

How to develop and sustain small groups in your church.

A) Why small groups?

Sunday has changed in our society and more and more churches are finding that midweek small groups are no longer an add-on for those who are keen, but are becoming an indispensable part of church life. In small groups deeper relationships are forged which create a sense of belonging and good pastoral care. They are also places of nurture and discipleship where people grow in their understanding of the faith, in putting it into practice, and exploring the use of gifts of leading, teaching, prayer, pastoral care etc.

There is a biblical pattern – Jesus chose 12 disciples, the early church met in homes, and at various times in church history small groups have been important e.g. Wesley. It seems that in our day there has been an upsurge in them in various forms.

They are called by various names - fellowship, home, cell, holistic - it doesn't really matter, it's what works in your context. In this paper I will refer to them by the general term 'fellowship groups'.

Growing churches almost without exception find these to be one of the keys to continued and sustained growth. BUT they can also be a place of stultification and even rebellion and they need to be developed and handled well.

B) How to develop small groups.

1) Look at what you've got.

- a) Many churches have Lent groups and Advent groups which introduce people to the idea of small groups. Quite often there are a few who wish they would continue and would be willing to do so with help.
- b) Nurture Courses and Confirmation classes. These are excellent for introducing new people to the Christian faith but the biggest problem is that there is often nothing to feed them into once the course has ended. Many who attend these want to continue learning and sharing close fellowship.
- c) Task groups. Various church groups such as choir, cleaning teams etc. can also be places of belonging and fellowship. Sometimes the addition of a bible thought and prayer can develop them into much more.

In reality, it can be hard to get existing members into a fellowship group pattern as they do not see the need. You can expend a lot of energy and cause a lot of aggravation by trying to force existing members to join groups – it is better to start with those who are willing, especially new members, and then let others hear and see how good they are and 'want' to join one.

- 2) **Grow a small group pattern for your church through nurture courses.** Find a course which works for you. There is a paper which outlines the most popular ones [here](#). Encourage new people into these courses and ask some of your spiritually alive and mature existing members to help in this. As the nurture group nears the end of the course, suggest the possibility of it continuing and become a fellowship group (you have your leaders already there). Grow them one at a time. In one church I was in we didn't have mature existing members to do this and so the nurture groups who wanted to carry on had to find their own leader from within the group – in almost every case, they did!

Once you have three or four groups you also have the option at the end of the nurture course of feeding members into existing groups. This can be helpful if there are not enough to form a new group and it also helps to revitalise existing groups.

Some churches find it too big a leap to go from their nurture course into a fellowship group. At the end of the nurture course members are encouraged to join their 'Beta' group which looks at basic discipleship teaching. After a year they can then feed into existing groups or start a new group. For suggested Beta materials, go to <http://bit.ly/TuwtlN>.

In some situations a new Vicar will want to develop fellowship groups quickly. One format which has worked in some places is to choose a nurture course and encourage as many as possible in the church to do it. Offer continuation groups for those who wish to do so and this can kick-start several groups into existence in a church. A new Vicar can only normally get away with this in the first year

3) **Invest heavily in the leaders.**

The key to successful small groups for fellowship and bible study in churches is the training and continued support of the leaders.

Initial training: Rev'd Denise Burgess from Elford, near Tamworth, has generously shared with us her training package which she uses for her Holistic small group leaders and bravely allowed this to be put on DVD to make it available to a wider audience. Denise tells us the story of the growth of small groups. talks us through the way she trains her leaders, and outlines her values and vision. I recommend that you watch the DVD, take notes and adapt it to your own circumstances, The DVD is just under 40 minutes in length. The PowerPoint slides which show on the screen are available as a separate PowerPoint and Denise has given permission for others to adapt these for their own local circumstances. The slides can be downloaded from the Diocesan Web Site at <http://bit.ly/NkpY8H> or contact Richard Barrett for them. Just ask and a free copy of the DVD can be sent to you.

Various books offer ideas for training also. They can be found in the resources paper at <http://bit.ly/UdIDI9>.

Continued support: It is no good expecting fellowship groups to develop and flourish if the Vicar never meets with the leaders. I recommend meeting at least three or four times a year to share how it is going, input good practice and share vision. Encourage openness and honesty as it's a really tough job – leaders can help each other. If you have a centralised pattern of teaching, then this is where you can share the ideas and the scheme. It is also where you can share the vision and direction of the church as the groups become a key part of the communication structure. Invest in the leaders as much as you can! It will pay rich dividends – in reality they will, in return, pastor and care for a significant number of people and save the minister an enormous amount of time and effort and energy – so it's time well spent. Some churches structure their groups twice a month and on the week between groups the Vicar meets with the group leaders for their nurture and fellowship. Find a pattern that suits and sustains. Without continued support, you will find the groups stultify or go off at tangents.

Leaders or coordinators. The term 'leader' can be misleading and 'coordinator' is better in many situations. The coordinator does not always lead and teach. Some of the best groups are where the 'coordinator' encourages everyone to take part in some way. If the 'leader' always does the leading or teaching (or both) then a dependency grows which can be unhealthy. There are a lot of materials around these days which means several people in the group can take part in leading sessions; see <http://bit.ly/UdIDI9>.

You do need one key person who is the coordinator between the Vicar and the group for communication and accountability. It is always good to have a deputy so if the coordinator is ill or unavailable or moves, the group can continue. The deputy coordinator may, in time, go on to have a group of their own.

Never ask for volunteers to coordinate groups! Choose someone who is faithful and reliable, able to handle people, but not necessarily with outstanding gifts. Other gifts will grow within the group if there is the right coordinator.

- 4) **Style and Frequency of meeting.** Ideally groups should meet weekly. Through this, bonding and fellowship develop. Groups which meet less frequently tend to take longer to bond together and members more easily drift away. However, there is a danger of stagnation in a weekly meeting and so churches develop their group structures in varying ways to combat this.

Some churches have a monthly 'joint fellowship' where all the fellowship groups come together. This gives an opportunity for experimenting in worship style, deeper teaching and prayer, as well as giving the group leader or host a week where they can take in and do not need to prepare.

Some churches meet bi-weekly or twice a month and in-between have clusters of groups meeting together. This creates a variety and dynamism which can be very helpful. An example of this is a church where 'community groups' (25 people) meet fortnightly and 'life groups' (8-10 people) meet the alternative weeks. Another term for this used in some churches is a 'pastorate' for the larger group. Go to www.htb.org.uk/pastorates for more details.

Some are concerned to keep groups outward-looking and so have built this into the structures. An example of this is a church in Aldershot which has 'Pod' groups which are explained at <http://bit.ly/Pzimnj>.

We don't do nurture courses or cell groups in our type of churches. I hear this most commonly in rural contexts. Churches in the Mease Valley near Tamworth have found that in small rural communities nurture courses do not work because everyone knows everyone and the stigma of appearing to be a beginner puts people off. But there they have developed 'Holistic Small Groups', mentioned above, and also found these to be an excellent way to integrate the rural churches in the Benefice. In the Tas Valley Sally Gaze has developed a network of cell groups which are thriving. You can read the story at <http://bit.ly/o8ZOW1>. Some churches may struggle with weekly fellowship groups and so another way forward is to develop the Community of St Chad 'spiritual growth groups' which meet monthly and fulfil many of the aims of fellowship groups with a different structure. More details are available at <http://bit.ly/Q471LF>

I have found small groups effective in almost every church context. However, in order for them to work they need to be invested in by the key leader of the church in terms of time, enthusiasm and energy.

C) Ongoing Issues.

- 1) **Content of the teaching.** A key question in many churches is whether the groups devise their own teaching /subject syllabus or whether this is driven centrally by the church leaders. I used to allow my groups to devise their own syllabus but occasionally asked them to follow a centralised pattern of teaching. There were some groups who needed constant help and advice and others who resented it when asked to follow a central pattern. Allow for the diversity if you can. I used to have a store of resources people could

borrow and was always willing to give advice. There are numerous resources around but many are costly. Why not work together as local churches? Find out what works in churches similar to yours and share good resources. You can access a good list of resources at <http://bit.ly/UdIDI9>

Churches which adopt a 'cell' approach use the previous Sunday's sermon as the basis of the content of the study/discussion with a stress on applying the teaching to daily life as well as understanding it more. Churches who adopt this method often ask the preacher to summarise his/her teaching and provide questions for the groups to discuss around "Welcome, Worship, Word, Witness". For more on cell church models go to <http://celluk.org.uk/>.

The "Swedish Bible Study Method" has been adopted by a church in West Brom where groups look at the subject of the following week's sermon with four simple questions:

- **Light.** What light does this passage shine on God, the world, the church, or me?
- **Questions.** What questions do I have?
- **Change.** What should I do or change as a result of reading this passage?
- **Speech Bubble.** What could I say to someone from this passage? Who will I say it to?

More details can be found at <http://bit.ly/Q1n3pm>

- 2) Sub-group structures.** In larger churches sustaining multiple groups can be hard work. As a curate in a large growing church I found coordinating 20+ groups almost a full time job. In addition to knowing who was attending which group, at any given moment three groups were struggling and three were developing! Overseers (or some other more suitable term) are the key – people who will monitor and support 3 or 4 groups – visit regularly, look after the coordinators. Again, not all groups will want this, but some will love it as it will mean they are nurtured. If there is opposition, grow this pattern with new groups as they develop. And some coordinators will love it anyway. You will also have some people who have had enough of being a group coordinator but will relish the opportunity to oversee coordinators – and may do it very well.
- 3) Sacking and restructuring.** This is normally done because the leadership feel that the groups are stagnating or rebelling. Beware, groups develop a wonderful loyalty. But groups have a life-cycle and after three years may be rather tired and need a change. Either the group needs to end and re-form or there needs to be significant change in the group to keep it alive either by a new coordinator or the injection of new members. Beware of groups which stagnate: euthanasia is preferable to senility in small groups.
- 4) Multiplying groups.** Some groups grow naturally by current members inviting new ones. This is particularly the case if the host has a real gift of hospitality. Groups do not like to multiply (split!) as the members grow to love each other and have a commitment together. But if the group continues to grow its size will be self-defeating and it is necessary to sit down with the group and talk about options. To do a 50/50 split rarely works in my experience. It often works better to take a smallish number from the group to form the core of a new group which others can join – the larger group also has room for growth. The two groups often keep an association and meet for socials. In the longer term after another multiplication there may be 3 or 4 groups with a common source which can form a pastorate (see above).

D) Problems and remedies.

Problem	Suggestions
Heresies develop (this never happens in sermons, of course!)	a. Some churches have set programme of teaching for all to follow. There are a multitude of good resources and programmes. b. Regular reporting back and meeting with coordinators. Relationship. c. Keep your ears open.
Splits and factions – coordinators who want power	a. Relationship and regular report-back – meeting with coordinators and Vicar. Accountability. b. Overall vision of church. c. Keep your ears open.
Lack of coordinators	a. Develop ‘deputy coordinators’ in groups – when they show signs of frustration with their coordinator it’s often a sign that they are ready for their own group. b. Regular training to which new people are invited. c. Don’t look for the wrong qualities. Good people skills and group skills are more important than theological/biblical knowledge.
Maintenance of the structures	a. Have someone who can administer the groups, keeping an eye on who is going where (or not going). b. Develop sub-coordinators – see above. c. It is worth the time invested for the time saved elsewhere and the potential for growth.

E) Conclusion

The time and energy you give to small groups will reap dividends. In view of that, if you want advice or help with your small groups, do contact the Mission Dept as we see this as a vital area of church growth and therefore are more than willing to give advice and help.

F) Examples of good practice.

- a. Neil Robbie at Holy Trinity West Brom has developed some excellent guidelines based on Orlando Saer’s book, “Iron Sharpens Iron” (www.amazon.co.uk/IRON-SHARPENS-SAER-ORLANDO/dp/1845505751). The Guidelines can be downloaded at <http://bit.ly/Q1n3pm>