

SMALL GROUPS ARE THE CHURCH'S PAST AND FUTURE

Small groups are a significant part of the church's past. In early Christianity, the household played a central role in the movement of Jesus' followers throughout the Mediterranean world. The basic unit of church life was a small group, often no larger than eight to twelve persons, that met at someone's house. Meeting in a house offered privacy, intimacy, and stability of place, as members did not have to wonder where the group would be meeting that night.¹

Security in an Uprooted World

Small groups will also play an important part in the church's future. That's because contemporary life can be experienced as disruptive and isolating. In the face of this, small groups can help individuals experience stability and security. Consider the benefits of the small-group experience.

1. Through group study and discussion, members can talk about God and the teachings and example of Jesus.
2. Small groups build relationship skills in a setting where openness is prized and mutual accountability is expected.
3. Healthy groups provide a safe space to express difficult emotions such as anger, frustration, disappointment, or fear without fear of repercussions.
4. In the presence of caring individuals, group members can receive support in the face of grief and loss.
5. Through sharing food, group members may be connected to the sacrament of Holy Communion.
6. The stable routine provided by regular meetings can contribute to a sense of security in an ever-changing world.²

Getting Started

To get started, cast a vision of what small groups could do for your congregation through a series of sermons

by the pastor or personal stories by a lay person in the worship service or the newsletter. Start small by offering one group or two, with the leader inviting potential members directly. As momentum builds, offer invitations to the wider congregation in the form of a tear-off form in the bulletin or a sign-up sheet in the lobby.

A more ambitious approach involves a recruitment event. The pastor at one church offers a two-hour event several times a year called Life Link in which participants play an interactive game inspired by the Game of LIFE. As the evening progresses, people share things about themselves, and later have an opportunity to connect with others based on shared interests and experiences. After small groups are launched, consider a twelve-week system where groups meet weekly and then take one month off. During the "off month," training sessions can be offered for leaders.³



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Five Tips for Improving the Small-Group Experience

A recent study of 125 small-group leaders and 825 small-group members yielded the following best practices for small groups. Once a group has been established, take these actions to improve the small-group experience.

Articulate a purpose in a mission statement. Surprisingly, the best mission statements do not focus on the goals of growing spiritually or building relationships. Instead, choose an outward focus such as community service, evangelism, or any ministry that takes the group beyond itself. Relationship building should be the by-product of such a focus, not the focus itself.

Structure the sessions carefully to create a predictable environment. Many studies indicate that five to nine persons is the ideal size. Weekly meetings are best. That's because members can be expected to miss an occasional meeting. Meeting bi-weekly means that this person would not see the group for a whole month.

Share ownership with everyone in the group. The leader can achieve this through delegating responsibilities. Invite others to do meal planning, childcare, plan logistics, or take charge of coordinating a service project. Listen to group members' input and follow their advice.

Encourage good discussions through asking the right questions. It's common knowledge that open-ended questions work better than questions requiring a yes or no answer. At the same time, asking questions that are too broad can shut down discussion. Instead, aim for questions that are limited in scope. For example, in a discussion of friendship, ask members to talk about one of their best friends.

Embrace difficult conversations. Conflict can provide better understanding among group members. When conflict emerges, acknowledge it calmly, pay attention to your own emotions and others', recognize that there may be many interpretations of what's going on, and seek to resolve it and learn from it.⁴

Small Group for Mothers Opens Doors

Small groups can open the door to those unfamiliar with church life. Chancey Green, a young mother in Kansas City, participated in a small-group ministry at the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection called Building Better Moms (BBM). Though only nominally religious prior to attending the meeting, Green experienced a deepened faith over time and eventually joined the church. Later, after moving to Frisco, Texas,

she attended St. Andrews United Methodist Church, a "startup church" that met Sundays in an elementary school. After she shared her enthusiasm about BBM, the pastor invited her to start a group at the church. A year later, the ministry was launched with 54 members, only eight of which were affiliated with the church.⁵

Thank You, Loyal Subscribers

When Lyle S. Schaller founded *The Parish Paper* in 1971, he did so believing that helping church leaders ask the right questions led to better decision making.⁶ Herb Miller, the subsequent editor, brought a commitment to small-church vitality and a belief that stewardship fueled generosity.⁷ The next editor, Cynthia Woolever, a sociologist specializing in religion, brought a data-driven perspective from her research of U.S. congregations.⁸ Dana Horrell, the current editor, brings a commitment to parish ministry and grounded experience from decades of pastoral leadership. From the beginning, *The Parish Paper's* business model has been reprint-rights: one subscription with multiple copies for a church or judicatory. That model fit well for the age of the mimeograph and the monthly packet of photocopied information sheets sent out by the judicatory office. However, the rise of the Internet, the invention of the iPhone, and the dominance of social media have rendered this model obsolete. Consequently, this is the final edition of *The Parish Paper*. We thank the loyal subscribers who have been part of this ministry.

1. Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul, Second Edition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 74-110.

2. Theresa F. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community: A Practical Theology of Small-Group Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.), 145-47.

3. Rev. Junius B. Dotson, *How to Start Small Groups: Growing Larger by Acting Smaller*, (Nashville: United Methodist Board of Discipleship, 2018), 8-12. Download: <https://www.seeallthepeople.org/develop-a-discipleship-system>

4. Ryan Hartwig, Courtney Davis, and Jason Sniff, *Leading Small Groups That Thrive* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020).

5. Jorge Acevedo, *Vital: Churches Changing Communities and the World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012), 88.

6. Warren Bird, *Wisdom from Lyle E. Schaller: The Elder Statesman of Church Leadership* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012).

7. Herb Miller, *New Consecration Sunday*, Revised Edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012).

8. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations: Who's Going Where and Why, Second Edition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).