

MentorNet #08
Starting Small Groups:
The Need to Prepare Your People

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Many churches are making the healthy transition into becoming a “cell church.” That is, they are forming and multiplying small groups that are tiny but very real *churches* within the larger church body. Most churches in the West that attempt the transition, however, fail to carry it through. When we examine what they did (or did not do) the reason is usually obvious. In nearly every case they failed to prepare their people, including leaders, adequately. Few churches realize the importance of this preparation.

Observations by Christian workers in many countries agree on several points, which we must communicate effectively to our people:

- A) Small groups built around seekers, new believers and recently converted group leaders can easily grow and reproduce, with proper discipling and leadership training.

Small groups built around mature Christians, on the other hand, seldom grow and almost never reproduce. (We explain why below.)

- B) Small group organization that grows naturally out of existing relationships and builds on the strengths of the people who attend them, grow and reproduce readily, regardless of the “model” they follow (forms and structures).

“Models” with external forms and structures imported from other churches seldom lead to healthy, reproductive small groups. Such “imports” if used, require radical modification.

- C) Small groups form and reproduce readily when they grow out of members’ sincere desire to fellowship together, to share Christ and to serve one another in love.

Formal classes and training seminars, on the other hand, rarely enable Christian workers or lay people to launch small groups that grow and reproduce.

Why is it easier to form small groups with seekers, new believers and leaders who are still not mature, than with mature Christians and leaders?

One reason is that mature Christians have few relationships with unsaved persons who trust their opinion or have seen serious transformation in the Christians’ lives.

Another reason is that some mature Christians are so into living “by grace,” that the spiritual problems and sins of the seekers and new believers are of little concern to them and so their testimony seems off-target.

A third reason is that many mature leaders are accustomed to a style of meetings that does not fit small groups. They do not know how to let their small groups be small churches. They may try, but they imitate a style of worship that fits only a large congregation. They often turn their groups into conventional Bible study groups with a classroom format even when meeting in homes, that can become ingrown partying fellowships or exclusive, highly-focused and exclusive

ministry task groups. Such groups have their place but are not the answer for healthy home groups. Healthy groups practice the spontaneous and edifying “one another” interaction that the New Testament requires and that small groups do so well when properly led. Smaller groups can more easily maintain the intimacy, honesty and spontaneity that most people expect from friends and relatives—if we let them. New leaders, properly prepared, are more apt to give spiritually-immature people freedom to relate this way and serve one another, although in quite imperfect ways.

New believers usually have many unsaved friends and relatives who are still willing to listen to them. They have not yet adopted those evangelical cultural practices that offend ordinary sinners.

Mikel Neumann writes: “Cell groups grow through family and friendship networks. In other words, small groups of people grow as the people involved bring in those people they are close to. ... North Americans are less in tune with their neighbors and often live in cities far away from family members. However, their networks run along lines of common interests or affinity groups.” (From “How to Reach Your City With Cell (Home) Groups”, a free download from <http://www.acquirewisdom.com/cellsign.htm>.)

Why do small groups that grow spontaneously out of existing relationships and a desire to serve one another, develop far better than those that follow “models” from other churches?

There are many cultural factors (variables) that create significant differences between any two churches. These are magnified exponentially if a model comes from a different society or country. There are, however, universal principles or functions that apply everywhere, but they take on very different forms and structures in each locality. For a number of vivid examples see Mikel Neumann’s book *Small Groups for Urban Cultures*, Wm. Carey Library, ISBN 0-87808-281-6 <<http://www.wclbooks.com>>.

When we try to launch small groups through seminars or workshops, we tend to seek and follow the external forms and structures that fit only one social group, rather than to implement underlying New Testament guidelines that apply universally. Launching, leading and loving small groups requires skills that can only be gained through practice, whereas training classes usually only provide understanding of ideas and models.

Non-Western churches generally have fewer problems in forming reproductive small groups. They do some very positive things that Western churches, because of their non-biblical traditions, find difficult. Let us examine some of these.

Non-Western churches are more willing to allow poor, less-educated people to serve as leaders. In Western society middle and upper class clergy want their groups to be too good. They do not consider most of their church members to be “leader material,” because of dress styles, personality quirks, educational level or economic standing. Their laymen “are not ready.” That is, clergy often look for suave, articulate, theologically-minded, “respectable” types who — they image — will be able to attract others of the same kind into their congregations.

Non-Western pastors are usually more willing for “lay” people to serve as genuine shepherds. Western clergy, on the other hand, are often hesitant to “put the cap” on capable lay leaders who might prove competent and challenge their leadership. Sometimes such pastors unconsciously

sense their own inability to teach, guide, encourage or control able lay people, and protect their position by hiding behind the tradition of an elite, exclusive priestly caste.

A healthy guideline that many missionaries have discovered for reproducing churches and small groups is to follow only *New Testament* guidelines for selecting and training leaders and to discard all the rest.

Non-Western churches have, for the most part, escaped the deadening influence of *affluence*. Wealth weakens spirituality. Personal pride, cultural or religious arrogance, and satisfaction with material possessions, kill faith. Poorer people are more willing to change and therefore more willing to listen to the promises that Jesus offers to them. If you want to see many come to Christ in new small groups, look on the fields that are ripe for harvest, as Christ commands. Look at the poor and immigrant groups around you. Jesus did!

Where Christianity is growing rapidly, it is usually through some kind of small group ministry: social action teams, Bible discovery groups, church cells, interest circles, and so on. Most such groups are started and led by very ordinary persons whose pastors or other group leaders have authorized, encouraged and equipped them to do so. In these situations, we observe several common factors:

- Most groups that grow and reproduce are led by recent converts, and usually meet in the homes of new believers or seekers.
- The groups that grow fastest are those that start smallest. Large growth comes through multiplying many tiny groups that at first are ‘too small.’
- Most conversions and new churches arise from the poorer, less developed social groups in a country. Often they are the people who embrace more vices and crime. “Good soil” — it seems — is composed of “bad people.” Romans 5:20 has something to say about this.

Considering all these implications, certain guidelines for preparing small group leaders become patently clear:

1. Seek some of your potential leaders from among the culturally-rustic, theologically-naïve and less spiritually mature persons in your congregation who are willing to bring together their unsaved friends and relatives.
2. Provide coaching for them behind the scenes, such as Aquilla and Priscilla did for Apollos in Acts 18:24-28.

By “coaching” we mean mentoring the way that Jesus and the apostles did it. They did not approach their training sessions with a prepared outline. They observed the needs and listened. From the trainees, a coach learns their friends’ needs and questions instead of dispensing lofty ideas and well-packaged curricula written originally for other social classes. The coach provides insights that answer current needs of persons in the group or families, and help the new leaders to make short-term plans for what to do with their little groups. Pray with them for the folks they are helping and teaching. We must not forget that only God converts sinners and grows new Christians.

3. Help new leaders to look constantly for the “vein of gold,” those friends and relatives of new believers who have not yet been hardened to the gospel by boring sermons, hypocritical believers or popular media.
4. Let small group leaders train new leaders by apprenticing them within the groups, giving them more and more responsibility until they can lead their own groups. Let as many from the parent group who want, go with them. Maintain the relationships with those who leave by providing occasional united celebrations and coaching.
5. Make sure your small group leaders are shepherds, not preachers. If you do not know the difference, then please, *please*, delegate leadership training to others.
6. Build strong, edifying ties between groups. Arrange for members of one group to coach members of another. A group small enough for spontaneous interaction is too small to have a good balance of spiritual gifts and gift-based ministries. [There were two “therefore”s in a row.] Therefore, it is just as important to practice the interactive ‘church body life’ between groups as within them.
7. Deal with immediate needs. Pray for healing. Prove the transforming power of God by putting into practice serving one another as described in Romans 12.

One enemy of such edifying interaction are the ‘ticks’ that creep into small groups and suck the life-blood from small groups. Some are seeking material benefits, others merely attention. Help small group leaders to avoid wasting valuable time with chronic problems and people who enjoy being the victim of bad circumstances. Such parasites on the body of Christ absorb too much time and attention in your meetings, if you let them. Have someone deal with them in private, or quiet them by saying, after they have spoken once in a meeting, “Let’s hear from someone who has not yet spoken.” You might also say something like, “Let’s deal with the needs of others who may be too shy to speak up.” If the parasites do not control their behavior, then we must ask them to leave our group, so it can survive.

Help your leaders, and all your people, to see that small groups are *normal*. The first-century churches of Jerusalem and other cities in the book of Acts were clusters of tiny house churches. Their elders were shepherds. In Christian “people movements” all over the world, small groups are their backbone. If you need help with this, you may contact Galen Currah at GalenCurrah@cvmail.net.

8. Let groups be different! Do not push them into one mold. Do not force one curriculum on all of them. Give options that will meet many of the current needs or ministry opportunities. Do not dictate when or where groups must meet. Let leaders with more experience experiment with new things. You may find that God is willing to save many more folks that you imagined possible, but they may be culturally or economically different from your present congregation or groups. You may have to let your new leaders shepherd them in quite separate groups or a separate congregation. Let Christ’s kingdom grow!

For mentoring tools and sites, visit <<http://www.mentorandmultiply.com>>.

We invite those who use Train & Multiply™ to write to George Patters <GPatterson@cvmail.net>.

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