

Subj: Small Groups
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From: ghinson@mail1.il.net (Gerald Hinson)
To: 102074.675@compuserve.com (Becker, Ron), garygbond@aol.com (Bond, Gary),
ad997@detroit.freenet.org (Bostic, Dave), ymb2829@aol.com (Brauninger, Mark),
chrisjburk@aol.com (Burkholder, Chris), CoffeyDE@aol.com (Coffey, Dave),
104166.2770@compuserve.com (Davis, Gerald), ghinson@il.net (Gerald Hinson),
75553.2220@compuserve.com (Grigg, Bob), kaelble@anet-stl.com (Kaelble, Alan),
gjk100@aol.com (Kryder, Jeff), 73740.151@compuserve.com (Lundy, Dale),
JAMARG@ccmail.monsanto.com (Margherio, Mike and Jane),
75543.2650@compuserve.com (Mehringer, Ben), 76467.3147@compuserve.com
(Robinson, Dale), 104252.341@compuserve.com (Rush, Dusty and Crystal)

March 10, 1996

Hello all,

I wanted to take a few minutes to respond to you regarding the small-group meeting we had last Sunday.

First of all, thank you all for coming. I was very encouraged by the number of people who showed up. Your presence implies a deep concern for the welfare of our body and the small groups and for that I am very grateful.

As I stated in the meeting the small-groups were begun in late 1986 for a number of purposes. These included:

- Training new leaders.

- Provide an atmosphere which would be more effective for evangelism. The idea being that many people who would not consider coming to church would be more likely to attend a study in someone's home.

- Provide better shepherding of the congregation. In many cases, the leadership wouldn't here about people struggling in marriages, etc. in many cases until it was too late.

In the years since the groups' inception, we have seen varying levels of success in accomplishing these goals.

The primary purpose of Sunday's get-together was to allow you the chance to provide feedback on both the group you attend as well as the small-group program

overall. A
number of items were raised for consideration.

1) Dave Coffey expressed concern over the lack of a formal "job description" for group leaders. This item is near and dear to my heart as well. For example, where does the job of group facilitator end and elder begin? It was mentioned that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, and as such we all have a responsibility for one another's spiritual well-being. But, on the other hand, God inspired Paul to have Timothy appoint elders to fulfill some very specific roles in a way distinct from "every" Christian.

Personally, I think it would be very healthy to build a formal description of the facilitator role. Years ago, when I was first asked to facilitate a group I was given a written job description of the role. It was very clarifying for me. Some of the responsibilities which have been brewing in my mind regarding this role are:

- commit to a minimum of one hour of prayer a week for your group
- attendance of regular, scheduled meeting with leadership to report on spiritual health/needs of group. This time would also provide an opportunity for the leadership to provide direction regarding spiritual needs within the body, etc.
- plan ? number outings a year for group (some social, some service)
- set aside time (one weekend?, maybe a couple of vacation days?) for formal training as group facilitator a year.

Again, these are just initial ideas of mine. Take them for what they are worth.

~~Please pray very specifically that God will clarify for us what role He wants us to play as group facilitators.~~

2) Another item which was mentioned was the formal group lessons. Historically, Dale Robinson has prepared these lessons for us. I have already approached Gary Bond

and Mark Brauningner concerning how we could assist Dale in this task. This particular task can be as simple as preparing a written lesson to guide the facilitators in a group discussion to preparing a cassette or video which exhaustively examines a text.

Ben Williams used to prepare both a handout and a cassette tape. The cassette tape was formal instruction (usually pretty meaty) for the facilitators to use beforehand to prepare to teach a passage. I personally found his instruction invaluable.

Another possible approach would be to have an additional, separate group for facilitators only. Jina has been attending CBS (Community Bible Study) this year. Their facilitators meet on Wednesday for a private study and then host the community study the following day. An advantage of this approach is that group leaders are better able to "give" once their own cup has been filled. The disadvantage here is, of course, the amount of time required to fit another get-together into our schedules.

Short-term (let's get practical), Dale Robinson has asked us to provide the material which will be used the last 6-8 weeks prior to the summer break. One suggestion already in is to look at Ecclesiastes. Short-term suggestions are welcome. What would your group benefit from studying? Call me on this one (961-6665) soon. We need to get rolling on this.

Incidentally, most of the groups have built their own children's programs. I would very much like to see us combine our efforts in this area. Several years ago, our group (Jim Cox's home) asked both Lynne Tomanek and Jan Holland to give us a one-night mini seminar on "How To Teach Kids Effectively." It was excellent. I would be willing to approach some of our veteran teachers, if enough people were interested in a session of that sort again.

3) Jim Griffith reminded us all of how important it is when starting a new group for everyone to be aware of the group's goals. Over the years, we have struggled

with the purpose of the groups. Some have wanted to focus on evangelism, others body life, and some on both. Opinions on this topic abound, but one thing is certain: if the group cannot agree on its purpose it will not be effective. I was especially grateful for the honest struggles which were expressed by both Matt Merrit and Jim for a couple of reasons. One, it makes it much easier to pray for a group when you know specifics to pray about. Two, we can now move forward as a team and help address the problems. Incidentally, I spoke with Matt this morning about his group. He shared that a number of new people had showed up last week. God has already begun to answer our prayers for this group. In addition, this group will be meeting with the elders when Matt returns from a conference (scheduled next week) to formally discuss the issues raised.

4) Steve Awtrey, along with Dave and Jena Coffey, shared quite a bit regarding the way in which their group split last year. Dave commented that it was always easy to think of a reason not to split until they attended the one-day conference with Pat Hile. This conference caused them to begin to re-evaluate their group's health more openly. Steve stated that he had begun to notice that prayer night had begun to flop. The intimate time in prayer which their smaller group had afforded was no longer occurring. The group had simply grown too large for that level of intimacy in their prayer time.

Once they realized the need to split into two, smaller groups, the obvious question remained: who would be in each group. The answer was a practical one: families with older children attend one group, families with younger children the other. After the split, prayer time began to flourish again.

One of the hardest things about groups is when the time comes to split.

Relationships are a God-given gift and understandably precious to us all. It is natural to resist separation. However, sometimes one has to look at the higher calling of spiritual health. This is one of the roles of the group facilitators: we must constantly be asking the question "Is this group healthy. What is God guiding us to do?" I really appreciate the sensitivity to healthy prayer life and other issues which prompted this group to divide. We should all learn from this example.

Along these lines, another challenge for us as group leaders is to provide the opportunities for the growth of new leaders. Please petition God in your weekly prayer time to guide us in this endeavor.

5) A number of other excellent issues were raised: Chris Hale shared that they had accidentally stumbled into a "bussing" ministry. The Margherio's shared that their group was struggling with low attendance and needing help in the teaching role. Alan Kaelble talked about how being in the same group for a long time was positive in that it was a local, neighborhood group, but suffered in that he rarely has occasion to meet most of the membership of our congregation. Bob Grigg talked about the need, as a group leader, to ask questions of the teenagers which require answers of acceptance or rejection of the teaching.

Steve Smith, Jina and I attended a church leadership conference last November in

Chicago. The congregation which hosted the conference has a membership of 15,000.

Numbers aren't everything, but one has to ask the question "Why are so many people attracted to this church?" In their own words, it all boils down to one thing: community. People are desperate for a sense of community. This particular church is

probably the most successful implementation of the mega-church model I've ever encountered. They are, to a person, clear on their church's mission "to turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ." This church is very successful in attracting people who have given up on "church." After twenty years of ministry and growth the leadership of this church recently concluded that "small groups provide the optimal environment for the life-change Jesus Christ intends for every believer."

Consider this excerpt from WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? by Ralph W. Neighbour Jr.

The largest single local church in the history of Christianity exists in this land. It is the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea. It has grown from five people who gathered in a tent in 1958, to a congregation of over 600,000 in 1989. After spurts of growth using more traditional church methodology, Dr. Cho instituted cell groups in 1964. In the first five years, without cells, the congregation grew to about 3,800 people. By September, 1980, the congregation had 141,000 members. For the past nine years the church has averaged a growth of 140 members every single day. In a personal interview with Dr. Cho in 1984, he explained he was seeking to curb the growth of the congregation by selecting capable men from his pastoral staff and giving them 5,000 members to launch a new church. The amount of time spent in prayer by this congregation exceeds any other single activity of their weekly schedule.

If this church were the only cell group congregation showing such growth in Seoul, it might be ignored as the fruit of a dynamic pastor's personality, but this is not the case..... Neighbour goes on to describe other cell group churches in Korea, Japan, Singapore, Thailand, mainland China, Macau, Hong Kong, Africa, England, Australia, South America and the United States; all of which are experiencing growth far beyond the usual. I personally find this very exciting. Consider this: the

early church worshipped almost exclusively in small groups in homes as a rule for the first few hundred years of their existence.

It is my opinion that the best way to both reach people and nourish them spiritually is through close, personal relationships. God designed families in exactly this way. Hebrews speaks of the priesthood of ALL believers.... No longer do we need someone to enter into the most holy place of the temple on our behalf. The curtain was ripped. We (all believers) became the temple of God. I know of no other "church model" which has more potential to share the good news of Jesus than small groups of committed believers meeting in each other's homes. This is where the priesthood comes alive! It is in our homes where we can let our hair down; share a cup of coffee or a meal. When you invite someone into your home, you are telling them, "I care about you. I want you to be a part of my personal life." Where else can we better discuss how the words of scripture apply to me personally. Where better to share our struggles with sin and pray specifically for everyone in attendance. Who better to call us to repentance than those who have heard us share our day-to-day struggles and triumphs. God made us this way.

Acts 17 tells us that God chose the specific place and time in which we would live. He has a plan for our lives; a very specific one. I would like to challenge you to ask God to write on your heart specifically what He is calling you to do; what he is calling us to do with our small groups. How can we better challenge one another? Encourage one another? How do we do a better job of reaching out to the lost? What do we need to change about our groups? How do we inspire and train new leaders? What should the format of our groups be? I truly believe that God will show us very clearly the path He has chosen for us and our groups.

Thank you again for attending the meeting. The atmosphere was filled with a concern and commitment for our body's spiritual health which was very encouraging. I can't begin to describe the gratitude I feel to God that He has allowed me to serve alongside all of you. I look forward to the upcoming months and years He has planned for us. I know it will be exciting.

Yours in Christ,

Gerald Hinson

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From: Gerald Hinson <ghinson@mail1.il.net>
X-Mailer: Mozilla 2.0b5 (WinNT; I)
MIME-Version: 1.0
To: "Becker, Ron" <102074.675@compuserve.com>,
"Bond, Gary" <garygbond@aol.com>,
"Bostic, Dave" <ad997@detroit.freenet.org>,
"Brauninger, Mark" <yimb2829@aol.com>,
"Burkholder, Chris" <chrisjburk@aol.com>,
"Coffey, Dave" <CoffeyDE@aol.com>,
"Davis, Gerald" <104166.2770@compuserve.com>,
Gerald Hinson <ghinson@il.net>,
"Grigg, Bob" <75553.2220@compuserve.com>,
"Kaelble, Alan" <kaelble@anet-stl.com>,
"Kryder, Jeff" <gjk100@aol.com>,
"Lundy, Dale" <73740.151@compuserve.com>,
"Margherio, Mike and Jane" <JAMARG@ccmail.monsanto.com>,
"Mehringner, Ben" <75543.2650@compuserve.com>,
"Robinson, Dale" <76467.3147@compuserve.com>,
"Rush, Dusty and Crystal" <104252.341@compuserve.com>
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