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SMALL GROUPS IN THE PRAXIS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

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“And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart...”
Acts 2:46

During the course of church history, there have been many ideas, plans, and programs designed to grow the church and disciple believers. The potter’s field of used ideas is littered with an eclectic variety of deceased ideas that worked for a season then vanished. A friend of mine bought old limousines and went through poor neighborhoods and picked up people for church. It worked splendidly for a time, then its usefulness waned. Some ideas are momentary, they are designed for one moment, and then the usefulness diminishes. This does not mean that it was a bad idea or a mistake, only that it was momentary. There are some approaches, however, that are so biblically rooted that, if done properly, continue to be efficacious for all generations. One such method is small group ministries in the local church. Small group ministries predate the church, going back to the times of Moses and the personal ministry of Jesus Christ. The model of small groups in the praxis of the local church is the Scriptural method for church growth and discipleship. I will show that small groups in the local church are biblically, historically, and in praxis the consistent method for discipling Christians and growing churches.

Moses and Jethro

Moses’ task of leading 2-6 million people from Egypt to Canaan was quite possibly the most daunting leadership task in all of history. Upon Moses fell the responsibility for all needs, natural and spiritual. Moses became the prophet, politician, provider, navigator, and judge for millions of people. Even with Moses’ keen sense of hearing in regards to the voice of God, the needs were dramatic. Exodus 18 tells the story of a visit from Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law. Jethro observed how Moses personally tried to meet the needs of the entire congregation. It consumed Moses’ time from morning until evening, not only Moses’ time, but the time of all the people in the line (Exodus 18:13-14). Jethro knew that this would strain Moses and the people beyond their ability to maintain the process. Jethro gave Moses a plan for how to minister to the needs of the people. He instructed Moses to set up men who were able to oversee different sized groups of people; thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens (Exodus 18:21). This became the process by which Moses and the Hebrews operated throughout their wilderness journey.

Churches become bogged down when one man tries to do too much and takes

the needs of the entire congregation upon himself. Even small churches (perhaps especially) need to learn to share the load of ministry. Jethro did not merely tell Moses to set “heads” over thousands and hundreds, but over fifties and tens. Under this system, everyone would be included in a group of ten, which was part of a group of fifty, which was part of a group of a hundred, and a thousand. This system made the most daunting leadership task in history, manageable, and healthy for the leaders and the people. Jethro was not shy to point out that his idea was a “command” from God (Exodus 18:23). If it were God’s will for one man to lead groups of 50, 100 or more alone, then God would not have commanded that the structure goes to small groups of 10. The command to Moses is the first instance of God using small groups for the health of His congregation and leaders.

Jesus the Small Group Leader

To be a Christian is to be “Christ-like” or to emulate the actions, teachings, doctrines and methods of Jesus Christ. In this light, let us examine the ministry of Jesus through the lens of small group ministry. It is certain that Jesus had a ministry to the multitudes, that is undeniable. On two occasions He fed multitudes by miraculous provision. On another occasion, the multitude thronged Him by the seashore and forced Him to continue teaching from a ship. These stories aside, Jesus predominately worked in small groups. Bobby Harrington and Alex Absalom pointed this out in writing, “Jesus focused on the small group more than the public group gatherings.” M. Scott Boren sounded a similar tone in saying that small groups “are obviously central to the ministry of Jesus—he primarily ministered to and with a small group of twelve disciples...” He continued by stating, “The way of Jesus is a way of small groups.”

The primary expression of Jesus as a small group leader is in His relationship with the disciples. William A. Beckham wrote, “For three and a half years, He lived with twelve leaders who were His special community.” His ministry in small groups was not limited to the band of twelve, He often worked among smaller groups in intimate settings. Joel Comiskey details this point well in *2000 Years of Small Groups: A History of Cell Ministry in the Church*:

“Jesus in the house of Peter (Matthew 8:14) Jesus in the house of Matthew (Matthew 9:10) Jesus in the house of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) Jesus in the house of Lazarus and his sisters (Luke 10:38-42) Jesus in the house of Jairus (Mark 5:35-38) Jesus healing two blind people in a house (Matthew 9:28-30) Jesus in the house of Simon the leper (Matthew 26:6) Jesus teaching his disciples in a house (Mark 7:17-18; 9:33, 10:10) Jesus forgiving and healing a paralyzed person in a house (Luke 5:19) Jesus in the home of a Pharisee (Luke 14:1) Jesus instituting the Lord’s Supper in a house (Matthew 26:18) Jesus sent his twelve and his seventy disciples to heal and teach from village to village and

house-to-house (Luke 9:1-9; 10:1-11).”

Comiskey pointed out that very often Jesus chose someone’s home as his base of operations in a particular area. He postulated that one reason was because He wanted to illustrate how the church would operate as a spiritual family. He said, “And to make this happen, he first had to transform people where they lived and where essential character values were displayed. Jesus wanted to infuse the normal family network with a new vision of love and sacrifice.” Jesus often worked in homes, and among none but His 12 disciples, even occasionally isolating Peter, James, and John into an even smaller group. Robert E. Coleman points out that in evaluating Christ we often fail in understanding that our revelation of Christ should include

how he taught others. Coleman profoundly wrote, “One cannot transform a world except as individuals in the world are transformed, and individuals cannot be changed except as they are molded in the hands of the Master. The necessity is apparent not only to select a few helpers but also to keep the group small enough to be able to work effectively with them.” Jesus was indeed a believer and practitioner of small group ministry in His own discipleship methodology.

Small Groups in Acts and the Epistles

In December of 2000, the remains of an ancient Christian church building were discovered in Rihab, Jordan. Two scholars, Samer Abu-Ghazalah and Abdel-kader Al-Hissan, dated the church to the year 230 C.E. insisting remains constituted the oldest Christian church. Bradley Billings said, “During the first and second centuries ce Christians were a new social and cultic group, seeking to establish themselves in both the physical and social landscape of the urban area. They met in homes and continued to meet primarily in domestic space until at least such time as the first buildings dedicated to Christian use begin to appear in the archaeological record during the course of the third century ce.” If the archeology is correct, the early Christians did not commonly have stand-alone locations designed only as worship centers.

If the Rihab Jordan site is not the earliest church, we do know that church buildings were not common for the primitive church. Possible reasons vary from place to place. In some places it was persecution, in others lack of resources, in others laws may have forbidden it. Regardless of the reasons why the early Christian church did not have buildings, we do know that there were small groups which met regularly in members’ homes. In this light it would stand to reason that the early Christians did not see a building as the church, but the members. The word ‘ekklesia’ appears one hundred fourteen in the New Testament. J. W. Roberts gives two meanings to the word “ekklesia,” as used in the Scriptures, by identifying its two-fold meaning as, “used in a comprehensive or universal sense, ... and a local or community sense,” In the common classical

use of the word in Greek culture, from which the word emerged, Roy Bowen Ward pointed out that ekklesia and its cognates was “a political term, meaning an assembly of citizens.” He further stated, “In the Greek city-state the citizens were called forth by the trumpet of the kerux (herald) summoning them to the ekklesia (assembly). The ekklesia was the ultimate power in the constitutional government of the Greek city-state, whether it was a monarchy, oligarchy, or democracy.”

The writers of Acts and the epistles used ekklesia to represent the church, likely with an eye to its classical usage, but redefining it to a degree for their own purposes. J. Y. Campbell wrote “The probability is that at first they used it [ekklesia] as an obvious name for those simple 'meetings' which were the most conspicuous distinctive feature in the life of the early Church.” In Acts, ekklesia is used twenty-three times, nineteen of which refer to what we commonly would think of as the church body. Roy Bowen Brown declares that these nineteen passages refer to the “institution of Jesus Christ” and that it “means more than the actual assembly; it is also the people who assemble.” Rad Zdero pointed out that the common use of ‘church’ in the New Testament refers to believers gathering in a home assembly and never used in reference to a ‘special building.’” He added that no “biblical or archaeological record of church structures has been found whatsoever for the first century.”

Luke recorded the events of the early church in Acts. He said, “And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:46-47). Acts 5:42 gives a similar scenario pointing out that there were meetings both in the temple courts and from house to house. It is clear that the first Christians met both publicly and in smaller settings. To this point F.F. Bruce wrote, “in the weeks that followed the first Christian Pentecost, the believers met regularly in the temple precincts for public worship and in public witness, while they took their fellowship, meals in one another’s homes...” David W. Shenk and Ervin R. Stutzman spoke of the groups meeting in homes as ‘home cell groups’ stating that these small clusters formed the larger congregation which would also meet around the temple area for larger events.” In the same vein, Horatio Hackett cited Neander as saying, “...in addition to their daily resort to the temple, they met in smaller companies, at different places; that they here received instruction from their teachers or one another, and prayed and sang together; and, as the members of a common family.” Richard Longenecker claimed that the early Christians favored meeting in the Temple where they discussed their beliefs and praised God, but also o

resorted to homes for fellowship. Aubrey Malphurs points out that Paul said that while he

was in Ephesus, he taught both publicly and from house to house (Acts 20:20). It is clear that the home, or house church was the bedrock of the early Christian church. David G. Peterson wrote about Acts 2:42-47 saying, “They also broke bread in their homes... They were aware that God was at work in their midst in a new way and that they were enjoying the benefits of the messianic salvation.” He continued, “God’s kindness to these believers bound them wholeheartedly to himself and to one another in a fellowship of generous self-giving. They expressed their gladness and devotion to God by constantly praising him and caring for one another.” I. Howard Marshall wrote, “The Christians met together for their own religious gatherings. They met in one another’s homes and broke bread together in a spirit of intense and sincere joy.” Joel Comiskey evaluated the use of homes in the book of Acts saying, “Luke describes homes being used for prayer meetings (Acts 12:12); for an evening of Christian fellowship (Acts 21:7); for holy communion services (Acts 2:46); for a whole night of prayer, worship, and instruction (Acts 20:7); for impromptu evangelistic gatherings (Acts 16:32); for planned meetings to hear the gospel (Acts 10:22); for following up (Acts 18:26); and for organized instruction (Acts 5:42).” I. Howard Marshall describes what the early church did in their house meetings in saying, “according to the New Testament witness Christian gatherings were for instruction, fellowship and prayer; in other words, for the benefit of the people taking part; there is less mention of the worship of God, although of course this element was not absent.”

It appears that there was a prosperous house church in Phillipi at the home of a prominent woman named Lydia. Upon their release from prison, Paul and Silas met with believers in Lydia’s home before departing the area (Acts 16:40). Craig S. Keener wrote, “Given the presence or rapid gathering of believers at Lydia’s home, we may assume that she was now hosting a house congregation.” It is clear that the Acts record provides the small group basis for the praxis of the New Testament Church. Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Southern Baptist Seminary, Dr. John Polhill, said “For the story of the church’s formative years, for the history of its early mission, one turns to the Book of Acts.” It is clear that the church met in small groups within homes, and this was a very basic element of the growth of the movement. Gerhard Lohfink said, “The houses into which the disciples entered were to become bases for the Jesus movement. A net of households into which eschatological peace had entered was to extend throughout the whole land. Everywhere in Israel there were to be people who were captivated by the reign of God and therefore trusted each other to share and care for one another.” Hadaway, Dubose, and Wright said, “Christians have been worshipping in homes in one way or another since the time of Christ.” Bill Donahue and Charles Gowler wrote, “The existence of smaller gatherings and house churches continued beyond the apostolic era, becoming the common form of assembly in areas and cultures where church

buildings were nonexistent.”

The Interconnectedness of the New Testament House Churches

It has been estimated that during the time of the apostles, Jerusalem had probably 100-200 house churches in the area. It seems that a similar system was also in place in Corinth. Richard Last wrote, “a majority of scholars now characterize the earliest population of Christ-believers in Corinth as a system of familial networks.” By adding together Paul’s references to individuals’ houses, L. Michael White calculated six house churches in Corinth. Arthur G. Patiza points out that other scholars have estimated that there were seven Corinthian house churches in Paul’s time. The question of autonomy and the connection of the early house churches is important. Joel Comiskey wrote, “House churches in the New Testament were not independent of each other. Rather, they were part of a larger unit. The house church and the larger gathering of several house churches existed side by side in early Christianity. In other words, individual believers and house churches considered themselves part of a greater citywide church.” Ken Giles also addressed this issue in saying, “It is often assumed that in the New Testament age there were no institutional structures linking individual congregations or local churches to the wider Christian community, but this is not true.”

Though there were often many house churches in the more populated areas like Jerusalem, Corinth and Ephesus, these churches were not independent, autonomous entities. The house churches were interconnected and operated under the supervision of the Apostles. Ken Giles said, “In the Book of Acts, Luke maintains that a group of elders with general oversight of the Christian community in Jerusalem was in place by the time the church at Antioch was established.” In a similar way George Hunter states, “The early church experienced two structures as necessary and normative for the Messianic movement. They met as cells (or small groups) in ‘house churches’; and the Christians of a city also met together in a common celebration or congregation.” F.F. Bruce said, “Such house churches appear to have been smaller circles of fellowship within the larger fellowship of the city ecclesia.” Richard Last wrote, “in Corinth was institutionalized according to a two-tiered system of organization: a city-wide group that Paul called the whole assembly (ἡ ἐκκλησία ὅλη, Rom. 16.23; 1 Cor. 14.23) and the small familial groups, now known in scholarship as house churches...” Robert Banks indicated the existence of the two-tiered organization of the Corinthian church because of Paul’s use of the “whole,” in regards to the church coming together (1 Corinthians 14:23). He states that the use of “whole” would be unnecessary if the Corinthian Christians only met as a single group for corporate worship. To Banks, this implies that the Corinthian church utilized small groups throughout the city.

The early church utilized the venues available to them. In Jerusalem, the temple remained a place to meet for corporate worship, while much teaching and instruction took place in the small groups which met in homes. This vast network of house cells which met everywhere the church spread was vital to the growth of the movement. Joel Comiskey said, "it would be safe to say that the first three centuries belonged to the house church movement." As Christianity moved forward into subsequent ages, the use of small groups ebbed and flowed, always resurfacing in some form or another. Pillay and Greyling rightly stated, "Every generation should take on the quest of calibrating the dominant ecclesiologies with the life and practices of the early church as seen on the pages of the New Testament."

Small Groups Movements in History Monasticism

The growth of monasticism in late 3rd century Europe contained some elements of small groups. William Brown wrote, "Gradually some of these hermits discovered that if they grouped together in small communities, they experienced spiritual as well as practical benefits. In time many of the features of the Christian community in Acts 2 were reincorporated into monastic life, and yet there was still a separation from the people." Benedict evaluated monasticism and determined that along with the need for order, the monks also needed a community environment to provide support and strengthen spiritual growth. This less restrictive and isolative order of monasticism became vastly popular and was named the Benedictine order, after its founder.

The Anabaptists

According to Jane Latham, "In the 1520's, Anabaptists often gathered in small groups at the homes of fellow believers of their persuasion. The groups would study the Bible together and use them to grow spiritually." It should be noted that the purpose of small groups cannot entirely be attributed to their efficacy for spiritual growth and formation. The Catholic's influence on European governments had caused all Anabaptist activity to be made illegal. It is important to note that after the Anabaptist persecution ended, they continued to meet in homes, because they felt it was in line with the practices of the early church.

The Moravians

Zinzendorf and the Moravian Church used small groups to bring about spiritual maturity in its members. They divided the members into "choirs" of 10-25 people, according to age, sex and marital status. The Moravian church developed small groups for married couples, widows, widowers, singles (men and women separated), as well as separate groups for older boys and girls, and younger boys and girls. The particular choirs kept their own schedule of

activities, and meetings.”

John Wesley’s use of Small Groups

John Wesley transformed the Church of England and birthed the Methodist movement. Bob Whitesel said, “One of history’s most remarkable spiritual renewals took place when an unassuming Anglican pastor named John Wesley took his message outside the stately confines of English churches and into the streets. The message was so widely received that the teeming throngs of new converts began to overload the system.” Bill Donahue and Charles Gowler wrote, “Wesley’s conception of group life employed gatherings that existed apart from and in addition to regular weekly church services. The purpose of these groups included accountability and spiritual formation, being organized into societies (gatherings of 20-50 people), classes (averaging 10-15 members), and bands (groups of 4—5) for catechesis and mutual encouragement toward spiritual progress.”

Wesley instituted weekly small groups called “class meetings” and made them compulsory for his members. He would not allow members to attend the larger church meetings if they had not attended their weekly small group. Bill Hull wrote, “The class meeting was considered the most influential instructional unit in the Methodist movement.” Cambridge

University researcher, Tim Albin succinctly said, “The secret of the Methodist movement was in its small groups.”

The Early Modern Pentecostal Movement

The early modern Pentecostal movement owes much to small groups. The restorationist and primitivist impulse of the early Pentecostals caused them to search the Scriptures for truth. This was often done in the context of small groups. The place widely regarded as the birthplace of modern Pentecostalism began with only about 40 students in Charles Parham's Bethel Bible School in Topeka, Kansas. It was here where on January 1, 1901, Agnes Osman was baptized with the Holy Ghost speaking in tongues at 10:30 p.m. William Seymour, the leading figure of the early Pentecostal Movement, was locked out of the church he had been invited to preach to. Upon his banishment from the church he was invited to stay, and preach, at the home of Richard and Ruth Asberry at historic 214 Bonnie Brae Street; it was here that, on April 9, 1906, several people began to speak in tongues. It can be said, that the Azusa Street revival started as a small group in a home.

Small Groups in the Modern Church

The success of the primitive church cannot be denied but it should be used as an example for all generations. F.F. Bruce said, “To this day the surest criterion of an apostolic church is its adherence to the apostolic teaching.” Bruce’s point is

well taken, if we want to be a church like the Apostles built, we must adhere to their teachings and practices. The disciples' understanding had been opened (Luke 24:45) and the resurrected Christ had spent forty days teaching them things pertaining to the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). It is safe to believe that these men knew the pattern by which God wanted them to grow and solidify the church. This pattern was shown in the New Testament and continued in varying forms throughout church history and has found its way into the modern Church. The modern church should not have small groups just because others do. There must be a theological conviction and an understanding of their value in praxis. No program or method is without difficulty and challenges, without a strong theological framework, the process will be aborted. Small groups should be started because they are a Scriptural method, because they are beneficial to the church and because, if done properly, they work. Joel Comiskey said, "When a church does not develop a strong foundation upon which to build cell groups, the reason for doing cell ministry will also shift like sand." Comiskey further stated, "Theology gives wings to cell ministry because it provides the basis for implementation in both receptive and non receptive areas." Finally, he added, "Cell church principles and practices must be built on a biblical foundation if churches are to become healthier and make more and better disciples. It's not a quick growth strategy, but rather, a biblical one. Cell groups provide the environment to form disciples." Small groups are effective for evangelism, discipleship, providing a caring environment, and building strong Christian relationships.

Evangelism

J.A. Kirk said when the church "ceases to be missionary, it has not failed in one of its tasks, it has ceased being church." Small groups should strive to be missionary environments. There are some people who would not consider going to a church service for a variety of reasons. The small group environment can be a great introduction, or reintroduction, to Christianity. Robert E. Coleman described Jesus' use of the small group to train the disciples for evangelism in saying, "Though he did what he could to help the multitudes, he had to devote himself primarily to a few men, rather than the masses, so that the masses could at last be saved." Brad Lewis warned of small groups becoming inwardly focused environments only for the blessing of the members, saying that small groups should always be "looking for ways to incorporate others." He continued by stating, "Healthy groups have an emphasis both on relational evangelism and discipleship." M. Scott Boren contends that Christians who are in small groups should be trained in relationship evangelism. He correctly wrote, "Relationships are more effective than things like door-to-door witnessing, handing out tracts or organizing evangelistic rallies."

Discipleship

One of the greatest benefits of small groups is their ability to aid in discipleship. One of the most effective methods of Christianity in the last century has been the Sunday School class, which is essentially a small group. Generations of children have been discipled in the basics of Christianity by small group leaders called Sunday School teachers. Rob Wegner and Jack Magruder call small groups “microenvironments” and state that they “are naturally conducive settings for transformation.” M. Scott Boren aptly said, “Discipleship or spiritual information is the dynamic found in the Great Commission.” Thom Rainer claimed that new Christians who immediately joined small groups were five times more likely to remain in the church for five years than those who were not involved in small groups. When people join small groups they get a more intimate connection with the church, and they tend to stay. Rad Zdero said, “Research on missionary work around the globe confirms that the most rapidly growing church planting and evangelistic movement today utilizes house church concepts.” Joel Comiskey agreed by stating, “Cell church principles and practices must be built on a biblical foundation if churches are to become healthier and make more and better disciples. It’s not a quick growth strategy, but rather, a biblical one. Cell groups provide the environment to form disciples.”

When churches were evaluated for strength and growth patterns emerged. One pattern which emerged is the presence of thriving small groups. Christian Schwarz said, “If we were to identify any one principle as the ‘most important’—even though our research shows that the interplay of all basic elements is important—then without a doubt it would be the multiplication of small groups.” Joel Comiskey evaluated 8 characteristics of healthy churches one of the factors was holistic small groups. He said, “...research has shown that cell-based churches are statistically healthier in all eight categories than those that are not cell-based.” Likewise, Earle Cairns stated, “Bible study and prayer in small groups will promote revival, witness, and fellowship”

It could be claimed that the presence of small groups is the difference between plateaued/declining churches and growing churches. Christian Schwarz said, “... research in growing and declining churches all over the world has shown that continuous multiplication of small groups is a universal church growth principle.” C. Peter Wagner said, “The major difference between the church under the 200 barrier and one over the 200 barrier is fellowship groups.” Dr. Bob Whitesel said, “it is in small, intimate gatherings where most growth in Christian faith and maturity can take place.”

Caring

Modern Pastors are under a heavy burden. The stress and burn out levels from serving the church are very high. Bill Hull said, “When one man tries to meet the needs of the entire flock, he will fail. The majority of broken pastors leave the ministry due to the misconceived expectations of congregations.” Many pastors feel the burden of doing the work, when in reality the top priority is to make sure the work gets done. Hull says the pastor’s greatest task is “to get the work of ministry done through others. Doing it right means multiplication of ministry through every member.” He continued, “It is better for the shepherding or caring ministries to be decentralized throughout the entire body.” Training members to provide spiritual care for their fellow members is a core principle of small group ministry. Carl George wrote, “Adequate caring lies at the foundation of all sound church growth.”

George said, “The best solution, which enables the largest number of people to receive personal, quality attention, occurs when a church systematizes care by building it into the ongoing life of the entire fellowship. For this to happen, self-help caring must be developed as a mutual resource through a churchwide system of lay-led small groups.” Brad Lewis said, “The small group provides a safe place to ask questions, share personal “junk,” and shed tears. Deep relationships are nurtured.” In addition George wrote, “...the more caring cells your church has, the more people you can sustain and the more crises you can handle without loss of quality.”

Win and Charles Arn wrote, “One of the most meaningful, rewarding, growing experiences the new Christian will have is in a small group within the church, in which the caring, loving fellowship of the body can occur.”

Relationships

There is often a disconnect with people within our digital society, leaving people craving interaction with others. Pillay and Greyling said, “Postmodern communities are often more digital than physical; this leaves people with a hunger for face to-face interaction. People need community, real community. Postmodern technology creates a global community, but in essence is taking away physical interaction. Many are starting to feel the hunger for real relationships in this cultural scenario. Postmodernism creates global networks but in the same breath is indirectly creating a need for people to meet face-to-face.” The church can provide this meaningful interaction through effective small groups.

Win and Charles Arn said that “small group involvement should be one of the first concerns of the church for its new members.” The closeness developed through the fellowship of the small group creates a safe place to ask questions, share personal issues, and care for one

another, fostering deep relationships. Church growth consultant, Lyle Schaller has done extensive studies of the role building relationships has in regards to retaining attendees and new members. His research shows that the more friends a person makes within the church, the less likely that person is to leave the church or become inactive. Win and Charles Arn said, “The number of new Christian friends a person makes during the first six months of his or her church life directly influences whether that person continues as an active member or drops out.” Nelson Searcy said, “Small groups are the single best way to close the back door [*of the church*].” In a similar tone, Dr. John Bosman said, “These groups are tremendous and indeed meet the needs of many people. It serves a marvelous purpose in building relationships and developing spiritual growth.”

Conclusion

Small groups in local church are biblically, historically, and in praxis the consistent method for discipling Christians and growing churches. Religious movements in our postmodern society have widely rejected the traditional church model. One such movement is the emergent church which sees the institutional church as cold, uncaring and burdened by tradition. Pillay and Greyling point out that the draw of the emergent church movement is its “rejection of the institutionalism of the inherited churches.” This rejection of the “institutional” church is an over correction. Acts two points out that they were daily in the temple (institutional) and from house to house (organic community). It is a mistake to solely embrace either, and reject the other. We do not need an emergent church, we need a merging church, that retains the accountability, inspiration and programs of the institutional church and merges it with the communal fellowship and discipleship potential of small groups.

There is no way to overemphasize the value of healthy, scripturally based small groups in regards to discipleship and caring for members, as well as spurring numerical growth. One place this is seen is in the remarkable growth of Christianity in China. Harley Atkinson said, “One of the most remarkable church movements since the rapid expansion of the Church after Pentecost has been the house church movement of mainland China.” Earle Cairns also reported the great growth of Christianity in China, “which had about one million Protestants in 1949, had over 50 million Protestants in 1990. Most of these are evangelical. There are 100,000 house churches meeting in China.” Under the communist dictatorship of the Chinese government most all expressions of Christian religion are illegal, certainly traditional church buildings are forbidden. The Chinese church has thrived off small groups and house churches. These small groups are the driving force of this dramatic growth, and can serve as a model for the world-wide church going forward.

I am not proposing the abdication of the traditional church model which most all

denominations use. I am advocating the inclusion of small groups into the model which will provide balance to the body of Christ. George Hunter said, “Many people are involved in the congregation, and are thus involved in its proclamational, sacramental, and liturgical life, but not in the cell; they therefore never experience half of what ‘church’ has to offer.” Additionally, William A. Beckham stated, “The problem today is not in proving the church existed in both large congregations and small cells during the first century. That is evident in the New Testament. Our problem today is that the traditional church ignores the New Testament pattern and lives without New Testament community.”

From the implementation of Jethro’s organizational plan for Moses, through the ministry of Christ to the disciples, and the explosive growth of the early church, small groups are seen as beneficial and a catalyst for growth. This is also true of the post Apostolic age and into the modern times. The record proves that small groups in the local church are biblically, historically, and in praxis the consistent method for discipling Christians and growing churches. Christian Schwarz wrote, “Holistic small groups are the natural place for Christians to learn to serve others... with their spiritual gifts.”

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