

DEVELOPING SMALL GROUP MINISTRY PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE
FOR HISTORICALLY FUNDAMENTAL BAPTIST CHURCHES

By

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To Brenda, with whom I have lived in Christian community
for more than 25 years

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INTRODUCTION

The idea for this topic grew out of the research and preparation for small group ministry at the First Calvary Baptist Church in Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota. The church is a historically Baptist church. It is committed to the fundamentals of the faith,¹ and it is a member of the Minnesota Baptist Association (MBA). The MBA has been a fellowship of local, independent Baptist Churches for more than 150 years. First Calvary's pastoral staff began the transition to small group ministry in April 2010, and launched the ministry in August 2011.

The church and its pastors determined that the body lacked a method by which Bible truth could be "lived out" in the membership. Through conversations with its pastors² and deacons, the congregation expressed its

¹ As delineated in its statement of faith: the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Bible; the Trinity; the eternal Sonship of the second person of the Trinity; the virgin birth; the substitutionary atonement; the bodily resurrection; the literal, bodily return of Christ; the personality of the Holy Spirit; the depravity of humanity; salvation from sins by grace alone through faith alone; separation; the eternal state of heaven and hell; the invisible and visible church; the practice of two ordinances; and the creation account as recorded in Genesis 1.

² The two pastors conducted in person interviews with most of the member families. Members answered a four question survey: (1) do you think you are connected to other member/attendees, (2) do you think the church provides physical and spiritual care to its members/attendees, (3) do you think the members/attendees converse with each other about God and His Word, and (4) do you think the members/attendees chase after wandering members/attendees and after fringe members/attendees and after the lost in the community? Because the pastors surveyed the member families before the development of this professional ministry dissertation and did not retain the data, the survey results are not available.

delight in the pulpit ministry of the church and the education ministry of the church. Conversely, the church expressed its disappointments that members were not connected to each other or cared for by each other, that spiritual conversations rarely occurred outside of the larger gatherings on Sundays and Wednesdays, and that members could be absent from the church for extended periods without someone from the church making concerted efforts to discover the reason(s) for the absence.

In the course of research for an understanding of small group ministry, the pastors considered published materials and engaged pastors within the MBA and their networks. They discovered that a very small percentage of historically fundamental Baptist churches employed small group ministry, as it is understood in modern ecclesiology, in the core ministries of the local church. Further discoveries included wide ranging attitudes among pastors and church members in historically fundamental Baptist churches, including ignorance, curiosity, excitement, indifference, and resistance. Potential for a professional ministry dissertation project developed.

Need for This Study

Within the wide range of evangelicalism,³ small group philosophy and ministry is nothing new and is an important ministry offering within those

³ “Of those Protestant churches, as the Methodist and Baptist, that emphasize the salvation by faith in the atonement of Jesus, and reject the efficacy of the sacraments and good works alone: also called *orthodox*.” “Evangelical” *Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary, Unabridged Second Edition*, ed. Jean L. McKechnie (Cleveland: World Pub. Co., 1971), 632. Also, “belonging to and designating the Christian Churches that emphasize the teachings and authority of the Scriptures, esp. of the New Testament, in opposition to the institutional authority of the church itself, and the stress is paramount the tenet that salvation is achieved by personal conversion to faith in the atonement of Christ.” “Evangelical,” *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, 2d ed., unabridged, ed. Stuart Berg Flexner (New York: Random House, 1987), 670.

churches, with this exception: historically fundamental Baptist churches have not and are not practicing small group ministry, nor are they contributing to small group ministry thought and practice. Conversations with peer pastors and members of other churches suggested it is the rare historically fundamental Baptist church that understands what small group ministry is, how small group ministry could benefit the local body of believers, or what the process should be in making a ministry shift that includes small group ministry. At present no published work exists to guide the leadership of a historically fundamental Baptist church in regards to small group ministry philosophy and practice. Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson wrote *Building a Church of Small Groups*⁴ to help churches and pastors with existing small group ministries strengthen those ministries. Though the authors contribute many helpful ideas to the study of small group ministry, they offer very little for pastors of average size, traditional congregations. Buried near the end of the book is the small sub-heading, "Phasing in Groups in Small Traditional Churches." The section covers less than two total pages of the book. As an example of a small, traditional church, the authors allude to a church with five hundred in attendance at weekly worship, a size that hardly fits into anyone's definition of "small." A pastor or staff of a historically fundamental Baptist church would have a difficult time finding a peer to whom he could turn for information, caution, correction, or direction.

In contrast to other educational branches of evangelicalism, seminaries and Bible colleges that serve historically fundamental Baptist churches offer little, if any, instruction about small group ministry. For example, Northland

⁴ Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups: A Place Where Nobody Stands Alone* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 202-04.

Baptist Bible College, a school in Northland International University and in character historically fundamental, offers several unique classes in its church ministry curriculum including camp work, youth ministry, and Sunday school. However, a ministry student will not find in the class catalog a course bearing the title of small group or a course offering teaching on small group in the class description.⁵ The same is true for students at Maranatha Baptist Bible College and Seminary,⁶ Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary,⁷ Central Baptist Theological Seminary,⁸ or Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary.⁹

Bob Jones University (BJU) School of Religion, Graduate School, and Seminary may have the broadest course offerings of educational institutions that serve historically fundamental Baptist churches. Nowhere in the course offerings is a class designed for the student to study any material related to small groups, its history, its methodology, or its acceptable or non-acceptable usage in the local church. The closest BJU comes to touching the subject is in the graduate course CH 650 - American Church History. The course description reads, "History of the Christian Church in America from its European origins to the present:

⁵ Northland International University catalog, available from <http://www.ni.edu/Schools/NBBC/Academics/2010-2011-Catalog/>; Internet; accessed August 29, 2011.

⁶ Maranatha Baptist Bible College catalog; available from <http://www.mbbc.edu/seminary/Seminary-Course-Descriptions.aspx>; Internet; accessed August 29, 2011.

⁷ Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary catalog, available from <http://www.dbts.edu/pdf/2010Catalog.pdf>; Internet; accessed September 13, 2011.

⁸ Central Baptist Theological Seminary catalog; available from <http://centralseminary.edu/academic/catalog.pdf>; Internet; accessed August 29, 2011.

⁹ Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary catalog; available from <http://www.cbs.edu/academics/courses/pt.html>; Internet; accessed September 13, 2011.

Colonial beginnings, Puritanism, revivalism, the church and the Revolution, religious liberty, the church and slavery, sectionalism, denominationalism, and recent tendencies.”¹⁰ It may be that students receive instruction on small group ministry during the teaching on “recent tendencies.” However, such instruction would be minimal at best.¹¹ This observation is not intended to criticize but to identify the need. Educational institutions that serve historically fundamental Baptist churches do not offer instruction on small group ministry philosophy or practice. No doubt, a myriad of reasons exist, but the fact remains.¹²

Conversely, many evangelical institutions do offer instruction on small group ministry philosophy and practice. The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary requires that certain of its Master of Divinity and Master of Arts students to take courses in education of and field training involving small groups.¹³ Trinity Evangelical Divinity School offers EM 7260 Small Group Processes in Ministry, “an examination of the biblical and theological foundations of small group ministry, types of small groups and their place in

¹⁰ Bob Jones University catalog; available <http://www.bju.edu/academics/courses/?subject=Church+History>; Internet; accessed August 29, 2011.

¹¹ Dr. Mark Sidwell teaches church history at Bob Jones University. In an email to Dr. Sidwell the author asked, “Is small group ministry a recent tendency that is discussed?” Dr. Sidwell replied, “I don’t know of any classes that cover the history of small groups. I teach American Church History, and with so much to talk about we don’t really get that specific.” Personal email from Dr. Mark Sidwell to Mike VerWay, September 13, 2011.

¹² Reasons may include a limited number of faculty members to teach specific courses, other courses considered more important to a student’s preparation that limit elective options, or theological and philosophical disagreements.

¹³ Southern Baptist Theological Seminary catalog; available http://www.sbts.edu/documents/Catalog_complete.pdf; Internet; accessed August 29, 2011. Small group courses are required of Master of Divinity and Master of Arts candidates in the School of Church Ministries.

church growth and ministry, small group dynamics, and leadership development.”¹⁴ At Dallas Theological Seminary a ministry student may take CE205 Small Group Process, “the examination and practice of communication skills in small-group settings with emphasis on exercises that enhance those skills. Current small-group ministry models will be reviewed.”¹⁵

In 1994 small group observer Robert Wuthnow wrote on the impact of small group ministry in the American church:

Small groups are no stranger to American religion. They have deep roots in the Methodist class meetings and Baptist prayer meetings of the nineteenth century. They resemble the Sunday school classes and youth groups that characterized many other religious traditions as well. Yet, the current popularity of small groups – the extent to which people are turning to them in search of spirituality, and the ways in which religious leaders are championing them – is unprecedented. So it becomes necessary to ask, What are the consequences of small groups for the religious faith of the American people? What are the potential dangers? And how may small groups themselves be encouraged to contribute to the deepening of American spirituality?¹⁶

Wuthnow wrote those words nearly two decades ago, and it appears the fundamental Baptist church is not involved in the conversation at any level.

Statement of Purpose

This dissertation aims to produce a small group ministry philosophy and practice for use by historically fundamental Baptist churches using First Calvary Baptist Church of Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota, as a model. The work

¹⁴ Trinity Evangelical Divinity School catalog; available <http://www.tiu.edu/divinity/academics/educationalministries/adultministry>; Internet; accessed August 29, 2011.

¹⁵ Dallas Theological Seminary catalog; available <http://www.dts.edu/departments/academic/ce/coursesoffered/>; Internet; accessed August 29, 2011.

¹⁶ Robert Wuthnow, ed., *I Come Away Stronger: How Small Groups Are Shaping American Religion* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 344.

considers the theological authority for small group ministry, the history of small groups in the church since the Reformation, the objections to small group ministry raised by some within historically fundamental Baptist churches and potential answers to those objections, and a plan to develop small group ministry within the church. It is hoped that this work will assist the historically fundamental Baptist church to engage in the conversation about small group ministry and to contribute to its theological soundness and practical implementation. The model may not fit with every church in every locale nor does the model represent a perfect conclusion. Changes will be made as the years pass. However, the model should aid interested readers.

Delimitations

This dissertation will not address the implementation of small group ministry in church plants where the new church intends to be historically fundamental and baptistic in its character. This dissertation addresses the implementation in established churches which can be resistant to change.

Recognizing that historically fundamental Baptist churches are not exclusive to America or western cultures, this dissertation will not address the international church where group mentality may exist within the culture beyond what it does in western cultures.

This dissertation is not intended to be a study in group psychology. Ample resources exist that address the dynamics of group interaction.

This dissertation will not address the ministry model of house churches, where a small group of believers connected to a larger group of believers in a given locale meets in a member's home with regularity for worship, the practice of the two ordinances of the Baptist church (water baptism and the Lord's Table),

and Bible teaching. Finally, this dissertation will not address other kinds of groups, such as recovery groups, that exist in some churches.

Definition of Terms

A small group is a “face-to-face gathering of a few persons to be, to share and to act for the betterment of one another and the wider good of others.”¹⁷ As a subset of a local church, a small group is “a more or less cohesive collection of individuals who relate to each other personally and at intervals in more or less patterned ways because they share certain beliefs, values, affections, motives, norms, and roles and have a common goal.”¹⁸

A historically fundamental Baptist church is a local assembly of Christians who believe the historic fundamentals of the faith, follow Baptist tradition in their ministry practices, worship and gathering, and do so independent of denominational connection.¹⁹

Previous Works

The available material of published, unpublished, and web-based information grows by the week in the world of small group ministry. New

¹⁷ Gareth Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry: An Integrative Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 14. One may wonder how this definition differs from the definition of a small church. Unlike the membership of a local church, a small group does not have elders, does not practice the ordinances of believer’s baptism or the Lord’s Table, nor does it discipline its participants like a local church might discipline its members.

¹⁸ A. Paul Hare, *Small Group Research: A Handbook* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing, 1994), 1.

¹⁹ For a very recent work on Baptist tradition, see Kevin Bauder, *Baptist Distinctives and the New Testament Church Order* (Schaumburg, Ill.: Regular Baptist Books, 2012).

material is the reality when a ministry philosophy and practice is as broad based as small group ministry is.

Selected Works Prior to 1990

Larry Richards thought, taught, and wrote on the necessity of small groups in the local church in the 1960s. While a professor at Wheaton College, Richards gathered a group together at Wheaton's Bible camp for dialogue on needed changes within the local church that promoted discipleship and personal evangelism. The model he presented was one of small groups. Richards wrote *A New Face for the Church* following the meeting as record and recommendation.²⁰ Two matters in his work are important for historically fundamental Baptists. First, that Richards encouraged small groups forty-five years ago speaks to the issue of trendiness or fad that some consider the small group movement to be. A fad may come and go as quickly as the change of seasons. Whatever one thinks of small group as a discipleship methodology, the fact remains that mega-churches of the 1990s and 2000s did not birth them.²¹ Second, the examples cited in his book are Baptist churches. They may not have been independent, but they were absolutely conservative, a point Richards clearly makes. These churches may not be the equivalent of present day historically fundamental Baptists, but they were not distant cousins either.

²⁰ Larry Richards, *A New Face for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

²¹ An interesting read on small groups available decades ago is in Robert C. Leslie, "Small Groups in the Church: a Bibliography." *Journal of Pastoral Care* 28, no. 4 (December 1, 1974): 241-244. Text of the journal entry containing the top twenty-seven Leslie rated "most important for religious workers" appears in Appendix D - "Small Groups in the Church: a Bibliography." Note especially records 5, 7, and 10 both for Leslie's comments about the book and the date of publication.

In 1963 Clyde Reid asked the questions, “Is the small group movement a passing fad on the Church scene, or a permanent part of the Church’s life? Is group dynamics a superficial bag of gimmicks, or a serious science? What is the place of the small group anyway?”²² Nearly five decades ago Reid asserted, “small groups are here to stay,” with the result that “we cannot choose...to ‘try’ small groups or to ignore them. They will be a part of any significant task in which the Church is involved. Our only choice is to be intelligently aware or unaware of the proper role and the dynamic processes involved in small groups.” Ignoring small groups appears to be the stance of the historically fundamental Baptist church.

In his book *The House Church*²³ Del Birkey provides an interesting thread showing groups meeting in homes from Pentecost to modern times. His work provides both a theological and historical tract for the idea of Christians meeting apart from larger public gatherings. The title is somewhat misleading. Birkey does not advocate the establishment of local churches in homes, nor does he record house churches throughout history. Instead, he traces the additional meetings, apart from the large Sunday gatherings, in members’ houses.

John Mallison was a pioneer in the development of small group workshops and leader training, first in Australia and later in the United Kingdom. Mallison offers “practical guidelines for developing and maintaining

²² Clyde H. Reid, “Small Groups Are Here to Stay.” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 18, no. 4 (May 1, 1963): 393-403. The inclusion of Reid’s work does not endorse his liberal theology. The inclusion of Reid’s work is to answer the past question of staying power of small group ministry.

²³ Del Birkey, *The House Church: A Model for Renewing the Church* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1988).

small groups in the local church.”²⁴ Its charts, graphs, and sketches are dated for the modern reader but provide thoughtful material for church and small group leadership alike.

Steve Barker’s *Good Things Come in Small Groups, the Dynamics of Good Group Life*²⁵ is highly practical. He provides one of the early resources for existing churches without small groups, a strategy for beginning the ministry in a local church.

Selected Works 1990 - 2004

The fifteen years from 1990 – 2004 bring an outpouring on the subject of small group ministry led by publishing companies and para-church organizations. Long the standard in small group instruction, *The Big Book on Small Groups* covers all the basics for what it means to lead a small group or participate in a small group. Jeffrey Arnold’s work was key as churches in the 1990s pursued small group ministry. His emphasis on leader training and member involvement is very beneficial, but he offers only a little help to the pastoral/church leadership wishing to consider small group ministry direction and even less on how to go about moving an existing ministry from its present structure to a small group ministry model. For Arnold, the assumption is that the church is already committed to small group ministry.²⁶

²⁴ John Mallison, *Building Small Groups in the Christian Community* (West Ryde, NSW, Australia: Renewal Publications, 1979), 1.

²⁵ Steve Barker, *Good Things Come in Small Groups: The Dynamics of Good Group Life* (Downers Grove, Il.: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 121-30.

²⁶ Jeffrey Arnold, *The Big Book on Small Groups*, 2d ed. (Downers Grove, Il.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 10-39.

Arnold's later work, *Starting Small Groups: Building Communities That Matter*,²⁷ presents a thorough blueprint and strategy for beginning a small group ministry in a local church. Each chapter answers a key question about small group ministry and concludes with a step-by-step process church leaders can follow to provide a necessary and practical answer.

Like many proponents of small group ministry, Gareth Icenogle sees small groups everywhere in human history, in biblical literature, and in God Himself which is why his book "is about how God launches, sustains and completes humanity through the mutual ministry of small group community."²⁸ It is not a "how-to book;" it is a "why" book.²⁹ Icenogle, like the whole small group movement, accentuates the term "community." The word appears on virtually every page. To understand what small group ministry is one must understand what is meant by "community." Icenogle defines community as "the process of individual persons coming together into unity (*com + unity*)."³⁰ To Icenogle, Christians coming together makes Christian living possible and is both the biblical and pragmatic foundation for small group ministry. Many readers will disagree on some matters of his theology. For example, he questions the "maleness of God...that enforce(s) an exclusivity of male leadership in the faith community," and his redemptive examples lack terminology that conveys with

²⁷ Jeffrey Arnold and Herb Miller, *Starting Small Groups: Building Communities That Matter* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).

²⁸ Icenogle, 10.

²⁹ Ibid, 11.

³⁰ Ibid, 10.

clarity “by grace alone through faith alone.”³¹ With that disclaimer, this book is vital for the theological understanding of small group ministry; no book excels this one for its attempt to support and promote the idea of small group ministry from a theological base.³²

Darin Kennedy takes a different approach to the theology of small groups.³³ Nobly, he desires that a compelling theological reason direct any activity within the church because “whenever the practical precedes the theological, a danger exists.”³⁴ Although many small group advocates seek biblical justification for small group ministry, Kennedy’s philosophy for small groups within the church does not seek theological justification but theological cause. He finds the cause in the doctrine of election as conveyed in both testaments.

To Kennedy election determines groups. God’s election of Abram and the wider nation of Israel shows how God forms a group of people to accomplish a task. Kennedy then observes that God called out smaller groups of priests or prophets. The smaller groups existed to aid the larger group. In the New Testament, Kennedy sees further evidence when God called out the smaller group of apostles to aid the larger group of all professing Christians. He concludes small groups emerge in a local church at the election of God for the

³¹ Icenogle, 379.

³² The psychology of group dynamics is outside of the scope of this dissertation. For interested readers, few works give the attention to the psychology of group dynamics that Icenogle gives and what that means to small group ministry.

³³ Darin Kennedy, “A Theology of Small Groups,” *Restoration Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (January 1, 1996): 175-183.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 175.

prophetic or priestly benefit of the church. No one signs up for a small group or is placed into a small group by church leadership. This is the activity of God as He works His plan for the local church; they just form on their own as a result of the work of God. Kennedy's work takes the idea of community, so prominent in small group literature, in a different direction by tying it to election. Acceptance of his premise would fundamentally change small group ministry in modern ecclesiology.

Since its publication, Kennedy's premise has garnered little traction in small group literature.³⁵ While the study of the doctrine of election is outside the scope of this dissertation, Kennedy's application of the doctrine has no historical precedent and rests on the shaky premise that because God chose smaller groups out of larger ones at specific points in the biblical literature that this is the only way that small groups should form within the local church. The inclusion of Kennedy's journal entry is to demonstrate the variety of ideas in the literature that address the theology of small groups and to prompt the reader considering small group ministry to investigate the ideas in the establishment of his own philosophy of ministry.

³⁵ None of the prominent and recent authors listed in the bibliography of this dissertation reference Kennedy's theology. Still, some might find helpful insight in Kennedy's approach to small group validation that references the primitive church. He writes, "One proof for beginning small groups in a congregation must be summarily dismissed. The church today should not have small groups simply because the early church had them. The empty argument of historical imitation has been rejected in discussions about the covering of women's heads, foot-washing, supernatural gifts of the Spirit, and other subjects. If God's purposes continue throughout time and small groups fit into those purposes, then they will naturally continue when God's eternal purposes are examined and followed. However, one cannot make the connection that they did it then; therefore, God must have always wanted congregations to have small groups. The mention of small groups within Scripture simply becomes prooftexts for practicalism rather than the foundational word for the church's purpose, life, and ministry." Kennedy, 175.

In 1994 Warren Bird wrote about the “great small group takeover” of the Southern Baptist Convention where, away from the church building, small groups were taking the place of adult Sunday school classes.³⁶ When small groups were all the rage in 1990s and churches everywhere were jumping on board, Bird identified the change in emphasis for churches encouraging membership to join small groups. Bird observed the stress twenty-five years ago was an emphasis on seeking God, and today it is an emphasis of seeking friends. As historically fundamental Baptist churches enter the conversation and implementation of small group ministry, Bird’s warning in the 1990s is no less needed today.

Selected Works Since 2005

Much of the small group literature after 2004 concerns refinements of existing small group structures, that is, how to address difficult members, how to focus an inward group outward and the like. Two recent works explain the philosophy and practice of small group ministry through the lens of a local church. Steve Gladen has been pastor of small groups at Saddleback Church since 1998. In *Small Groups with Purpose*, Gladen lays out the philosophy and practice of the small group ministry at Saddleback Church.³⁷ Gladen’s book is important in the study of small group ministry because of the laboratory in which it was produced. Saddleback Church is to small groups what Microsoft is to computer software. Gladen’s book proves very helpful to the ministry trying

³⁶ Warren Bird, “The Great Small-Group Takeover: Small Groups Continue to Multiply, but Are They Helping the Church Pass on the Faith?”, *Christianity Today* 38, no. 2 (February 7, 1994): 25-29.

³⁷ Steve Gladen, *Small Groups with Purpose: How to Create Healthy Communities* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011).

to understand the nature of small group ministry, how it functions, who it involves, and what is required to run an effective ministry. In chapter fifteen, “Sunday School and/or Small Groups,” Gladen provides a useful reading section for leaders in historically fundamental Baptist churches.³⁸

Many pastors have written about small group ministry from the perspective of their local church. Pastor Larry Osborne desires that North Coast Church near San Diego be a “sticky church.” His book with the same title tells the story of North Coast’s small group ministry and its impact on the lifecycle of the church.³⁹ As a story, it is highly anecdotal. It is not a theological work by any standard. While Osborne alludes to many Bible principles, he never actually references any. As a standalone work, the lack of Bible references is troubling. While Osborne’s story says his model worked, historically fundamental Baptists require a theological foundation before implementing a model. The small group model Osborne advocates builds off the Sunday sermon in what he calls “sermon based small groups.”⁴⁰

Present day pastors and church leaders digest Osborne’s book with great appreciation, but the idea for small group discussion of preached sermons

³⁸ Pastors and churches with an adult Sunday School will find the chapter helpful because Gladen raises pros and cons of both Sunday School and small group in a question and answer format. He describes why Saddleback chose small groups over Sunday School. Ibid, 191-203.

³⁹ Larry W. Osborne, *Sticky Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

⁴⁰ Years previously, Osborne identified five advantages for churches when small groups use the Sunday sermon as their conversation piece: (1) increased sermon impact, (2) it pulls in the marginally interested, (3) sharpened focus, (4) it mainstreams new believers, and (5) it develops easier-to-lead small groups. Larry Osborne, “Multiplied Sermon Applications: What Happens When Small Groups Use Sunday’s Message as Their Conversation Piece,” *Leadership* 21, no. 2 (March 1, 2000): 33. Of course, this assumes the membership/attendees attend the Sunday sermon and participate in a small group. Neither is assured.

predates North Coast Church. In 1971 Findley Edge advocated “holding small group talk-back sessions after the sermons have been presented, to maximize their effectiveness.”⁴¹ In 1974 John Drakeford called this an “experiential Bible study”⁴² where “the group shares a commitment to action. It tries to help each member decide what to do with the truths encountered in the study. The individuals in the group can confront one another with proposed changes in knowledge, behavior, and attitude, consistent with the material under study.”⁴³ In 1974 William Clemmons and Harvey Hester wrote that sermon-based small groups “are a calling...to a lifestyle change in persons and churches. The group members minister to each other. They facilitate change and growth.”⁴⁴

The idea of sermon-based groups is intriguing for the pastor who does not want to see God’s Word or his work vanish from the hearer’s mind following the final amen. The First Calvary Baptist Church implemented this model in August 2011.

⁴¹ Findley B. Edge, *The Greening of the Church* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1971) 109-11; 114-133.

⁴² John W. Drakeford, *Experiential Bible Study* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1974) 16.

⁴³ Dennis L. Price, W. Robert Terry, and B. Conrad Johnston, “The Measurement of the Effect of Preaching and Preaching Plus Small Group Dialogue in One Baptist Church.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 19, no. 2 (June 1, 1980): 186-197. The journal article is the research completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for B. Conrad Johnston’s Doctor of Ministries degree from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. “The purpose of this research was to investigate and compare the effects of preaching, and the effects of preaching supplemented by dialogue in small groups, on a listener’s knowledge, behavior, and attitudes. Many advocates of both preaching and preaching supplemented by small group dialogue maintain that these means of communication have unique characteristics when occurring in religious settings,” 186.

⁴⁴ William P. Clemmons and Harvey Hester, *Growth Through Groups* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1974), 46, quoted in Price.

Both Gladen's and Osborne's books are important contributions to the study of small group ministry but will be set aside by many in the historically fundamental Baptist church tradition because the authors are connected to Saddleback and North Coast. Others may set the books aside because Saddleback is unlike any other church in that it boasts 3500 small groups while North Coast regularly worships with 8000 in attendance any given weekend.

Two works by pastors of historically fundamental Baptist churches require attention. Dr. James Singleton (1927-2001) and Dr. Mike Sproul have in common writing on small group philosophy and ministry and serving as the senior pastor of the Tri-City Baptist Church in Tempe, Arizona. Dr. Sproul succeeded Dr. Singleton in the ministry. Tri-City is a large Baptist ministry in the circle of fundamentalism.

Pastor Singleton wrote a booklet that expressed what he and the church learned in the eleven years when they practiced small group ministry.⁴⁵ It may be that this published work was the first on the subject attempted by someone within the circle of historically fundamental Baptists. In kernel form, Pastor Singleton suggests a theology, offers a few paragraphs on the history of small groups, and proposes a model based upon the ministry at Tri-City. He opines that "fundamentalists" are "suspicious" of small groups and the churches that embrace the idea while answering three objections some may have to small

⁴⁵ James E. Singleton and David C. Griffith, *Welcome to the World of Small Groups* (Tempe, Ariz.: Tri-City Baptist Church, 1994).

group methodology.⁴⁶ Though his work was not widely disseminated and is difficult to find for consideration, Singleton broke ground in his writing.

Prior to his installation as the next senior pastor, Pastor Sproul produced another dissertation on small group ministry from the vantage point of the historically fundamental Baptists.⁴⁷ Unlike his predecessor, Sproul directed his research at the possibility of small group ministry on United States military bases. As an army chaplain, he identified the lack of community within the ranks of enlisted personnel and officers. Though written for a very narrow application, Sproul's theology and methodology can serve a reader by generating ideas that could benefit a more traditional church setting.

Craig Muri pastors a historically fundamental Baptist Church in Plymouth, Minnesota. His Doctor of Ministry dissertation is a recent attempt by someone in the circle of historically fundamental churches to address the subject of small group ministry. Muri's dissertation helps the historically fundamental Baptist church as it offers "biblical and theological foundations for small group ministry so that their legitimacy and purpose might be clearly established"⁴⁸ from the perspective of a pastor in a historically fundamental Baptist church. This is the strength of his work. However, Muri expressly chose not to address

⁴⁶ Singleton writes that (1) many pastors do not understand small groups, (2) many pastors are afraid of small groups, and (3) many pastors want to control everything. Ibid, 15-16.

⁴⁷ Michael D. Sproul, "Building Believers and Reaching Unbelievers in a Young, Mobile, and Ethnically Diverse Community Through the Use of Small Groups, a Model for Military Chaplains," (D. Min. diss., International Baptist Graduate School, 1995).

⁴⁸ Craig Muri, "Forming Small Groups for Intentional Discipleship," (D. Min. diss., Central Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010), 4. Muri later states, "The purpose of this paper is not to discover a theology of small groups but to comment on those aspects of theology which may be served by having believers collected into smaller, more interactive groups," 20.

the history of small groups in the church, a critical idea this dissertation addresses.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Muri's work lacks answers to objections raised by those within the network of historically fundamental Baptist churches. He also does not supply data within or without the circle in which he ministers.

Montia Setzler's dissertation provides an interesting narrative of the Southern Baptist Church in California and the place of traditional Sunday school in the lives of these churches. He writes, "The purpose of this ministry focus paper is to develop a uniquely Southern Baptist Strategy for California Southern Baptist churches to utilize small groups for adult Bible study."⁵⁰ Setzler's contribution for this dissertation is a plan for transitioning established Southern Baptist churches with a traditional Sunday school ministry to some small group model. For the traditional church transitioning to small group ministry, the assistance is valuable but limited. He is most helpful in talking about the general nature of change in an organization and the role of the leader (pastor) in change. For church leadership considering significant ministry change, his advice on change will prove helpful. His work is limited in that he does not address the specific challenges historically fundamental Baptist churches may face when considering small group ministry.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Muri writes, "Is the small group movement a novelty that has somehow become a permanent component of the evangelical church? Is it useful? Rather than wade through enormous amounts of data collected over three decades from countless churches, the logical step seemed to be examining Parker's Lake Baptist Church in light of the New Testament documents looking for biblical principles and precepts that might compel adoption or rejection of this popular model," 4.

⁵⁰ Montia Setzler, "A Strategy for Using Small Groups in California Southern Baptist Churches," (D. Min. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1997), 1.

⁵¹ Some challenges include adding small groups to the existing ministry offerings and obedience to the Scripture's command not to "forsake the assembling of ourselves together" (Heb. 10:25).

Pastor James McKinney offers a thorough philosophy of ministry for the church he leads, a Southern Baptist congregation in Arkansas. McKinney describes the church as conservative but not fundamental. In his overall ministry shift, McKinney has a brief section on a proposed small group ministry and a plan for the future direction of the church. His observation on the reason for Sunday evening services articulates a problem in his church that may exist in other churches.

As it stands now, Sunday evening worship is a rather redundant time in the weekly schedule at Park Hill. It is basically a slightly less formal replication of what the church does on Sunday mornings. . . . The reason the church has Sunday evening worship is that the church has always had Sunday evening worship. My original desire was to drop the service entirely in order to free people to spend some time in a small group. . . . However, conversations with several lay leaders have convinced me that resistance to that change would be so strong that it could jeopardize the acceptance of the overall system.⁵²

Pastor Mark Combs' 2011 Doctor of Ministry dissertation enlarges the theological idea of progressive sanctification in small group theory.⁵³ Combs is not the first to connect the necessity of small group ministry specifically to the wording "progressive sanctification," but he may be the first to give it a thorough examination.⁵⁴ His small group model replaces the traditional Sunday school ministry in this Southern Baptist Convention church with what he calls

⁵² J. B McKinney, "A Strategy for Maturing and Mobilizing Disciples at Park Hill Baptist Church," (D. Min. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2001), 34-41.

⁵³ Mark A. Combs, "Developing an Effective Small Group Ministry at Salem Baptist Church, Salem, Kentucky," (D. Min. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, School of Missions and Evangelism, 2011).

⁵⁴ C. J. Mahaney made a significant contribution to the consideration of progressive sanctification in the theological grid of small group ministry. See C.J. Mahaney, ed., *Why Small Groups? Together Toward Maturity* (Gaithersburg, Md.: Sovereign Grace Ministries, 1996), 3-6. Mahaney's inclusion is not an endorsement of all his doctrine. For example, historically fundamental Baptists will disagree with Mahaney's continuationism. That Mahaney holds to continuationism need not preclude him from helping those considering small group ministry.

“Connection Groups.” He offers two paragraphs of caution for those looking to establish “an effective small group ministry in a traditional church where leaders may find resistance to change.”⁵⁵ Though he desired to replace the Sunday evening service with the new Connection Groups and drop the Sunday school hour from the Sunday routine, he discovered this change would be too drastic and opted for their traditional schedule while changing the adult Sunday school to Connection Groups. While providing more than adequate theological backing and detailed planning, it remains to be seen if the desired “progressive sanctification” can take place in this format, a format that appears to be less small group and more Sunday school.

Other Helpful Works

Much of the modern expression of small group philosophy and practice resembles John Wesley’s discipleship work in England during the 1700s.⁵⁶ In *John Wesley’s Class Meetings, A Model for Making Disciples* D. Michael Henderson provides a necessary history of Wesley’s methods, an appreciation of which serves any church considering small group ministry in a modern setting.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Combs, 87.

⁵⁶ Considerable contributions to Wesley’s role in modern small groups are found in the Wesleyan journals. See especially David Hunsicker, “John Wesley: Father of Today’s Small Group Concept?” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 192-212 and Daniel Castelo, “Perfecting One Another: Friendship and the Moral Implications of Wesley’s Small Groups,” *Asbury Journal* 64, no. 1 (March 1, 2009): 4-21.

⁵⁷ D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meetings: a Model for Making Disciples* (Nappanee, Ind: Evangel Publishing House, 1997). For a brief but insightful look at how John Wesley, Richard Baxter, and Martin Luther used in home discipleship, see Bruce L. Shelley, “Beyond Casual Christianity, How Churches – Throughout History and Today – Give Depth to Those with Shallow Faith,” *Leadership* 21, no. 2 (March 1, 2000): 31-35.

Cell Groups and House Churches, What History Teaches Us provides historical background for what is happening today.⁵⁸ Fundamentalists want to know the background of church ministries and broad ministry movements. It is part of their doctrine of separation.⁵⁹ If historically fundamental Baptist churches embrace small group ministry or if those in that circle desire to participate in the conversation, they should know the history. Though brief (ninety-five pages), author Peter Bunton delivers helpful insight that bridges the gap between the first and twentieth century, with special attention given to small groups after the Reformation until the present. Like Richards' work, Bunton provides perspective on the idea of trendiness and fad.

The Trellis and The Vine presents ministry philosophy critical for development of small group ministry.⁶⁰ While not a small group book, its emphasis to grow "people who are disciple-making disciples of Christ" captures the hope of small group ministry.

⁵⁸ Peter Bunton, *Cell Groups and House Churches: What History Teaches Us* (Ephrata, Pa: House to House, 2001).

⁵⁹ From the First Calvary Baptist Church constitution: "We believe in the Biblical (sic) doctrine of separation which encompasses three (3) things: (1) the separation of the local church from all affiliation and fellowship with those who deny the verities of the 'faith once delivered to the saints,' such as those of Neo-Orthodoxy and New Evangelical persuasion; (2) the separation of the individual believer from all worldly practices that may dishonor the Savior; and (3) the separation of church and state." The teaching on separation includes denying ungodliness, worldly lusts, and fleshliness (Titus 2:12); identifying the error of false teachers (Rom. 16:7 and Jude); and removing from membership blatantly disobedient Christians (1 Cor. 5).

⁶⁰ Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine: The Ministry Mind Shift That Changes Everything* (Kingsford, NSW, Australia: Matthias Media, 2009).

Internet Based Resources

Web sites and blogs continue the current conversation on small group thought and practice in the place of the books and journal articles of the past. Christian publishers operate the most comprehensive sites. Group Publishing runs smallgroupministry.com. As a publishing company, Group sells or hopes to sell written materials. Contents of the site are free, updated regularly, and cover a wide range of topics.

Christianity Today and its sister publication *Leadership* maintain what may be the most significant small group web presence at smallgroups.com. They claim 50,000 pastors and small group leaders in their network of fee-based resources and offer hundreds of articles, networking opportunities, multimedia, and questions and answers on the free side of their site.

Steve Gladen (*Small Groups with Purpose*) and Saddleback Church promote small group theory at smallgroups.net. In addition to resources available for purchase is an expansive collection of free helps for those curious and/or experienced. As one might expect, the site is built on the ideas in Gladen's book and the practices of Saddleback. Among the many helpful paths is the free download section on starting small groups. One need not accept all of Saddleback's philosophy or methods to benefit from the thought-provoking content of the material.

Mark Howell is Community Life Pastor at Parkview Christian Church in Orland Park, Illinois. He is interested in helping other pastors and church leaders start, sustain, and grow local church small group ministries. At markhowelllive.com readers benefit from nearly five hundred free posts on small group ministry.

Joel Comiskey leads joelcomiskeygroup.com and the organization of the same name that exists to “complete the great commission in this century by providing resources and coaching to plant new cell churches and transition existing churches to cell-based ministry.” Comiskey’s online presence and business group grew out of his Ph.D. dissertation.⁶¹

Lifeway.com is the web presence of the LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention. The site is helpful to know what Baptists in that slice of Christianity are doing in the area of small groups and is included here as the closest possible reference to historically fundamental Baptist churches because that group has no web presence on the subject of small groups.

Method of Procedure

Chapter one establishes the theological basis for small group ministry. The chapter identifies how God created humanity with the need for spiritual interaction with other human beings and how God gave humanity the capacity to interact spiritually with other human beings. The chapter explains the Trinitarian relationship as a model for human relationships. Further, the chapter considers God’s intent for spiritual relationships within the local church through examination of the idea of unity, the term *κοινωνία*, the one another statements of the New Testament, the exercise of spiritual gifts, and the Reformation era teaching about the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer. The importance of this stage lies in the fact that the more theologically grounded a ministry

⁶¹ Joel Thomas Comiskey, “Cell-based Ministry: A Positive Factor for Church Growth in Latin America,” (Ph. D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, School of World Mission, 1997), available from <http://www.joelcomiskeygroup.com/articles/dissertation/index.html>; Internet; accessed October 31, 2011.

philosophy is, the more theologically grounded will be the people living out Christianity in that ministry philosophy.

Chapter two provides historical reference for small group ministry. This section shows a thread of small group ministry in the history of the church, specifically the western church. The chapter aids understanding of the current thinking on small group ministry, considers locales where small groups appear in church history, and identifies the causes for origination. Next, the reader learns about past church leaders and their contributions to small group ministry in local churches. The chapter considers the doctrinal beliefs of those leaders and their churches. Finally, the reader discovers what the passage of time has uncovered about the effects of small groups in churches.

In many ways today's small group method looks like the Methodism of John Wesley in the mid-1700s. Much like today's churches who embrace a small group ministry model, Wesley expected converts to Christ to attend weekly meetings, submit to the accountability of the group, and benefit from the encouragements, admonition, and support of the other believers.⁶²

Chapter three considers the attitude of historically fundamental Baptist churches toward a small group ministry model and the impact moving to a small group ministry model might have on a historically fundamental Baptist church. Data from George Barna and other church study groups will shed light on the broader attitude among evangelicals. A survey of the churches comprising the Minnesota Baptist Association (the association of First Calvary Baptist Church of

⁶² Wesley's definition for a society, the initiating group for new converts, was "a company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their own salvation." Henderson, 84.

Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota) will offer insight into the attitudes of leaders in historically fundamental Baptist churches.

Chapter four details a proposed methodology for developing a philosophy and practice of small group ministry in the historically fundamental Baptist church. The chapter offers a philosophy of ministry that uses small groups in the expression of a core value and provides a suggestion for how to begin a small group ministry. The dissertation concludes with the author's personal observations about the early impact of small group ministry in his church.

CHAPTER 1

THE THEOLOGY FOR SMALL GROUP PHILOSOPHY AND MINISTRY

Many Baptist churches and other churches of a conservative bent proclaim the Bible as “the only supreme and ultimate authority for faith and practice.”¹ The churches mean that they secure their doctrine from the Bible and find their basis for ministry practices in the pages of the Scriptures, especially the New Testament. Such scriptural basis initiates and guides local church ministries like the Sunday School, the church choir, the existence of a youth group, or the formal education of students in a Christian day school. Like proponents of other ministries in the local church, proponents of small group ministry find its authorization in the pages of the Bible.²

While no Bible text mandates the initiation of small group ministry in a local church, the Bible, from the creation account of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2

¹ Church Constitution, First Calvary Baptist Church, Inver Grove Heights, MN. See also the “Confession of Faith of the Minnesota Baptist Association,” available at www.mnbaoc.org. “We believe the Bible...is a perfect treasure of heavenly instruction...and (is) the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and opinions should be tried.”

² An authorization for a ministry differs from a mandate to do a ministry. Some advocates of Christian education see a theological justification for Christian school ministry in Psalm 1, but these same advocates might not see a theological mandate in Psalm 1. The Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) is a theological mandate for evangelistic efforts, whereas a mission board exists by theological justification. Most small group proponents see a theological justification for the ministry not a theological mandate. An exception is Darin Kennedy who sees in the doctrine of election a mandate for small groups within a local church. See Darin Kennedy, “A Theology of Small Groups.” *Restoration Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (January 1, 1996): 175-183.

to the admonitions of the apostles in their epistles, presents a pattern for living a spiritual life in a community of spiritually minded people who need each other for the purpose of spiritual growth.³ This chapter identifies Bible texts that give a biblical justification for small groups girded by the concept called “community.”

Understanding Community

Towns build community centers. Post high school education might take place at the local community college. Churches all across America adopt “Community” as an official word in their names.⁴ Community means that something is taking place at these sites that is bigger than the individual. To apply community to a church is to consider the role the collection of believers in a local assembly plays in the spiritual nurturing of Christian men and women from their conversions to their glorification. The spiritual nurturing of an individual is a “community project.”⁵

Within the Christian church, community describes both the actual group of people who meet for corporate events and the interaction of the group of local Christians who accept the responsibilities and possibilities of Christian relationship with each other and who seek to promote growth in Christ for each other.⁶ Community is what happens when individuals share together so as to

³ Jeffrey Arnold, *The Big Book on Small Groups* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 86.

⁴ For example, Hope Community Church and the New Life Community Church exist in suburbs of St. Paul, Minnesota.

⁵ Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp, *How People Change* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2006), 73-90.

⁶ Robert Banks writes, “The word ‘community’ is used in a variety of ways. Community may be defined geographically (the neighborhood or city), anthropologically (the kin group), institutionally (the school or workplace community),

become united around an idea or a cause.⁷ Christians coming together makes living the Christian life possible and is both the biblical and pragmatic foundation for small group ministry. Within small group ministry theology and theory, the community concept is the foundation from which a small group ministry rises.

Among Christians, that idea of community began in the earliest days as new disciples of Jesus Christ linked with each other to learn Christian doctrine, to foster allegiance to their Lord, and to fulfill His command to make additional disciples from all the peoples of the world (Matt. 28:18-20). In Acts 2:42-47 Luke reports the public gathering of Jesus' followers and the in-home gatherings that facilitated mutual growth.⁸ Concerning these new Christians, Donald Guthrie asserts that a "widespread conviction was that all Christians (those in Christ) were bound together into a new community."⁹ The Lord Jesus Christ intended His followers to gather in public and private. As Guthrie writes, "The selection of a special group of men as well as the wider group of disciples presupposes in the intention of Jesus an ongoing community."¹⁰ That ongoing community of

politically (the nation), religiously (a congregation or order), psychologically (a support group), culturally (the artistic community). . . . My own working definition of community . . . is a group of people who seek to develop a Christianly informed 'common' life, through regular verbal and nonverbal 'communication,' leading to the development of real 'communion' with one another and God." Robert Banks, "The Biblical Approach to Community," *Christian Education Journal* 13, no 3 (1993): 19.

⁷ Gareth Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry: An Integrative Approach* (Downers Grove, Il.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 10

⁸ Unless otherwise noted, all references are from the New King James Version.

⁹ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Il.: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 55.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 708.

Christian disciples joined together to practice the life of a Christian in the circle of other believers. Neither Jesus nor His apostles intended the Christian life to be lived in isolation from other believers. Instead, the Christian life in all its facets must be shared with other men and women of all ages, nationalities, social status, and intellect. Therefore, the local assembly should seek an intentional method by which its members can practice community.

God's Design of Community in Humanity

The fact of community is a design feature instilled in humanity by its Creator. Community was purposeful and necessary for humanity's progress, and as humans lived in community, they reflected the very image of God in which they were created.

God's Design of Community in the Creation of Adam and Eve

The earliest expression of community in humanity appears in the creation of Adam and Eve.¹¹ Within the creation account of Genesis, we discover from the record qualities that God instilled in humanity which can be expressed or heightened in small group structure.

From the beginning, humanity was a relational being, first with God and then with other humans (Gen. 1:25-28).¹² Prior to Eve's creation, Adam demonstrated the relational, social skill of language when he gave names to the

¹¹ Icenogle, 22. Looking back at the first created beings and their creator, Icenogle sees a "human community" existing "foundationally as *small group*, that is, at least one man and one woman in relationship with God (emphasis original)." Icenogle's terminology is too strong. God did not create "a small group" like those that appear in many churches. Icenogle's general concept of people in relationship with God, however, is valid.

¹² Ibid, 23.

animals God created. When Adam used his language skill to assign names to all the animals, he displayed one use of communicating, the exercise of authority. However, God made Adam for more than authority, and God provided Adam with communication skills beyond the capacity to apply names to the members of the animal kingdom; God made Adam for community,¹³ a human being created to live with other human beings displaying God's glory. Yet Adam remained alone.¹⁴ Though he enjoyed the closest of relationships with God, God describes Adam's aloneness apart from another human being as an unacceptable reality; therefore, God created for Adam a female companion with whom Adam could live in community, both with her and with God.

Together they would know God, obey God, speak to each other about God and enjoy God's gift of the Garden of Eden and the rest of the creation (Gen. 2:24). Together they would rule the creation (Gen. 1:27-31).¹⁵ In the beginning God created all of humanity to live together in community. God created the rest of humanity, as their descendants, with the same capacity and need.¹⁶ Unlike the rest of animated creation, man could not be content to have

¹³ Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), 65.

¹⁴ Tim Lane and Paul Tripp note that Adam's aloneness was not a design flaw but a design concept. They write, "In Genesis 2:18, God says that it is not good for man to be 'alone.' This statement has more to do with God's design for humanity than Adam's neediness. God created us to be relational beings because he is a social God. God lives in community within the Trinity as Father, Son, and Spirit, and he made humanity in his image. Genesis 2 is not speaking primarily to Adam's experience of being lonely as much as it is revealing his nature as the person God created him to be." Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp, *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making* (Greensboro, N.C.: New Growth Press, 2006), 9.

¹⁵ Icenogle, 23.

¹⁶ Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups: A Place Where Nobody Stands Alone* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 24.

his “animal needs” satisfied. Man requires more than the satisfaction of his hunger or regenerative sleep.¹⁷ Man requires face-to-face interaction that goes beyond the veneer of his expressions to the innermost workings of his soul.

According to Genesis 1:26, God made man in His “image” and “likeness.” Over the millennia as men have read this verse, they have labored to understand its meaning because God has chosen not to make any direct statements in His Word that set a definition.¹⁸ Among the “reasonable inferences” the careful student of the Bible can draw is that man’s capacity to interact with God and others comes from God’s capacity to commune with Himself and with His creation. This is a demonstration of the image of God in man.¹⁹ Thus, community is not something human beings manufactured to manage life; community is necessary for the righteous and joyful fulfillment of life because God created the human race to experience life together.

¹⁷ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 489.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 512. In addition, see Erickson (495-517) for a helpful discussion on ways to view the nature of image. Erickson details the “substantive view,” the “relational view,” and the “functional view,” evaluating each of the views and completing the section with his conclusions about “the nature of the image” and “implications of the doctrine.” His first implication is that humans belong to God and should respond to Him as those who bear His image. Second, humans should see in Jesus the pattern for their earthly lives. Without sin, His life is the pure image of God in human form. Third, apart from God no human experiences full humanity. Fourth, work and learning are good for humans. Because God commanded man to care for the creation before man’s fall, man expresses the divine intent of creation when he lives as a worker and a learner. Fifth, the image of God that sets man apart from the rest of the creation declares the value of humanity. The image and value prohibit murder. Sixth, all men everywhere carry the image, eliminating intimidation, manipulation, slavery, racism, bias, and prejudice.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 513.

God's Design of Community in Marriage

Adam and Eve were more than co-habitants of God's creation. They were husband and wife. Genesis 2:24 teaches that an anticipated result of marriage is a shared intimacy described as "one flesh." God said, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." Both Jesus and the Apostle Paul quote the Genesis text for instructional purposes elevating in the minds of their hearers and readers the relationship that exists between a husband and a wife (Matt. 19:5; Eph. 5:31). The concept of one flesh describes a "very intimate relationship that takes precedence over all other ties"²⁰ and a relationship that "takes precedence over every human relationship."²¹ Christian pastors, writers, and laymen rightly promote the intentional pursuit of oneness within the bond of marriage. John MacArthur writes:

God engineered man and woman to complement, support, and give joy to each other through the mutual commitment of the marriage bond. It is by his divine hand that they are created to fulfill each other, encourage each other, strengthen each other, and produce children as fruit of their love for each other. Whether they recognize it or not, every couple who has enjoyed the companionship, happiness, and fulfillment of marriage has experienced the miraculous blessing of God.²²

²⁰ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1992), 481.

²¹ A. Skevington Wood, *Ephesians – Philemon*, vol. 11 of The Expositor's Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D. Douglas, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1978), 78.

²² John MacArthur, *Matthew 16-23*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 166.

God's intent for marriage moves beyond the superficial. The spouses share in every facet of life, together experiencing life's joys and sorrows, bearing responsibilities, and supporting each other in life's mundane routines. It is not incidental that the high points of a marriage bear the marks of unity or oneness. That is exactly what God meant in Genesis 2:24. It is also true that the low points in a marriage bear the marks of individuality and separation. At those times when a man acts in self-righteousness, self-preservation, self-gratification, and self-advancement, his relationship with his wife always suffers. On the other hand, when a man acts in such a way that promotes the righteousness of both his wife and him, the preservation of both of them, the gratification of each other, and the advancement of what they share, their relationship blossoms. God designed two completely different persons to come together as if they were glued to each other to form a community of a shared life.

Christian Relationships that Look Like a Marriage Relationship

Many of the qualities of oneness experienced in a marriage should be experienced in the relationships of the local church. Consider that Paul uses virtually the same language to teach on unity in marriage as he does to teach on unity in the church. He writes concerning marriage, "For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord *does* the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones" (Eph. 5:29-30). Writing about the church in Romans 12:4-5, he says, "For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another." In

some way, whether great or small, the local church can learn what life in the body should look like from the godly marriage described in Ephesians 5.²³

Peter and Paul express similar ideas of attitudes and actions in Christian marriages and Christian relationships. Addressing marriage in his first epistle, Peter writes that wives should submit to their husbands (3:1). Addressing the whole church at Ephesus, Paul writes that each believer should submit to the other believers (5:21). Peter encourages husbands to live with their wives in such a way that their behaviors and attitudes demonstrate an intimate knowledge of their wives (3:7). Paul sent Tychicus to the Colossian church “for this very purpose, that he may know your circumstances and comfort your hearts” (Col. 4:8). Paul called Timothy his “son” (1 Tim. 1:2). Certainly, this was not a physical relationship produced in marriage; rather, it was a spiritual relationship where one believer parented a younger believer.²⁴

For sound biblical reasons churches go to great lengths to promote intimacy between spouses. They host or promote marriage conferences and retreats. They suggest Christian literature written to address the divine directive of togetherness over individuality. Their pastors preach and counsel on the subject, encouraging the memorization of Scripture and mentorship within the church by older couples to younger couples. The events, the literature, the preaching, and the counsel teach Christians that they should expect oneness in a marriage and be satisfied with nothing less. Without suggesting that the brothers and sisters in a local assembly can or should duplicate every intimacy of a married couple, we can learn from the common directives and shared principles

²³ Donahue, 36.

²⁴ Ibid, 37.

of the New Testament texts. An understanding of the texts and an emphasis to implement the texts can assist a church to move beyond “casual camaraderie” and “surface relationships” among its people.²⁵

Christian Relationships that Resemble Cruise Ship Relationships

Relationships within some churches might mirror those on a cruise ship rather than the relationship of a marriage. On a cruise ship, all passengers sail toward the same destination. They learn a little about each other while sitting at the same dinner table, playing shipboard games, or attending shipboard events. They discover other passengers with whom they share common interests and learn to avoid those who are annoying, offbeat, rude, or different. Everyone learns how to function for the length of the cruise. The relationships are superficial and transitory, and the passengers are happy that way. When the ship docks at port, passengers disembark with no responsibility to anyone else except themselves, until the next cruise comes around and the relational ship itinerary begins again.

In churches some relationships within the body may look similar to those on a cruise ship. Members and other regular attendees attend the events of worship, education, and social activities. Each knows which of the other attendees to seek out and which to avoid. They arrive on time or in time to capture the experience of the event, stay just long enough to mingle but not so long as to become uncomfortable, and then they leave only to return at the gathering of the next event when the relational dance will again commence.

²⁵ Donahue, 61.

Small group philosophy and ministry provide the church with a means to overcome such shallowness within the assembly.

God's Design of Community in the Command to Multiply

God commanded Adam and Eve to expand the community (Gen. 1:28). God desired Adam and Eve to bring more human beings into the relationship which they experienced and enjoyed with each other and into the relationship which they experienced and enjoyed with God.

The reasons God commanded Adam and Eve to multiply may include the need for more people to manage and rule the creation. Whatever the reason, the addition of more humans to the equation provides for more occasion of community.²⁶ These new members of the race would learn from their parents who God is, how and why God created them, what names to call each animal, how to cultivate and keep the garden, and what clear commands of God that all must obey. As these descendants developed and multiplied in their own right, they would live in common worship of the same God, together enjoying God's presence, purposes, and creation, receiving from each other and giving to each other. Of course, the fall of man destroyed what might have been, but the fall did not remove humanity's relational design.

Every subsequent generation longs for community. A man desires a woman's companionship. A woman longs for a man's embrace. Parents want

²⁶ Brad House, *Community: Taking Your Small Group Off Life Support* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 32. Gordon Wenham notes that the narrator's comment, "And God said to them," in verse 22 "draws attention to the personal relationship between God and men." Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, vol. 1 of the Word Bible Commentary, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glen W. Barker (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1987), 33. A reasonable inference is the offspring of the first couple are brought into this personal relationship with God and the rest of the human race.

children. Children want friends. The bereaved miss the sound of the voice of the loved one. Retirees return to their places of employment just to catch up with “the guys.” Alumni gather for reunions, and families travel great distances to be together for a birthday, wedding, holiday, or special event. Quilting clubs, bowling leagues, Girl Scouts, fantasy football, and the verities of social media all express a humanity created by God to live in community. This creation imprint requires a response of the Christian church. Small group philosophy and ministry provide the potential for the correct response.

God's Design of Community for Humanity in the Model of the Trinity

The earliest pages of Old Testament Scripture direct the reader's attention to plurality within the Godhead (Gen. 1:26; 11:7; 18:17).²⁷ That God exists in Trinity remains one of the great mysteries of Christian doctrine. In John 17, the record of Jesus' prayer to His Father brings readers into some dimensions of the relationship that exists among the members of the Trinity. While not fully understanding every nuance of meaning, a reader can determine Jesus' mind on one of the relationships within the Trinity. First, Jesus regards the first person of the Trinity as His Father and He as the Father's Son (v.1). Second, Jesus and the Father engaged in the shared mission of granting eternal life (vv.2-4). Third, Jesus existed with the Father before God formed any of the creation (v.5). Fourth, Jesus offers prayers on behalf of those who are His followers (vv.6-19). Fifth, within the requests for His followers is the request that the followers would

²⁷ Banks, 19. For a summary of possible interpretations of “Let us” in Genesis 1:26, see Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1984), 144-45.

experience what the Father and the Son share, “Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We *are* (v.11).”²⁸

When two or more are of the same in kind, substance, or quality, we call them “one,” and when two or more present a unified front or mission, we call them “one.”²⁹ Shared nature and shared mission are foundational points for the doctrine of the Trinity. John 4:1-4 presents the argument for the shared nature between the Father and the Son, while John 17:2-4 presents Jesus’ testimony of shared mission. In nature and mission, they are one. This unity of nature and mission among the Trinity is a display of community.³⁰

²⁸ Through the centuries interpreters and churchmen find in these verses multiple meanings to argue for erroneous conclusions, including a mere “moral or ethical” nature between Jesus and God and a command to ecumenical church cooperation. See Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12-21*. Vol. 25B in *The New American Commentary*. Edited by E. Ray Clendenen and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 205. The better interpretation for the unity of this text is shared mission. As the Father and the Son are one in mission, so too the Lord’s disciples must be one in mission. See Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*. The Baker Exegetical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 494, 97-98.

²⁹ For an understanding of the Greek word, $\omega\varsigma$, see Joseph Henry Thayer, *The New Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Lafayette, Ind.: Book Publisher’s Press, Inc., 1981), 680-82. For an English definition, see Merriam-Webster, Inc. *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 1993).

³⁰ Exegetical commentators do not use the word “community” in their interpretations of this text. They do, however, use the terms or ideas of nature and mission. “The meaning of this much disputed passage is, after all, rather clear if it be seen in the light of its context. Jesus is not requesting that some day all denominations may become one mammoth-denomination...When he offered this prayer, there were no denominations. Neither is he praying that in some vague manner the essential (or ontological) oneness of the Father and the Son may be *duplicated* in the lives of the disciples (true though it be that the mystic union between the believers and Christ results from and is a reflection of the relation between the persons of the Holy Trinity). The meaning, as we see it, is this: Jesus requests that the disciples may constantly (note the force of the durative present subjunctive) be one in their stand over against the world; in other words, that they may remain united in love and in the defence (sic) of all truth, just as the Father and the Son are constantly one... True, the logic here requires that unity of cooperation be meant. Well, that is meant, but more also. In God the unity of essence is the basic to the unity of manifestation (the ontological trinity lies back on the economic trinity). That nothing less than unity of essence is indicated follows from

Community displayed in nature and mission is equally true of Christians. By virtue of their common new lives in Christ, Christians possess a shared nature (2 Cor. 5:17). By virtue of their common Master, all Christians have a shared mission (Matt. 28:18-20). The Christians' model for how to express shared relationships is the model of the Trinity.³¹ When Jesus requests that His followers demonstrate the same sense of oneness that exists within the Trinity, He requests that His followers experience community as the Trinity experiences community. Though the Godhead is plural, they are one; so too, where believers are plural, they are one. John Sailhamer explains the plurality of Genesis 1:26-27 and its significance for oneness within humanity.

God created humanity through an expression of plurality. . . . The divine plurality of persons expressed in v.26 can be seen as an anticipation of the human plurality reflected in man and woman, thus casting human personal relationships in the role of reflecting God's own personhood (emphasis added).³²

Community exists within the Trinity in the relationships that occur between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These "interpersonal relationships within the being of God" existed "before the creation" and form the basis for how theologians make the claim for a "genuinely personal" God.³³ The relationships within the Trinity continued after the incarnation. Jesus maintained a perfect

17:21." William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953), 357.

³¹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1963), 1137.

³² John Sailhamer, *Genesis - Leviticus*, vol. 2 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Tremper Longman and David E. Garland, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 70.

³³ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 247.

relationship with the Father while on earth, regularly talking in prayer with the Father.³⁴

The Father loves the Son (John 17:26), and the Son loves the Father (John 14:31), and their shared love produces unity within their relationship.³⁵ This unity, grounded and produced by love for each other, is the model for the relationships among Christian men and women (1 John 3:23; 4:7-8; 5:1). Further, the “perfect plurality and perfect unity in God himself” is “the basis for thinking there can be any ultimate unity among the diverse” humanity that should be the Christian church.³⁶

God has not revealed to us *how* members of the Trinity relate to each other. We know only *that* the Trinity exists in relationship to each other. They love each other, express submission where the Son and Spirit choose, cooperate with each other, and commune with each other. How the Trinity relates is not the point when considering the importance of the Trinity to the theology of small group ministry. What is important is that the church promotes community or oneness among its assembly after the Trinitarian model because “the biblical teaching of the Trinity is very practical for relationships since God himself is a model of loving, cooperative, unified community.”³⁷ From the Trinity, believers in local churches learn to love, submit, cooperate, and so much more. Small

³⁴ Erickson, 514.

³⁵ Gaebelien, 164.

³⁶ Grudem, 247.

³⁷ Lane, 22.

group philosophy and ministry can be an effective method to express qualities of the Trinity within the church.³⁸

That God exists in community and that believers should follow the model of the intimacy of the Trinity is not a late twentieth century development. In Tod Bolsinger's, *It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian*, he considers the role of a local church in the spiritual development of the individuals in the assembly. The book deals with what the church is, not with what the church should do, and it does so from the foundation of orthodox teaching on the Trinity. Bolsinger credits the inspiration for his book to a fifteenth-century icon, *The Holy Trinity*, painted by Andrei Rublev.³⁹ Bolsinger describes the painting which reflects one part of the thinking of the fifteenth-century church on the doctrine of the Trinity. The painting depicts three figures, each representing one member of the Trinity seated around a table. At the center of the table rests a cup filled with wine. Through similar expressions, gestures, and items possessed by each figure, the painting depicts that they share fellowship with each other and that they share in the work the cup represents. Then Bolsinger concludes:

The icon serves as an evocative starting point. The Godhead as Persons, equally sharing rule, equally involved in redemptive suffering for the world, equally and intimately united to each other, invite the believer in their fellowship of intimacy and suffering love. The believer finding the comfort of fellowship with the Triune God becomes a partner in comforting ministry (2 Cor. 1:3-7). It is a communion that is grounded in love, expressed in mutuality, intimacy, and hospitality, and then is demonstrated in its ministry in the world.⁴⁰

³⁸ Icenogle, 20-21. See also, Donahue and Robinson who claim that the Trinitarian evidence "may be the defining piece of evidence in the theological case for small groups," 29.

³⁹ Tod E. Bolsinger, *It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian: How the Community of God Transforms Lives* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), 18.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 58-59.

God's Expression of Community in the Church

Because Jesus gave ecclesiastical authority to His disciples (Matt. 16:18-19) and because they wrote literature inspired by the Holy Spirit to local churches (2 Pet. 1:19-21; 3:15, 16; 2 Tim. 3:16-17), we should expect to see ideas of community in their writings. Indeed, the Apostles pour out the expectation for community among believers in local assemblies.

God's Expression of Community in the Attribute of Oneness

The book of Ephesians presents a Christianity branded by community in expression of oneness.

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all (4:1-6).

Paul advocates a shared Christianity, not a Christianity of isolation.

Following the cultural mantra that religion is a private matter, many Christians keep their Christianity to themselves, hide behind that erroneous thinking, and avoid putting their noses into the business of other Christians. There is a significant difference between personal religion and private religion.⁴¹

Personal Religion Not Private Religion

As people who practice the distinctive⁴² that church association consists of a saved and baptized membership, Baptist churches and those like them regard

⁴¹ Paul Pettit, *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to Becoming Like Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008), 46.

⁴² On the subject of Baptist distinctives, Kevin Bauder writes, "No belief that is held universally by Christians can qualify as a Baptist distinctive. Some teachings set all Christians apart from other religious people. These 'Christian distinctives' are known as

every commitment to Christ as personal. This distinctive means no one else can create a relationship with God on behalf of another. To say that religion is private is to say that it is exclusive of other people. Private religion is not a biblical concept and should not be the unintended consequences of ministry philosophy and programs that emphasize platform activities at church services and attendance at corporate events to the exclusion of interpersonal connectedness, responsibility, and opportunity throughout the week.

Oneness Not Simply Events

Small group philosophy promotes oneness within the body through gatherings of believers apart from large public events. Public events like worship services and Sunday School provide needful structure for preaching, corporate praise, and building Bible knowledge; however, public events cannot “address some of the most significant needs that humans possess, including biblically based needs for inclusion, support, empowerment, and accountability.”⁴³ To facilitate a relational oneness having these qualities requires an intimate group of

essentials, or fundamentals. All true Christians affirm the fundamentals. Because Baptists are Christians, they also believe the fundamentals...The fundamentals are the common property of all true Christians, whether Baptist, Lutheran, Calvinist, or Wesleyan. Therefore, a fundamental doctrine is not really a Baptist distinctive, even though all genuine Baptists believe it...We must not say that *only* Baptists hold *any* of the Baptist distinctives. Baptists are characterized by several beliefs. Not one of those beliefs is absolutely unique to Baptists...What makes Baptists different is that they alone hold the combination of beliefs that are known as the Baptist distinctives...While each of the Baptist distinctives is held by *some* other Christians, no Baptist distinctive is held by *all* other Christians. Therefore, each one of the distinctives sets Baptists apart from some other Christian group. When all of the distinctives are added together, the combination ends up setting Baptists apart from all other Christians (emphasis original).” Kevin Bauder, *Baptist Distinctives and the New Testament Church Order* (Schaumburg, Il.: Regular Baptist Books, 2012), 12.

⁴³ Jeffrey Arnold, *The Big Book on Small Groups*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, Il.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 106.

trusted Christian brothers and sisters.⁴⁴ These believers embrace Paul's words that "we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another (Rom. 12:4-5)."

God's Expression of Community in Κοινωνία

Some churches identify a room in the church as the "fellowship hall," or call an event following a corporate gathering a "church wide fellowship," or a time during a church service where people greet each other as "fellowship time." Unfortunately, these uses of the New Testament word "fellowship" diminish its weight. The uses of the word in the New Testament describe much more than casual conversation over cake and coffee in the church basement.

Paul's Teaching

In the English New Testament the word "fellowship" often translates κοινωνία. No other word "embodies the ideals of Christian community"⁴⁵ as does this word. For example, in Philippians 1:5 Paul acknowledges the "fellowship (κοινωνία) of the gospel" he knew with this church. In his gospel efforts, the Philippian church had a part so that his words commend a "partnership" between them and him. In Romans 15:26 "contribution" translates κοινωνία. Paul writes, "For it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make

⁴⁴ See pp. 96-97 of this dissertation for additional discussion on connection to the entire local church.

⁴⁵ Pettit, 79. Paul uses κοινωνία 14 of the 20 times it appears in the New Testament. "The noun comes from the adjective κοινός, 'common.' So its basic idea is that of sharing something in common." Ralph Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), 335. See also Thayer whose first meaning is "the share which one has in anything," 352.

a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem.” To give of one’s assets to the relief or aid of another is to act in *κοινωνία* (Rom. 12:13; 15:26-27; 2 Cor. 9:13; Gal. 6:6). Paul commends the Philippians for sharing in his distress (4:14-15), either through material aid or spiritual intercession or both.

The Primitive Church’s Expression of *Κοινωνία*

The first use of *κοινωνία* occurs in Acts 2:42, where the new believers “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship.” A few verses later Luke records the sale of household goods and the pooling of resources for the aid of anyone who had need of revenues from the sale. Whether needy because of poor social status or because of immediate persecution from identification with Christ, help was available from the other Christian brothers and sisters.

Κοινωνία describes more than the monetary contributions of the wealthy to the poor. The word describes the mutual faith (Titus 1:4; Philem. 6), and the common salvation (Jude 3), the enduring of persecutions together (2 Cor. 1:7; Heb. 10:33; 1 Pet. 4:13), and the unity of believers despite their varied ethnicities, social class, gender, and age (Eph. 2:11-22).⁴⁶ Many long to see and experience this ideal shared community of life touching life realized within the framework of their local church.⁴⁷ Small group philosophy and ministry can provide the necessary structure.

From the theological justification of *κοινωνία*, John Mallison, a leader in small group philosophy, promotes small group ministry in the local church:

⁴⁶ Pettit, 80.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

A basic reason for the small group is the need to know others intimately in order to become the church . . . the distinguishing mark of true Christian fellowship will most likely not be rediscovered in large meetings where the participants seldom see each other during the week . . . (and where) we do not truly know each other. We cannot truly love, because we are not able to be involved in each other's lives.⁴⁸

Pastors need to teach the people in their assemblies the full breadth of the meaning of New Testament *κοινωνία*, and people in the pews need to receive the preached word with gladness. People long for the intimacy of *κοινωνία*.

The Research on the Longing for Community

In a vital work about the impact of small groups on the American populace in general and the American church specifically, sociologist and Princeton professor Robert Wuthnow provides hard data on small groups. According to Wuthnow's study, exactly "forty percent of the adult population of the United States claims to be involved in a 'small group that meets regularly and provides caring and support for those who participate in it.'"⁴⁹ When Wuthnow collected the data in 1994, 40 percent of the adult population equated

⁴⁸ John Mallison, *Building Small Groups in the Christian Community* (West Ryde, NSW, Australia: Renewal Publications, 1979), 8. Mallison's full quote begins, "Small groups are essential because of the quality of life we seek." His language is too strong, but the general concept is valid. Larger gatherings of the local church do not lend themselves to intimate conversations, to accountability, or to mentoring. A smaller setting is necessary. In recognition of this, many historically Baptist churches use adult Sunday School in their ministry model. See pp. 83-86 of this dissertation for discussion on the adult Sunday School and small groups.

⁴⁹ Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 45. From surveys and interviews, Wuthnow deduces the results of small group involvement and why the participants participate in small group life. His research combines hard data and unique participation by researchers who observe small groups for extended periods of time. Another of his books, *"I Come Away Stronger": How Small Groups Are Shaping American Religion* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1994) provides weighty observations and warnings about the small group movement in the American church. Wuthnow is a prolific writer. Any serious consideration of small group ministry should involve his expertise.

to approximately 75 million people who looked to their small group⁵⁰ for caring and support,⁵¹ ideas consistent with *κοινωνία*. Wuthnow's research revealed a trend that would increase those numbers in the future.⁵² If the percentage holds steady, the number of adults involved in small groups in the United States in 2010 was 94 million, a staggering number.⁵³

The millions in these small groups find spiritual value in their participation. Some of the groups are not connected to a church in any way, yet "(these groups) are perceived by their members as having contributed to their spiritual development."⁵⁴ They continue in the groups not merely to bowl, knit, or speak a foreign language. They find care and support in their groups. Care and support is the arena of *κοινωνία*, and dealing with the spiritual lives of people is the role of the local church and the believers in them. Former pastor and author C. J. Mahaney offers his opinion:

⁵⁰ "This estimate is based on a question in the survey that asked, 'Are you currently involved in any small group that meets regularly and provides support or caring for those who participate in it?' Exactly 40 percent said 'yes.' This question had been pretested in a small national survey and in-depth interviews. The pretests showed that people were sometimes unsure about what type of group might be relevant, and on occasion realized only later that they were indeed involved in something that they should have mentioned. For these reasons, respondents who hesitated were shown a list of groups that contained phrases such as 'Bible study group,' 'discussion group,' 'support group,' 'Sunday school class,' 'couples group,' and comparable terms. Had respondents not been shown this list, the percentage responding affirmatively would likely have been lower. However, judging from the other questions, the 40 percent seems to be a reliable figure." Wuthnow, *I Come Away Stronger*, 369.

⁵¹ Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey*, 45.

⁵² *Ibid*, 48.

⁵³ The 2010 United States Census counted 308,745,538 persons of whom 234,646,608 were over the age of 18. For complete 2010 United States Census data, see www.census.gov.

⁵⁴ Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey*, 55.

Genuine fellowship isn't practical in a crowd of 200 or 2,000. That's why I feel so strongly that churches must create small groups where Christians can develop strong, personal relationships, where they can "know and be known." A church following a biblical model will not just "have" small groups. It will not merely "offer" small groups. Rather, it will be built with small groups (emphasis original).⁵⁵

No biblically sound church "must create" a small group ministry model, nor must the church "be built with" the small group model to be biblical, healthy or God-honoring. However, every biblically sound, healthy, and God-honoring church must intentionally and purposefully develop the ideas of *κοινωνία* with their church's ministries. The small group model is one way to develop *κοινωνία*.

God's Expression of Community in the One Another Statements of the New Testament

To the benefit of the Christian community, many modern writers have made their readers cognizant of the numerous "one another" texts throughout the New Testament.⁵⁶ The statements exhorting believers to engage in ministry make up a biblical authorization for small group ministry philosophy⁵⁷ by the working out of the statements among small group members.

Caring for One Another

In 1 Corinthians 12:25 Paul instructs Christians to "care for one another." Such care for each other brings concerned believers to the aid of suffering believers. Before aid can be given, caregivers need to know that a need exists. Most worship services provide neither the opportunity to reveal needs nor the

⁵⁵ C. J. Mahaney, ed., *Why Small Groups? Together Toward Maturity* (Gaithersburg, Md.: Sovereign Grace Ministries, 1996), 3.

⁵⁶ Insightful discussions of the "one another" statements can be found in Gene A. Getz, *Building Up One Another* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: ChariotVictor Pub, 1997). See also 25 categories of "one another" commands in Pettit, 92.

⁵⁷ Donahue, 165.

occasion to meet needs. Further, if the need is more than a request for an ache or pain, church members may be reluctant to offer the request in the large gathering of the whole church. In order to care for people, others must gain intimacy with one another. To care sufficiently for physical and spiritual needs, believers need to know each other's names, families, histories, passions, goals, temptations, and hurdles.

Bearing with One Another

When one member of the human race irritates another member, the natural response often is avoidance of the offender. The Scriptures call for a completely different way to relate to a Christian brother who is an annoyance. Christians must "bear with one another in love" (Eph. 4:1-3). This will require humility and gentleness, and a disposition that is eager to maintain unity. Yet it is so much easier to sit on the other side of the room, walk a different hallway, or exit by another doorway. Small groups provide the opportunity for Christians to display Christlike love to those in the group who have annoying habits, immature responses, and sinful patterns of behavior.

Promoting Good Works in Each Other

Believers have a responsibility to rouse one another to loving good works. The writer of the book of Hebrews says, "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works" (10:24). To fulfill this biblical command requires communication, and communication of this sort requires an intimacy that trusts the one doing the "stirring up." Such intimacy cannot be gained in the

large, corporate gatherings of the congregation. A lesser personality may find the atmosphere in a small group setting ideal to fulfill this command.⁵⁸

Quiet personalities may find initiating ministry difficult. Because they keep to themselves, the ministry desires of their hearts remain unfulfilled. A woman may have a growing burden for the mothers, fathers, and babies of unplanned pregnancies. By nature she is reluctant to communicate to a pastor or a deacon her desire to see her church get involved.

The same women can become very comfortable communicating with those in the small group. A flyer at the local crises pregnancy center that calls for a diaper drive soon becomes a text message from her to another woman in the same small group that results in a gift of diapers from the members of her small group. Obedience to Hebrews 10:24 by a reserved woman comfortable in her small group can provide impetus to the good works of sisters-in-Christ and new tools for a ministry to use in its evangelistic outreach to the community.⁵⁹

God's Expression of Community in the Spiritual Gifts

God has given spiritual gifts to all the personalities of a local church. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul writes to the church about "spiritual gifts" (v.1). He delivers a broad, if not complete, list of gifts granted by the Holy Spirit to the local church (vv.4-11). Paul then launches into an analogy of the human body as an illustration of the local church. In the same way that each human body part

⁵⁸ One may rightly assume that such "stirring up" should occur in pulpit ministry. This text, however, is not addressing pulpit ministry but believer to believer ministry.

⁵⁹ See pp. 106-08 of this dissertation for a discussion on the necessary oversight for small groups so that no small group becomes a rogue group in opposition to the stated ministry direction of the body.

contributes to the healthy functioning of a body, each person in a local church contributes to the healthy functioning of the whole church (vv.14-20).

Diversity of gifts

A local church consists of any number of people. Without regard to church size, one constant from church to church is the broad dispersion of gifts among the members of the church. That is the point of referencing foot, hand, ear, eye, and nose (vv.15-17). Divinely gifted people assemble in larger churches and in small churches, in rural churches and in urban churches. Each member possesses spiritual giftedness (v.27).

Public Displays of Giftedness

At public gatherings those members who possess gifts appropriate for that occasion exercise them for the benefit of the body. Gifted teachers teach God's Word. Gifted musicians lead public worship, play instruments, or sing in ensembles. Gifted hosts warmly greet members, attendees, and guests. The public gatherings provide wonderful venues for the necessary exercise of these gifts. The whole body benefits from gifted teachers, musicians, hostesses, and more. If, however, the only emphasis, or primary emphasis, in a local church is the exercise of these public gifts, then the church faces two equally distressing realities. First, the body assumes that it has no need for other gifts, and second, those possessing other gifts think the body has no use for them (v.21). As a result, the body's function is less than God desired because some part is missing, and individual members become frustrated because the gifts the Spirit grants remain dormant.

The exclusion is likely, not done with intent. Pastors do not discuss in staff meetings what body parts are unnecessary in the life of the church. Rather, gifts lie dormant more to oversight and negligence than they do by plan. John Mallison observes, "Only a small number can minister in a large gathering and then only in a fairly superficial manner to each individual in that crowd. The majority are denied the opportunity to exercise their ministry to the gathered church."⁶⁰ Mallison exaggerates the point, and many will find his word choice offensive. However, the general concept is valid. Churches should consider that when the emphasis is on the expression of gifts to the gathered church, potential exists for only a "few to minister," a ministry model never intended by God but the reality in some of our churches.⁶¹

Promoting the Exercise of Spiritual Gifts

A small group ministry model can provide a vehicle for the exercise of one's giftedness in the days surrounding the public gatherings. Paul writes, "But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit *of all*" (v.7). The Apostle did not mean that this profit would occur only when the assembly gathered for public worship and events. Beyond the larger gatherings,

⁶⁰ Mallison, 11.

⁶¹ Donahue, 115. Donahue and Robinson do not deny the importance of public preaching or the ministry that takes place at public gatherings. Their comments call into question whether all the members can exercise their gifts in a corporate gathering. Additionally, while it is true that Acts 6:3 identifies a "select few" to "appoint over (the) business" of widow care, Luke does not tell us how this was done. Exegetical commentators do not interpret this text as a restriction where only officials of the church can care for widows. For example, see Merrill C. Tenney, *John*, vol. 9 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D. Douglas, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1978), 330-31 and Frank Staff, *The Book of Acts; The Early Struggle for an Unhindered Gospel*. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1955), 90-91. 1 Timothy 5 gives ample direction on widow care that directs more than officers of the church to engage in the practice.

providential meetings are occasions for the exercise of one's gifts, and small group meetings and the relationships that develop in them can promote the exercise of one's spiritual gifts.

Small groups can promote the exercise of spiritual gifts by identifying them in the participants of the group. While spiritual gift tests may be useful, a better way to identify giftedness is for one or more believers to observe in another the giftedness the Spirit may have imparted (2 Tim. 1:3-7).⁶²

The small group environment and philosophy can provide a wonderful setting for encouraging the exercise of spiritual gifts and inspiring one to take the next steps for expressing the gift.⁶³ As members of a small group get to know a specific person in the group, hear the passions of his soul, and observe his words and action, they may find it quite easy to help him identify and define his gifts. The environment provides an immediate audience for the exercise of the gifts. For a person unusually gifted with a gift of service (Rom. 12:7), he finds before him in his small group a collection of people to whom he can direct his giftedness for their mutual good and the glory of God. From week to week, the consistency of meetings provides built-in accountability and encouragement to the exercise and development of the individual gifts of each member.⁶⁴

⁶² Paul recognized Timothy's giftedness for ministry. Such recognition developed from an intimate relationship described by Paul in the opening verses of 2 Timothy.

⁶³ Gladen, 63. Reference to the work of Steve Gladen is not an endorsement of the theology and methodology of Rick Warren and the Saddleback Church. Significant problems exist in Warren's soteriology, ecclesiology, and teaching on sanctification. Concerns regarding Warren are well documented in evangelical literature. Gladen's influence on small group theory is too significant to ignore.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

God's Expression of Community in other New Testament Texts

Beyond the New Testament texts already considered, many more texts direct believers to the practice of community. Paul told Christian men and women, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15). Like the rest of humanity, Christians experience deep pain related to loss and hurt. Often the pain lingers far longer in the life of a bereaved person than those around realize. Though surrounded by the masses of people in public gatherings, many in the church may suffer alone. A small group of caring people diminishes the chances of suffering alone. In Wuthnow's research, two-thirds of respondents said their small groups fully met the need for deep emotional support in times of distress.⁶⁵

In Ephesians 4:15-16 Paul continues on the same body theme found in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12.

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (Eph. 4:15-16, English Standard Version).

Paul makes clear that each individual within the body of a local church is to grow up in Christ by the influence of others within the body. This instruction creates gender issues that can be solved within the structure of a small group.

Like today, the churches in ancient Corinth and Ephesus experienced the realities of a fallen nature in regard to human sexuality, and the churches in Corinth and Ephesus experienced the realities of ignoring biblically defined gender roles that make males responsible for church leadership and the authority

⁶⁵ Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey*, 53.

of the preached word.⁶⁶ When Paul instructed the Ephesian church that the whole body benefits from what every member of the body supplies, he did not rule out the spiritual impact across gender lines. Women should contribute to the spiritual growth of men, and men should contribute to the spiritual growth of women.⁶⁷ Fallen nature complicates the contributions. Intimate relationships may provide provision for fallen flesh to fulfill sinful desires. In humanity's sinful thinking, churches allow women with the gift of teaching to enter the pulpit and assume the role of an elder because she has a gift that would benefit the whole.

Small group philosophy and ministry can fulfill the mandate for both genders to contribute to the health of the whole body. Without occupying the office of elder in title or practice, a woman can offer to the men in the setting of a small group meeting what she has learned from God's Word. Two families from the same small group may have dinner together. In the course of conversation, one of the women interjects a Bible text or truth that aids all in her presence. They benefit from her insight without transgressing the biblical mandate regarding gender roles.

⁶⁶ For a thorough study of the roles of males and females in the life of the church, see John Piper and Wayne A. Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991).

⁶⁷ John MacArthur's exegesis of 1 Timothy 2:11-12 provides an excellent interpretation and application for the role of women as it relates to the ministry of the Bible in a local church. MacArthur rejects what he calls "revisionist interpretation" that restricts women from talking at all in the context of the church. MacArthur summarizes the teaching restriction in two points. Concerning the occasion of worship, he writes, "The issue is where they (women) exercise those gifts," and concerning the office of elder, he writes, "The role of the elder as evangelist or pastor-teacher is only for men." John MacArthur, *1 Timothy*, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 82-87. See pp. 105-08 of this dissertation for a discussion on small group leadership.

While not fail proof, the numbers in a small group can serve as a deterrent to sinful flesh. The presence of spouses in the meetings of the group and the accountability of others in the group can provide a safety net against unintentional falls between members of the opposite sex.

God's Expression of Community in the Priesthood of the Believer

As a traditional Jew, the Apostle Peter understood the office of priest. In his New Testament letters, he calls Christians priests.

You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:5).

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9).

The Apostle John was no less proficient in his understanding of the priestly office, and he too identifies New Testament Christians by the same office and title.

And has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen (Rev. 1:6).

And have made us kings and priests to our God; And we shall reign on the earth (Rev. 5:10).

From these texts theologians developed the doctrine of the Priesthood of the Believer. Baptist literature states the doctrine:

Baptists use the term "priesthood of all believers" to mean that all believers in the Church Age have the same standing before God, and all have direct access to Him through Jesus Christ. We need no human mediator to approach God. No special group of Christians today has more acceptance by God or power before Him than others.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Donald K. Anderson, *The Biblical Distinctives of Baptists* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1984), 27.

A Christian priest comes before God without need of an intercessor. He is his own priest and has free and open access to God. As a priest to God, he is welcome in God's presence. This wonderful truth is part of the doctrine, but there is more to the doctrine.

Students of church history know the great reformer Martin Luther for his doctrinal contribution of *sole fide*, faith alone. Luther understood the Scriptures to teach that justification was apart from works and rested in faith alone.⁶⁹ This great doctrine was not the only enduring doctrine Luther contributed. He ardently fought for the priesthood of every genuine believer in opposition to a hierarchy of clergy and layman.⁷⁰

Luther believed that the priesthood of the believer was for the benefit of the whole church, not merely a benefit to an individual who sought immediate access to God. As confessors, Roman Catholic priests heard the sinful acknowledgments and granted absolution. Protestants reject the need for confession to any man, and rightly so. Luther considered James 5:16 the priestly responsibility and privilege of every believer. "Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." The scene would play out this way. A believing man might approach a brother-in-Christ and confess to him a sin of commission or omission. The brother, as priest of God to that man, could on the

⁶⁹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1953), 707.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 713. Baptist commentators identify priesthood in similar terms. Regarding 1 Peter 2:5, "This is a basic passage of the cherished doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Every believer is a priest for himself before God. Every believer is also a priest for every other believer before God." Ray Summers, "2 Peter", vol. 12 of *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. Clifton J. Allen (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1972), 155.

authority of God's Word (1 John 1:9) affirm for the penitent brother God's promise of forgiveness, and like the Lord encourage him "to go and sin no more."⁷¹

More than 100 years after his death, one of Luther's adherents expanded his teaching on the priesthood of the believer. According to Lutheran historian David Zersen, Lutheran pastor Jacob Spener took the next logical step after studying Luther's writings on the priesthood of the believer. He taught that the doctrine was not a doctrine to be applied solely to self, but a doctrine to be applied additionally in the exercise of priesthood to others, specifically the spiritual care of one Christian for another.⁷²

In a pastoral writing Spener offered his longings for a local church. He hoped that "good friends would come together" on a Sunday afternoon following the morning's worship. He suggested that they put away the table games and talk to each other about the morning's sermon or read a Christian book for the edification of all who gathered. He understood that "we preachers cannot instruct the people from our pulpits as much as is needful," and that the congregation needs other gifted and mature Christians who, as priests to God

⁷¹ One might wonder if Luther's teaching on confessional practices toward other believers was a remnant from his days as a Roman Catholic priest. Luther historian Paul Althaus rejects the premise. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 313-18. He notes that Luther taught, "Strong faith in God's forgiveness, however, does not need the brother, for the Christian is then able to confess only to God," 318. Luther connected confession to counseling and helping a sinning and repentant brother not to securing the brother's absolution.

⁷² David John Zersen, "Lutheran roots for small group ministry." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 8, no. 4 (August 1, 1981): 235.

and to others, would instruct, correct, and exhort in matters of Christian doctrine and Christian lifestyle.⁷³

Priests do the work of God, and Spener understood that the work of God could not be carried out by the recognized clergy alone.⁷⁴ The church needs more believers acting in their priestly roles than the one they recognize in the pulpit or on the platform. No pastor or group of pastors can or should conclude that they are the key discipling agent for every member of a local church (Eph. 4:11-12). The church needs all the believer-priests in the pews to know who they are and the gifted office they hold for the benefit of the whole body. The impact on churches cannot be exaggerated if churches with one, two, or more pastors carrying the burden of the whole added to their number the church membership acting as believer-priests toward one another. The effect of believers listening to the cares of other believers and guiding them to God's truth would change the soul of the whole body. The same would be true as these many priests cried out in intercessory prayer for others, extended care to each, and offered refuge to weary souls.⁷⁵

Baptist theologians considered the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer to extend beyond the benefits of the individual. They regarded priesthood as "one of the most important and original features presented in the

⁷³ Philip Jacob Spener, *Erbauliche Evangelische – und Epistolische Sonntags – Andachten* (Frankfurt, 1716), 638; quoted in Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 13.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 27.

⁷⁵ Donahue, 105.

history of the Christian Church.”⁷⁶ As God’s priest, a Christian man or woman was both free and obligated to assist the church in her worship, education, prayer support, and ministry of the Bible.⁷⁷ To these believer-priests, God endowed necessary gifts for the activities of priestly ministry toward others in a local assembly.⁷⁸

God’s Expression of Community in the Meaning of Discipleship

The whole church consists of disciples of Jesus Christ. Our Lord gave us his Great Commission to make disciples of all peoples. According to our Lord, discipleship includes teaching converts all the topics the Lord taught His original disciples. The Apostle Paul understood the generational nature of Christian discipleship.

And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also (2 Tim. 2:2).

Our Lord and Paul teach Christian doctrine passes from one Christian to the next. Certainly, both spent considerable time in solitude with the Father at the leading of the Spirit. This is necessary for spiritual growth. Also necessary is the influence of an authentic biblical community for the spiritual formation of an individual Christian.⁷⁹

Christian writers express discipleship by many different words or phrases. Life change, progressive sanctification, spiritual formation, Christian

⁷⁶ Thomas F. Curtis, *The Progress of Baptist Principles in The Last Hundred Years* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1856), 336.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 339-41.

⁷⁸ Henry Cook, *What Baptists Stand For* (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press, 1947,) 100-02.

⁷⁹ Pettit, 22.

growth, and transformation all identify the process by which a formerly unsaved man becomes a man who reflects the image of Jesus Christ.

Believers experience this change to Christlikeness via three divine resources. The first is the word of God (Ps. 119:9-10; Pro. 3:5-6). The second resource is the Spirit of God (2 Cor. 3:18), and the third resource is the community of believers that leads a Christian onward and upward toward Christ (1 Cor. 12:7, 20-26; Eph. 4:11-16).⁸⁰ To know God fully one needs to know what others know about Him from their interaction with His word and His Spirit.

The church, with the highest calling to advance the Christlikeness of the people, needs the interaction of the body in the life of every member for the purpose of change toward Christlikeness. The church has taught this for centuries. A survey of the history of small groups in the church across the centuries and the oceans is the subject of the next chapter.

⁸⁰ Pettit, 45-46.

CHAPTER 2

SMALL GROUPS IN HISTORY

To no one's surprise when teachers and students reduce history to names, dates, and events, the study of history diminishes to a tedious collection of facts. When names, dates, and events become instruments for learning principles, gaining insight, and developing wisdom, they cease to be dreary, by turning the mundane into the stirring.

Sociologists and small group authorities define a small group as "a face-to-face gathering of a few persons to be, to share, and to act for the betterment of one another and the wider good of others,"¹ and "a more or less cohesive collection of individuals who relate to each other personally and at intervals in more or less patterned ways because they share certain beliefs, values, affections, motives, norms, and roles and have a common goal."² When it comes to the church, a small group is a collection of believing people who connect with each other, care for each other, converse with each other about God and His Word, and chase after each other as the New Testament commands and instructs them to do.³ They covenant with each other to fulfill these commitments in events like

¹ Gareth Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry: An Integrative Approach* (Downers Grove, Il.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 14.

² A. Paul Hare, *Small Group Research: A Handbook* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing, 1994), 1.

³ For example, see Rom. 12:5, 10, 16; 13:8; 14:19; 15:5, 7, 14; 16:16; 1 Cor. 11:33; 12:25; 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; Gal. 5:13; 6:2; Eph. 4:2, 32; 5:21; Phil. 2:3; Col. 3:13; 1 Thess. 3:12;

a formal weekly meeting and informally as they intentionally or providentially cross paths.⁴

A Survey of Small Group History Beginning With the Reformation

Knowing the history of small groups in the Christian church offers two immediate benefits. First, how success occurred in the past may indicate the potential for success in the present. Learning from what others did correctly has always been a method of instruction. Second, avoiding error by studying the mistakes of the past develops wisdom in the life of the student.

To historically fundamental Baptists the origins of a method or idea is of great significance as are connections to denominations, movements, or church leaders. It is part of their position on the doctrine of ecclesiastical separation.⁵ A method or an idea may be a good one, but if it is too closely connected to a wayward or deviant brother or ministry, or if its source is a deviant brother or

4:9, 18; 5:11, 14, 26; 2 Thess. 1:3; Heb. 10:24; James 5:16; 1 Pet. 1:22; 4:9; 5:5, 14; 1 John 1:7; 3:11,23; 4:7, 11, 12; 2 John 5. The alliteration of these four words is a memory tool used by the people of First Calvary Baptist Church to identify the practices of each person in a small group.

⁴ See Appendix A - "The One Another Statements of the New Testament for commands given to believers in their interactions with other believers."

⁵ Ecclesiastical separation concerns the interaction between churches and its leaders with other churches and their leaders. Rightly, a church or leader who identifies another Christian as failing in obedience to God and unrepentant in the call to holiness must disassociate with the sinning person(s) or church. Some conclude that if a ministry idea emerges from a disobedient brother or church, the ministry idea should be dismissed because of the failure in a different area of holiness. See David O. Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity: American Fundamentalism Since 1850* (Greenville, S.C.: Unusual Publications, 1986), 6-10. Beale later writes, "Every phase of the Christian ministry came under the influence of new evangelicalism: Sunday school literature, publishing houses, and evangelism. The movement left no area untouched, and separatist Fundamentalism virtually had to start afresh after the 1940s by building their own institutions and agencies," 263-64.

ministry, there is a strong probability that the method or the idea will be summarily dismissed.

Small Groups Not the Latest Fad

Some observers may look at the practice of small group ministry and conclude that it is a fairly recent idea. The conclusion could be to dismiss small group method as the next in a long line of Christian ministry gimmicks or as the latest fad for “cutting edge” churches. The accounts of small group ministry across the Protestant landscape record an insightful history showing the antiquity of the practice.

Small Groups during the Protestant Reformation

As previously noted, Luther believed strongly in the “priesthood of the believer.”⁶ The religious climate of his day promoted dissimilarities between the clergy and the laity so that a figurative canyon cut between them.⁷ The doctrine had ramifications on a believer’s personal ministry toward another believer,⁸ and potential ramifications on the organization of the church.

⁶ See pp. 59-60 of this dissertation.

⁷ David John Zersen, “Lutheran Roots for Small Group Ministry.” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 8, no. 4 (August 1, 1981), 235. Luther wrote, “Indeed, all Christians are priests, and all priests are Christians. Worthy of anathema is any assertion that a priest is anything else than a Christian. For such an assertion has no support in the Word of God and is based only on human opinions . . . Let us go and show . . . that all Christians are priests in equal degree. . . . Mostly the functions of a priest are these: to teach, to preach and proclaim the Word of God, to baptize, to consecrate and administer the Eucharist, to bind and loose sins, to pray for others, to sacrifice, and to judge all doctrine and spirits.” Martin Luther, “Concerning the Ministry,” *Luther’s Works*. American Edition, Vol. 40 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 19.

⁸ Luther wrote, “It is of value to be reminded . . . Scripture expressly tells us to ‘encourage the fainthearted’ (1 Thess. 5:14) and that a ‘dimly burning wick should not be quenched’ (Is. 42:3) but rather nurtured. . . . Therefore the Spirit reminds and admonishes us everywhere that Christians have authorization from God Himself to

Luther contributed doctrinal reform and organizational structure to the church. His German Mass of 1526 suggested three kinds of “divine service” or “mass,” one in Latin, another in German, and a third altogether different that allowed for intimate connection between true believers away from the public gathering. Though Luther never established such meetings (a practice taken up later by his students), Lutheran historian David Zersen sees in this practice both historical and theological beginnings for small groups. Zersen concludes that Luther “made a notable beginning for the functional realization of the priesthood. Here Christians would be able to meet face-to-face to carry out the implications of their spiritual role.”⁹

Small Groups Continue with Luther's Students

It is worth noting the application of Luther's writings by two of his followers in different generations. Martin Bucer (1491-1551) advocated “Christliche Gemeinschaften,” (Christian communities). These were not Christian city-states at a time of great political turmoil driven by extreme shifts in established religion. Instead, they were meetings of committed, genuine believers who, upon examination by a pastor, were admitted to the official membership of a house group whose purpose it was to aid all the members in living out biblical

teach and console each other. . . . You should listen to me, according to God's command, when I comfort you in whatever battle and peril you may be, and you should believe me. I, on the other hand, should listen to and believe you when I find myself in similar emergency. . . . There is tremendous weight in the word of a brother which . . . he adduces from Scripture.” Martin Luther, “Psalm 90:7,” *Luther's Works*. American Edition, Vol. 13 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 111.

⁹ Zersen, 238.

Christianity.¹⁰ Like Luther before him, Bucer did not advocate the establishment of house churches, assemblies of local believers meeting apart from the established parish and in opposition to it; instead, these in-home meetings were Christians touching the lives of other Christians.

A century later in Germany, Jakob Spener (1635-1705) read Luther's words and saw in them the authority to gather believers together apart from the formal meeting of the parish.¹¹ The meetings happened in Spener's home as believers met twice weekly. Historian Christina Bucher identifies three characteristics of those meetings. First, those gathered practiced the priesthood of the believers in a way that could not be practiced in an atmosphere where the privileges and responsibilities of clergy and laity were so unbiblically diverse. Second, the groups "encouraged learning" as they discussed what they learned from the pastor's Sunday preaching and its impact on their thinking and actions. Third, group attendees participated and practiced "Christian community" in a way that could not happen in the large worship setting.¹²

As the impact of the Reformation spread across the continent, "Baptists, Moravians, Brethren, Methodists and Quakers" all saw the potential in additional meetings of believers usually occurring in someone's home, not in

¹⁰ Peter Bunton, *Cell Groups and House Churches: What History Teaches Us* (Ephrata, Pa.: House to House, 2001), 12.

¹¹ Christina Bucher, "People of the Covenant Small-Group Bible Study: A Twentieth Century Revival of the Collegia Pietatis." *Brethren Life and Thought* 43, no. 3-4 (June 1, 1998), 49.

¹² *Ibid.*

conflict with the Sunday morning worship service, and for the application of Christian truth.¹³

Small Groups under the Leadership of John Wesley

While a student at Oxford John Wesley (1703-1791) experienced the impact of a small group on his own life and the lives of others in “The Holy Club,” a group of young men who met regularly and purposefully for Bible study, prayer, confession, accountability and mutual encouragement. This early episode in his life laid the groundwork for the Methodism that developed later.

Departing Oxford with his younger brother Charles, Wesley traveled to Georgia in the colonies to engage in missionary work. Like so many Atlantic voyages, this trip encountered treacherous weather. On board the vessel with Wesley was a group of Moravians, Christians whose conduct during the voyage and calm spirit through the storm impressed Wesley, so much so that when Wesley returned to England after the Georgian mission failed to accomplish what he had hoped, he sought out a Moravian group for spiritual enrichment. Their mutual care for one another, edification of each other, and accountability to each other impacted Wesley personally in his own spiritual life and later in his discipleship of believers.¹⁴

When George Whitefield sought someone to assist and carry on the work he was doing among the villages and rural settings in England, he turned to John

¹³ James A. Davies, “Small Groups: Are They Really So New?” *Christian Education Journal* 5, no. 2 (January 1, 1984), 43.

¹⁴ That Wesley was not born again during his colonial mission was foundational for the ministerial failure he experienced.

Wesley.¹⁵ In the ensuing years following the Georgian missionary trip, Wesley worked tirelessly. While nowhere near the orator that Whitefield was, Wesley showed an aptitude for taking converts from conversion to various stages of discipleship, a trait Whitefield recognized as a weakness in his own ministry and a strength in Wesley. In fact, Wesley “left nothing to chance. He made sure that those who were serious about leading a new life were channeled into small groups for growth in discipleship.”¹⁶ Whitefield left for the colonies, leaving the ministry to Wesley.

The ensuing revival that swept across England, the development of Methodism, and the societal impact of the revival has been well documented and need not be repeated here. For the pastor or church leadership considering small group ministry, D. Michael Henderson has written a helpful work. He connects what Wesley did in eighteenth-century England and its ongoing impact into the nineteenth century to the modern expression of discipleship in the philosophy and practice of small groups. Wesley’s ideas were not original to him,¹⁷ but were a collection of ideas and practices garnered from many different sources resulting in “the establishment of little gatherings of devout people who met

¹⁵ D. Michael Henderson, *A Model for Making Disciples: John Wesley’s Class Meeting* (Nappanee, Ind.: Francis Asbury Press, 1997), 27.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 28.

¹⁷ Many historians see Wesley’s ideas as a precursor to the modern practice of small groups. For example, “Though not the originator of the small group, John Wesley’s role might be considered so instrumental that without him present circumstances probably would be quite different.” David S. Hunsicker, “John Wesley : Father of Today’s Small Group Concept?” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 31, no. 1 (March 1, 1996), 193.

weekly for prayer, reading devotional books, distribution of food to the poor, and discussion of personal religious experience.”¹⁸

The cornerstone idea for Wesley’s method was the belief that Christianity is not to be experienced in isolation, but true Christianity can only be realized when all Christians “counterbalance each other with support, encouragement, and instruction.”¹⁹ In contrast to the Western spirit of individualism, a pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps mindset, Wesley championed the position that “the growth in holiness that leads to Christian perfection is a journey that takes place in the company of others.”²⁰ When someone made a profession of faith in Christ at an open-air preaching event, Wesley directed the new believer to an introductory group called a “class.” A group of ten to twelve converts met weekly apart from the Sunday worship wherever space was available and accommodating. A meeting might last for an hour or so and was highly interactive. This was not a Bible study, but a highly structured exchange between the members. The format of a meeting included an opening hymn and a transparent conversation from the group leader to all the group members regarding his spiritual experiences since the last meeting.²¹ Class members followed in turn with similar expressions until all had participated.²² The group

¹⁸ Henderson, 49. In this regard, Wesley’s Methodism has some semblance of structure to the *Christian Communities* of Bucer nearly two hundred years after Bucer’s death.

¹⁹ Davies, 44.

²⁰ Daniel Castelo, “Perfecting One Another: Friendship and the Moral Implications of Wesley’s Small Groups.” *Asbury Journal* 64, no. 1 (March 1, 2009), 5.

²¹ Henderson, 99.

²² Henderson observes “every Methodist spoke at every meeting every week... There was no allowance for mere listeners or watchers. The success of the entire

responded with exhortations to Christian character, offers of prayerful support, and reminders of biblical truth. The group interaction continued beyond the weekly meeting. Because groups consisted of members from the same village, town, or neighborhood, unofficial contact was natural. Informal yet intentional support or accountability of what was privately discussed in a class meeting served to strengthen each class member.

Beyond the small group called “class,” Wesley developed other groups. His “bands” organized professing believers who desired Christian maturity. Like the classes, they met weekly and expected open and transparent conversation. Beyond the classes, these small group meetings penetrated deeper into the lives of their members, asking questions about motives, thoughts, and sinful desires. “The group environment was one of ruthless honesty and frank openness, in which its members sought to improve their attitudes, emotions, feelings, intentions, and affections.”²³

Two other groups completed Wesley’s Methodist system. The Select Society was those chosen by Wesley himself from among those who had demonstrated spiritual maturity and leadership in both the classes and the bands. The group retained the strictest confidence, provided a pool of potential leaders for the movement, and offered to Wesley an arena to challenge and be challenged in doctrine and practice.²⁴ His Penitent Bands served as an early attempt at rehabilitating drunkards, prostitutes, and those with other addictive

system hinged on the assumption that everyone would participate fully.” (Emphasis original), 142.

²³ Henderson, 112. See Appendix B - “John Wesley’s Rules for Bands-Societies.”

²⁴ Ibid, 121-25.

behaviors. Often, these groups met on Saturday nights as deterrent to the activities normally associated with that day.

Some lessons from Wesley transfer forward to today's churches. Beyond Bible study groups and church prayer meetings, church members need the discipline and accountability that a group provides. Where small group organization exists, potential for "continual renewal and vitality of the corporate church" exists as well.²⁵

Wesley believed that group participation and not sole individual efforts are necessary for discipleship. Wesley felt indebted to Christians near him who provided him biblical solutions to his "human problems." He concluded that what was true of his experience could and should be true of others.²⁶

Wesley was not satisfied that preaching alone, apart from person-to-person interaction, was adequate to develop spiritual maturity in a believer. There had to be much more than simply listening to sermons, even doctrinally sound ones. Wesley wrote in the "Preface to the 1739 Methodist Hymnbook."

That part of our economy, the private weekly meetings for prayer, examination, and particular exhortation, has been the greatest means of deepening and confirming every blessing that was received by the word preached, and of diffusing it to others, who could not attend the public ministry; whereas without this religious connection and intercourse, the most ardent attempts by mere preaching have proved of no lasting use.²⁷

²⁵ Davies, 49.

²⁶ Henderson, 132.

²⁷ John Wesley, "The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley: Reprinted from the Originals, with the Last Corrections of the Authors; Together with the Poems of Charles Wesley Not Before Published." Collected and arranged by G. Osborn. (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1868-72), I:xix-xxiii.

Within the stacks of small group instructional literature and the practice of local churches is the image of Wesley's methods. It is why John Wesley has been called the father of small groups.²⁸

A Survey of Small Group History in the United States

The small group movement that exists today among American churches began with the renewal movement in the evangelical church following World War II.²⁹ At a time when the American economy was booming, making the necessity of interdependence less apparent, rugged individualism that is so much of the American psyche permeated the whole of society (including the church), so that the result was not simply a decline in public participation in church events but a decline in what it meant to be a Christian.

In December 1974, Dr. Robert Leslie of the Pacific School of Religion, Graduate Theological Union in Berkley, California, compiled a list of journal articles and books "dealing with the therapeutic use of small sharing groups in the church." His bibliography, containing 195 journal articles and books, included sources from 1954 through 1974. While his one line descriptions of each

²⁸ Hunsicker, 210.

²⁹ No definitive work exists that articulates the origins of small group ministry in the United States. In 1974, William Clemmons and Harvey Hester, Southern Baptist leaders in the 1960s and 1970s, wrote concerning the growth of the small group movement that it did not have a leader or a denomination behind it but was more akin to a grassroots movement that moved from church to church during the 1950s and 1960s. See William P. Clemmons and Harvey Hester, *Growth Through Groups*. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1974). In a personal email to the author of this dissertation Gareth Icenogle opined that small group ministry "was launched in the parachurch movements of InterVarsity and Faith at Work and the beginnings of Alcoholics Anonymous. A significant person in the midst was Lyman Coleman. I do not know of a book that has researched this. Lyman Coleman told me directly in our friendship back in the 80's (sic)." Email from Gareth Icenogle to Mike VerWay, September 22, 2011. Lyman Coleman was one of the earliest authors on the subject. See Lyman Coleman, *Growth by Groups* (Huntingdon Valley, Pa.: Christian Outreach, 1960).

work provide keen insight into content, the greater contribution for modern readers may be the record of publications as early as 1954, ancient history for many in the American church. Simple observation reveals that small group ministry as a movement in the American evangelical church dates at least to the early 1950s.³⁰

Concerned for the church at the present and hopeful for its future, Larry Richards was thinking, teaching, and writing on the necessity of small groups in the local church in the 1960s. While a professor at Wheaton College, Richards gathered a group together at Wheaton's Bible camp for dialogue on needed changes within the local church that promoted discipleship and personal evangelism. The model he presented was one of small groups. Richards wrote *A New Face for the Church* following the meeting as record and recommendation.³¹ Two matters in his work are important for historically fundamental Baptists. First, that Richards encouraged small groups forty-five years ago speaks to the issue of trendiness or fad that some consider the small group movement to be. Second, the church examples cited in his book are Baptist churches. They may not have been independent, but they were absolutely conservative, a point Richards clearly makes. These churches may not be the equivalent of present day historically fundamental Baptists, but they were not distant cousins either. They are much more alike than dissimilar.

³⁰ Robert C. Leslie, "Small Groups in the Church: A Bibliography." *Journal of Pastoral Care* 28, no. 4 (December 1, 1974): 241-244.

³¹ Larry Richards, *A New Face for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

Learning from History

First, whatever one thinks of small group as a discipleship methodology, the fact remains that mega-churches of the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s did not originate them. The current landscape suggests that churches across the evangelical spectrum apply some form of small group ministry in their overall discipleship structure. As noted, small groups in the Protestant church have a long and well documented history evidencing believing people who met at specific times apart from the corporate gathering of the church, not in opposition to the established assembly but in anticipation of mutual edification toward Christlikeness for the benefit of the whole church.

Second, while it may not be possible to show a name-to-name connection of leaders, movements, or denominations that promoted and implemented small groups with each passing decade from the fifteenth century to the present, it is possible to show a shared theology³² which those in the past applied to small groups.³³ Baptists embrace the priesthood of the believer. Likewise, Baptists believe in the expansive giftedness of the body as articulated in texts like

³² A broader theology of small group ministry appears in chapter one. This point only summarizes shared positions. The reader may wonder why no Baptist representation from this history of small groups appears in the section. The author is unaware of any documentation regarding Baptists in small groups like those described in the Lutherans and Methodists. Baptists in England during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were far fewer than their Protestant cousins, and their spiritual vitality was dismal. Henry C. Vedder, *A Short History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907), 237. It may be that documentation about small groups in Baptist churches was not written, or it may be that the groups who identified themselves as Baptists practiced the ideas of community reflected in the larger denominations without the benefit of structure like the structure which existed among the Lutherans or Methodists.

³³ Davies notes four points comprising a theological foundation for groups in the past: (1) the functional nature of the church, (2) commitment to Christ for growth in holiness, (3) corporate accountability, and (4) voluntary discipline. James A. Davies,

1 Corinthians 12, a giftedness some in the past taught was best expressed in a small gathering of people apart from the larger corporate gathering. Modern day Baptists identify the necessity of the practice of communal discipleship in the promotion of the “one another” statements. Church leaders in the past shared this passion and saw its real expression in small groups. Historically fundamental Baptists embrace the theology of personal change toward Christlikeness via the process of progressive sanctification over and against crisis-experience. Wesley’s doctrine called for holiness among Christ’s followers, a characteristic nurtured in group life. Group members moved toward Christian maturity following a sustained pursuit of Christ in moment by moment choices, checks of the heart, and expressions of submission to the Scriptures and humility before others. The change toward Christlikeness was ongoing, encouraged, fostered, and enhanced by a group of believers toward all in the group.³⁴

Third, the pastoral concerns of men in the past, like those referenced in this chapter, are the pastoral concerns of so many historically fundamental Baptist pastors and local churches today. Many within the historically fundamental Baptist niche call for accountability of all the body yet lack a structure within the church that promotes accountability or expects it. Recent George Barna research reveals that as few as 1% of all professing Christians say their church practices some kind of accountability.³⁵ The large worship gathering

“Small Groups: Are They Really So New?” *Christian Education Journal* 5, no. 2 (January 1, 1984), 44.

³⁴ Castelo, 20. See notes 47 and 48.

³⁵ *National Study Describes Christian Accountability Provided by Churches*, November 29, 2010 <http://www.barna.org/congregations-articles/454-study-describes-christian-accountability-provided-by-churches?q=groups> (accessed October 20, 2011). Barna concludes, “One of the cornerstones of the biblical concept of community is that of

does not foster intimate accountability nor does the lecture system in an adult Sunday School. It is possible such accountability could occur in mid-week prayer meeting or in a men's ministry, a women's ministry or a youth ministry, but if no structure exists to promote accountability, accountability probably does not occur.

One man is able to care for a finite number of people, even if he is a vocational pastor. Whatever the number of people his gifts and resources allow him to care for at any given time, more than likely the number is less than the total of the body he serves. That concern was shared by past church leaders, and they saw a solution in small groups.

Modern pastors lament the passive participation of the body, yet much of the structure lends itself to passive participation. The body watches the choir, watches those who play special music, watches the lecturer in the education hour, and watches the preacher. Local church members should affirm consent to Bible truth, have a venue for objections to be answered from the Bible by other believers who desire his spiritual growth as well as their own, and to converse with each other about the Bible and their own, very real struggles with what God says in the Book. Past leaders shared these sentiments and found an arena for active participation in small groups.

mutual accountability. But Americans these days cherish privacy and freedom to the extent that the very idea of being held accountable by others—even those with their best interests in mind, or who have a legal or spiritual authority to do so—is considered inappropriate, antiquated and rigid. With a large majority of Christian churches proclaiming that people should know, trust and obey all of the behavioral principles taught in the Bible, overlooking a principle as foundational as accountability breeds even more public confusion about scriptural authority and faith-based community, as well as personal behavioral responsibility.” Even when factoring in only Christians Barna identifies as evangelical, the number rises slightly to 15%, a shockingly low number for a practice held as critical for maturing discipleship.

Shy believers, reluctant to approach a pastor out of fear, accessibility, or inability to communicate effectively, may find expression for ministry ideas in a small group. Here churches can experiment with ministry ideas, discipleship endeavors, missions projects, or evangelistic efforts without calling upon the resources, cooperation, calendar, or limited staff of the whole church.³⁶ In small groups the local church can remove racial barriers, as well as age, gender, and social barriers so that members of color learn from Caucasian members, old men learn from young men while young women learn from older women, and where the socially backward but wealthy gain from the socially skilled but poor and vice versa. In small groups churches of 50, 500, or 5,000 members can experience true Christian friendship. In small groups believers can realize true Christian fellowship that is not in the "Fellowship Hall" or in the "Pot-luck Fellowship."

Nearly forty years ago when William Clemmons and Harvey Hester studied the re-emergence of small groups, they identified two reasons for their rise: an impersonal society and an impersonal religion.³⁷ Those qualities of human behavior have not changed. The phenomenon of social media shows no sign of slowing down. Facebook now boasts one billion members.³⁸ For all that social media offers by way of connections, those connections can happen without

³⁶ In 1970 Larry Richards wrote, "Church organization should encourage innovation. It is vital that our churches retain the ability to discover and implement new ways to solve problems that arise in our changing culture. Church organization today is fixed, committed to a strategy of big meetings and agency-centered activity. The weight of its organizational machinery does not permit it to be responsive to people within or without." Richards, 217.

³⁷ William P. Clemmons and Harvey Hester, *Growth Through Groups* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1974), 13.

³⁸ Geoffrey A. Fowler, *Facebook: One Billion and Counting*, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390443635404578036164027386112.html> (accessed November 8, 2012).

any intimate interaction with a real person in real time. The need for and the potential of Christian to Christian interaction small groups offer shows no sign of waning and has been the desire of church leaders for centuries.

Across the last five centuries of the church, at the minimum, believers have met in settings that can be called small groups. They existed under the blessing and guide of their pastors and for the purpose of obedience to the idea of Christian community. When the present day church practices small groups as an application of Christian community, it does so as the next in a series of practicing churches.

Having established a theology and considering the history, some will raise legitimate objections to small group philosophy and ministry. The following chapter considers potential answers to these objections.

CHAPTER 3

ANSWERS TO ANTICIPATED OBJECTIONS

Small group ministry raises questions and concerns for pastors and church members. Hopefully, the first two chapters answered questions of theology and origins. This chapter provides reasonable answers to many questions that some might have about small groups as they think about their churches. The chapter does not consider every possible question nor does it offer every conceivable answer. However, the chapter does provide food for thought. Pastors and others in the church are wise to consider these and other questions. Failure to consider the genuine concerns and emotions of those in the church may do more harm to the church than the good that a small group ministry can bring.

Small Groups Are Not What Our Churches Do

It seems few historically fundamental Baptist churches embrace small group ministry as a ministry practice. It is difficult to make a definitive conclusion on this observation. In a survey of 50 pastors from historically fundamental Baptist churches across the United States, 20 of the 50 pastors claim their churches currently offer small groups as a ministry option.¹ Of the 20

¹ The author of this dissertation initiated the survey. Fifty pastors from fifty different historically fundamental Baptist churches across the nation answered the questions in person or in telephone conversations. Unless noted, the “survey” in this chapter is the author’s. The questions and results appear in Appendix C - “Small Group

pastors who answered that their churches offer small group ministry, only 3 strongly agreed that the ministry was a core ministry of the church, and only 3 strongly agreed that it is the congregation's expectation that every adult member participate in a small group.

Defining terms is a challenge. For many, a ladies' Bible study, a men's prayer breakfast, an adult Sunday School, or the mid-week prayer meeting is a small group. Defined so broadly, the survey suggests that in most churches small groups are neither a core ministry nor a ministry in which the congregation expects broad participation of each other. Still, observers question the existence of small group ministry in these churches.²

When those conducting the survey asked the pastors who do not have a small group emphasis in their church for their opinions about small groups, 70 percent agreed that small groups were something "big churches do"³ seemingly eliminating this as an option in their predominantly smaller churches. Of the 50 pastors surveyed, 44 report congregations of less than 200, identifying these assemblies as small churches.⁴ It may be that these smaller congregations and

Survey of Pastors Serving in Smaller or Medium Size Historically Fundamental Baptist Churches in the United States."

² James E. Singleton and David C. Griffith, *Welcome to the World of Small Groups* (Tempe, Ariz.: Tri-City Baptist Church, 1994), 15.

³ Robert Wuthnow noted in his research about small group participants that "14 percent of the members of these groups say they belong to churches of fewer than 100 members, 18 percent belong to churches of between 100 and 200 members, another 14 percent are members of churches with 200 to 300 people, 17 percent belong to churches with 300 to 500 members, 18 percent are in churches of 500 to 1,000 members, and 16 percent are in churches with more than 1,000 members." Robert Wuthnow, *"I Come Away Stronger": How Small Groups Are Shaping American Religion* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1994), 375.

⁴ Gary L. McIntosh, *One Size Doesn't Fit All* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1999), 18.

their leadership do not really understand what small groups are and have written them off because they see it modeled only in larger churches. An understanding of small group philosophy removes this perception by considering that the body dynamics described in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 do not depend upon the size of a local congregation. The smallest of churches can begin small group ministry when it begins with a sound theology for small group ministry.

Sunday School Does the Same Thing

All the churches represented by the pastors who answered survey questions use a Sunday School in their ministry model. Some wonder why churches need to add small groups when segments of the congregation already meet in smaller groups of people in the adult Sunday School where points of emphasis of small group could merge into the existing Sunday School.

According to a survey by George Barna that studied religious changes from 1991 - 2011, only one in four "born again" adults attend Sunday School. The fourteen-point decline was the largest downward shift in behavior over the time period.⁵ Even if adult Sunday School is doing the job, it achieves it with a minority of the congregation.

⁵ George Barna, *State of the Church Series, 2011 Part 6*, <http://www.barna.org/faith-spirituality/514-barna-study-of-religious-change-since-1991-shows-significant-changes-by-faith-group> (accessed October 26, 2011). Regarding the phrase, "Born Again Christians," Barna notes, "This category is comprised of people whose beliefs characterize them as born again; it is not based on people calling themselves 'born again.'"

Barna offers no evidence why there is a decline in Sunday School attendance.⁶ One reason may be that few churches expect the same kind of participation in adult Sunday School that they do in formal worship. Sunday School is optional, not an expectation of church involvement. Where churches expect Sunday School participation, Barna's decline does not hold true.⁷

Further, the purpose of Sunday School is not the same as small group ministry. As its name determines, Sunday School is for education. It should be another time for intensive teaching of the Bible. Sunday School can do very well as qualified and experienced teachers instruct Christian students. Whether Sunday School can promote intimacy that leads to transparency, confession, or accountability remains an open subject.

In 1999 researcher Thom Rainer studied three hundred Southern Baptist churches that experienced significant growth and high retention of new converts. His published findings, *High Expectations*, identified a number of common traits including the importance of Sunday School. He asserts, "Sunday School is the most effective assimilation methodology," while recognizing that all Sunday Schools "will not fit one pattern."⁸ Common traits in the Sunday School of the

⁶ For an interesting read on the departure of young adults from the church, see Ken Ham and Britt Beemer, *Already Gone: Why Your Kids Will Quit Church and What You Can Do to Stop It* (Green Forest, Ark.: Master Books), 2009. The authors interview 1,000 individuals who grew up in church but seldom or never go to church. They draw an unexpected conclusion that poor education during Sunday School was a contributing factor.

⁷ Thom S, Rainer, *High Expectations* (Nashville: Broadman & Holdman Publishers, 1999). Rainer studied 300 Southern Baptist Churches that he describes as high expectation churches. These churches were the most effective in both outreach and assimilation. Rainer concluded that these churches stood out from the rest because of the importance placed on the adult Sunday School. The expectation within the church is that all adults actively participate in the Sunday School, 33.

⁸ *Ibid*, 47.

churches Rainer studied included gifted and highly trained teachers, care groups within the classes consisting of no more than five persons led by a care group leader, an outreach leader responsible for follow-up on guests, accountability for on-time participation, and an overall “well-organized” structure. Given these traits, any theologically sound church ministry should excel.

In support of adult Sunday School, Rainer notes that ministry leaders claim Sunday School is easier to administrate and organize than are small groups. That is an open question. Both Sunday School and small group ministry require diligent administration and organization to be effective.⁹

Rainer observes that Sunday School resolves the problem of children, a problem that small groups must address. It is understood that in most churches where adult Sunday School exists that a children’s Sunday School also exists. When mom and dad go to Sunday School, so do the children. Childcare is built into the system. There is no such built in childcare for small groups. While a reasonable argument, the argument is not without its flaws. For example, if adult Sunday School is the method for accomplishing body life, then the teachers of children’s Sunday School and nursery workers are left out of that experience. Further, solutions exist for how to address the challenge of child care for small groups. First, parents can use the built in care of older siblings. Second, parents can use extended family who live in the area, like grandparents or aunts and uncles. Third, small group members can rotate childcare responsibilities week to week so that every fourth, fifth, or sixth week, one couple serves the others by caring for the children. Fourth, members of another small group can offer to

⁹ Rainer, 46. Consideration of small group administration and organization follows in chapter four.

provide care for a small group that meets at a different time. Fifth, students in the church can serve others in the body by offering to babysit children as a ministry. Sixth, a small group can meet at the church building, pooling together to hire childcare while using the church facilities. Seventh, parents can hire a babysitter who can care for the children at home. This happens regularly in the American culture when parents want or need to be away from home.

The point under consideration is not to debate the merits of Sunday School against the merits of small group ministry. Both have advantages and disadvantages.¹⁰ Instead, the point is “both and” not “either or.” Churches can seize the benefit of both ministries without giving up the impact of either.

Lessons to be learned from research and experts in the field are that leadership must teach the body that involvement in ministries like Sunday School and small groups is the hoped for participation for all the church; further, whether in Sunday School or in small groups, the definitive idea is not that one attend the Sunday School hour or attend the small group meeting, but that one embrace the responsibilities shared by group members when the meeting is over until it meets again the following week.

Small Groups Create Many Little Churches instead of One Church

Some may contend that instead of one church where all the members covenant together within one entity, church members covenant together with the members of their small group, forming an *ecclesiola en ecclesia*. Martin

¹⁰ Gladen, 192. See chapter 15, “Sunday School and/or Small Groups” for honest assessment in a question and answer style, comparisons between the two ministries, along with suggestions for evaluating Sunday School and suggestions for how to have both Sunday School and small groups in the same church setting, 191-212.

Lloyd-Jones used that phrase in a 1965 address at a London conference to describe the history of birth of the Methodism out of the Church of England.¹¹

Lloyd-Jones correctly observed that Wesley and others established little churches within the church because they found the larger denomination and local assemblies failing in practical Christianity. Though not the intent of Wesley and others, the effect was the formation of an entire new denomination.

Small groups as presented in this dissertation are not a reaction by the more spiritual within a local assembly to have a more genuine spiritual gathering apart from the larger cooperate meetings. Instead, small group ministry is an application of the shared value of the whole church to live in Christian community with each other. Careful attention from small group leaders, pastors, and small group members emphasizing the purpose of small groups can guard against *ecclesiola en ecclesia*.

We Do Not Have the Leaders

Every ministry requires leadership. Small group ministry is no different. Leadership requirements concern many pastors. In the author's survey more than 50 percent of the pastors said that small group ministry was "unrealistic" for their congregations. When asked for explanation, 69 percent cited leadership as a limiting factor.

Leadership will make or break small group ministry. Identifying potential leaders, training leaders, and encouraging leaders requires time and wisdom. This should not cause us to back away from a ministry. Instead, pastoral

¹¹ The phrase translates "little church within the church." D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors: Addresses Delivered at the Puritan and Westminster Conferences 1959-1978* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 129.

leadership should think like the Apostle Paul when he encourages those who have learned from him to teach others (2 Tim. 2:2).

Small group leaders need not be seminary trained people, nor do they need to be those capable of lecturing in a classroom setting. They need to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ who understand and believe the philosophy of small group ministry and are willing to take the risk of leadership. Before a church can pursue small group ministry as a ministry model, it may need to invest heavily in leadership training.¹² That training will be a worthwhile investment for the overall health of the church.

My House Is a Disaster Area

In many churches, reality may be that both spouses work outside the home, leaving precious little time to prepare the home for a group of people to come and settle down for an evening of Christian community in a small group. Possible solutions include meeting at the home of another group member who does not have the same circumstances. One might be surprised to discover how willingly group members open their homes for the meeting of the small group. While less than ideal, a room at the church building or gathering at a coffee shop can provide a locale for the group to meet. If the group leaders present the scenario to the group members in a group meeting, the group may provide additional solutions that best fit the needs of the leaders and the group.

Small Groups Are Breeding Ground for Discontent

Any group within a church that meets together for any period of time can be an occasion for problems. Choir members can sit in choir rehearsal and gripe

¹² See pp. 106-08 for suggestions for leadership training.

about the music, their role in worship, or the content of a sermon. A missionary committee can bemoan the lack of emphasis on missions in the church. Where the meeting occurs does not determine or prevent sinful communication. It is a fallacy to think that because a small group meets away from the church building without the on-sight, in-person oversight of a pastor that the group will naturally drift toward sinful communication that disrupts the body. When believers met in houses in the book of Acts, there is no record of problems because those meetings happened without apostolic presence (Acts 12:12).

Nevertheless, when sinful people come together, problems can and will come with them. The answer is strong pastoral oversight, as this is the answer in all church life (Acts 20:28). A pastor who provides oversight to small groups will emphasize in the pulpit, in leader meetings, and in casual conversations the purpose of small groups. He will provide accountability to the leaders ensuring that the group actually meets, who attends and who is missing, what was the tone and content of the conversation at the group meeting, what problems the leader observes, and what questions he can answer for the group. The pastor or a member of a pastoral staff should visit each small group. He arranges with the leader the best date to make his visit. He observes the group, listening and watching both for occasions of rejoicing and for potential problems which may indicate the overall spirit of the group. His visit can assess the leader's style and preparation as well as affirm the leader's efforts.

Small group meetings are opportunities for human expression. There is risk for sinful communication as well as potential for godly communication. While attendees hope for a safe environment for expression of areas of spiritual need or growth, the same environment can be nothing more than a place of "woe

is me” self-pity or sinful venting at circumstances or annoying people.¹³ In the same way that pastors will need to train leaders how to lead, they also will need to train church members how to function within a small group. They will need to teach what sinful communication is, what appropriate communication is, and how to address the sinful communication of others. Pastors will need to teach that commitment to a small group is more than commitment to attend meetings; it is a commitment to fulfill the body responsibilities of 1 Corinthians 12 when the meeting concludes and until next week’s meeting begins.¹⁴ This kind of ministry with people can get messy. “There are risks, uncertainties, and potential negative impact in the intensive group experience. But the alternatives – continued Christian lethargy, spectator religion, and the failure to provide life-related Christianity to counteract the alienation of contemporary society – hold greater dangers.”¹⁵

This Is Not What Fundamental Churches Do

Historically fundamental Baptist churches are late comers to the world of small groups.¹⁶ Many evangelical churches practice small group ministries; far fewer historically fundamental Baptist churches do. One-half of the pastors who do not have small group ministry at their churches said small group ministries

¹³ Wuthnow, 352-58.

¹⁴ Chapter four considers ideas for teaching these responsibilities.

¹⁵ James A. Davies, “Small Groups: Are They Really So New.” *Christian Education Journal* 5, no. 2 (January 1, 1984), 49.

¹⁶ Singleton, 9.

are what “neo-evangelicals do,”¹⁷ while two-thirds said that implementation of small group ministry would be met with “uncertainty of the overall direction” of the church.

It is easy to see why some hold this opinion. The publishing houses and Internet resources are not within the fundamentalist Baptist camp. Seminaries and Bible colleges that traditionally serve fundamental Baptist churches offer minimal training in small group history, theory, and implementation in contrast to other non-fundamental training centers.¹⁸ In many towns and cities, churches that embrace small group ministry are outside the circle of fundamental Baptists. That non-fundamental churches lead the way on the ministry is not sufficient reason to dismiss the ministry model. Historically, small groups pre-date neo-evangelical churches. Methodologically, small groups have strong biblical authorization. Logically, that non-fundamental churches operate food shelves, use PowerPoint slides, or operate bookstores has not been reason for fundamental Baptist churches to avoid them.

Others may suggest that the New Testament says nothing about small groups; therefore, churches should not use them in their methodology. However, the New Testament says nothing about mission boards, Christian camps, counseling centers, bookstores, or day care ministries, yet Christians should not conclude that the New Testament teaches nothing about their “order and

¹⁷ The term was not defined for the pastors who took the survey. “It should be noted that the term new evangelical is often used loosely in Fundamentalist circles and applied to any non-Fundamentalist conservative who does not accept or practice the principle of ecclesiastical separation, even though they do not actively promote the other emphases of new evangelicalism.” David O. Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity: American Fundamentalism Since 1850* (Greenville, S.C.: Unusual Publications, 1986), 270.

¹⁸ See pages 3-6 of this dissertation for previously referenced support.

function.”¹⁹ Similarly, Christians should not suppose because the New Testament says nothing about small groups, that there is no New Testament teaching about their order and function.

The Church Calendar Is Full

Of the thirty churches in the survey that do not have small groups, twenty-eight have Sunday School, Sunday morning worship, a Sunday evening service, and a mid-week service as their normal activities. Most churches that practice small groups do not have this routine. Often, their evenings, including Sundays, are free of regularly scheduled church-wide gatherings. When asked if they would be willing to give up Sunday night services to implement small groups, more than half replied they would not. When asked if they would be willing to give up mid-week services to implement small groups, slightly more replied they would not. When asked if they would be willing to give up both Sunday night services and mid-week services, 83 percent replied they would not be willing to do that.

Small group ministry requires structured time. Likely, churches will have to choose how to use the available time they currently have with members and attendees and not add to the calendar if they are going to implement small group ministry. No church should enter into such a decision haphazardly. To do so would be dangerous and foolish.

Historically, no definitive answer exists to how, when, or why churches began to hold multiple meetings on Sundays or called people together at mid-week. Before the convenience of modern transportation, church families may

¹⁹ Edmund P. Clowney and Gerald Lewis Bray, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 24.

have stayed for a noon meal following Sunday morning worship and then gathered again for a second preaching time before loading up the wagons or beginning the long walk home.²⁰ Automobiles made transportation to and from locales routine and not an all-day affair. Electricity, central heating and air-conditioning, and electric lights made coming and going from a church building hassle free. Unlike the documented origins of Sunday School, the documented origins of why, when or how churches began to meet in the morning and then again six hours later in the evening remains unwritten. It is simply part of who the historically fundamental Baptist church is. Every church needs to arrive at its own conclusion about when and how often it gathers for the ministry of the Word and the fellowship of the gathered body, but it needs to gather for purposes greater than “this is what we have always done.”²¹

For many churches a move to small group ministry will require giving up something, and that something probably will be one or more evening gatherings. No church should seek to implement small groups because attendance on Sunday nights or at mid-week services continues to decline. Initiating small groups because of decline in these services is neither biblical nor the practice in the history of the church.

²⁰ James M. Renihan, *Edification and Beauty: the Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists, 1675-1705*. “Studies in Baptist History and Thought,” Vol. 17 (Colorado Springs, Colo., 2009), 126. Renihan cites an agreement for the order of service when, in 1695, two London churches merged. “The publick Worship in the Congregation on the Lord’s Day be thus performed, viz. In the morning about half an hour after nine, some Brother be apointed to begin the Exercise in reading a Psalm, & then to spend some time in prayer; & after yt to read some other Portion of H. Scripture, till the Minister comes into the Pulpit; and after Preaching & Prayer to conclude with singing a Psalm. The afternoon exercise to begin abt half an hour after One, & to be carried on & concluded as in the forenoon.” (All archaic spelling and punctuation original).

²¹ Gladen, 28.

Should a church agree to free the calendar to make small group ministry possible, expect that not all will accept the change. Some will question the direction the church is heading. Others may leave the assembly because that is not the kind of church the members desire. Pastors should do all they can do to teach privately, to answer questions, and to express sincere love and hope that all in the church family will understand the reasons foundational to the change. If, after making every effort to aid the distraught family, the members cannot make the move with the church, graciously allow them to leave and move forward with those who remain.

Small Groups Limit Interaction with the Pastor

Should a church determine that implementation of small groups requires one less formal meeting time, Sunday night for example, then the interaction of the church with the senior pastor or other pastors will diminish. The size of a church will bear on the impact and perception of the diminished contact.

Smaller congregations expect more access to their pastor than larger congregations. Smaller congregations may not have office personnel. Phone calls made to the church building are often answered by the pastor. Conversely, larger congregations know that to get to the pastor, one must first speak to his administrative assistant. Smaller churches expect to speak to their pastor at a gathering of the whole, while members of a larger church may or may not have personal interaction with the pastor(s) at the public gatherings, and that is acceptable to them.²² The smaller congregation may have difficulty with the

²² McIntosh, 59-71.

reality of less interaction with the pastor, and the pastor may have difficulty with less interaction with his people.

Small group ministry will require a change in how a pastor of a smaller congregation views his pastoral role and how the members view his role. The paradigm shift requires that both pastor and congregants see that small groups facilitate a 2 Timothy 2:2 and Ephesians 4:11-12 ministry model. If a pastor of any size congregation is going to extend his influence throughout the church, he must do this through other people. His weekly schedule calls for preparation for multiple preaching and teaching occasions, formal counseling sessions, informal counseling when he takes phone calls, answers emails or responds to text messages, maintaining and running programs, and a myriad of other tasks; he cannot possibly meet regularly with every member.²³ However, small group ministry allows him to influence leaders who, in turn, influence small group members, who, in turn, influence each other, the exact pattern of 2 Timothy 2:2 and Ephesians 4:11-12.

When churches make changes, they often focus on what they will lose. "In order for us to master change, our paradigm must switch from what we will lose to what we will gain."²⁴ Pastors cannot ignore what the perception is concerning what the congregation believes has been lost or his own feelings on what has been lost. He will need to be creative to maintain contact with church members, especially in smaller churches where that personal contact is so important to the people and the perception of a caring pastor can wane. Technology is a gift to

²³ Wuthnow, 351.

²⁴ Steve Gladen, *Small Groups with Purpose: How to Create Healthy Communities* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 24.

these pastors. Email and text messages convey to the recipient that the pastor has not forgotten them. They are not far from his mind. He still cares for them. Visiting small group meetings or other gatherings of a specific small group shows he cares about the individuals in that group. The potential for maximum member to member ministry is worth the price of less contact with the pastor.

Small Groups Limit Interaction with the Whole Church

Similar to the reality of less interaction with the pastor(s), churches that implement small group ministry, choosing to do so by eliminating one of the formal gatherings, will have less contact with the whole gathered assembly. It can be a shock to the system for those who have always attended multiple services on Sunday or mid-week prayer meeting not to attend a Sunday night service or a mid-week service or both. While small group members meet weekly with their small group, they are not meeting weekly with the whole church like they used to meet. That will be problematic for many, especially for older members and for members of smaller churches.

The membership in 80 percent of American churches is less than 200 people, and a full 50 percent are less than 100 people.²⁵ In these assemblies a common assessment is that everyone knows everyone else. Often, the churches have extended families that comprise many of the members. Each Sunday is another opportunity to see the cousins and the grandchildren.²⁶ Taking away a Sunday night service or a mid-week service feels like missing a time with the family. It is common in smaller churches to hear members say that church is like

²⁵ McIntosh, 17.

²⁶ Ibid, 39.

family. Pastors and churches are unwise to ignore this reality. They will need to be creative and choose how to bring the whole body back together for additional times of interaction. For example, a church may choose to gather the last Sunday evening of every month to celebrate the Lord's Table, or a church may choose to gather in the evening for a large church-wide event when a month has a fifth Sunday. Some churches use their Sunday evening services for missions presentations, for opportunities for assistant pastors to preach, or for visiting itinerant groups. Careful planning can allow for these events.

Eliminating a traditional gathering on Sunday evening or at mid-week for the purpose of opening the calendar for small group ministry is no small decision. Every church is different and will need to address its unique characteristics, history, and demographics, and each church will need to measure what is a necessary and appropriate response.

Small Groups Reduce Preaching Opportunities

Should a church eliminate the Sunday evening or mid-week service to free the calendar to establish small group ministry, the church will lose one occasion of exposure to the preaching of God's Word. Strengthening the Sunday School can diminish the feeling of loss. Churches can develop the content of the classes so that the offerings resemble a Bible college curriculum.²⁷ Churches should promote the expectation that all members attend Sunday School for the purpose of learning the Bible in a setting where teachers and students expect substantial

²⁷ The Capital Hill Baptist Church offers "Core Seminars" during its adult education hour on Sunday mornings. Its content resembles English Bible class offerings similar to the offerings in a Bible college setting. See www.capitolhillbaptist.org/we-equip/adults/core-seminars/

content. In this ministry model Sunday School is no more optional than the worship service.

Some People Will Not Participate in Small Groups

When an established church begins the ministry of small groups, some members and attendees will not participate. Pastors and church members must be patient with these brothers and sisters (1 Thess. 5:14). Their church has changed and does not feel as comfortable as it did previously. Pastors and church members can talk privately, encouraging participation. Public testimonies at church gatherings can help reluctant members recognize the value of small groups as they hear how the group has helped in the maturing process. As new members join the church, the church should emphasize the expectation that all church members commit to a small group for the purpose of growing in discipleship.

We are now ready for the implementation process. Some will want to start here, but as the theology, history, and answers show, pastors and churches must consider these matters ahead of implementation.

CHAPTER 4

IMPLEMENTING A SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson wrote *Building a Church of Small Groups* to help churches and pastors with existing small group ministries strengthen those ministries. Though the authors contribute many helpful ideas to the study of small group ministry, they offer very little for pastors of average size, traditional congregations. Buried near the end of the book is the small sub-heading, *Phasing in Groups in Small Traditional Churches*.¹ The section covers less than two total pages of the book, and the authors cite as an example of a small, traditional church, a church with 500 in attendance at weekly worship, a size that hardly fits into anyone's definition of "small."

When the two pastors at First Calvary Baptist Church looked for help on "phasing in" small group ministry philosophy and practice, they found very little assistance either in print or in conversations with other pastors of historically Fundamental Baptist churches that would address the realities of the congregation they served. Fourteen months after the pastors' initial inquiries into small group ministry, the members of First Calvary Baptist Church launched their small group ministry as an application of a core value of the church.

¹ Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups: A Place Where Nobody Stands Alone* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 202-04.

Establish Church Philosophy to Begin Small Group Ministry

Before undertaking the new ministry, the church needed to determine what values were important to the congregation, that is, areas of ministry mandated by the Scriptures and, therefore, indispensable to the existence of a New Testament Church. They settled on three core values.

We Worship Together

Following the example in the book of Acts and the epistles, the local church gathers for public worship. The core value determines that the church meets on Sundays to practice the various disciplines of worship. In its formal worship, the church will read the Scriptures together (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; 1 Tim. 4:13). The church will pray together (Rom. 15:30; 2 Cor. 1:11; Col. 4:3; 2 Thess. 3:1; 1 Tim. 2:1, 8; Heb. 13:18; 1 Pet. 4:2). The church will sing together (Pss. 33:2; 71:22; 149:5; Eph. 5:19). The church will receive the faithful preaching of the Bible (2 Tim. 4:2; see also the examples of the apostles in Acts 5:42, 17:3 and Jesus in Mark 1:38). The church will express their gratitude for God's goodness to them in giving (2 Cor. 8:1-12). The church gathers weekly on Sunday mornings for the formal, intentional, and purposeful activity of worship.

We Learn Together

The Bible is a massive piece of literature revealing to the church the mind of God on all matters related to His creation. God's people studied both the Old and the New Testaments to know what God had to say about Himself and about His ongoing activity in His creation. Like God's people in ancient times, the church determined to learn God's Word together beyond the worship gathering (2 Tim. 2:2, 15). The core value determined that the church gathers weekly on

Sunday mornings in addition to its public worship for the education of children, students, and adults in the content, doctrines, and worldview presented in the Bible.

We Live Together

The Bible presents the life of a Christian as a life lived in cooperation with other believing men and women.² The core value determined that the church facilitate the shared Christian life by expecting its members to commit to the importance of participation in a small group.

Establish Church Practice to Begin Small Group Ministry

Small group ministry is one possible way to apply the church philosophy. In a similar way that establishing and communicating philosophy requires much time and thought, establishing the practice requires much time and thought.

Beginning Small Group Ministry in a Church Plant

The present dynamics or characteristics of a local church will have great bearing on how a church begins small group ministry. A church plant meets in new locations, at new times, and with new people. Because of a variety of factors, they may change their meeting location more often than desired. As they grow and mature, they likely add new ministries like a nursery or a children's program. Adding small groups as the expression of a core value can happen at the founding of the ministry or soon thereafter without the necessity to consider church traditions or the routine of the church calendar from week to week. For a startup church the page is blank, and adding something new is normal. The

² See chapter one in this dissertation, *The Theology for Small Group Ministry and Philosophy*, for a defense.

church needs only to establish small groups as the expression of a core value and then implement the ministry wisely.

Beginning Small Group Ministry in Established Churches

As pastoral leadership in an established church becomes familiar with the theology and history of small groups, they may consider embracing small group ministry as an application for the core value of community, or the shared Christian life.

Pastoral Assessment

Pastors will need to assess thoroughly their congregation to determine if and how the believers in their assembly are living Christianity together. When they talk to the church members, they should listen carefully for what the members say about their spiritual interactions with other Christians, listen for reports of conversations about God that occur away from the formal gatherings of the body, and listen as members communicate to the pastors how important decisions were made in individual's lives, giving attention to any mention of conversations with other believers who provided biblical wisdom regarding the decision. Pastors should listen to members talking about times of prayer with other members in the body. They should listen for reports of spiritual and physical care provided by members to members. They should listen for reports of believers discussing preaching, examining its doctrine and application like the church at Berea. They should listen for relationships that promote intentional accountability between believers. All this data will prove valuable for assessing the level of spiritual interaction between the believers in the congregation.

Members leave churches for many reasons. Whenever possible, pastors should conduct exit interviews about the strengths and weaknesses of the church with members leaving the membership. They should listen for examples of one Christian life impacting another or for lack of the same.

The pastoral assessment may indicate a weakness in the church's ministry. It may be common to hear people say, "We love the preaching and the music, but we just are not connected to other Christians in our church," or "I love my church, but when I was in real need, no one was there to help me." Pastoral assessment that finds weakness in the mutual ministry from one believer toward another is cause for investigation regarding the need for small group ministry.

Small Group Survey

There is no shortage of available materials on small group philosophy and practice. Amid the vast volumes, helpful books include *Community* by Brad House, *A Model for Making Disciples* by D. Michael Henderson, *The Trellis and the Vine* by Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, and *Small Groups with Purpose* by Steve Gladen.³

Web research provides numerous locations to find information on crucial small group matters. Entering "small groups" into any Internet search engine will produce sufficient hits to gather resources. Exploration leads to discovering and developing theology and philosophy.

³ D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meetings: a Model for Making Disciples* (Nappanee, Ind.: Evangel Publishing House, 1997). Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine: The Ministry Mind Shift That Changes Everything* (Kingsford, NSW, Australia: Matthias Media, 2009). Steve Gladen, *Small Groups with Purpose: How to Create Healthy Communities* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011).

Establishing Theology and Philosophy

Beginning small group ministry in an established church means the church is changing.⁴ From the beginning, the pastoral leadership must emphasize over and over again the theology and philosophy of small group ministry. They must be able to address the question of why the change is necessary for the overall health of the church. Changes will be so dramatic that a failure in this area will doom the whole endeavor.

To ensure that the church understands the theology and philosophy, communication and establishment of the core value of small group ministry must begin with the senior pastor. He cannot hand this off to a designee. He must own it, understand it, and be able to champion it publically and privately in a variety of ways. His voice and his pen convey the direction of the church as it moves forward in the fulfillment of the core values. No other person has the privilege to communicate as broadly, passionately, and frequently as he does.

Know and Understand Critical Texts

A pastor's communication begins with the key Bible texts that support small group ministry. These include Acts 2:42-47, where the early church gathers together and begins its allegiance to Jesus Christ, committed to and relying upon the community of believers. Genesis 1:25-28 will direct the people to understand how God created them to live in His creation in the concept of community. John 17 describes the Trinitarian model of community that Jesus desired His disciples to experience.

Ephesians 4:1-6, 15-16; Romans 12:4-5, 15-16; 1 Corinthians 12;

⁴ Price Pritchett and Ron Pound, *Business As Unusual, The Handbook for Managing and Supervising Organizational Change* (Dallas: Pritchett Publishing Company, 1991), 1.

1 Peter 2:5-9, and 2 Timothy 2:2 all contain necessary truths that support small group ministry. The pastor should know what these texts contribute to small group theology and how to communicate their ideas.

Behind the biblical material, the pastor may find it helpful to know the history of small groups in The Church through the centuries. This will assist him when he answers questions about the origin of the idea of small groups.

Communication with Church Leadership

The wise pastor will learn the theology and history with his staff if he has any additional vocational staff, or he will teach his pastoral staff what he has learned. His staff will be additional teachers to instruct the congregation on small group theology and philosophy.

When he presents the idea to his key church leadership, the pastor can anticipate a response of uncertainty about the church and its future.⁵ The changes may sound extreme or outlandish, even controversial. His best move will be to articulate clearly the theology and answer questions with as little ambiguity as possible. The senior pastor's attitude or that of the pastoral staff will be significant at this stage of communication. He cannot convey a defensive spirit at any level. A defensive spirit will derail the effort for change, not because of theology, but because of the spirit of the messenger.

Identify Small Group Leaders

After communication with church leadership, the most important step is the selection of those who will serve as leaders of small groups. Initially, leaders

⁵ Pritchett, 7. Leadership should include other staff members, deacons, Sunday School teachers, and influential leaders often present in smaller congregations.

may come from the influential groups within the church to whom the pastor has already introduced the idea of small groups. The leaders likely will be those already involved in ministry to and with people. They will be ones that want to see people grow to spiritual maturation. They will be ones willing to venture into an unknown area of ministry trusting the Lord that the theology is sound and the methodology biblical.

Small group leaders should make a one-year commitment to lead the group for which they are responsible. This provides initial stability as the ministry begins. Over time, the hope is that new leaders who understand the theology and believe in the philosophy of ministry that directs small groups will arise from within existing groups.

Train Small Group Leaders

Most aspiring small group leaders in established fundamental Baptist churches will know little about what it means to be a small group leader. That means there are no bad habits to unlearn, only good habits to learn. The clearer the guidance the pastor can give, the better the leaders will implement the small group philosophy he desires for the congregation.⁶

Some people learn best by observation and participation. A pastor can teach small group leaders how to lead a small group by making the collection of leaders a small group for a period of four to six weeks. They meet together like a small group would meet while the pastor leads their meetings. They learn by watching his example. They practice mutual discipleship with each other.

⁶ Pritchett, 9.

When small groups begin church wide, leaders can meet weekly on Sunday mornings for thirty minutes prior to the education hour. Pastors can train in a 20/20 model, that is, they train leaders for 20 weeks 20 minutes at a time.⁷ Further, pastors can train in quarterly meetings where they discuss reading assignments or weighty issues that require more than twenty minutes of training.

When training leaders, pastors do well to be specific, not vague. They should establish the expectations all the small groups should achieve. The leaders learn their role is to “extend the pastoral ministry of our church by providing a context in which to apply God’s Word so that connection, care, conversation, and chasing can happen.”⁸ In addition, leaders ensure that small groups should meet weekly at the same location and time. Members should receive communication from leaders when there is any change to the routine. At meetings leaders must adhere to the direction established by church leadership for the conversation at meetings. A leader should not choose to take group conversations in a direction that he considers best, nor should he allow others to take the conversation down a path that is not helpful for the spiritual growth of all in the group. He is responsible for how the conversation unfolds.

On the other hand, the pastor should encourage initiative in the leaders. The doctrine of “State’s Rights” can be a helpful teaching tool. The United States doctrine teaches that matters not expressly conveyed in the United States

⁷ Ideas abound in the previously mentioned resources to cover 20 weeks of training. Suggested topics for 20/20 training appear in Appendix E - “Suggested Topics for 20/20 Training of Small Group Leaders.”

⁸ Maheney, 45. The meanings for the terms connect, care, converse, and chase follow on pp. 109-11.

constitution remain for the decision of individual states. When individual small groups meet the expectations for all the small groups, free them to initiate other practices unique to their small groups. Allow the leader to use his gifts and creative ideas to best assist the spiritual growth of his group. He spends more time with his group than the pastor does. He knows them and wants what is best for them. Freeing him to initiate his ideas within the broader expectations of the stated small group philosophy and theology encourages him and others to new means of discipleship.

Determine What Small Group Members Will Do

Groups should plan to meet on a regular basis. Their commitment to the weekly meeting is the starting point for fulfilling *κοινωνία* and the one another texts outside of the weekly meetings.

Day and Location

Meeting day and time are determined by the small group leader. The day that works best for him is the day he suggests for his small group to meet together. The location may be his home, the home of one of the group members, the church building, or another agreed upon place. The leader determines the time and location and should plan on at least one hour and forty-five meetings for each meeting.⁹

Pastoral leadership may identify some groups by geography and seek leaders in certain communities represented in their congregation. Others may

⁹ For example, a group's meeting begins at 5:45pm and includes an ice-breaker, Bible conversation, prayer, and any mingling the members like to do. It is reasonable to conclude the meeting will last until 7:15pm.

identify groups by demographics. College-age singles, women, young married couples, or students all can be ideas for groups determined by demographics.

Pursuing Discipleship

In a word small groups exist for discipleship. A community of believers seeks the spiritual growth of other believers following a biblical model. Disciples *connect* with each other (1 Cor. 12). They know each other's names, histories, gifts, temptations, failures, passions, and questions. Knowing this, they are in a position to give and to receive from each other.

Disciples *care* for each other. They provide the front line for spiritual and physical care (Phil. 2:19-30). Small group members take interest in the spiritual matters of other group members. They look for occasions to encourage, to offer counsel, to warn and to admonish. They engage in provision when illness, injury, financial trouble, or disaster strikes.

Disciples *converse* with each other about God and to God together in prayer (Eph. 4:14-16; Titus 2:1-6). Conversation is the main facet of small group meetings. When they gather, they talk about God. He is the focal point of the dialog. When one group member offers information about a troubling circumstance he currently experiences or brings up a past hurt that still aches, the group turns his attention and theirs toward God.

One way to talk about God is to discuss the impact of a recent sermon upon the hearers and the church as a whole. The group reads again the text from the previous sermon. Group members discuss the text's meaning, expressing to each other key ideas from the text. They communicate how God desires to bring change into their lives because of the ministry of the Holy Spirit during the

preaching. The small group leader facilitates the conversation by keeping the talk focused on God's working through His Word.

The group converses with God together in prayer. Expect the prayer requests at first to be of the "twice-removed" variety. "Please pray for my brother's boss who recently had a heart attack," a member might offer. It will likely be some time before members feel connected enough and cared about sufficiently to offer intimate prayer requests like, "Please pray for our family. There are some real challenges in the relationships within our house."

Group leaders manage their meetings so that sufficient time remains for prayer. The result may very well be that the church, if it has a high percentage of its adult members active in small groups, finds itself with more members praying together than at any time in its history.

Disciples *chase* other people. To chase is to pursue. Disciples *chase* the lost (Matt. 28:18-20). Small groups may be a place where an unbeliever comes into the group and comes to faith as the result of interaction with believers. More likely, the group's communication to each of those within their circles of influence whom they are trying to reach with the gospel becomes regular communication that burdens the soul winner for the lost person while those in the group pray with the group member and encourage him in his gospel work.

Disciples *chase* the fringe people of the congregation (1 Cor. 12). The fringe are those who identify with the church but neither share in the gifts of the body nor contribute their gifts to the body. They often slip in to the room when the public gatherings begin and slip out just as quickly. Small group members identify these brothers and sisters and seek them out for participation in the small group for the purpose of mutual discipleship.

Disciples *chase* the wandering (Gal. 6:1). Wandering identifies those who are “caught in a trespass.” When a group member stumbles into sin, the others in the group are ready and eager to chase after him in the humble and loving spirit Paul commends. Because they love this brother, they will not allow him to wander off in his sin, no matter how great or small, without seeking to call him back to their Lord.

Prepare the Congregation

Communication will be paramount to prepare the congregation for the implementation of small group ministry. Pastors and other church leadership should seek many opportunities and means to express why the church is making these changes.

Communicate in the Pulpit

The pastor can preach a series of messages to the congregation on the core values of the church. Those values may include worship, learning, and the necessity of Christian life touching Christian life. Each of these values can be a sermon by itself. The last sermon will lead naturally into the theology of small group ministry and how the church family will benefit from this ministry.

Other Promotional Ideas

If a church has a newsletter, the pastor can write articles detailing what small groups are, what they do, and how they will benefit the church. If he or the church publishes an online blog, he can contribute blog posts on the coming small groups. Pastors can develop graphics for the church website or for display around the church building that use key words to promote small group ideology.

Formal Questions and Answers

The church leadership may consider taking a few weeks during the education hour to provide answers to the questions people have. Church members can submit questions ahead of time so that leaders can prepare answers, and timid church members can feel free to ask their questions. In addition, leaders should encourage members to ask questions in person, by telephone, or in email. Answering questions for people can diminish fears and alleviate suspicions of a hidden agenda.

Be Transparent

If the church implements small group ministry as an expression of a core value of the church, the culture of the church will change. Do not attempt to hide this. Be honest about what will change and emphasize what the church will gain because of the purposeful choice it makes. Let church members know what they can expect and how it will impact their routine.¹⁰

Launch

As a part of the overall message, communicate the launch date. Set the date far enough into the future to allow for adequate “soak time” as people wrestle with the theology, methodology, and changes, yet keep the date close enough that it occurs in the near future. Four to six weeks from the formal question and answer sessions is an adequate time.

¹⁰ Pritchett, 11.

Sign Up

Most authors on small group methodology advocate allowing people to choose which group they want to attend.¹¹ Four weeks prior to the launch date, publish names of the small group leaders, where the small groups meet, and the day and time of the meetings. Three weeks prior to the launch date conduct a “Small Group Signup Day.” Arrange the church lobby in such a way that people can go to a small group leader at a table or other obvious place and sign up for a particular small group. Small groups fill when space at a location fills. Allow for that number of names on each signup sheet. If a group overflows, seek a solution by moving to a different location, asking later signees to commit to a different group, or beginning another group. Consider signup a success if 60 percent of your adult members commit to a small group. Moving forward, settle for nothing less than 100 percent participation in small groups from new members joining the church.

No doubt some members will ask to change small groups if they do not like the small group they join. Encourage group members to stick with the small group they join unless providentially hindered by a job change or other factor beyond their control. Conflicts with other group members are not a reason to leave a group. Small groups are a great arena in which to learn how to handle conflict biblically without hiding from other believers or hurling sinful communication at other believers.

¹¹ Gladen, 215-16.

Now That Small Groups Are Underway

The first meeting is only minutes away. Members arrive at the appointed time and place, Bibles in hand and ready to meet. For nearly all the members it will be the first time they have participated in anything like small groups. Expect some to be nervous, others apprehensive, and a few skeptical. Recognize the small success – people actually showed up! That is no minor achievement.

Overseeing the Conversation

Some question the wisdom of a group of people meeting away from the church building to talk about religious matters. They envision this as a prime breeding ground for discontent and doctrinal error. A pastor should exercise his pastoral responsibility for oversight in this area. A simple and effective way to direct conversation is to use the previous Sunday's sermon as the hub from which all the conversation flows.

Each week the pastor provides talking points or questions that stir conversation about God and His Word. For example, in 1 Peter 5:5, Peter writes, "Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (English Standard Version).'" The sermon's theme considers the conduct of the members in a local assembly. The pastor provides a series of talking points from the sermon.

The first question is, "What did the Holy Spirit impress on you from the sermon?" The question emphasizes that each hearer should respond to the faithful preaching of the Word and convey to others in the group how the Holy Spirit sought to bring change to that individual believer. This communication

promotes accountability and humility and encourages others in the group by hearing of the ministry of the Word in the life of another believer.

The next questions apply the teaching of the text very specifically. The group considers, "Living together creates occasions where wants are in conflict. In our church what are potential conflicts in wants?" In addition, the group considers, "How can we clothe ourselves in humility in these wants? What would that look like?" The leader directs the questions by introducing them to the group and facilitating the conversation as the group explores biblical answers to the questions.

Some groups will want more Bible study. For them the pastor includes in his talking points the text for Philippians 2:4-8 for additional study on the subject of humility.

Next, the pastor's talking points ask, "Do you have a question for me?" It may be that in the course of conversation, the small group asks a question for which it cannot determine an answer. The question may be a matter of interpretation or clarification on a misunderstood idea from the sermon. A small group may ask its pastor if an application the group identified is consistent with the text. The small group formulates the question, and their leader passes it along to the pastor. The pastor may choose to answer the question directly to that small group. If the question comes from more than one small group, he should choose to answer the question in a broader fashion via an email or even in the following Sunday's sermon.

Communication with Group Leaders

Pastors should communicate with each small group leader shortly after a small group meeting. The leader should convey who of the group's members

was in attendance and who did not attend. The pastor should record this information on an Excel spreadsheet or other tracking method. The pastor's knowledge of who attends and who misses small group meetings provides him opportunities to encourage both parties to participate in their small group.

The pastor and the group leader should talk about what the group discussed. This will be an additional guard against rogue groups and will allow the pastor to answer any questions raised by the group. The pastor needs to be disciplined to initiate this communication following each group meeting.

In his communication with the group leaders, a pastor does well to praise and encourage each leader. Leadership is not easy, and for most new leaders this is new ground, full of pitfalls and obstacles. Any encouragement from the pastor will go a long way to promote the ministry of the leader.

A pastor should ask specific questions about physical and spiritual matters for members of the small group. The information he receives will help him to fulfill his pastoral responsibilities to the group members as he follows up on the information he receives. For example, a group member may share with the whole group a physical problem that requires a medical procedure. The pastor needs that information. Both the leader and the pastor should assume the responsibility to acquire and deliver the information.

Be Patient

1 Thessalonians 5:14 is a great verse for pastors and churches beginning small group ministry. Paul says, "Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all." Established churches take time to make major course corrections. Establishing small group ministry is a major course correction. Getting people to attend small

groups will be the quick and easy part relative to what is necessary after small groups begin. Teaching people how to live in small groups will be the long and difficult part. Be patient with people. Some will embrace small groups slower than others. Teach small group leaders and the whole congregation that change requires patience as people adjust to a church philosophy that feels awkward and misplaced.

Adjust to a New Way

If a church chooses to open the church calendar by making Sunday nights available for small group meetings, then the church will need to adjust in other areas. Careful planning can address both the feeling of loss and the need to continue with other important aspects of church life. By planning carefully, a church may call the whole assembly back together for monthly gatherings, an important part of the culture in smaller churches. They may plan for regular celebrations of the Lord's Table on Sunday nights, seasonal picnics or dinners centered on holidays or important church events, and meetings with itinerant preachers. With careful planning, it is not too difficult to have both small group weekly meetings and once a month gatherings of the whole church.

Alternative Plan

Some churches will find the shock too great to dive in head first to the waters of church-wide small groups. For these churches it may be better to enter the shallow end of the pool first. A pastor may choose to begin with a select group of people like high school or college students or a group of young marrieds. If a church has a Christian school, the pastor could choose to develop a small group among the teaching staff and school administrators. He will teach

them the same theology and implement the same leadership and the same expectations, only in one small group. That small group becomes the starting point for what he hopes will be a larger movement toward small group ministry.

Each church will determine for itself the best method for implementing community. Some will consider small group ministry. Others may consider the theology and seek to implement the theology in an existing ministry offering. What is good for one church may not be good for another church. However, every church must pursue community because God created mankind to live in community.

CONCLUSION

Nearly two years have passed at First Calvary Baptist Church since the initiation of small groups as an application of the core value of living together. Some initial observations are apparent. They are included here to help the reader considering small group ministry.¹

Getting Started

We pastors considered our launch highly successful. We began the first year of the ministry with six small groups. Three of the groups were formed geographically, while a ladies small group, a young marrieds small group, and a group of singles in their twenties formed along demographic lines. We encouraged our church family to sign up for a group of their choice based upon meeting location and time, familiarity with the group's leader, or a factor that was unique to an individual.

Overall, our church family received to the ideas but wondered about the unknown. Only one man in our church had any prior experience with small groups. Some of our congregation had heard about small groups, but with the exception of the one man, none had been part of a church that used small groups in their ministry model. Our initial goal was to have 60 percent of our adult

¹ The observations are those of the author (the senior pastor at the First Calvary Baptist Church) and the statements and stories of the members of the church. In this chapter, the author writes from the first person.

members and attendees commit to a small group.² More than 75 percent of our adult members and attendees made an initial commitment to a small group. In year two, we again had more than 75 percent commit to a group, with some joining a small group who did not participate the first year.

Despite our efforts to communicate the necessary reasons to implement a small group emphasis and despite our efforts to answer all questions, we were not able to keep everyone in the church. Sadly, we lost a handful of families from our assembly. We lost two families where the spouses were in their seventies. They wanted a church that had a weekly Sunday night service. Neither family was a church member.

While we anticipated losing someone along the way, the loss of two additional member families surprised us. As pastors, our anticipation was that these two families would thrive in a small group. Prior to teaching on the core value of community, these two families repeatedly expressed the desire to have the impact of other believers in their lives. We were unable to persuade them to stay with us and move together in this direction.

Demographically, younger adults and those newly converted to Christianity made the transition easier than older adults and those who have been part of our church or one like it for many decades. Our young marrieds small group and our student small group for teenagers are thriving. Very quickly, they embraced the philosophy and are growing in their attempts to pour themselves into the lives of other Christians and to receive the Christian influence of others.

² The 60 percent figure did not include home bound senior citizens in our church.

Those who have had the most difficult time with understanding why we are doing what we are doing are middle-age members in their fifties and sixties. Though most of them have known the Lord for more than forty years, they struggle with talking about God in group meetings, opening themselves up to other members of the group in the form of accountability or transparency, and with a general commitment to their group; simply, “this isn’t church” to many of them. To their credit, they are trying, and I commend them for that. Change is very difficult. This philosophy of ministry change at our church may be the most significant change in the history of our church.³

We have learned that not all small groups are the same. Some gel quickly and discover the blessing of community. Other groups struggle and require more encouragement from the pastors and the rest of the church family.

Some might be interested in these additional observations. First, though we do not have a weekly Sunday evening service, we have not noticed any significant change in our church giving because we lack the offering received at the previous Sunday night gatherings. Second, I watch with great joy the growth in the leaders of the various small groups. This experience stretched them beyond what most had experienced at any time previously in their Christian lives. Third, we have found that gathering for the weekly meeting in someone’s home provides a better environment than meeting in a room in the church building. Our building is institutional in its architecture. In contrast, it may be

³ I am the thirteenth senior pastor of the church since its formation in 1954. I began my pulpit ministry in December 2000. The successive changes in senior leadership of our church have produced many different points of emphasis for the ministry. I hope when the Lord calls me and the present membership away from this ministry, that the church will maintain the philosophy of ministry established in the core values of worshipping, learning, and living together. The next generation will most likely find different ways to apply the core values. This is good and right, as it should be.

that the setting of someone's home assists group members in their meetings more than gathering at our church building does. Fourth, because we will discuss the Sunday sermon at an upcoming small group meeting, we are better listeners to preaching.⁴ Fifth, in our northern climate weather can force the cancellation of a group's weekly meeting. We have not yet discovered how to resolve the reality of not meeting in a given week, but continue to seek a solution. Sixth, we have not experienced difficulty in securing group leaders. We have found our people willing to lead a group. Seventh, pastoral interaction with group leaders has added an extra responsibility to the job description. Encouraging, supporting, listening, thinking about small group leaders and members, and answering questions from group leaders occupies a good portion of the week. Finally, now that our church has been at this for nearly two years, some in our church suggest ideas for what they think a small group should be. I am glad that they care enough to think and to offer suggestions. Some of the ideas are good (for example, the study of a devotional book during weekly group meetings) but fall outside of what we are attempting to accomplish at this time via a small group ministry.

Unexpected Consequences

When people meet together weekly for an extended period of time, issues come out. Matters hidden from other believers in the casual conversations before and after public gatherings are now obvious to other small group members. Some believers will want to hide from the other members of the body when life's

⁴ At the beginning of our second year in August 2012, all groups read a booklet that helps Christians develop good habits when listening to Bible preaching. Christopher Ash, *Listen Up! A Practice Guide to Listening to Sermons* (Purcellville, Va.: The Good Book Company, 2009).

circumstances get hard instead of running to the aid of the body. Other believers will display a critical spirit toward a spouse in an unguarded moment or speak in such a way that demonstrates a bitter heart. A different believer may offer a thought that provides some immediate comfort but is doctrinal error masquerading as truth.

Many group members will not be ready to handle these group interactions. Through years of sitting under sound preaching, most heard their pastors preach on these matters, but few have been in a situation to assist another brother or sister when the issue seeps to the surface. Pastors should anticipate this reality when small groups get under way and help the body by regularly reminding of how the body assists Christian people when “stuff comes out;” because, it will. These teaching moments from the pastor are great opportunities to encourage small group practice among the body.

Over the last two years, we have found the response of pastors in other churches to be enthusiastic. Many have requested a copy of this work when completed. On multiple occasions our pastors have been invited to speak to other pastors about the subject of small groups. It seems that pastors in churches like ours sense similar challenges that we experienced and are looking for assistance.

Benefit of Hindsight

If we could turn back the clock to April 2010, there are a few things we would do differently with the benefit of hindsight. We would find additional ways to teach the church the theology of community. I preached this some, but not enough. Too many people had the lingering question, “Now, why are we doing this?” Over the last year, I have attempted to interject the theology of community wherever possible. If I could do it again, I would make more of the

importance of community, as detailed in chapter one of this dissertation, in my sermons and my writing, and then I would introduce the methodology for promoting community via small groups.

This is not our first attempt to develop the ideas of community within our congregation. We tried for ten years to build the ideas of community through the existing ministry of our adult Sunday School. We sought qualified teachers of the subject matter, but the teachers were not able to provide the leadership necessary to facilitate community. The only classes that saw the development of community were those classes led by our pastors. With only one or two pastors at any time in our congregation, most of our people were not in a setting that facilitated community. For us, developing community through the adult Sunday School did not work. Ten years of evidence was more than enough time to prompt us to consider a different option.

Defining our ministry philosophy and developing a methodology to promote the biblical idea of community has been challenging. However, the potential blessing to the local church and to its individual members make the effort worthwhile. I trust our efforts bring glory to the Triune God.

APPENDIX A

ONE ANOTHER STATEMENTS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Rom.	12:10	Be kindly affectionate to one another
	12:10	Giving preference to one another
	12:16	Be of the same mind one toward another
	13:8	Love one another
	14:13	Let us not judge one another
	14:19	Pursue the things which make for peace . . . and may edify one another
	15:5	Be like-minded toward one another
	15:7	Receive one another
	15:14	Admonish one another
	16:16	Greet one another
1 Cor.	12:25	Care for one another
Gal.	5:13	Through love serve one another
	6:2	Bear one another's burdens
Eph.	4:2	Bearing with one another in love
	4:32	Be kind to one another forgiving one another
	5:19	Speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs
	5:21	Submitting to one another
Col.	3:9	Do not lie to one another
	3:13	Bearing with one another and forgiving one another
	3:16	Teaching and admonishing one another
1 Thess.	3:12	Increase and abound in love to one another
	4:18	Comfort one another
Heb.	3:13	Exhort one another daily
	10:24	Consider one another to stir up love and good works

- James 4:11 Do not speak evil of one another
5:9 Do not grumble against one another
5:16 Confess your trespasses to one another and pray for one another
- 1 Pet. 1:22 Love one another fervently with a pure heart
4:9 Be hospitable to one another without grumbling
5:5 Be submissive to one another
- 1 John 3:11 Love one another

APPENDIX B

JOHN WESLEY'S RULES FOR BANDS SOCIETIES

Drawn up December 25, 1738.

The design of our meeting is, to obey that command of God, "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed..."

To this end, we intend.

1. To meet once a week, at the least.
2. To come punctually at the hour appointed, without some extraordinary reason.
3. To begin (those of us who are present) exactly at the hour, with singing or prayer.
4. To speak each of us in order, freely and plainly, the true state of our souls, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt, since our last meeting.
5. To end every meeting with prayer, suited to the state of each person present.
6. To desire some person among us to speak his own state first, and then to ask the rest, in order, as many and as searching questions as may be, concerning their state, sins, and temptations.

Some of the questions proposed to every one before he is admitted among us may be to this effect.

1. Have you the forgiveness of your sins?
2. Have you peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ?
3. Have you the witness of God's Spirit with your spirit, that you are a child of God?
4. Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart?
5. Has no sin, inward or outward, dominion over you?
6. Do you desire to be told of your faults?
7. Do you desire to be told of all your faults, and that plain and home?

8. Do you desire that every one of us should tell you, from time to time, whatsoever is in his heart concerning you?
9. Consider! Do you desire we should tell you whatsoever we think, whatsoever we fear, whatsoever we hear, concerning you?
10. Do you desire that, in doing this, we should come as close as possible, that we should cut to the quick, and search your heart to the bottom?
11. Is it your desire and design to be on this, and all other occasions, entirely open, so as to speak everything that is in your heart without exception, without disguise, and without reserve?

Any of the preceding questions may be asked as often as occasion offers; the four following at every meeting.

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations have you met with?
3. How were you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not?¹

¹ Andrew Goodhead, *A Crown and a Cross: The Rise, Development and Decline of the Methodist Class Meeting in Eighteenth Century England* (Eugene, Or: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 323-24.

APPENDIX C

SMALL GROUP SURVEY OF PASTORS SERVING IN SMALLER OR MEDIUM SIZE HISTORICALLY FUNDAMENTAL BAPTIST CHURCHES IN THE UNITED STATES

This survey questioned fifty pastors on their opinions for small group ministry. Pastors represented churches from the states of California, Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Texas, and Wisconsin. Surveyors asked questions via telephone interviews and personal interviews. Churches were selected randomly from the directories of the Minnesota Baptist Association, the Minnesota and Iowa state directories of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, the national directory for the Fundamental Baptist Fellowship, and the national directory for the Baptist Bible Fellowship International.

1. What is the number of people who meet regularly for Sunday worship?
 - a. 15-200 (44)
 - b. 201-400 (6)
 - c. 401+ (0)

2. Is your church affiliated with any state or national association?
 - a. Minnesota Baptist Association (25)
 - b. Fundamental Baptist Fellowship (1)
 - c. GARBC (10)
 - d. BBF (8)
 - e. Not associated with any state or national association (6)

3. Are you the solo pastor or member of a pastoral staff?
 - a. Solo pastor (32)
 - b. Senior pastor (17)
 - c. Assistant pastor (1)
 - d. Other

4. How long have you been in your current position?
 - a. Less than 1 year (4)
 - b. 1-5 years (17)
 - c. 5-10 years (10)
 - d. 11-20 years (17)
 - e. 20 or more years (2)

5. Does your church currently offer small groups as a ministry option?
 - a. Yes (20)
 - b. No (30)

If yes, continue to question 6. If no, move to question 21

6. What percentage of your adults participate in your small groups?
 - a. Less than 10% (3)
 - b. 11-25% (4)
 - c. 26-50% (5)
 - d. Greater than 50% (8)

Please answer the following statements with (a) strongly agree, (b) mostly agree, (c) mostly disagree, (d) strongly disagree.

7. Small groups are a core ministry in our church.
 - a. Strongly agree (3)
 - b. Mostly agree (11)
 - c. Mostly disagree (6)
 - d. Strongly disagree (0)

8. Small groups are accomplishing what your church desires them to accomplish.
 - a. Strongly agree (6)
 - b. Mostly agree (9)
 - c. Mostly disagree (2)
 - d. Strongly disagree (3)

9. Small groups in our church are an effective means for discipleship.
 - a. Strongly agree (9)
 - b. Mostly agree (9)
 - c. Mostly disagree (2)
 - d. Strongly disagree (0)

10. Small groups in our church are the primary means by which church members and attendees come to know names, histories, desires, passions, goals, challenges, and gifts of those within the church.
 - a. Strongly agree (3)
 - b. Mostly agree (5)
 - c. Mostly disagree (11)
 - d. Strongly disagree (1)

11. Small groups in our church are the primary means by which church members and attendees receive physical and spiritual care.
 - a. Strongly agree (3)
 - b. Mostly agree (6)
 - c. Mostly disagree (10)
 - d. Strongly disagree (1)

12. Small groups in our church are the intentional environment where church members and attendees talk with each other about God.
 - a. Strongly agree (8)
 - b. Mostly agree (11)
 - c. Mostly disagree (1)
 - d. Strongly disagree (0)

13. Small groups in our church are the intentional environment where church members and attendees talk with each other about the Bible.
 - a. Strongly agree (10)
 - b. Mostly agree (8)
 - c. Mostly disagree (2)
 - d. Strongly disagree (0)

14. Small groups in our church are the intentional environment where church members and attendees pray with each other.
 - a. Strongly agree (7)
 - b. Mostly agree (5)
 - c. Mostly disagree (8)
 - d. Strongly disagree (0)

15. Small groups in our church are the primary means by which church members and attendees pursue evangelistic opportunities.
 - a. Strongly agree (1)
 - b. Mostly agree (3)
 - c. Mostly disagree (13)
 - d. Strongly disagree (3)

16. Small groups in our church are the primary means by which church members and attendees pursue fringe members and attendees for the purpose of greater union to the body.
 - a. Strongly agree (3)
 - b. Mostly agree (9)
 - c. Mostly disagree (8)
 - d. Strongly disagree (0)

17. Small groups in our church are the primary means by which church members and attendees pursue sinfully wandering members and attendees for the purpose of restoration to the body.
 - a. Strongly agree (2)
 - b. Mostly agree (1)
 - c. Mostly disagree (15)
 - d. Strongly disagree (1)

18. Our congregation expects every adult church member to participate in a small group.
 - a. Strongly agree (3)
 - b. Mostly agree (6)
 - c. Mostly disagree (7)
 - d. Strongly disagree (4)

19. We intend to continue our small groups for the foreseeable future.
 - a. Strongly agree (17)
 - b. Mostly agree (2)
 - c. Mostly disagree (1)
 - d. Strongly disagree (0)

20. When do your small groups meet?
- a. During the adult education hour on Sunday mornings (2)
 - b. On Sunday nights (2)
 - c. On various nights throughout the week (11)
 - d. Other (5)

End survey for those answering yes to question 5.

21. I have an intimate knowledge of what small group ministry is.
- a. Yes (17)
 - b. No (11)
22. I have given consideration to developing small group ministry in our church.
- a. Yes (13)
 - b. No (15)

Please answer the following statements with (a) strongly agree, (b) mostly agree, (c) mostly disagree, (d) strongly disagree.

23. I consider small group ministry to be a ministry big churches do.
- a. Strongly agree (9)
 - b. Mostly agree (12)
 - c. Mostly disagree (7)
 - d. Strongly disagree (1)
24. I would be willing to give up Sunday night services so people could participate in small groups?
- a. Strongly agree (6)
 - b. Mostly agree (7)
 - c. Mostly disagree (6)
 - d. Strongly disagree (10)
25. I would be willing to give up mid-week services so people could participate in small groups?
- a. Strongly agree (3)
 - b. Mostly agree (6)
 - c. Mostly disagree (11)
 - d. Strongly disagree (8)

26. I would be willing to give up both Sunday night and mid-week services so people could participate in small groups?
- Strongly agree (1)
 - Mostly agree (2)
 - Mostly disagree (12)
 - Strongly disagree (13)
27. Our church is too small for small groups.
- Strongly agree (7)
 - Mostly agree (11)
 - Mostly disagree (6)
 - Strongly disagree (6)
28. Small group ministry is unnecessary to overall health in a local church.
- Strongly agree (4)
 - Mostly agree (8)
 - Mostly disagree (16)
 - Strongly disagree (2)
29. Small group ministry is what neo evangelical churches do.
- Strongly agree (4)
 - Mostly agree (11)
 - Mostly disagree (11)
 - Strongly disagree (4)
30. Small group ministry is a passing fad
- Strongly agree (1)
 - Mostly agree (6)
 - Mostly disagree (16)
 - Strongly disagree (4)
31. Small group ministry is unrealistic for the congregation I serve.
- Strongly agree (8)
 - Mostly agree (8)
 - Mostly disagree (10)
 - Strongly disagree (4)

If respondent answers a or b, continue to question 32. If respondent answers c or d, move to question 36.

32. Small group ministry is too much work.
 - a. Strongly agree (0)
 - b. Mostly agree (0)
 - c. Mostly disagree (11)
 - d. Strongly disagree (5)

33. Small group ministry requires leadership not available in this congregation.
 - a. Strongly agree (6)
 - b. Mostly agree (5)
 - c. Mostly disagree (2)
 - d. Strongly disagree (5)

34. Small group ministry is a drain on resources.
 - a. Strongly agree (1)
 - b. Mostly agree (4)
 - c. Mostly disagree (8)
 - d. Strongly disagree (3)

35. Small group ministry is not a ministry I am capable of leading.
 - a. Strongly agree (1)
 - b. Mostly agree (3)
 - c. Mostly disagree (4)
 - d. Strongly disagree (10)

36. Implementation of small group ministry as a core ministry in our church would be met with enthusiasm.
 - a. Strongly agree (1)
 - b. Mostly agree (9)
 - c. Mostly disagree (12)
 - d. Strongly disagree (7)

37. Implementation of small group ministry as a core ministry in our church would be met with skepticism.
 - a. Strongly agree (7)
 - b. Mostly agree (15)
 - c. Mostly disagree (5)
 - d. Strongly disagree (2)

38. Implementation of small group ministry as a core ministry in our church would be met with resistance.
- a. Strongly agree (6)
 - b. Mostly agree (14)
 - c. Mostly disagree (5)
 - d. Strongly disagree (4)
39. Implementation of small group ministry as a core ministry in our church would be met with uncertainty of the overall direction of our church.
- a. Strongly agree (7)
 - b. Mostly agree (13)
 - c. Mostly disagree (7)
 - d. Strongly disagree (2)

End Survey

APPENDIX D

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APPENDIX E

SUGGESTED TOPICS 20/20 TRAINING OF SMALL GROUP LEADERS

1. Understanding the purpose of small groups at First Calvary Baptist Church.
2. How the leader helps group members live in community between group meetings.
3. How to show empathy for one member in a group meeting without getting bogged down on an issue.
4. How the leader responds to difficult or quirky people.
5. Some resources for ice breakers.
6. How to move the conversation back to the original topic.
7. How to draw out reluctant participants.
8. How to encourage weekly attendance at group meetings.
9. How to add variety to weekly group meetings.
10. The leader's responsibilities to the group when the group is not meeting.
11. How to assist the members in taking ownership/responsibility for the group.
12. How the small group leaders can communicate the importance of community among the church family.
13. How to make logistical choices of where, when, who, and how.
14. How to use electronic communication and social media between members and other small groups.
15. How to learn and interact with other small groups so as to learn from them and share with them.
16. How the group should admonish the members of its group.
17. How the leader might confront members of his group.
18. How a leader directs pastoral care to the members of his group.
19. How to develop accountability for leadership of groups among the leaders.
20. How to bridge conversation between weeks so that what members discuss one week leads to the discussion the following week.

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