Christ found those who had prayed for them their first point of reference.

Among the factors which contributed to the effectiveness of Prayer Triplets, Brian Mills lists:

The praying is outgoing rather than inward looking.

Prayer is specific. People are prayed for by name; day-to-day needs are upheld with a special focus upon them becoming Christians.

Those praying feel motivated and supported to share their faith with those for whom they pray.

Relationships deepen, confidence grows, faith is strengthened, spiritual growth takes place and a close bond develops. The group provides an effective framework for sharing, mutual support, encouragement and warm accountability.

Expectancy levels begin to rise as faith deepens, understanding of the meaning of prayer takes place, and the strong help the weak.

It is biblical. Matthew 18:19,20 is acted upon: 'If two of you on earth agree about anything, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.'

The Prayer Triplet strategy is now being used extensively in evangelistic outreach around the world.

Frequency and life

The Contact and Evangelism groups I have used have usually been one-meeting groups held from time to time. The Nurture groups are short-term, usually covering a six-week period. Bible study growth groups meet over an extended period, usually weekly, by terms, and divide when an agreed number is exceeded. The intercessory prayer cells prove to be most regular and long term, meeting weekly in most cases for up to forty or more weeks per year. (See the section on the life cycle of a group in chapter 6 and the termination of a group, chapter 16.)

OTHER SIGNIFICANT GROUPS

These groups will indirectly affect church growth and renewal so I have listed them separately.

Support groups

While members will experience significant care in Bible Study Growth Groups, some may feel the need to meet with others who are peers or experiencing similar pressures. Bible study will play a role in these groups but the group's main attention is upon open sharing, discussion of problems in the context of prayer, and pastoring of one another, usually in pairs between group meetings.

Christians seeking to live out a Christian witness in their professions, in various forms of public office, in unions and in their work place are often at risk and would benefit from the opportunity to share the pressures they experience in a small supportive group, where they are able to struggle together with issues and find personal and spiritual support. For a number of years I belonged to such a group of business people and politicians which was part of a world network. One of the questions which these groups constantly struggle with is: 'What will it involve for me to live under the lordship of Jesus Christ in every area of my life (family, daily occupation, church, leisure, "neighbours")?' 

The Pittsburgh Experiment in the USA, commenced by Bishop Sam Shoemaker, has a long successful track record in facilitating these groups for businessmen and women, the unemployed, and those in a variety of other situations.

Clergy, their spouses and others in full-time Christian ministry are in vulnerable, often fairly isolated situations, where they need opportunities to meet, especially with peers, to share and pray together. This type of continuing group plays a major role in my own life and witness.

I belong to two groups of mainly clergy which meet for breakfast in homes. One has met twice each month

over many years with changes to membership mainly due to moves to other areas. All are close to my own age with most in key positions in our State Synod. This group organises the large Annual Synod prayer breakfast. The other is smaller, with members younger than myself, and meets most weeks. Open sharing and prayer are the main components of both. All find empathetic support, often in times of great need.

Those attending special training events away from their local church often do not maximise the experience because they are not helped to thoughtfully anticipate the opportunities for learning both formally and informally at the event. Many then fail to transfer the learning to their back-home situations. As indicated under **Christian Education Groups** earlier in this chapter, a small support group can play an important role to help a person get the most out of these opportunities to learn.

Over the years I have discovered a wide variety of these groups across our nation, mainly meeting with peers over meals or suppers, gathering together those with common needs and concerns and a desire to live an authentic Christian lifestyle: judges and magistrates, businessmen and women, professionals, manual workers, seniors, young people, young mothers, parents, singles, newly-weds, all meeting to support and encourage others on a similar journey. Honest interaction, compassionate concern for each other both during and between meetings, discovery of guidance and hope in a brief encounter with the Bible, and believing prayer are the main components.

Spiritual formation groups

Richard Foster's best-selling book *Celebration of Discipline* encouraged many to seek a deeper spirituality. However, frustration was experienced by many due to lack of intentionality and balance.

Foster teamed with James Bryan Smith to develop what has proved to be an effective small-group model, similar to that used by John Wesley in eighteenth-century England.

These spiritual formation groups, which are proving so effective in nurturing a balanced spirituality, have become known as **Renovare** groups (from the Latin, meaning 'to renew').

They are based on the five spiritual dimensions that we see in the early church and later movements:

- Contemplative: The Prayer-filled Life
- Holiness: The Virtuous Life
- Charismatic: The Spirit-empowered Life
- Social Justice: The Compassionate Life
- Evangelical: The Word-centred Life

When all five of these traditions are active in the church, they bring balance and wholeness to the Christian life and mission.

These form the basis of the Renovare group covenant. Mutual accountability helps maximise this group agreement, facilitating balance and wholeness under the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

The manual is *A Spiritual Formation Group Workbook* and the major resource is the *Devotional Classics*. Both are by Richard Foster and James Bryan Smith and were published by Harper San Francisco in 1993.^d

Mission/Action groups

A group of people with a common concern for issues within the church or community bind together to study the issue, alert others to the need, explore solutions and take appropriate action. Community issues often include injustice, hardship and environmental matters. These groups work on the basis that there is strength in numbers. Among the common projects that such groups in my parishes have set up are: a mobile domiciliary nursing service, language classes for migrants, a drug advisory service, senior citizens' club, a pre-school kindergarten, an aged care hostel, and the city wide youth service described above.

Recovery groups

Recovery groups have an important role to play in the rehabilitation of those who have experienced distressing emotional upheavals in their lives. The wide range of loss experiences, such as bereavement, loss of health, loss of a steady occupation, relocation with loss of familiar and secure surroundings and friends, etc, produce harrowing reactions which prevent people from being in control of their lives. Intense traumatic feelings and inability to manage their lives are also experienced by those coping with various forms of abuse. Those who have lost control of their consumption of alcohol, their gambling and spending habits, all experience horrific emotional turmoil as they struggle to regulate their lives.

Recovery groups for people experiencing similar problems help them work through their woundedness and loss of control as they come to understand their pain, get in touch with their feelings, discover adequate coping mechanisms and explore realistic options for their future. The leaders for these groups not only need to be skilled group facilitators, but also to have understanding of the particular problems and ways of helping. Recovery group leaders need not be professionals, but must be well trained. Sensitive leaders with a strong, realistic Christian faith can bring the unseen divine dimension of strength, healing and hope into these groups.

‘At Home’ groups

This is a strategy my wife and I developed in our parish ministry to help build a deeper sense of community within our congregations. Different people were invited in small clusters to our home over an extended period, in an effort to foster deeper relationships in the congregations. These groups were also used on a continuing basis to help orient newcomers. More detail on these groups and how to organise them is given in chapter 15 entitled ‘“At Home” Groups’.

Committee sub-groups

The efficiency of committees can be improved by dividing members into smaller sub-groups to deal with difficult issues. In my parishes I found this strategy involved the total group more effectively in the decision-making process and resulted in greater commitment to decisions made. The process was facilitated by the executive meeting held well in advance to formulate the agenda and identify issues which needed careful thought. Information on each issue was compiled and distributed well beforehand. When these issues came up in the course of the meeting, we divided into groups of three or four for ten minutes or more, answered any questions at the conclusion of the period, then took a vote without any further debate. The one or two who objected initially were those who normally dominated any debates!

While chairing our annual State Synod meetings, during difficult protracted debate I suspended the discussion and asked the 650 members to discuss the issue with two or three around them. The assembly quickly came to a decision after that exercise.

In her book, *Turning Committees into Communities*,³ Roberta Hestenes gives many practical suggestions for improving the quality of life and efficiency of committees. Among the ideas is the replacement of the ‘opening devotional’ with a sharing and prayer time around two questions: What is your own greatest personal need that we could pray for? and What is the greatest need in your ministry that we could pray for?

References

- (1) Robert E Logan, *Beyond Church Growth* (Fleming H Revell, 1989: Old Tappan, New Jersey), p 124.
- (2) Carl F George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (Fleming H Revell, 1991: New York).
- (3) Roberta Hestenes, *Turning Committees into Communities* (Fuller Theological Seminary) Pasadena, California.

Notes

- (a) A limited selection of titles relating to some types of recovery groups:
Divorce:
Bill Flanagan, *Developing a Divorce Recovery Ministry* (Colorado Springs: NavPress) 1991.
Jim Smoke, *Growing through Divorce* (Eugene: Harvest) 1985.
Alice Bryan and Paula Rinehart, *Healing the Broken Pieces* (NavPress USA) 1988.
Loss of Child:
Paul Arnott, *No Time to Say Goodbye* (Sutherland: Albatross) 1992.
Abuse:
Cathy Ann Matthews, *Breaking Through* (Sutherland: Albatross) 1992.
* Dale and Juanita Ryan, *Life Recovery Guides* (IVP, USA) 1990.
- (b) The Early Methodist Class Meeting — David Lowes Watson, Discipleship Resources, Nashville USA.
Accountable Discipleship — David Lowes Watson, Discipleship Resources, Nashville USA.
- (c) For information on Australian Covenant Discipleship groups, contact the UCA Board of Mission, PO Box A2178, Sydney South, 2000. Resources include cassettes, books and manual.

- (d) Audio tapes, etc of workshops conducted in Australia by Richard Foster and others to help facilitate these groups are available from Serendipity Christian Resources (Australia), GPO Box 1944, Adelaide SA 5001.

*Many different areas: Sexual Abuse, Dysfunctional Families, etc.

STUDY GUIDE

- 1 Of the small groups to which you have belonged, which has been the most helpful?
- 2 What new insights did you gain from this chapter?
- 3 The section on Bible Study Growth Groups gives a number of characteristics of these groups. Which of these do you consider to be the most important? To what extent are all or some of these found in your group?
- 4 When I asked the coordinator of many different groups in a large church in the USA how they started, he said: 'Whenever we discover a few people with the same need or interest, we commence a small group'.
What are some of the needs and interests which could be best met in a small group?
- 5 Discuss the section on Support Groups.
In what practical ways does your church provide spiritual and emotional support for your church staff and its other key leaders?
Think of other ways support groups are being, or could be, used.
- 6 What new possibilities for small groups in your church did you discover through reading this chapter?

KEYS FOR EFFECTIVE SMALL GROUPS

As we have seen, there are a wide variety of small groups. Their purpose differs according to the specific needs of the individuals involved. It is virtually impossible to give a list of guidelines which apply to all groups, so we shall consider in this chapter some that are applicable to a number of the most common types of small groups found within the Christian church, especially those concerned with making disciples and growing the church.

Here are a few suggestions. More can be found in other chapters.

Set clear goals

Goals will vary according to the type of group. The goals for friendship or interest groups will differ radically from those for prayer or recovery groups. It helps to have a clear statement of purpose, for it gives direction and guides the group in planning what it does. Clear goals also provide criteria against which the group's life and activities can be measured. Often it is appropriate during the first meeting of most types of groups for members to be given opportunity to express their hopes and expectations, as this can result in



the setting of the group's goals or modifying or accepting goals which have already been determined for the group. After discussion and some negotiation one or two may feel that this is not the group for them. This can avoid future frustration and conflict for them personally as well as for the group.

Groups for Christian disciples who are committed to taking their discipleship seriously should hold to a **fourfold set of goals**. These goals which express the nature and purpose of the Christian church are: worship, community, nurture, and mission.^a

Worship. The chief end of the whole of creation is to extol our Creator. Repeatedly the psalmist exhorts us to give praise to God: 'Give to the Lord the glory due to his name' (29:2); 'O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker' (95:6); 'Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name' (103:1). Paul writes: 'We . . . worship God in the spirit and rejoice in Jesus Christ' (Philippians 3:3).

Worship is not limited to the singing of a few songs or hymns in our groups. We open ourselves each day individually and in each of our meetings to all the grace God has to give to us through his Spirit, so that all that



we are and do and say and sing will bring praise to his wonderful name (2 Corinthians 10:31). When a group has as its goal worship in this broad biblical sense, it aims at becoming Christ-centred rather than self-centred. It exists in and through and for Christ.

Community. God's intention for those he has called to himself in Christ is not that they should be an association of rugged individuals. Paul's 'body' passages are about interdependence while each retains their uniqueness. We need each other from the weakest to the strongest. Together we rejoice, serve, and suffer. None should walk the road alone. The many 'one another' passages instruct Christ's followers to comfort, instruct, pray for, submit to, support, forgive, show kindness to, and serve 'one another'. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews put it this way: 'Let us think of one another and how we can encourage each other to love and do good deeds . . . Let us do all we can to help one another's faith, and this the more earnestly as we see the final day drawing nearer' (Hebrews 10:25).



The unique characteristic, the governing principle of the church, is given to us by the Lord of the church: 'They will know you are my disciples because of your love for one another'. Each Christian small group has as its goal to develop and maintain a compassionate community which reflects the divine love. This depth of community is seldom, if ever, possible in large gatherings of God's people.

M Scott Peck in *The Different Drum*^b gives a descriptive analysis of what community is and is not. The

book is a useful resource for explaining the practicalities of this goal.

Nurture. The Christian life is meant to be a growing experience. 'Disciple' literally means 'learner'. Serious followers of Christ are becomeers. Special spiritual gifts are given to individuals to enable the 'body of Christ' to 'become mature', to 'grow up into Christ' (Ephesians 4:11–16; see also 1 Peter 2:2, 3; 2 Peter 3:18). Each small Christian growth group should be a discipleship workshop.

The Bible will be studied to both inform and transform. The group will never be satisfied with merely discovering the meaning of the text but will explore together its application to everyday life and then support each other in putting it into practice. Nurture involves instructing, guiding, tutoring, coaching, encouraging, supporting, and, most importantly, modelling by those who are further down the track. Small groups are ideal discipling units to provide fostering care in a framework of compassionate concern, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Mission. The Scriptures never portray our salvation in Christ as merely a spiritual insurance policy. We are set free in Christ to be part of God's great mission in the world — we are saved to serve. Being part of God's mission involves proclaiming the gospel, calling people to be reconciled to God through repentance and faith in Christ (Acts 2:38). Christ's great commission involves going and making disciples (Matthew 28:16–20; Luke 24:45–49). Our Lord taught and modelled servanthood (Matthew 20:28; John 13:14,15; Philippians 2:5–7). Paul taught the young church to 'bear the burdens of the weak' (Romans 15:1; Galatians 6:2), to 'serve one another in love' (Galatians 5:13), to 'do good to all people' (Galatians 6:10). Jesus fulfilled the great messianic passages of the prophets, he linked his ministry with their passion for justice and righteousness (Isaiah 61:1–3; Amos 5:24; Luke 4:16–21; John 11:4,5). He calls us to be part of his continuing ministry.

The church has always had great difficulty in holding these in an appropriate tension. There are varying understandings and commitments to mission, as the National Church Life Survey publication, *Winds of Change* (p 61)^c revealed. Some sixteen per cent of Australian

church attenders place their priority on evangelism alone, thirty-nine per cent on evangelism with social action, fourteen per cent on social action with evangelism and five per cent on social action alone. The majority believe word and action, evangelism and social concern, the needs of soul and body, need to be kept in some sort of balance.

Christian small groups in the developing world are leading the way in what is often referred to as 'holistic evangelism'. The most vibrant groups I have observed throughout Australia and other countries are those which have as their goals worship, community, nurture, and mission. They have caught God's big vision for those he has called out and empowered to be his channels of truth, love, and hope in his world.



Plan to grow

One of the soundest strategies for church growth is based on the establishment and expansion of small groups, as Lyle E Schaller says: 'Thousands of congregations are intentionally organised around the development of a large and ever-growing number of small face-to-face groups. This is one of the healthiest and most productive organising principles. It is widely used in rapidly growing and strongly evangelistic urban churches.'¹

Groups committed to grow will focus on facilitating quality of lifestyle and witness, growing together as a community of the Holy Spirit, and increasing numerically. Development which is authentic will avoid a preoccupation with numerical growth, with only superficial attention to these other facets. Indeed the

growth which will last, and best reflect God's intention for the body of Christ in this world, is essentially the work of the Holy Spirit. It will grow from a disciplined life together, arising out of a sustained and earnest encounter with God's word, expressing itself in a continuous involvement in Christ's mission in the world.

A church which is committed to growth can experience both quality and quantity growth through a strategy of multiplying small groups, without the strains associated with some forms of church growth being propagated today.

Small groups that are committed to be midwives of the Holy Spirit in bringing new life to both those inside and outside the Christian fellowship will set themselves clear goals to grow to the point where they have to divide, or will facilitate the planting of new cells led by members who feel called to leave their group for this purpose.

There are simple principles to follow in moving towards this objective. First, **begin with a small group of two or more** who are committed to win people to Christ and to care for these new Christians. The **Prayer Triplet plan** (outlined in chapter 2 on types of small groups) could be followed, but with a Bible study and worship dimension incorporated into it. Let the goal be to grow to ten or twelve members by the end of the first year. They could take a grain of wheat as their symbol, based on Christ's words: 'Unless the grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit' (John 12:24). (The great paradox of the Christian life is that by 'losing life we find it!') This becomes the group's motivation for their life together — to grow to the point where they lose their original identity by dividing at the end of twelve months, to become the basis for two more groups with the same goal. As this process is repeated, so the redemptive fellowship of the original small group is multiplied.

On this basis, if four groups of three people decided to commit themselves to this strategy and keep up this process over a ten-year period, the incredible result



would be 2048 groups with 20 480 members! Most of us are usually not impressed by such calculations, for there are too many variables to take into consideration. However, the exercise at least serves to show the potential in small groups, provided those involved catch the vision and commit themselves to it, and seek the Holy Spirit to work through such a strategy.

Secondly, plan to meet for **three or four terms each year**. No new members are added during each 6-8 week term, as this usually disrupts the growth and relationships of the group. New members are therefore added only at the commencement of each term. However, during the term an empty chair is placed in the group as a reminder of the group's evangelistic purpose. Some who are unbelievers will fill the chair; others will be believers at different stages in their spiritual growth. (Of course the empty chair will also remind the members of the ever-present Christ, who brings both consolation and a continuous call to his mission in the world.) New members are presented with this philosophy and encouraged to become part of this great dream by being on the look-out for others to link up with the group.



Thirdly, make preparations for the dividing of the group well in advance. Potential leaders should be identified and given opportunity to develop their gifts by sharing some aspects of the leadership. They will be encouraged to expand their knowledge through reading books on small group leadership, such as this one, and attending appropriate training programs. In the third or fourth term, they may be invited to attend the leaders group and the annual planning and training conference.

In the last term, **prepare the group for its division**. This can be done by conducting the study segment in two sub-groups meeting in different rooms, and then coming together for the closing exercise. The second-last session for the year could be held in different homes, but with all joined for the last session. The final step is to commence the new year with separate groups. Two members of the original group may form a leadership team to head up

each new group if individuals are not sufficiently confident to lead a group on their own.

It is important to be aware that a group which has grown close together in fellowship will experience grief through the division. Groups which are not prepared for this could fragment. Grief will be experienced by most for some time, despite the steps taken to ease them into the parting and the celebration associated with achieving the growth goal. For this reason, build into at least the first term of the next year a few opportunities for the groups to come together, either for a normal meeting or a social gathering. (See chapter 16 for other help in terminating a group.)

For this program to work effectively the believers in the group not only need to understand the philosophy but they will also need training in witnessing to others and then how to disciple those who join. Help will need to be given in how to invite others, eg guidance in how to tell others about the value of the group fellowship in their own personal faith journey.

Some committed to this plan for church growth will feel the need to belong to two groups: one for outreach, as described, and another for in-depth personal and spiritual growth. With frequent additions to the groups, the level of spirituality reached may not satisfy the more deeply committed members. In such cases, additional groups are often formed which remain closed for twelve-month periods or more to enable the development of deeper spirituality.

Even if a group does not wish to commit itself to this growth plan, the principle of dividing groups before a group grows too large remains. The size of the group reaches an upper limit, beyond which meaningful interpersonal relationships become less possible at any depth. If a group increases to over twelve it should divide, just to ensure that it exists as a viable group. Acquainting the group with this principle from its inception will ease the trauma associated with the division.

There are numerous other ways to multiply groups. A few examples are given in chapter 7 under Multiplying Groups.

Plan optimistically

If we have faith in the power of God to produce change, then we can be optimistic about the possibilities of renewal through small groups. We ourselves need to be thoroughly convinced that small groups are a viable method for new life in the church. Our enthusiasm and optimism will rub off onto others.



It is often the one who may seem to be the least likely person who will be interested in joining a group. Do not prejudice potential interest in a group. I am frequently surprised that some whom I thought would not be interested, willingly link up with a group and become active members. The majority will become involved because they have been personally invited.

Train leaders

Ideally, training for leadership of a small group should involve both pre-service and in-service training.

Before each of the small-group multi-cell programs commenced in three of the parishes in which I have served, basic leadership training was given. This varied. At Port Kembla the leadership of the groups grew out of a larger study/fellowship group, which met for over two years preceding the decision to commence the small-group program. Training in the content of the Christian faith was accompanied by the demonstration of various methods of study and leadership techniques.

Honesty, openness, growth in relationships, and experience-centred learning were some of the characteristics of training. A short, intensive, pre-service program dealing specifically with small-group leadership skills then sought to prepare the new leaders for their specific tasks. On other occasions, the period of preparation for potential leaders was much shorter, and



for this reason I felt the leadership in some cases was not as rich as in the Port Kembla groups.

The development of skills in group dynamics will be balanced with training in Bible study, theology, church history, and discipleship if our small groups are to avoid being superficial and deteriorating into a sharing of ignorance. Each leader should be expected to have the basic texts in the kit of books listed in chapter 11 on Bible study and be given help in how to use them.

Leaders who are relatively immature spiritually can be effective, provided there is continuing support and there are ongoing opportunities to develop their skills and confidence. In one of my parishes a number of the small-group leaders had been committed Christians for only a short period. However, they proved to be capable leaders despite their inexperience, because of the in-service training and support provided through the regular small-group leaders meetings (see later in this chapter) and the encouragement and guidance I was able to give. An annual evaluation and planning event for the small-group program, also mentioned in this chapter, further enhanced their leadership. (See chapter 4 for ideas on developing leaders.)

Use informal situations

For most small groups, it is generally more beneficial to meet away from the church building. This need not be a home — it could be an office, or a special room set aside in a church. Church facilities do not always provide ideal situations for natural interaction between people in small groups. Also, where groups are committed to reaching those not associated with a church, it could be a deterrent initially to invite people to a church building.

The intimacy and comfort of a home situation makes it easier to put people at ease and facilitate close relationships. Meeting in homes also allows greater flexibility for churches committed to church growth. As the groups increase, more homes are enlisted. Alternatively, if the groups decrease, the church is not left



with expensive empty buildings, as has been the case where special facilities were developed on the church site to accommodate groups.

If possible, use the same location for each term. People are apt to get confused and cease attending if the meeting is held in a different home each meeting night, especially if a person misses a meeting or loses their roster list. The people in whose home the group is held need to be warm and friendly in order to make people feel welcome and relaxed.

Refreshments after the group can be useful, in that it can be a relaxing time for informal fellowship. However, most people are more concerned about having a well-run meeting and getting home, though single people may want to stay on. The element of competition can so easily creep in, where somebody wants to put on a better spread of snacks than somebody else. The hosts and hostesses can be given some pointers, such as not busying themselves during the meeting with preparation of refreshments to be served at the conclusion.

Determine the size of the group

‘What is the ideal number to have in a small group?’ There is no one simple answer to that question. It depends on the purpose of the group and the background, maturity, and resourcefulness of the members, along with other variables. However, some upper limits can be set. Changes in beliefs and attitudes of persons are more likely to take place where there is opportunity for all to be involved with interaction in the clarification and expansion of ideas. The amount of interaction possible between people in a small group is determined by its size.

There is a simple equation which expresses the number of relations possible among people in various sized groups: $R = N(N - 1)$. This is based on the fact that if one person communicates with another and is satisfactorily received, a relationship has been formed. When the reverse takes place, another relationship is established between the two people.

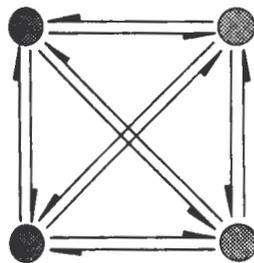


Diagram No. 3:
Possible Relationship
in a Group of Four

The number of relationships, **R**, equals the number of persons in the group, **N**, multiplied by one less than the number of persons in the group, **N - 1**.

As shown in the diagram, when four people are involved in dialogue there is a pattern of twelve interpersonal relationships. The number increases steeply as only a few extra are added to the group.

For a group of 6	(6x5) 30 relationships
For a group of 8	(8x7) 56 relationships
For a group of 10	(10x9) 90 relationships
For a group of 12	(12x11) 132 relationships
For a group of 15	(15x14) 210 relationships
For a group of 20	(20x19) 380 relationships

It is evident that the larger the group the less possibility there is of deep interpersonal relationships among the participants. It is generally agreed that the upper limit for a small group, in which members are able to participate meaningfully, is twelve. Beyond that number the group tends to be dominated by a few aggressive members.

However, the upper limit for deep relationships is not the only factor which determines the size of the small group. For growth groups and some other types of small groups dealt with in this book, six to eight is a good number to aim at.

Twelve not only sets the upper limit for meaningful relationships but also provides a non-threatening situation for those who are new to small group experiences. This allows involvement of the participants to the degree they desire. It helps them exercise their individual right of dissent, to stay out of involvement in the group to any real depth without making it obvious.

It is significant that Jesus chose twelve men to be in his group. His radical message required deep interaction between himself and each member of the group, but the size of the group allowed each to determine his own level of involvement while growing to a point of total commitment to Christ.

Don't overlook odd times to hold meetings

Often people's immediate reaction when they are asked to join a small group is 'I haven't got a spare night'. Giving the impression that the Holy Spirit operates only

between 7.30 pm and 9.30 pm on week-nights, with some variations to his schedule on Sundays, should be avoided!

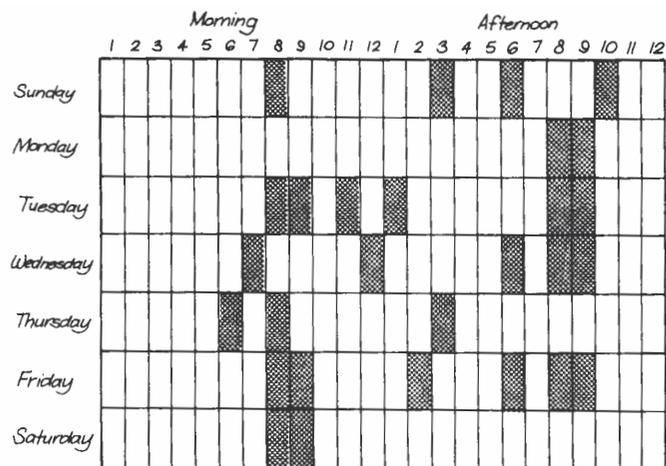


Diagram No. 4

Everyone has numerous time slots in the week which are possibilities for small-group meeting times. The chart dividing a week into one-hour time slots serves to show a variety of possible times for small groups to meet. The shaded segments indicate the time slots used by groups in my parish experience and, because they were successfully adopted, they deserve comment.

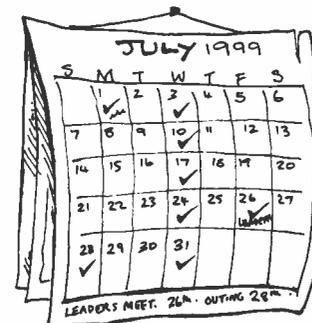
Less obvious times:

- (i) A number of young mothers tried meeting during the day, but were frustrated by the natural disturbance of their small children. To find quietness to study and relate at depth, they chose to meet from 5.00 am to 6.30 am weekly — not a popular time by any means, but for this group a rich growing experience eventuated which lasted for a number of years. A deep sense of need will motivate people to consider more unusual times.
- (ii) A group of teenagers, another of business people and community leaders, and in another instance clergy, met over breakfast, which for some meant starting at 6.00 am and others at 7.00 am. The host ate before the group arrived in order to be free to serve the group. Study and sharing took place during the meal, which was always kept simple.

- (iii) A frontier youth workers' support group met at 7.30 am in a regional centre, where the participants did not have far to travel to work after the meeting.
- (iv) Groups of businessmen and women and tradesmen held meetings during their lunch hours, mostly meeting in offices or committee rooms, sometimes in a corner of a workshop. One met in a secluded corner of a greasy boiler-house!
- (v) Students gathered for their group meetings over supper, after an evening of study.
- (vi) Periods before and after church worship have been popular times for busy people.
- (vii) Senior folk often preferred to meet in the afternoon rather than in the evenings.

Meet regularly

Frequency of small group meetings will vary from group to group. Certain types of groups will need to meet more regularly than others to maintain the group life and achieve the agreed goals, though meeting weekly generally provides the desirable frequency in most situations. Some groups will find a fortnightly meeting adequate and the only possibility under their circumstances. Meeting less than bi-weekly usually lacks continuity. However, I belonged to a group for a number of years whose members all travelled extensively, so we met whenever we were all available, which sometimes meant four weeks between meeting, yet it was a very helpful group.



Meet by terms

If a group is heavily study oriented, it is helpful to meet by terms of six to eight weeks, roughly following the pattern of school terms. In our adult groups we generally commenced the first term mid-February. The final term ran to late November, closing before the heavy Advent preparations in December. After running a small group program for three years which met for fifty-two weeks in the year, we found this a sensible variation well received by the participants.

Meeting by terms has many advantages:

It avoids both busy and slack periods such as Easter, Christmas, school vacations, and school and university examinations.

Each term a new study unit can be accomplished. This helps hold interest and provides a range of subjects.

The fresh start to the groups throughout the year encourages enlistment of new members who otherwise may be reluctant to break into a group which has been functioning for a period.

The breaks between the terms give opportunity to make alterations to the groups in terms of leadership or membership.

A different home can be used for each term, providing a variety of venues without the confusion which can arise when a different home is used each week.

Each term can be commenced and concluded with a combined gathering of all the groups, which is an advantage in preventing isolation.

The conclusion of the term provides a natural opportunity to undertake evaluation, sometimes overlooked in a group which meets throughout the year.

The period between the terms provides a welcome break for the group without people feeling guilty about missing a meeting.

Some leaders have used the recess to visit drop-outs or potential members.

A leaders meeting can be held between terms in addition to a mid-term meeting.

The term system seems to best fit the groups with a study component, but other types of groups also follow this practice. It is now widely used.

In most of the groups in my churches, which operated by terms, we organised combined activities at the beginning and end of each term.

For the first meeting of a term the groups gathered together in the local church or hall to launch the term. Each group was assigned a task in the program, which varied from leading the praise segments to preparing and serving drinks and refreshments at the conclusion. A film, video, or specialist resource person was frequently used to introduce the theme for the term.

At the conclusion of each term the groups again converged at the local church. The program included a

sharing time in which a chosen representative of some groups recounted the most helpful aspects of the group life during the term. A panel often dealt with questions raised in the groups but not answered during the term. Sometimes small group work was done in the hall, with each person meeting with people other than those in their regular group. On occasions the Lord's supper was celebrated, using a special order for clusters of small groups.

Limit the length of each meeting

The length of meetings varies with the amount of time available and the work to be done. Breakfast and lunch-hour groups may be limited to forty-five minutes; evening groups from an hour and a half to two hours. Regularity and punctuality are of great importance. In any effective group, faithfulness in attendance is essential. Most small group covenants list it as the first commitment the group member is asked to make. It is therefore a reasonable expectation that meetings will be held as scheduled, and that they begin and close at the hours agreed upon. Other responsibilities of the members should be



respected, from keeping business appointments to getting the baby sitter home on time.

If a group is involved in an absorbing sharing or discussion period which looks like taking the group over time, the leader should seek a group decision regarding exceeding the scheduled time for finishing. Those who may have to leave should be able to do so without being made to feel they are letting the group down.

Have a plan for each meeting

Each group will need to create a pattern of meeting which serves its needs and situation. The **fourfold goals** given at the beginning of this chapter should guide the preparation of the plan for each meeting.

There are certain elements, reflecting the fourfold goals that are common to most small groups, which are



making a significant impact upon their members, their church, and their community: **worship** and praise; **study** (of the Bible, books on the Christian faith, etc); **sharing** (insights, problems, questions, judgments); **prayer** (of various kinds, and both silent and spoken); **service** (planning for the group's ministry to others).

A meeting plan which has been used by some groups for a two-hour meeting is as follows:

Worship (10 mins) — including praise in song and possibly some simple form of liturgy. Hymns, psalms, Scripture passages, and most church hymnals provide resources for simple response reading.

Brief prayer (3 mins) — silent or spoken to acknowledge the presence of Christ in the group.

Feed-back segment (15 mins) — in which people report on any issues raised in the previous meeting about which they have sought more information. The leader may have been wise enough not to muddle through a difficult question raised previously and may now give an adequate answer. This period may include a brief review of and reflection on the previous meeting, with members sharing how they tried to relate aspects to their life situations in the intervening period.

Study (40 mins) — linked with discussion/sharing and hopefully some creative group work, using some of the methods suggested in other chapters.

Prayer as a response to hearing the word of God (10 mins). Chapter 14 suggests a variety of creative ideas. This period of prayer will focus on petition, confession, and thanksgiving.

Service to others (10 mins). A small sub-group may do the detailed planning of aspects of the group's ministry to others. This will be a time for reporting back, discussion, and assignments.

Intercessory prayer (20 mins) — for members and for other persons and situations to which the group is committed. An important segment for a group which has a vision wider than the needs of the immediate group.

Praise segment (10 mins).

Make a covenant with each other

The concept of covenant is a major theme in the Bible. It is a solemn agreement and promise, often made binding by an oath, and witnessed and guaranteed by God. Next to kinship and associated obligations and privileges, covenants were the most common form of relationship in ancient Israel and beyond. Examples of personal covenants made between individuals are those made between Jacob and Laban (Genesis 31:44–54), Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 1:15–17), David and Jonathan (1 Samuel 18:3). The divine covenant is also the most unifying single theme in Old Testament religion. God made a covenant with Noah (Genesis 9:8–17), Abraham (Genesis 15 and 17:1–14), Moses (Exodus 19:24), and David (2 Samuel 7:8–16).

The failure of Israel to live by these covenants led the prophets to speak of the emergence of a faithful people (Isaiah 10:20,21) and a 'new covenant' (Jeremiah 31:31–34) which would involve a new beginning, an intimate relationship with God, and would be internal rather than external. This covenant was partially fulfilled in the death of Jesus (the kingdom is yet to fully come) (1 Corinthians 11:23; Mark 14:24; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Hebrews 8:8–12). It called for the acceptance of a new commandment (John 13:34). The New Testament represents Christians as living within this new covenant of grace, initiated by God, sealed by the blood of Jesus Christ, involving an intimate personal relationship with God, promising final redemption and eternal membership in the household of God, and imposing on us the duty to love one another as Christ loved us.

The implications for us are that as we stand within this covenant relationship with God we are united with all other Christian believers and therefore must moderate our individualism. Further, it is a covenant of grace, but it also calls us to a life that befits members of the divine covenant, exhibiting patient trust, covenant faithfulness, and covenant love for one another. Of special significance for us here is that our own covenants with one another stand within the context of the divine covenant and are to mirror it. (This biblical background is based on a lecture given by Rev Dr G S Dicker at a covenant-making workshop.)

Elizabeth O'Connor has some pertinent things to share when making comments about the place of discipline in

the Mission groups at the Church of the Savior, Washington, D.C.

As members of a mission group we need to be disciplined and we need to be willing to require a discipline of those who would be on mission with us. No person or group or movement has vigour and power unless it is disciplined. Are we willing to be disciplined ourselves and to require it of others when it means that we will be the target of the hostilities and the pressures of many who do not see the necessity? The chances are that we will give in unless we know that this 'giving in' means that our mission group will have no hard sharp cutting edge, and will in time peter out.²

In forming a covenant, questions the group will need to answer are: 'What is the purpose of the group? To what discipline or tasks will each participating member need to commit themselves to achieve the stated goals of the group?' Differentiation will need to be made between maintenance goals (those which concern the life within the group) and the goals which have to do with the work undertaken by the group.

It is important that the covenant be a group decision and not something superimposed by the leader. Even in a situation where a number of groups are formed to operate under the same covenant to help in the achievement of an overall agreed goal (such as in some networks of covenant/discipleship groups), each group is generally given the option to commit itself to only a number of the aspects of the agreed covenant at the commencement, with others being introduced as each group develops.

For some new Christians an extensive covenant can be too daunting to begin with. It is better to let the commitment grow rather than over-burden them with too high an expectation at first.

When a single group is considering a covenant the leader may submit a model such as that used by the Covenant Groups at the National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. But the group should negotiate this and come to a group decision, to ensure a full commitment.



WATCHING OVER
ONE ANOTHER
IN
LOVE

It is imperative that covenants be administered in a spirit of grace and not law. While it is reasonable to have high expectations of people who thoughtfully and prayerfully commit themselves to such a covenant, we must avoid creating a legalistic spirit in the group. A lazy or undisciplined person will

need to be nudged. A healthy Christian fellowship involves exhortation and rebuke, but this always must take place in a pastoral atmosphere of love and patience. Essentially, covenants in Christian groups are about 'watching over one another in love'.

However, don't water down the expectations of a highly motivated group to the point where the group life rises little higher than the superficiality and lack of discipline so common in many sections of the church. Our Lord said to those who would be his disciples, '... let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me'.

Most group covenants have these common features:

- regular attendance
- ordered personal devotional life
- prayer, and pastoral support for each member of the group
- practice of Christian stewardship
- involvement in regular worship of the gathered church
- availability for service.

Washington Covenant Groups

Louis Evans Jr, senior pastor at National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., gives some guidelines followed by the groups attached to his church. He stresses they are principles and not legalisms.

Covenant groups are an expression of our life in Christ and cannot reach their potential unless he is an active member of the group. Our life and strength flow from him; therefore we can take joy in his presence and express what he is accomplishing in our group as a member of it. His word is our guide to all of life and therefore it should be used as the groups feel the need. It is out of his word that we identify the following covenant dynamics:

1. **The covenant of Affirmation** (unconditional love, agape love) There is nothing you have done, or will do that will make me stop loving you. I may not agree with your actions, but I will love you as a person and do all I can to hold you up in God's affirming love.
2. **The covenant of Availability** Anything I have — time, energy, insight, possessions — are all at your disposal if you need them. I give these to you in a priority of covenant over non-covenant demands. As part of this availability I pledge regularity of time, whether in prayer or in agreed upon meeting time.
3. **The covenant of Prayer** I covenant to pray for you in some regular fashion, believing that our caring Father wishes his children to pray for one another and ask him for the blessings they need.
4. **The covenant of Openness** I promise to strive to become a more open person, disclosing my feelings, my struggles, my joys and my hurts to you as well as I am able. The degree to which I do so implies that I cannot make it without you, that I trust you with my needs and that I need you. This is to affirm your worth to me as a person. In other words, I need you!
5. **The covenant of Sensitivity** Even as I desire to be known and understood by you, I covenant to be sensitive to you and to your needs to the best of my ability. I will try to hear you, see you and feel where you are, to draw you out of the pit of discouragement or withdrawal.
6. **The covenant of Honesty** I will try to 'mirror back' to you what I am hearing you say and feel. If this means risking pain for either of us I will trust our relationship enough to take that risk, realising it is in 'speaking the truth in love, that we grow up in every way into Christ who is the Head'. I will try to express this honesty, to 'meter it', according to what I perceive the circumstances to be.
7. **The covenant of Confidentiality** I consider that the gifts God has given me for the common good should be liberated for your benefit. If I should discover areas of my life that are under bondage, 'hung up' or truncated by my own misdoings or by the scars inflicted by others, I will seek Christ's liberating power through my covenant partners so that I might give to you more of myself. I am

accountable to you to 'become what God has designed me to be in his loving creation'. [Used with permission]

In appendix F there are further examples of covenants used by the Yokefellow Movement and Serendipity relational Bible study resources. You will also find there practical guidelines for developing your own covenant, especially an adaptation of that used by the Washington Covenant Groups.

Make all study relevant

A common criticism of some small groups in the church has been that they are dull and uninteresting, that their studies are irrelevant, and that rather than produce change, the studies reinforce limited thinking and experience. Instead of helping people grow, they stunt growth.

One of the reasons for this criticism is that the topics studied in many cases have not grown out of the expressed needs of the participants. The particular interests of each member have not been explored. Instead, the subjects have frequently been imposed by the leader or without adequate opportunity for the group to plan together its own syllabus.



The methods of study have been another area contributing to this irrelevance and ineffectiveness. Generally, an authoritarian leadership style results in a didactic, lecture type of presentation with little or no opportunity for the group to think through the issues raised. The inductive method, on the other hand, makes for relevance as it involves the whole group in the learning. It draws upon the individual experiences of each member, reflects upon and analyses these, and sets lines of action which will affect their life situation. Chapter 10 on 'Learning Together' develops this further.

The study of the Bible has been often little more than an academic or intellectual exercise. Minds have been filled with information, but opportunity has not been

given to apply this to the stage the learners have reached in their personal and corporate life. The Bible is the vehicle through which God reveals his will to humankind. It is meant to foster change. It is intended to help people realign their lives to God's intention for them in their everyday situations. Time must be taken to let this happen in other than a superficial manner. Methods, like those set out in chapter 12 on Bible study methods, should be used to enable people to wrestle with the relevance of the Scriptures to their inner life, every aspect of their relationships, their home, their work or study situation, their leisure, and the world in which they live. And that takes time, it involves honesty, is somewhat risky, and there will be agony of mind on occasions. But unless we make all study relevant, small groups can become part of the problem rather than part of the answer.

Provide opportunities for worship and celebrating the Lord's supper

Praise should have a prominent place when God's children gather together. It brings pleasure to God and joy to those who sing from the heart. But the worship segment should be varied. Instead of thirty minutes of singing, the worship session could include, along with some singing, an affirmation of faith, said together, or a poem, or a psalm. The worship segment should focus on God, affirm his love and mercy, and set the tone for the meeting. On occasions the whole meeting could follow the pattern of praise, confession, thanksgiving, petition and intercession, interspersed with singing and the reading and study of the word of God. There are certain orders of service which could be adapted for small groups, eg an agape feast, or a shalom meal. (See appendix C for an agape celebration.)

An early account of the agape meal is thought to be described in a second century document called the Didache.



The people gathered for supper and brought with them offerings of food. After this supper, the food was shared in what is now called the mass, or communion, and the leftover food was given to the poor. Gradually the meal fell into disuse because of the problem of control, and because congregations became too large for such informal meetings . . .

Today the agape meal is becoming a popular form of worship and celebration in ecumenical church gatherings because it makes possible a form of 'breaking bread together' which is outside the confessional rules and regulations and can be celebrated by laity of all confessions.³

Worship Now (published by The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1972) contains an order of service for the celebration of the Lord's supper in a small group. It has been well received by groups in which I have been involved, though it is rather lengthy. Some segments could be omitted.

The celebration of this sacrament has proved to be an enriching experience for combined gatherings of small groups, especially to conclude a term or yearly program. Often we have done it in creative ways while still keeping to the order. After the reading from John's gospel relating to Christ's washing of the disciples' feet, we have washed either each other's feet or hands.

Pastor each other between meetings

Where deep relationships are developed in a group, the care and concern expressed for one another when together will continue between meetings. In some groups the leaders contact each member at least once weekly. Other groups appoint one or two members with pastoral gifts to keep in touch with the members who have expressed special needs. In most groups, however, this is done informally, growing out of a genuine concern for one another.

Concern has been expressed through personal visits, by telephone, or a short note. What an encouragement to

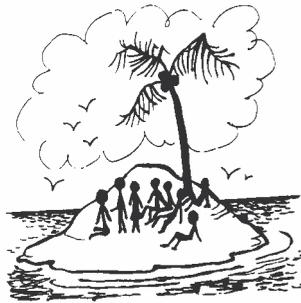


have an unexpected call to say, 'I'm just ringing to let you know I will be praying for you as you face that big responsibility today', or 'I'm just checking that you are OK. I've been remembering you in prayer since you shared so openly. Is there anything I can do to help?'

Our groups have often expressed concern in practical ways: by minding a young mother's children to enable her to cope, assisting with shopping and housework, providing meals, helping a family move house, and a host of other means of support.

Avoid isolation

Isolation can produce real problems in small-group life. It is easy for a group to become inward looking and degenerate into a 'holy huddle' or 'bless-me-club'. This is always a risk in groups where there is much sharing of personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences. The high degree of subjectivity can cause the group to deteriorate unless it is balanced with more objective experiences. This can be done by introducing more objective content into a group study, making frequent opportunities to serve as a group, and through widening the fellowship by meeting occasionally with other groups having a similar purpose.



In some of our networks of cells, where we met by terms, in the middle of an 8–10 week term all the groups met in pairs. The leadership and venues were pre-arranged, with the program in most cases similar to an ordinary meeting.

(See also under Meet by Terms, earlier in this chapter, for some of the combined events we held to commence and conclude each term.)

Serve to live

The Christian church is 'the servant church of the servant Lord'. We are called to serve. Where a Christian community exists for itself it soon deteriorates and expires.

Busy group members who are involved in their church and community will often bypass this principle of serving to live by asserting that they are already serving

individually. However, there is real advantage in serving as a group, at least on occasions. Some of the richest times in groups for me personally have been while working alongside other members, especially in situations of need in the community.

In one small group program we used a regular meeting night mid-term to reach out. The groups assembled in their usual meeting place a little earlier than normal for a brief worship session. The groups divided into pairs, each receiving two or three assignments to visit shut-ins, drop-outs from the local church, or those only loosely associated. They regrouped again at 9.00 pm, shared their experiences, prayed for those visited, and had refreshments. All agreed these nights were some of the highest points of the group's activities.



Many churches organise their groups to be responsible for different aspects of the local church program. In one church I observed, every group was responsible for keeping contact with a section of both the active and inactive families on the church roll. They gave pastoral oversight, distributed church publications and kept the people in touch with both the regular and special aspects of the church activities.

In another church every group was required to have a 'mission' task to which it felt called. Some groups were responsible for launching and maintaining a coffee shop to reach the unchurched. Others provided services for socially disadvantaged people. The worship and fellowship activities were the responsibility of other groups. Two groups headed up the educational dimension of the church life.

Frequently a conference I have led for a local church has been organised by one of the groups linked with that fellowship.

Groups with a service dimension keep dynamic. They are blessed when they gather for fellowship, but share that blessing with others. They practise the great Christian

paradox, that it is in losing our life for Christ's sake that we find it (Matthew 10:39)!

Prayer is one of the most important aspects of our call to servanthood. An intercessory prayer group which keeps its prayer life vital is operating on the frontiers of service. However, such a group will keep itself available to be a channel through which its prayers are answered. It will be willing to put legs under its prayers to provide tangible expressions of its love and concern for others.

Evaluate regularly

'The unexamined group life is not worth living.'⁴ The importance of evaluation to the life of a small group cannot be overestimated. It is absolutely necessary if the group is to function as a vital activity in which members find fulfilment, significant growth takes place, and goals are achieved.

Evaluation will take place whether it is planned or not. Too often evaluation takes place after the meeting by one or two people sharing their frustrations or grievances. The group cannot profit from these private judgments. Only when a group member's critical or reflective comments are heard by the group can something be done about them.

Sara Little suggests **four areas in which evaluation should take place** at the same time or at different times.

Purpose — did we achieve our purpose?

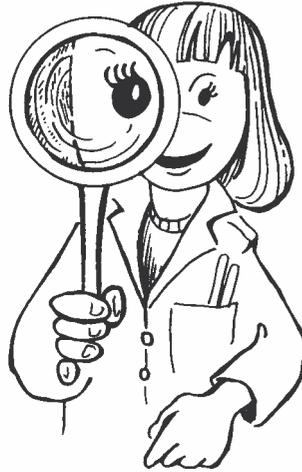
Content — what did we learn?

Group Process — how well did we work together?

Personal Growth — what happened to us as individuals?⁵

The following list is not exhaustive but is fairly representative. It gives another slant on the kind of evaluation necessary:

1. Clarity of goals.
2. Agreement on major and minor goals.



3. Agreement on methods of attaining the goals.
4. Support of group activities.
5. Coordination of activities in group tasks.
6. Availability of resources necessary for task accomplishment.
7. Effectiveness of communication.
8. Competence of leadership.
9. Clarity of lines of authority.
10. Participation in decision.⁶

Evaluation by the group can be done at some stages during the session. But it is generally undertaken after the session, when time is set aside to reflect and determine what experiences have been helpful and what could have been improved.

Occasionally a whole meeting should be given over to do a more thorough evaluation than is possible after most regular meetings. Where a group has met for an experimental period, an unhurried time should be allowed for evaluation.

It is also valuable to hold an **annual leaders retreat** in which **evaluation and planning** are a major part. Those in any form of leadership in the network participate. Evaluation forms should be completed and collated beforehand to form the basis of some of the work. Use a skilled resource person to help facilitate the process.

Leaders will be involved in **informal evaluation** continuously. They will observe group members' actions and attitudes to discover anxiety or dissatisfaction. When a member stops attending, the leader will follow up to discover why and not be easily put off by evasive explanations. The behaviour of members in the group clearly reveals lack of interest or disagreement. A question to the persons concerned, during or after the group, can bring to the surface issues which the whole group can evaluate.

A natural way to evaluate, which doesn't give the appearance of a structured evaluation, is simply to ask the group at the end of the meeting:

- What did you find helpful?
- What would you have liked to explore further?
- What can we do to improve the group?

There are a number of more **formal ways** to undertake evaluation. A common one is to use reaction sheets, which are prepared beforehand, using questions, often with multiple choice answers, or columns in which to indicate degrees of positive or negative response. These usually cover the areas suggested earlier. See appendix G for some sample evaluation forms, based mainly on group goals.

Sometimes an **observer**, not always a group member, is used to observe the group. The person sits outside the group circle, not making comments and endeavouring not to distract the group. Often this person will follow a check-list and then report findings to the group at its conclusion.

We have also found the following use of an observer very worthwhile in helping members to evaluate their participation in the group. The observer places a large piece of chart paper in the centre of the group and each person draws a small circle on the chart to represent their position, writing their name next to it. The observer then sits outside the circle and charts the interaction by drawing lines between those in dialogue. Remarks addressed to the group in general are represented by lines to the centre of the group. As the lines accumulate, they show the silent members and those who speak the most.

During the report segment, the chart is placed in the centre of the group, in the same position as it was previously. Discussion could centre around these questions:

What does the chart reveal about your own participation?

How do you feel about that?

How does the group feel about that?

What can we do to help each other adequately participate?

Be loyal to your local church

Small groups can become a divisive force within a local church fellowship. For this reason criticism is often directed towards the small group movement. Loyalty should be characteristic of a healthy group. This will extend to the wider Christian community of which they are a part, and its appointed leader.

I have frequently counselled frustrated and



discouraged people who, having caught the vision of the possibilities of renewal through small groups at one of my conferences, have returned with high hopes and renewed enthusiasm to their local church, only to have the new insights rejected out of hand by their local minister and church leaders. There are reasons for this reaction.

Sometimes previous groups have been badly handled and become divisive, either through a 'holier than thou' attitude or poor strategy and impatience in seeking to produce change in the church.

Alternatively, ministers or other church leaders can be autocratic and feel that unless they are running everything their authority is threatened. Happily, not many are like this, but unfortunately some do dominate a church and cannot let people grow.

Some ministers feel that heresy or doctrinal unsoundness will creep into the church unless they are leading most, if not all, of the teaching dimension of the local church. Certainly some leaders have had to cope with people in their churches who have propagated grossly inadequate or wrong beliefs and practices. As leaders, they are commissioned to uphold the good order of the church and, when this is threatened, they can rightly be expected to respond accordingly. My plea here is for patience and understanding. From my broad experience, I have found very few instances of church leaders resisting the formation of small groups if the group leaders are godly, balanced, loving people, committed to maintaining the unity of Christ's body.

We are required as Christian disciples to be faithful. Loyalty is closely aligned with faithfulness. We need to be loyal to our group, our church (its members and leaders), but above all to our Lord Jesus. If you have a small group meeting in your home, it is courteous to inform the minister and leaders, but you don't have to ask him to attend all the meetings, nor are you obliged to let him lead.

As a group, maintain a warm, positive, caring attitude. Be open to others and be available to serve your local

church when possible. Then your leaders will see modelled the kind of dynamic groups that we are advocating.

Plan some leisure events

Opportunities should be provided, in addition to the regular group meetings, for informal socialising and leisure activities. Occasional outings for recreation, relaxed meals together, or a weekend away, all help develop relationships in an informal atmosphere and provide for restoration. These also can include spouses, friends, and families on occasions, providing a way of interesting potential new members.



When a member moves away

Once people have experienced the depth of care and concern and growth possible in a vital small group, they will generally never again be completely satisfied with trying to be a Christian alone. The small group should be aware of its continuing ministry to those who leave their groups because they have to move out of the district. A leader with the heart of a pastor will try to find details about cells meeting in the district to which the member is moving. The group should together continue to give support through prayer and personal contact.

A copy of this and other appropriate books could be given to help in the formation of a new group by the departing member. A sharing of resources and ideas could be offered to help the new group become established.

Form a local church network

Most of the 'keys' given so far have related to individual groups. The problem of groups becoming isolated has been touched upon. There is a great advantage in groups being linked together for support, resourcing, training, and for maximising their collective impact. Even in a small inner-city church to which I have been attached, with only four groups, having a supervisory, supportive network with a coordinator answerable to the eldership keeps the groups vital. In the Small Group Church and

Cell Church models, a pyramid structure of oversight lies at the heart of the strategy, enabling the groups to work together to be a significant force for nurture and mission. Where a church has a vision to grow through the multiplication of small groups, it is important from the beginning to put in place this structure, which can then be expanded to cope with growth.

The Exodus 18 principle is often referred to in arriving at a workable plan of oversight. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, gave some wise advice to prevent a deeply committed and busy Moses from burning out (read Exodus 18). The large group of Israelites were divided into groups of 10 (!) each with a leader. These leaders were then clustered in fives with another leader supervising their leadership, and so it went on up the pyramid, finally to Moses. You will have a massive membership if you need to implement all aspects of Jethro's organisational plan!

Robert E Logan, Ralph W Neighbour Jnr, and Church Resources Ministries, Australia, all have well-tested guidance to give.^d

The structure in its simplest form is here in diagram 5.

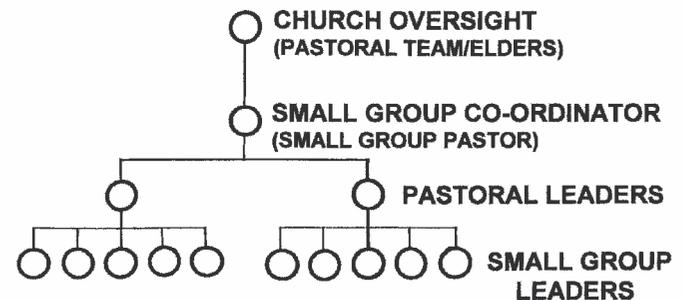


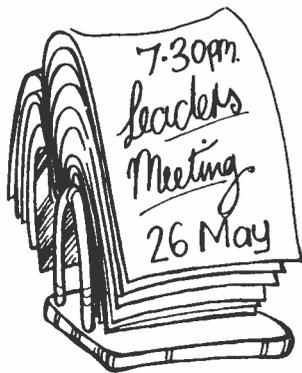
Diagram No. 5

The local church small-group network, while allowing a flexibility for each group, brings a sense of unity and purpose in seeking to fulfil the church's vision statement. Basic and advanced training can be planned more efficiently for existing and potential leaders. It provides an efficient communications network and pastoral care of both leaders and group members. The group can extend the care to those not associated with their groups.

Leaders cells

From experience, I'm thoroughly convinced that the regular leaders meetings are the most important cell, no matter how many small groups in a church.

The late David Watson, of an Anglican church in York, England, wrote: 'In so far as this support group of leaders is able to be open to God and to each other, so that same openness is likely to happen in the groups they lead. Thus the reality of spiritual life in the support group is vital: worshipping, praying, sharing, studying, caring. If these and other ingredients are increasingly to be found, they are likely to be reproduced in the rest of the fellowship. In this way, there is the continuous training of leaders, comparable to the "in-service" training so widely practised in the secular world.'⁷



As has already been stated, in a large network where a pyramid structure is used, the leaders are grouped by fives, together with their associate or apprentice leaders. This group of ten is led by a pastoral leader at the next level of the structure. In small networks, one slightly larger meeting may suffice in the early stages.

I have found that our leaders meetings helped maintain unity, gave the leaders a sense of support, and provided a place for sharing of ideas and in-service training. Most leaders meetings are held every four to six weeks to effectively fulfil the roles suggested here.

Let me expand on this.

Planning and evaluation of curricula, study resources, basic and in-service training, service, outreach, combined meetings, and finance were all given oversight by this meeting. The leaders shared the feed-back gathered from their group, orally or from questionnaires, concerning most of the above items.

In-service training was an important segment in each meeting. Generally a chapter of a suitable book was discussed or new skills developed in brief workshops. Problems encountered in leadership were discussed and there was a sharing of ideas, resources, and new insights gained while leading their groups.

The SAILS 60–90 minute leaders cassettes, comprising 10–15 minute segments of a series of practical insights from successful small group facilitators across Australia, are now proving a valuable resource in leaders meetings.⁸

Pastoral care. Problems were shared and there was ready support for any who were discouraged. Leaders did not suffer from the isolation most leaders of individual cells experience. There was always a listening ear, prayerful concern and encouragement, plus training and new resources to help them in their ministry.

The pastoral aspect extended to group members. The problems of members which surfaced during the regular meetings of the group were shared in confidence, and ways of providing help were discussed. A leaders group check-list, used in some of our meetings, is found in appendix D.

'. . . the best possible context anyone has ever discovered for developing **leadership** occurs because of a small group.'⁸

Coordinator of network

The coordinator or **overseer** is the key to the success of any network of small groups, no matter how large or small. In a smaller church the person may be a volunteer with the time and ability or a person employed on a part-time basis. In a larger church the coordinator may be a full-time or part-time staff person.

In selecting a coordinator, look for these characteristics: spiritual maturity, a skilled group leader, relates well to people, has gifts in encouragement, teaching, pastoring, and administration, is willing to undertake further training, has the time to give to the role, and has a clear sense of call to this ministry.

Helen-Meyer, coordinator of the large small-group network in Mt Evelyn Christian Fellowship in Melbourne, supplied this **list of specific tasks of a coordinator**:

- (1) development of philosophy and strategy, within church's vision statement, with working group;
- (2) promotion of small groups;
- (3) oversight of new leaders' growth, selection, training, assignments;
- (4) integrate newcomers;
- (5) development of resources;
- (6) pastoral care of leaders; facilitate care of group members;
- (7) facilitation of leaders group/s;
- (8) trouble shooting;
- (9) ongoing leadership training;
- (10) networking outside the church;
- (11) oversight of budget.

(See appendix H for more on the role of the small group pastor/coordinator. See also chapter 4 for a description of how the coordinator fits into a supervisory structure.)

Depend upon divine grace

In seeking to establish worthwhile groups, don't depend only upon some of the insights gained from this and other similar books, or experience, education, personality, and natural gifts. We must continually remind ourselves that what we do will only count for eternity if we take the time to unhurriedly listen to what God would have us say and do, then, having some idea of what is God's intention, plan and work in a spirit of dependence upon God's enabling grace. We can 'make ready . . . but the victory belongs to the Lord' (Proverbs 21:31).

References

- (1) Lyle E Schaller, *Assimilating New Members*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1983.
- (2) Elizabeth O'Connor, *Call to Commitment* (Harper & Row).
- (3) Letty M Russel, *Ferment of Freedom* (National Board, YWCA of the USA, 1972), 61 (see pp 59–67 for a description of a shalom meal).
- (4) Philip A Anderson, *Church Meetings that Matter* (United Church Press), p 58.
- (5) Sara Little, *Learning Together in the Christian Fellowship* (John Knox Press 1956), p 60.
- (6) D Cartwright and A Zander, *Group Dynamics Research and Theory* (Row, Peterson and Company).
- (7) David Watson, *Discipleship* (Hodder & Stoughton 1981) pp 91, 92.
- (8) Carl F George, *The Coming Church Revolution* (Fleming H Revell, Grand Rapids, 1994) p 70.

Notes

- (a) See the following books for their treatment of the four goals for groups:
The Big Book on Small Groups, Jeffrey Arnold (IVCP).
Good Things Come in Small Groups IVCP Staff (IVCP).
 Robert E Logan in *Beyond Church Growth* (pp 135,6).

- (b) M Scott Peck, *The Different Drum* (Random Century).
- (c) P Kaldor, National Church Life Survey, *Winds of Change* (Lancer Books 1994) p 61.
- (d) Ralph W Neighbour Jnr, *Where do we go from here?* (Touch Publications, Houston USA 1990).
 Robert E Logan, *Beyond Church Growth* (pp 135,136).
 Church Resource Ministries, Australia.
- (e) SAILS — Australian Small Group Network, *Small Group Leaders Cassettes*, Ray Nicholls, PO Box 410, Carlingford NSW 2118.
 Robert E Logan in *Beyond Church Growth* (pp135,136) has a description of the role of the cell groups coordinator.

STUDY GUIDE

- 1 Discuss the four goals and their implications for your group.
- 2 Why do some groups become closed and resist growth?
- 3 What are the disadvantages of letting your group get too big?
- 4 What are the advantages of having a group covenant?
- 5 Which aspects of the Washington Covenant Group's covenant would you especially like to guide your group life?
 Why is it to the detriment of a discipleship group to treat the study of the Bible as little more than an academic or intellectual exercise?
- 7 What are some leisure activities your group has done together? What are some other possibilities?
- 8 What are some of the advantages of forming small groups into a network?
- 9 Why is it important for leaders to meet together regularly?
- 10 'Depend upon divine grace.' In what ways do you and your group do this?

EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

“The “good news” must always be incarnate. The lives of Christian leaders are the gospel of their followers.’

The fundamental qualities for the task of leading a small Christian group do not need to be those of an exceptional person. It is not necessary to have sophisticated skills in group dynamics nor great knowledge of the Bible, nor to be a mature Christian. Most effective small-group leaders feel inadequate for their role. But what is essential for any leadership role in the church is a life touched and renewed by Jesus Christ. Then ordinary abilities become extraordinary.

Some of the best small-group leaders I have worked with over the years have had very little formal training and a number were immature spiritually, having been Christians only a few years. However, they were highly motivated to learn and serve and approached all they did with a deep sense of dependency upon God.

When we think of leadership in Christ’s terms, the normal connotations must be put behind us. Christ alone is Head of his church. Leadership in the church is not related to self-aggrandisement: the leader is to be like Christ, the servant of all. For one to wear the mantle of leadership humbly, and to lose oneself in service to others, one’s **character** will be far more important than one’s accomplishments.¹

The New Testament model is of a person who lives the truth — others believe and follow. This is the key issue — credibility and integrity. “The “good news” must always be incarnate. The lives of Christian leaders are the gospel of their followers.’ Paul was so credible he was even able to say ‘do as I do’, ‘copy me’. If he had simply

been an egotist demanding adulation he would have been disregarded.

Our ultimate model and example is Jesus Christ. Our credibility and effectiveness stem, not from having ‘arrived’ spiritually, but from a willingness to admit we have not, but are still in the process of becoming, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

A SMALL GROUP LEADER IS ONE WHO . . .

- Sees each person as having worth and dignity in his/her own right.
- Respects people enough not to intrude upon their privacy.
- Does not force people to speak.
- Does not tell others to participate but creates a situation in which they can participate.
- Helps people to really communicate with one another.
- Believes each member of the group has something to say that is worth hearing.
- Is a good listener and one who encourages others not just to hear, but to listen carefully to what others are trying to say.
- Is patient and gently draws people out and assists them in becoming articulate.
- Does not manipulate the members of a group to agree with his/her ideas.
- Is not self-seeking.
- Is flexible, but not casual; sensitive to the mood and expressed needs of the group.
- Is the servant of the people in the group and not the master.

Has warmth, understanding, and an easy manner.
 Makes all his/her life available to the group.
 Does not expect to be a perfect leader.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A LEADER

The Catholic Renew *Resource Booklet for Small Group Leaders* defines the role of effective group leaders as:

- enabling group members to develop a sense of belonging
- helping to establish an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect
- contributing towards the development of a prayerful basis to the group's work; an openness to the workings of the Spirit within the group
- encouraging an openness towards sharing of visions and dreams of each member
- enabling the groups to have the courage to dissent and obey the call to action that is such an integral part of the message of Jesus.²

Frequently God calls the most unlikely person to a position of leadership. People who would usually be overlooked receive God's call. Availability, commitment, and high motivation to learn and serve have enabled many to achieve far more than others who are more richly endowed.



'For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the

world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption; therefore, as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord" ' (1 Corinthians 2:26-31, RSV).

For many years the most common approach to the study of leadership concentrated on leadership traits per se, suggesting that there were certain characteristics, such as physical energy or friendliness, that were essential for effective leadership . . . Since all individuals did not have these qualities, only those who had them would be considered potential leaders.

A review of the research literature using this trait approach to leadership has revealed few significant findings. As Eugene E Jennings concluded, 'Fifty years of study have failed to produce one personality trait or set of qualities that can be used to discriminate leaders and nonleaders.'³

Some basic qualities of leaders

Here are some essentials for a good leader:

A growing, strong commitment to Christ. The fruit of the Spirit is evident.

Relates well to people. Is not authoritarian, abrasive or insecure. A good listener, able to affirm, encourage, and take a real interest in others. Is able to readily exercise servant leadership.

Has some of the spiritual gifts especially necessary for leaders, such as wisdom or knowledge, or an ability to teach, pastor, administer, help others, etc. Some very effective leaders have only one of these gifts!

A team person. Doesn't try to do everything him/herself. Believes in mutual ministry — that all the committed members of the group are gifted for ministry — and seeks to identify, affirm, develop, and use those gifts. Can both give and receive help. Is loyal to the church and is readily accountable to those appointed to oversee his/her ministry.

Is teachable. Holding leadership positions in the secular world does not necessarily mean a person will make a good leader of a Christian group. Leadership styles may need to be modified. A person with biblical or theological education also often needs help in developing group leadership skills. Openness to ongoing mentoring and ongoing growth is essential.

Time to give to the role. To do the job properly there is a large time commitment for preparation, conducting the group, nurture of members plus training, mentoring, and involvement in the network. Leaders may need to be relieved of other tasks in the church.

A sense of call. This will play a big part in helping

leaders to persevere when the going is difficult. Those making selection of Christian leaders have to discern not just whether the person wants to lead a group but whether God wants that person.

A careful study of all the characteristics listed by Paul as requirements for leadership in the church reveals that they are those that he expected of every Christian. These leadership qualities are the outworking of the indwelling Holy Spirit — ‘the fruit of the Spirit’.

While teaching for a short time at Rahrunga Theological College in Papua New Guinea, I asked a group of senior students what they would look for in choosing a small-group leader. Here is what they listed

A person who loves Jesus. One who is continually growing like Jesus through praying and reading the Bible regularly, and seeking to obey him.

A person who loves people and shows this through his/her patience, willingness to listen, care and concern, availability, and servanthood.

A person who loves Christ’s church, shown through being loyal, seeking to maintain the church’s unity, and working for its growth in numbers and quality.

I find it difficult to improve on this list when I am asked what I would look for in a small-group leader.

HOW TO ENLIST LEADERS

The right Christian leaders are chosen by God. Our task is to discern on whom God has placed his hand.

A general appeal for someone to fill a vacancy is not a successful ploy in calling a person to a particular ministry. Many have found the following procedure to be effective:

Gather the elders or deacons, pray for guidance, list any names that come to mind, read slowly through the church rolls for more possibilities and be prepared to be surprised! Discuss the persons’ gifts and suitability. Appoint two elders/deacons to approach individually those chosen and to make an appointment with the potential leader. A ‘call’ is issued on behalf of the church. The role and time commitment is clearly explained, along with the training and support to be given. An immediate response is not sought, but time is allowed for the person to pray and consider the call.

APPRENTICE LEADERS

‘The model we increasingly find in healthy and growing churches is that the entry into leadership will, in most cases, be through the apprentice gateway. This concept of leadership development is capable of being both decentralised and constantly repeated. Its most fundamental formula is found in 2 Timothy 2:2 and elsewhere. One leader trains others who, in turn, train others, who in turn train others.’⁴

The identification and development of leaders will be an active ongoing aspect of a growing church. Group leaders are probably in the best position to recognise emerging leaders. They should be helped to recognise those in their groups with leadership potential and know how to nurture them.

Leaders will be trained to share their leadership, not only because delegation helps them concentrate on areas for which they are especially gifted, but because it enables others to develop and use their own gifts. As certain group members assigned specific tasks show their reliability, capability, and spiritual graces, the leader should begin to mentor them and involve them in increasing leadership responsibilities.

A skilled leader will help the group affirm these emerging leaders. Before it comes to this stage, however, the leader will consult with the area leader and peers in the leaders group to confirm his/her own convictions. After this endorsement, the apprentice leaders may in some way be set apart by the wider community and be expected to extend their knowledge by reading and training and to attend most activities especially for leaders.

TRAINING LEADERS

A distinction has already been made between initial and in-service training. One of the best forms of initial training is for a skilled leader to gather potential leaders into a discipleship growth group over an extended period. The group learns by experience and observation. At the conclusion of each meeting, time should be allowed for the group to reflect together on the process. This action-reflection model is a powerful way to learn.

This manual is intended as a tool for each stage of learning. In the section on leaders groups, some ideas have been shared for its in-service role.

A church which does not feel confident to conduct its own training could engage a qualified person to lead this training. (There are many in the Australian Small Group Network, or known to the Network, who are available.) When bringing in an outside facilitator, invite other local churches to participate to maximise the person's time and to broaden and enrich the learning situation. When engaging trainers, offer to pay all their expenses and negotiate a realistic fee. Even if they are permanently employed, their organisation should not be expected to fund your costs. A course registration fee can be charged to all participants to meet these costs, with your own participants subsidised from your education budget.

Areas for Leadership Development

To provide balanced training it is helpful to recognise there are three main areas on which to focus:

Being — personal growth and spiritual formation, including relationships such as marriage and family.

Doing — ministry formation. The development of skills for ministry.

Knowing — the Christian resources. Growth in knowledge of Bible, theology, church history, etc, and how to discover their relevance for life and ministry.

Greg Davies has gathered these points into the following goals in his extensive training: development of Vision, Skills, Abilities and Training, Pastoral Care, Discipleship.

Les Scarborough provides this list: Personal awareness, Holiness, Priority of relationships, Building trust, Awareness of leadership functions, Spiritual leaders built on a biblical basis, Stewardship of time (not overcommitted), Understand change, Communication, Responsibility, Accountability, Understanding power base of church, Conflict negotiation and resolution, Establishing plurality of leadership.

SUPPORT FOR LEADERS

Leaders in various roles in the church often complain that they are not adequately sustained by the church. Leaders are vulnerable to spiritual attack and need to be continually resourced, encouraged, cared for, and affirmed for their role. Here are some suggestions:

One to one. Those with the immediate oversight of the small group leaders should do this by regular **informal contacts**, face to face or by phone, and a **formal one-to-one meeting** for an hour or two every four to eight weeks for mentoring. **Ready accessibility** when the leader is in need is essential.

Leaders meetings. These provide a support community of peers sharing, pastoring and equipping. (See under 'Leaders cells' in chapter 3.)

Local congregation. Leaders need to be aware that the whole church is behind them by **regular prayer support** through mention in intercessory prayers in worship services, inclusion in prayer points on church bulletins, and being upheld by the church prayer network. An **annual commissioning service** of all in leadership roles in the small group network is a strong affirmation. **Reports** to the congregation of their work through various communication channels also keeps their ministry before the church.

Initial and in-service training. No leader should be thrust into leadership without training. Even those with skills because of their professional training will need orientation to the unique aspects of Christian groups. While leading the group, the leader will become aware of issues for which he/she needs further help. The regular leaders meetings and special short courses conducted by the church or other outside bodies will keep leaders growing and feeling supported.

Leaders retreats. These provide opportunities for spiritual renewal and informal socialising. Those responsible for a cluster of leaders often organise a weekend retreat for their leaders, apprentice leaders, and spouses (and sometimes their families). Large networks usually plan one annual retreat for all the leaders and apprentice leaders.



THE ROLE OF THE PASTOR

The pastor plays a key role in a network of small groups in the local church. Indeed, little of significance happens if the pastor doesn't have a commitment to the program. The degree of the pastor's involvement will depend upon a number of factors, including his/her spiritual gifts, other commitments,

and whether the vision was his/hers initially.

A pastor with a strong teaching gift may lead an education program for potential leaders, with others providing input in areas in which he/she is not skilled. Whether the pastor's gift is administration or ability to help others catch the vision and move ahead in faith, the focus will be on that area, with others taking the lead in different aspects.

Where a pastor is a good small-group leader (and not all are, because their gifts lie in other areas), they may lead the initial group from which the future leaders emerge.

In networks of groups in my parishes I helped the congregation catch the vision and then played mainly the roles of trainer and pastor. I led the leaders cell, providing in-service training and pastoral support for the leaders. I also kept myself free to visit the groups systematically and to act as a resource person.

In large churches, the senior pastor often brings much inspiration, encouragement, and affirmation to the groups, both one-to-one and in the assemblies of the church. 'The fact that the small group leader is coached, receives additional skill training, and is championed from the pulpit further affirms the blessing of the clergy on this person'.⁵

Where there is a pastoral team, a non-ordained or ordained part-time or full-time pastor may be assigned oversight of the groups as their priority in their package of ministry responsibilities.

LEADERSHIP STYLE

Leadership style is how we behave when we are trying to influence the performance of a group. The chart shows four common styles of leadership with the main characteristics of each.

(Diagram No. 6 source: Items 1 and 8 in each column and all the items in the 'Authoritative' column are by Roberta Hestenes.⁶ The other items are taken from the author's book, *Building Small Groups in the Christian Community*, Renewal Publications, Australia, 1978.)

The small-group leader needs to keep sensitive to what is happening in the group and respond with a style of leadership which is appropriate. This is sometimes referred to as **functional leadership**. The leader is flexible in order to respond to the needs of the group in fulfilling its task, maintaining good group relationships and meeting the needs of each individual.

Situational leadership is an approach to managing and motivating people developed by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard, and written about originally in their book *Management of Organisational Behaviour: Utilising Human Resources* (1969). Changes have been made to the original model and this now forms the basis of the popular One Minute Manager series. Although the model is concerned with managing people in an organisation, there are principles here which are applicable to leadership in a small group setting. Blanchard talks about turning the common organisational model, often thought of in terms of a pyramid, upside down. He says, 'Managers should work for their staff . . . provide them with the resources and working conditions they need to accomplish the goals you've agreed to . . . help them win . . . if they win, you win.'⁷ This sounds very similar to what the New Testament says about mutual ministry, with the Christian leader equipping others to fulfil their own ministry. It gathers together the roles of teacher, servant, encourager, and enabler.

The situational model of management accepts that 'people who are at different levels of development need to be treated differently'.⁸ Blanchard teaches four ways of behaving when trying to influence the performance of someone else: 'Directing, Coaching, Supporting, and

LEADERSHIP STYLES

**Autocratic
(Domineering,
dictatorial)**

1. Total control, with members as listeners and followers.
2. Determines goals and policies and wants the group to choose the goal he or she has chosen.
3. More interested in the subject matter (content) than with the people (process).
4. Makes decisions regardless of other viewpoints.
5. Talks too much.
6. Focuses attention on himself or herself.
7. Group members are almost puppets.

**Authoritative
(Definite yet
responsive)**

1. Strong control, with members actively involved in the discussions.
2. Has a definite purpose and plan but is open to modification.
3. Active and energetic and seeks the activity of others.
4. Prepared to give direction and support as needed.
5. Uses communication skills to involve others.
6. Takes responsibility until others can assume it.
7. Uses personal power to empower others. Asks others to take functions.

**Democratic
(Group-centred)**

1. Shared control, with leader and members sharing functions and decisions.
2. Shares leadership responsibility.
3. Believes in other people.
4. Creates a sense of security and belonging in the group.
5. Ensures that other members have opportunity of leadership.
6. The leader's withdrawal will not mean that the group will fall apart.
7. All policies a matter of group discussion encouraged and assisted by leader.

**Laissez-faire
(Permissive,
passive)**

1. Minimal control, with members directing.
2. Doesn't prepare and lets things drift.
3. Doesn't seem to care.
4. Causes the group to accomplish very little.
5. Encourages fragmentation through indiscipline and unreliability.
6. Makes no attempt to appraise or regulate the course of events.
7. Lacks courage in making decisive plans.

IN A BIBLE STUDY:

8. Asks and answers all questions.

8. Prepares and asks questions; members respond and discuss.

8. May ask other(s) to lead discussion; leadership may be passed around, using study guide.

8. Asks one vague or general question, then is silent.

Diagram No. 6

Delegating. BUT . . . THERE IS NO ONE BEST LEADERSHIP STYLE.⁹ The 'skill of diagnosing a situation before you act is the key to being a situational leader'.¹⁰

In using the situation leadership style in a small group, we recognise that group life is dynamic, always changing. If a serious conflict situation arises — such as a person being brutally put down by another, the group overlooking its task and getting side-tracked, or members not hearing each other in a heavy argument — a directive or autocratic role will be exercised to rescue the person being hurt, get back on the track again, or improve communication. But the use of that particular style may be needed for only a brief period of the meeting.



If during a learning segment the leader keeps asking questions to which none are prepared to respond, a laissez-faire style will be more appropriate. The leader will repeat the question, remain silent, use some eye contact with the group, but essentially be passive. This can motivate group involvement.

In the early stages of a group, the leader will normally need to be more directive in helping the members begin to develop relationships, set directions, and decide on an agreed program. However, as the group grows, generally there will be more involvement of the members in the leadership.

The Situational Leadership Style recognises that group life is dynamic; it is full of variables. Small-group leaders need to develop sensitivity and skills in identifying the clues in the situation, and adapt their leadership style to meet the changing demands of the group. There is no one best way to guide people when they cluster together.

All of us have natural styles of leadership. Some by nature are more directive, others are more passive. In growing as a leader we need to identify our natural style and then work on developing the other styles. Role playing in training sessions and practising different styles in a variety of informal situations can help us gain confidence in using other styles.

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

The adage goes: 'Christianity is caught not taught'. Modelling the fruits of the Spirit and a joyous Christian style of life will be a key role of the leader. Paul said, 'Be imitators of me as I am of Christ' (1 Corinthians 11:1). The young church at Philippi was exhorted, '. . . what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do' (Philippians 4:9).

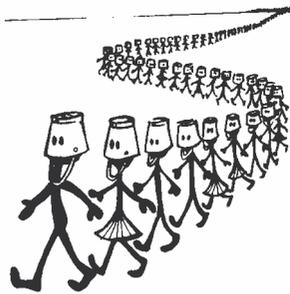
A group usually learns to be open with each other when the leader is one who doesn't pretend or live behind a mask.

Christ modelled servanthood by washing his disciples' feet, and in many other ways. The disciples not only heard Christ teach '. . . whoever would be great among you must be your servant' (Mark 10:43), they also saw it regularly demonstrated. On one occasion the demonstration was followed by: 'I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you' (John 13:15). Followers look to their leaders for evidence that the gospel really works. We are called to be 'living epistles' (2 Corinthians 3:3,4) — 'letters from Christ' for all to read.

WHO SHOULD LEAD?

While having a different person or couple lead the group each meeting can relieve the preparation load, develop leadership and give variety, it can, however, result in lack of continuity and a degree of insecurity among the members. There is no one pattern to follow, but, from my experience, the best way seems to be to have one designated leader with others taking responsibility for different segments as the group matures. The one leader heads up the group for a term or a year at least.

In the early stages of the group's life, the leader will carry the full responsibility while playing an inductive



role in enabling the group in its learning. All will be involved in the process but not initially in leadership roles.

As the group begins to cohere, different members can share various tasks. One may be responsible for preparing and leading the praise segment, another the intercessory prayer time, two or more may be responsible for

aspects of the study period, and one or two the refreshments. The designated leader will act as a guide and resource person to these people in the preparation, and be ready to support and encourage them in their leadership. The leader will also help them evaluate their presentations. The leader's degree of involvement will depend upon the capability of the members. Affirmation, availability, and prayerful support will develop confidence and future leadership.

HELPING THE GROUP ACHIEVE ITS MAXIMUM POTENTIAL

In chapter 6, 'Life Together', we deal with a variety of issues affecting group interaction. Here are a few techniques which the leader can use to help the group function more effectively.

Question making

This is a tool the leader uses in order to stimulate talk and contributions from all members.

Use straight questions, not those which are weighted in one way or another, such as:

Don't you think . . . ?

You don't think, do you . . . ?

Avoid questions with a simple yes/no answer.

To involve a person who has not contributed or those who could make a contribution to the discussion, ask:

What do you think of this, (name)?

I'm interested in your opinion (name).

Or ask a question of the whole group rather than to a particular person. Modify the above or ask:

Does anyone have a contribution on this?

What is the main point here?

To redirect. The leader must learn not to answer most of the questions asked but to redirect them to the group as a whole or to a specific person, by asking:

What do other members of the group think about this?

Let's hear what (name) thinks about this first. How would you answer this, (name)?

To clarify. Conversation can get confused and often lead to misunderstanding and conflict if people do not clearly understand what a person meant by what he or she said. Asking clarifying questions can also help the people develop their own thinking as well as get them a good hearing. Ask questions such as:

Could you put that another way for us?

What do you mean by saying that . . . ?

Why do you make that statement? What is your understanding of that? or Why did you use that?

Have you considered this . . . ?

To move on. The group could have talked out an issue or appear to be spending too much time on one item, so the leader can ask:

Do you think we have covered that sufficiently?

Should we move on now?

Summarising. To help the group in their thinking or to reach a conclusion, leaders will give their summary of what they understand the group to be saying. Opportunity is then given for approval or amendment by asking:

Is that your understanding of what is being said . . . or the conclusions we have reached?

The summary can be attempted by the group in response to questions such as:

What have we agreed to so far?

Silences are a valued part of group process

Silences can give people space to reflect and think. Sometimes the silence will occur after a question is raised by the leader. The leader should not break the silence by asking: 'Doesn't anyone have an answer?' or by answering it him/herself. The silence can motivate individuals to get involved, as few can stay with silence very long.

Occasionally the leader may suggest a period of silence during a discussion to allow for individual consideration, or to seek to hear God's perspective.

Facilitating group participation

Leaders should seek to position themselves so they have eye contact with each member. This eye contact will make all conscious that the leader is aware of their presence, and even a casual eye contact can motivate a particular person to respond. The eye contact is also important to pick up non-verbal communication of each person.

Part of the leader's role is to enable each member to participate and seek to curb those who are dominating. Normally a leader will interfere with the flow of conversation as little as possible, letting it flow back and forth. It is not always routed through the leader.

The flow of conversation where either the leader is dominating the group or people are not comfortable enough to get into dialogue with each other is shown in Diagram No. 7.

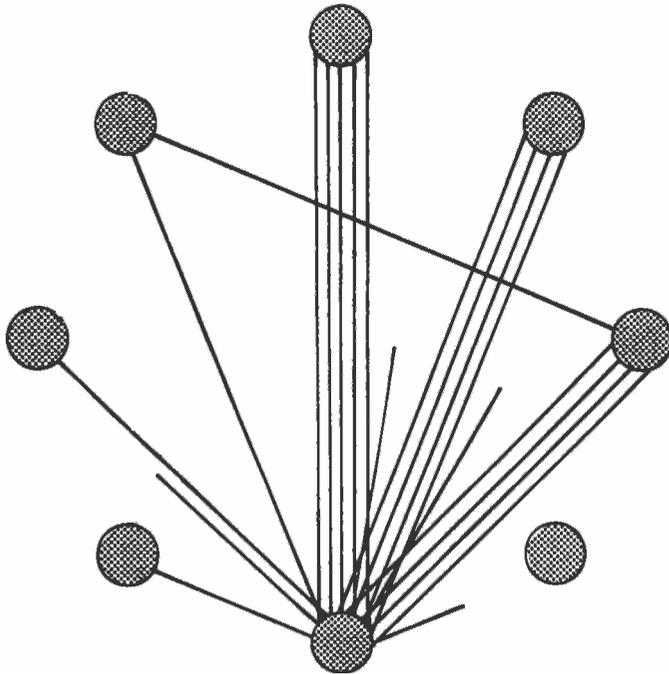


Diagram No. 7

Group participation should be as shown in Diagram No. 8, where the leader is playing a good enabling role.

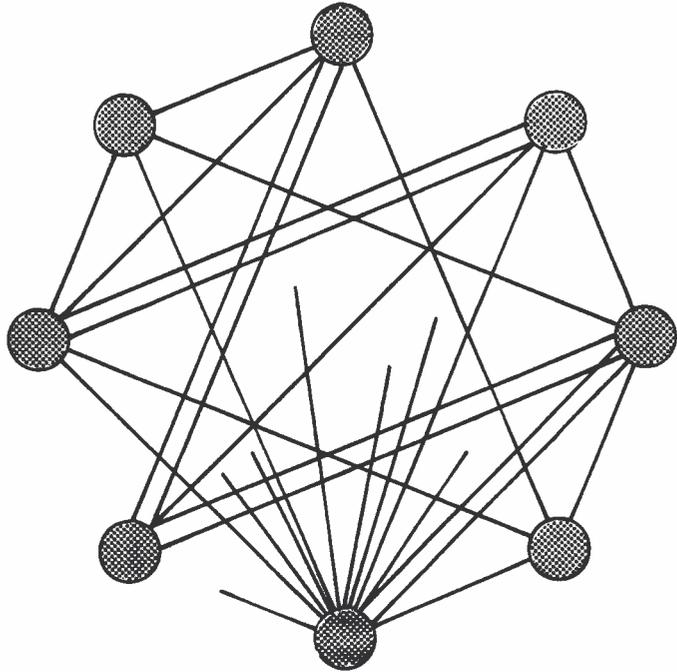


Diagram No. 8

USING A LEADERSHIP TEAM

In certain situations it will be helpful to involve a number of members with you in the group leadership in ways other than those dealt with elsewhere in this chapter.

In my first experience in using clusters of small groups, because of the large number of people wanting to participate in the new small-groups program, we had to use many relatively new Christians who were inexperienced not only in matters of Christian discipleship but also in group leadership. These were teamed in pairs to share the leadership. The regular evaluation we kept undertaking, which included feedback from the group members, indicated the effectiveness of this approach.

Another form of team leadership practised fairly widely is to **assign members' roles according to their spiritual gifts**, with the leader playing more of a coordinating, enabling role. One or two persons with the gift of **administration** take responsibility for arranging venues, making rosters, ensuring all are informed of decisions made, making any changes to arrangements, and organising special events. Those with the gift of **hospitality** are responsible for welcoming newcomers, facilitating the informal socialising before and after meetings, and organising get-togethers of a recreational nature. Follow-up of lapsed members and those who have special pastoral needs is undertaken between meetings, with house or hospital calls, phone contacts, and notes in the mail, by those with **pastoral** gifts. These may also keep an attendance record.

Those with the gift of **teaching** share the preparation and leadership of the study segment. The prayer segments are led by those with special **prayer** gifts. They may keep the group prayer journal, recording prayer requests made at each meeting on one page and noting the answers on the blank page opposite during future meetings. They may also come with a summary of current news items to include in the intercessory prayer time.

The serving dimension of the group is facilitated by those with gifts of **service**. They may follow through on needs in the local church or community, involving the whole group where necessary.

Those with gifts in leading **praise and worship** keep this aspect alive by ensuring variety and making it relevant to the topic being studied.

The **evangelist(s)** of the group will be on the lookout for new members and keep the group alert to the need for outreach and growth.

The **other many spiritual gifts** will surface as the group proceeds — some will be ongoing, others emerging from time to time as the Spirit sees appropriate.

Another way to use a leadership team is to draw from the group a **recorder**, a **reporter**, a **researcher**, a **timekeeper**, and occasionally, an **observer**. This form of team leadership is more appropriate for a conference setting, where small group



experiences are provided during the sessions as part of the learning process. However, occasionally ongoing groups may benefit from using people in some of the roles listed here:

The recorder writes group findings on a visual aid such as a board (chalk, chart, or white) or an overhead projector. These may be particular points as the discussion proceeds, so that they will not be forgotten. This may be useful in helping the group visualise thoughts, especially when it is trying to formulate a statement or restate some points.

The reporter is most commonly used where there are a number of groups meeting in the one setting and the individual group work is followed by a plenary/report back segment. Key points are noted and checked out with the group before reporting.

In a continuing group, this role could take the form of keeping an attendance record for follow-up purposes, and possibly a group journal in which highlights of the sharing and discussion in each meeting are briefly recorded, along with prayer requests.

The timekeeper. This is a role which varies depending on the type of group. It is perhaps most useful in a conference session or a group seeking to follow a session plan divided into time segments.

Time segments for items to be covered are agreed upon at the commencement and the timekeeper gives gentle reminders of how the time is progressing. The group determines whether to stay with the original plan or extend aspects.

The researcher. Where more information is needed on an item raised in the discussion this person undertakes to dig out this information by consulting books or resource people and report to a future meeting. The person may also undertake to gather additional material in preparation for a meeting.

The observer. This role is used occasionally by groups wishing to improve their performance as a group. The person can be a group member or an outsider. The observer does not participate and does not normally sit within the group. The group interplay is observed: how frequently various people speak, how freely the discussion moves. A flow chart may be prepared. The observer notes whether one or two members monopolise the conversation, when things go off the track, or when

the discussion gets bogged down. The observer is as objective as possible in his/her assessment and comments. The information is then discussed by the group and strengths and areas for improvement noted.

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- (7) K Blanchard, P Zigarmi and D Zigarmi, *Leadership and the One Minute Manager*, Collins Willow.
- (8) *ibid*
- (9) *ibid*
- (10) *ibid*

STUDY GUIDE

- 1 Individually list the names of a few Christian leaders who have had a positive influence upon you. Next to each write a few of his/her characteristics. Share with the group.
- 2 'Character will be far more important than . . . accomplishments. The "good news" must always be incarnate. The lives of Christian leaders are the gospel of their followers.'
Discuss this in the context of the opening paragraphs of this chapter.
- 3 Discuss the basic qualities of leaders listed. How do these compare with the characteristics you recalled in item 1?
What would you add to this list?
- 4 What are the best training programs you have attended?
What do you remember most about
— the way the information was presented
— the methods used
— the speakers themselves.
- 5 Discuss the subjects suggested for inclusion in a training program.
What would you want included?
- 6 In what ways as a leader have you felt supported by your church?
What further support would you have appreciated?
- 7 What are the strengths and risks of leading by example?
- 8 Another word for functional leadership is 'maieutic' leadership. It comes from Greek, and from it we get our word 'midwife'.
Discuss Christian leaders as being 'midwives of the Holy Spirit' in the context of the section on Leadership Style.

You might want to practise using a leadership team (recorder, reporter, timekeeper, researcher) if the group is large enough to divide into a number of sub-groups of four or six. Use a plenary report-back time.

UNDERSTANDING AND HELPING PEOPLE IN SMALL GROUPS

It is . . . within the church that a person might hope to experience koinonia, that fellowship, that sense of community binding Christians together — a fellowship which is, indeed, far more than a sense of “groupness”. Baillie says that God’s eternal purpose for human beings was that they might be a part of this fellowship, and that, through the fellowship, they might become what God intended them to be.¹

GROUPS ARE FOR PEOPLE

Every group is made up of people, each bringing into the group experience attitudes, prejudices, needs, and expectations. If a sense of real fellowship is generated, members of a group will want each other’s help and support. Worries, fears, and doubts can be brought out into the open in an atmosphere of loving acceptance, and joy and hopes celebrated.

One of the most thrilling things that can happen to a group, as it becomes established and as masks are allowed to drop, is that God uses these times of closeness. As we share other people’s hopes and fears and as we pray for each other, our spiritual and human discernment grows. You may find the group seeking each other out, apart from the meeting times, as it becomes a truly sharing-caring fellowship.

If practical help is offered, this involves genuinely being available to people when they want us, not just when it is convenient for us.

A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

The Bible presents us with God’s perspective on human beings. Many suffer with tunnel vision when viewing others, only seeing their weaknesses, failures, the things in their attitudes and behaviour that make them unattractive. God sees every facet of us, the good as well as the bad, the potential for success as well as the failure, our alienation and the hope of restoration through his grace. In seeking to be Christ’s agents of change in ministering to others we often have to discard past conditioning, which results in blinkered vision, and seek to see people as God sees them and hold to that divine broad view. Biblical Christian teaching perceives people as image bearers, flawed, and wounded.

Image bearer. Men and women are people of dignity, ‘created in the image of God’, ‘in God’s likeness!’ (Genesis 1:26,27; 5:1). They are ‘made a little lower than angels, crowned with glory and honour’ (Psalm 8:5; 21:5). Theologians have thought hard and long about what that really means, but whatever it means, it is mind-boggling! People are unique in God’s creation, very special beings. They are made with a capacity to live in close fellowship with God. They are created to receive love from and to give love to God, and to be channels of God’s love to others.





Flawed. Human beings **have sinned**; we have all ‘fallen short of the glory of God’, of God’s glorious plan. We have ‘forfeited the glory of God’ (Romans 3:23). We are not what God intended us to be. Outside of Christ we are alienated from our holy and gracious, loving heavenly Father (Isaiah-

59:2). But the incredible good news, the wonderful word of hope, is that life can begin again (2 Corinthians 5:17). Christ died and rose again to deal with sin and its consequences (Romans 5:1, 2, 6–8). Through repentance and faith (Acts 2:38) we can be ‘transformed into his likeness’ (2 Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10; 1 John 3:1–3). There is hope! What a privilege to be called to experience this personally and then pass it on to all to whom we minister!

Wounded. All of us carry scars from hurts we have received from being members of a flawed community. Christ’s gracious and loving invitation is to all ‘who are weary and burdened’, ‘all who carry heavy loads’. To such he offers ‘rest’, relief (Matthew-11:28). We work with many people for whom life has lost its meaning (Ecclesiastes 6:12), broken people, who know the real meaning of suffering and weakness.

With empathy and sensitivity we graciously point them to the divine healer (2 Corinthians 12:7–10; Hebrews 5:15,16; 7:25).

The vision God gives to us in Christ is all about possibilities — what might be, not what is. People need not be locked into more of the same. Life can begin again!



GROUP NEEDS

Group needs are three in number:

- (i) the need for a **task**;
- (ii) the need of the **individual** members;
- (iii) the need for group **maintenance**.

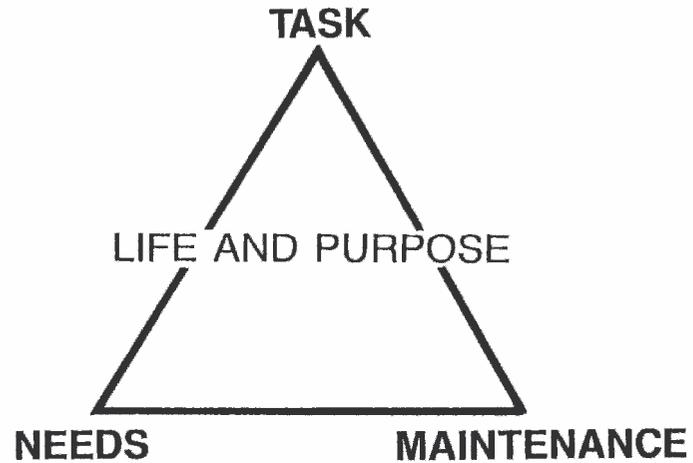


Diagram No. 9: Group Needs

Task. Every group must have a **task or purpose**. The task overlies the aim. If the interest and commitment of the members is to be maintained and their imagination captured, everyone needs to know what this task is and the consensus must be that it is worthwhile.

For example, a small group may form with a vague idea that it will be both a study and service group. Somewhere along the line the service idea may dissipate and some members may become restless and dissatisfied. ‘We are always studying and never doing’, they may say, and they may drift away or openly rebel. If there is a profound misunderstanding about the aim or function of a group from the outset, then the group is doomed to dissolution.

Individual needs. Each member brings to the group situation the sum of their life experience to that point: their conditioning, their attitudes, prejudices, points of view, strengths, and weaknesses. Each one brings individual needs to the group. These needs are not

always admitted and will include the basic psychological needs indicated in diagram no. 10 of Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs'. Spiritual needs will also be present, such as the need for forgiveness, assurance that they are acceptable to God, discovery of their role in the body of Christ, confidence in expressing their faith, and many more.

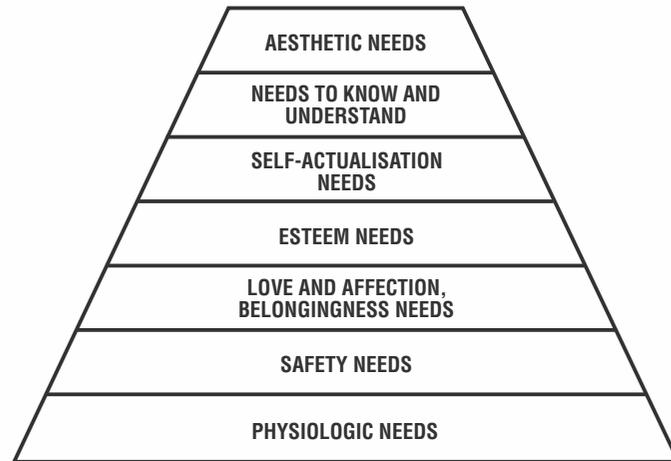


Diagram No. 10: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Most will bear wounds caused by themselves or others from their immediate situation — and some from their distant past. These individual needs must be recognised and accepted; they will inevitably affect a person's participation and task achievement. 'To understand people I must try to hear what they are not saying, what they perhaps will never be able to say.'²

One of the basic functions of the effective leader's role will be to spend time with people outside of the group meeting to understand these individual needs of members. Every symptom has a cause. Behind all disruptive behaviour there is a reason — often buried in the sub-conscious which, when surfaced and adequately dealt with, will bring freedom and the emergence of the real person.

Degrees of personal need. A group leader needs to be aware that there are degrees of need. Some will be casual, some significant, and others crucial. Most casual needs can be met by an empathetic, warm, sensitive

helper. Significant needs require real wisdom and some experience in working with people. Even then the person may need skilled help which the leader is not able to offer. Crucial or critical needs are usually well beyond an untrained person. Leaders must recognise that there will be times when a situation is beyond their competence and they will then act as a bridge to professional counsellors.

Exercise sensitivity in dealing with people.

Openness and honesty must be balanced with discretion and tact in dealing with others. John Powell warns:

We must be very careful, extremely careful in fact, that we do not assume the vocation of acquainting others with their delusions. We are all tempted to unmask others, to smash their defences, to leave them naked and blinking in the light of the illumination provided by our exposure. It could be tragic in its results. If the psychological pieces come unglued, who will pick them up and put poor Humpty Dumpty Human Being together again? Will you? Can you?³

Group maintenance is concerned with the need to preserve a free and healthy group life for it to retain its unity and purpose. Every member is committed to the maintenance of the group through active listening, ability to empathise, sensitivity, openness, development of trust, and a willingness to both affirm and confront. Chapter 6, 'Life Together', opens up this subject more fully.

Refer to diagram no. 9 in chapter 6 to see how these three factors form part of the seven basic elements which facilitate healthy groups.

For the group to operate in a way which will bring fulfilment to the members and achieve the purpose for which it exists, the leader and the members will **need to keep these three needs in balance**. There will be times when the task will be seen to be dominating the group, to the exclusion of the needs of individual members or the total welfare of the group. At such times the group will need to pause to become more sensitive to each other. People matter more than goals or tasks. In one group a member said, 'My doctor told me yesterday I have been diagnosed as having cancer'. Immediately the set task for that night paled into insignificance, as the group provided the space for that person to unburden their shock and disbelief. The group reached a high point in caring concern. To a lesser degree I have found that there is seldom a meeting where one member does not

come up with a pressing concern, with the group giving more time to that person in that particular meeting.

At other times the group will get sidetracked and need to be brought back to its agreed task, otherwise many will become frustrated.

THE ROLES PEOPLE PLAY

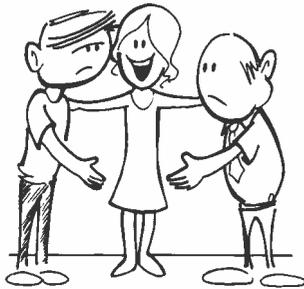
Every group consists of a variety of individuals who will bring their own personalities, attitudes, values and behaviour to bear upon the group. Each will play different roles in the group. Not all those listed below will be found in the same group (hopefully!). However, you will find some playing more than one of these roles.

Harmoniser

Attempts to reconcile disagreements. Minimises conflicts. A 'let us all be friends' approach reduces tension.

'Blessed are the peacemakers', but not if it means sweeping conflict under the rug! Conflict needs to be wisely confronted, not avoided or diffused.

Refer to page 79, 'Handling conflict creatively'.



Blocker

Interferes with progress of group. Keeps group from getting its work done. Goes off at a tangent. Reacts negatively to all suggestions. Cites personal experiences unrelated to problems.

As a leader you are responsible for keeping the group on track to fulfil its task. Use your active listening skills to help this person hear how they are coming across to the group. Consciously 'act' towards this person rather than 'react'. Don't become defensive. Model a positive spirit yourself — our God is 'the God of hope'. Seek positive responses from others in the group and explore possibilities with an expectation of the miraculous!



Helper-Facilitator

Opens communication by encouraging others. Is warm and friendly, making it possible for others to make a contribution to the group. Clarifies issues.

Pray you may have at least one of these in your group! And, as leader, see this as an essential part of your own role.



Intellectualiser

Puts discussion on a high plane. Gives little lectures on theories. Talks about 'basic concepts' or 'it is known that . . .'

While this type of person can give an impression of being superior to most in the group and make others feel inferior and threatened, they can also lift the discussion above the superficial and get people thinking. They can be a useful resource person. However, they can also be theoretical and can fail to consider the relevance for everyday living. Encourage them to relate their input to real-life situations by asking: 'How do you see that working out in your own life?' Affirm the contributions of those who may suffer with a sense of inferiority, and endeavour to help the intellectualiser appreciate the input of every member of the group.



Non-participant

Is indifferent or passive. Doodler, daydreamer. Withdraws from group by using excessive formality. Can withdraw verbally, perhaps by whispering to others.

Not everyone feels like becoming deeply involved in every meeting. No-one should



be coerced into participating; all have the right of individual dissent. Sensitive ask quiet persons for their opinion without embarrassing them. If they are bored, check on the relevance of the discussion, the resources and the methods being used. Also check your own leadership style and whether you are enabling the fulfilment of the three needs of the group mentioned earlier. Shy people should be made to feel wanted, and to feel that it is OK to be a silent member of the group.

Student

Relies on authority or sanction of others: 'My lecturer says that . . .' or 'Research indicates that . . .'

Affirm the desire to learn. Ask, 'But what do *you* think about . . .?' Learning involves **understanding** as well as knowledge.



Fighter

Aggressive. Works for status by blaming others. Deflates ego of others. Shows hostility against group or some individual.

If someone is getting hurt, the person causing the trouble needs to be confronted head-on. Rebuking this person within the group should be avoided if possible, but not at the expense of others being destroyed.



Initiator

Suggests new ideas. Proposes solutions. Makes new attack on problems. Definitive approach. Organises materials.

Also pray for one of these to be in your group! However, they may move the group along before it has adequately dealt with an issue. Don't let them control the group. Take notice of these people because, as a group



member, they may be able to see the situation more objectively than yourself. But trust your own hunches about direction and speed of the group.

Joker

Clowns. Jokes. Mimics others. Disrupts work of group.

This person can be either a hindrance or a help. They are a hindrance if they overplay this role, but can be a help in relieving tension. Clowning can be their way of avoiding some issue which may be threatening or of drawing attention to themselves. Try to direct attention away from them, or direct questions to them to try to get them to take the discussion seriously. If they persist, give them a task which will help them get attention without being disruptive.



Dominator

Interrupts others. Launches on long monologues. Tries to assert authority. Dogmatic.

A tough one, this! Like all difficult people, this person shows symptoms of deeper problems, such as a lack of recognition and affirmation, and a deep insecurity. Part of a leader's role is to control the flow of interaction so that each is given space to contribute. Draw others into the discussion through eye contact or asking for their input. Having someone make a flow chart of the group's



interaction may help the awareness of the dominating person. Affirm good and positive contributions and encourage them to be patient with others. God has not finished with any of us yet!

In terms of the group needs, we have already considered it may help to be aware of the functions of the above roles within the group.

The 'Harmoniser' or 'Helper-Facilitator' will serve to keep the group functioning as a whole, thus maintaining its life. The group will be aided in the accomplishment of its task by the 'Initiator' and the 'Helper-Facilitator'. The 'Fighter', 'Joker', and 'Blocker' may hinder the group's progress as they seek to have their individual needs met. However, sometimes they can perform a useful function in drawing the group together to cope with the demands they make, or force the group to re-examination or to an exploration of new directions.

HELPING NEEDY MEMBERS

And above all these put on love, which binds everything in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom . . . (Colossians 3:14-16)

We can easily treat people whose behaviour in a group causes conflict or disruption as problem people. A more positive response is to view them as needy people. Keeping in mind the Christian perspective dealt with earlier will make us more useful in being channels of God's transforming grace. It is sobering to keep before us that we are all potential 'problem' group members. At times we may reflect aspects of these people we have considered. As leaders, we are also wounded people, needing healing and the help of the group in our own personal growth and in being more effective leaders of the group.

Avoid making hasty assessments of people. It is all too easy to categorise and pigeonhole people who do not see things our way as 'difficult' or 'problems'. It is essential that we don't rely on first impressions nor cast people into stereotyped roles.

Be wary of projecting your own hangups in seeking to understand others. We may feel inadequate in one person's presence, or we may feel superior to others who don't conform to our attitudes, values, or behaviour. Often the problem is not in the other but in our own sense of inferiority and insecurity.

All 'needy' people need a group. Left to themselves without the feedback, wisdom, support, and prayers of a caring Christian community, they may never get on top of their problems.

Groups need different kinds of people. Any community contains a diverse group which has to learn to live together. Small groups are microcosms of the wider community. Coping with a diversity of characters enriches and deepens the group life.

Conflict, properly handled, can lead to individual and collective growth. We cannot expect every group meeting to be a happy experience for every member. Growth involves discipline and pain. More often than not our growing will take place in conflict situations caused by the behaviour of needy people.

Christian small groups are redemptive communities. These groups are the basic units in God's rescue mission. They provide a network of people through whom the Holy Spirit can bring love, hope, and transformation to those whose lives have been misshapen.

Try to discover the cause for the person's behaviour by spending time out of the group getting to know the person in a relaxed, informal way. When their confidence and trust in us grows, they may feel free to share something of their story, which can lead to a better understanding of what has moulded their life and how we can care for them.

Be prepared to seek specialised guidance. As we noted earlier, a group member may present deep needs which we are not equipped to adequately help. Discuss the matter with another leader, your minister, or a counsellor.

Draw upon the supernatural resources of the Holy Spirit for wisdom and grace; pray! By all means learn all you can about human behaviour and how best to help others, but always remember the supernatural dimension to our ministry. God, the Holy Spirit, is waiting to counsel and guide us (John 14:16,17,26), to maximise our learning, and give us dimensions to our caring that one can never learn from books. There is a wisdom that is God-given (James 1:5). Divine love, with its characteristics of patience, kindness, humility, sensitivity, trust, and perseverance, is God's most precious gift in understanding and helping others (1 Corinthians 13:1-7; Romans 5:5; Galatians 5:22-25).

CARING BETWEEN MEETINGS

Some of our best caring is done between the group meetings, where we prove the genuineness of our love by extending the help given during the meeting on a one-to-one basis. Here are some suggestions:

Casual visit — 'Dropping by to see how you are.'

Prearranged visit — 'May I call to see you this afternoon?'

Phone call — 'I'm just checking you're OK.'

A letter or card — 'Just to let you know you are in our thoughts and prayers.'

Flowers — 'These may say what I find hard to put into words.'

Deliver a meal — 'This may take the pressure off a bit.'

Sharing in a task — 'Can you help me by . . .?' or, 'Can I help you with . . .?'

Meeting for a meal or coffee — 'Let's have lunch together.'

Recreation together — 'Would you like to play a game of . . .?'

A walk/hike together — 'Do you feel like a walk?'

Babysit — 'Why don't you both have some time to yourselves?'

Practical help — 'How can I help?'

Paul's letter to the Philippians embodies the thoughts of an ideal leader. Notice how he yearns over his people, his affection for them and what he expects of them.

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, and participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves.

Let each of you look not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself taking the form of a servant (or slave), being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:1-8)

If people are to meet God in the group and to grow into Jesus Christ, then the group must be receptive to the Holy Spirit and understand his work. The Holy Spirit is God's agent of growth and change in human beings at all levels of spiritual life — collective and individual. Christian groups must draw upon the supernatural resources of the Holy Spirit for wisdom, love and grace, so that each member may more fully discover the freedom that is in Christ and therefore bring glory to God.

References

- (1) Sara K Little, *Learning together in the Christian Fellowship* (John Knox, Richmond, Va., 1956) p 18.
- (2) John Powell, S J, *Why am I afraid to tell you who I am?* (Tabor, 1969), p 113.
- (3) *ibid*

STUDY GUIDE

- 1 Discuss the concept of 'image bearer'. Think of one or two persons you had never thought of as 'image bearers'. How could that change your attitude to them?
- 2 Discuss the statement at the end of the section 'A Christian perspective': 'The vision God gives to us in Christ is . . .'
- 3 What are some individual personal and spiritual needs people may bring to a group meeting? Discuss practical ways in which a few of them could be met by the group.
- 4 Discuss John Powell's quote in 'Group needs — Individual needs'.
- 5 Take one or more of the roles people play in a group and list
 - the needs of the individual
 - the possible effect on the group.Discuss ways in which the needs of the individual can best be met:
 - suggestions for handling the person positively
 - how the whole group, rather than just the leader, could be involved in this process.
- 6 After reading the section 'Helping needy members',
 - discuss the reasons some group leaders unwisely try to handle deep needs of their members without seeking help. What are the dangers in this?
 - think of some meetings of your group where things may have been different if those characteristics of divine love had been more evident.
- 7 Think of one person in your group, family, or workplace who's giving out distress signals. What three non-threatening questions could you ask him or her to show you care?
- 8 Describe a time when someone asked you how you were and you answered quite honestly. Did that person respond in a way that lightened your burden?
What could he or she have said to make you feel genuinely cared for?
- 9 Think of some other ways individual group members could be cared for between meetings.

Chapter 6

LIFE TOGETHER

Let us think of one another and how we can encourage each other to love and do good deeds . . . let us do all we can to help one another's faith, and this the more earnestly as we see the final day drawing nearer.

(Hebrews 10:25b J B Phillips)

Life is community and community is relationships and relationships die without communication.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer¹

Small groups have a crucial role to play in the renewal of individuals and society. All the liberating forces of the small group, now recognised by the social sciences, have been inherent from the beginning in the church. When the divine power of the Holy Spirit, present in individuals, operates in conjunction with the natural power of group relationships, people can be set free to relate to each other and to God in new and deeper ways.

Relationships within the small group are a most important factor. Whatever the purpose of the group, what happens to the people involved is more important than group structure or work accomplished.

The group itself does not cause spiritual renewal. But the structure and the dynamics of a small group seeking God's leadership provide an atmosphere conducive to growth, discovery of gifts, commitment, and service. Renewal is a gift which God in his grace bestows upon those who genuinely seek him, and this is important to keep before us throughout this chapter. While drawing upon the insights of group dynamics, as a Christian group we must always be aware of the divine factor present in each group. Technical know-how provides the framework in which the Holy Spirit may or may not choose to work renewal.



THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Human beings are made for community and togetherness. But, of course, it is not just common human togetherness we are interested in here. What we are inquiring about is something special, namely that extraordinary fellowship that is spoken of, and sometimes reflected in, the New Testament. What is it really? The Greek word commonly rendered as 'fellowship' is *koinonia*. It is derived ultimately from the word *koinos*, which means 'common'. This is the word used in Acts 2:44, where it is said that those who believed 'had all things in common'. *Koinonia* literally means the state of sharing, of being partners, of having common or mutual interests.

There are some things we all share in common. We share with all people a common humanity and we all participate together in a common human predicament.

We have varying backgrounds, interests, needs, beliefs, and values which become the basis of many fellowships. There may also be barriers to fellowship. Yet with those with whom we share some of these things we may have fellowship that is meaningful and lasting. Christian fellowship also is based on sharing things in common. What distinguishes it from all other fellowship is the nature of what is shared by Christians. If we try to state all that Christians share in common we shall have to make a very long list. However, the New Testament speaks particularly of **three things shared in common by all Christians**: they are all partakers of Christ, they are all partakers of God's love, and they are all partakers of the Spirit.

We may not often think of our relationship to Christ in terms of participation, or sharing in Christ, but this is in fact a common New Testament way of describing that relationship. Paul uses the metaphor of the body of which all Christians are members. The basic idea is that all faithful people share together a single life in Christ. The same idea is conveyed in the gospel of John by the metaphor of the vine and the branches (John 15). Because of this sharing in Christ, earthly distinctions no longer count for anything: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28).

That Christians **share in God's love** is so obvious that it hardly needs to be stated. The whole point of Christ's death is that it is both an outworking of that love and a demonstration of it. The aspect of *sharing* in God's love comes out especially in those passages which speak of us as adopted children (Galatians 4:4-7; Romans 8:14-16 and 1 John 3:1). Of course, this in turn implies that we all are members of God's family and ought to love one another.

If we ask how it is that we come to participate in Christ and share in the love of God, the answer of the New Testament is that it is **through the Holy Spirit**.

In view of this it is not surprising that, according to the book of Acts, **the gift of the Spirit was the primary and most important thing shared in common by all Christians**. The amazing community described at the end of chapter 2, which even expressed itself in sharing of all possessions, was the direct outcome of the event of Pentecost. This was not just an exciting experience, but the reception of the Spirit as a gift permanently shared.

One can judge how essential that gift was from the words of Paul: 'Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him' (Romans 8:9). The gift of the Holy Spirit is the hallmark of the Christian.



Of special interest is the concluding verse of 2 Corinthians, so familiar to us all: 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all'. This blessing includes the three most important things which Christians share. But what is the meaning of the phrase 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit'? The

fellowship of the Holy Spirit is the fellowship he creates and gives to us. Fellowship arises from sharing things in common. What makes Christian fellowship distinctive and different from all other fellowships is the nature of what is shared, and that, pre-eminently, is the gift of the Spirit.

It is not too much to say that, within any group of people, until there is a deep awareness that what holds them together is nothing less than the sharing of this one gift of the Spirit, their fellowship is not, strictly speaking, a Christian fellowship. Sooner or later this will become apparent when someone of different social or racial origin tries to join the group. Then subtle, and not so subtle, pressures to exclude the person will indicate that what holds this group together is not sharing in the Holy Spirit, but sharing in some social or racial class, or some other common factor. If the fellowship is truly constituted by sharing in the Holy Spirit it will not depend on bonds of this kind, whether conscious or unconscious.

As well as creating fellowship by being the object shared, the Holy Spirit has also a more active role in creating and sustaining fellowship. Fellowship is always in danger of being disrupted by human sin. Even those who are justified by grace through faith still have sin remaining in them. Their selfishness and self-centredness must be broken again and again if they are not to offend one another, or be offended. This also is the work of the Spirit.

In the natural state Jew and Greek, bond and free would not hold together. Jealousy and rivalry stemming from diversity of gifts can even disrupt the fellowship of Christians unless these ugly reactions are extinguished by the Spirit. 'The Go-Between God' is the name John Taylor² gives to the Holy Spirit, because the Spirit is God going between the individual and his or her neighbour, making them aware and sensitive to each other, so that at the point where they meet they are bonded together in fellowship. A fellowship will only remain a Christian fellowship as its members remain open to this 'go-between' work of the Spirit.³

THE SEVEN ELEMENTS OF VITAL GROUP LIFE

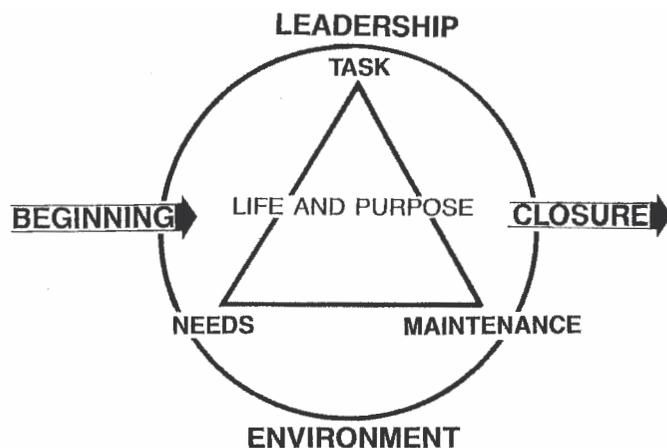


Diagram No. 11: The Seven Elements of Vital Group Life

The seven elements which keep groups alive and able to fulfil their purposes are indicated in diagram no. 11. An effective group leader will be aware of the essential role these factors play and seek to plan accordingly, while showing the flexibility needed to respond to the changing dynamics of the group.

In the previous chapter we briefly dealt with the group **task**, individual **needs**, and **maintenance** of group life. In chapter 4 we dealt with the **leadership** factor, and chapter 16 covers the **closure** of a group in the sense of terminating its existence.

Commencing the group

The group commences immediately members arrive at the venue. Sincere welcomes as each arrives and informal introduction of new members one to one all help create an atmosphere of acceptance and expectation. Drinks and simple snacks will be appropriate for the commencement of most meetings. Name tags with Christian names large enough to read from the other side of the group should be provided, even when there may be only one or two new members.

The physical aspects of the meeting place will all assist the newcomer to quickly adjust to an unfamiliar environment. Seating should be comfortable, and arranged so all can have easy eye contact with each other. Appropriate heating or cooling indicates further thoughtfulness and sensitivity to comfort.

A **get-acquainted exercise**, chosen to suit the particular group, is not optional; it plays an essential role in building the group. It is not a game! (Refer to appendixes A and B.) These group activities speed up the process of getting to know each other. They relax people in a light-hearted non-threatening atmosphere and enable recognition and acceptance as good listening takes place.

In most exercises, particularly in the Interview method, each person responds to easy questions as well as asks them of their partner. This helps each become enrolled in the group process as they break their sound barrier by hearing their own voice. After this experience, people find it easier to become involved in the ongoing communication in the group.

Creating an effective group environment

We have touched on some of the physical factors to which attention needs to be given. The following are some of the emotional components which need to be developed and maintained. While a skilled leader will play a major role in creating the right emotional environment, most of the following could be linked with aspects of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22) which is divinely given to those who will 'live by the Spirit' and 'keep in step with the Spirit' (Galatians 5:25).

Love and acceptance. Later in this chapter we learn that 'true listening is always a manifestation of love'. Evangelism has been defined as 'loving people into taking God seriously'. Love is the essential ingredient of the

Christian life, both individual and collective. Acceptance of people as they are is primary in enabling them to become who God intended them to be.

Empathy and support. When our selfishness is put to one side, we are more able to empathise, to stand closer to another, even to stand in their shoes, to understand a little more clearly their thoughts and feelings. Love and empathy lead to appropriate and reliable support. These are the incarnational dimensions of relationships: identification and servanthood. Christ is our best model!

Trust, openness, and confidentiality. Yes, in that order! As the levels of trust grow, members will feel more able to venture into the open with their deeper feelings and concerns. Coercing or manipulating openness must be avoided. Allow it to grow naturally and prepare to be surprised! It is best modelled by the leader — and then with sensitivity. Talk together about how imperative it is to maintain confidences and how you will do this.

Affirmation and encouragement. While some, like Barnabas, have a strong gift of encouragement, the need to encourage one another is a common theme of the New Testament (Acts 15:32; 1 Thessalonians 4:18; 2 Timothy 4:2; Titus 2:6; Hebrews 3:13; 10:25). It counters the devil's vigorous activity of discouragement and accusation. Encouragement lights a candle in the darkness, cheers on the strugglers, gives hope amid apparent failure, and freely says 'well done'. It is conveyed through words spoken and written and often through a touch or a smile. It is one of the most precious of the divine gifts.

Freedom and accountability. God moved to institute the new covenant of grace because the old covenant deteriorated into a religion of mainly impossibly restrictive rules and regulations. Paul warned the Christians of the Galatian church against slipping back into the old religiosity and losing the freedom they had in Christ (2:4). 'It is for freedom that Christ has set us free' (5:1, 13). While groups may operate under an agreed covenant, this, like all aspects of the group life, must be administered with grace, avoiding legalism which creates unwarranted guilt and destroys joy. All must be encouraged to develop a spirituality and lifestyle of their own, consistent with New Testament teachings and guided and empowered by the Spirit. Unity in

diversity is the model Paul gives for the body (1 Corinthians 12:12–26).

However, **accountability** is also an essential ingredient of Christian fellowship. We will all give an account of ourselves on the Judgment Day (Matthew 12:36; Romans 14:12; Hebrews 4:13). Being accountable to one another here helps us prepare ourselves for God. Paul's 'body' passage, referred to above, emphasises the point of interdependence, each person part of a unique togetherness. The way one functions influences the rest of the body. Suffering and rejoicing is a collective experience. We are to 'encourage each other to love and do good deeds . . . let us all do all we can to help one another's faith' (Hebrews 10:25). The 'encouraging' and 'helping' involves affirmation when we are succeeding and exhortation and rebuke in love when we miss the mark (Luke 17:3; 2 Timothy 4:2). Group covenants play an important role in keeping us accountable to each other in grace.

Availability and sensitivity. The Washington Covenant Groups' covenant quoted in chapter 3 expresses **availability** well: 'Anything I have — time, energy, insight, possessions — are all at your disposal if you need them. I give them to you . . . I pledge regularity of time, whether in prayer or in agreed-upon meeting time.'

Genuine Christian love sets no limits to its availability. The ministry of caring for each other will extend beyond the small-group meeting. Some of the deepest and most practical caring will occur between meetings.

Sensitivity means we will avoid coercing or manipulation. We will be aware of the limitations of others in reading skills, praying, and sharing their stories openly. Physical and emotional disabilities, and restraints because of family and work commitments, will be taken into account in what the group expects of its members.

Faith and hope. God has called the church to be a lighthouse of faith, hope, and love in a storm-tossed world that has lost its way. Every Christian small group is a microcosm of the church and has the same high calling. There is no place for defeatism, despondency, pessimism, cynicism, or despair. Being a centre of faith and hope is its primary goal. The small-group leader will essentially be an apostle of hope, continually pointing the group to our risen and glorified Christ and the hope, power,

victory, and living presence of Christ made ours through his death and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:54–58).

Life-related learning. As the psalmist put it, God's word will be the group's lamp to show it the way (Psalm 119:105) as it grapples with the big issues of everyday living in the home, workplace, and community. Groups which bring hope and transform lives never approach the Scriptures casually or purely academically. They seek to understand its real meaning and then what it is saying to people living in the real world. All the group's learning will seek to be relevant to everyday living.

THE LIFE CYCLE OF A GROUP

The seven elements of vital group life include the beginning and closure of a group. We have briefly dealt with a group's beginning and in chapter 16 cover the termination of a group. These are the first and last of a number of stages through which a group passes. The different ways groups behave can often be somewhat bewildering to a leader unless they understand that, like human beings, groups act in different ways as they develop and mature. Group members will also be better able to assist the group's growth if they have an understanding of these stages.

'Groups are living organisms; like the human life cycle (birth, infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age, death) they have a beginning, a middle, and an end. The development of a group is not simply in a straight line, but tends to go in a series of forward movements interspersed with regressive interludes. The general movement, if the group is healthy, is towards its avowed goal despite the backward periods.'¹⁴

Theorists have different ways of expressing these discernible developmental stages. Trevor Tyson draws on B W Tuckman's work in which he synthesised the findings of several dozen writers in this field into his popular 'Forming-Storming-Norming-Performing' model. The following is a summary of his description of each of these stages of group life.

Forming. In the early meetings of the group the members will be tentative, looking for support and direction, and conversation will be relatively superficial.

The group will want to define their purpose and decide how it can be achieved. The leader will play an important role in enabling the group members to feel secure and find a sense of direction.

Storming. Some frustration is experienced as things begin to bog down a little. Personal agendas emerge with resulting tension, and stronger personalities will want to control the group. Confusion and loss of confidence in achieving the expectations of the group can lead to a sense of hopelessness and a sense of apathy. The leader's ability to manage conflict is a major factor in the phase.

Norming. If the group remains together it may begin to cohere, accept individual differences, establish norms, and begin to pull together in order to achieve its purpose. The group will gradually begin to be less dependent upon the leader, looking to him/her mainly for encouragement and advice.

Performing. This is the productive stage. The three elements we have already considered of task, personal needs, and maintenance of the group life will be kept in balance. Conflict will surface from time to time but it will be of a more minor nature. Leadership will be shared according to the appropriateness of the now-recognised unique contributions of each member to the needs of the group at particular times. The leader's role will become more of a playing coach role.

Termination. When the group agrees it has fulfilled its purpose, it plans its ending. The loss of the group experience will result in varying degrees of grief. The leader will play an important role in helping it work through an appropriate closure experience. In chapter 16 we deal with this phase in detail.

'It is important to recognise that the stages of group development are not like watertight compartments, and although the above model appears to be linear, all the authors acknowledge two important qualifications: (i) progression is likely to be irregular with intermittent regressive interludes or periods of stagnation: a stage might last an hour in one group, a month in another; and (ii) transition from one stage to another is usually gradual rather than sharp. In addition, some groups may skip a stage entirely, others may make little or no progress at all.'¹⁵

THE CHANGING FOCUS OF A GROUP

'Three Philosophies of Life' is the title of an insightful sermon preached by Leonard Griffith.⁶ Basing it on the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), he explained that the philosophy of the robbers was **What's yours is mine — I'll take it**. They were entirely self-seeking, irrespective of the cost to others, even to their own lives. The two religious leaders who passed by without showing any compassion were also self-centred. Their sin may have been the greater, in showing apathy in the face of human need. Their philosophy of life was **What's mine is mine — I'll keep it**. The Good Samaritan's generosity and disregard for personal safety proved he lived by the philosophy of **What's mine is ours — we'll share it**.

The group life of many Christian small groups has been helped by reflecting on these three philosophies. In the early stages of the life cycle of a group there is often a high degree of self-centredness, leading to conflict as some try to get the most out of the group for their own benefit, disregarding the needs and interests of others. The group functions best when it reaches that point where the Good Samaritan's philosophy governs its relationships.

Here is another way of looking at the group's life cycle from a Christian perspective in a manner that incorporates these philosophies and links in with Tuckman's group life stages (see Life Cycle of a Group).

Focus on the group. This is the exploration, honeymoon, 'forming' stage when the group is birthed.

Focus on self. The members focus on what the group can do for them. Conflict is evident in this transition, 'storming' stage. The group exhibits the characteristics of childhood. The attitudes of the robbers and the uninterested, pious leaders are evident.

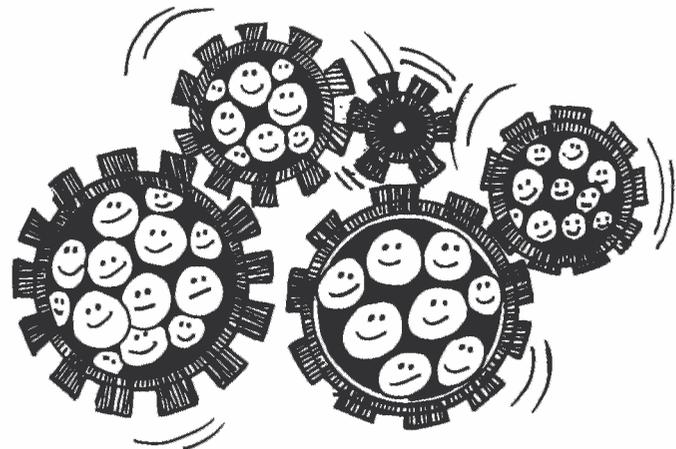
Focus on Christ. Members begin to focus less on their own personal needs and bring Christ onto centre stage. A Christ-centred, caring community emerges, and the 'norming' of the group takes place. The Good Samaritan is our model for both this and the next phase.

Focus on others. Our servant Lord, now the governing factor of the group's life, turns the attention of the group outward in service to others. This is the 'performing', outreach, ministry stage as the group reaches maturity.

Focus on growth. As in Christ's parable of the seed of wheat, the group is prepared to die so that it may reproduce itself. Then others may benefit by joining the new cells which emerge. This is the closure, the termination of the group, its death, so that it may rise to newness of life. Ralph Neighbour's cell church strategy is essentially based on this way of interpreting the group life cycle in a Christian context where a church has a strong orientation to growing the church through the multiplication of small groups.

THE DYNAMICS OF THE GROUP

Groups are more than just a certain number of individuals together, more than just the sum total of their membership. In every group, whenever people come together, unique emotional pressures are at work. These pressures arise from the different relationships within the group, the group's relation to the outside world, and the different needs individuals bring to the group. These forces and pressures help shape the nature of each group. The feeling of 'team spirit' is released when a group is committed to a particular goal and to some extent to each other. But these forces are not only constructive. People will often change their behaviour, or do things that they would not normally do as individuals, when in a group. We refer to these forces as 'group dynamics'.



Group cohesion

One of these forces is known as group cohesion. This refers to those pressures which encourage the members to join the group and maintain their membership of it. The individual will relate to a group to the degree that he/she sees it meeting some of his/her needs. And the extent to which the group can meet these needs of its different members will determine the degree of group cohesion. Leaders should be aware of the most common needs individuals bring to the group. These needs include:

- A sense of belonging and love.
- A sense of purpose and meaning.
- To be able to share in planning.
- To have a clear understanding of what is expected of themselves and the group (ie the group's goal).
- To experience genuine responsibility and challenge.
- To feel that progress is being made towards set goals; a sense of achievement.
- An intense desire to be kept informed.
- A desire for recognition when it is due.
- A reasonable degree of security.

In addition to the positive forces (sometimes called **rewards**) listed above, which encourage group cohesiveness, there are also forces (**dis-rewards**) working against the maintenance of the group membership. Some of these could include:

- Loss of free time.
- The presence of 'problem' members in the group.
- Ineffective leadership.
- Lack of opportunity to 'do their own thing'.
- Destructive competition among the group members.

While these may appear obvious, we often tend to think of a group from our own point of view rather than that of the other members. Although we cannot make our groups appeal to everyone, we should be aware of the effects of both the rewards and dis-rewards from the members', or potential members', point of view.

People bring their own assumptions, attitudes, mental sets, values, etc to the group. Feelings and prejudices are communicated through words, intonations, facial expressions, posture, etc. Be sure that you are at least aware of your own attitudes and feelings as they affect

the group's life, for you can be sure that they will be communicated, either verbally or non-verbally, to the group and will affect the meaning the other members draw out.

Informal organisation

It is also necessary for the leader to be aware of the informal organisation within the group (ie the values, relationships, etc) that may not be provided for by the official, formal group structure and organisation. The nature of the informal organisation within your group will depend on how your group sees itself and its purpose. This is one reason why goal clarification and periodic evaluation of the group life and task achievement is so important.

If your group is primarily 'task-oriented' (ie concerned above all with the achievement of the observable objective — eg planning a particular project), the informal organisation will favour those who are productive and helpful; if companionship oriented, then those who are companionable and friendly. However, to be really effective, groups need to be efficient in performing their task as well as effective in their interpersonal relationships.

Informal leadership

Informal organisation involves the aspect of informal leadership. In any group meeting, one or more people may naturally assume leadership roles at different stages of the meeting. Informal leaders further the real interest of the group; their behaviour comes closest to the group ideal; they are the group representatives. It is important then to recognise your informal leaders — don't feel threatened by them. It is not necessary to formally incorporate them into the leadership team, but it is essential to utilise them as a communication channel to the group. Recognise them as an asset and relate to them accordingly. Have them onside!

Communication and relationships

Proper and effective communication is the most strategic factor in motivating a group. But communication only takes place when the meaning (ie the facts plus the subjective interpretation of the facts) intended by the communicator coincides with the meaning interpreted by

the group. For this to happen communication must be seen as a two-way process. The communicator must listen to the group as well as talk. Indeed, speaking and listening skills should be used to build a warm, accepting, friendly climate in which all members feel free to participate in relevant communication and discussion. The flow of communication is affected by the interpersonal relationships within the group and the relevance to the life and purpose of the group of information being communicated. As has already been indicated, the leader — through their knowledge of group dynamics, but more importantly through their love and concern for the members of their group — must facilitate this climate.

In his excellent book, *Why don't people listen?*, Hugh MacKay shows in a simple yet revolutionary way that the key to improving the quality of our relationships is through a more disciplined and sensitive approach to communication.

He helps us see how dangerous and inappropriate it is to follow what he calls 'the injection myth', the theory that by constantly repeating an ineffective message it will eventually impact the listener. He emphasises the need for 'the fertile ground of a functioning relationship', for the message 'to blossom and flourish' — for '“common ground” being the essence of communication — the participation of both of us'.⁷

Helping people change and grow

It should be stressed here that, as Christians, we are not in the business of manipulating people towards either our views or the lifestyle we might believe they should follow. However, groups are concerned with the learning, growth and development of their individual members, and therefore we should be concerned with helping people change and grow. To influence the behaviour of individuals in a group we need to deal with the group as a unit, because the individuals are held in position by forces pressuring them to conform to the group's standards. So you need to 'unfreeze' the existing group standard through uninhibited discussion, free expression of views and feelings, and perhaps changing the physical environment (eg a more relaxed physical setting), until the group as a whole accepts a higher standard. As Kurt Lewin, one of the leaders in the field of group dynamics

has said: 'It is easier to change the ideology and social practice of a small group handled together than of single individuals'.

It is important, then, for group leaders to be aware of the forces below the surface in their groups and to be able to, in some degree, manage them. Jesus himself understood the importance of group dynamics and to some extent utilised those forces in his ministry. In the small group of twelve disciples, ideas, attitudes, and behaviour were changed. Group dynamics is a very real tool that the Holy Spirit uses to minister to us and through us to each other.

FIVE LEVELS OF COMMUNICATION

There are five levels of communication on which people relate to one another. These levels stand for degrees of willingness to communicate ourselves to others.

The base of the triangle in diagram no. 12 represents the least willingness to communicate and, at the same time, the largest percentage of people. More people choose to use this level of communication than any of the other four. The successive ascending levels indicate greater and greater willingness to communicate and fewer and fewer people. Reaching the peak requires real openness and honesty, and not many have the courage to go all the way.

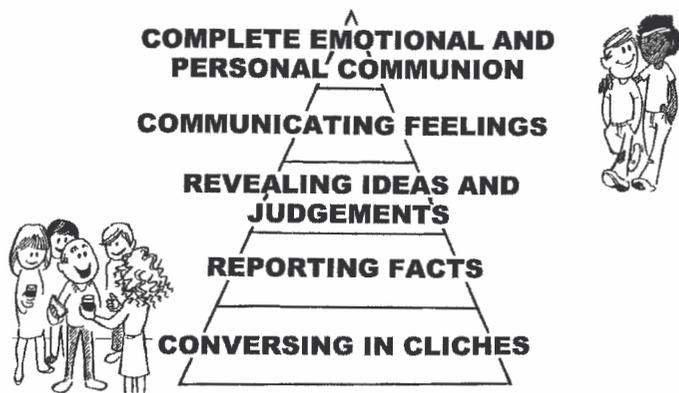


Diagram No. 12: Five Levels of Communication

In *Why am I afraid to tell you who I am?* John Powell⁸ gives a helpful description of each of these five levels of communication, and what follows is an adaptation of his explanation.

Level 5: Conversing in clichés. This is the most shallow and superficial level. It is the lowest level of self-communication and, in fact, may not even be communication at all.

We may say such things as: 'How are you?' or 'It's really good to see you' or 'No worries!' and not really mean what we are saying. If the other person were to begin answering our question 'How are you?' in detail, we would be very surprised. The standard answer to this superficial and conventional question is: 'Fine, thank you'. There is no sharing of self at all. Tragically, 'talking without speaking' and 'hearing without listening' is as deep as many choose to go.

Level 4: Reporting facts. At this level we expose very little of our real selves. Instead, we remain satisfied to report facts about others — what someone has said or done — without giving anything of ourselves or inviting anything of others.

Level 3: Revealing ideas and judgments. There is, on this level, some communication of ourselves. We risk telling another person some of our ideas, judgments, and decisions but give careful attention to how these ideas are being received. The slightest indication of non-acceptance, a yawn for example, makes us change the subject or go silent.

We don't often communicate at this level but, if we sense acceptance of ourselves and our ideas when we do, we may be willing to go on to the next level of communication.

Level 2: Communicating feelings. There is much more of ourselves to share than ideas, judgments, and decisions. The feelings or emotions that lie under these convictions reveal who we really are. Feelings 'most clearly differentiate and individuate' us from others, but very few of us communicate at this level.

'I think you are very clever', is a judgment. Some possible underlying feelings might be: 'I feel envious', 'I feel pleased to be your friend', 'I feel inferior to you'. Because we feel that others will not be comfortable with such emotional honesty, we engage in superficial relationships, and this way of relating is not conducive to

personal growth. Even husbands and wives can live for years under the same roof and not communicate on a feeling level.

'Any relationship, which is to have the nature of true personal encounter, must be based on this honest, open, gut-level communication.'

Level 1: Complete emotional and personal communion. This is the most intimate form of communication. All true friendships, and especially marriage, must be based on total openness and honesty, and this will result in moments of complete emotional and personal communion. Such depths of communication are rare times of tremendous joy and satisfaction.

FACTORS WHICH AFFECT OUR COMMUNICATION WITH OTHERS

One of the major influences upon group life is the quality of the communication which exists. There are at least five major factors which contribute to the way in which each person in the group will help facilitate good or poor communication: self-image, listening skills, ability to express themselves, conflict, and the degree to which each is prepared to be open with others.



Self-image

Self-image is the concept we have of ourselves. It is the very centre of our being from which we see, hear, evaluate and understand everything else. A healthy, strong self-image is necessary for vital and satisfying interaction with others, for this helps people live fully and confidently and enjoy life and people.

A person with a poor self-image is insecure, lacks self-assurance, is over-concerned for what other people think, feels unworthy and inadequate. Because of this, he/she feels that his/her ideas and thoughts are uninteresting and are not worth communicating. This person fears rejection and criticism and so has difficulty in relating to others in an open, honest way. 'I am afraid to tell you who I am, because if I tell you who I am, you may not like who I am, and it's all that I have.' John Powell continues by saying:

. . . this thought reflects something of the imprisoning fears and self-doubt which cripple most of us and keep us from forward movement on the road to maturity, happiness and true love.⁹

As our self-image affects the way we communicate, so our communication with others shapes our concepts and the way we see ourselves. We derive a great deal of self-knowledge from our experiences with other human beings, particularly from the 'significant others' in our lives: parents, family, peer group, and those we love. If a person is to have a strong self-image, he or she needs the assurance of the love, respect and acceptance of those who are the 'significant others' in his or her life. In a supportive small group, members may have these needs met in a way which will enable growth and acceptance of themselves which has never previously been possible. They can also discover that there is a divine inner capacity which can enable them to be more than they are.

Listening

A great deal of our failure to communicate stems from the fact that we do not listen properly. Creative, sensitive, accurate, non-judgmental listening is vitally important in a meaningful relationship. Growth takes place within us when we can offer this kind of listening to another and also when we have been the recipients of this kind of listening.

Carl R Rogers says:

I can testify that when you are in a psychological distress and someone really hears you without passing judgment on you, without trying to take responsibility for, without trying to mould you, it feels doubly good. At these times it has relaxed tension in me. It has permitted me to bring out the frightening feelings, the guilt, the despair, the confusion that have been part of my experience. When I have been listened to and when I have been heard, I am able to re-perceive my world in a new way and to go on. I have deeply appreciated the times that I have experienced this sensitive, empathetic, concentrated listening.¹⁰

Most of Christ's parables conclude with 'Anyone who has ears, listen'. Each of the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation ends with: 'Anyone who has an ear, listen to what the Spirit is saying . . .' God's complaint in Psalm 81 is: 'O that my people would listen to me'. In his epistle, James exhorts: 'Let everyone be quick to listen

and slow to speak' (James 1:19). Christ, in his explanation of the parable of the sower, emphasises that each seed which failed stood for someone who had not listened properly and therefore did not grow.

Listening does not only mean the physical process of hearing with the ears; it involves an intellectual and emotional process as well, when one's whole being strives to understand and hear the thoughts, feelings, and meanings behind the words being uttered. It requires patience, sensitivity, understanding, acceptance, and alertness.

Clarity of expression

Communication is often hindered because some have difficulty in translating their thoughts into the words which express what they really mean or feel.

A sensitive group, committed to the full participation and growth of each member, will help develop each other's thoughts by feeding back what is received and asking appropriate questions to draw out and help people develop their thoughts.

Use 'I' messages

Communication in the group improves when members are willing to take responsibility for their own ideas and feelings and use the personal pronoun 'I' when it is appropriate. All too often people say something like this: 'After studying this we should take this seriously', rather than indicating that they personally have gained new insights and challenge by saying: 'After studying this *I'm* convinced *I* should take this seriously'.

The leader should model for the group in his/her communication a willingness to share directly what he/she feels or thinks by saying 'I', 'my', 'mine', rather than talking about others or hiding behind the generalities or vagueness of 'People say . . .'; 'You will want to . . .'

Using personal pronouns to express personal feelings or thoughts directly can deepen the level of communication in the group, avoid indirect or vague messages, and develop relationships through greater openness.

Conflict

Many people find conflict unbearable. They would rather smooth over a situation than let feelings of hostility or

anger be displayed. This inability to deal with conflict frequently results in a breakdown in communication. Feelings of resentment and hostility are repressed and may only surface when triggered off by perhaps some totally irrelevant incident.

Sometimes conflict can be fruitful. We reveal our innermost feelings and, if we are in a group, the group can channel healing to us.

Christians are expected to get angry about evil in all its ugly forms. However we must separate righteous indignation from petty spite, or annoyance because something has inconvenienced us. Righteous indignation, which is not prolonged to the point of turning a person sour, can be constructive. Paul wrote to the Ephesians:

Throw off falsehood; speak only the truth to each other, for all of us are the parts of one body. If you are angry, do not let anger lead you into sin; do not let sunset find you still nursing it; leave no loop-hole for the devil. (Ephesians 4:25,26, NEB)

Christ did not suppress his anger with those who were robbing the pilgrims visiting the temple, or with the religious leaders who were more concerned about religious observances than the healing of the man with the deformity.

Conflict handled wisely can help a group draw closer together. There may be some cost involved, but there usually is when growth is taking place.

Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure in a group is a mutual process. The more we know about each other, the more effective and efficient our communication will be. Mask-wearing, pretence, and play-acting all hinder the life of a group. Many sit week after week in a group, never feeling able to be open about a deep hurt or about their doubts and fears. We cannot bear each other's burdens if we do not know what they are.

Carl R Rogers talks about 'communicating the real person', telling it like it is. James's injunction, 'Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed' (James 4:16), encourages an openness beyond what is found in most groups today. Unfortunately many groups do not encourage such openness. To be accepted in some, one has to appear to

always be succeeding. To discover a real sinner in their midst would be intolerable!

The self-disclosure envisaged here has been a characteristic of the great movements of the Holy Spirit. In those situations it happened quite spontaneously with no manipulation by those present. The lesson here is that no-one should be coerced into self-disclosure.

As the group develops deeper levels of trust, as a caring, relaxed, accepting, open spirit arises, and as the leader sensitively models greater openness, members will gradually feel freer to let themselves unfold.

These elements make interpersonal communication enriching and enhancing.

LISTENING: THE RAREST FORM OF LOVE

When someone gives us their undivided attention while we are speaking, and through their thoughtful feedback prove they have understood what we have said, we are made to feel significant, we feel we matter to this person, they care about us, they love us.

M Scott Peck, in *The Road Less Travelled*, while discussing the nature of loving relationships, says:

True listening, total concentration on the other, is always a manifestation of love. An essential part of true listening is the discipline of bracketing, the temporary giving up or setting aside of one's own prejudices, frames of reference and desires so as to experience as far as possible the speaker's world from the inside, stepping inside his or her shoes. This unification of speaker and listener is actually an extension and enlargement of ourself, and new knowledge is always gained from this. Moreover, since true listening involves bracketing, a setting aside of the self, it also temporarily involves a total acceptance of the other. Sensing this acceptance, the speaker will feel less and less vulnerable and more and more inclined to open up the inner recesses of his or her mind to the listener. As this happens, speaker and listener begin to appreciate each other more and more, and the duet dance of love is again begun. The energy required for the discipline of bracketing and the focusing of total attention is so great that it can be accomplished only by love, by the will to extend oneself for mutual growth. Most of the time we lack this energy. Even though we may feel in our business dealings or social relationships that we are listening very hard, what we are usually doing is listening selectively, with a preset agenda in mind, wondering as we

listen how we can achieve certain desired results and get the conversation over with as quickly as possible or redirected in ways more satisfactory to us.¹¹

That 'duet dance of love' will involve the discipline of silence — silence while the other is talking and silence by both to allow time for thoughtful reflection. As someone has put it: 'This silence of love is not indifference; it is not merely poverty of something to say. It is a positive form of self-communication. Just as silence is needed to hear a watch ticking, so silence is the medium through which heartbeats are heard'.¹²

When love motivates our listening, there is a commitment to not only grasp what is being communicated but to also discover the person behind the words.

'Listening in dialogue is listening more to meanings than to words . . . in true listening, we reach behind the words, see through them, to find the person who is being revealed. Listening is a search to find the treasure of the true person as revealed verbally and nonverbally'.¹³

The distinguishing mark of the Christian fellowship is love for one another, as Christ modelled love (John 13:34, 35). In Christian small groups, genuine listening, total attention, a sincere desire to get to know each other, and an openness to be known will manifest that the group is taking seriously Christ's command to love as he loved.

HOW TO LISTEN TO OTHERS

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes:

Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among most people they meet, not even amongst their close friends. But he who can no longer listen to another has lost contact with life. For life is community and community is relationships and relationships die without communication. One who cannot listen long and patiently will presently be talking beside the point and never be really speaking to others; unfortunately, he will not be conscious of it.¹⁴

Some active listening skills

One of the ways to improve our communication skills is to work at active listening. Active listening means more than simply concentrating on what the other person is saying, although that is part of it. It includes letting the



other person know that you have heard what he/she has said.

Very often in conversation we assume we know what the other person means by a statement, that is, that we understand what the other person intended by his or her remarks. This may be the case, but often we may be missing an important element in the person's communication to us. It is often useful to check to see if we have heard what the person really intended to communicate.

1. Paraphrasing

The basic skill involved in active listening is paraphrasing or putting into your own words what the other person seems to be communicating to you. This gives him/her a way to know whether you have missed his/her point and further clarification is needed. Paraphrasing is letting the other person know the meaning his/her words have for you in order to test whether or not you have heard what he/she intended to communicate to you.

Here are some examples:

Ted: There's nothing in church for me any more. None of it makes any sense.

Ned: Church no longer has any meaning for you.

Ted: I wish it did, but I can't believe in God any more.

Ned: You mean the real problem with church is that God doesn't seem real.

Jane: I can't stand the remarks my father makes about my friends! He thinks they're all irresponsible idiots.

Anne: You're angry with him because he doesn't like the friends you choose.

Jane: It's more that he jumps to all the wrong conclusions without making any effort to understand them.

Anne: You wish he didn't write them off so quickly.

To paraphrase is not to make a judgment about the other person, who is the only one who knows what he or she really meant. Paraphrasing is a way of testing your understanding of what the other person meant and is always open to being changed. It may not be in the form of a question, but a question mark is always implied. Paraphrasing does not mean approving or agreeing with what the person says, nor is it seeking to reassure, or to probe, or to argue. It is simply letting the other person know they have been heard.

Obviously, paraphrasing is not your only response in a lively conversation. The examples above may seem onesided, because they do not include any feelings or opinions from the person who is responding, as you would expect in a typical conversation (this is often a neglected element). However, this kind of active listening can greatly facilitate good communication.

There are added benefits from paraphrasing. It lets the other person know you are really interested in what they are saying. It shows you want to know what they mean. If the other person feels you can understand their point of view, they are more likely to want to hear your point of view. Paraphrasing can also be useful to the other person in helping them to clarify their own thoughts or feelings by seeing them more objectively or in a different perspective.

2. Reflecting feelings

Paraphrasing may respond to two dimensions of a communication: the information or content in the communication, and what the person feels about the information or content. Sometimes the feeling level will be the real message and at other times almost no feeling at all will be involved. Effective paraphrasing will seek to pick up what the person is really intending.

Paraphrasing words tests whether or not the listener has heard what the speaker intended to communicate. In a similar way, reflecting the feelings which the listener perceives to be communicated gives opportunity for the speaker to confirm, deny, or clarify. Feelings are expressed directly or in metaphor, eg 'I'm angry', 'I feel accepted', 'I'm

confused' are direct expressions of feelings. 'I feel as though I'm being treated as a child', 'I feel like something the dog dragged in' are feelings expressed in metaphor.

Being able to recognise and describe the feeling clearly is important if it is to be reflected properly. The label given needs to be clear in meaning: love, anger, attraction, boredom, curiosity, fear, frustration, hope, hurt, joy, rejection, relief, embarrassment.

The feelings being communicated through these statements are obvious:

'Will you stop that!'

'That was a wonderful evening.'

'Can't you ever get home on time?'

'This is a thoughtful group to belong to.'

Here is an example of feeling reflections:

John: I have had it with that son of mine!

Stephen: You sound very angry with your son.

Another example:

Jill: The way you said that just now gives me the impression that you are bored.

Mary: No! I'm not bored. I had little sleep last night and I'm very tired. I'm finding it hard to remain alert.

3. Perception check

These are responses you can make to ensure you are not making false assumptions. Express your own idea of the other person's statement. You may say: 'Is that what you meant?' 'I feel that you are disturbed. Did my last statement bother you?' 'I believe we are agreed to meet at the post office corner at five o'clock. Is that correct?'

4. Behaviour description

This involves reporting the specific acts of another to check on your own interpretation of their behaviour and to give opportunity for confirmation or correction by the other person. 'I saw you closing your eyes for a moment. Are you very tired?' 'I saw you jump. Were you startled?' 'I saw your smile turn into a frown. Are you displeased?' 'I saw you waver and sit down. Are you feeling ill?'

5. Direct questions

This involves asking questions without any evaluative judgmental words.

6. Describing your own feelings

'I feel warm about your helping me in this way.' 'I am sad to hear about that.' 'I am very anxious about your trip tomorrow.' 'I am very upset with you.' 'After discussing this together, I feel very hopeful.'

Listening, questioning and observing are three major categories of communicating.

SEVEN THINGS GOOD LISTENERS DO

'Listening is an art. We can't afford to be too rigid about the techniques for becoming better listeners because, as in all aspects of communication, our performance grows out of our experience of personal relationships and each of those relationships has its own dynamics, its own style, its own degree of intensity and its own importance to us.'¹⁵

Hugh Mackay goes on to introduce the seven things good listeners do to improve their performance. He says that these are 'the disciplines which good listeners impose on themselves in order to ensure that their brains — as well as their ears — are working'.

Here is a summary of what Mackay suggests:

1. **They receive the message before they react to it.** They postpone judgments about the communicator and the message until they are sure they have understood.
2. **They resist the distraction offered by 'trigger' words.** Certain words set off reactions in us because we don't understand them, or they don't fit into our framework of thinking or feeling, beliefs and prejudices, or they switch us off to do some private thinking so that we miss chunks of the message.
3. **They ask themselves: 'What can I do about this? How can I use this?'** They seek to discover the relevance for their own needs, interests, or concerns.
4. **They work hard at listening.** They avoid being too comfortable. They concentrate, but realise there are limits to concentration so try to get the message in

manageable amounts. They encourage the communicator to help them in this regard.

5. **They harness their thought speed.** Our minds are capable of thinking much more quickly than most people speak. Good listeners discipline themselves to both listen and reflect at the same time. They try to discover the speaker's intention. They think about what is being said while the other is speaking, while still listening.
6. **They try to empathise with the speaker.** They try to get into the speaker's mind and feelings to catch their mood and respond appropriately, to team their spirit with that of the speaker, to 'match their energy level'.
7. **They reflect what they have heard.** Feeding back to the speaker what the listener has understood to have been communicated before making a personal response proves that the person has been acknowledged, taken seriously, listened to, and understood.

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Research into face-to-face communication between human beings has found that the *verbal* dimension (words spoken) provides only about seven per cent of the total impact of a message. The *vocal* dimension, which is the way a person speaks those words (the tone of voice, where the emphasis is placed and inflection), together with other sounds which are not actually words, contributes thirty-eight per cent to the message a person actually receives. However, the non-verbal aspect, a person's facial expressions and body language (movement and position), contributes fifty-five per cent. Some researchers set this *non-verbal* figure in excess of sixty-five per cent.

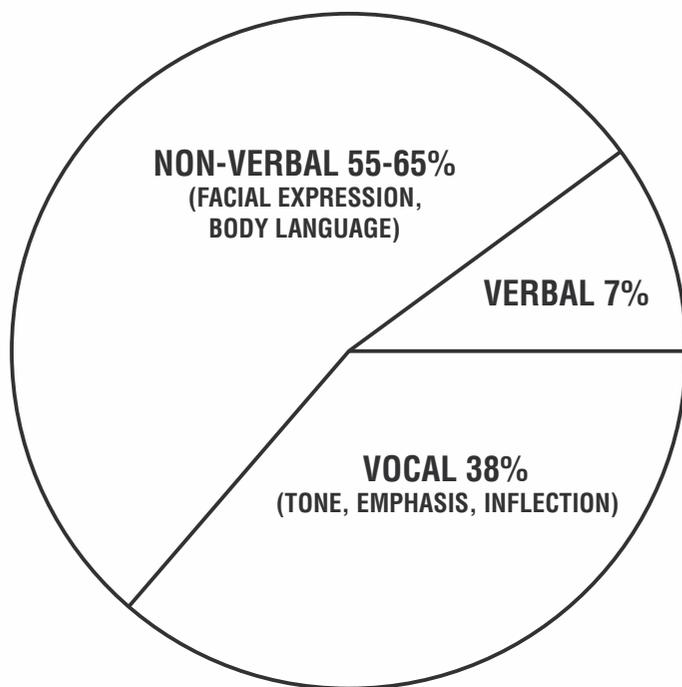


Diagram No. 13: Dimensions of Face-to-Face Contact

The techniques regarding verbal communication already described in this chapter can be used to significantly improve the verbal dimension. But even using these skills will not improve the ability to communicate nearly as much as that of the vocal and non-verbal aspects.

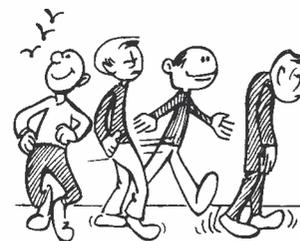
A number of well-written books are available on non-verbal communication. *Body Language* by Allan Peace (Camel) is easy to follow and well illustrated.

I have touched on only some aspects of non-verbal communication, hopefully to stimulate you to read more on the subject.

Always keep in mind that non-verbal communication is complex. You should be warned against taking one cue in isolation. Usually a number of cues need to be taken into account before drawing a conclusion concerning what a person is involuntarily communicating.

Walking style

This relates to how people carry their bodies, whether they swish, amble, or stamp. Observe how people arrive at the group. Their movements could convey expectancy, confidence, purpose, caution, heaviness of spirit, joy, etc.



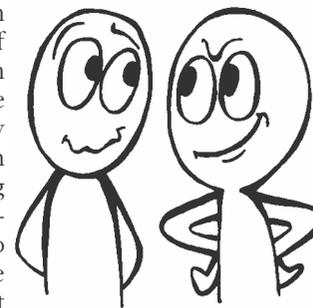
Touching

This is probably the most powerful non-verbal communication form. We can communicate interest, trust, tenderness, warmth, anger, rejection, and a variety of other emotions through touch. People differ in their willingness to touch and be touched. Some give out non-verbal signals that say they do not wish to be touched. Different cultures respond in different ways to touching. We need to be sensitive to this in groups of mixed racial backgrounds.



Eye contact

People tend to size each other up in terms of trustworthiness through reactions to each other's eye contact. Counsellors know that eye contact is an important way of creating understanding and acceptance but, again, we need to keep in mind that some cultures use less eye contact than others.



When seeking to get people involved in discussion, you can follow up a general question by a brief look at one or more in the group to invite their involvement, or a fleeting glance around the whole group to seek anyone's response.

Posture

How people position their bodies when seated or standing constitutes a set of potential signals that may communicate how they are experiencing their environment. People who fold their arms and cross their legs are often said to be on the defensive. It is sometimes observed that a person under severe psychological threat will assume the body position of a foetus. A person slouched in a seat may be bored, feeling relaxed, or showing disagreement.



Mannerisms or tics

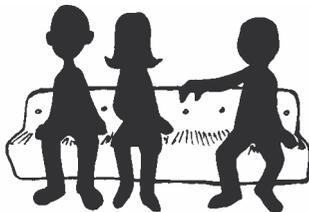
The involuntary nervous spasms of the body can indicate when a person feels threatened, not in agreement, or irritated. The continuous or even casual movement of a foot or the fingers can indicate disagreement or impatience with what another is saying. These mannerisms can be easily misinterpreted.



Distancing

Each person is said to have a psychological space around them. If someone invades that space they may become tense, alert, defensive. We tend to place distance between ourselves and others according to the kinds of relationship that we have and what our motives are towards each other.

Some people who have had a traumatic experience with another person, especially in early life, will find it disturbing to have another person stand close to them. This needs to be kept in mind when leading a small group. Most will be very relaxed about sitting close to one another, whereas others may want to keep some space around them until they feel comfortable in the group, and for some that may require an extended period of meetings.



Gesturing

Gestures (the way we use our hands and arms) carry a great deal of meaning but do not mean the same things to all people. Again, these need to be interpreted against a person's cultural background. Gestures give emphasis to our words and often clarify our meanings. They often are expressive of deep emotions and can be both threatening or accepting.



VOCAL COMMUNICATION

As has already been indicated, when people speak to each other, the way in which they say the words that they speak contributes thirty-eight per cent to the effectiveness of the communication. Other sounds which are not strictly words also contribute to this aspect.

Vocalism has to do with the way we pronounce or emphasise what we say. The way a word or sentence is packaged vocally determines the signal it gives to another person. Where the emphasis is placed determines the meaning another is likely to infer from our message. As an example, take the sentence, 'I love my son'. Shifting the emphasis to a different word each time it is spoken can give an entirely different message. For example, if the emphasis is on the first word, 'I love my son', the implication is that others do not, or it could be defensive against an accusation that the speaker does not love his son. If the emphasis is on the second word, it could be given to deny neglect or emphasise the depth of the relationship. By emphasising 'my', the implication is that someone else's children do not receive the same affection. Whereas to emphasise the word 'son' could mean there are other members of the family who are not held in the same regard.



My wife and I most times call each other 'darling', but that word gets packaged in different ways. When we are feeling warm towards each other it expresses a closeness and deep love. If we are being inconsiderate or disagreeing with one another, the same word comes over as less than accepting and affirming!

Sub-vocals are the sounds uttered when trying to find words, eg uh, um, er. We use a number of non-word expressions in order to carry a meaning to another person. We hum, grunt, groan, and so on. These are not words, purely noise, but they do carry meaning, saying: 'I agree', 'I understand', 'I'm impatient, get on with it', 'When you have finished', 'I have something to say', 'I do not agree', 'Surely not', 'You can't be serious!'



HANDLING CONFLICT CREATIVELY

Jesus lived a life of authentic person-to-person encounter in which he creatively confronted and used human conflict. He did not avoid conflict with the Pharisees and the religious authorities.

Conflict and tension can never be avoided by the Christian. It is part and parcel of our call to discipleship. It is interesting too that the behavioural scientists affirm that conflict and tension are vital for human growth and maturity. Unfortunately many tend to think of conflict as always being something negative.

Some possible conflict situations

In small groups, conflicts emerge for many reasons. Here are a few:

Personality clashes; 'We've always done it this way!' 'That won't work!'; doctrinal differences; interpretation of Scripture; dominant personality (authoritarian, loud mouth, know-all, clown); generation gap; threatened by newcomers; unreal expectations of people (pressure to conform); differing expectations; belittling individuals;

hidden agendas (relatives in same group); sense of superiority by one or more members; patronising spirit; sidetracks; cultural differences; diversity of values, attitudes, behaviour; poor people skills (listening/acceptance).

Responding to conflict

We can classify our strategy for handling conflict into three categories: **avoidance**,

defusion, and **confrontation**.

We have already stated that avoiding the conflict is no answer. Ignoring the 'stirrer' in a group or pretending that people 'don't really mean what they say' in the heat of an argument helps no-one and gets nowhere. If that conflict is not squarely faced and properly handled it will simmer below the surface and pollute the relationships within the group.



Some people think that conflict is like a bomb. If you can't avoid it, then defuse it! But defusion is a delaying tactic. Invariably defusion results in feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration towards the leader, 'problem' person, or the group as a whole, and anxiety about the future and one's own image.

The third way of responding to conflict is by an actual confrontation between the conflicting issues or people. But confrontation itself can be further subdivided into **power** strategies and **negotiation** strategies. Power strategies mean the use of physical force; bribery (eg gifts, favours); punishment (eg withholding love, money); and exercising one's authority, 'pulling rank', to settle the conflict. From the point of view of the 'winner' such tactics are often quite effective. Unfortunately, hostility, anxiety, resentment, and physical retaliation are generally the 'loser's' reactions to these win-lose power tactics. And such reactions are totally destructive not only regarding the relationship between 'winner' and 'loser' but for the entire group.

On the other hand, with negotiation strategies both sides can win. The aim of negotiation is to resolve the conflict with a compromise or a solution which all the

parties involved would find acceptable and satisfying. Therefore negotiation is regarded as the most positive conflict management strategy.

The conflict management process

Successful conflict management requires the knowledge and practice of necessary negotiation skills.

Diagnosis of the nature of the conflict. In this first step the important thing is to determine whether the conflict is a 'value' conflict (ie one arising out of different life attitudes and values) or a 'real' (tangible) conflict, or a combination of both.

'Value' conflicts are very difficult to resolve. However, a difference in values is only really significant when our opposing views affect us in some real or tangible way. It is not necessary for either of us to change our values in order for us and the whole task group to come to a mutually agreeable position.

If it is a conflict in differing personal values that in no way affects the life of the group, then we should respect one another's right to differ and leave it at that. However, most conflict situations in small groups are 'real' conflicts that do affect the life of the group and its different members, and as such need to be resolved.

Effectiveness in initiating a confrontation. Here it is important not to begin by attacking or belittling the other party. A defensive reaction on either side will block any effective resolution. The most effective way to approach the situation is to state the actual effect the conflict has on you personally, or on the group. If the conflict directly affects the whole group, invite other members to check out how they are affected.

Hearing the other's point of view. It is vital to listen to and really hear what the other party is saying. He or she may react with a defensive counter-argument or a hard-line approach. Avoid making argument-provoking replies. Do not try to defend yourself; do not explain your position, and do not make threats or demands. Instead listen to, and reflect back to, the other person, in your own words, what he or she is feeling and saying.

Showing that you have listened to your opponents and checking out their position will lower their defences. You

have indicated that you have made an effort to begin to understand their viewpoint. As a result, they will be more ready to hear your point of view. Only then should you present your position. In this way, not only is the road opened for a resolution of the immediate conflict, but you are starting to build a bridge of understanding between yourself and the other person that will lead to improved relationships and greater honesty within the group.

Problem solving. The final skill needed to resolve a conflict is the use of the problem solving process by the group to reach a decision that is agreeable to all. The steps in problem solving are:

1. **Clarify the problem.** The above skills in diagnosing the nature of the conflict, initiating a confrontation, and listening to the other's point of view are important here. The group should consider: what is the real issue or concern here that affects us; what is its cause; and how does each of us stand concerning this issue?
2. **Establish objectives.** What is the purpose of the decision you wish to reach? What are your specific objectives regarding that decision?
3. **Generate alternative solutions.** Brainstorm as many alternative solutions as you can. Don't worry about how wild or way-out they may seem. They'll be evaluated later.
4. **Evaluate alternatives against objectives.** Now evaluate those 'wild' alternatives against the purpose and objectives of your desired decision.
5. **Assess alternatives against adverse consequences.** From step 4, what two or three alternatives seem best suited? What possible disadvantages does any have? What could go wrong with any one of them?
6. **Select best alternative.** Remember that this is to be a group decision. You are to decide together (not voting) on the best solution. The one solution most acceptable to all (in the light of the above steps) should be chosen.
7. **Plan to implement the solution.** How, when, and where will the solution be carried out? What preventative steps can be taken in case something should go wrong?

8. **Implement the solution.** Now put the solution into practice.
9. **Evaluate the solution.** In spite of all the above steps the solution you chose may not have been the best or most workable. So plan to evaluate your solution after a specified period of time. If your solution does prove to have flaws, the problem solving process should begin again from step 1.

Another guide — ‘fighting fair’

The Conflict Resolution Network distributes this guide to resolving conflict between individuals:

‘Do I want to resolve the conflict?’ (Be willing to fix the problem.)

‘Can I see the whole picture, not just my own point of view?’ (Broaden your outlook.)

‘What are the needs and anxieties of everyone involved?’ (Write them down.)

‘How can we make this fair?’ (Negotiate.)

‘What are the possibilities?’ (Think up as many solutions as you can. Pick the one that gives everyone more of what they want.)

‘Can we work it out together?’ (Treat each other as equals.)

‘What am I feeling?’ (Am I too emotional? Could I get more facts, take time out to calm down, tell them how I feel?)

‘What do I want to change?’ (Be clear. Attack the problem, not the person.)

‘What opportunity can this bring?’ (Work on the positives, not the negatives.)

‘What is it like to be in their shoes?’ (Do they know I understand them?)

‘Do we need a neutral third person?’ (Could this help us to understand each other and create our own solutions?)

‘How can we both win?’ (Work towards solutions where everyone’s needs are respected.)¹⁶

A final word for group leaders

It goes without saying that the role of the group leader in conflict management is especially important. In addition to acquiring the above skills the leader should be aware that, in the initial stages of a conflict, the group members must feel that the leader is strong, competent, and

personally secure enough to be able to stand in the middle of an aggressive confrontation. Furthermore, the climate in the group needs to be an open one with evident trust if a resolution is to be reached. Members must be encouraged to accept their own feelings, hold their own values, and strengthen those ideas which seem to be most helpful to them.

Finally, although he did not seek it out, Jesus was a man who faced conflict well and used it, regardless of where or who it came from. He refused to ‘play it safe’. Can we who follow him do less?¹⁷

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- (16) *Fighting Fair — a Guide* (The Conflict Resolution Network, PO Box 1016, Chatswood NSW 2057).
- (17) Adapted from Graham Beattie’s chapter, ‘Resolution of Conflict’ in *Building Small Groups in the Christian Community* (John Mallison, Renewal Publications).

Other sources

The section on 'Handling Conflict' is based on material prepared by Graham Beattie, used originally in the author's book *Building Small Groups in the Christian Community*.

A number of roneoed resource sheets and short articles have been drawn upon which were received from the Yokefellow Institute, Richmond, Indiana and the Program Council of the Iowa United Methodist Conference, Des Moines, Iowa. Unfortunately, the authors' names were not indicated.

Material in a number of Annual Handbooks for Group Facilitators, by Pfeiffer and Jones (University Associates, California), has also been adapted for use in this chapter.

STUDY GUIDE

- 1 When you first joined a group, what were some things the leader or members did that helped you feel accepted into that group?
What are some of the advantages of using a get-acquainted exercise when commencing a group?
- 2 When the Holy Spirit is creating and sustaining a Christian small group, how would that be evident in the group's relationships and in other ways?
- 3 Which aspects of an effective group environment are most evident in your group?
What do you need to do more work on? How?
Try to match the aspects given with the various 'fruits of the Spirit' in Galatians 5:22.
What would it involve for a group to 'live by the Spirit' and 'keep in step with the Spirit' (Galatians 5:25)?
- 4 Think of experiences in groups to which you have belonged which illustrate one or more of the stages of a group's life cycle.
In what ways would a group be adversely affected by refusing to face the possibility of its termination?
- 5 Discuss the parable of the Good Samaritan as it relates to the changing focus of a group.
How does your group focus on Christ and others?

- 6 Read and think together about Bonhoeffer's words under 'How to Listen to Others' and also the following:
Some fast by restricting for a period their food intake for physical or spiritual reasons. Try a fast on words for a day so you can be more alert to what others (and God) are saying. At the end of the day reflect on your experience.
- 7 'True listening is a manifestation of love.' Read the whole section 'Listening: the rarest form of love', and discuss its implications in developing the life and mission of a small group that is a community of people with unselfish, outgoing, benevolent love, not only for each other but also for those not in the group.
- 8 Which of the suggestions for improving listening skills did you find most helpful, and why?
- 9 Try to recall a conflict situation in your group, or some other situation which was not resolved. In what ways would the suggestions for handling conflict have helped?

GETTING STARTED

One never knows where the Holy Spirit may come into a relationship or a company and give it his own stamp of meaning and power. Perhaps the first question is not whether we want to start a group, but whether God does. If he does, he must ordinarily find someone who is open to such direction and leadership. It does not take great saints, else none of us would be used; but it takes people with spiritual purpose and the beginnings of spiritual experience. If the will and intention are there, and prayer, God can use you.¹

There is no magical formula, no set pattern to follow when commencing a small group. The history of small groups in the church shows that they commence in a variety of ways. It is helpful to know how other groups commenced. Some guidelines will emerge if we study how people have been drawn together. We need, however, to ensure and preserve flexibility, for the way your group commences may have some similarity or it may be entirely different.

HOW SOME GROUPS BEGAN

In my small-groups conferences I have asked participants how the small groups with which they have been associated began — what was the initial motivation. Here is a collection of the answers given, some of which give the reason why a particular individual joined a group.

I was not achieving and felt I wanted fellowship with others to help me grow.

There was a lack of depth in the fellowship available in my church.

After a house-party experience we felt a deep desire to extend the depth of fellowship and learning which took place over that weekend.

I wanted to improve a skill.

It was a tradition in our church to work through small groups. They had been successful in helping people grow so I wanted to join one.

I had a need for self-acceptance, which I felt could be met in a group.

I was lonely and insecure.

A number of us felt we wanted a continuing situation in which we could be encouraged, supported, affirmed and loved. (Repeated)

I had a deep desire to share with others where I stood spiritually.

I wanted to be honest. I wanted to learn more.

We wanted to break down the barriers which exist between age groups.

A number of us wanted to show concern for others outside the church. (Repeated)

My problem was communication with others — this led me to seek out a group.

Someone invited me to join the group to which they belonged.

A group which had grown too large divided.

I liked the informality of a group in contrast to the formal fellowship in rigid worship services.

One person was the driving force. (Repeated)



It was commenced as a follow-up to an outreach program.

As a couple we wanted to meet with other couples who were experiencing similar problems.

In the main these groups commenced because:

- (i) There was a common interest.
- (ii) There was a deep sense of need.
- (iii) One person had initiative and vision.

These generalisations were supported from further feed-in at these conferences after groups had read sections of books dealing with experiences of new life in the church, in which small groups played a major role. After seeking to learn from each writer about how small groups commence, the groups reported:

The initiator shared honestly and openly a deep sense of need with others.

The group began in an informal manner.

One person took the initiative to seek out others who felt the same way.

The witness of others helped motivate the need.

There was a willingness to 'give it a go'.

They all needed each other.

There was a convergence of events which drew the group together.

One insignificant person gave himself wholly to God.

It doesn't take a saint to start a group!

People cannot be coerced into joining a group.

Often the least likely person will want to join.

The Holy Spirit was the key factor.

Having found others with a common need, they did not procrastinate: a definite time and place was set.

The leader did not have all the answers but he was prepared to search for them.

The Holy Spirit directed, but he needed individuals who were responsive and available but not necessarily with great ability.

There was a hunger for knowledge and a gripping sense of need for purpose and meaning in their lives — for something better. (Repeated)

There was a willingness to be open and take risks in sharing their own lives.

The group started as a response to a call from God, not as a gimmick.

There was a need to share a vision in order not to lose it.

From these observations we can deduce that:

A common interest and sense of need were necessary prerequisites.

The significant role played by an inadequate person, who was nevertheless open and available, is established.

The need to make definite plans to get together once a number feel drawn together is imperative if the initial vision and motivation is not to be lost in vagueness and indecision.

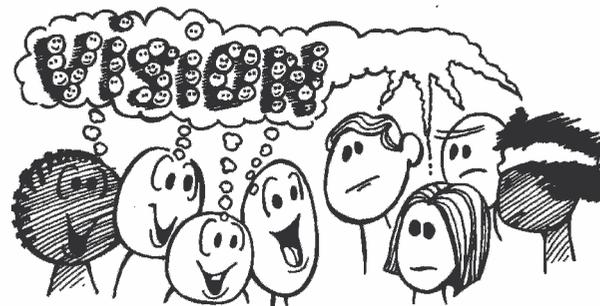
The prime role of the Holy Spirit in awakening the sense of need, giving a vision of how this need can be met and enabling the initiator and participants is a deep insight which should always be kept in mind.

John L Casteel sums up these findings:

Groups come into being when the hunger, faith and determination of concerned persons are matched with the leading and empowerment of the Holy Spirit.²

HELPING OTHERS CATCH THE VISION

Gaining a vision of what it is like to belong to a caring, concerned, redeeming small community of people as a necessary first step in implementing groups is vital. 'Unless there be a consciousness of the significance of groups and their possibilities, leaders are not likely to improve those now existing or to set up new ones to fill new purposes.'³ Potential members will also need to be helped to gain such a vision of the role the small group experience can be expected to play in meeting their needs and those of others.



People sharing their experience of being in groups can be valuable in helping people see the potential of the small group. A living witness always helps motivate the sceptic who needs 'proof'. A small group of lay people whose lives have been touched by this process can be a strong encouragement to others. Individual members from two of my parishes, where we had networks of small groups, would often be asked to share their experience of the value of the small group with churches in other areas. I made cassette recordings of some testimonies which I took with me when called in to consult with parishes about this means of renewal. Whenever we conducted a Lay Witness Weekend, most of the team would be members of our small groups and inevitably spontaneous sharing about the value of the small group experience would take place during the supper groups. Frequently new groups have been formed after these events.

A team from a church or parish with successful small groups has often conducted a conference or series of special meetings to help another church or parish to see the possibilities of small groups through the team's rich first-hand experiences. The overflow of lives enriched by small groups is a powerful means of helping others catch the vision.

The media available to us in a local parish is another channel through which the message can be communicated. Articles in the parish paper giving the rationale for small groups, reports of successful groups, and testimonies of individuals who have been enriched through such experiences all heighten interest. A number of suitable films are available which could be used at appropriate times.

Preaching on related subjects is another way. In one of my parishes in the period between the leaders catching the vision at a Church Life Conference and the planned commencement of the small-group program, I preached a series of sermons on the early church, looking at the quality of its life and witness. Other sermons focused on the ministry of Jesus, his calling of the twelve, and their life together.

Books and articles of the experiences of people helped through being in small groups will be helpful. Articles appear in Christian magazines and papers from time to time, telling of significant small-group work.

There are many books on the market today linked with the small-group movement, telling of the search for spiritual renewal which found fulfilment in a small-group experience. Others treat the subject directly and show how new life came into local parishes through small groups. These are helpful to put into the hands of thoughtful people. I made it a policy in parish work to keep books circulating among my people which had helped me catch a new vision for various facets of our ministry. Then it was not a superimposed program from on top, but a moving forward together.

Use recorded resources. There are a number of prerecorded audio and video cassettes, which you could lend to people, on the value of small groups. Recorded lectures by leaders in the small-group movement are also available.

The SAILS (Some Aussie Ideas for Leaders of Small Groups) cassettes produced by the Australian Small Group Network⁴ have a number of appropriate titles

Enable personal discovery. A variety of methods can be used to help people discover for themselves the value of small groups. There are a number of worksheets available which are useful for this task, or they can be designed to meet the local situation without requiring special skills. On page 12 of his book, *69 Ways to Start a Study Group and Keep it Growing*, Lawrence O Richards lists some dimensions of relationships of which the Bible speaks. Next to each he provides a graded check line to help individuals check out their own life and decide if perhaps they need to become involved in a group. This could be varied in a number of ways to cover the characteristics of a Christian community or aspects of a Christian style of life which are developed in relation to others. Against these lists people measure their individual and collective Christian life. It could help awaken a sense of need for the growth which is possible in a small group.

Provide 'sample' small-group experiences. People can be given a one-time small-group experience to help them see the potential of belonging to a small group. This is similar to the previous point but without the requirement for preparation prior to the group. Chapter 8, 'Sharing the Good News Together', and chapter 15, "At Home" Groups', give some suggestions for this type of experience. The group should be kept informal. Some relationship exercises which provide a completely non-

threatening experience could be used. At the conclusion, a test of their readiness to go on into a continuing group could be made by simply asking, 'Would you like to meet again?' A series of these low-key groups may be needed before the group decides to be an ongoing group. We have also used this method to help a whole congregation grasp the potential for small groups. A series of four low-key small-group meetings in homes were held with the emphasis upon getting to know each other and undertaking some simple, relational Bible studies.

Special learning events. On two occasions in my parish work, the local membership caught the vision during a Church Life Conference. We considered the New Testament pattern and characteristics of church life. Against this model we evaluated our existing life within the local community of faith. Alternative styles were considered. Out of this reflection by the members grew significant networks of groups for youth and adults. In both cases I circulated a variety of books for thoughtful individuals to read in the three and four months prior to each conference.

Use a weekend away. Most church camps or retreats provide a variety of small-group experiences which introduce people to the quality of fellowship possible in the small group. In some retreats participants are formed into small groups for the entire period. Study, worship, recreation, kitchen duties and the like have all been undertaken in the small group, with only occasional combined activity. Following such events some have extended the small-group experience or formed new groups.

'Colouring the parish'. Arthur R Baranowski uses this phrase in describing how to help a vision for small groups become a reality.

'Once small faith communities become the parish goal, then this vision should colour everything else that goes on in the parish.'⁵

I am so convinced about the major role small groups can play in renewing the church's life and mission that I spontaneously use small groups in a great variety of situations. One friend says I wear small-group-coloured glasses!

The question to consistently keep asking about every activity of the church is: 'How can we use small group processes in this event to draw closer to God and each

other and to make what we are doing more effective?'

Here are a few ideas to help 'colour' your parish or church.

Short-term orientation groups for newcomers play an important role in many churches. From their very first association with the church, these people learn to experience the warmth and support of a small cluster of people.

In parish committee meetings we have divided into small groups to discuss and pray for major issues. Roberta Hestenes recommends commencing every committee meeting with sharing and prayer in pairs (see p 24). Brief faith sharing can also become part of these decision making meetings.

The 'At Home' program (chapter 15) helped a wide range of people to get to know each other informally in one-off groups. Our Hospitality Sundays gathered groups of eight or ten into homes across the parish to have a meal together and share informally.

In worship services, especially those for outreach, we have used brief group experiences to get acquainted or to discuss the message and to pray. Retreats, weekend church or family camps, training conferences, and fellowship events can all be enriched by dividing into small clusters for study, discussion, faith sharing, and prayer.

Form a 'movers' group. The research quoted under 'Handling Resistance to Change' later in this chapter shows that only 2.6 per cent of people act as the movers in producing change. Seek out these people. Some will be the most unlikely. They usually show enthusiasm and an openness to learn and to try something different and are willing to make themselves available.

Some of the suggestions in this section could be undertaken in this group. For example, the discussion of books, articles, and recordings.

Exploring what the Bible says about Christian togetherness and discipleship will give a biblical base to these people's thinking. Particular chapters in this book, especially 1, 2 and 6, could be studied, using the questions at the end of the chapter. As the group continues, prayer will have growing significance. This group may develop into an ongoing growth group out of which potential leaders for future groups will emerge.

Other ways of leading people to see the potential of

small groups were given by participants in our training conferences during brain-storming sessions:

Use the individual approach.

Share your own sense of need for a group.

Learn to depend on the Holy Spirit to lead you to people who have the same need; then share how the small group can help.

Personal enthusiasm will play an important role in inspiring others.

Listen to people.

Have an open home to which people will feel free to come and informally experience care in a small group.

Share with others resources and experiences gained at a Small Groups Conference.

Invite others to accompany you to Small Group Training Conferences.

Pray until you are convinced about sharing your need with a person.

Talk about small groups, how others have been helped and what they have meant to you.

Demonstrate the value of small groups through your own growth.

Provide opportunities for people to think about the best methods for the church to fulfil its work and witness.

Introduce people to small groups as a viable method.

TWO WAYS TO BEGIN

Start small and let it grow. Many groups have been started because just one or two people felt the need for them. Two or three motivated persons who have a desire to grow in fellowship and faith are enough to begin a group.

It is better to begin to develop a group with a small number of well-intentioned persons who can relate to one another at some depth because of their sense of need for such an experience, than to begin with a large number who come with reservations. From a small but sound beginning the group can pray that God will either send people to them or send them to people who should be in their group. Lyman Coleman says: 'One person with a genuine hunger is enough to start a group. One group is enough to penetrate a community. The question is not one of quantity, but quality'.⁶

Start big and let it consolidate. Some have been guided to gather a large number for a period in a seminar-

type teaching program which later provided a foundation for small groups. Work in small groups was undertaken in the large meeting, helping participants become used to the process. This meeting then divided to form the nucleus of a number of house-centred cells.

COMMENCING A SINGLE CELL

As we have observed, there is no one way to commence a small group. Each group is unique. No two small group experiences are exactly the same. We consider here some possible alternatives for commencing a single cell.

Check your motives. The Faith at Work small-group movement recommends that we begin with a period of self-examination in which we ask ourselves two questions: 'Why do I want to start a small group?' and 'Why do I need a small group?' If answers are written down and considered, this will help us to clarify our motives and the expectations we have and will assist us in our approach to others. We will be better able to express our hopes and aspirations for the group when talking to them.

Decide what kind of small group you want. When you have considered your motives and expectations, the type of group which will best meet these needs will be clearer.

Listen for expressed needs which can be met in small groups. In taking the initiative we need to do so with sensitivity to people who are aching for this type of experience yet are not communicating it verbally, at least in direct terms. I remember the advice Professor Ross Snyder of Chicago gave to a number of us in this regard at a National Conference of Christian Educators in the United States. He led us in a variety of small-group experiences over a number of days and thoroughly whetted our



appetites for an ongoing group experience when we returned home again. At the conclusion he advised us not to rush into drawing a group together. 'Take time to really listen to people. Seek to recognise their inner stirrings. Listen between the words they use for veiled expressions of a deep heartfelt need which can be met in a small group. Some will be crying out to you from the depth of their inner being, "I want to belong. I long to be wanted. I desperately want to grow", without so much as using any of these words.' When I returned home I put this advice into practice and it worked! My first experience of sharing openly and honestly in a small group was an unforgettable freeing and renewing experience. It was made up of the most unlikely people drawn from a broad cross-section of the community. That group came together because of this method of seeking to be sensitive to expressed needs.

Listening is an art which requires time and practice. Hearing people express the desire to belong to a group will often occur when we least expect it. We will be best tuned in to people when we are tuned in to God. Sensitivity to spiritual need is a gift of divine grace.

Take the initiative yourself. Sometimes God will guide us to be more direct in approaching others. In some situations it will be right for us not to wait for others to make the first move, but to make the effort to do all we can to encourage the formation of a group. By taking the initiative we may awaken a sense of need, or help some to articulate deep desires for a more authentic life.

Test interest by giving a book to a selected group of people. Pray about who could be invited to link up with a group. Select a book which fits in with the expectations you have for the group. Buy a few paperback copies and distribute them to those to whom you feel drawn. Say you would like them to read it and meet together in a few weeks to share their reaction. Some may have already communicated an interest in linking up with a small group. It may be wise not to mention at this stage that you are hoping to start a continuing group. This method tests people's sense of need. Give a precise period for reading, and set a date for a get-together. Keep the meeting informal and let the Spirit move in the way he wishes. Each should be given opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings about the book. Openly receive both negative and positive responses.

At the conclusion of the group some may spontaneously express the desire to meet again to discuss the same book more fully, possibly taking a chapter at a time over a number of meetings. The wish may be to take another book and deal with it in the same way. Don't expect everyone to continue with the group. From such an experience a continuing small group could begin. It tests interest without initial specific commitment to an ongoing group. The once-up meeting can be of value in itself even if it doesn't result in the formation of a group.

Treat early group experiences as experimental.

Most of us hesitate to commit ourselves to new experiences that do not have a clear cut-off point. For this reason, suggest a specific number of meetings in a set period of time when the group decides to be ongoing. Six to eight meetings on a weekly or bi-weekly basis is a reasonable period of an experimental quality which encourages a definite commitment. At the end of the time the experience can be assessed and a decision made whether or not to continue.

Pray about it. The setting up of small groups in the name of Jesus Christ is essentially God's work. Our task is basically that of cooperating with what God is already doing in his world. In prayer, we acknowledge this, make ourselves available to God, check on our motives, develop the right attitude, listen to God's leading, and seek to make God's timing our timing. As we pray, God can strengthen our desire and resolve to start a group, or he can make it clear that we should wait for some other opportunity.

Paul Everett, director of the Pittsburgh Experiment which facilitates hundreds of small groups in that great city and elsewhere in the USA, advises those wishing to commence groups to commit themselves to the Thirty Day Prayer Experiment. He goes on to say:

Prayer makes us sensitive to God's will and may lead us to others who need a small group. Even people who are fully convinced that it's a great idea to start a group need to submit themselves through prayer to God's purpose and leading. Try this prayer: 'Lord, I believe that you are leading me to start a group. If this desire in me is from you, increase it and make my next step clear.'

The prayer experiment will also help you find the people who are being led to join a prayer group. God has a plan

and purpose for every one of us; therefore it is essential to pray for guidance to determine who should be invited into the fellowship of koinonia. Try this prayer: 'Lord, lead me to those people or those people to me whom you want to be included.'

As you pray make a list of the names that come to mind. Also stay open to unexpected encounters, where people of whom you had not thought whilst praying are suddenly and sometimes surprisingly revealed to you in your daily routines. God has mysterious ways of bringing people together.

Approaching individuals. Go to these people one at a time. If only one comes to mind, remember you can start your group with just two people. In time and with prayer it will grow.

Whenever you approach someone, pray for God's leading in what you say. A good way to break the ice can be something like this: 'I have been needing in my own life an opportunity to deal with (you fill in your own honest content) and the part that God plays in it. I want to start a small group where people can share their concerns and joys, and I was wondering if you would be interested.'

If they say, 'That's not for me at this time,' don't be discouraged. Only God can lead people to say 'yes', so go on to the next person on your list with confidence and approach him or her in the same prayerful manner.⁷

COMMENCING A CLUSTER OF SMALL GROUPS

Begin by establishing one core group using the suggestions given. Then, following some of the ideas mentioned earlier, seek to involve this group in helping others appreciate the potential of small groups as they share the benefits being experienced. This group will provide potential leaders or co-leaders for the cells to be formed.

Enlist and train potential leaders. In the first parish in which we formed small groups, training began before we caught the vision of the possibilities of small groups! I never cease to be amazed at the way God works out his purposes, frequently without our being aware of it at the time. Often it is only in retrospect we see the plan. We gathered together the people referred to the church from

a Billy Graham Crusade, to establish them in their new-found faith and prepare them for membership. Others joined with them and over seventy people packed into our lounge room each week for these sessions! The evening included informal fellowship, praise, group prayer, an illustrated lecture and discussion. After two years the number dwindled to twenty-five. We sought to discern what God was saying to us through this decline in interest. Through a series of events while absent from the church, I caught the vision of the potential of small groups. This was shared with the remaining twenty-five and we decided to make the group a training ground for potential leaders (and co-leaders). We struggled to learn something about how small groups function, develop some leadership skills, and evolve a plan to introduce our vision to the congregations.

These leaders received a preparation for their tasks which few small-group leaders experience. Crash programs do not allow for adequate teaching in doctrine, introduction to the Bible and church history, which these leaders experienced for nearly two years, together with the significant group experience.

This enables the potential leaders to learn how to lead through involvement in an actual group. Effective leadership is modelled for them and, as the group develops, opportunities are given to share the leadership.

Enlist potential members. Each potential leader could be encouraged to follow some of the suggestions already made for forming a group. We have commenced clusters of cells for youth and adults in a more structured manner to good effect. A list of prospects was compiled from the lists of those associated with our churches. The list was divided into geographical areas and a leader assigned to each section.

Most leaders received a list of up to thirty names but ended up with an average of twelve in their final group. The leaders visited each person on their list, drawing



attention to the prior publicity in the church paper and special mailings, and sharing their own experience of being a group member. They gave further information and issued an invitation to attend a launching dinner and a 'sample' small-group experience. A blanket invitation was also given to the whole church by mail and pulpit announcements to ensure that no-one was overlooked.

At the launching dinner, the new program was outlined and response forms issued, upon which people indicated their interest and the nights they were available. Further forms were available at the weekly church services for those not able to attend the dinner. These were then sorted into common times and geographical areas and leaders assigned. They then visited each person in their group and invited them to an inaugural meeting in the host homes.

When commencing youth cells in one parish, we began by making a comprehensive list. This comprised all young people in the existing youth groups and others from past and present Sunday school rolls. These we then divided into groups based upon age, locality, and mutual interest. Most groups contained a balance of 'actives' and 'inactives'. By 'inactives' I mean young people who have little or no association with the church. Difficulty was later experienced in some groups where there was a greater number of 'inactives'. Fewer groups with a better balance would have made the task more effective. The two leaders appointed for each group visited the home of each young person assigned to them, which permitted a discussion with the parents about the new program and established an important personal contact.

In setting up one small-group program in a Presbyterian parish where I was called in to act as consultant, we used the elders' districts as the basis for the groups. Each elder was trained as a group leader and visited those in his/her district to invite them to join a group, in most cases held in the elder's home. In two or three districts, where there was little response, the elders combined their groups and acted as co-leaders.

A long-term approach. Some innovators in the small group movement have taken a long-term approach when commencing clusters of small groups. Their method, in brief, was to lead a cell themselves until the group became established. (The time this took varied from

group to group.) As experienced group facilitators, they modelled a good leadership style. The group learnt about leadership and small-group techniques by demonstration. These leaders recognised and developed potential leadership within their groups until they felt confident they could relinquish leadership. They then commenced another group, repeating the process. There is much to be said for this long-term approach.

HANDLING RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

Research shows that only approximately 2.6 per cent of people act as change agents in a given situation. It can be expected that if the vision is shared effectively, another 14.4 per cent will join the movement for change almost immediately, with 34 per cent following sometime later. Another 34 per cent will become involved after a considerable delay, but 16 per cent will continue to resist any effort for change.

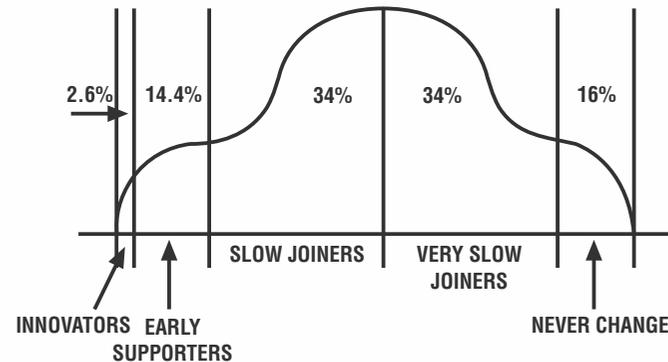


Diagram No. 14: The Bell Curve

Ross Kingham gives some helpful suggestions to enable the initial movers to understand and handle aspects of resistance to the introduction of small groups in the local church.

If there are a number of small group enthusiasts in a church you will find it a worthwhile exercise to perform a role play and become people who object to the introduction of small groups. You may find that your imaginary people just do not want to know about them. You may find they recall past failures to introduce new concepts or techniques. You may

find that the participants reveal they feel threatened by change, or that they fear it means the same old workhorses will have to do the work, or be leaders, or organisers.

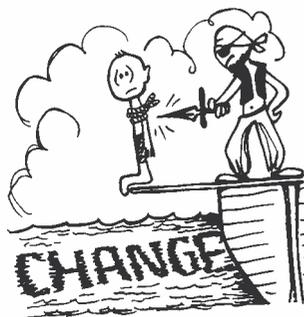
You may find a reluctance in the person playing the minister to delegate authority or responsibility for church members' nurture or guidance. You may find people saying there is no room in the church program for something new. You may find people saying they do not want little holy huddles dotted around the church, wallowing in subjectivity.

Having verbalised many of the objections, how do you deal with them? Successful change in a church depends on the personal spiritual growth of the members and their sense of freedom to take part openly and honestly in the on-going process. At heart I believe we all want to be free, to grow. But to be actually given the challenge, the opportunity can be a shattering experience.

Most of our fellow congregation members may appear fixed in their societal, their community, their home and their church roles. I would particularly plead for understanding for one of the people most fixed in a role — the clergyman. For many clergy the small group idea is a totally new one. These people need our love and understanding. They need to know that we are not criticising their ministry if we are enthusiastic about small groups.

Another factor which militates against inducing change through small groups is that our church buildings are not designed for coping with the pattern. Some pew backs are so high you cannot turn round to see the person behind you. If you try to alter the physical design of the church you are once again cutting across tradition or the fact that the basic floor plan of a church cannot be changed without ripping the whole thing apart.

There is temptation for the small group proponents to move out of the local church fellowship. This solves or avoids conflict, but it means that the small group cannot merge with the larger body of believers. Alternatively, even where there are a number of different types of small groups in a church, there will be some church members who will totally stand outside them, or even withdraw (hopefully temporarily) from the church.⁸



MULTIPLYING GROUPS

There are numerous ways to produce new groups from existing groups. Here are a few examples.

Division. A common way is to allow the group to grow to ten or twelve, then split into two new groups. There are some things which are essential to help the group in this process. These are dealt with in chapter 3 under 'Plan to Grow'.

Group planter. Some leaders are specially gifted in planting new groups. The planter stays with a group until it has grown to ten or twelve and has developed a leader in the group to take over. The planter then leaves the group to commence another while continuing to mentor the new leader of the original group.

Group planting team. In this example, usually the group planter takes one or two of the original group to form the core of a new group. There are variations to this when a planting team is especially trained to operate as an outreach from an established group. The group supports them in various ways. In some cases the team retains their membership of the original group.

There are a number of keys to multiplying groups. The first is to help the group understand and commit themselves to the Kingdom principle of multiplication: Christ's parable of the seed, dying to live. Next is the training of leaders and team members in how to enlist new members and to plant and lead new groups. Leaders also need to have skills in helping their group work through the grief experienced when they divide.

References

- (1) Samuel S Shoemaker, *With the Holy Spirit and with Fire* (Harper and Row, NY, 1960)
- (2) John L Casteel, *Spiritual Renewal through Small Groups* (Association Press, NY, 1957) p 191.
- (3) Sara K Little, *Learning Together in the Christian Fellowship* (John Knox Press, USA, 1956) p 31.
- (4) Australian Small Group Network National Office, P O Box 410, Carlingford 2118, NSW, phone 02) 638 1785.
- (5) Arthur R Baranowski, *Creating Small Faith Communities* (St Anthony Messenger Press, 1988).
- (6) Lyman Coleman, *Growth by Groups* (Growth by Groups, USA).

- (7) Paul Everett, *How Do I Start a Small Group?* (In-Touch, July 1987, Vol 1, No. 2).
- (8) Ross Kingham (extract from a chapter he contributed to *Building Small Groups in the Christian Community*, by the author).

STUDY GUIDE

- 1 What motivated the commencement of a group to which you belonged?
- 2 'How Some Groups Began' gathers together some initial motivations. Discuss these.
- 3 What can we learn from Professor Snyder's advice under 'Listen for Expressed Needs'?
- 4 What needs or interests have you heard people expressing in the various places you have been over recent weeks which could be met by forming an appropriate type of group?
- 5 Under 'Colouring the Parish' a number of suggestions are made to make parish life more effective through using small groups. In what other ways have you or others used small groups?
- 6 Who are some of the people in your parish who fit the first two stages of the Bell Curve (diagram 14)?
- 7 Use a role play, as Ross Kingham suggests under 'Handling Resistance to Change', to help understand and deal with aspects of resistance.
- 8 Discuss Paul Everett's emphasis on prayer in getting groups started.
- 9 Read the quote from Samuel S Shoemaker which commences the chapter.
What kind of people does God use (see also 1 Corinthians 1:26–31)?
What are some of the indications that God is in a particular activity?

SHARING THE GOOD NEWS TOGETHER

In a successful small group, love, acceptance and fellowship flow in unusual measure. This is the ideal situation in which to hear about the kingdom of God. In this context the facts of the gospel come through not as cold propositions but as living truths, visible in the lives of others.¹

The experience of the church through the years has been that there is no single way of undertaking evangelism. People have come to faith on their own, through another's witness, in a regular church service, and many in very large gatherings. In his examination of the church's recovery of its sense of mission, Athol Gill says:

The evangelistic programs which will probably command most respect will be those which treat the hearers as persons and respect their integrity; which are able to meet them at the point of their present understanding; which encourage long-term in-depth involvement with them; which take place primarily out in the world as an integral part of the total ongoing ministry of the Christian community; which readily incorporate new Christians into that ministry and contribute to its spiritual development.²

Small groups are one method of evangelism which in an effective way gathers up most of the points made here by Dr Gill.

In my parishes we developed a strategy which was based on lay people sharing their faith in small groups. We first used this method in our local churches to reach

the unchurched. Later we gathered teams of up to fifty people to conduct weekend evangelistic events, sometimes long distances from our parish. These teams comprised our own members and people from other churches. Preparatory training was given in how to share their faith story, particularly in a group situation, and in how to lead a group.



Usually this outreach was conducted over a weekend, commencing with a combined evening meeting of praise and witness, or a dinner. This was followed by small groups in homes during which lay people spoke of their faith. A low-key invitation to commitment was also given during these home groups. A number of the methods described later were used in these groups. Lay people witnessed in a variety of ways during the normal Sunday church services, which were sometimes followed by further home groups. Many were wonderfully converted to Christ during these weekends.

We also helped our people use a similar approach to reach their neighbours through one-off groups in their homes.

Many other churches in Australia have used these methods effectively.

In Cambridge, England, St Barnabas' Church followed a regular pattern of twice-yearly evangelistic missions based on the Home Groups. The main thrust of the missions would be events put on by the groups themselves, such as dialogue evangelism supper parties. Often an evangelistic team from outside would come to conduct the mission, but they would really be a resource to be used by the Home Groups. Initially, of course, groups found this difficult, as they had no non-Christian friends to invite, but, by repeating these events regularly, people became aware of the opportunity and learnt to make friends as well as to invite them. Basing the missions on the Home Groups took a lot of the organisational hassle out of the process, and the dialogue evangelism approach increased the confidence of members to share their faith.

In this chapter we are concerned about short-term or one-time groups whose main purpose is to develop relationships to win people to Christ. These are the bridging groups to the Christian church. In chapter 3, 'Keys for Effective Small Groups', suggestions have been given for enabling an evangelism dimension to ongoing fellowship groups.

MORE THAN A MATTER OF MODELS

Peter and Sue Kaldor in *Where the River Flows*³ emphasise that sharing the gospel requires more than getting our strategies straight. They have given a range of stories of the ways people from different backgrounds and traditions are doing evangelism. They emphasise that we need to be receptive to the guidance of the Spirit of God. What is found to be successful in one area, in a certain period, may be inappropriate elsewhere at the same time or later.

Most of the ideas in this chapter I have used to good effect in different situations. Some may be right for you, others may not. Pray, depend upon God, try different methods, and evaluate what you do. Don't be put off by apparent failure; seek to learn from it. It is not God's intention that any should be lost (2 Peter 3:9), so he has ways in mind to reach people, and usually these ways are so simple we often miss them!

SOME ADVANTAGES OF USING SMALL GROUPS

Here are a few reasons why small groups provide such an effective and credible structure for evangelism:

They offer a bridge for shy people

Shy people may be painfully uncomfortable in crowds or large groups or they may be wary of church gatherings and church buildings.

They are personal

One person in a crowd may be very lonely and feel very insignificant. In a small group that person will respond to the group's care and concern, and to the group's recognition of his/her identity and worth.

A small group allows maximum participation

Each person has the opportunity to ask questions, to participate in the discussion, and to share ideas and feelings.

They are flexible

The length, time and venue of the meeting can be varied and the program need not be fixed in a definite pattern.

There is a minimum of organisation needed

Large amounts of time, energy and money are not required. Nor do we have to wait for church councils to move.

Evangelism is localised

A home is identified with the gospel in a neighbourhood.

They encourage spontaneity in evangelism

Two or three people with the sense of mission and a love for people can invite a few neighbours and friends into their home with the minimum of effort.

They are informal

A relaxed, natural atmosphere is possible.

Communication is easier

In the small-group situation personal problems may be shared and solutions, both practical and theoretical, can be offered. We may be able to present the Christian

message more easily and clearly. Difficulties can be discussed, problems clarified, and knowledge shared. The small group offers a very natural situation in which we can share our personal faith stories.

Richard Peace gives further reasons:

First, a group provides the continuing exposure to Christianity so vital to spiritual discovery . . . Second, because groups are familiar to all of us since we spend hours in informal groups discussing everything under the sun, a group is a natural way of exposing people to Christianity . . . Also, groups generally meet in a familiar place — a home, an office, a favourite restaurant . . . Third, small groups provide opportunity for face-to-face interaction . . . interaction is necessary if they are to understand how Christ can meet their unique needs . . . Fourth, in a successful small group, love, acceptance and fellowship flow in unusual measure. This is the ideal situation in which to hear about the kingdom of God. In this context the ‘facts of the Gospel’ come through not as cold propositions but as living truths visible in the lives of others . . . Finally, small groups work because they meet a fundamental need within each of us for fellowship.⁴

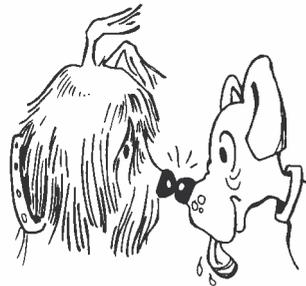
FRIENDSHIP/CONTACT GROUPS

Purpose

These groups, held in homes, are intended to reach irregular church attenders and the unchurched. They are concerned with creating a situation in which bridges of friendship can be built. Hopefully a foundation is laid upon which deeper communication can take place at a later stage. A non-threatening situation is provided, where the people invited determine the degree to which they wish to be involved. The program is essentially of a ‘getting acquainted’ nature. A climate is created in which the Holy Spirit can work to the extent he chooses.

Who to invite

Begin by inviting a couple of Christian friends to help you. Pray and plan together. Preparation of refreshments and other items for the evening can be shared.



Aim at having no more than twelve attend. Sometimes these will share a common interest. Be optimistic in considering who to invite. Often the most unlikely people will accept. Your list of invitees will include people from your broad network of relationships, including neighbours.

How to invite

Generally, the best invitation is a personal one. However, there is some advantage in sending a hand-written (or printed) invitation and following this up with a telephone call or home visit, as this gives opportunity for the invitation to be discussed prior to the personal contact.

Be sure to state clearly the purpose of the meeting. To simply call it ‘a social evening to get to know each other’ is possibly the best way to describe it. Indicate the times for commencement and conclusion.

Preparation

Name-tags for each person, prepared beforehand, are helpful for group fellowship and assist the leadership. The lettering should be large enough to be read at a distance. Have cheap note pads and pencils available for the ‘get acquainted’ game. Seating should be arranged to enable each member to see the rest of the group. Light background music could be playing as the guests arrive. But do not use ‘religious’ music.

Program

Introduce people as they come, give them name-tags and allow plenty of time for informal conversations.

Use one of the get-acquainted exercises in appendix A. ‘Interviews’ is a non-threatening game. The questions can be varied to suit those who attend. Do not use questions which probe (eg ‘What is your aim in life?’). Keep them general at this stage. The ‘Guess Who Fishbowl’ is helpful for those who know each other well. Again, watch the questions you choose.

As the main purpose of the evening is to develop friendships, the program should not be too heavily structured. Have some well-chosen questions in mind to address to the whole group after the above game. These should seek information rather than opinions or feelings. Some questions will arise naturally out of the initial sharing.

The refreshment should be buffet style to encourage more mixing.

Finish on time.

Some hints

Listen carefully to people. Show a real interest in them.

Be alert to expressions of need — whatever they may be (eg physical, emotional, spiritual, etc). Follow up on these.

Don't be easily shocked by what some may say.

Avoid controversial subjects.

Be natural.

Do not be surprised if people want to talk about spiritual matters.

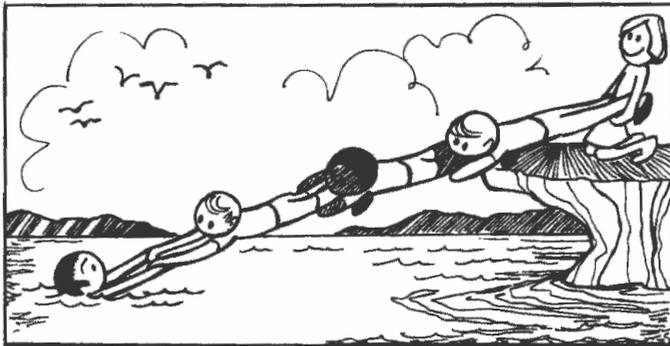
Be sensitive to the desire or otherwise of the whole group to pursue these matters.

Pray about the meeting beforehand and ask others to support you.

Your own close communion with God will be your best preparation.

EVANGELISTIC GROUPS

These groups could be part of a structured local church evangelism program or spontaneous group.



Purpose

Unlike Friendship/Contact Groups, these have a specific aim to present the Christian good news, with a call to faith in Christ. When people are invited to such groups, it should be made clear that the group will seek to explore seriously the meaning of the Christian faith for today.

These are generally one-off groups, sometimes providing the option for further get-togethers for those who indicate interest in pursuing further the matters raised.

Preparation

Most of the suggestions for invitations and preparation for a Contact Group will apply.

Be prepared with some suitable booklets for those who wish to make commitments or think more about what was said.

PROGRAM IDEAS FOR EVANGELISM GROUPS

It is important to emphasise that these strategies are not meant to be used as one-off events. The assumption is that ongoing relationships will have been developed with those invited. The ideas given here need to be used with flexibility and sensitivity. It may be best to have a series of informal groups using the friendship approach and some of these suggestions in order to build relationships. In many cases it will be inappropriate to give a concise presentation of the gospel in early gatherings especially in an Australian context, where the average person is almost totally ignorant of the Christian gospel or even of basic facts about the life of Jesus. These ideas could be useful to lay the foundations for a Christianity Explained program (see later in this chapter).

Precede most of the following options with a **get acquainted exercise** such as 'Interviews' found in appendix A.

Have a party!

Rebecca Manley Pippert, author of *Out of the Saltbaker and into the World*, writes:

A wonderful way of evangelism is to have parties. I believe that a spiritual ministry is infinitely easier when there is already an atmosphere of openness, love and trust.⁵

Here are some ideas:

A barbecue party to which each person brings and pools their 'eats'. This could be followed by an informal sharing by all on:

The first time I tried my hand at cooking . . .

My grandma's or mother's special meal . . .

If I didn't have to pay the bill, the place I would like and the meal I would order are . . .

What I like most about barbecues is . . .
The one thing that really burns me up in life is . . .

To climax the time together, tell with enthusiasm a suitable story such as the 'barbecue' on Mt Carmel of Elijah and the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:17-40) with a simple evangelistic application.

A skills party. Each brings something he/she has



made such as craftwork, cake, etc and talks briefly about it. Others may have musical skills they use for the entertainment of the group. Some may choose to talk about work, garden, sport, etc with some item to show relevant to that.

This could be followed by a talk on God's creative genius illustrated by slides, posters, or items from the creation (flowers, leaves, etc). A brief witness by the speaker concerning the ways God has recreated his or her own life, or has brought new life and hope into difficult situations, could help focus on God's forgiving and renewing love in Christ.

Other suggestions which could be used as the major segment in a 'party' are:

A concise presentation of the gospel followed by dialogue. Use a sensitive speaker who can give a simple, brief talk and follow with discussion. We have frequently used visuals to illustrate the presentation. These have been diagrams, cartoons, or pictures and summaries of main points, using flip chart, posters, overhead projector, video, film clips, or slides. Audio cassettes of suitable speakers could be considered for some isolated situations.

Questions to help facilitate the dialogue could be:

What did you think of the message?

Did it make sense?
Is it your experience?
Would you like it to be?

A Christian film or video on a subject of interest to the group which can lead to discussion. The questions suggested above could be used here also. Be sure to carefully select a well-presented film or video and preview it with a couple of discerning friends well beforehand. Some will not be suitable for the purpose of this group. 'The Jesus film' continues to be effective for reaching a cross-section of people.

Discussion on topic of general interest to participants. It is important to discover the entry points into people's lives, to begin where people are in terms of their interests and needs. We discover these by taking a genuine interest in them — by using active listening skills, empathising, and showing compassion. As we build bridges of friendship through contact groups or informal relationships we lay the foundation for these groups.

Groups which have done this groundwork have planned meetings to cover topics which included: Coping with early parenthood; Answering our children's questions honestly; Understanding and helping our teenagers; Hanging together as a family; Making good marriages better; When the bottom falls out of our world; Rebuilding our broken lives; There is hope!

A skilled facilitator is essential for this group. The topic may be handled by this person or a guest speaker. The topic is developed in such a way that there is a clear Christian perspective. The leader and speaker are chosen so that they can contribute out of their own faith story. The presentation is followed by questions and discussion.

A discussion of a selected book. Give a copy of the same book to each person who plans to attend a few weeks prior to the meeting. Ask them to read it and be prepared to discuss their reaction to the book.

Faith-story telling. Invite one or two sensitive people who have a vital up-to-date Christian experience and can express themselves reasonably well. These can be invited to share the story of their experience of God's grace at work in their lives. (This witnessing needs to be specific and have an air of reality about it.) The meeting is then thrown open for the group to respond. (The questions already suggested could be useful here.)

Alternatively, the leader could interview the witnesses using questions such as the following:

- For how long have you had a meaningful faith?
- How did you find this faith?
- What helped you make this discovery?
- What prevented you from taking this step earlier?
- How is it working out in specific situations in your life now?

The heart of Christianity. Using the same pairs as for the ‘get-acquainted’ session, have each pair discuss for approximately five minutes: ‘What do you consider to be important things about Christianity?’ Each pair lists only *four* points between them. All points are restricted to one or two words, to help in the following collation.

The findings of the group are recorded on a chart by the leader taking one point at a time from each pair.

A number is then placed in front of each point to facilitate the feedback from the next stage.

Taking three to five minutes each pair considers the list on the chart and selects *four* of the points they now think to be at the heart of Christianity. Reports from the pairs are recorded by placing a tick next to each of the numbers listed.

Opportunity is then given for any to share why some of these points are important for them personally (particularly those with a cluster of ticks). This segment is introduced by the leader pointing out that of the many things we have been taught, we tend to retain those things which have been supported from our own experience. Therefore it would be reasonable to assume that the items listed have to varying degrees been experienced by members of the group. Facilitate the sharing then by asking: ‘Would anyone care to share some personal incident in which one of these has been part of his/her own experience?’ or ‘What experience has proved one of these points to be real for you?’ or ‘Why has one of these points become important for you?’

The leader may sensitively ask questions to draw a person out, to clarify or help a person express him/herself.

We usually have one or two mature Christians present, who have been trained in telling their story, to help facilitate the group. However, they are taught to withhold their contributions until others present have had opportunity to respond.

Levels of warmth. The group can share in a random fashion on the basis of these questions:

- How did you heat your home when you were young?
- Can you recall any good experiences around the place where the heat was centred?
- Which person was the centre of warmth in your home?
- Can you recall some warm experiences you had of God when young?
- What does God mean to you now?

(See appendix A under ‘Warm-up’ for full outline of this method, together with some alternatives.)

General questions. These questions are used to facilitate participation.

- What inspires you most about the creation?
- Who is Jesus Christ to you?
- When did God become more than a name to you?
- What do Scripture promises, such as the following, mean in your own personal experience? (Optional)
 - ‘The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.’ (Lamentations 3:21-23)
 - ‘I am with you always.’ (Matthew 28:20)
 - ‘Nothing can separate us from the love of God . . .’ (Romans 8:38,39)

SOME OPTIONS FOR CONCLUDING MOST OF THESE PROGRAMS

The final step is for the leader to seek a response of faith, using one of these options:

A brief impromptu talk based on some of the main items raised during the session.

A short talk explaining the way to respond in faith to Christ, using some visual aids.

A suitable booklet explaining how to become a follower of Jesus Christ is given to all present. The leader then asks all to follow in their own copy as the main points are covered. (Each of these options is followed by opportunities for commitment through silent individual prayer. This is then followed by an open response, completion of a card, or the recording of names in a disciples’ book. In some circumstances, none of these

options will be appropriate, but an invitation is given for inquirers to talk to the leader after the meeting.)

If there has been no apparent interest during the meeting by those who are uncommitted, close with a brief prayer of thanks for the evidence of God's mercy and love in the things shared. (Often during the following informal refreshment time we have found a seeker who, while too shy to do so in the group, will speak to the leader afterwards.)

Modern versions of the New Testament and a few well-chosen books/booklets could also be available for any to take.

Be available to people immediately after the group or at other times outside the group.

Take a long-term view. Follow up people who showed interest — and those who did not appear to!

Remember that in any situation God is the evangelist, we are but channels of his truth and grace. Our task is to pray, to maintain our own growing close relationship with God, and to present the gospel of Jesus Christ accurately, understandably, and with compassion. It is God the Holy Spirit who convinces people of their need of Christ and creates repentance and faith (John 16:8–11).

As mentioned at the commencement of this section, these gatherings could be useful as a bridge to a Christianity Explained course.

CHRISTIANITY EXPLAINED

'Christianity Explained' is a tool for evangelism developed in Australia by Michael L B Bennett and used with outstanding success. It attempts to provide an alternative to the quick one-off presentation approach to evangelism. It is a six-unit presentation of the gospel which aims to teach the fundamentals of the Christian faith. The underlying assumption is that the inquirer knows virtually nothing about Jesus or the Bible. It is a low-key approach in that there is no attempt to pressure or manipulate people into a commitment, though the need for a genuine faith-response is clearly and often put.⁶

References

- (1) Richard Peace, *Small Group Evangelism* (IVP).
- (2) John Mallison, *Youth Outreach and Evangelism* (The Joint Board of Christian Education of Australia and New Zealand, 1975).
- (3) Peter & Sue Kaldor, *Where the River Flows* (Lancer Books, Anzea Publishers, 1988).
- (4) Richard Peace, *ibid.*
- (5) Rebecca Manley Pippert, *Out of the Saltbaker and into the World* (IVP, 1980).
- (6) Michael L B Bennett, *Christianity Explained* (Scripture Union, 1985).

STUDY GUIDE

- 1 Identify the main points made in Athol Gill's quotation and discuss some of them.
- 2 Research shows that few people come to church activities without being brought by a friend. How important is the development of relationships in evangelism?
What does building relationships involve?
Athol Gill emphasises 'long-term, in-depth involvement'. Discuss.
- 3 What other advantages of using small groups can you think of?
- 4 What are some of the problems in transplanting a model of evangelism without first analysing your own situation to see whether it is suitable or needs adaptation?
- 5 Arrange a meeting, using one of the ideas for an evangelistic group, to trial it with others who are interested in reaching out to their friends. At the conclusion, spend time evaluating it in order to assess its suitability or otherwise.

CARING FOR NEW CHRISTIANS TOGETHER

The references to the 'disciples' as a corporate body are much more frequent in the Gospels than are references to individual disciples. Most of the references to individuals refer to failures on their part; while the references to the group as a whole more often speak of their joy, understanding or achievement. 'There is simply no substitute for getting with people, and it is ridiculous to imagine that anything less, short of a miracle, can develop strong Christians'.¹

The apostle Paul took seriously his nurturing of new disciples. He said to his friends in Thessalonica: 'You are our witnesses, and so is God, that our conduct towards you who believe was pure, right, and without fault. You know that we treated each one of you just as a father treats his own children. We encouraged you, we comforted you, and we kept urging you to live the kind of life that pleases God, who calls you to share in his own Kingdom and glory' (1 Thessalonians 2:10–12). Then, in Luke's report of a speech before the elders of Ephesus, Paul recalls his ministry: 'Watch, then, and remember that with many tears, day and night, I taught every one of you for three years' (Acts 20:31).

Growing to become the person God wants us to be is a long-term goal, requiring all the help available through the Holy Spirit working directly with us and through other Christians.

Early in my ministry, the Lord taught me an unforgettable lesson about the priority of nurturing new

disciples. In 1959, while I was at Port Kembla, the steel city south of Sydney, the combined churches participated fully in the first Billy Graham Crusade in Sydney. We organised buses to take two thousand people to the meetings over the three weeks. Our parish developed a comprehensive orientation program for fifty people associated with our parish who registered their names as inquirers at the Crusade. Small short-term nurture groups and a six-month discipling program, one to one and in large gatherings, resulted in forty-seven of those people becoming ongoing members of our church. Most of them are still deeply involved in churches across our country.

Here are a few things I found helpful then, and since, in fostering beginners in the way of Christ.

BOND WITH A MATURE CHRISTIAN

Christian fellowships which take seriously their care of new Christians assign sensitive, mature persons as undershepherds or helpers to take a special interest in the new disciples. They do this by making them feel wanted; helping them through their traumas; personally introducing them to people who share their exhilaration and recognise the significance of their decision to follow Christ; and by praying for them and discipling them.

Norm was a carpenter who had a pastor's heart. He took seriously his assignments to care for others, especially young people and new Christians. We assigned him to follow up a builder and his wife who were converted. He frequently shared meals with them in his



home, brought them to church where he sat with them, introduced them to others, and made them feel comfortable and wanted. To help this couple develop their devotional life, he met with them for breakfast once a week, during which time they read the Scriptures and prayed together.

LINK WITH A NURTURE GROUP

In addition to this one-to-one care, new Christians should be linked to a nurture group as soon as possible after they have decided to follow Christ.

What is a nurture group?

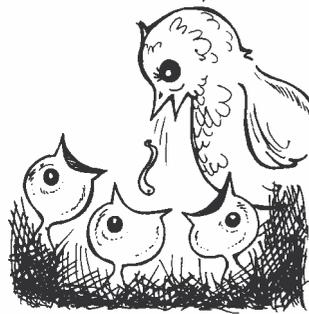
Nurture groups are short-term groups, usually lasting six to eight weeks, which provide support to help new disciples of Christ begin their life together in a caring fellowship of Christian love. The group consists of some experienced Christians as well as the beginners.

A home is usually the best venue, because of the intimacy and warmth it provides. Where the 'undershepherd' or 'helper' system is in place, the new Christian is invited and accompanied to the group by this person.

The purpose of a nurture group

In a nurture group new Christians are helped to take some first steps and are given some very basic 'food' and support. Relationships with their new-found Lord and other members of their new 'family' are carefully developed in an atmosphere of care and concern.

Although the Bible will play a very important part in the group, the aim is not simply to do Bible study. The group will primarily try to care for and encourage new Christians, making them feel wanted and accepted. It will be a place for new Christians to get to know others, share experiences and ask questions.



There is sometimes a tendency for mature Christians to underestimate the relational aspects of the program. This aspect is essential for the newcomer to experience something of what it means to belong to a truly caring Christian community, where people really matter. Instruction without a relational dimension can give the new Christian a wrong perspective on the rich fellowship which should be a characteristic of Christ's kingdom.

A nurture group is also like a bridge helping new Christians into the wider fellowship of a local church. The group is a smaller version of the larger church. It is important that new disciples are not pressured to join other groups or organisations within the church at this stage; they need to become established first.

The composition of the group

There is an increasing emphasis in Christian education upon inter-generational work — a mixed-age group with all working together. This is a healthy trend away from the division into youth and adults and the splitting up of the family, which has happened in most church programs. Some churches may therefore choose to run their nurture groups on an all-age basis.

However, for the small and more intimate group such as a nurture group, there can be value in dividing people into peer groups, particularly where there are extremes of culture and background among the members. It is best for people with a similar background to struggle together with the problems of witness and lifestyle.

Plan in advance

When a local church is planning an evangelistic outreach program the structure for the nurture groups should be set up at the same time as the outreach is being planned, to ensure immediate follow-up. Churches frequently neglect making these plans in advance, which results in a time delay in which valuable support is not available when the new disciple is often in greatest need of it.

The local church which has evangelism as part of its ongoing program will need to be alert to the continuing need to provide nurture group experiences to support new Christians.

The objectives of a nurture group

You should be able to identify the following objectives in a nurture course, some of them in each session:

To provide opportunities for group members to get to know one another.

The aim is to establish deepening relationships without forcing the pace. Sometimes the sessions will include talking in pairs and sometimes there will be opportunity to talk with the whole group.



To ensure that spiritual foundations have been properly laid. Those still troubled by failure and sin need to accept Christ's forgiveness; those still unsure need to be assured of the presence of the Holy Spirit. All need to be given help in being open to daily receive all the grace and strength God has to offer and to learn to maintain a relationship with Jesus Christ.

To encourage regular Bible study. By the time the group finishes, new disciples should know how to handle their Bibles and have studied a few significant passages for beginners in the faith. Learning to pick out the main points in Bible passages and to see how the Bible applies to daily living will be key experiences for new Christians.

To develop confidence in beginning to pray aloud. The new Christians should hear others pray and, starting with silent prayer and simple word and sentence prayers, build up enough confidence to begin to pray aloud themselves.

To enable group members to begin to share their faith. New Christians are often the most effective witnesses — both to non-Christians and older Christians. The group should encourage everyone to begin to talk to others about Christ and to share with the group any difficulties they have had.

Leading the group

Remember how important it is that new disciples have a good experience of a caring, concerned Christian community, where they will feel accepted and significant.

Do everything you can to make the group meetings **times for experiencing true Christian love.**



If possible, **have some spare copies of the Bible** in an easy-to-read, modern translation (preferably the Good News Bible or the New International Version). It will help if everyone has the same translation.

Begin and end on time. Don't let the session drag on.

Make the meeting interesting and lively. Keep the pace going and avoid long talks.

Use visual aids whenever possible. They are a tremendous help in understanding and retaining the message. Simple sketches, phrases and words are all that are needed. You could use felt pens with sheets of newsprint (attached to a piece of hardboard with snap clips), chalk and chalkboard, and an overhead projector if one is available.

Keep things simple. Avoid using clichés or technical Christian words, which may mean little or nothing to a newcomer to the faith. A useful exercise is to write down short and simply worded definitions of words and phrases such as 'conversion', 'grace', 'commitment', 'discipleship', 'Christian experience', and 'Christian lifestyle'.

Don't swamp people with too much information; it will only confuse or discourage them and they won't retain it.

Be sensitive to the needs of individuals — that means being ready to listen!

Think carefully before using hymns or choruses in the meetings. Most non-churchgoers will find the



practice a little strange to begin with. If you do sing, choose your songs carefully and try to include some well-known, traditional ones, or those with familiar tunes, as well as modern, informal choruses. You may find that some members do not know any, so do not introduce more than one new one in any meeting.

Be aware that many newcomers will know little about the Christian faith and how to live with it. Most will not know how to read the Bible or how to pray. Concentrate on telling them **how**, not stressing that they **ought**. Many will have difficulty finding passages in the Bible. This is where it will be helpful if everyone is using the same version and preferably the same edition. You can then give the page number with the passage reference. Do everything possible to avoid embarrassment, and give people plenty of time.

Be unshockable! Those with no church background may have no idea about what is and is not 'acceptable' in Christian circles. Be ready to step into awkward situations to prevent embarrassment.

Encourage questions. The new Christians will be trying to understand and absorb many new ideas. They will need opportunity and time to sort out these new thoughts. Asking questions and talking about how their faith affects their life will be invaluable, so be patient with them.

Emphasise that the Christian life is a growing experience. Remember that understanding and commitment are both things that grow.

Demonstrate by personal example how to share experiences with others in the group. Allow plenty of time for members to share their own new experiences — don't fill every silence with your own words! This will help new Christians gain confidence in expressing their faith.

Encourage shy members to participate, but don't force them. Help them to know that it is all right to have a problem and to talk about it.

Be careful not to put pressure on people to



conform to your ideas of Christian lifestyle. This could inhibit openness and sharing, or even stop people coming. Give new Christians time to grow as the word of God speaks to them.

Serve a drink and maybe some light refreshments at the end of each session. This gives a relaxed atmosphere for further informal fellowship, and you may find that the most open conversations happen at this stage of the proceedings. Ask your hosts to be responsible for this.



Arrange some opportunities for informal social get-togethers with no structured program. Spouses and families can be invited.

A program to follow

There are a number of resources available which are intended for nurture groups. Some are too content-centred for beginners and focus too much on instruction from the leader. 'Caring for Christians', the six-week course a few of us developed, now in many different languages, is a good model to guide you in selecting appropriate resources or preparing your own. Here is what should be included in each session:

Relationship-building experiences (see appendix A).

Times for each to share their stories — how and why they came to faith and how it is working out.

Simple relational Bible studies introducing the basics of discipleship, eg beginning (conversion), being sure (assurance), growing (the means of grace), taking God seriously (obedience), maturing in Christ (holiness), blessed to be a blessing (ministry). The style of the Serendipity Bible study resources is appropriate.

Prayer together, using non-threatening methods (see chapter 13).

Worship together. Not many hymns or songs, as most newcomers won't know them.

Supper — a good time for informal conversations.

Here is an outline for your first meeting, incorporating some of these guidelines:

Get acquainted (using Interviews in appendix A).

Sharing — an opportunity for all to talk about their commitment and clarify what they have done.

Can you think of one word to describe how you felt when you decided to follow Christ?

What had helped you take this step?

What difference has it made?

A talk to help the new Christians understand what they have done. This will outline in a simple manner the steps involved in committing their life to Jesus Christ (see end of this chapter).

Prayer in silence with suggestions given by the leader.

Refreshments.

COMBINED GET-TOGETHERS TO COMMENCE AND CONCLUDE NURTURE GROUPS

There is often value in holding a combined meeting of all those who have become Christians or are wanting to find out more about being a Christian. The ‘helpers’ or ‘undershepherds’ are also invited. An informal evening is best, with time to get to know one another and for sharing and worship. Some of the mature Christians as well as the newcomers could be asked to briefly share their faith-stories. An interview may be more appropriate with some. Do not make an initial meeting like this too long. Make it a bright, warm time of celebration. Refreshments or a light meal would make a good ending to the occasion.

This combined meeting may be used to launch the home-based nurture groups or to conclude them, or both.

WORKING WITH CLUSTERS OF GROUPS TOGETHER

There may be occasions when leaders, who have completed the training program, do not feel confident to lead the whole nurture course. In this case, the groups could meet together on church premises. The minister and/or some experienced lay people could lead the meetings, with most work and sharing being done in small groups led by the trained leaders. If you do this, be sure you have individual seating, so that you can split up easily into groups.

QUESTIONS NEW CHRISTIANS ASK

New Christians will have many questions after they begin to think through the implications of their commitment, and especially when they begin to live out and to share their new-found faith. Paul E Little, in *How to Give Away Your Faith* (IVP), lists and gives brief answers to the following questions commonly asked by beginners in the faith:

How has Christ secured my forgiveness?

How does Christ live in me by his Spirit?

How does God speak to me through the Bible?

How does God invite me to speak to him?

How does Christ want to have the central place in my life?

How does Christ want me to share his love and the Good News about him?

How will the church help me to grow in my Christian life?

Group leaders and the assigned helpers need to be familiar with the questions and appropriate answers. If any of them fail to emerge and you think that they are particularly important for some individuals to grasp, look for an opportunity to raise the questions yourself.

A TALK FOR BEGINNERS

Here is an outline of a brief talk I have always given in the first session of a nurture group. It takes no longer than fifteen minutes if it is carefully prepared and visuals are used. Although overhead projector transparencies, prepared in advance, are probably the best way to present the material, plain paper and a felt pen are quite adequate in a small group.

1. God loves us and made us for a close relationship with himself

God created us ‘to be like himself’ (Genesis 1:27), which gives us both status and responsibilities in the world God created. One way in which we are ‘like God’ is in having moral and spiritual capacities — we are far more than mere animals.

God created us capable of knowing him.

But God did not create puppets. He made us capable of choosing between good and evil.

This circle could be taken to represent how God made us — his potential for humankind.

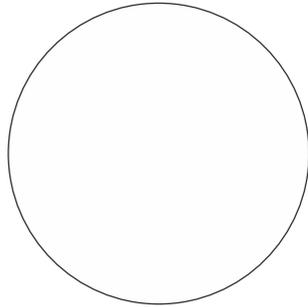


Diagram No. 15

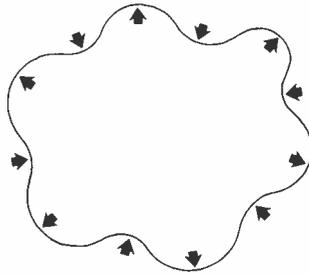


Diagram No. 16

2. We have not become what God intended

The original intimate relationship with God (Genesis 3:8) has been broken right from the beginning of the human race.

Now we choose naturally not to live God's way. 'Everyone has sinned, everyone falls short of the beauty of God's plan' (Romans 3:23 J B Phillips).

The warped circle represents the distortion of God's potential for humankind by the impact of sin from within and from outside. This allows the 'world' to 'squeeze' us 'into its own mould' (Romans 12:2, J B Phillips).

3. God did for us through Jesus Christ what we could never do for ourselves

Because God loves us he made it possible for us to have our close relationship with him restored.

'Christ is the visible likeness of the invisible God' (Colossians 1:15).

Through Jesus Christ, God dealt with the problem of sin which prevented us from being 'like himself' and spoilt our relationship with him.

'God has shown us how much he loves us — it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us!' (Romans 5:8).

When we accept what Christ has done, our relationship with God is restored. From this relationship we now have the power to become what God intended us to be.

'The secret is simply this: Christ in you! Yes, Christ in you bringing with him the hope of all the glorious things to come' (Colossians 1:27 J B Phillips).

4. We need to receive what God offers in Christ

We must desire to have our broken relationship with God restored, to be sorry for our attitude of rebellion, and by faith accept Christ and what he has done.

We often refer to this step as making our commitment to Christ. We trust Christ to save us from sin and commit ourselves to his kingly rule over our lives. We are then 'born again' — made alive in Christ (John 3:16).

Christ becomes the focal point around which our life begins to revolve.

'Christ, the hidden centre of our lives' (Colossians 3:4 J B Phillips).

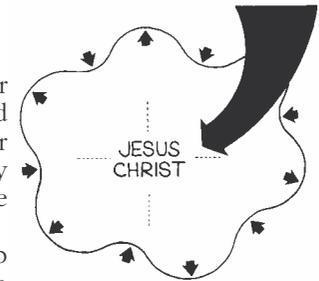


Diagram No. 17

5. Disciples of Christ have a new power within them

The Holy Spirit of God gives us new spiritual resources which help us to overcome those influences of evil which have spoilt our life.

The Holy Spirit gives us a new perspective on life and deepens our relationship with God.

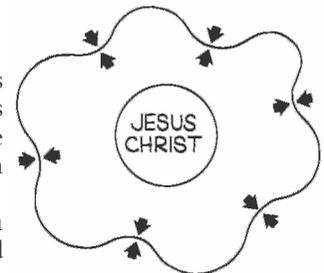


Diagram No. 18

We do not have to try to make a success of our new Christian life on our own. It is a partnership, with God as the senior partner.

'I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives me' (Philippians 4:13).

6. Our relationship with God needs to be maintained

For any relationship to grow one needs to spend time with the other person. In our relationship with God this is achieved *by prayer, and by knowing and understanding the Bible. It also grows through fellowship* — all that the community of God's people experience and share together in worship, celebration of the sacraments, mission and service. And we grow by learning to obey God — following his leading and intention for each aspect of our life.

Another way of expressing this could be to take the model of a simple wheel. If the hub is Christ and we are the rim, we keep in contact with him through the spokes.

We could also express this by seeing each of the ways we maintain our relationship with God likened to those things which are essential for a newborn baby to grow and mature.

PRAYER

Air (a hymn writer calls prayer 'the Christian's vital breath').

BIBLE

Food.

FELLOWSHIP

A family where care, support, sharing and love are experienced.

OBEDIENCE

Exercise to help us develop and keep fit and healthy.

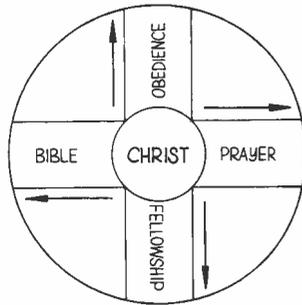


Diagram No. 19

ONGOING NURTURE

In the apostle Paul's prayer for the believers in Ephesus he prayed that they would keep growing into Christlikeness, understand and fully experience God's love in Christ and continually be empowered by the Spirit (Ephesians 3:14–21). As an experienced pastor, he knew full well that the Christian life is an ongoing experience, never completed in this world.

In this chapter we have touched on how to help the new believer in Christ take some first steps in their new-found walk with Christ. In the next five chapters we deal with the role small groups can play in helping Christ's followers mature in Christ as they learn to understand and take seriously the Bible and pray more effectively.

Reference

- (1) Robert E Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Revell, 1964).

STUDY GUIDE

- 1 What nurture did you receive as a new Christian, and how did it help? OR
What assistance would you have appreciated?
- 2 Mark 3:14,15 tells of Jesus calling out the twelve to share in his ministry. These were a very diverse, young, and inexperienced group.
What do you think might have been some of the first things Jesus did with this group?
'To be with him' — what do you think that might have implied for such a group?
- 3 What special characteristics would you look for in a person to lead a nurture group?
- 4 Don't bond insensitive 'mature' Christians with a new Christian, and certainly don't invite them to a nurture group!
How do you respond to that statement, especially in the light of the description of the task of mature Christians under 'Bonding'?
- 5 What are the advantages of using small groups for nurture?
- 6 Why is giving attention to the relational dimension of a nurture group so important?
- 7 Have someone prepare and present the Talk for Beginners. Discuss the content and presentation.
- 8 Take some of the themes suggested to be covered in a nurture group and list things you would include under each. Remember that it is only an introduction to the subject and needs to be kept simple.
- 9 How would you answer some of the questions that new Christians ask? Check your answers with Paul E Little's book.
- 10 What are the advantages of informal social gatherings for new Christians?

LEARNING TOGETHER

Try to learn what is pleasing to God.
(Ephesians: 5:10)

When a group studies the Christian faith and its relevance to life, the Holy Spirit can work renewal in mind and life. Study has always been seen as an integral part of Christian growth and fellowship. In calling people to follow him, Jesus said, 'Take my yoke upon you . . . learn from me'. He was known as a rabbi or teacher. Jesus challenged people to seek the truth and find their freedom in that enlightenment (John 8:31,32). To become a follower of Jesus Christ is to commit oneself to a passionate search for truth. The word 'disciple' means 'learner'.

Christ's great commission to his followers included: ' . . . teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you . . .' (Matthew 28:20). The New Testament church was committed to serious study: ' . . . they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching' (Acts 2:42). Paul exhorted Timothy: ' . . . what you have heard from me . . . entrust to faithful men and women who will be able to teach others also' (2 Timothy 2:2).

In his letter to the disciples in Rome, Paul said, ' . . . be transformed by the renewal of your mind' (Romans 12:2). There is a direct relationship between the renewing of the mind and the transformation of the life. A disciplined study of the Christian faith and its relevance to the whole of life lies at the heart of vital Christian witness. Many small groups stagnate because their focus has been purely upon emotional response; they have viewed Christian experience as essentially feelings. High moments of joy, praise and a variety of feelings result from the Holy Spirit

being at work in the individual and the small group, but it is a fatal mistake to avoid serious intellectual pursuit. Indeed it is neglecting a God-given faculty which God obviously would not have given his creatures if it could not be a means through which we can draw closer to him.

In all our study we need to avoid the other extreme of becoming too intellectual. A group can suffer also from people batting ideas back and forth without digesting or assimilating them. It is easy to hide behind a mask in discussion and never let the truth being discussed seep down into one's life. Enlightenment of the mind should be linked with genuine piety. 'Be renewed in the spirit of your minds and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God . . .' (Ephesians 4:23,24).

Commitment to Christ and his cause is inevitably linked with our study in small groups. In all Christian education, development of knowledge and understanding should lead people to a new or deeper commitment to Christ. A personal response to Christ should have the central place — a commitment involving acceptance by faith of the free, yet costly, grace God offers to us in Jesus Christ, and a surrender of our whole being to his lordship. 'Conversion' experiences can be expected to take place in small groups where the word of God is encountered with open minds.

As the group studies with a genuine desire to discover the relevance of the gospel in our contemporary world, it will become aware of specific claims of Christ in particular situations. Every study should have an element of call to commitment to specific thought, feeling and action, accepting the risk and the danger which may be involved in the latter.



HAVE FUN!

Contrary to many people's past experiences, learning can be an enjoyable experience even when struggling with weighty spiritual matters. The Christian gospel is 'good news'. The essence of that gospel is 'joy and peace in believing' (Romans 15:13). Christian education should be a pleasurable experience. I cannot imagine the disciples being bored with Christ's teaching! God is the God of the unexpected. He is always surprising us! Learning of him and his will for us, under the guidance and inspiration of the Spirit, can be serendipity — experiences of unpredictable, happy surprises.

The learning methods dealt with in this chapter and the relational, inductive Bible study methods introduced elsewhere in this book will help captivate interest, include laughter (as well as possibly some tears), result in learning which will not be soon forgotten, and facilitate changed lives.

God gave us the capacity to smile and a sense of humour. Let us use these beautiful gifts and enjoy our learning together as we explore the best news ever to break upon this world!

EFFECTIVE LEARNING

In many small groups the traditional pattern of the church's teaching ministry has been followed, where learners have expected to be told by their leader the facts and what to think about them. However, learners are much more likely to adopt an idea they have discovered themselves than one that has been told them.

It is sometimes said that people remember ten per cent of what they hear, thirty to fifty per cent of what they see,



Diagram No. 20

seventy per cent of what they say, and ninety per cent of what they do. While this is an over-simplification and disregards some other important factors involved in remembering or learning (which is not the same thing), it does draw attention to the importance of participation in learning. People learn more by experiencing things for themselves than by being told about them.

The vast majority of people learn through the whole of their personalities, their senses, their relationships. The greater the sense of participation and involvement in a situation, the more the whole of one's faculties are exercised in that situation, the deeper the lesson being taught in the situation becomes embedded into life!

It takes longer to get facts across using discovery learning than it does by lecture, but discovery will be more effective. No one approach is always right and the lecture still has a place. However, people must be helped to develop skills in seeking out information for themselves, reflecting on their experiences, interpreting their findings, and applying them to their everyday lives.

Learning is not restricted to formal teaching situations. On the contrary, the greater part of learning probably occurs informally, through experience in all kinds of life situations.

Learning from experience takes place both consciously and unconsciously. A child learns many skills



without consciously being aware of the process taking place. However, here we are essentially concerned with the development possible when we take time out to think about and analyse our experiences. We could learn far more from our rich storehouse of experience. This learning will be made most efficient when we reflect

consciously and deliberately on what really happened in our present and past experiences. This will need to be climaxed with resolutions for future action, based on the insights gained.

When used in Scripture, the word 'know' means more than to know about someone or something. It means to have a personal experience of that person or thing. It involves knowing both intellectually and experientially. Christ's method of training the twelve was that of action followed by reflection. He combined both teaching them theory and involving them in doing, and he alternated this with practice. Many of their experiences were followed by time for reflection together. They learnt from experience, but deeper learning took place as Jesus helped them consciously to reflect on their experiences and try to discover what new insights there were for them in what took place. This is known as **learning by praxis**.

In our daily lives we do not generally have time to reflect upon experiences in the structured manner set out below, although learning will be present to some degree. However, in the structured situation in a small group, it will aid learning to study and follow this pattern.

To learn from experience, people need time firstly to look at what happened. They need to recognise specific aspects of the experience.

Who was involved and in what ways?

What were the circumstances?

What surrounded it in time?

What were the facts?

The process of recognising the facts of the experience needs to be followed by an analysis of it.

Why did it happen that way?

How did the people involved behave?

What was helpful and what was a hindrance?

What was the outcome of the experience?

How did the people involved feel about it?

Appropriate resources are then introduced into the process to deepen and broaden the learning. Christian groups will explore relevant Bible passages, using some of the various methods introduced in this book to discover the relevance of the Christian gospel to particular situations. A variety of other resources can also be involved at this stage.

The learning climaxes with a time of seeking to discover the relevance for the learners personally. This involves generalising, drawing together all that has been learnt and applying it to their life situations.

Here are some questions to help facilitate this:

What have I learnt which will help me when next I find myself in a similar situation?

What should I be prepared to do when next I face a similar event?

What specifically would be involved in applying this?

Am I really willing to work at applying these new insights to my own life situation?

Am I prepared to take the risk and make the effort to forsake my old patterns of behaviour and deliberately put new ones into practice?

The principal thesis of this kind of learning is that learning is only learning when it results in some new behaviour. That thesis is consistent with the gospel of Christ. Christianity was never meant to be purely intellectual. It is meant to result in changed lives (Matthew 7:24-27; James 1:22-25).

In *Learning Through Encounter*, Robert Arthur Dow² lists eight factors which are basically required to make this kind of learning happen in a small-group situation.

1. Maximum participation by the learner, who is a respected member of the group, not because of his/her knowledge, but because of the resources of his/her own experience which he/she brings to the group.
2. The individuality of each person is respected.
3. It applies the theories of human development, taking into account the expectations of the person at their particular stage of development.
4. It requires an understanding of the small-group process — how to interact, the roles people play,

- decision-making, and development of group cohesion.
5. Shared leadership is encouraged. The teacher is an acknowledged learner, too. Other members can then display leadership in areas where they can provide solutions to group problems.
 6. Flexibility and spontaneity are keys to learning, wherever they may lead.
 7. Experiential learning is 'personal goal' oriented. It depends on the learner's response.
 8. It always deals with living issues. Relevance is its main aim.

LEADERSHIP OF LEARNERS

In the learner-centred approaches to learning, the role of the leader/teacher is quite different from that of the traditional didactic up-front teacher-centred approach.

Leader-centred learning is characterised by:

emphasis upon facts;
what to learn;
teaching by telling.

In contrast, with learner-centred learning there is:

emphasis on individual discovery;
how to learn;
learning by doing.

In leader-centred learning, the role of the leader is that of

Instructor-Initiator

Selects topics and resources;
Verbal source of information;
Explainer;
Stimulator;
Critic of ideas and skills;
Motivator of all that happens;
Sees groups as a whole rather than as individuals;
Is usually the assigned leader.
This kind of leadership results in passive small groups.

In the learner-centred situation, the role of the leader is that of

Enabler-Facilitator

Topics and resources chosen by group to meet common needs;

Selects suitable learning method;
Involved with individuals;
Leader is a learner-participant;
A guide through the learning experience;
Provider of part of the resources for learning;
Available as a consultant;
Generally elected or 'emergent' leader.

This kind of leadership leads to active small groups. It should be pointed out, however, that the Instructor/Initiator role and the Enabler/Facilitator role are not mutually opposed or contrasting. A sensitive leader will perform both roles at certain times, with the emphasis, hopefully, more on the latter.

LEARNERS ARE PEOPLE

Know your group members

It is important to have more than a superficial understanding of who our group members really are. We should seek to know what people are thinking — the kinds of pressures they experience in their homes and their work situations, the books they are reading. We only gain this kind of knowledge as we observe them, talk with them, and take time to listen to them. There are no short cuts to getting to know people at this level. It takes sensitivity and a genuine interest in people, and time.

Knowing your group also involves having some understanding of the general characteristics of an age group. This is particularly important in leading the group in study. Younger teenagers learn in a different way from older teens and adults. Study methods, topics and resources will be different for these age groups. We know that people play different roles in groups. A good leader will seek to understand these roles and how to help people who hinder the group. A wise leader will also try to have some grasp of people's emotional or psychological needs and how they can be met through the group experience. This may seem a formidable array of skills, but a good leader will always be seeking to improve his/her effectiveness.

Recognise their limitations

Many people will come to a group with restricted knowledge of the Christian faith and limited experience. A leader must be sensitive to this if people are not going to be made to feel embarrassed. Some will not know their way around the Bible; many will not know in which order the books occur. So they will have sparse knowledge of its content. Others will have only a superficial Christian experience and may never have prayed in a group before. Group members often have reading problems. Others have problems in written expression and spelling. An alert leader will avoid the deep embarrassment which can occur when such people are asked to read or write in front of the group.

Build self-esteem

‘The feeling of self-esteem is important since it is the point of reference of all one’s behaviour. The value people place on themselves is determined by the extent to which they feel themselves to be accepted, participating members of a group.’³

Many experiences in life help to destroy our self-image. Christ came to set us free from the shackles a sinful world has put upon us. He came to develop the real person God intended us to be. If leaders are to help others actualise this, then they themselves must have come to grips with who they are, have accepted the forgiveness and renewal Christ offers, and be daily opening their lives to the power and love of the Holy Spirit. Leaders must be able to accept themselves, because God, in Christ, accepts them. Effective leaders will know their limitations and be aware of their ‘gifts’, potential and strengths. They will humbly but confidently seek to develop these and make them available to others. A leader will then be in a position to help others in a similar search.

Self-esteem influences all our behaviour. It is important to accept each individual as a person of worth, even when one does not agree with their ideas. ‘Persons are more important than information.’ What happens to the individual learner is the important thing.

Help people to change

The Christian gospel is the good news of the possibility of change (John 3:3; 2 Corinthians 5:17). Life can begin

again. In the Christian small group this complete about-face in thinking, goals and direction can take place through the Holy Spirit working through the leaders and each member. This complete turn around is one form of change. With some it may be a quickening of pace in moving towards our goal through new insights and motivation to see more clearly the way in which we have been going.

Change will fall into different categories — knowing, thinking, feeling (attitude), and doing (behaviour). Another way to see it is in terms of relationships — to God, to others, to ourselves, to our environment. All worthy change is the work of the Holy Spirit. Our techniques, study methods, understanding of people, and appropriate leadership may all help, but the spiritual growth is essentially God’s work. We sow the seed, others tend the garden, but God is the one who gives the harvest. A wise Christian small-group leader will be sensitively praying and expecting growth in faith and lifestyle in the group.

PREPARING THE STUDY

Prepare in advance

Hasty preparation does not produce the best results. However, when hurried preparation is forced upon us we can trust God to make up for our lack of adequate time. It is hoped that knowing more about how to prepare an effective study will make you want to spend the time needed to prepare adequately.



Involve others

The distinctly New Testament metaphor of the church is that of a body with all members functioning. Mutual ministry, the priesthood of all believers, and the development of the gifts of all members of the body is prominent in the New Testament (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4). Leaders should be player-coaches and not solo performers.

A Christian small group provides an ideal situation to discern, affirm, develop and use the variety of spiritual gifts of the members for mutual upbuilding. Therefore, when tasks are delegated, it is not primarily to decrease the load of the leader, but essentially to develop the individual ministry of each member.

Group members can be involved in the preparation of any study. It may be prepared by a number of people but presented by one. More than one member can present different facets of the study.

The majority will need help in fulfilling assignments. Each needs to understand what is expected of them and to know that assistance is readily available if and when they need it.

Some will fail. Help in reflection on their failure can lead to new learning and growth. Affirmation and encouragement will readily be available from a secure and sensitive leader.

Have a specific aim

A vague aim usually results in vague study. You cannot accomplish a goal if you do not know what it is. Many groups will follow prepared study materials which have clear aims for each lesson, but they will not necessarily adopt the aim as stated. Other groups will prepare their own studies based on the expressed needs of the group. Begin by writing down your specific session aim. An aim seeks to state what you want to happen and/or what you want the group to learn. Be concise and specific. Your aim will fit into one or more of three basic educational goals: knowledge — thinking; attitude — feeling; behaviour — doing.

Follow a plan

It will help to have an ordered study session. The outline will depend upon the resources and method which are chosen. If you are using prepared study material, a plan will be suggested. However, always be flexible with all prepared material and adapt both the material and the session outline to your particular group.

In the section of this chapter dealing with experience-centred learning, an outline of an inductive method was given.

Two patterns found helpful are:

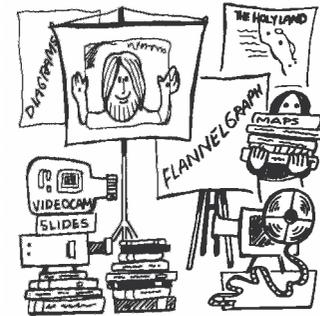
1. **Establish the 'life need'.** Discover the relevance of the Christian gospel to that need. Seek a life response in terms of behaviour, attitude and belief. Plan specific action and begin working on it.
2. **Study a passage of Scripture.** Discover the 'life-need' dealt with by it. Seek a response.

USE TEACHING AIDS

Teaching aids help implement learning. They introduce another level of sensory perception into the learning experience. They help hold attention and add interest. They visualise abstract concepts and increase retention of knowledge.

Audio and video aids

are numerous. Recordings of music or talks are available from Christian bookshops and libraries. Secular records provide rich resource material. Record your own copy of speeches and discussions from special radio or television programs or meetings. News broadcasts contain up-to-date material for discussion.



Visual aids which can be used include: pictures, maps, charts, drawings and posters. A Snoopy wall poster shows Snoopy embracing Charlie Brown. The caption reads: 'Dogs accept people for what they are'. There is a good discussion starter!

Printed aids, such as books and pamphlets, make good resources to draw upon as group studies. Certain comic strips like 'Peanuts', 'Fred Bassett', 'Dear Abbey', 'Hagar' and many others have some insightful comments on life. News of people and the world, and editorials in daily newspapers, can be helpful aids to the group.

Projected aids include overhead projector transparencies, which are easy to make yourself. Some pre-printed sets are available commercially. A segment of a movie or a single slide can be shown to illuminate a point for discussion.

WHAT TO STUDY

Deciding what to study is a major decision for every study group. The needs and interests of the group should guide us here. The first consideration should be: 'What are the members interested in studying?' Too often we find well-meaning leaders informing their group of the study program to be undertaken.

When the group concerns have been identified, a number of alternative resources could be proposed.

There ought to be some comprehensive plan or overall design that seeks to give a balance to the study. Interests ought to be balanced by needs of the group.

When resources are being considered, it needs to be remembered that most leaders are busy and need handbooks and other resource material that will require the least amount of preparation. If leaders are unaccustomed to leading or expressing themselves about spiritual truths, then resources for leaders are crucial.

While much of the resource material available is helpful, all too often it can be either too lengthy, too intellectual, or not sufficiently related to everyday living. Therefore, all resource material should be carefully scrutinised and, if possible, a period of experimental use allowed, with due regard to the spiritual and intellectual development of the participants.

I asked some group leaders to list what they considered **the basic requirements of a successful study**. Here are some of the suggestions made:

A study needs to answer a human problem and point to a better way of living.

It needs to be kept simple.

It needs to clearly set out the aim, especially for the guidance of the leader.

It must give opportunity for group discussion and provide questions that promote discussion.

The questions for discussion need to help the group relate the principles outlined in the study with their own needs and circumstances.

It should be based on the Bible. One comment was, 'We don't want another sermon with someone's ideas. We want to know what the Bible says.'

It must have an outlet in the actual everyday life of the group.

There is little value in studying about Noah if this is not connected in some way to everyday living.

A study plan needs to be long enough to give approximately three-quarters of an hour to an hour for study, but not too long so that it has to be skipped through hurriedly, thus missing various important points.

The study needs to deal with a topic which grips the imagination of the group and holds their interest.

When the Christian church, in the power of the Spirit, has evangelised and faithfully cared for new Christians, teaching has played a vital role. In small groups, people are rediscovering the renewal of mind and life as they confront the Scriptures with openness and a will to please God. They are using methods which not only result in more effective learning, but facilitate many pleasurable experiences and surprises as they grow in Christ and reach out in witness and service to others.

References

- (1) Douglas S Hubery, *Teaching the Christian Faith Today* (Joint Board of Christian Education, 1965).
- (2) Robert A Dow, *Learning through Encounter* (Judson Press, 1971). Used by permission of Judson Press.
- (3) O A Oeser, *Teacher, Pupil and Task* (Tavistock Publications 1955), p 34.

STUDY GUIDE

- 1 What have been some of your most enjoyable learning experiences?
What do you remember about the leader:
— their personality, attitude, Christian experience, etc?
— the way they planned the learning?
What can you learn from this reflection to make the learning in your group more enjoyable and effective?
- 2 ‘To become a follower of Jesus Christ is to commit oneself to a passionate search for truth.’
Discuss this in the light of the quote from Romans 12:2 and the example of the early church (Acts 2:42 — look up the meaning of ‘devoted’).
- 3 What are the disadvantages of either a mainly emotional or an intellectual emphasis in our group meetings?
- 4 In Christian education, development of knowledge and understanding should lead people to a new or deeper commitment to Christ. Discuss.
- 5 Diagram 20 emphasises the need for greater participation in a learning situation.
In what ways could you have improved the aspects of ‘seeing’ and ‘doing’ in a recent group experience?
Try to recall a small-group learning experience which would have been enhanced by using a ‘praxis’ approach.
- 6 Underline the main points in ‘Learners are People’ and discuss those things that are essential to guide us in leading a group.

STUDYING THE BIBLE TOGETHER

Let not thy word, O Lord, become a judgment upon us that we hear it and do it not, that we know it and love it not; that we believe it and obey it not; O thou, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit livest and reignest, world without end. Amen. — Attributed to Thomas à Kempis

Many reasons have been given why the Bible should receive serious attention. William Barclay, in his book *Introducing the Bible*, sets forth a number of convincing reasons. He commences by drawing attention to the first chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith, where it states that the books of the Bible ‘ . . . are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life’. It continues, ‘ . . . the whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture; unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men’. That is a tremendous position given to the Bible in the Christian community. It means that *‘the church accepts this ancient book as having final and binding authority’*.¹

Barclay then goes on to explore why the Bible is so special. He claims we get close to the reason for its uniqueness by reflecting on its effectiveness, and he quotes a few examples of lives which have been dramatically transformed by reading it. Barclay says *the*

Bible is still relevant and powerful because it is about people and about personal relationships. This means it is always relevant because people essentially do not change from one generation to another.

The last and supreme reason he gives as to why the Bible is unique and for ever indispensable is that: *‘The Bible is the one place where we find Jesus Christ*. The Bible is literally the only source book for the life and the words and the teaching of Jesus. Take the Bible away and we would be left with fugitive memories and subjective opinions. And this is inextricably linked with the last point we made. It is only in and through Jesus Christ that our relationship with our fellow human beings is the relationship of love, and that our relationship with God is possible at all. In it alone we are confronted with the portrait of the one person in heaven in whom these relationships become what they ought to be.’²

AVOIDING COMMON PITFALLS

The purely intellectual approach

A danger which should be avoided in small-group Bible study is that of taking a purely intellectual approach. The danger here is to merely view the passage as containing a set of doctrines or propositions, and not see it as mediating God’s word that addresses our feelings and behaviour as well as our minds.

Associated with this pitfall is the problem of not seeing the passage related to the life of the community for whom



it was originally written, and also related to our experience and life in today's world. God's word is concerned with living. Scripture never fulfils its prime purpose if it is studied in an abstract, intellectual fashion that is little more than a philosophical discussion of correct doctrine.

Bible study must be speaking to the pains and joys we experience as human beings and as Christians as we live out Christ's gospel in our age.

The nature and mission of the Bible is transformational. Our responsibility is not merely to believe it, we are to live it. Our concern in studying the Bible is with its 'experiential impact'. 'Unfortunately, most of us have been trained to think of and to read Scripture in terms of "truth to be understood" rather than "reality to live"'. One problem most small groups in the church will face is tied directly to this. How can the study of the Bible be meaningful in our group? For this many of us will have to re-learn our approach to Scripture.³

Professor Ross Snyder, previously of Chicago Theological Seminary, has made a very significant contribution to this whole area of helping people discover the experiential relevance of the Bible. His 'Depth and Encounter' Bible study method has brought a new dynamic in many groups to which I have introduced it. I consider it to be one of the most effective and thorough of all the many Bible study methods I have used. It can lead to new levels of communication and sensitivity in interpersonal relationships within small groups. I have seen many receive a compelling word of God through this study method and come alive spiritually or move out into new experiences of freedom and spiritual power. The method with some minor additions is described in chapter 12.

Professor Snyder writes:

The truth of the Bible needs to get into the places where people are living. When we find an important passage we should stay with it long enough to really grasp it — its core message, its feeling about life, what it can do to our own daily experiences. Too often we never stop to study precisely any particular verse, never dig and sweat

intellectually or existentially; seldom become involved personally in the message of a particular passage of Scripture and, therefore, never really possess any verse. In group discussion we tend to make pious comments, knowing full well no-one intends to take them seriously.

By approaching the Bible existentially we mean the involvement of the individual in the message of a particular passage of Scripture. You ask 'What does this passage of Scripture say to me, for my life, right now?' Instead of asking, 'Why is there suffering?' you ask, 'How do I react to suffering?' It's important to understand this point if Bible study is to be more than a mental exercise.⁴

Shared ignorance

The opposite extreme to the purely intellectual approach to Bible study is the danger of simply sharing ignorance. If Bible study is merely subjective we fail to move beyond the feelings, attitudes and opinions of the group. While the subjective dimension is necessary, effective Bible study also demands that we come to grips with the findings of reliable scholars and teachers and understand the Bible passage in its historical and theological setting. We can overcome the dual dangers of an imbalanced subjectivity and sharing of ignorance in a number of ways, such as:



- (i) using a resource person to provide necessary historical, linguistic and theological background information (eg your minister, a Bible teacher or a well-read lay person);
- (ii) providing printed resources for the group to use (eg commentaries, Bible dictionaries, guided Bible studies with explanatory notes);
- (iii) having one or more members of the group research beforehand possible areas requiring specialist feed-in, discover the necessary information, and introduce it to the group at the appropriate time;
- (iv) recording during the meeting matters requiring specialist information and at the end of the session inviting members to research the various areas and share their findings at the next meeting.

By using a variety of these means, learning can be stimulated. In the main, use group research to discover needed information. Occasionally a specialist can be used to discuss problem areas and so reinforce or clarify the discoveries the group has made.

A person does not have to be a scholar to read and study the Bible with understanding. But anyone who desires to take the Bible seriously will also need to take advantage of what others have learnt. The findings of scholars can open the treasures of the Bible to those of us who do not have the technical training and commitment to do our own hard research. Do not fall into the trap of thinking that the findings of scholars are not important. Seek to use the fruits of scholarship without being burdened with the jargon and the methods of technical scholarship.

Ideally all group leaders should do some serious systematic study of the Bible to better equip them to lead the study of the Bible effectively. Courses for the laity in Bible background, an overview of the Bible and hermeneutics (how to interpret the Bible) are readily available through lay training centres, Bible colleges and theological colleges. There are also numerous correspondence courses. However, seek the advice of your pastor or a mature Christian leader, as not all will suit your background and some are lacking in balance, depth and reliable scholarship. Every leader needs the kit listed later in this chapter, and where it is not possible to undertake the above study, the study of these books will help.

There are a number of well-prepared courses which a local church could conduct. Leaders and as many members of the small groups as are able should be encouraged to be involved. The learning will lift the level of Bible study in the groups.

The Kerygma Bible Study in-depth course takes a thematic approach, tracing through the great biblical themes of Salvation, God's Faithfulness, Kingdom of God, Righteousness, Wisdom, Worship, Hope, etc. It is designed to be used in small groups with a skilled leader. There is built into it a relational dimension to prevent it being purely academic. The resources are readily available from The Joint Board of Christian Education, PO Box 1245, Collingwood, Vic 3066.

The Bethel Bible Study Series, prepared by the Adult Christian Education Foundation (Madison, Wisconsin, USA), is also available in Australia (Adult Christian Education Foundation, 67 Lawford Street, Chullora, NSW, 2196) and other countries. It takes a narrative approach, giving an overview of each of the books of the Bible. Leaders of the course are required to undertake special training.

The new 'Mastering the Basics' course produced by Serendipity USA (available in Australia, Serendipity Christian Resources, GPO Box 1944, Adelaide, SA 5001) is designed for use in small groups with leaders who are prepared to do some serious preparation. It covers a book of the Bible in 6-14 weeks and provides in-depth scholarly resources while retaining a relational dimension.

Superficial treatment

Superficial treatment of the passage is another potential problem. This danger is particularly acute if the group does not realise the importance of serious Bible study, is uncommitted to their task and to one another, or fails to use a commentary or other specialist help. The problem



can also arise if you try to cover too much material in one session. It is usually best to limit the group to a passage with a reasonably self-contained unit of thought. The natural paragraph divisions in the NRSV are generally a useful, quick guide. However, the leader will need to exercise his/her own discretion. Reference to one or two commentaries will also give guidance regarding the optimum number of verses to cover in one session.

There is a great deal to be gained in occasionally staying with only one verse to dig deeply into its meaning and explore what it is saying to each person's situation. Snyder's 'Depth and Encounter' method is helpful here.

Failure to get an overview

Small groups have not always provided a good model of biblical studies. Generally Bible study has been too piecemeal. There is a need for a good overview of the



Bible, to study it as a complete unit rather than in the fragmented way it has been studied. This is a large undertaking and obviously a verse by verse study cannot be undertaken within the group. The speed with which the study moves will vary from book to book but it is important to avoid getting

bogged down or, on the other hand, not capturing the main message of a particular book. Generally the group members contract to read a certain number of chapters, or a whole book, in between meetings. Some will want to do their own reading of commentaries on the weekly segments.

Innovative ways have been developed to help people get a broad panorama of the Bible. Some of these are not suitable for use in small groups and are studied individually or in larger gatherings. However, others, such as 'Mastering the Basics' and 'Kerygma', are specifically designed for a small-group setting. (See earlier reference to these resources.)

Neglecting the immediate context

One further common pitfall is failure to study the passage in its immediate context. Also if the standpoint of God's full revelation in Jesus Christ is not considered, 'sub-Christian' interpretation can result. A number of parts of the Old Testament, for example, do not align with the teachings of Christ (eg the 'eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' law). While such passages must be seen in their original historical setting, we must look beyond them to God's fuller revelation of himself and his will which we find in the New Testament. Also, difficult or ambiguous passages in the New Testament must be interpreted in the light of what is clearly shown elsewhere in the Bible as God's will as revealed through Christ in his earthly life or through his Spirit.



Not lead to action

Bible study in small groups has received just criticism because it has not always resulted in action.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act — they will be blessed in their doing. (James 1:22–25 NRSV)

In Bible study we should seek to sense, and then go and do, God's will. It carries with it a commitment to do God's will as he leads. We need the 'freedom to be responsible'. Freedom is found in obedience. The purpose of the Bible is to transform human lives and situations.



Group members need encouragement to seek the relevance of the Scriptures for specific situations in each of their lives and also for it to become a reality for them. When a person says, 'This is what I believe. I must act now in obedience to God's word to me', the group can provide motivational support by praying in the group and covenanting to uphold the person in prayer between group meetings. A pastoral call in person or by telephone, offering help and assuring them of continuing support, can further facilitate their actions.

Accountability is being rediscovered by many as a further motivation for action. Opportunities for reporting progress, or otherwise, can have positive effects provided unreal guilt is not generated due to a legalistic stance by the group. While accountability implies legitimate expectations of those wanting to take their discipleship seriously, it must always be within the context of grace.

STEPS TO EFFECTIVE IN-DEPTH BIBLE STUDY

These steps can be used for small-group or personal Bible study. When used in a small group, members individually

work on steps 1 to 6 prior to the meeting and then share their findings together. The group can then take the roles set out in steps 7 and 8.

A leader of a group will also find this helpful in preparing his/her role as a resource person.

1. **Personal preparation** (Get right with God.)
Be open to what the Holy Spirit has to reveal. Be ready to obey.
2. **Research** (What does the passage actually say?)
Make patient inquiry into the text.
Read and re-read in a variety of versions.
Gather information on people, places and situations mentioned.
Note references to time and sequence.
Seek out the meaning of the main words and phrases.
Ask questions of the passage, beginning with 'How . . .?' 'Why . . .?' and 'What . . .?'
Re-write the passage in your own words — as you would say it.
Keep it simple and brief.
3. **Interpretation** (What does it mean?)
What was the original intention of this passage? What gave rise to it being written?
Compare it with other passages of Scripture.
Look up cross-references. Let Scripture interpret Scripture.
Refer to a commentary (only after you have done all this work).
4. **Application** (What could it mean for me?)
Think of the ways in which you would be different if you took this seriously.
If you put this into practice, to what persons and situations would you have a different approach? In what ways?

Rev Dr Terry Fullam uses a simple acrostic 'SPACESTEP' to help in applying Scripture to our lives:

- S – Is there a **sin** to confess?
- P – Is there a **promise** to receive?

- A – Is there an **attitude** to cultivate or avoid?
- C – Is there a **command** to obey?
- E – Is there an **example** to follow or avoid?
- S – Is there **something** for which to give thanks?
- T – Is there a **truth** to believe?
- E – Is there an **error** to reject?
- P – Learn to **pray** the passage.
[Used with permission.]

5. **Action planning** (What will I plan to do?)
From step 4, select one or two things which you could begin working on immediately. Think of the steps you will need to take. Make a plan of action.
6. **Timing** (When will I begin?)
Set some realistic deadlines for some of the main steps in your plan.
7. **Support** (With whom will I share my intent?)
List the names of one or two Christian friends with whom you will share your plans and seek their support, especially in prayer. (Your small group may be the ones you choose to support you in this.)
8. **Accountability** (When will I report progress?)
Set a time with your friend/s in step 7 for talking over your progress, or otherwise, in working through your plan.

AN INTEGRATED PARISH PLAN FOR BIBLE STUDY

In many churches around the world, the Bible study in small groups has been integrated into the total life of the congregation.

Many years ago I observed this model in the East Harlem Protestant parish in New York and adapted it for my own parishes. The original model, as I remember it, followed the plan set down here.

A well-presented booklet prepared by the parish set out their own lectionary for the year, following a theme for each week and incorporating original artwork related to these themes. Every member received a copy and was encouraged to follow these readings in their own devotions.

Ensure that the commentaries you choose include both the theological and historical dimension, together with a general introductory section to the book concerned. There are quite a number of commentaries available, reflecting differing theological standpoints. It will be up to the leader to select what he/she considers to be suitable. Some popular commentaries in addition to those mentioned in the previous paragraph are: *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, *New Bible Commentary* (IVP), *Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Abingdon), *One Volume Bible Commentary* by William Neil, and the new *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (Nelson), edited by H H Rowley and Matthew Black (contributors include F F Bruce).

Bible dictionaries

Bible dictionaries give a background to the different customs, place names, characters and theological words that appear in Scripture, arranged in alphabetical order. They are ideal for quick, ready reference. Popular one-volume dictionaries are: *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (Harper & Row); *New Bible Dictionary* (IVP); *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible* (T & T Clark); *Interpreters One Volume Dictionary of the Bible* (Abingdon); and *Dictionary of the New Testament* (Colin Brown, editor — Zondervan).

Concordances

These help locate specific verses or names in the Bible. There are a number of small abridged concordances on the market, but pay the extra for one of the following: *Nelson's Complete Concordance of the Revised Standard Version*; *Cruden's Complete Concordance of the Bible* (Authorised Version); *Morrison's Analytical Concordance of the New Testament* (RSV), Westminster Press; *NIV Complete Concordance* (Hodder & Stoughton); *N.A.S.B. Handy Concordance*.

Bible background books

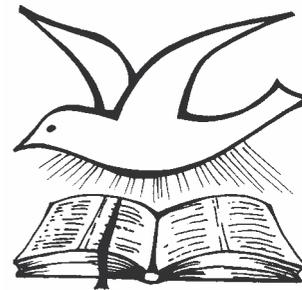
Choose from this selection: *The Bible with Understanding*, G Dicker (Joint Board of Christian Education, Melbourne); *Introduction to the Bible*, John H Hayes (Westminster); *How to Read the Old Testament*, E Carpenter (SCM Press); *How to Read the New Testament*, E Carpenter (SCM Press); *New Testament Foundations — A Guide for*

Christian Students (2 vols) Ralph Martin (Eerdmans); *A Theology of the New Testament*, G E Ladd (Eerdmans); *The Lion Handbook of the Bible* (Lion Publishing); *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*, Fee & Stuart (Zondervan/S.U.); *Understanding the Bible*, John Stott (S.U.); *User's Guide to the Bible*, Wright (Lion).

Other resources

There are other resources to include in your kit. A **concise dictionary** of the English language will help words come alive; a **Bible atlas**, and a **theological word book** such as *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* by Alan Richardson (SCM).

BIBLE STUDY AND THE HOLY SPIRIT



We began this chapter by referring to the Westminster Confession. After declaring that the Bible contains all that is necessary for salvation, the Confession goes on: 'Yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts.' It further states: 'We acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the word'. We need the Spirit to enable us to fully understand the meaning of the word of God. Through the Holy Spirit God gives us the grace to be willing and able to put into action his revealed intention for us. In other words, study of God's word and prayer must go hand in hand.

Barclay wisely exhorts us:

We do well to approach the Bible with George Adam Smith's great prayer on our lips:

'Almighty and most merciful God, who has given the Bible to be the revelation of thy great love to man, and of thy power and will to save him; grant that our study of it may not be made in vain by any callousness or carelessness of our hearts but that by it we may be confirmed in penitence,

lifted to hope, made strong for service, and filled with the true knowledge of thee and of thy Son Jesus Christ: this we ask for thy love's sake. Amen.⁵

References

- (1) William F Barclay, *Introducing the Bible* (The Bible Reading Fellowship, 1972).
- (2) *ibid*
- (3) Taken from *A New Face for the Church* by Lawrence O Richards, p 178. Copyright 1970 by Zondervan Publishing House. Used by permission.
- (4) Ross Snyder, from a pamphlet describing his 'Depth and Encounter Bible Study Method'.
- (5) William F Barclay, *Introducing the Bible* (The Bible Reading Fellowship, 1972).

STUDY GUIDE

- 1 List and discuss the reasons given why the Bible should receive serious attention.
2. The purpose of Scripture is to transform, not merely to inform.
Refer to the quote from Thomas à Kempis, the sections 'The Purely Intellectual Approach' and 'Not Lead to Action', and James 1:22-25 in thinking together about anchoring the Scriptures into our real life situations.
- 3 'Accountability must always be within the context of grace.'
What do you understand by this?
- 4 Shared ignorance is a common problem in studying the Bible together.
What suggestions are made for avoiding this? Can you think of others?
- 5 What are the disadvantages of studying a verse or a longer passage of Scripture out of its context?
- 6 Discuss the section on the role of the Holy Spirit.
Refer to these Scripture passages:
John 14:15-17,25,26; 15:26,27; 16:13-15. (Someone may need to look up these verses in a commentary to discover what they really mean, so that the group won't be discussing them in ignorance.)

CREATIVE WAYS TO STUDY THE BIBLE TOGETHER

In this chapter you will be introduced to Bible study methods — some old and well proven, some new, from overseas or written locally, and offering great promise. Where we have been aware of the source, it has been acknowledged and, where possible, permission gained to reproduce it. However, many of these methods have come to us in a photocopied form with no acknowledgment. We regret we have not been able to trace and recognise their origin.

In most groups it is advisable to start with a method suitable to a newly formed group, for example, the ‘Swedish Symbol Method’ or ‘Silent Sharing Method’. After one or two sessions the group can move to a deeper method of Bible study.

Most of these methods require a degree of honest sharing. If groups are content to operate behind their ‘masks’, this lack of openness will result in a superficial application to life. Honesty will not come automatically and often there are barriers of in-built resistance and years of lack of openness to be overcome. Sensitivity and patience will be needed. Where the leader is secure enough to model this openness, the group will find it easier to open up with each other and struggle together to put into practice God’s intentions for their lives, revealed through the Scriptures.

Do not over-use any one method. Vary your method, as this helps to hold interest and broadens the learning experience.

For variation and greater depth, combine some appropriate aspects of different methods.

Finally, be open to the Holy Spirit! Bible study can be a vital and lively asset for the Holy Spirit, changing people for the better in a way that will honour God and influence others with whom they live and work.

INDEX — BIBLE STUDY METHODS

Below is a list of the methods included in this chapter, to help you quickly locate them:

	Page
1. Depth and Encounter Bible Study	124
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3. Head — Heart — and Hand	127
4. Human Need and Christian Action	128
5. Human Transformation Method	128
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1. DEPTH AND ENCOUNTER BIBLE STUDY

This method was developed by Professor Ross Snyder, at Chicago Theological Seminary, and is used with permission. It is for those who are serious about growing in their discipleship.

A focus is made on only one verse. Each stays with it long enough to really grasp its core message and what this can do to his/her journey through life. Too often we never stop to study precisely any particular verse, never sweat over it intellectually, or actually become involved in the message. This method seeks to lift the group out of abstract debate and get each person struggling with the meaning and the application of the Scriptures to his/her life situation.

It involves active listening to each other's work on the passage without superimposing our own thoughts. The aim in the initial stages is to help each develop his/her own thoughts by at least one or two persons in the group stating what was communicated to them. The person being received is then given opportunity to add to or correct what the others understood from what he/she said.

Only after all have shared their individual work, and been encouraged to do further thinking, does the group get into general discussion.

The method also avoids the common problem in relational Bible study of sharing of ignorance. A specialist is brought to the group to give some sound exegesis of the passage after the group has struggled with the passage.

The value of this method of Bible study lies in the distinctive way we carry on the discussion. Note that the method of sharing is different from the usual methods of group discussion where everyone jumps right in with his/her ideas. With this approach we are meeting one another where each of us lives. Our purpose is to help each one of us become clearer in our grasp of Christian truth. We are after development, not debate.

If members of the group plunge in immediately with, 'This is the way I translated it . . .', the more vocal people will tend to dominate, the depths of each person may never be revealed, and the members of the group may not learn the difficult art of **creatively listening to another person**. Furthermore, we are not being trained in our own translating and contemplation of the Bible.

Here are the steps of this 'Depth and Encounter' method:

1. Individual work

Silent prayer

'Lord, help me to grasp the meaning of this passage and enable me to express it clearly and then take it seriously.'

Write out your own translation.

Pray as you think and write.

Try to use different words to those in the various translations as far as possible.

Endeavour to put in your own words each of the main words before you write out your translation.

Write it as *you* would say it. Imagine you are writing a letter to a friend.

Make it clear; keep it simple.

Ask yourself (Do some serious thinking)

* 'What would happen if *I* took this seriously?'

* 'To what persons and situations would *I* relate differently?' (Name them)

* 'In what ways would *I* act differently?' (Be specific)

* 'What else would *I* do differently?' (Write down one or two ideas that come to mind.)

To help in responding to the above questions refer to diagram 21 on the next page.

2. Work group (Divide into groups of 4 to 6)

NB These are not discussion groups, but opportunities to share, with more listening than speaking. All will aim to concentrate with loving sensitivity on what others are saying.

Each person in turn is given opportunity to share.

All give their own translation and thoughts, with explanations if needed.

One or two persons in the group may state what has been communicated to them. The person being received is then given the opportunity to add to or correct what others understand from what he or she has said.

The group helps each person develop his or her thinking and does not criticise or pass judgment. Questions to help another test his/her thinking may

be: 'How would you apply that to this situation?' or 'What would you say to this idea?' The aim is to help the person grow or develop an idea but still keep it his or hers. We are after development not debate.

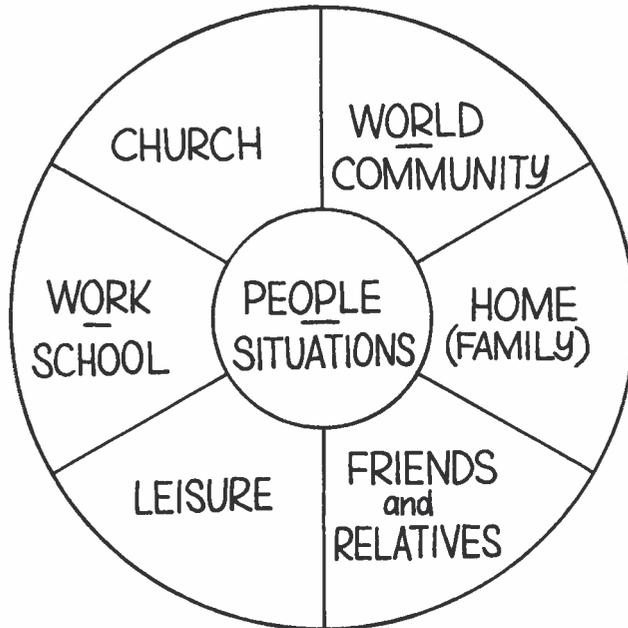


Diagram No. 21
For Helping Application of Learning to Life

3. General discussion

After each person in the group has been so received, a general discussion on whatever has been awakened in the group is profitable.

4. Bring into the group specialist resources

After your group has had a few sessions on a portion of the Bible, bring in a specialist in the Bible. Have this person explain the meanings of the key Greek or Hebrew words in the passages, and help the group grasp, somewhat dramatically, what this chapter meant to the people who first heard it.

Then ask the specialist to share what excitement the passage aroused in him or her (not give advice to other people on what they should do).

It is important to be clear how this differs from inviting a Bible expert to come in to lecture and then, after the person has told the group what to think, having the group discuss what the expert has said. In this approach the lecturer is expected to be open about how the passage addresses him or her personally.

In the absence of a special Bible teacher, consult a few commentaries. Dig the material out for yourself. Caution! Don't go to the reference until you have come at the Bible directly with your own life, and your group has behind them three or four solid sessions.

5. Further reflection and steps to action and growth

It is useful to follow the previous steps with further opportunity for each person to reflect in silence on their own work, in the light of the specialist feed-in, and make possible additions or amendments. This can also include a time for developing a simple plan to implement the challenges to action. Each individual makes a list of specific proposed actions in order of priority, with a noted deadline after each for commencing to do something about it. One or more of these can be shared with the group and prayed over. Groups which are serious about supporting each other in their growth will expect reports of progress or otherwise to future meetings.

Kinds of passages to study by this method

The suggestions given below indicate the type of passages which lend themselves well to this method of Bible study. On the whole, narrative passages are not so fruitful for translation. Only one verse, or one unit of verses which can be kept in mind at once, should be used. Never take a whole chapter; too many points would be glossed over.

In many instances, the passages given here would be broken up into smaller units for study. They deal with frequent problems and the offer of life which Christ makes.

Romans 8:1-19;
12:1,2

Ephesians 3:16-19
Hebrews 12:1-17

Philippians 1:27-30;
2:1-13,4:4-13
2 Timothy 2:1-5,
14,15
Matthew 5:3-16

James 1:1-4, [12,19-27]
1 John 1; 2:9-11
1 Peter 2:1-10;
3:13-17; 2:9,10
John 15:9-21, 26,27

2. EIGHT QUESTIONS

This method may be used individually or in small groups. Each person or group is given a sheet of paper, with their eight questions printed so that there are enough spaces left for writing in the answers. When all have finished, the summing-up can be a comparison of all the answers of the individuals or small groups. If time is short, the two most important questions are: 'What is the central meaning?' and 'What act of obedience follows?'

Preparation required

- (a) A copy of the questions for every person or each group. If working with one group, the questions may be placed on a chalk/blackboard, chart paper or overhead projector, and blank sheets of paper issued.
- (b) A chalkboard or substitute will be needed for summarising.

The eight questions

1. What are the scenes?
2. What are the difficult words (either because we do not understand them or they have been used so often they have lost their full meaning)?
3. What is the relation of this passage to the whole context in which it occurs?
4. Why is it in the Bible at all?
5. What is the central meaning? (Ask what the passage says about God and his attitude to us, about our attitude to him and about our attitude to each other.)
6. Can you illustrate this central truth from the life of the church today or in the past?
7. What is the meaning of this passage for our own group today?
8. What act of obedience follows from this, for the Christian community and for each of us individually?

Passages suitable for this method

The Parable of the Great Supper — Luke 14:15-24

The Raising of Lazarus — John 11:38-44
Jesus and the Accusing Pharisees — Matthew 15:1-20

3. HEAD — HEART — AND HAND

Preparation required

The group as a whole is divided into small groups so that all may have the opportunity to share. Each group needs a competent leader.

- (a) Provide paper and pencils and a Bible for each person.
- (b) Materials for reporting and recording findings from the group will be needed.

Enthusiasm to see this method through to its conclusion is also needed.

Group work

Each group works together through these steps:

1. **Head:** Here the facts about the passage are discovered, such as the meaning of the words; build-up of the story; context: for what, to whom, by whom it was written — what kind of people were they — what were their needs, etc. This may be done by the leader verse by verse, or by the group using one of the other methods. (Where a cluster of groups are working together in the same setting, a skilled person may present this method in a plenary session.) 
2. **Heart:** The passage is read silently and each individual tries to find the heart of the passage (central meaning) for himself or herself that day. (The 'Silent Sharing' method may be used.) 
3. **Hand:** This phase deals with action. The leader accepts reports from each member, summing up at the end to give an overall picture of what has been discovered. For a few minutes these findings are discussed to find which is the most important one for the group (although individuals may make their choices as well). 

Action often falls into three sections:

Some obvious group action for the group, church or community.

If there is a feeling that the group needs to know more, further study may be planned. (Make sure that this does not become an escape route.)

Individuals decide for themselves on the things which need to be changed in their lives.

Plenary: Where a number of groups are involved, opportunity should be given for reporting on any significant aspects of the experience, particularly the action planning segment.

Example of a passage suitable for this method

A changed life in a New Society — Colossians 3:1-17.

4. HUMAN NEED AND CHRISTIAN ACTION

This method will help groups to become more aware of the suffering of fellow humans and to explore the application of the gospel in practical ways of caring.

Step 1: The leader or member of the group presents an **actual situation of human need**. This may be in the form of suffering through a crisis, a neighbour's difficulties, a problem at work, a situation in the church or in the town/suburb. It is flexible but needs to be specific.

Step 2: The problem having been set before them, small groups of four or five **discuss the situation** with what Christian insight they have. To quote William Barclay, 'One needs to get inside the skin of another person to see what they see and experience what they feel'. This is what the members are asked to do: to study each person (not only the apparently 'wronged' person or the one suffering misfortune, but each one) in order to see the situation from every angle. After half an hour, the leader (or member leading) records the reports on a chart but makes no comment on them.

Step 3: The groups are now **given a Bible passage** which has been selected beforehand by the one leading, and chosen because of its relevance to the topic. Only now is the Bible used. Another half hour at least is needed for this. Now deal with these questions:

- (i) Having looked at the passage, is there anything there which prompts us to change the thoughts we had

earlier? Are there any guidelines which may help decide what action to take either as (a) individuals, (b) the group, (c) the church community?

- (ii) From what we have learnt in the Bible passage and the situation presented to us, what should we include in our prayers of (a) confession, (b) thanksgiving, (c) petition?

Step 4: Reassemble in the large group and **share findings**. Only now can the one leading the group make any contribution.

Step 5: Determine what action is to be taken. What is God calling us to do? What will be involved? Who will take the initiative? When will we begin?

Step 6: Close with a time of **group prayer** using the points which have come from step 3. The leader concludes this prayer segment.

5. HUMAN TRANSFORMATION METHOD

This Bible study is an adaptation of the procedure outlined by Dr Walter Wink in his book *The Bible in Human Transformation*. This method requires the leader to have some background in theology and biblical exegesis.

Preparation required

Before the study group meets, the leader prepares a thorough exegesis of the passage, used as his/her basis for a carefully thought out series of questions, to guide the group into a greater awareness of the historical and theological background and meaning of the passage.

Step 1 — Analysis

By means of the leader's prepared questions, the group analyse the account, working together on their own exegesis of it. The leader may need to provide some specific technical information, or guide the group when they seem bogged down or headed in the wrong direction. Questions may be asked also concerning the recording of the incident, for example: Does it appear in any other gospel? Do the accounts differ? Why? What is the meaning of certain words, traditions, etc?

Step 2 — Picturing the message

The aim is now to enter more deeply into the story. By

means of historical imagination, and using the critical analysis of step 1 as a check on sheer speculation, the passage is thought through again and members are asked to seek to relive the passage. In this step, questions (for example, concerning what the early church understood about the nature of God and his relationship with human beings, or who Jesus is, etc), may be raised as a direct result of information from this section. If questions from this step are factual, then the danger of premature self-reflection (which fails to allow the unexpected and 'offensive' elements in the text to confront the group) may be avoided.

Step 3 — Putting yourself in the picture

In this step the leader uses questions to help the members closely identify with the characters in the gospel story. The members are helped to use these ancient characters as mirrors of their own lives, which involves imagination, serious thinking, and honesty. The leader will need to set the pace by modelling this openness, application and involvement but will need to avoid manipulating people into going further than they are prepared to go in being open.

Transformation can take place during this phase. The members may hear the voice of God and feel the power of the Holy Spirit, in a way similar to those who experienced a transforming encounter with Christ in the original story.

Questions based on the story of Mark 3:1-6 could go like this:

What is your 'withered' or 'crippled' hand? In other words, what aspects of yourself do you identify in this character? (Allow a short pause for people to reflect and gather their thoughts.)

What is the 'Pharisee' in you?

Is there a 'sabbath' day in your life? Is there a special part of your life that you keep for yourself? Is there a part that you refuse entry to the work of the Spirit of God?

Why then does your 'Pharisee' not want your 'crippled hand' healed, or want God to work in your life?

How does Jesus fit into the picture?

How can Jesus relate to our 'Pharisees', 'sabbaths' and 'withered hands'?

(The session in our example ends in prayer, with the members reaching out to God for their various needs, and at the same time supporting one another in prayer. The conversational prayer method could be effectively used here.)

Step 4 — Creative expression

In this concluding segment each member is asked to creatively express some aspect(s) of the passage studied. This may be done using poetry, crayons, paints, or clay, in the members' free time between sessions, and brought to share with the group at the next meeting.

6. THE MEDITATIVE USE OF SCRIPTURE

(Based on a session led by Rev Gordon Cosby of the Church of the Savior, Washington, D.C.)

The meditative use of Scripture is one of the most significant ways in which the Christian is addressed by God. It is an art which needs to be developed. It is not study, nor is it merely reading — it is letting Christ address us.

This method requires sufficient time to do it unhurriedly. Some or all of the work could be done prior to the group meeting or a longer period allowed for the group meeting.

The method is **ideal for retreats**, where time is not a constraint. Sometimes I have allowed two hours for this in such a setting.

The whole purpose of this experience is to help us hear our destiny and to fulfil it. However, it is easy to develop devotional life apart from mission. The question which is ever before us in true meditation is, 'What is God's call on my life now?' That call will have certain characteristics:

There is a feeling of ultimateness, a feeling of being dealt with by God.

There will be a feeling of impossibility — a tendency to brush off as seeming ridiculous. On the other hand, do not miss it because it seems so simple.

There will be persistency — it will keep coming to you if you are continuing to be a growing person.

Change will take place within us as the Holy Spirit takes hold of this event. Growth takes place with this type of day-by-day encounter with the living Christ. What

transforms life, making it spiritually vital and dynamic, is the cumulative power of the word of God.

The whole of the individual work should be undertaken in complete silence. Silence may be a problem for some because they may be afraid of a dark disturbance, or that Christ may make real demands upon them which go beyond their present level of availability to him. These possibilities should be mentioned beforehand and encouragement given to trust God's love for us. Some may need further support, such as working in silence alongside the leader with the option to break silence if necessary.

Individual work (in silence). Up to an hour or more should be allowed.

(1) Preparing

Open the Bible at random. Select your own passage. Ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit as you read. Let him select the passage which you need most at the moment. Some of you will find it more helpful to begin in the gospels and read on until a passage captures your attention.

Select a brief passage. Sometimes it will only be a phrase because we want to encounter it at depth. A long passage will not permit this in the time we have available.

Pray. Ask that you may be personally addressed by God through this Scripture. Pray for the guidance of Scripture. Ask for courage to meditate upon it, for this is a dangerous business ('it is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God' — it may mean being told to go to Nineveh!). It will be tragic if we are disobedient and costly if we obey. Pray: 'Lord, I want you to get hold of me'.

Use the passage 'not as a model for morality but as a mirror for our identity' (Sanders).

(2) Picturing

Try to picture the original event — get into the event by bringing the past to bear upon it. Use your intellect and your imagination. It will help to write notes as you proceed.

(3) Pondering

Get into conversation with Christ. He is there within you and beside you. He is in you and you in him. Christ is talking to you now; listen, talk it over with him. Ask him questions about yourself, such as 'What are the implications of this passage for my life?' Write notes on your inner stirrings. The Scripture provides the approach for you to get in touch with the Christ who is alive and ever present with his people.

(4) Dialogue prayer

Hold a conversation with God. Express innermost feelings, not feelings you think you ought to feel. Do not pretend. Write out your prayer. Record what you say to God in response to his word to you through the passage you have meditated upon. Write what you imagine God to be saying in reply. When we are in a close relationship with a person, we can closely predict what their response might be. God has revealed his character to us in the Scriptures. We know sufficient about him to have some ideas concerning the replies we could expect from him. Let it flow back and forth until you feel the dialogue has finished. Keep what you say brief and precise. What you feel God is saying must be consistent with his nature and intentions revealed in Scripture, supremely through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Sharing

This can be done in small groups or in a plenary session. Not every member will be asked to share. Usually it is best to ask only those who received a compelling word from God — something they feel is a strong call to action. The dialogue prayer is not shared.

7. PRAYING THE SCRIPTURES

An ancient form of seeking to hear God speak to us through the Scriptures is attributed to Saint Benedict (c 480–c 543). The basic form has been adapted for use by small groups as set out below. Groups which have used this method over a period of time have found it extraordinarily rewarding. This guide is supplied by Tony Neylan.

Method

At the outset the leader describes the sequence below so that all are familiar with what to expect.

1. One person **reads aloud the Scripture text slowly and prayerfully**, pausing at the end of each sentence. All can follow in their Bibles or just listen.

This is followed by a period of silence during which all ask themselves, 'Has a particular word or phrase captured me?' That word or phrase is allowed to unhurriedly echo silently within.

The person who read the text now prayerfully speaks aloud the word or phrase which stood out for him/her. Allow a brief silence as the others drink in that word. Other members of the group say their word or phrase, pausing after each person speaks.

2. A second member of the group reads the text slowly and prayerfully.

Then there is a second period of silence. Each rests in the scene and stays with a particular word or phrase.

The second reader now speaks the word or phrase (the same word as previously, or a new word) which he or she found significant. Other members of the group say their word or phrase, pausing after each person speaks.

3. Let the group put away their texts and listen to a third slow and prayerful reading.

This is followed by a third period of silence.

The third reader speaks the word or phrase and follows it with a mini-prayer, making use of the word or the words in the phrase.

4. Remain for a little while in a prayerful silence. Then one person speaks of his or her experience of listening to and praying the above text. Was there something which spoke to them in a particular way? Did the text connect with some aspect of their life? Perhaps there was some sense of a silent and peaceful spirit, which cannot be put into words.

Continue around the group. One person speaks at a time, without comment from others and without discussion.

8. RELEVANCE TO CURRENT EVENTS

This Bible study is a good tonic for a group which is becoming too introspective and is having difficulty seeing further than themselves! The leader selects an appropriate Bible passage, which is discussed in small groups. (The Head-Heart-and Hand method would be appropriate here.)

Each group is then given a recent newspaper and they are asked to discover in the paper any news item upon which the passage throws light. These questions may be asked:

1. Why is the passage relevant to the news item?
2. Is there something I personally could do about it? Should I be more informed? Would it be costly to my own integrity? Is there a similar situation close at hand?
3. What is the group feeling about the news item(s)? Is there any action for the group to take?

Findings should be shared in a plenary session and, if possible, any suggested course of action should be recorded for the group to see each subsequent week, and plans made to set it in motion.

A fitting close would be to link arms, or join hands, in a circle, symbolising that all members are part of that decision and each has the support of the other. Each may share in prayer of commitment — either in several words or simply one word, 'yes'.

9. ROLE PLAYING THE BIBLE

(Adapted from Robert C Leslie's book, *Sharing Groups in the Church*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1971, pages 31-44)

The Bible is a document of timeless experiences about which everyone knows something in their own life. By talking about their personal experiences, each individual speaks as an expert about the life that they know best.

1. Introduction

Read the Scripture reference out loud using different voices for different characters where applicable as well as a narrator for continuity, and using modern translations freely.

Thus, even before the study begins, a number of the group members are involved actively in the procedure.

2. In small groups

Discuss the associations stirred up in your mind by the passage of Scripture. You are an expert on what associations come to your mind. Share these associations in as personal a way as you can with the study group. (If the group is more than twelve, divide into groups of about six.)

The leader can help set a contemporary note by sharing an association of present-day life and encourage personal associations by group members to the story.

Discuss the following question: ‘What do you think this story is really about in terms of relationships between people?’

As the small groups struggle with this question, they begin to sense the contemporary relevance of the Bible. Only at this point is biblical interpretation introduced. There obviously is a place for informed understanding about biblical research. The point is, however, that the Bible often gives examples of life experiences that are typical of any age so that specific contexts are less important than the central message.

Discuss your reaction to . . . Here the leader introduces an aspect of the story which might have been overlooked and, in so doing, may raise a major theological question. This can lead easily into the next issue.

3. Plenary

Discuss together in the large group with the leader what it means to . . . (here **the main theme of the story** can be discussed).

Robert Leslie gives **two examples** of the method:

The first, based upon the story of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 37:2-8,12,28, illustrates the first steps well. He then chooses Genesis 45:4 (‘God sent me before you to preserve life’). He follows this up by asking the large group to discuss ‘what it means to live a life directed by God’.

The second focuses upon the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-9. He begins by asking, ‘Have you ever been “up a tree” like Zacchaeus?’ Then, ‘When have you felt cut off?’

The plenary discussion follows naturally: ‘When you felt cut off, what helped?’

This discussion leads easily into a consideration of how Jesus went about reaching Zacchaeus and of the meaning of an invitation to have a meal at home.

He then suggests an additional item of discussion:

In the same group of six, discuss the meaning of Luke 19:9 (‘And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham”’).

After the small groups have talked together about the meaning of ‘salvation’, the leader can interpret salvation as a new kind of relatedness, a relationship that includes both the person-to-person (ie Zacchaeus restored to his Jewish community from which he had been alienated) and the person-to-God (wrong relationships made right) dimensions.

10. SILENT SHARING METHOD

This method is very simple and may be used with youth and adults. It is also a good means of introducing beginners to Bible study.

Preparation required

Every person needs a Bible.

Choose the passage carefully, according to the needs of the group.

Have a chalkboard or chartpaper on which findings can be recorded.

Method of approach

Give instructions to the group before indicating the passage they are to read.

Tell the group that, on their own, they are to look for **one verse** which:

either ‘**means most to me** in this particular passage’,
or ‘**sheds new light** on the Christian life’,
or ‘is God’s message for me at this moment’.

Inform them that this step is **done individually and in silence**.

Indicate that they will be asked to share their answers when they have finished reading.

Now give the Bible reference to be studied.

Leader should read also and should be prepared to

share first, giving the reasons why the verse was chosen.

Others in the group share also. Significant answers may be recorded on a chalkboard or chartpaper.

If some share the same verse, they may have different reasons for choosing it.

General discussion follows.

Conclude with each person praying in silence or audibly for the matters the person to their left shared.

Some suggested Scripture passages

Romans 12:9-21

Ephesians 4:1-16

Psalms 139:1-10

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

John 15:1-14

Colossians 3:12-17

11. SWEDISH SYMBOL SHARING METHOD

This is also a very effective method for a group not used to Bible study.

Preparation required

Find a suitable passage. This method is most suited to the teachings of Jesus (particularly parables) and sections of the epistles.

Ensure Bibles are available for each person.

Make copies of the worksheet. (You have permission to photocopy it for your group.)

If copying facilities are not available, draw the symbols, together with each explanation, on a chart or the like. Provide sheets of paper for each to draw their own worksheet. They can just draw the symbols (or use numbers) and refer to the chart for the explanations.

Have commentaries, a Bible dictionary and a concordance available for any questions which may arise.

The leader should study the text carefully in advance in order to be better prepared to answer any questions personally.

Have an aid available on which to record the possible summary at the end.

1. Read the passage

The passage chosen is read either aloud by the leader, using expression, or by the group as a whole so that they are all involved right from the beginning.

2. Individual work

Individual study of the text follows for ten minutes with the aid of the symbols below. An explanation of each symbol may be needed. The relevant verse numbers are written next to the appropriate symbols and a brief note made of the ways in which the symbol relates to the verses chosen.

WORKSHEET

SYMBOL	VERSE	COMMENTS
 This is Something I Never Realised Before		
 This Speaks to Me Personally		
 I Do Not Understand this Word, Phrase or Verse		

Diagram No. 22

3. Group work

The group comes together for all to share their work on one symbol before proceeding to the next. The leader usually shares first.

Notes can be made on a chalkboard or substitute of some of the main findings, particularly under the light and question mark symbols.

General discussion follows.

In anticipation of some questions not being able to be answered satisfactorily, have commentaries etc on hand for reference.

Questions still unanswered are noted and answers sought from a specialist prior to the next meeting.

Any person can share what they plan to do, and when, concerning the 'arrows' they noted. The leader should share first.

Prayer should follow for those who shared. Do this in a similar way to that suggested at the conclusion of the Silent Sharing Method.

Some suggested Scripture passages

Matthew 20:1-16; Luke 7:36-50; Ephesians 2:13-20.

Extension

This method can be extended by adding two more symbols:



I don't really understand this but I want to say yes. Something about it seems great!

I have questions or doubts about this, but it moves me. (This symbol is an Interrobang. It combines question and exclamation marks.)

This is not new, but it comes through to me now with greater emphasis and meaning.

12. CREATIVE EXPRESSION

Most of the Bible studies in this book have been limited to oral or written expression. For the more adventurous, creative expression of what each interprets the Bible to be saying can be a very 'freeing' and enriching experience.

We need also to remember that some people have difficulty in reading and expressing themselves verbally. The exploration of other ways of interpretation is an

encouragement to them as they feel their contribution is accepted, and they in turn feel themselves accepted as a worthwhile member of the group.

Another advantage of creative expression is that one has to think more deeply about a passage to express it in this way. This work may be done as 'homework' between meetings to allow for more thought, concentration and time.

However, some extremely good work can be done quite quickly. Some people are stimulated by being able to express themselves in a free, non-critical atmosphere.

Here are some ideas (let the Holy Spirit kindle your imagination!):

1. Make a montage or mural

Take a word, 'salvation' for example, and express its meaning by a montage (pictures and words cut from magazines and pasted on paper) or mural. This allows for a diversity of 'sub-headings' which together give a better picture of the totality of the word. Where this is done between meetings, members may like to discuss one another's contribution before beginning the study for the day, which may be on that topic or it may be an expression of what has been previously discussed.

Create a collage using scrap material — cloth, paper, foil, ribbons, laces, herbs, seeds, etc. The collage can be abstract and symbolic (expressing feelings, concepts) or realistic (depicting incidents) in style.

Created by a group on a large scale and combined with montage, painting or weaving, this can be used to decorate a room to create an atmosphere of worship, or express joy, etc.

2. Writing a poem, prose, short story, prayer or song

Alternatives need to be given if possible so that at least one method is always on any one member's level of achievement.

3. Drama

Try some spontaneous 'acting out' of a story; perhaps you could give it a modern setting or take one facet of an incident reported in the Bible. For example, if the group is discussing the healing of the blind man, take it in turns blindfolding one's partner and leading them around the

house. Discuss how it felt to be blind and what it felt like to see again.

4. Painting or drawing

Take a theme like 'I am the light of the world' (John 8:12) and illustrate, using paints, soft crayons, felt pens or charcoal.

5. Write a brief play or a musical drama

This may be done as a group effort or by two people working on it together.

6. Other ideas

These include making a mobile, clay modelling, abstract modelling from bits and pieces, and writing or finding a song that expresses the theme of a passage.

If working systematically through a book of the Bible, Creative Expression, together with a variety of other Bible study methods, will give a freshness of approach and a new vitality to the group. It is important to remember that we do not have to be artists to paint. What is wanted is the expression of each person's thoughts. To expect masterpieces destroys the whole purpose of freedom of expression.

Encouragement needs to be given to members to 'try'. Most will hesitate, especially the first few times, but it will not be long before many talents will be appearing which may have been either dormant or undiscovered.

STUDY GUIDE

- 1 What have been some of your best experiences in studying the Bible in small groups?
What can we learn from these about making Bible study more effective?
- 2 In the introduction to this chapter, there are given some things that are essential for these methods to have their best effect.
What are these and why are they essential?
What role does the leader play in facilitating these?
To what degree are these a characteristic of your group?
- 3 What is the value of using some of these methods to complement a study book?
How would you do this?
- 4 The previous chapter touched on the problem of shared ignorance.
Which of these methods seek to guard against this?
In what ways could reliable interpretation of a passage of Scripture be incorporated into those methods which seem to lack this?
- 5 We need to experience these different methods to appreciate their worth. Divide into threes with each triplet taking a different method and applying it to a suitable Scripture passage for 30-40 minutes. Then spend 5-10 minutes reflecting on its strengths and weaknesses. In a plenary, each group shares their experiences and reflections.
- 6 Read and discuss the section, 'The Purely Intellectual Approach', in chapter 11.
Then use the Depth and Encounter method, applying it to Philippians 4:6,7.

PRAYING TOGETHER

Intercession is the most promising way to meet our neighbours, and corporate prayer, offered in the name of Christ, the purest form of fellowship.¹

In small groups people are exploring the meaning and purpose of prayer. They are rediscovering the power released through prayer. God's promises are being taken seriously. Barren stereotyped procedures — which have straitjacketed much of our small-group prayer — are being discarded, and new and exciting skills in communicating with God are being developed. The power of the Holy Spirit, in his role as the divine enabler in prayer, is being experienced anew.

I keep receiving reports from many countries around the world of new small-group prayer movements among both Protestants and Catholics, some existing within the established church structures, others not. Sometimes it may be just two or three concerned people meeting spontaneously.

Many prayer cells meet across denominational barriers. There are many Catholic parishes across my own state where over fifty intercessory prayer cells meet weekly — some pray for me regularly.

The experience of the church is that there is no real progress in true Christianity without prayer. Periods of spiritual power in the church have been preceded by and sustained by great prayer. No limit can be put to its power. I find that many people really want to pray but do not know how. Most are very limited in their prayer experience. For many, the extent of their learning in prayer has been listening to public prayers, or the reciting by rote of prayers they learnt in their childhood. Often

people meeting in small groups for Bible study, sharing and prayer are aware that their prayer time is ingrown and lifeless.

In small groups we have an ideal situation to provide help for people in personal and corporate prayer.

I have set out in the next chapter a variety of methods to enable group prayer to become more dynamic.



WHY PRAY WITH OTHERS?

There are many reasons why we should pray with others. The three I suggest are: Jesus prayed with others; the early church practised it; we experience untold advantages in praying together.

Christ taught us to pray individually in isolation and he did so himself. But that was only one aspect of his prayer life. Even when he withdrew to a quiet place, this was not necessarily for solitary prayer. As he was praying alone the disciples were with him (Luke 9:18). Peter, James and John were with him on the high mountain (Luke 9:28) and accompanied him into the Garden of Gethsemane. To

record his prayer in Mark 14:33, they must have overheard it. The Lord also prayed habitually with the apostles. If we are to be his disciples, to 'learn' from him, we must pray alone and we must pray with others.

From the very beginning the apostolic church was a community at prayer. It was upon a company at prayer that the Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost (Acts 1:14). The first converts 'joined with the other believers in regular attendance at the apostles' teaching sessions and at the breaking of bread services and in prayer'. In the crisis of persecution, the assembled church spontaneously resorted to prayer (Acts 4:23-31). When Peter was imprisoned and threatened with execution, 'many were gathered for a prayer meeting' in the house of Mary, mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12). Barnabas and Paul were dedicated for their special task following a time of prayer and fasting by a small group of five church leaders in Antioch (Acts 13:1-3).

We experience advantages in praying together because Jesus said that the mind and will of God can come to us more clearly when we pray with others (even though he insisted that we find solitude and be alone with God).

If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them. (Matthew 18:19,20)

When we pray alone, it is difficult to sift our selfish desires from our real needs and our own will from God's intentions. So when we pray with others as a group, we have the advantage of testing our assessment of God's will against the group's insights.

From that same passage in Matthew, we deduce the greatest advantage of praying together — the promised presence of Christ in the midst of that fellowship. All through the ages when Christians have assembled for prayer with a common purpose and a deep sense of unity, they have been aware of the unseen Presence and have encountered the living Lord.

There is also a deeper joy in praying together, an added vitality, a plus difficult to define. It is rather like the difference between eating your meal alone and sharing in a party feast. Eating together is not the same as eating in solitude; the something more is the company, the fellowship. So it is with prayer.²

THE PERFECT PATTERN FOR PRAYER

In answer to his disciples' request, Jesus gave to them and to us what has become known as the Lord's Prayer. The pattern it sets out is very simple, but very comprehensive. It is at one and the same time a prayer to use by itself and a pattern for all prayer. Many small groups are finding an enriching experience as they study this prayer in depth.

Some, using a resource such as *The Plain Man Looks at The Lord's Prayer* by William Barclay, have taken a section at a time to expand their understanding of prayer. Others have benefited from paraphrasing the prayer individually or as a group. The pattern which the prayer follows has been studied by some groups, which then follow this outline for private and group prayer experiences over a period to give direction to their own prayer. Maxie Dunnam's *Workbook of Living Prayer* (Upper Room, Nashville) suggests two seven-day segments working through the Lord's Prayer, and then using the pattern as a base for further growth.

William Barclay says: 'The pattern of the Lord's Prayer must be the pattern of all prayer, for it begins by giving God his proper place, and it goes on to take life's past, present and future to God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.'³

Helmut Thielicke in *The Prayer that Spans the World* likens the Lord's Prayer to the rainbow colours of the spectrum. He says: 'The whole light of life is captured in this rainbow of seven petitions'.⁴ He gives another refreshing interpretation of this greatest of Christian prayer resources. Numerous other books are on the market to assist the group in plumbing the depth of this immortal prayer.

THE FORMS OF PRAYER

The study of the Lord's Prayer will open up the order in which Christians have found it helpful to pray. It may help to deal with them here and make some comments which are applicable to prayer in small groups.

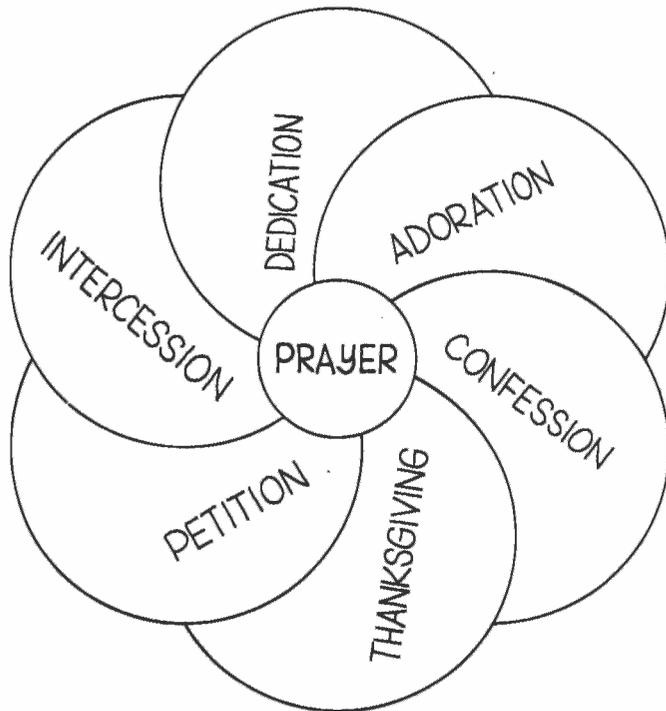


Diagram No. 23

Adoration is the rarest of all prayers. In this we do not even say thank you, we simply adore. We think of the greatness of God — how incredible that he should bother to hear us at all! Dwell on the person of God, his love and his holiness.

It often helps to view a scene from a mountain lookout. Stand on a cliff overlooking the sea, or concentrate upon a flower. A picture of these can be used as an aid.

An appropriate passage of Scripture from the Psalms, such as 111 and 121, Isaiah chapters 6 and 40, or others describing Christ, his nature and purpose such as Philippians 2:5-11 and Colossians 1:15-23, can be meditated upon, collectively or individually, leading to adoration.

It is unnatural for this prayer to be prayed in isolation from other forms. But it is a good discipline for spiritual uplift, even in a group, to use it sometimes.

Confession in group prayer is best undertaken in silence. Do not hurry this. Allow a time to recall past failures. Encourage the group to be specific. Bidding prayers can help: 'Think of a relationship with another that you may not have taken the initiative to heal', or 'Think of words you may have spoken which have not been suitable for the occasion', or 'What action spoilt your witness last week/yesterday?' Assure them of forgiveness as they have asked for forgiveness in the name of Jesus; quote a promise such as John 1:9. Encourage the group to accept by faith, apart from feelings, what God offers to them by his grace. In silence, or audibly, let them then praise him in general terms.

In our prayer workshops we have found it helpful to have participants write the sins they confess on a piece of paper. Then, as an act of faith, they draw a cross over what they have written and tear the slip into small pieces. A paper cup is passed around each group to receive the pieces. As it is passed around the person passing it says to the next person: 'As you have confessed your sins to God, in the name of Jesus you are forgiven'. On occasions, we have completed the time of confession and assurance of forgiveness by placing the contents of the paper cups in a large metal container and sending one person outside to burn them. The person has returned saying: 'The records of our sin are completely consumed in the fire of God's love in Christ. Praise be to God!' The groups reply, 'Praise be to God! His grace is sufficient for all our sins! Blessed be his holy name!'

The general confession (Psalm 51), particularly in a modern translation, is a useful form of group confession. To paraphrase 1 John 1:9 individually can help confirm the reality of God's love and forgiveness.

Thanksgiving is the natural step to follow an experience of the certainty of forgiveness, through God's grace in Jesus. Again help people to be specific. Bidding prayers can further help as people recall particular experiences of God's goodness. For example: 'Reflect on persons, situations, experiences you can be genuinely grateful for at home this week', or 'Can you recall a time when you have been specially loved or had the opportunity to show love since we last met?' or 'Can you remember the gratitude you felt as you lay down to rest after a hard day's work?' Health, friends, books, fun, work, life's challenges (and a thousand others!) are all topics for thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving should also include expectations of future fulfilment as an affirmation of our faith in God's ability to answer our prayers.

It will also go beyond ourselves to thanking God for the blessings others have received in the group, and beyond the group to our friends, and widening out to world situations.

Petition is the next step. W E Sangster says: 'Keep petition in a minor place. Nothing more reveals the juvenility of our prayers if we pray with persistence and passion only when we want something for ourselves.'

Again we should be specific. It is helpful to have each member write out a prayer of petition as a response to a meaningful Bible study segment. These can then be prayed silently or audibly around the group in turn. Each can be followed by members putting their hand on the persons next to them and praying: 'Lord, grant . . .'s prayer'. Some find it helpful to keep a confidential spiritual diary, in which they record prayer responses to significant learning experiences.

Intercession, or praying for others, is selfless prayer. In it we exercise one of the most sacred aspects of the ministry to which we are all called. This is our 'priestly' role. We become 'bridge-builders' between people in their need and God, the source of undeserved favour. A concerned person listens for expressed needs rather than inventing their own assessment of another's needs. Again prayers need to be specific. Avoid allowing the gathering of information about others for prayer to degenerate into gossip.

In a number of groups we have found it helpful to keep a group prayer journal. In a notebook we wrote on one page the date and items for prayer, keeping the opposite

page open to record future answers to these prayers. This not only prompts specific regular intercession, but engenders specific thanksgiving as answers to prayer are noted from one meeting to another.

In our networks of cells, a weekly list of parish and community needs was provided by our prayer convenor for distribution to each group. A copy was supplied to each group member, with space provided to add additional points. These were then added to in the various groups.

Dedication is an aspect which follows naturally after intercession. This is the 'Lord here am I, send me' response to human need or 'with eyes wide open to your mercy I present myself to you, Lord, as the least I can do. Use me as you will'. Sincere dedication can be an awesome thing (Acts 4:29-31).

SOME KEYS FOR PRAYER CELLS

Limit the size of your group. Six to eight is sufficient if all have a strong sense of call to pray.

Teach people how to pray. Include a 'Lord, teach us to pray' segment. Endeavour to learn something new about prayer each time you meet. You will not need to spend long. Study a Scripture passage, an extract from an appropriate book, or a hymn dealing with prayer.

Gather prayer points from your group for praise and special needs. List these on a chart, and on slips of paper for each member and have them written down in the group prayer journal. They should be prayed along with prayer requests from the parish prayer convenor.

Encourage short prayers.

One sentence or even one word prayers will be helpful for the less confident, and as a discipline in thought to the experienced. Introduce your group to Conversational Prayer.

Do not coerce people into praying verbally. Allow people to pray in silence,



each saying 'Amen' when they have finished. The whole group should be introduced to the value of times of silence for meditation, waiting, time to think, reflecting and responding to God personally.

Introduce variety into meetings. Group experiences should not be dull and uninteresting. Vary the meeting format. Introduce new prayer methods. Use a guest speaker, a recording, or visual aids in the 'how to pray' segment of your meeting. Arrange for an occasional combined meeting with another group.

Keep a balance in prayer. Do not over-emphasise intercession to the neglect of adoration (reading or singing a psalm could help), confession (usually in silence), or thanksgiving (spend much time here).

Pray positive prayers.

Negativity indicates doubt and lack of faith. Positive prayers believe 'mountains' can be moved by a God who 'specialises in things thought impossible'. And it only requires a small seed of faith for that to happen!



Make your groups Christ-centred.

Focus on the living word, the risen victorious Christ, ever present when his people gather. Worship, affirm and love him. In each meeting explore some relevant aspect, no matter how briefly, of the written word.

Be punctual. Start and finish on time.

Allocate your meeting time. A simple plan is to spend one-third of the time in learning about prayer, one-third for sharing and for introducing and receiving prayer requests, and one-third for prayer.

Pastor each other. Spend time getting to know each other and repeat this for new members. Care for each other in prayerful and practical ways. Follow up on absent members.

Seek to develop a vital group. Spend time getting to know each other and encourage honest, open sharing. Pray and work at becoming a fellowship of love where people feel accepted and significant.

Put legs under your prayers.

Make yourselves available to be part of the answer to your prayers. True intercessory prayer should lead to corporate and personal action in meeting the spiritual and practical needs

of others. Organise some informal groups just to make contact with others, possibly those being prayed for, to develop friendships. Building relationships with non-Christians is an important aspect of pre-evangelism. (See Contact Groups, chapter 2 and chapter 8.)

Develop Prayer Triplets. They can be sub-groups of a prayer cell or quite independent. (See chapter 1 and chapter 2.)



THE PLACE OF THE BIBLE IN PRAYER

The Bible has an important role to play in personal and corporate prayer. One person has said it comes alive as the word of God when read and responded to in the context of prayer. The Bible should be the heart of the corporate life of the group.

A small group which hopes to grow in its prayer life must have a good grasp of biblical teaching to make a firm base for their prayers. The purpose, potential and possibilities of the Christian's prayers are arrived at by studying God's revealed word on the matter. The many books on the subject only supplement this data.

The greatest contribution the Bible makes to prayer is that it reveals to us the true nature of the Divine Person to whom we offer our prayers. Even groups which have prayer as their main aim seldom, if ever, maintain real vitality without regular and frequent reference to and meditation upon the Bible.

The Bible is a treasure-house of written prayers from

the stories of some of the greatest persons in prayer the world shall ever know. Jesus, the patriarchs, the prophets, the psalmists and the apostles all have left us an eternal heritage of prayers prayed in real life situations. Here is a sample of some of these prayer resources the Bible provides:

Prayer for preservation and protection — Numbers 10:35,36

Prayer for a sick child — 2 Samuel 12

Prayer for understanding of affliction — 1 Samuel 21:1-12

Prayer in national danger — 2 Chronicles 14:11

Prayer as intercession — Job 42:7-10

Prayer for preservation here and hereafter — Psalm 16

Prayer for confession and a broken heart — Psalm 51

Prayer for peace — Isaiah 26

Prayer for the oppressed — Lamentations 5

Prayer as taught by Christ — Matthew 6:1-13

Prayer habits of Christ — Mark 1:35

The intercessory prayer of Jesus — John 17

THE ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN PRAYER

The Holy Spirit is God at work in us in the here and now. He is our life. Prayer comes alive not because we have correct understanding of the theology of prayer, nor because we have developed some special techniques or because of our regular disciplined application to its pursuit, but essentially because God is in it. The Holy Spirit is the key to vital prayer life, individually or corporately.



And in the same way — by our faith — the Holy Spirit helps us with our daily problems and in our praying. For we don't even know what we should pray for nor how to pray as we should; but the Holy Spirit prays for us with such feeling that it cannot be expressed in words. And the Father who knows all hearts knows, of course, what the Spirit is saying as he pleads for us in harmony with God's own will. (Romans 8:26,27)

There can be no activity of prayer with any significance if the Holy Spirit is not at its heart.

References

- (1) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (SCM Press).
- (2) Stephen Winward, *Teach Yourself to Pray* (Hodder & Stoughton) p 86.
- (3) William Barclay, *The Plain Man Looks at the Lord's Prayer* (Fontana/Collins, 1964) p 54.
- (4) Helmut Thielicke, *The Prayer that Spans the World* (Harper & Row, 1945) p 29.
- (5) W E Sangster, *Teach Us to Pray* (Epworth Press, 1966) p 22.

STUDY GUIDE

- 1 What memorable experiences have you had in praying with others?
- 2 What are the advantages of praying with others?
- 3 Divide the group into pairs and assign to each pair one of the forms of prayer. Each pair then study that form, and work together in writing a two or three sentence prayer, focusing entirely on that particular form of prayer. Each pair tells what they learnt. Then all pray together the written prayers following the order suggested. Discuss the value of following this order in a group.
- 4 Which of the keys for prayer cells did you find especially helpful and why?
- 5 Tell of times when your group put legs under their prayers. What did it mean for the recipient and the group?
- 6 What place does the Bible have in prayer? Keeping the same pairs as previously, each chooses a sentence or two from one of the Bible prayers and, working together, rewrites this in their own language. These can then be prayed in the group.
- 7 'The Holy Spirit is the key to vital prayer.' Discuss this in conjunction with a brief prepared study of Romans 8:26,27. Sing some hymns together that focus on this.

CREATIVE WAYS TO PRAY TOGETHER

Pray in your own way! There are twelve gates into the holy city and a thousand different doors to prayer. When we pray we are entering a vast expanse of truth which leaves room for much experiment and many approaches.¹

To communicate with our heavenly Father, who loves us so deeply, should be a wonderful experience. God has given humankind the gift of creativity and imagination, and this rich endowment should be used to make prayer a lively, varied, satisfying activity.

These methods and ideas are given as suggestions which should be adapted to each situation. Not everyone will find each item helpful. Therefore they will need to be used with discretion.

SPOKEN PRAYERS

Enabling spontaneous prayer

Spontaneous spoken prayer may be a frightening experience, especially for newcomers to group prayer. Some people like to have time to 'think out' their prayer if praying in a group with others, while others may be so afraid of their own voice that they never have the courage to speak. As an aid to spontaneous praying, a leader may encourage members by asking the group for a few suggestions of people or topics to include in the prayer, and then formulate these into prayer. Alternatively, the leader may open and close in prayer and ask the group members to mention their topic or person for prayer. The

leader should try to keep the prayer simple in order to encourage others to understand that praying aloud is something anyone can do. We need to remember also that spontaneous praying is a basis for an adult relationship with God and not all people have attained this maturity.

Chain prayer

Chain prayer involves each person praying in order around the group. Its main drawback is that people can feel forced to pray, resulting in embarrassment. However, this can be avoided by stressing the validity of silent prayer. Those who wish to pray in silence can simply touch the next person when they have completed their silent prayer, or if they do not wish to pray. Chain prayer can be used for each segment of prayer, going around the circle once or twice for the period of adoration, then around the chain again for thanksgiving and so on. Confession is generally in silence with each indicating when they have concluded. It is often used for one segment only with a different procedure for the other aspects.



One word bombardments

These are helpful in encouraging those who are new to group prayer. Each spends a brief period in silent reflection and follows this with a prayer focused into one word or a brief phrase. For example, in Adoration, time may be spent in meditation upon an attribute of God or the promise of Christ's presence in the group. The group responds as each feels moved, with 'Jesus', 'Father', 'Our Lord', 'You are here', 'We adore you', etc. This is especially helpful for Adoration and Thanksgiving. When used for Intercession the person's name only is used, or the specific situation mentioned.

I have sometimes photocopied a hymn for all to sing which deals with the nature of God. As it is sung each person underlines words relating to God. After the hymn, in a spirit of prayer, each says one of these words with feeling, one at a time.

Litany response

In this a prepared prayer is used with a copy for each member to follow. The leader reads brief portions which are followed with prepared responses for the whole group to read. These are readily available in older or modern forms. Copies of the Book of Common Prayer or other equivalents could be borrowed, or photocopies of certain sections made. A number of hymns, old and modern, lend themselves to this use, eg 'Jesus, with thy church abide' and 'Saviour, when in dust to thee'. The chorus of others can be used as the response, or the last line or two of appropriate verses adapted. Some groups write their own litany as the follow-up from a study, which is then used to conclude the group meeting.

Bidding prayers

The leader needs a book of prayers prepared for this purpose or a list is compiled, either by the leader beforehand, or by the group during the meeting. The leader then bids, or invites the group, 'Let us remember God's goodness to us', or 'Let us pray for our government', which is followed by silent or vocal response by the members. The leader may pray a brief prayer on the subject before moving on to the next point. The leadership can be shared with any number of members, each taking a different aspect.

Open-eyed prayer

We have been taught to close our eyes in prayer to help our concentration. It has become a rigid ritual unfortunately, 'All eyes closed . . .' Occasionally try keeping your eyes open and focusing on a symbol, or worship centre or picture of the creation, and respond in prayer. This works especially well when the group is able to meet in a bushland, open country or garden setting or overlooking the sea.

Often when we discuss persons and situations for intercession in order to prepare a list of requests to follow, the time quickly slips away and someone in a surprised voice says, 'Oh! We have run out of time and will not have time for intercession!' It does well to affirm where God was during the conversation! He heard every word. A brief prayer acknowledging God's presence during the 'open-eyed' conversation and committing to him all that was mentioned can then be prayed without the group feeling their concerned conversation was not heard by God.

Conversational prayer

Instead of each one present praying once and covering many subjects, in conversational prayer each one prays as many times as they wish, but for only one subject at a time.

It involves careful listening to and support of each other's prayers. When one finishes, another will not repeat a prayer but simply agree with a 'Yes, Lord', or expand on the other's prayer. It is real conversation with God. We pursue one subject at a time, not covering all the aspects of prayer in the one prayer. Each of the five steps below is adhered to.

It involves honesty, openness and simplicity with the One who really loves us and a group who accepts us. Part of that openness is saying 'I' when we mean 'I' and 'we' when we mean the whole group.

Each may pray as many times as they wish, but each short prayer relates to the subject being pursued by the group at that time. There is no order for people to follow as in chain prayer; each prays as moved by the Spirit.

The five steps

The purpose of these steps is to give a starting point and a workable plan to follow. They help bring direction and



meaning to group prayer. To follow them requires attention and thus produces fresh interest. The leader will introduce each when it seems appropriate.

1. Jesus is here. This begins usually with a period of silent meditation on God's presence or his unconditional love for each of us. Playing a suitable recorded hymn or song which suggests the presence of Christ with the group can be helpful. It helps for the leader to introduce this step by reciting Matthew 18:19,20.

2. Thank you, Lord. It is helpful to begin this segment with a period of reflection on ways in which each has experienced God's goodness.

These first steps are a unit of worship in receiving love from God and responding in expressing our love and worship to him. The next three steps are a giving of love to others, both in the group and those outside it. In step 4 there will be a beautiful experience in receiving love from one another.

3. Help me, Lord. In this step confession and petition are the focus. This follows easily after the study of the word of God.

4. Help my brother and my sister. In this step the group begins by responding to the individual prayers in step 3, applying a 'bandaid' of love upon that wounded spirit. This then widens out to the families, friends and acquaintances of the group and to the community and world. After one person prays for a person or situation, one or two others in the group will support the prayer. In some cases the support prayers will be 'Yes, Lord'; 'That is our real concern too, Lord'; 'Lord, we share John's concern for his friend'.

5. Use me, Lord. This is a natural progression for the sincerely concerned person. True intercessory prayer in

the small group should lead to corporate and personal action. We make ourselves available to be part of the answer. We put legs under our prayers!

The role of the leader

It is essential to have a sensitive leader to facilitate this prayer experience. The leader will be conversant with the process and able to sense when it is appropriate to move onto the next stage. The leader will also know how to handle people who are negative, critical or unwise in sharing their personal failures.

It takes time to learn

This is a skill which needs time and patience to develop. Most will find it hard to keep to one subject at a time or to restrict their prayers to one or two sentences. Avoid embarrassment by acknowledging this from the outset. Encourage the group to persevere.²

WRITTEN PRAYER

Group prayer is an art which many find difficult to launch into. Older folk particularly, who have not prayed openly, find it a traumatic experience. Beginners in corporate prayer often benefit from writing out a prayer and then reading it when the group prays. A natural way to do this is in response to a Bible study period. Participants write their own prayers, which they then read in the group. However, people should still be given the opportunity to not participate.

Some wise leaders have suggested to a person who is experiencing this difficulty that they prepare a prayer at home, which they may be asked to read to open the group or in the collective prayer sessions.

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing traditional prayers or hymns is a useful exercise. A prayer either from the Bible or a book of prayers, or a hymn-prayer, is rewritten by each individual. It is kept simple by using everyday words. A dictionary



for each participant will help in putting technical words in a way each would say them. With long prayers or hymns, assign segments around the group. This work can also be done as a home assignment. The paraphrases are then read in group prayers.

Rewriting the 23rd Psalm

Psalm 23 would be the best known of all psalms, but it is written in terms with which we are not very familiar in our nuclear age. Shepherd and sheep had a close relationship and that association had far more meaning when the psalm was written. Try rewriting the psalm in the way you would say it in the colloquial language of your culture, using comparisons with which people are familiar. In *God is for Real, Man*, by Carl Burke (Fontana, 1967), the paraphrase of the 23rd Psalm says that the Lord is like a 'probation officer', a term that had special relevance for kids from the streets. Perhaps terms such as 'navigator', 'companion', etc might be used. The idea is for the participants to choose a word that is their model of God. Having done that, move through the psalm, changing the ideas to whatever is relevant, keeping in mind the picture of God that was chosen. Then allow the psalm to be a prayer of affirmation and confidence in God.

Personalise the Lord's Prayer

While recognising that the Lord's Prayer is given to us in the plural so that it embraces all peoples, a fresh approach may be taken when we pause to personalise it. Take all words written in the plural and substitute 'My Father', and 'me' throughout, and replace old-fashioned words such as 'art' 'hallowed', etc with words current in the vocabulary of today. Having discussed the changes in each group, all members of the group quietly pray the prayer by themselves.

Dialogue prayer

This is a way of truly holding a conversation with God. Feelings are expressed without pretence. Each person writes out a prayer in the form of a dialogue with God, recording what he/she says to God together with what is imagined God is saying in reply.

When we are in a close relationship with a person we can almost predict what their response might be. God has

revealed his character to us in the Scriptures. We know sufficient about him to have some ideas concerning the replies we could expect from him.

The conversation flows back and forth, until the person feels the dialogue has finished. Each segment of the dialogue is kept brief and precise. What each person imagines God to be saying must be consistent with his nature and intentions revealed in Scripture and supremely through the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore dialogue prayer is generally best used with other than beginners.

THE USE OF SILENCE

Silence plays an important part in private and corporate prayer. People need encouragement and help in spending more time in silent meditation and contemplation. 'Be still and **know** that I am God' is a wise word for busy people in the twentieth century. **Planned silence** should be a regular part of all group prayer. Until the group develops an ability to use the silences, the time should be kept reasonably short. Suggestions may need to be fed in from time to time.



Some help should be given in using **unplanned silence**. When the group is praying orally and a silence occurs, teach the group to continue to use the time in non-verbal prayer or listen for the voice of God speaking to them.

TOUCHING OR PHYSICAL CONTACT

Most of us know the power of touch — a friendly slap on the back; a hug; a warm handshake; the gentle, loving touch of our closest loved one; a child's arms thrown around us in a spontaneous welcome; a concerned friend's arms around our shoulder in a time of distress.

Jesus and his disciples touched people to heal and bless them. His followers have found the human touch in prayer to be important. Some will have reservations and

others real problems in being touched by another, but it is often very supportive to hold a person's hand or put our hand on their shoulder as we pray for him or her. As in Jesus' ministry, somehow power is transmitted person to person by touch.

Laying on of hands

This is an ancient tradition practised by Jesus and the early church, and used frequently since, for setting apart persons for special ministries and for healing. In small groups it is commonly used when praying for one who has openly expressed a deep desire for special prayer for personal renewal, or for healing, or a fuller awareness of the Spirit, and to acknowledge special gifts or to confirm a person's call to a specific task. The members of the group gather around the person and lay their hands on his head, shoulders or back.

Sometimes 'laying on of hands' by **proxy** has great meaning. A person in the group 'stands-in' for one who is not present, the others laying their hands on him. The 'proxy' person seeks to become one with the person for whom prayer is being offered.



Huddles

These can give a sense of concern for each member and deepen the sense of unity. All stand in a tight circle with shoulders touching. Arms can be placed on each other's shoulders or around waists, or hands can be held.

Cradling

This can be a supportive caring experience for someone who has shared deeply and seeks the group's care and concern in their problem. The person lies on his or her back on the floor. The group gathers around, then lifts the person to waist height and rocks him or her back and forth like a baby. Prayers may be spoken for the person while he or she is cradled. Usually a minimum of four persons on either side is needed. The process concludes by standing the person back on their feet.

BODY POSITION

Kneeling

This has traditionally been a common pose for prayer. It is an indication of humility and submission to our sovereign God. For physical reasons not everyone will be able to kneel, and when it is done for long periods some will find it more difficult than others. The pose can be varied by facing inward during most of the prayer period and changing to face outward during the period of intercession, as an indication of concern for others outside the immediate group. Most people will find it helpful to have a chair or table to rest against if the period is to be prolonged.

Lying prostrate

Lying face down on the floor is seldom done in prayer today, but it was a common pose in the Bible as an indication of complete submission to God. Young people have used this in recent times with benefit.

Reclining

Reclining is a relaxed position. A chapel in a retreat centre I visited had an inspiring art piece in the ceiling. The absence of any seating and a carpeted floor was a natural setting for this relaxed form of meditation and prayer.

Try this on a warm, clear night outdoors. Look up at the stars and the moon. The vastness of creation and the might of our creator God becomes more real.

The wheel position

This is a more structured form of reclining for a small group to experience a restful unity. The group lie on the floor to form a wheel with heads facing inwards, each person being a spoke! Hands are raised and grasped and prayer made together with a deep sense of oneness.

Creative movement and dancing

These are used to amplify a prayer through body motion. The group stand at more than arm's length from each other with eyes closed. As the leader slowly recites the Lord's Prayer or another appropriate prayer or hymn, each expresses their thoughts by appropriate body movement.

Dancing has played an important part in the worship of God. The Old Testament tells of Miriam and the

women with timbrels, dancing and singing praise to God (Exodus 15:20,21); 'David danced before the Lord' (2 Samuel 6:14); and the Psalms contain exhortations to 'praise his name with dancing' (Psalm 149:3) and 'praise him with timbrel and dance' (Psalm 150:4). Not everyone will feel sufficiently uninhibited to participate in dance, so it will need to be used with sensitivity and as an optional prayer response.

Some groups play appropriate recorded hymns, songs or music to which each individual can make their own prayer response combined with dance.

FANTASISING

This is a creative use of our God-given gift of imagination in prayer. Taking a stationary, relaxed body position and using creative movement, each person seeks to identify with the creation by playing a fantasy role. While background music is playing and eyes are closed, each imagines that he or she is a mountain stream, a cloud, a flower, a water-lily on a pond, a leaf or a tree. After a few minutes prayers are offered, stemming from the feelings experienced.

Fantasy trips

These are used regularly in therapy and can be put to good use by a sensitive leader in group prayer. We have found it particularly helpful in Confession or in Thanksgiving. Each sits or lies (if there is room) in a comfortable relaxed manner with eyes closed. Through centring their thoughts on their breathing, they seek to get in touch with themselves. Slow deep breathing helps the relaxation. After a brief period the leader asks each to imagine that they are lying relaxed on a carpet. It is a magic carpet which slowly lifts them up and gently conveys them through past events and experiences. The leader reinforces this movement backward into the past, by asking: 'What were you doing before you came tonight? Was there anything for which you can be genuinely thankful? Where were you today? Who were you with? What did you do? What did you see? Can you recall something for which you can praise God?' Encourage them to begin by going back over the last few days. Then let them go back as far as they wish into their past till they recall a person or an event for which they

can be truly thankful to God. The 'trip' needs to be completed with a bringing back to the present and a brief period of relaxation for de-rolling.

When used for Confession, a segment for specific handing over of guilt and acceptance of forgiveness by faith must be followed by assurance of forgiveness, together with some reassuring acts within the group, each to the other. A brief period of sharing can conclude the experience, which will give opportunity to share any disturbing memories or feelings and inspiring or enriching recollections. The sharing could be introduced with: 'How do you feel after that experience?' Most leaders need training in this form of prayer.

PRAYER CONTRACTS

Too often group prayer is vague, especially when it comes to promises to pray for one another. The small group movement in Pittsburgh, USA, known as the Pittsburgh Experiment, initiated 'Thirty Day Experiments' as one of its main emphases for individual and group prayer. One of their pamphlets explains:

A thirty day experiment is simply this. We suggest that no matter what the problem or concern might be, if a person will only pray every day, as often as he thinks about it, or feels tension arise within himself, then God will help him to understand the situation and the other parties involved. We have seen this work in hundreds of situations. I have yet to see anyone who has been faithful and honest in daily prayer for thirty days, end up with their prayers unanswered.

The group can enter into a contract with a person to pray for any specific period: seven days, fourteen days or thirty days. It avoids the vague promises of support and encourages concentrated prayer for a specific period, at the end of which progress can be shared.

It often enriches this experience for the person who is the focus for this prayer, and at least one other who has contracted to pray, to keep journals for the period and then compare notes at the end. I frequently do this when counselling someone who is seeking guidance or trying to find their way through a difficult situation. Those apparently small messages from God in everyday life, so often passing unnoticed, are captured. Together, over an extended period, they often lead to clear insights.

PRAYER AIDS

Small cards

These could be approximately 130 mm by 80 mm (standard file cards are useful). They can be written on without needing a support and fit into the back of an average size Bible. Use them for each person to note the intercessory prayer requests for the day. Each may send their card around the group so that others may write a signed prayer request on it and return it to the owner as a reminder throughout the week to pray for the group. It has a variety of other uses.

Prayer record books

We found it useful to use a cheap school exercise book to record the requests for prayer in an intercessory prayer group. A separate page was kept for each meeting with the opposite page kept free for recording progress in answers to prayer at future meetings. From time to time it was an inspiring experience of thanksgiving and praise to look back over the months and recall God's answers to our prayers.

Hymn book

A hymn book is a rich prayer resource for private and corporate prayer. For the non-conformist churches it is their prayer book. Many hymns are written in the form of a prayer. Use them for reciting together or silent meditation. Sing or read them as prayers. Let the leader slowly and prayerfully read a verse or so of a hymn of 'adoration' to commence the prayer time. In a time of 'confession' each may read in silence a hymn of 'repentance and forgiveness'. Sing together a hymn of thanksgiving. Paraphrase a hymn, putting it into your own words. The group members could each take a book and find a prayer that is meaningful for them. A hymn could be chosen for the group, and members asked to choose a verse as their special prayer for that day.

Books of prayers

There are many books of ancient and contemporary prayers which can be read or studied or paraphrased by the group.



Newspapers

These are useful in making intercession specific. Give each member a news page of a recent daily newspaper. Allow time for them to select a news item for prayer and underline the main points. Each gives a summary of the news item, which is followed by group prayer. Or each can

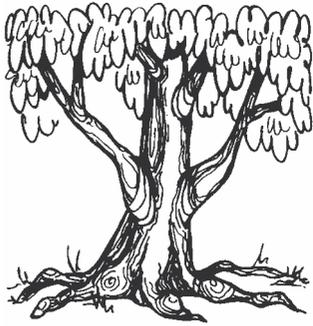
write a prayer in response to the news item they chose. These are then read in the group prayer time.

A variation would be to give each person a newspaper and ask them to choose an item that is of interest. (It may be a story, report, advertisement or cartoon.) Now ask, 'What is the relation between the article you have chosen and God?'

Having established the connection, form a prayer around the theme. For example, with an advertisement designed to sell cars, the prayer may include thanks for all those involved in the production and design of cars; for those working on the repetitive production line; for those injured in producing vehicles; a prayer for responsibility for those who drive; and intercession for those who have been injured in a car accident. These could be made more specific. We can pray for a realisation of our own responsibilities on social issues. It is not enough to pray that there will be no strikes — think about what causes are involved.

Symbols

These have played an important part in giving a common focus, stimulating reflection and facilitating a worship response to God. A cross, candle, loaf of bread, chalice, jug of water, open Bible, vacant chair, a simple drawing of a fish or dove, and other traditional symbols can be useful aids if they are varied.



The creation

The world around us is rich with things to inspire our prayers. Ask each member of the group to bring some natural object with them to the next meeting. (This could be a flower, a leaf, a piece of bark, a piece of driftwood, a stone, etc.) Alternatively, if it is a day meeting (and depending on the locality) each person could go out

and find an article. In any case, they are asked to conceal it so the others do not see what they have. Arrange the group in pairs, numbering A and B. Then ask A to close his/her eyes while B puts the 'found object' he/she has brought into A's hand. The article is felt by A, who may smell it or even taste it, while trying to guess what it is. When that has been done, A then gives to B what he/she has brought.

While each partner still holds the article which the other person has brought, ask each to try and imagine that piece of nature in its original state. Then ask: 'Does it remind you of God in any way?' Following a short period of silence, ask each to use their picture image as the basis for a personal prayer.

If the object brought to the group was a rock it may have reminded the person of the strength and stability of Christ's love — 'He is my rock and fortress', etc. Members may like to share with one another their thoughts which led to the foundation of their prayer. The objects can then be placed together as a focus for worship.

Alternatively, posters of different parts of creation, a montage of cuttings from magazines of suitable pictures and words, can be displayed and responded to.

If the group is meeting in a room looking out onto a garden or a wider view, get members to locate parts of the creation before them with which they identify. Some reactions might be: 'I would like to be more responsive to the Spirit, as those leaves are to the wind', or 'May my life become more beautiful like that flower', or 'Thank you for the silent growth that is taking place in your creation and in my life'.

THE BIBLE

The Bible will be our most useful aid to group prayer. Here we find many prayers of the patriarchs, prophets, psalmists, our Lord and the apostles. The Christian's understanding of prayer comes primarily from this book. Studies of the teaching and example of Jesus and the apostles will be an important aid to group prayer. The recorded prayers can be paraphrased, personalised or used as they are.

GENERAL

What are the words saying?

Keep alert for music, songs, an excerpt from a book, television or radio commercial, poem, etc which may either form a prayer in itself or be an excellent opener for one. As an example of an 'opener' to prayer, play a record of 'My Favourite Things' from *Sound of Music*. Ask each person to list about ten of their favourite things and then move into a prayer of thanksgiving. Or a topical song may be chosen, leading to prayers of intercession.

God in everyday things

There are reminders of God all around us. Choose four objects and suggest they be the basis for prayer, or ask each person to contribute an object. One may choose a pair of glasses, a dictionary, map of the world or a coin, and the prayer could be 'Enlarge my vision, O Lord, to see meaning in the ordinary and the profound, and extend my vision to perceive the needs of others around me. Remind me there is a tangible way of helping those less fortunate than I am.'

Share a prayer

Ask each to choose as a partner the person sitting next to them. Explain that they will be given thirty seconds to think of someone, or some need in the world, for which they would like to pray. (This could be varied by asking them to think of a problem which they would not mind sharing with their partner, or to think of someone who means a lot to them.) Allow about thirty seconds for each to explain to their partner the prayer need.

Remind the group of Jesus' promise that where two or three are gathered in his name there he is in the midst

(Matthew 18:20). Then say that in the silence of the next thirty seconds each will be asked to remember that promise and to pray for the need that their partner has just shared with them.

Appreciation of love

Using the chart in diagram no. 24, each person thinks carefully and tries to picture in their minds the names and places that immediately come to view. They describe the place briefly, be it home, town, church, bushland, etc. The same is done with the animals they remember. They then recall those who have loved them and those they have loved.

THANK YOU GOD FOR YOUR LOVE AS I SEE IT EXPRESSED ALL AROUND ME			
A Place I have loved...	An animal who loved me...	People who have loved me...	People I Love...

Diagram No. 24

They use their lists as they pray quietly, thanking God for the love they have experienced in the past, present and the future. (Prior to this last step, each group member might like to share one point from their list.)

A good introduction to this method would be to play the record 'Where is Love', from the musical *Oliver*. There are an abundance of relevant songs on this theme.

Expressing thanksgiving

Either provide for each member a copy of the following chart (diagram no. 25) or a sheet of paper on which they can make their own copy by hand.

THANK YOU GOD FOR THE GOOD THINGS OF(Date)			
Good Things I Did...	People I Enjoyed Being With...	Good Experiences (things that happened to me)	Good Reminders of You (God)...

Diagram No. 25

A time of silence is allowed while each person completes the sheet. Then suggest that each reads what they have written, thanking God for their recalled experiences.

Another way of thanksgiving

Cut coloured paper or gift wrapping in rectangles and decorate so that each resembles a parcel. Distribute one to each person (together with a pencil or felt-tipped pen) and ask that they write down a gift/s which God has given them, for which they are especially grateful, and which they do not mind the other group members seeing. Then using a board, ask each to come forward and place the gift parcel on it (with pin or masking tape). The leaders may ask if the gifts suggest a prayer. The members may then move to a time of thanksgiving, or one member may praise, using the names on the gifts.



Removing mountains

Ask the group to look up Matthew 17:20. Remind members that Jesus placed an emphasis on faith as the condition of appropriating God's love and power. Prepare several small cards (about 130 mm by 80 mm) and give one to each person. Explain that they are to write on the card the 'mountain' which they are facing at the moment (they can state it in very general terms if they wish). Point out that this will become known to the group later. Their name is not to be on the paper. When each has finished, the cards are collected, shuffled and distributed to the members.

Silently the person reads the other person's 'mountain' and prays for the mountain to be removed. Then each card is read aloud, the group pausing after the reading of each for quiet prayer.

Where the group has developed a fair degree of trust, names can be placed on the card and the card handed to the person on their left for prayer. The card is then kept by that person as a reminder for continuing prayer until the next meeting.

References

- (1) Charlie Shedd, *How to Develop a Praying Church* (Word).
- (2) Adapted from *Prayer — Conversing with God* by Rosalind Rinker (Zondervan, 1983) (used with permission).

STUDY GUIDE

- 1 Try to recall the first time you prayed with others. How did you feel? What helped or hindered you? What lessons are there for us here in leading others in prayer?
- 2 What different ways do you use to pray on your own or with others?
- 3 Someone has said that God, who is so creative and full of surprises, must get bored with our stereotyped prayers. What do you think?
- 4 What are the advantages and disadvantages of 'heads bowed, eyes closed'?
- 5 Try paraphrasing a few verses of a psalm or hymn, with each reading their work in a prayerful manner to the group.
- 6 Pray together using the One Word Bombardment method.
- 7 Experiment with the other suggestions under Spoken and Written Prayers.
- 8 Using a number of these creative ideas, plan a meeting for a group which wishes to spend the whole time covering the whole spectrum of prayer addressed in this chapter.
- 9 Following the suggestions for thanksgiving and some other ideas, plan a small-group meeting which wants to spend the whole meeting expressing gratitude for God's great kindness.

'AT HOME' GROUPS

This is based on my experience with 'At Home' programs held during a number of my parish ministries. In each instance many favourable comments were received from the participants. Such remarks usually concerned the pleasure of being invited to meet socially in the minister's home, and the opportunity to get to know other members of the congregation better. In one situation, two elderly church members, who had been attending the same church for forty years, confessed that the evening provided the first experience of conversing with each other beyond a merely formal short greeting after Sunday worship!

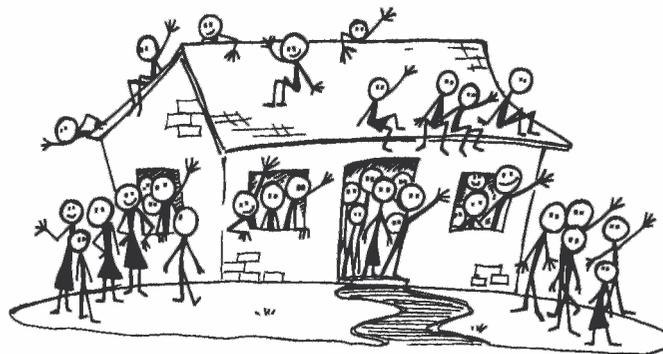
This intensive program outlined here is very demanding of the pastor, his or her spouse and their family. It can easily be adapted to not need such a large involvement by them.

This program has now been tried in other areas by some who have participated in my Small Groups Conferences where the concept was introduced. One minister reported:

We have found 'At Home' groups very effective in our area. Within a three-week period we were able to meet 180 folk in this way. Being a rural area, not all folk could travel easily to our home in the main town. Therefore, five meetings were held in our home, with three others being held in private homes in the outlying centres. These have been held to integrate newcomers to the parish as well as to assist us in getting to know the established congregation.

New folk have deeply appreciated the experience of acceptance and warmth that such an evening provides. They participate in one or two relationship games and talk informally over supper. By this means those who are either

new to the area, or who have lived in the locality for some time but without feeling incorporated in a congregation, are helped to link up with others. Another interesting and unexpected by-product of these evenings has been the genuine uplift given to the 'older' members doing the welcoming. A number of these folk have stated later that they were thankful for what the evening had meant to them in terms of personal satisfaction and enjoyment, and knowing they had been able to minister to others.



Another minister reported:

We followed your outline almost to the letter and found it to be most effective. Over a period of twelve nights we had 164 different people attend our home. Sub-committees were formed in each of the three centres in the parish to undertake the organisation necessary. The church women supplied the supper for each evening.

We followed your suggestion to use a set of slides. About forty or fifty of general interest were shown. These had something to do with our personal experience, places we

had visited and tasks we have undertaken. The best groups were between fifteen and eighteen people. These evenings were a tremendous strain on the whole family, but, looking back, we feel it was well worthwhile. We now plan to hold further groups in the future.

Aims

An 'At Home' function has three aims:

1. To develop a deeper sense of community in a congregation/parish.
2. To enable the minister and his/her spouse to get to know as many of the congregation as they can in a short period of time at the commencement of a ministry.
3. To help the congregation to get to know the minister and his/her spouse.

When to hold 'At Homes'

'At Homes' provide an effective way to get to know a large number of people in a relatively short period. For that reason they are useful when a minister moves to a new parish to help them get to know their people quickly. However, I have used them later during my ministry in the same parish with equally good effect. In this case the program took a varied form to that used in the original series.

It was my practice to use this type of group on a continuing basis to help orient newcomers. Names of new arrivals were recorded and when two or three couples were listed, they were invited to one of these types of group. A number of members of the congregation were also invited to help the newcomers integrate into the local church community.

Organisation

It is essential that ministers and their spouses do not get involved in the tedious details of setting it up. If the plan outlined here is followed, the minister will be heavily committed in the demanding visitation program and his/her spouse will be busy hosting the meetings in addition to the normal daily schedule.

A small group of people with a good knowledge of the local church people should handle the organising. (These need not necessarily be church office-bearers; they could be a small group already in existence.) It can be explained that the minister and his/her spouse will be

busy in the 'At Home' program and wish to concentrate on getting to know people rather than getting involved with the organising.

Organising committee's duties

1. Make master list

The group compile an up-to-date master list of people, including all who have some connection with the church.

Information can be drawn from the Sunday school roll, youth group membership lists, church membership roll, women's and men's groups, etc.

The list is graded into 'actives' and 'inactives'.

The list is divided into areas and then into streets (in order of street number).

Note: The minister does a crash-visitation program. This method of listing enables systematic visitation.

2. Make groupings

The list is divided into groups of 25. It has been found that 25-30 people need to be invited at one time to ensure an attendance of 12-15. This will vary from place to place.

Each group should contain a proportion of 'actives' and 'inactives' (say two-thirds 'inactives' and one-third 'actives').

These smaller groups are still kept in areas and in street order as far as possible.

It was found advisable to include some special groups, eg for young married couples and young people.

3. Prepare group lists

The group lists should be typed on loose-leaf sheets which fit into a small folder.

Have one page per group and three copies of each group list. (One copy is the minister's visitation list, one copy is kept near the minister's house or office telephone to record telephone replies, and one copy is filed.)

Layout of lists

..... (Date of 'At Home')

NAME	ADDRESS	CODE "A" or "Ind."	OTHER INFO. Family Details, ways Involved etc.

Diagram No. 26: Layout of At Home List

4. **Enlist 'actives' to help**
The Organising Committee contact 'actives' in each of the groups to bring eats and help with the washing-up after the meeting.
5. **Prepare and post invitations**
The invitation should be printed, preferably in script, leaving a blank space for the name of the person/s invited and the date. They should be of a size which will fold easily into a standard envelope.

Suggested wording

The Rev John and Mrs Everyman invite you to be their guests at an informal social evening in their home on
commencing at pm.
Supper (coffee/tea and dessert) will be served at pm.
To assist with catering arrangements, we would appreciate it if we could have a reply by
(one week in advance).

174 Pilgrims Way
Southaven 2999
Tel. 174-2999

Names and addresses should be typed on envelopes, which are then stamped.

Keep in batches with dates on front of each bundle.

Post invitations four to five weeks before date of each 'At Home'.

One person on the committee should be responsible for the regular mailing of the invitations.

Encourage replies by mail to prevent excessive telephone calls.

Notes

If possible, use the minister's residence, even if it is not a very large house.

If this really is not feasible, and it will not be in some cases, use the homes of key members.

If people cannot come to an 'At Home' and reply to let you know, then plan an additional 'At Home' for them.

Launching

Discuss with the appropriate governing body of your church or parish the intention to hold an 'At Home' program.

Photocopy or make a summary of these pages for all to know what is envisaged.

Seek to get their approval for this short-term activity to have priority over other activities, as it will be extremely demanding.

Announce to the congregation that everyone will be invited at some time.

Work out dates for the 'At Homes' well in advance, and give them to the Organising Committee.

Visitation

Visit by lists, whether a reply has been received or not.

Call one week before the 'At Home'.

Make the call brief. Introduce yourself as the minister. Mention the invitation (you may find you will be picking up replies).

Express a hope that they might be able to share in this 'informal social evening'.

Call even if people have said they will not be coming to the 'At Home'.

If no-one is home, leave your card with a note.

The evening

Have name tags prepared (in large print so that they can be read from across the room).

Be ready well in advance, introduce people as they come, and allow informal conversation.

State aims of the evening.

Use the 'get-acquainted' exercise 'Interviews' (see appendix A). The minister and spouse also participate.

Generally the minister presents a video or set of colour slides lasting no longer than thirty minutes, including aspects of family and previous ministry, to give some understanding of background, interests and experience.

Serve refreshments (coffee/tea and dessert).

Say a brief 'family' prayer.

Finish on time.

After an overseas study trip I repeated this program in order to report to the whole congregation and share insights which later became the foundation of a new direction in that church. I illustrated my report with slides and items I had collected.

Note: If people say they would like to come but cannot get a baby-sitter, perhaps it would be possible to have the Organising Committee make arrangements for this.

After the 'At Home'

Immediately after the meeting, make notes regarding attendance and any special things that have been learnt about those who attended and any follow-up to be undertaken.

These notes can be made on one of the lists of names supplied by the Organising Committee and later transferred to the pastoral care files.

TERMINATING A GROUP

Every group has a beginning and an end. With some, they slowly die for many reasons, including poor leadership, loss of interest, and atrophy due to failure to find and fulfil their mission. Others know it is time to wind up because all agree the group has fulfilled its purpose or the circumstances for a number of members have significantly changed due to jobs, family, health, etc and insufficient are able to attend to maintain the group's viability.

Other groups close because the leader is no longer able to lead and another is not sufficiently trained or confident to take over the group.

A substantial loss of the original members and an influx of new ones can lead to tension as the longstanding members miss something of the original life and purpose and the others bring their own expectations and uniqueness to the group. In these cases there needs to be a rebirthing of the group, preceded by a suitable ending.

Groups committed to growth goals, such as those operating under the Meta or Cell Church models will work towards reaching the goal of division, and so the termination will be a celebration of achievement of its purpose. However, there will also be a degree of sadness in the breaking of relationships formed in supporting each other's pilgrimage, which needs to be addressed.

When the members, as well as the leader, have an understanding of the life cycle of the group, from the early stages it will anticipate, at least in general terms, that there will be a time for the group to end.

Sometimes the group members will need help in recognising that the group should terminate. An

evaluation process, focusing particularly on the members' original hopes and expectations expressed in the agreed task and the changing individual needs and interests, will indicate that these have been or are not being met. This could lead to a group decision that it is time to end the group, possibly with it re-forming with others, or having time out for renewal and awaiting new directions.

See appendix G, especially 'Reflection on a Group's Pilgrimage', which has been designed to help a group reflect on where it has been, at a stage when it is planning to end. It has proved to be a very useful tool.

In chapter 3, under 'Plan to grow', suggestions are given about how to end an original group which will reform as two smaller groups.

In **John 12:24**, Christ gave us **a kingdom principle** which he intended to guide every aspect of Christian living. 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed; but if it dies, it produces many seeds'. Enabling groups to understand and accept this fundamental teaching of Christ can not only help them work towards reproducing themselves in one of the ways suggested in chapter 7, but it can be useful in recognising the possibility of God's underlying purpose in an unplanned break-up of a group.

The loss of the group experience will result in varying degrees of grief. The leader will play an important role in facilitating a suitable closure experience.

THE FIVE FACETS OF A COMPLETE CLOSURE EXPERIENCE

Briefly expressed, these five facets are: recall, confession, thanksgiving, expressions of hope, and farewells. The first stage involves **recalling** the high points of the group's experiences: those unforgettable times of celebrating together an unexpected blessing or God's answer to a major prayer request; bearing together a deep crisis through which a member passed; sharing together a wonderful time of jubilation or a time when God's word came alive in a very special way for the group. Some questions to help here are: What has been most helpful to you in this experience? In what ways did God get your attention? How have you been encouraged? How would you express the impact on your own personal life and your ministry?

In the **confession** segment, opportunity is given for any who feel they may have failed one or more in the group. 'Bill, we all promised to pray for you for seven days when you had that big decision to make, and I completely forgot. I haven't felt good about that and just wanted to say I'm sorry.' This shouldn't be protracted and heavy; a sensitively guided brief time can bring healing and release. Where a deeper issue emerges, it may be best facilitated outside the group.

Thanksgiving provides the opportunity for affirmation of each other's contributions to the group through who they are as a person, what they have done, or things they have said. 'You mean so much to me for the way you have always . . .'; 'Thanks for your wisdom when . . .'; 'I appreciate your sense of humour which relieved some tense moments'. This can be done in a number of ways, such as:

— Each person comes to the group with a signed note for every member expressing gratitude for their contribution. These are opened and read while the person is seated or standing and oral thanks follows one-to-one or in the group.

— Every person has a piece of cardboard on their back, with paper stuck to it, suspended by a cord around their neck. While moving around, the members write on and sign their notes of thanks for the respective individuals. A plenary time for response follows.

— Greg Davies uses a piece of paper folded in

concertina fashion with everyone writing a comment on each fold, and folding it so the next contributor is unaware of previous comments. After reading, responses are made.

— Pieces of chart paper are fixed to walls or boards, one for each person with their name at the top, and comments are written and signed by each member. In a plenary each writer comes to the front, reads their comment, and asks the person named to accept it as their gift of gratitude to them.

Expressions of hope will vary. It may be a time for sharing visions for the future, particularly as it relates to a new small group or ministry activity. If the future is not clear, it may be a time of sharing visions of possibilities. It may relate to when they will re-group for one or two reunions to help cope with the sense of loss — 'See you again'.

The farewell can be done simply by passing the peace, or, with no prior warning, giving an item which the members have in their purse or pocket to a few or all the others. Gifts could be brought which cost no more than one dollar, or something from the garden — a leaf, flower, piece of bark, etc — in an envelope with a note.

A celebratory meal or supper will conclude the closure. You may consider having an Agape meal — see appendix C.

The five facets of a closure are found in our regular celebration of **The Lord's Supper**, Christ's closure meal with his disciples. It is a time of **recall** ('remember me'), **confession** and **thanksgiving** are significant segments, as is the note of **hope** ('until he comes'). We refer to the Lord's Supper as a sacrament, a means of grace. 'Sacrament' comes from the Latin 'sacramentum', the oath of allegiance the Roman soldier took to Caesar, which could only be broken by death. We too have the opportunity in our Lord's Supper celebrations to renew our commitment to our Master — to bid **farewell** to our self-centredness and take the yoke of Christ.

Often we have concluded our groups with the Lord's Supper after undertaking all or some of the closure aspects we have dealt with. Where a church precludes the unordained celebrating, gather all the groups for a celebration in a hall with all of them participating together.

STUDY GUIDE

- 1 A number of reasons are given why small groups slowly die. From your experience, can you think of some other reasons?
- 2 What are some of the disadvantages of groups that have become 'bless-me clubs' or 'holy huddles'?
- 3 What have been some of the high points in groups to which you have belonged?
- 4 Tell of two or three members of groups to which you have belonged that you can thank God for.
- 5 Discuss John 12:24.
Think how true this was in terms of Christ's death and resurrection.
The Christian life is meant to be a series of deaths and resurrections. Share with each other some of these experiences in your own personal lives and ministries.
- 6 Discuss the meaning of 'sacramentum' as it relates to the temptation to hold on to the love and support of a good group when God has bigger things for us.
- 7 What is your vision for small groups in your church?

Appendix A

GET-ACQUAINTED EXERCISES

These exercises are used to help people begin to develop relationships in the early part of their group experience. They provide a ‘warming up’ period which should create a congenial emotional climate. The intention is to help them feel comfortable, included and significant as they share some non-threatening information with each other. They also will provide one of the first important steps in group involvement, that of enabling the participants to hear their own voices and be listened to by the group. Sharing something of themselves in this manner should open the way for them to share at a deeper level later in the meeting.

These exercises are meant to be enjoyable, relaxed times — for that reason they are often referred to as ‘games’. Leaders should seek to engender this fun dimension by their own relaxed attitude.

INTERVIEWS

A completely non-threatening exercise, of value when commencing a new group or for one-time small group meetings.

Setting: Small groups with even numbers of people. Upper limit of 12 people. Can be used with larger groups, but more time is required.

Time: Depends upon the number in the group; 4-6 minutes for the interviews in pairs. Usually takes a total of approximately 25 minutes for a group of 12.

Materials required: Small notepad and pencil for each person.

Procedure: Distribute pencils and writing pads for brief notes taken in the interviews. Briefly explain the method. Pair off the group, making sure that married couples or close friends are not put together. With the assistance of a number of suggested questions, one seeks to discover as much as possible about the other in 2 to 3 minutes. The process is reversed for a similar period.

Each person in turn then shares with the whole group what they have learnt about the other.

Choose one of these methods for introducing the questions:

Put on a chart and place in a prominent position for all to see.

Dictate for the group to copy down individually (this is time-consuming).

Make a copy for each person with sufficient room left for the answers.

Questions for interviews: Sometimes all are asked to share four interesting things about themselves with their partner. However, most people will need a set of questions to give direction and breadth to their interview.

Suggested questions:

Name?

Where do you live?

How long have you lived there?

Where were you born?

Occupation?

Married — family?

Interest — hobbies? Sport? Clubs?

What is the nicest thing that happened to you in the last 12 months?

These will need to be adjusted for use in groups for young people. Some possible inclusions could be:
Which school do you attend?
How many in your family?
What is your favourite television show?

(See appendix B, 'Questions and Suggestions for Sharing', for more question ideas.)

FOUR FACTS

This is for use with people who are well known to each other.

Setting: Small groups of 6 to 12 people. Because this is for people who know each other well, it is better to work with smaller sub-groups of 4-6.

Time: Depends upon the number; 15-20 minutes for 10-12 people.

Materials required: Small notepad and pencil for each person.

Procedure: Write down four facts about yourself:

My favourite game when I was a child was . . .
My hero when I was twelve years of age was . . .
My favourite kind of music right now is . . .
The place I would like to live if I could live anywhere in the world is . . .

Of the four answers, three should be true, one should be untrue.

When everyone has jotted down their four facts, get together in groups of four and let one person in each group start out by reading their facts. The others in the group try to guess which fact is untrue.

When all have guessed, the person should explain which answer was untrue and which were honest answers.

Repeat this procedure for each person in the group.

GUESS WHO FISHBOWL

This game frequently helps people realise how little they really know about fellow group members or surprises them by demonstrating how misleading it is to 'typecast' or categorise people. It is useful for groups who know each other fairly well. It can be used at different stages in a group's life.

Setting: Groups of 6 or 8 sitting in movable chairs or on the floor.

Time: 30 minutes.

Materials required: A small sheet of paper and pencil for everyone, plus a bowl for each group of eight.

Procedure: The exercise is in two parts: Preliminary Exercise, with everyone working on their own; and Guessing Game, with everyone in groups of 6 or 8.

Preliminary Exercise (5 minutes)

Give everyone a sheet of paper and ask them to write down four facts about themselves. (Do not let anyone see what you jot down.)

Your favourite radio or TV program when you were a child.

Your hero when you were 12 years of age.

The place where you would like to spend a vacation.

One word that would best describe your life right now.

Fold your sheet of paper when you are finished.

Guessing Game (25 minutes)

Get together in groups of 6 or 8 and place your sheet of paper in the bowl for your group.

Let one person pick out one of the slips of paper and read the four facts or clues to the group. Then everyone tries to guess who it is. (The person who it is should play along by guessing someone else.) When everyone has tried to guess, let the person confess and explain their answers.

Repeat this procedure until you have removed all the slips from the fishbowl.

If time allows, have a general discussion on what the game revealed.

IDENTITY CARD

The aim is to enable people in a large gathering to establish contact with a significant number of people not previously known to them, but also to break a large group into smaller groups in a non-threatening manner. (It can be used as well with smaller numbers.)

Time: 20 to 30 minutes (or less).

Materials: Small file cards or scrap card cut to size; pencils.

Procedure: Distribute cards and pencils, one of each per person.

Individual work: The leader selects a set of questions similar to those used in the 'Interviews' game.

These questions are presented as incomplete statements and read out by the leader. Each individual writes the statement plus their completion of it, eg 'My occupation is . . .'

All the statements are written on only one side of the card.

Meeting others: All move around, meeting as many as possible during a 15-minute period, especially those who they have not met before or who are not well known to them.

During these encounters, cards are exchanged, the statements read, hands shaken and a welcome given by each. Then each writes on the back of the other person's card a greeting or wish for the other and the writer's signed name (for example, 'I hope this will be a growing experience. Bill S'; 'So nice to meet you. May God continue to enrich your life. Jill A').

Cards are returned, but the side with the greeting is not read at this stage.

Repeat this experience with as many as possible in the time available.

When the time expires, the pairs talking at that time sit together.

Only then are all the greetings, etc on the reverse side of the card read by the owner.

Groups can then be formed by each pair finding two or three other pairs and sharing anything on their cards.

HUMMING BIRDS

The aim is to facilitate contact between all members of a large group in a relaxed climate of fun and humour but also to break a large group into smaller groups in a non-threatening manner. (It can be used as well with smaller numbers.)

Time: Approximately 30 minutes.

Materials: A folded strip of paper concealing the title of a well-known song for each member of the group (one set of song title strips for each sub-group desired).

Procedure: The leader commences in a light-hearted manner, stating that there is a great deal of talent and skill in the room, which will be made evident through this exercise.

Each is given a piece of paper on which is written the title of a well-known song. Each looks at the title but does not share it with anyone else.

When the leader gives the word, each person will move around the room humming their tune until they find all the other members of the group with the same song.

Suggested songs: National Anthem, Three Blind Mice, Auld Lang Syne, Happy Birthday, Kum Bah Yah, For He's a Jolly Good Fellow, Mary had a Little Lamb, Jingle Bells, etc.

When the groups have been formed, each group sits in a circle. Groups are instructed to discuss how they felt at the beginning and during the exercise.

Variations

The leader can tell the participants how many others have the same song. This will accelerate the activity.

Instead of one song per strip, several songs can be listed. The first song is used to form pairs, the second

song fours, and the third a group of any number for some later activity.

If time permits, the final group can then be assigned the task of coming up with a group name or a song title to express their feeling as a group.

GET-ACQUAINTED MERRY-GO-ROUND

This works well where a large gathering has been subdivided into small groups; but it is also useful with a single group.

Time: 30-45 minutes.

Leader's note: The leader should complete the first three sentences, setting the pace for openness and honesty by his/her answers.

Procedure: The exercise is in two parts: Merry-go-round, with the outer circle in each group rotating every two minutes; and Synthesis, with each group of 6 or 8 rearranged into one circle.

Merry-go-round (20-30 minutes)

Get together in groups of 6 or 8 and arrange the chairs or sit on the floor in a merry-go-round pattern, with 3 or 4 people in an inner circle and the same number in an outer circle. The inner circle should face the outer circle in each group so that everyone is facing a partner.

The leader will read the first part of a sentence and give you two minutes to finish the sentence and discuss your answer with the person you are facing. Then the leader will call time and ask the people in the outer circle to rotate to the right.

When you are settled in front of your new partner, the leader will read out the next sentence and let you finish the sentence and discuss your answer with your partner for two more minutes. Then the leader will call time and ask you to rotate again.

Continue this procedure until you have finished the sentences or run out of time.

My favourite time of the day is . . .

My favourite time of the year is . . .

My favourite place in the house is . . .

My favourite television show is . . .

If I could visit any place in the world on a vacation, I would like to visit . . .

If I had ten million dollars to use for the benefit of humankind, I would use the money to . . .

If I could smash one thing and one thing only, I would smash . . .

The greatest force in the history of the world is . . .

The greatest crime one person can commit against another is . . .

The greatest discovery I would like to make is . . .

The greatest value in my life at the moment is . . .

The thing that gives me the greatest satisfaction is . . .

The thing that I fear the most is . . .

The time I feel most alone is . . .

The time I feel most alive is . . .

Synthesis (10-15 minutes)

1. Stay in your same group of 6 or 8, but arrange your chairs or sit on the floor in one circle, facing each other.
2. Go around and let each person finish the first sentence below and explain their answer. Then go around a second and third time, until you have finished the sentences or your time has run out.

The person I learnt most about in the last few minutes is . . .

The answer that surprised me most was . . .

The person in this group who seems most to feel about life the way I do is . . .

WARM-UP

The aim is to help a relatively new group get to know each other and provide an opportunity for some sharing of spiritual experience. It would generally not be used in the first meeting of a group which is to meet for a period.

Setting: A circle with each person in the group able to see the face of every other person.

Time: Approximately 60 minutes. A whole meeting could be given over to this exercise.

Materials required: None.

Procedure

Step 1

What is your name?

Where did you live between the ages of 7 and 12 years?

What stands out most in your mind about the school you attended?

The leader proceeds to answer the first question then goes completely around the circle asking each person to answer the question. This is repeated for each question.

Step 2

How many brothers and sisters were in your family when you were between the ages 7-12 years?

During your childhood, how was your home heated? Can you remember anything humorous about it?

Leaders, in telling about how their homes were heated, should try to think of some incident that may be humorous or vivid concerning the heat in their homes. Perhaps being cold in the morning, or having to get up and fetch the wood or coal; perhaps the gas or oil running out or an extended electricity failure.

An alternative:

Because some may have bad memories of home, or have lived in an area where they did not need heating, consider these alternative questions.

Can you recall some experience in which you were very cold, eg while you were swimming, or in a situation in which you were without enough warm clothing or bed covering?

How did you get warm?

What feelings did you have besides being cold and then warm?

Step 3

During that time, where did you feel the centre of human warmth was?

Was it a room (eg the kitchen, parents' bedroom, dining room, etc)? Or it may not have been a room at all; it may have been a person around whom you sensed an aura of safeness or warmth.

At this point the leader can explain that what we are actually doing is tracing the human experience of security. Our security is first known as a child in terms of physical warmth. As our horizon broadens outside of our immediate self, we sense our security in the warmth and acceptance of the people around us.

An alternative:

Some people simply do not have any remembrance of a centre of human warmth in their home or in any person. The leader, by mentioning this, may put at ease people for whom this experience is not a reality. The leader should try to anticipate this beforehand and possibly change the above questions to read:

What location has good memories for you? Can you recall a place where you experienced acceptance, love and concern? Or somewhere where you had pleasant experiences so that you feel warm when you recall this place?

Which person has encouraged and cared for you most?

Step 4

When, if ever, in your life did God become more than 'a word'?

When did he become a living being, alive in your own thinking and experience?

The group as a whole are asked these questions so that people can volunteer answers if they have any. This step can be optional, as it may be construed as threatening by someone who is afraid to reveal himself or herself.

We are not asking necessarily for an account of a conversion experience. This transition in one's thinking may have taken place while listening to a beautiful piece of music, watching a sunset, or in a conversation with a person who loved God. By this time the group may know each other well enough to volunteer answers right away. If not, the leader tells of his/her own experience.

After this last question has been asked, the group is in the midst of a discussion on the reality of God in human life. The leader may close this conversation by summarising the discussion and pointing out that, according to Christian belief, although everyone's experience of security and acceptance begins with

physical warmth and graduates to human warmth, we are so made that our security will never be complete until we find it in God.

What this whole discussion does is to take people as a group of strangers, and within an hour's time get them talking personally with deep involvement about the deepest issues of human life. It can lead to people making commitments to Christ. The leader will need to be prepared for this possibility but should be sensitive and not try to coerce the group.

QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR SHARING

Here are some further questions and suggestions to help facilitate sharing in small groups. All or some of these can be used in get-acquainted exercises and certain ones in connection with other relationship exercises.

AWARENESS OF GOD (right relationship to God)

1. What impresses you most about Jesus Christ?
2. What event in the life of Christ means the most to you?
3. In what ways does the creation inspire you?
4. When did God become real to you?
5. Who helped you most in your understanding of God?
6. When you were a child, what impressed you most about God?
7. Of all the things you know about the nature or character of God, what means most to you personally?
8. When do you feel closest to God?
9. What one question above all others do you want God to answer?
10. If God is real to you, what gives you that certainty?
11. What do you most want God to do for you?
12. What does 'faith' mean to you personally?
13. When has God seemed furthest away from you?
14. What do you find hardest to believe about God?
15. 'God is love' — what does that mean to you personally?
16. Of all the teachings of Jesus Christ, what has come to be the most significant in your life?

17. How do you endeavour to show your gratitude to God?
18. Which word best describes God to you?
19. At what time in your life was God most real to you?
20. What is the most vivid experience of prayer you have had?
21. What certainty do you have that you matter to God?
22. In what way does your relationship to God make your way of facing life any different?

SELF-AWARENESS (right relationship to self)

1. Draw your own crest or coat-of-arms as you wish it were (which describes you) and explain it to the group.
2. What would you do if you knew you could not fail?
3. What would you most like to do or be for the next five years, if there were no limitations (of family, money, education, health, etc)?
4. Who is the most authentic person you have met? (Describe him or her.)
5. What is your most satisfying accomplishment — ever? Before you were 6? Between the ages of 6 and 12? 12 and 18? 18 and 25? over 25?
6. Tell your three strongest points. Tell your three weakest points.
7. What is your happiest memory (at various ages)?
8. Describe the most significant event in your life.
9. Describe the characteristics of your 'ideal' woman or man.

10. What person besides your parents has been most influential in your life.
11. What present would you most like to receive?
12. List what your personal freedom depends upon.
13. Whose approval do you need the most?
14. In whose presence are you most uncomfortable? Why?
15. If you had what you really wanted in life, what would you have?
16. List your long-range goals. List your short-range goals.
17. Describe the most excitingly creative person you have known.
18. Write your own obituary.
19. List some creative ways to begin and to end a day.
20. What do you most daydream about?
21. What do you most trust in?
22. Who has most changed your life?
23. Where would you live if you could, and what would you do there?
24. Tell who you are, apart from your titles, honours, or your job description.
25. What is the best book (apart from the Bible) you have ever read?
26. What kind of social gathering or party do you like best?
27. Describe your favourite way of spending leisure time.
28. What feelings do you have trouble expressing or controlling?
29. What kinds of things make you irritated or furious?
30. What makes you feel depressed or 'blue'?
31. What makes you anxious, worried or afraid?
32. What gives you self-respect?

INTERPERSONAL (right relationship to others)

1. Describe the person who has meant most in your life other than a parent or child. What is that person's outstanding characteristic?
2. Who was the first person you felt really understood you? What did they do? What were they like? What was their effect on you?
3. Are you the kind of person others confide in? Why?
4. What kind of person do you confide in?
5. What makes a person a good listener?

6. What kind of listener do you think you have been in this group?
7. How do you feel this group has listened to you, both corporately and separately?
8. What makes a 'good' marriage?

RESPONSIBILITY TO HUMANKIND (right relationship to the world)

1. What would you most like to do to be remembered in history?
2. What is your ideal for the future of society (both immediate and long-range)?
3. Describe your convictions about 'equality'.
4. How could you help to change an injustice of which you are aware?
5. What is the greatest current need in your community?
6. If you were willing, what could you do to change your church, your home, your neighbourhood, your school, or your job?
7. What disturbs you most about misuse of the physical resources in our world?
8. How do you personally react to the underfed and underprivileged in your country and in other areas of the world?
9. If you had limitless resources, how would you use them to benefit others?

GENERAL (for use in groups or individual reflection)

1. List the things that make or keep your life complicated.
2. List the things that you do to keep your life simple.
3. List the things that you could do to make your life more simple.
4. What do you find to be the worst pressures and strains in your work?
5. What do you find most boring and unenjoyable about your work?
6. What do you enjoy most in your work?
7. What shortcomings handicap you in your work?
8. What are your special qualifications for your work?
9. How do you feel your work is appreciated by others?
10. What are your ambitions and goals in your work?
11. How do you feel about the salary or reward you get for your work?

12. How do you feel about the choice of career you have made?
13. How do you feel about the people you work with?
14. How do you feel about the way you handle money?

ADDITIONAL ITEMS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

1. The three things that I do best at school are . . .
2. The longest trip I ever took was to . . .
3. I have these hobbies or things I like to do . . .
4. My pet is . . .
5. One of the best books I ever read was . . .
6. My favourite radio or television program is . . .
7. If I could spend one day as I please, I would do these things . . .
8. The three things I want more than anything else are . . .
9. The three loveliest things I know are . . .
10. The thing I wonder about most is . . .
11. Three kinds of work I would like to do . . .
12. I think my best quality is . . .
13. Probably my worst fault is . . .
14. The three grown-ups I like best, next to my mother and father, are . . .
15. What I like best about church is . . .
16. The things I do not like about my church are . . .
17. The things that are different which I wish we would do at church are . . .
18. I think the Bible is . . .
19. One or two words which best describe God to me are . . .

CELEBRATING AN AGAPE MEAL (LOVE FEAST)

The aim in celebrating this meal is to capture something of the spirit of Christ's final meal with his disciples in the Upper Room before he was crucified. In most mainstream churches, for the non-ordained to celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper would not be acceptable. This Agape Meal does not contain the aspects of the order of service which traditionally only ordained persons are permitted to celebrate.

This meal is often used at the end of a term, especially the Lenten term or the last in the year. As the last meal of a small group or a small group leaders conference or retreat, it brings the event to a climax.

The Agape and its meaning

— A love feast in which members of **the Christian family** express their fellowship with each other and their love and unity in Christ, and in which we express our love for Jesus.

— **A celebration of joy** in which we are glad and thankful for each other and for Christ and his love.

— A time to **remember and give particular thanks** to God for Jesus' death and resurrection for us.

— A time to **hear from the word of God** and discuss it together.

— A time in which we **anticipate the heavenly banquet** when we shall all be gathered together in heaven in a great family meal of joy (see Matthew 22:1-14; Revelation 19:7-9).

Scripture Readings

Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-30; John 13:1-17; 15:1-17

Luke 24:13:35 (30); 36-49 (42,43); John 21:1-14 (12,13)
Acts 2:42-47; 1 Corinthians 11:17-33

Preparation

Room: If you have a large enough room and table, seating everyone around it would be best; otherwise use three tables in a U-shape.

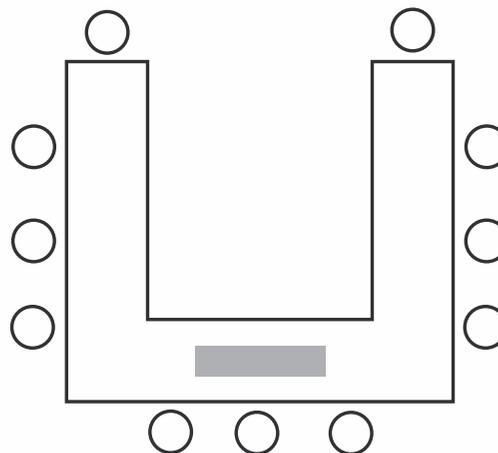


Diagram No. 27

People need to be in eye contact, and the leaders in positions where they are seen by everyone. The food could be served buffet style with everyone sitting around in a rough circle with a small table for the symbols.

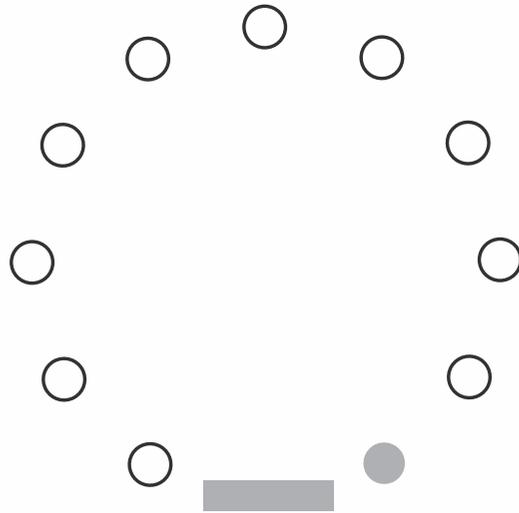


Diagram No. 28

There should be a loaf and a large glass or chalice of red wine or grape juice in a central spot on the table and flowers or other table decorations all carefully arranged to make it a symbolic visual focus. These elements will be used later in the special thanksgiving prayer. The **leader** needs to sit close to these elements so he/she can easily and readily break the bread, etc.

Food: Normal food, not too elaborate, could be served by four or five people who offer to ‘serve’ the group on this occasion, or everyone could help themselves from a side table. If you have courses (eg soup, main course, dessert), the break between courses can be used for songs or other parts of the liturgy.

Participants: Decide whether it is a family event with children present or just adults. If children are present, at what age will they sit at the table? Should there be a special smaller table for the little ones? What other special arrangements will need to be made?

The week before the meal, people will need teaching and an explanation of the agape and of what to expect and how to contribute.

Worship leaders: The leader needs to ask various people to come prepared with a selected Bible reading or prayer, and someone needs to be prepared to give the five to ten minute teaching from God’s word. This person

should also prepare a simple question that people can discuss in pairs where they are sitting, based on the sermon, to encourage informal sharing. Someone needs to prepare three or four really joyful and worshipful songs to sing at intervals, eg ‘Majesty’; ‘Open our eyes, Lord’; ‘Father, we adore you’; ‘Father, make us one’; ‘Spirit of the living God’; ‘He is Lord’; ‘A new commandment’.

Try to choose songs that are simple and easy to sing and remember. They should consist of direct words of praise to God, addressed to him. (Print on sheets, if not known by all.)

The children should have the event explained to them by their parents before they come and be included in some practical ways.

The Order and Leadership

1. A leader must be chosen for the event, preferably a small-group leader. His or her role is to lead the whole evening (others will assist).
2. Drinks are served as people arrive.
3. People are seated.
4. An opening prayer and a song (seated).
5. Soup or first course.
6. Ministry of Word — Bible reading and teaching (6–10 minutes). Question for discussion over main course.
7. Main course.
8. Extemporary prayers of intercession (open prayer time).
9. Dessert.
10. One or two songs of worship.
11. The leader now takes the bread and wine and says a prayer of thanks, using the words of 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 or Mark 14:22–24 as part of the prayer.
12. The bread and wine are then shared around the table, each person serving his or her neighbour, using the words, ‘The body of Christ was given for you. Be thankful. The blood of Christ was shed for you. Be thankful.’
13. Sing a song.
14. Holding hands around the table say the blessing together: ‘The grace of our Lord Jesus . . .’
15. Pass the peace to each other.
16. Serve coffee.

Acknowledgment: This section is an adaptation of material supplied by Greg Davies.

LEADERS MEETING CHECK LIST

This is based on a check list used in the leaders meeting of a network of adult groups in one of my parishes. Not all the items were dealt with in each meeting — however, good leadership ensured the major items were covered.

1. **Praise**

For what in our groups can we praise God?
What have been some of our surprises?!
(*This then led into a prayer time.*)

2. **Attendance**

How many are there on each group roll?
What was the average attendance in each group since last we met?
(These were then recorded in the master attendance book.)
Have irregular attenders been followed up by members or the leader?

3. **Group life**

How does each group leader describe the quality of the life of their group?
Are there any difficulties being experienced here?
How can these best be handled?

4. **Pastoral care**

Are there any group members requiring pastoral care in addition to that being received from the group?

(Sickness, bereavement, financial problems, employment, marital or family difficulties, loss of interest, new or renewed commitment to Christ.)
Who will undertake this special pastoral care?
(*This led into a prayer time.*)

5. **Spiritual growth**

What progress is being made in this area?
Are there specific answers to prayer to report?
Are there specific problems being experienced by individuals or the group as a whole?
How can these be dealt with?
In what ways can we deepen the spiritual life of our groups?
Are the regular parish prayer notes being used in each group?

6. **Learning together**

How are the present studies being received?
Are there ways in which they can be improved?
Is the learning being applied to everyday life situations?
Have there been any requests for subjects to be covered in future studies?
Do we need to develop new skills in leading our groups in their learning together?
Have the study resources been ordered for future terms?
What stocks of the present study book are being held by each group?

(The curriculum for the year was decided upon at the evaluation and planning conference held towards the end of the previous year.)

7. **Service**

What action by the groups has arisen out of the study time?

What other service has been undertaken?

Are there aspects of the parish program which could be handled by certain groups or the groups as a whole?

What are we doing to keep before the groups the needs of the community and the wider world?

8. **Leadership**

Who are emerging as possible new leaders?

In what ways are they being affirmed and encouraged to develop and use their gifts?

With what training events can they be linked?

Have they been invited to some of the present leaders' activities?

9. **Growth**

In what ways can we help our groups to grow?

What efforts are being made to enlist new members?

Are any groups approaching the point where they should consider dividing?

Who will we appoint as leaders and assistant leaders of the new groups?

Where and when will the new groups meet?

10. **Finance**

What is the state of the parish small group fund?

(Treasurer's report)

Have the group collections been properly recorded and paid into the central account?

What payments need approving?

11. **Sharing of ideas**

What new ideas or ways of doing anything raised in this check list have been found helpful? In what ways can we improve what we are doing?

12. **Special gatherings**

(These included combined meetings to commence and end each term.)

How successful were these?

How can future meetings be improved?

Special input (speaker, etc)

Program

Supper

Getting people there

When and where is our next meeting to be held?

What planning do we still need to do regarding:

Meeting place

Program

Assignment of duties to each group — preparing location, promotion, aspects of program, supper, welcoming group, etc.

13. **General**

Are there any changes to the time or location of any group?

Any other business?

14. **Next meeting**

When and where will the next meeting be held?

Who will have special responsibilities at that meeting?

Training segment

Leadership of prayer

Special reports

Other

GROUP LEADER'S CHECK LIST

This is based on a check list prepared for leaders in one of my parishes.

1. **Group Members**

Do I have my group roll book up to date?
(Members' names, addresses, telephone numbers, family members' names.)
Am I marking the roll each week?
Are there any who need following up?
Who will do this?
Am I praying for each member of the group?
Are we praying for each other as a group?

2. **Program**

Have I made out a meeting plan with the timing for each item and who is responsible?
Have those responsible for different aspects been reminded?
Do they need any help?
Have all members received study materials, etc needed before the meeting?
Have I found the answer to any questions, etc raised last meeting?
Are there any notices to be given to the group?
(Future combined events, parish activities, etc.)

3. **Arrangements**

Are there any matters to check with the host and hostess?

Are there any special arrangements to be made about transport, seating, baby-sitting, food, name tags?

4. **Equipment and resources**

Have I arranged for the visual aids needed? (Board and writing materials, masking tape, overhead projector and materials, etc.)
Is there any other equipment needed? (Audio or video cassette players, record player, etc.)
Have I arranged for items for praise segments? (Hymn and song books, music book, musical instrument, musician.)
Are any other resources needed? (Spare Bibles, handouts, parish news sheets and prayer notes.)
Are there any materials needed for expression work?

5. **Evaluation**

Have I planned to get some informal feedback from the group as a whole or from individuals?
Am I recording this somewhere for future reference and for sharing with other leaders?
Do we need to do some more formal evaluation?

6. **Leaders meeting and small group pastor or coordinator**

Are there items I need to raise with the meeting as a whole or with the overseer?

MAKING AND USING A SMALL-GROUP COVENANT

This section is to assist groups in developing their own covenant. It should be read in conjunction with **Make a Covenant with Each Other** in chapter 3.

SOME MORE GROUP COVENANTS

The Yokefellow Movement is a vigorous effort to give depth and direction to a full participation in the cause of Christianity by any Christian who wishes to share the 'yoke of Christ'. The Yokefellow card sets the disciplines out in this way:

As one who seeks to submit his/her will to the will of Christ, I humbly undertake to wear Christ's yoke in the following ways:

1. **The Discipline of Prayer.** To pray daily, preferably in the morning with a minimum goal of thirty minutes for the devotional period.
2. **The Discipline of Scripture.** To read, reverently and thoughtfully, every day, a portion of Scripture, following a definite plan.
3. **The Discipline of Worship.** To participate each week in the worship, work and fellowship of a local church.
4. **The Discipline of Money.** To give a definite portion of my annual income for the promotion of the Christian cause.
5. **The Discipline of Time.** To employ my time in such a way that I do not waste God's gift, but make a daily Christian witness, particularly in my regular work.

6. **The Discipline of Study.** To develop my understanding and insight by the regular study of serious Christian books.
7. **The Discipline of a Group Experience.** To attend weekly meetings of a Yokefellow Group, and give priority to the meetings and the daily devotional period. (Used with permission.)

The Serendipity relational Bible study resources covenant has enabled the development of caring groups which reach out to others with the good news of Christ, while making unexpected discoveries in encountering the word of God together.

Lyman Coleman says:

Insist on the Covenant. In the push to transform the church overnight into a network of Bible study and growth groups, the temptation will be to cut corners — especially on the requirements for membership in groups. Don't do it!

If a person is unwilling to sign the Covenant, you should ask this person to wait until a later time when he/she is able to give him/herself to the common discipline.¹

The Serendipity Covenant

1. **Attendance:** Priority is given to the group meetings. Except in cases of emergency, you will be present and on time.
2. **Participation:** The purpose of the first six sessions is to get acquainted and build up a sense of oneness,

or 'koinonia', in your group. This is accomplished by letting each group member 'tell his or her spiritual story' to the group. To be in a group, you must be willing to let the group hear 'your story'.

3. **Confidentiality:** Anything that is shared in the group is kept in strict confidence. This is not a therapy group, but information will be shared from time to time that should not be repeated outside the group.
4. **Accountability:** At the close of every session, an opportunity is given for you to share new goals you want to set for your life. When you state a goal and ask the others in the group to 'support' you in these goals, you are giving permission to the group to 'hold you accountable'.
5. **Accessibility:** The group is for people who know they are weak and need the help of others to overcome temptation, spiritual depression and chronic weakness. In asking to be in a group, you are admitting you need support . . . and that you are willing to support others in the same condition. To be in a group, you are giving others permission to call on you for spiritual help — even at three o'clock in the morning — and you are asking for the same permission from others.
6. **Evangelism:** The group is willing and ready at any time to adopt new people who need the support and correction of your group. In forming a group, you also agree to 'keep an empty chair' for anyone who needs your help and is willing to agree to these minimum disciplines.

THE ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF A SMALL GROUP COVENANT

Professor David Lowes Watson² says the following should be found in a balanced covenant for those who are serious about their discipleship:

Becoming — Christian growth is facilitated by understanding and using the channels of God's grace such as regular, disciplined balanced prayer, planned regular Bible study, personal and corporate worship, witnessing and service to others.

Being — Encouraging Christ-like living through the pursuit of holiness, seeking to have the mind of Christ, and evolving a Christian lifestyle.

Trusting — Deepening faith in and living in partnership with the indwelling Holy Spirit in order to draw upon divine strength, wisdom and love.

Serving — Commitment to, availability for, involvement in Christ's mission to the world.

Accountability — Willingness to both give and receive exhortation, encouragement and support. 'Watching over one another in love.' Openness and honesty.

HOW TO GO ABOUT MAKING A COVENANT

Involve the whole group in drawing up the covenant. Don't superimpose.

Make a clear statement of purpose - a vision statement for the group. What are you hoping to achieve?

Consider some models as a guide. Adapt them to your group's situation.

Keep it simple. Use understandable language.

Take God's word as your guide. Let 'love' not 'law' guide you. 'Love each other as I have loved . . .' (John 15:12; Galatians 2:15,16,21; 5:1,6).

Making it work

The leader should lead by example — modelling. The leader is the first to share openly and honestly, takes risks, is vulnerable, real.

Seek to develop deep levels of trust. It takes time. Work at building acceptance, open sharing, sensitivity, confidentiality.

Have high but realistic expectations of each other. Stretch each other without putting things beyond reach.

Avoid cold legalism — administer with grace. Avoid judgmental attitudes engendering unwarranted guilt.

Affirm progress. Encourage even small steps.

Evaluate the covenant from time to time. Is it helping achieve our purpose? Does it need to be modified?

Focus on Christ. The central purpose is to draw each other and the group closer to Christ.

Seek the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Self effort and group support is never enough!

COVENANT MAKING WORKSHOP

The following was developed and used by Greg Davies, who was for many years coordinator of the extensive network of small groups at St Hilary's Anglican Church, Kew, Victoria. It will help your group in formulating a covenant which is best for them. Use the following questions *prior* to discussing the specific content of the covenant. The wording of the covenants used in this exercise are from the covenant used by Louis Evans Jnr's Covenant Groups, described in chapter 3.

1) The covenant of affirmation

Unconditional love. Recall a time when you have really felt cared for. Did you expect it from that person (or those people)? Did you get the feeling that it didn't matter to those doing the caring whether you could ever repay or could have ever earned their care? What did this teach you about unconditional love? If you are to love others as much as God loves you, how is this going to affect the way you relate to them?

Now write the covenant of affirmation in terms that are meaningful to you and in a way that realistically expresses what you can do.

2) The covenant of availability

How easy do you find it to respond to requests for help? Do you find it just as easy to ask for help? Have you ever given permission to anyone to call you at any time of night or day? How would you feel if your best friend rang you at 3.00am just for a chat? What is your normal response when the phone rings in the middle of dinner?

3) The covenant of prayer

How do you respond to the idea of a prayer partner? How easy do you find actually praying for someone when they ask you to or you have offered to pray for them? Have you ever prayed with someone over the phone?

4) The covenant of openness

How have you demonstrated to another person that you need them? Who have you ever trusted with your dreams? Who really knows you? To what degree do you live the life of a self-sufficient person? What prevents you from disclosing your joys and sorrows to others? How do you feel about the notion of 'letting it all hang out'?

5) The covenant of honesty

How honest is honest? Are there limits to honesty? What qualities in a relationship must be in place if being honest is helpful? How do you keep others honest? What is the hardest thing you find being honest about? What limits honesty in a group?

6) The covenant of sensitivity

Recount a time when you have felt someone has walked all over your feelings with hobnailed boots. How did this affect you? When you have wanted to comfort someone and words have been inappropriate, how did you communicate with them? When you greet someone with 'Giddyay, how are you?' how do you really show that you have 'heard' their reply which truly reflects how they are? What do you do when someone is insensitive in a certain situation?

7) The covenant of confidentiality

What prevents you from being open in a group? Reflect on a situation in which you were involved where confidences were betrayed. What effect did this have on your relationship with those concerned and the degree to which you were prepared to be open with those individuals subsequently? What would you do if you realised that you had inadvertently betrayed something shared in the group?

8) The covenant of accountability

How do you react when someone strongly encourages you to take on a responsibility you could readily manage but you are unwilling to exercise the required gifts? To whom are you accountable at the moment? How does this accountability work? How would you respond if someone challenged you about a certain lifestyle issue?

Why are Christians encouraged to be accountable to one another (ie to be their brother's or sister's keeper)? What other covenants need to be in place if a group of people are to be accountable to one another so that they can become the type of people God has designed them to be in his loving creation?

References

- (1) Lyman Coleman, *Serendipity Basic Series — Leaders' Guide*, ANZEA-JBCE.
- (2) David Lowes Watson, *Accountable Discipleship* (Discipleship Resources, 1984) Nashville.

EVALUATION – SOME IDEAS AND SAMPLE FORMS

Here are some resources which have been used to good effect by Greg Davies in reviewing groups in the extensive small-group network at St Hilary's, Kew, Victoria.

Form 1 — PERSONAL NEEDS

Is your group meeting these needs? Below are a number of needs which we would expect to be met in a vital group. Reflect on the situation in your group. Attempt to indicate how the group would identify the degree to which the needs are met. Place an 'X' along the line to indicate a consensus point.

	Need always met		Need never met
(1) The need to belong, knowing you'll be missed if you're not there.	1	5	10
(2) The need to be loved, not just welcomed but loved; you know you're not too much trouble.	1	5	10
(3) The need to be encouraged. For the person who is with non-Christians all day, to be in a Christian group is an enormous tonic.	1	5	10

(4) The need to share. A small group can create an atmosphere of open unjudgmental honesty	1	5	10
(5) The need to be prayed for. Each of us needs to know that others are praying for us.	1	5	10
(6) The need to receive help. From time to time practical help will be required and always spiritual help is needed.	1	5	10
(7) The need to love and care for others. We need people with whom we meet regularly and on whom we can lavish our love.	1	5	10
(8) The need to grow in Christian understanding.	1	5	10
(9) The need to learn from the attitudes of others. We learn from seeing and hearing other people.	1	5	10
(10) The need to grow in Christian expression. Far too many Christians are inarticulate when it comes to explaining their faith to others; their own needs hinder the expression of their faith.	1	5	10

- (11) The need to have partners in the gospel. Those whom we know, who understand and believe as we do, so that together we can seek to tell others about Christ. 1 5 10
-
- (12) The need to discover our gifts and to have the confidence to use them. 1 5 10
-

The point of this type of evaluation is to help identify the group's strengths and weaknesses and to affirm the strengths and make changes to get rid of the weaknesses. It will usually point to changes. The changes may be minor, but in the case where a group is failing to meet many needs there may be little the group can do about it in its present state. There may be a number of reasons for this type of situation. At least four obvious ones are:

- (1) The group is at the end of its functional life (ie after eighteen months to two years of being essentially the same group, it will tend to be quite happy to meet an 'agreed' set of needs and feel uncomfortable when changes are suggested). This group needs to split and re-form with new members.
- (2) The group has never had an expectation that many of these needs should be met in the context of this type of group.
This group needs to embark on a teaching program centred on the goals for small groups.
- (3) Many members have never made a commitment to the group. This is indicated, for example, by the fact that absences are frequent.
- (4) Leadership has not been able to facilitate the meeting of people's needs.

In this instance the leader needs to examine what aspect of leadership in the group is not working. For example, the style is too authoritarian or laissez-faire; there are too many competing demands on the leader's time; leadership is rarely if ever shared; the leader is not a good model of the qualities required to meet the group's needs. (If a leader is not a caring person, it's unlikely the group will meet the need that people have to be cared for.)

Acknowledgment: The twelve points in the evaluation form are taken from Patsy Evans, *What? Me a House Group Leader*; Grove Pastoral Series.

Form 2 — REVIEW OF SMALL GROUP

Respond by placing an 'X' along the continuum between very effective and poor. If a characteristic is not part of the group at all, rate it as poor.

- (1) How effective is this growth group in meeting your needs?

I-----I-----I-----I
 very effective effective OK poor

What needs have been met?.....

.....

What needs have not been met?

.....

- (2) How effective is the worship time in your group?

I-----I-----I-----I
 very effective effective OK poor

List some strengths of your worship time

.....

List some weaknesses of your worship time.....

.....

Ministry (to each other, including practical ways — Fellowship of Love)

-----I-----I-----I-----
 High Low
 Further comment.....

Prayer and praise (meaningful, thoughtful, not superficial)

-----I-----I-----I-----
 High Low
 Further comment.....

Sharing (openness, honesty)

-----I-----I-----I-----
 High Low
 Further comment.....

REFLECTION ON A GROUP'S PILGRIMAGE

(A very useful tool to help in the termination process)

- (1) Drawing a time line for the group.
 - On a line, list the key events that have affected the group during its current life cycle (both highs and lows).
 - Show the points where people entered or left the group.
 - If the group grew out of an old group it may be worth reflecting on the significance this may have had on the current group. List these ideas in a space before the time line.

(Set up this activity by collecting the group around and together draw the time line on a large piece of paper spread out on the table.)

- (2) Telling my story about the group.
 - Share some humorous story.
 - Share some not-so-humorous story.
 - Talk about what God has been telling/teaching you in our time together.
- (3) Talk about, and possibly write on the time line, things that were happening when you felt:
 - quite connected to the group
 - not connected to the group
 - or
 - cared for by the group
 - not cared for by the group.
- (4) Review the goals you set for your Small Group. How did we measure up?

After reading them, people are asked to respond to the following. Write the responses on the piece of paper spread out on the table.

 - Which goal do you think we have met well?
 - Which goal have we been least able to reach?

(It may be helpful to see if the group has the same understanding of what the goals are.)
- (5) Next time around.

Write down what you will be looking for most in the group when the group begins again (or any future group you may be joining). Write your ideas in the space below:

The things I'll be looking for most in my small group next year are:

What is God wanting of you? Of the group? Commit the group to come together for a meeting of worship and waiting on God in prayer before making big decisions about the group and your involvement in it.

Note: Question 5 gives members a chance to turn negatives into positives.

OVERSIGHT OF A LOCAL SMALL-GROUP NETWORK – A WORKING MODEL

Here is a proven model, for the oversight of a large number of small groups linked to a local church, developed by Greg Davies while heading up the many and varied groups of St Hilary's Anglican Church, Kew, Victoria (see also chapter 3, Form a Local Network).

Diagram no. 5, in chapter 3, implies a rigid hierarchical system, but only in terms of accountability. The reality is somewhat different in that the system works with a high degree of autonomy being given to the group's leadership, and strenuous efforts are made not to undermine its authority.

THE SMALL-GROUP PASTOR'S ROLE

This is the job description for the small-group pastor.

Main objectives: To pastor and grow the small groups.

Small Groups tasks

- To pastor, supervise, administer, develop and grow the small groups program.
- To grow the groups both spiritually and numerically.
- To train and encourage new leaders for replacement and expansion.
- To resource the small groups for study, care and evangelism.
- To encourage and foster the spiritual growth of leaders, in particular their personal prayer life.

- To meet monthly with the leaders in a group for further training, encouragement, sharing and prayer.
- To organise a training weekend for leaders.
- To pastor the leaders by spending significant amounts of time with them individually.
- To assist in finding a solution to 'overload' of key congregational leaders who are also small-group leaders.
- To promote healthy family life through the small groups rather than create added stress upon families.
- To ensure that the life of small groups remains vital.
- To promote and encourage groups to work towards reaching the agreed goals of small groups.
- To work as a team member with the rest of the pastoral staff.
- To work with the small groups support committee.
- To hold before the congregation the desirability of seeing commitment to the local church being also a commitment to membership of a small group.

Ministry Team tasks

- (1) Some leadership of worship.
- (2) Some counselling (but concentrated on the needs of leaders and group members).
- (3) Regular attendance at staff meetings.
- (4) Provide reports to Vestry as required.
- (5) Meet regularly with a senior staff member.

- (6) Participate in preachers meeting and contribute to the planning of parish teaching program.

GOALS FOR COORDINATORS

- 1) **To be part of a coordinators leadership community** in order to be pastored and to grow as a coordinator. The leadership community is to have regular scheduled meetings.

Visioning: ‘Without a vision the people perish.’ This is achieved by: reaffirming core values and goals for the ministry of groups to the Christian community, including the need to identify and train new leaders and to pastor leaders; affirming those people and events that align closely to the reality of the vision; gaining a fresh vision from God through acts of worship.

Sharing/ministry: A time when the coordinators can experience a model small group and receive ministry, talk about how their leaders are going and receive affirmative and reinforcing feedback, and check out the details of the feedback sheets.

Learning together to do it better: In-depth Bible teaching to equip coordinators (and to model good Bible study techniques); training in practical ministry skills (to also model the coaching principles); help for leaders in the task of releasing and developing the gifts and skills of people in their groups; meeting the specific training needs as expressed by the coordinators.

- 2) **To establish a small-group leaders leadership community**, with five or six sets of leaders, in order to grow and pastor the leaders. This leadership community is also to have regular scheduled meetings.

The three components of this community are identical to those of the coordinators community but relate specifically to the small-group roles.

- 3) **Some specific objectives and activities for the coordinator**

- Praying for leaders on a regular basis.
- Praying with the leaders particularly during the ministry time and during the one-to-one times.
- Attempt to visit or at least phone your leaders once every second month.
- Ensure that the relevant feedback forms are

completed and information passed on to the small groups pastor.

- Plan to train (coach) leaders in a number of areas. Strongly emphasise skills in outreach and pastoral care.
- Require leaders to identify and train other potential small-group leaders in order to develop a leadership team and to produce future leaders of new groups.
- Enable and direct leaders to identify the gifts of people in their groups so that the gifts are released for ministry for the growth of the group.
- Continue the ‘health’ check of groups, looking for things such as erratic attendance, falling membership, closed static groups, oversized groups.
- Modelling the things that are important, such as specific skill areas already mentioned, keeping the groups Christ-focused, thanking God, facing challenges with God.
- Reinforcing and demonstrating the understanding that all people in leadership at all levels of our church’s life are responsible/accountable to the congregation and ultimately to God.
- Coordinators have the role of visioning and setting goals for the whole group system.
- First line of resourcing leaders with materials and ideas on aspects of running groups.

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REVIEWS

‘Vintage Mallison. His best yet. It’s comprehensive, practical, and theologically sound. A must for ministers and Christian leaders who want qualitative as well as quantitative church growth.’

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The Rev Dr Bill Brown
Syndal Baptist Church, Vic

.....

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I sincerely hope that all ministers and leaders will not only have this book on their shelves but will use it in their congregations.’

John E Mavor
Secretary, National Mission and Evangelism
Uniting Church in Australia

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The Rev Peter Corney
Senior minister, St Hilarys, Kew, Vic
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