

Why Small Groups?

The reason behind intentional Christian community

Carolyn Taketa

Churches use all sorts of names for small groups—life groups, growth groups, home groups, cell groups. They also use various models, numerous strategies for connection, various plans for assimilation, and church-specific vision and goals for their group ministries. Yet all would agree that small groups are a means to an end, not an end in and of themselves. Small groups exist as a way for people to engage in biblical community that helps them become more like Jesus in every area of their lives. The following are a few key biblical foundations, ministry purposes, and benefits of small groups.

Biblical Basis for Small Groups

God himself is in a community of three persons in one—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who exist in perfect unity. So it is not surprising that from the beginning, God created us to be in community with one another. Genesis 2:18 states: "It is not good for man to be alone." This passage is often used in the context of marriage, but it also speaks to our fundamental need to connect with others in the human community. What is striking about this statement is that God makes it before the Fall. There's no sin yet and no disobedience; man is in perfect intimacy with God. And yet, God declares that man is alone and that it is not good. Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian points out:

Community is deeply grounded in the nature of God. It flows from who God is. Because he is community, he creates community. It is his gift of himself to humans. Therefore, the making of community may not be regarded as an optional decision for Christians. It is a compelling and irrevocable necessity, a binding divine mandate for all believers at all times.

When Jesus' ministry began, he called 12 disciples to be his primary relational and ministry community. Did Jesus need this motley crew to help him? Not really. But Jesus chose to love them, teach them, and pour himself into relationships with them, thereby creating the first "small group."

The apostles continued Jesus' model and formed a community of believers who loved God and loved one another. Despite incredible persecution and against all odds, this rag tag group of Jesus-followers launched small communities (i.e. church) that proclaimed the gospel and changed the world forever.

Purpose of Small Groups

When we look at the early church we get a picture of small communities of people who followed Jesus together. The Book of Acts, especially Acts 2:42-47, gives us a great picture of the early church and the components of biblical community, which encompassed both the "temple courts" and "house to house."

These believers engaged in life together through teaching, fellowship, communion, prayer, miracles, radical generosity, and corporate worship. They spent time together eating, learning, celebrating, proclaiming the Good News, and supporting each other. In addition, the 50-plus "one another" verses in the New Testament flesh out other aspects of this community. For example, it was a place where people loved, forgave, served, bore burdens, encouraged, exhorted, prayed, equipped, spoke truth in love, confessed sins, and treated each other as precious members of one body.

God never intended for us to live the Christian life alone. How can we apply these "one another" references unless we are in intentional, close relationships with each other? God calls us to love, not in an abstract or superficial way, but in a deep, face to face, life-on-life, transformative way—which is difficult and inevitably messy.

In our modern culture, small groups are often viewed merely as a program or a fellowship ministry within the church. But for the New Testament church, it was a way of life, encompassing every area of their lives. Their relationships with one another were critical to their pursuit of Jesus, their growth in Christ, and their witness to the Good News. It would be impossible to experience biblical community apart from spiritually significant, intentional relationships with other believers. Relational structures like small groups, therefore, are an integral part of "being" the church and not just "doing" church.

Character Change Happens Best in the Context of Community

The consumer mentality rampant in our culture has permeated our understanding of community. We focus on what we are going to get out of church or small group rather than what God is going to do in us and through us because of our relationships within community. We need each other to help us know the truth about who we are, who God is, and how we can live in light of those truths. Like iron sharpening iron, the relationships we form within our small communities can become a tool for God to use in our character transformation. Dr. Bilezikian writes:

It is in small groups that people can get close enough to know each other, to care and share, to challenge and support, to confide and confess, to forgive and be forgiven, to laugh and weep together, to be accountable to each other, to watch over each other and to grow together. Personal growth does not happen in isolation. It is the result of interactive relationships. Small groups are God's gift to foster changes in character and spiritual growth. We live in an increasingly fragmented and disconnected world. Though social media and other technology have made our world seemingly more connected, people have fewer

genuine friends than ever before. It feels scary and threatening to allow ourselves to be known or to invest in knowing someone else at a deep level. It is much easier and more convenient to stay on the surface. Yet when we take the risk of being authentic with a small group of people, we can experience God's grace and love coming through others, which leads to freedom and transformation.

John Ortberg writes: "God uses people to form people. That is why what happens between you and another person is never *merely* human-to-human interaction—the Spirit longs to be powerfully at work in every encounter." So the goal of small groups is to create environments where Spirit-driven, life-giving experiences can flourish. While the type of group or study can help promote a positive environment, the real things that promote a healthy environment for flourishing are prayer, support, service, confession, worship, accountability, conflict resolution, social gatherings, and simply doing life together. Regardless of the specific guidelines a church may have in their small-group ministry, its objective ultimately is to help people engage in relationships that help them become more like Christ. Spend time building an environment that allows true relationships to flourish.

Small Groups Are on a Mission Beyond Themselves

The Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20 mandates that every follower of Christ is on mission to "go and make disciples of all nations." Jesus gave this instruction to all his followers, both as individuals and as the body of Christ. We, as a small group and as a church, bear collective witness to the good news of Jesus Christ.

One of Jesus' final instructions to his disciples is found in John 13:34-35: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Note that Jesus did not say people will know we are Christians by how many churches we build, how many Bible studies we complete, how many prayers we say, or how many people come to our church. The litmus test is clear: people will know we are Christ-followers when we love each other the way Jesus does.

Theologian Francis Schaeffer asserted, "Our relationship with each other is the criterion the world uses to judge whether our message is truthful—Christian community is the final apologetic." Our non-believing friends, family, co-workers, and neighbors are watching and deciding on the validity of the gospel message. We need others to help us live lives worthy of God's calling so that people will see the power of God's love in and through us.

Ultimately, small groups are a way of living out our purpose, both as individuals and as a collective group of believers—to be the church. We share a common foundation of faith and God has called us to live out the implications of that faith in a relational community, in the context that we call a small group.

—Carolyn Taketa is Small Groups Director at Calvary Community Church in Westlake Village, California; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How clear is your vision for small-group ministry?
2. How familiar are you with the "one another" commands that lay out a vision for biblical community?
3. What especially appeals to you about living life together with a small group of people?