

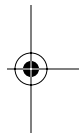
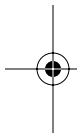


INTRODUCTION

I was once invited to speak about small groups in front of a large gathering of pastors from my denomination but, because of an already crowded docket, was given only a few minutes at the end of the meeting to do so. As I pondered my presentation, I settled on a simple yet fairly airtight logic.

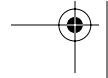
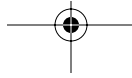
I started the presentation by asking, “How many of you have small groups in your churches?” About a third of the pastors raised their hands.

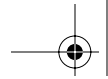
“You might want to reconsider your response to my question,” I said. “If you are involved in a congregation, then *every one of you* has small groupings in your congregations. Furthermore, every person in your congregation is in at least one group, and these groups have penetrated absolutely every aspect of the life of your churches. Of course, you may not recognize their presence. If you do, you might call them by their more frequently used name: cliques.” From their response, I think they got the point.



Cliques	Small Groups
Closed	Open
Inward-focused	Outward-focused
Controlling Leadership	Spirit-led
Past-oriented	Future-oriented
Elitist	Inclusive
Static	Fluid/Multiplying
Talk	Do
Segmented	Integrated
Unintentional	Intentional

The difference between cliques and small groups



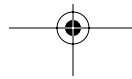
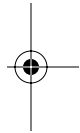


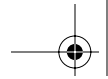
Just think about a church fellowship event. In a large meeting hall full of people, what results? Small groups: clusters of people, usually ranging in size (give or take a few loners) from two to six. The same dynamic tends to hold true for informal gatherings of friends, for committee or service team dynamics, and even (in congregations with predictable worship patterns) for people who sit near each other in sanctuaries, week in and week out. We understand from studying human practices that humans need small groupings for survival, support, emotional strength and stimulation.

WHAT IS THE SMALL GROUP MOVEMENT?

The small group movement, whose roots are in both the early church and later church history, became a broad phenomenon in the late twentieth century. Highly mobile and disconnected people of all ages began to seek deeper fellowship and spiritual nurture in groups. Key leaders began to emerge: Yonggi Cho, Lyman Coleman, Roberta Hestenes and Dawson Trotman, and newer leaders like Bill Donahue, Carl George and Ralph Neighbour. The movement was fueled by key parachurch ministry groups, including InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ and the Navigators. Christian publishing houses such as InterVarsity Press and Zondervan began to develop small group curriculum and leader guides, as well as many support materials for leaders. Congregations independent and mainline, charismatic and liturgical, Catholic and Protestant began to embrace groups, and conferences and training events were held all over the world.

What has been the result of such effort and energy? On the positive side, most congregations in the Western world have identifiable groups. Within the broad context of group life, small groups assume a variety of formats, focuses and names. Churches and fellowships offer





prayer circles, Bible studies, mission fellowships, sharing and caring groups, evangelistic teams, new member classes, house churches, cell groups, and more.

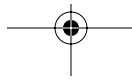
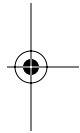
Even though the groups differ in size and focus, the vast majority possess several common elements. They are small and Christian in orientation, some study occurs, and people feel loved and cared for.

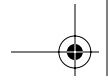
On the other hand, much work remains if this movement is to continue to be vital. Research conducted by academicians, polling firms, publishers, and even secular businesses and institutions has uncovered issues that need to be addressed. Information gained about group dynamics, training and structure issues, and multiplication methods needs to be intentionally taught and modeled if groups are to remain viable and transformative.

For example, although the movement has grown rapidly, many (if not most) groups have become ingrown or focused inward. Why does this matter? First, if churches and ministries are unable to find ways to multiply or create new group opportunities, the vast untouched public will not participate in groups. The movement could die within a matter of generations.

Second, inward-focused groups die. At one time in the small group movement, “family style” life commitments were in vogue in some circles. The idea was that you would make a lifelong commitment to your group, so that the bonds could imitate those of a family. Unfortunately, these long-term groups were nothing like families, because even (especially?) families have an “outward focus.” That is, from generation to generation, children are born, move out, find partners, form new families, and so on. A family tree is not a straight line. If it were so, families would die. Inward-focused groups face the same problem.

Another significant concern related to the small group movement is how to touch congregations that have not yet invested in significant





group life. Entire books have addressed the subject of bringing renewal to dying Western churches. Yet the inertia, the force that keeps many congregations moving in a slow death pattern, is difficult to overcome.

The current deficits and problems, including the vast number of nonparticipants in life-giving groups, provide a setting for a new generation of leaders to step forward and create new opportunities for group life.

GETTING STARTED

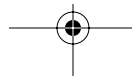
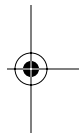
Churches often start small groups without having first addressed the fundamental issues of this ministry:

- How will we form groups?
- Who will lead our groups?
- How do we address problems in groups?
- How will groups relate to our church?
- What happens when a small group becomes a large group?

When leaders are recruited and groups formed without intention, disaster lurks. You have heard the phrase, “Aim at nothing, hit nothing.” Actually, the phrase should be restated. “Aim at nothing, hit the wrong thing.”

Many individuals and congregations have been damaged by a particular small group or ministry experience. Others have discovered that any positive impact that existed is now past, and they are dealing with an uninvolved congregation, apathetic leaders or members and a ministry that has plateaued or declined.

The Big Book on Small Groups is a training course whose purpose is to introduce new leaders to healthy group principles. Whether you are starting a ministry from nothing, attempting to revitalize an existing ministry or training leaders for a vital ministry, this resource offers help





with the most fundamental issue that every church or fellowship must answer: how to train leaders.

The Big Book on Small Groups was first published in 1991. This updated version includes new material, fresh insight and improvements suggested by those who used the original book.

The course can be used by a variety of group types within a range of group structures. Leaders of cell groups, care groups, nurture groups, committees, ministry teams, Bible studies and healing groups will find the material useful and adaptable.

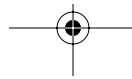
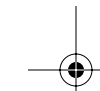
The first four chapters are designed to be the core small-group training course, while the remaining eight chapters can be used for follow-up training. Of course, the material can also be implemented within an intentional twelve-week training program.

This training material is easily adaptable for an individual learning alone, a one-on-one setting (coach-leader or leader-apprentice), a small group of potential leaders (also called a “turbo” group, since every trained leader may form a group), or a Sunday school environment. It can be crafted for use in weekend training, four-week training (with monthly follow-up meetings in which chapters five through twelve are discussed) and twelve-week training formats.

For coaches and trainers, material in the appendixes will guide you in how to better use this resource. At the end of each chapter you will find a section titled “Ideas for Coaches/Trainers.” There you’ll find helpful exercises and discussion points as you walk leaders through the training process.

GROUP PHILOSOPHY

This material will work best when used in conjunction with your own church’s small group materials. These materials need to address strategic issues such as how people are placed in groups, what



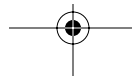
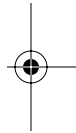


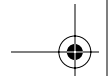
the leadership support structure looks like, and what types and names of groups are used in your particular setting. To help you ask and answer these key questions, I refer you to another book I wrote, *Starting Small Groups: Creating Communities That Matter* (Abingdon Press).

When *The Big Book on Small Groups* was first published, there were few significant small group resources. In the 1990s, however, many key books were published, including some that have deeply changed the way group life is perceived in the local congregation.

The simplest small group model is the “cell church,” proposed by church leaders Ralph Neighbour (*Where Do We Go From Here?* [Touch Publications]) and Joel Comiskey. A cell church, in general, is a congregation that uses two key ministry elements: worship (celebration) and small groups (also called multiplying cells). Cell churches tend to dispense with “program” and age-oriented ministries, choosing instead to perform the key church ministries (care, counsel, nurture, support and worship, and ministry to adults, children, youth and so on) in cell groups. These groups are led by lay leaders, and when groups grow, they multiply. Once a week (or, depending on the congregation, perhaps once a month) the cells then gather for a celebration—a worship service.

A second model, proposed by Carl George (*Prepare Your Church for the Future* [Revell Publishing]), is the “meta” model. It possesses similar traits to the cell model, including multiplying groups and the corporate worship and celebration of these groups. But the meta model incorporates a third, perhaps more “traditional” element of church life called “congregation.” This layer of church life recognizes more program-oriented elements such as Sunday school classes, training events and age-appropriate outreach events. Instead of perceiving those ministries as ends to themselves, however, the meta model views them as





gathering events (“fishing ponds”) that can draw people into group life.

A third model, which modifies George’s meta approach, embraces the idea of “a church of small groups” (Bill Donahue, *Building A Church of Small Groups* [Zondervan]). This model recognizes both the importance of connected, accountable, multiplying groups *and* important aspects of congregational life that, while not “small group” experiences in a technical sense, benefit from group principles.

A FINAL WORD

Whether you are an experienced facilitator of groups, an apprentice or a first-time leader, welcome! You are about to enter an experience designed to train you to make disciples for Jesus Christ in community. My desire in preparing this book is that as the gospel is preached and disciples begin to follow Jesus, he will receive the honor and obedience that are due him, and his kingdom will be extended to the ends of the earth. Small groups play a vital part in that process, so let’s get started!

