



The General Conference
Sabbath School &
Personal Ministries



TO

S M A L L
G R O U P
MINISTRY

SEVENTH-DAY
ADVENTIST CHURCH 

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Editor: May-Ellen Colon
Design: Linda McDonald

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SMALL GROUPS

Introduction

It is time for Jesus to come and yet there is a great work to be accomplished. Big plans need to be set in operation. One method by which those big plans and that great work can be accomplished is through small groups. The potential for church growth in Christ centered, Spirit-led, and well organized small groups with proper goals is unlimited. To think big and set into action big plans, the church needs to think small groups.

We will begin by reviewing briefly the Biblical, Adventist, and recent history of small groups, and then discuss how to organize and operate them for the greatest results.

Biblical, Adventist, and Recent History of Small Groups

The Bible story and the experience of the church both confirm that from the very beginning of human history to the present, small groups of one kind or another have been part of the divine plan for the human family.

- The family unit was the first and most important small group ordained by God. As far away as many individual families might be today from His ideal because of sin, the family is still the backbone of society worldwide.
- After the Exodus, God gave His approval to the suggestion of Jethro that Moses should divide the entire new nation of Israel (perhaps as many as two million men and women or more) into groups of ten, not just to make Moses' work easier, but to make God more accessible to the people (Exodus 18, note especially verse 23).
- Although Jesus had many disciples, He invested much of His time and energy in developing His own small group of twelve. (Mark 3:13-15; Luke 6:12,13). He taught them to be completely dependent on Him and on each another.

This arrangement was clearly an excellent means of intensive training and personal development for the disciples. It served as a model for the church of the future in which they would be leaders. And, at the time, it also provided mutual support and encouragement both for the disciples and Jesus Himself. He was there when they needed Him; and, though they let Him down occasionally, they were usually there when He needed them. For this He was grateful (Luke 22:28).

- The New Testament church was a small group church. Partly because the close relationships which bound Christ's first disciples together could only be sustained in small groups, and partly because Jewish animosity made it difficult for them to meet regularly in public places, believers met together in each other's homes. While they also met together in larger numbers whenever and wherever they could, the essence and genius of the apostolic church was this network of small groups to which everyone belonged. These small groups played an important part in the amazing numerical growth of the church after Pentecost from 120 to over 10,000 believers in a few months, and the development of its unique fellowship (Acts 1:15; 4:4; 5:42 etc.).

Nero's decree against Christianity in A.D. 64 also meant that it was impossible for Christians to build any sort of meeting place we might call a church, because Christian assembly was illegal. Yet the church not only survived, but thrived throughout the Roman empire without church buildings for 250 years until the time of Constantine.

- The spiritual decline in the church which followed the apostolic period and resulted in almost total apostasy was due in part to changes in its structure which occurred simultaneously with changes in doctrine. The emperor Constantine was responsible not only for the first civil law concerning Sunday observance; he also erected several of the earliest church buildings in the Roman Empire. In spite of the New Testament teaching that God now lives in and among His people rather than in buildings, his basilicas were designated as sacred places to be used

only for religious purposes and clergy were appointed to serve in them. Thus began a trend which led to the inevitable consequence that buildings, rather than homes, gradually became the center of church life. It also helped to create the unscriptural distinction between clergy and laity which remains with us to this day. Ever since, church life has revolved largely around buildings instead of people, and ministry has been seen as the responsibility of priests and pastors instead of every Christian.

- Since the time of the early church, small groups have played an important part in reformation and revival. Nearly every major revival in the Christian church has been associated with a return to the establishment of many small groups usually in private homes for Bible study, prayer, and the discussion of spiritual things.
- The Seventh-day Adventist Church began with a strong emphasis on small groups, partly because of its Methodist roots and partly because of the inspired counsel of Ellen White. For example, during her visit to Australia a major Christian revival took place in Melbourne, at the height of which 2000 small groups were meeting in homes all over the city. She subsequently wrote: *“The formation of small companies as a basis of Christian effort has been presented to me by One who cannot err.”*¹
- Thousands of Christian congregations throughout the world have experienced outstanding numerical and spiritual growth in recent years. Almost without exception, small groups have played, and continue to play, a very significant role in those congregations.
- In countries such as China where the church has been persecuted and threatened with extinction, it has not only survived, but flourished, through the ministry of small groups, despite the absence of professional pastoral leadership.
- It is clear, then, that small groups have always been part of God’s plan for men and women.

As the plan of salvation has unfolded through human history, three events stand out above all the others in their importance. They are the Exodus, the First Advent, and the Second Advent. On each of these three occasions—the establishment of the nation of Israel, the establishment of the Christian church, and the gathering and preparing of God’s people before the kingdom of God is finally established—we see that small groups were and are ordained by God to play a very significant part.

Ours is the privilege and responsibility of living just before the third and last of these great events. As the Day of the Lord draws nearer, we can expect the Holy Spirit to lead the church to the spiritual and numerical growth that we have dreamed of and prayed for. Small groups, used by God, will probably do more than anything else to prepare us for that experience and keep us together until the Day of the Lord arrives. What better reason could there be than this, for us to ask God to help us to see small groups as He sees them, to guide us in organizing them, and to help us to experience their full potential!

What Small Groups Are

“And every day in the Temple and in people’s homes they continued to teach and preach the Good News about Jesus the Messiah” (Acts 5:42 GNB).

A small group is an intentional, face-to-face gathering of three to twelve people, on a regular time schedule with the common purpose of developing relationships, meeting felt needs of group members, growing spiritually, and laying plans and working together to lead others to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior of their lives. The group is to help each to grow in their relationship with God, grow in their relationship with each other, and reach out to share what they have with others.

The best small groups are those which, by definition:

- a) are an essential part of the church’s life and structure,
- b) have a growth mentality, and
- c) operate relationally.

Small groups are an essential part of the church's life and structure. The church cannot just “try” small groups. Success with such an approach doesn't last long. It doesn't work. Small groups cannot be just an option. To succeed they cannot be just another program of the church; they must become the basic building block of the church itself. In New Testament times, small groups were to the church what cells are to the body. Just as the body performs all its functions largely at cell level and grows only as the cells grow, so the small-group church accomplishes what it is trying to achieve largely through its small groups, and the church grows because its small groups grow. The successful church operating small groups should be called a small-group church, rather than simply a church with small groups.

We speak of “going to church” and many think of the church as an organization. It is true that church buildings and church organizations have their place; but in truth the PEOPLE are the church. The New Testament word for “church”—*ekklesia*—is used to describe those who have been “called out” by God, who also come together in community because of their shared connection with Jesus. Such communities of “called out” people in the New Testament were small—small enough to meet in someone's home to worship, to eat together, to learn, and to serve. The Bible speaks of “the church in the house of . . .” several times (Rom. 16:5; I Cor. 16:19; Philemon 2; Col. 4:15). Hence, first of all, a holistic small group is really a mini-church, an *ekklesia*, functioning in all the basic areas of growth and ministry with which any church should be concerned.

Although the group meets for Bible study, Bible study is a means to build relationships among participants and between them and Jesus. He has promised that where two or three are gathered in His name, He will be present with them. Small groups meet in anticipation of experiencing together His presence so they can share the blessings of relationships and the Word with others. *The small group is to connect people relationally for the purpose of growing in Christ-likeness, loving one another, and contributing to the work of the church, in order to glorify God and make disciples of all nations. As Ellen White said, the “One who cannot err” has instructed that “the formation of small companies” should*

be the “BASIS of Christian effort.” Modern research shows how true that inspired directive is. Successful small groups focus on relationships and mission.

The admonition to “love one another.” Jesus taught His disciples to “love one another” as He had loved them (John 13:34). He stated that it was their love for each other that would convince others that they were true disciples. Here are some “one another” texts (which will result in mission) that can probably be followed better in the small group setting than in any other setting, given the fact that these admonitions were first addressed to the small groups of Christians of which the entire New Testament church consisted:

“Be devoted to one another” (Romans 12:10)

“Honor one another” (ditto)

“Accept one another” (Romans 15:7)

“Instruct one another” (Romans 15:14)

“Serve one another” (Galatians 5:13)

“Carry each other’s burden” (Galatians 6:2)

“Be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:2)

“Be kind and compassionate to one another” (Ephesians 4:32)

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ”
(Ephesians 5:21)

“Teach one another” (Colossians 3:16)

“Admonish one another” (Colossians 3:16)

“Encourage each other” (I Thessalonians 4:18)

“Build each other up” (I Thessalonians 5:11)

“Confess your sins to each other” (James 5:16)

“Pray for one another” (James 5:16)

Here is a sample of how God can use a small group that follows Biblical admonition, and works together in love, to minister to the needs of a group member:

A Load Lifted after Twenty Years

Sarai (pseudonym) was a medical doctor, and the mother of two young children. The Adventist pastor in the area was contacted one day by Sarai's brother, who was a member of the church in another town. Would he call on her when it was convenient and invite her to church? He did, she accepted the invitation, and began attending church regularly.

At about that time the church was trying to start a small group ministry, and Sarai began meeting with a number of others for fellowship, Bible study, and prayer. She enjoyed the Bible study—but what touched her life most was the way in which the other members of the group spoke so openly of their experiences. It was a very safe place to be. People could be themselves, and as they shared their needs and anxieties with one another (as well as their joys), they received encouragement and strength from the love and prayers of the rest of the group. It was almost as if God Himself was touching them as they met together.

One Monday evening, Sarai went to the meeting with a burden on her heart. She had no intention of mentioning her troubles to anyone, but as the group studied and discussed the Bible together, she began to see herself in the Bible story. She began to share what was on her heart. It was something she had carried around with her for twenty years. She had never been able to speak about it with anyone, not even her husband, for he wasn't a Christian, and wouldn't understand. Even as she spoke, her heart became lighter. She could not stop the tears of relief. Thanks to what happened that evening, she was able to put the past behind her and begin a new chapter of her life. A few months later, she was baptized.

Organizing Small Groups

1. Pray at every stage of the process. Small group ministry may be part of God's plan for your church, but much wisdom, patience, and energy will be needed in making it happen. Prayer is needed especially in the selection of group leaders and the

formation of leadership teams. Leadership teams will need divine guidance as they invite church members to form their core groups; and each core group will need to pray for God to make His will for the group—and who they should invite to it—very clear.

2. Identify specific areas of need which small groups could be designed to serve. As part of this process, enable the church to take a serious look at itself through a church life workshop, covering the four main areas of nurture, worship, community, and mission. The church needs to know what it is doing well, and what it is not doing well (or not doing at all). Churches which have been established for many years should be challenged to redefine their mission and goals in realistic and specific terms.

Four Leading Questions to Identify Mission and Goals:

- 1) *“From where have we come?”* Why was this church started, and what has been achieved in the past?
- 2) *“Where are we now?”* What kind of church are we? How well do we know each other? What are we doing? Do we like what we see?
- 3) *“Where are we going?”* What would we like to achieve within the next three/five/ten years, and how could we best achieve it?
- 4) *How are we going to get from where we are to where we want to be?* What changes must we make? What must we do that we are not doing to make the vision a reality? By identifying specific areas of weakness and need, and facing specific challenges and goals, members can see more clearly how small groups can help make the church what God really wants it to be.

3. Gain the approval of the church. The church must have the chance to discuss and approve the plan to introduce small group ministry. This may take some time, as the matter is presented formally in various committees (Personal Ministries, Youth, Board of Elders, Church Board, Business meeting, etc.) and informally on other occasions. No one should begin small group meetings secretly— without the knowledge of the church and the pastor.

4. Help others catch the vision. If the church is to make intelligent and positive decisions about small groups, it needs to know about them and have an opportunity to experience them.

- Arrange for Sabbath School classes to occasionally function on small group lines or utilize the simple Sabbath School Action Units plan. (Material is available on how to utilize this very easy-to-follow successful outreach plan.) Even if only a few classes followed this plan, as members began sharing the blessings of the units with the church others would be motivated to join small groups.
- Develop a more small-group-oriented approach to board meetings and other committees, allowing a period of time for Bible study, prayer, and sharing on a personal level.
- Arrange for occasional sermons to be preached on related topics, such as a series on the early church and the book of Acts.
- Invite individuals who have been blessed through small groups to come and share their experience with the church.
- Include short promotional notes on small group ministry in the church bulletin and prepare simple but attractive posters for the bulletin board.
- Conduct a small group workshop.

5. Grow, don't go, into small groups. It won't work if church leaders divide the congregation into groups and post lists on the bulletin board of who will attend which group. In developing the life-changing movement of His church, Jesus Himself:

- began with three or four innovators (who remained His closest confidants throughout His ministry)
- gathered a leadership core of twelve (His own small group)
- added a support network of seventy
- built a congregation of 120 believers, who then
- multiplied to thousands after Pentecost

That process took over three years. And the church would do well to follow His example, by starting with a few key individuals who share the vision.

In every church there are certain opinion leaders who may or may not be church officers, but without their support, the change process will be longer and more difficult.

6. Set up a small group steering committee. This committee will oversee the whole process of launching and developing small group ministry in the church. Three to five creative, visionary people are sufficient. Ideally the pastor should be involved as the overall leader-coordinator of this ministry, while others could be chosen from the existing church leadership (elders, Personal Ministries leader, Youth Leader, etc.), and/or interested and suitably gifted lay members.

7. Write a mission statement. While individual groups should have a clear idea of what they want to do, it is important that small group leaders, with the steering committee, prepare a small group statement for the local church, which will serve as an overall guide for the future.

8. Form small group leadership teams. The selection process should not be the responsibility of the Nominating Committee, but of the steering committee who should either:

- a) select leaders, assistant leaders and hosts/hostesses for each team or
- b) select only the leaders and invite them to choose their own leadership teams.

After taking some of the steps already mentioned, this should not be a difficult task. But remember that it should be the church body that appoints them and sets them aside for their special ministry. Leaders and groups are accountable to the church, not just a coordinator or a committee.

9. Start small. In most churches, three groups would be an ideal number with which to begin. In large churches, six groups could start the process, while in small churches a single group may be sufficient.

10. Train leaders. The best form of initial training for small group leadership teams is gained in a small group of their own, once they have gained a basic understanding of small group ministry. Three leadership teams (leaders, assistant leaders, hosts/hostesses) with the pastor or trainer/coordinator can form a small group together, and learn the basics of small group dynamics by role-playing. Even if there is only one leadership team to begin with, create a small group with three or four additional people and learn by trial and error. But remember that developing small group leaders is a similar process to developing pastors—there is always room for improvement and growth. On-going training should therefore be provided. In the long term, we should see group leaders as lay pastors. Small groups develop leadership. The church pastor or other individual with overall responsibility for small group ministry should meet with group leaders for training at least monthly once the groups are up and running.

11. Form core-groups of six to nine committed members chosen and personally invited by members of the leadership teams. There should be a maximum of nine church members in a core group, including the leadership team, since there must also be room in the small group for at least three non-Adventist members.

12. Introduce and invite friends. It would be ideal to introduce non members to the church members who are in the group before they are invited to the group, although this may not always be possible. Anniversaries and other family celebration events are good opportunities for bringing members and non members together in a non-religious setting. If a group member is following up a Bible study interest, one or two other group members could join in on the visits and get acquainted. When friends are invited to their first group meeting, they will be more likely to accept the invitation if they know they are already acquainted with others in the group.

Much of this depends on the culture. Sometimes the small group may start out with church members and non-members. The above approach would be better if it is possible.

Those who are invited will generally be:

- People who attend church who have not made a commitment to Christ or church membership
- Friends and relatives already known to one or more core group members
- People in the community who have made an initial contact with the church through a contact or entry event, an evangelistic campaign, a “Discover” or V.O.P. Bible School course, etc., and who, preferably, have already been introduced to one or two other members of the group
- Individuals (Christian or non-Christian) from any of the categories listed above with a known interest in or need for the subject on which the group plans to focus, and who will generally be able to identify with the group as a whole.

This is where the rubber meets the road. And absolutely nothing can compare with the joy that the group will experience when real life changes begin taking place because of their small group!

13. Evaluate and conduct leaders’ meetings. No church is going to get everything right the first time. There should be consistent leaders’ meetings with the pastor—every week at first, and eventually once a month—for evaluation, vision casting, sharing successes and challenges, skill training based on present and future needs, and for special prayer for one another, members of their groups, and other concerns.

Then encourage individual groups to evaluate their experiences after completing the first unit of Bible studies—what they did well, how they might improve, what was most/least helpful, etc. And as small groups increase in number, evaluate their overall effectiveness in achieving the objectives and goals of the church. Evaluation, like training, should be on-going.

Small Group Leaders

The three key leadership positions are Group Leader, Assistant Group Leader, and a Host/Hostess. A small group can function with only one person leading. However, it is best to have at least two, with three being best of all. Following is a brief job description for each:

Group Leader

- Oversees all details of group life in and outside of the weekly meeting.
- Facilitates the weekly group meeting and leads the discussion.
- Models and encourages participation, sharing, acceptance, and understanding among the members.
- Makes sure the needs of the group members are being met—spiritual, social, and personal needs. Works with the host/hostess to make people feel comfortable.
- Reports to the pastor and the weekly leaders' meeting on the progress of the group.

Assistant Leader

- Leads the sharing time.
- Leads the prayer time.
- Leads the group meeting when the leader is absent.
- Assists in recruiting new members, following-up with absent members, and making spiritual visits as needed.
- Assists with group life management.
- Is an apprentice in training to lead a group of his or her own in the future.
- Is a prayer partner and supporter of the leader and host/hostess.

Host or Hostess

- Has the spiritual gift of hospitality.
- Provides a comfortable place to meet, such as a home, restaurant, business place, etc.
- Sets up refreshments before the meeting time.
- Cares for the physical and material needs of the group, such as seating, Bibles, pencils, etc. Arranges chairs in cooperation with the leader.
- Welcomes people as they arrive and sets an atmosphere of love and acceptance for everyone—regular attendees and guests.
- Is a prayer partner and supporter of the leader and assistant leader.

Qualifications of Successful Group Leaders:

They could perhaps be summarized in brief as: faithful to God; available to meet the needs of the group members; and teachable and willing to learn.

Expanding on that, the following basic qualifications are important in group leaders:

- A model Christian and Bible student. Leaders should have an understanding of, experience in, and commitment to God's Word. The group leader needs to enjoy studying and learning from the Scriptures on a daily basis. A leader cannot facilitate a scriptural study if he or she does not study privately. Leaders also model what they are teaching by being a living example.
- A growing relationship with Jesus should be evident in the life and character (2 Peter 3:18).
- A desire and commitment to care for people. The leader is dedicated to reaching out to the members of the group and demonstrating loving concern for their personal sorrows, joys, and needs. The leader should be an encourager, assisting the members in their personal

growth and development. Jesus said that true leadership is putting the needs of others first.

- A passion for winning lost people to Jesus. The number one reason for the existence of the church is to connect people with Jesus. A leader must have this burning desire.
- A teachable spirit. A leader may not know very much about leading a group at first, but he or she can become a successful leader through humility and a willingness to learn.
- Time commitment. It takes time to be a group leader. The leader must be willing to spend one night a week in a group meeting; attend a regularly scheduled leaders' meeting; prepare for the weekly meeting; and make sure the members' needs are being met.

Keep in mind that no one may be able to fully meet all these ideals. However, Jesus promises strength, wisdom, and the Holy Spirit.

Contrasting Correct and Incorrect Motives for Leadership:

Correct motives that help the leader to serve positively include:

- A desire to uplift and glorify God.
- A desire to please God in using the spiritual gifts God provides.
- A desire to do something positive for God's church.
- A desire to share with others the fact that Christianity can help meet one's personal needs.
- A desire to connect lost people with Jesus.

Incorrect motives which can destroy group life:

- A desire to fulfill an emotional need, such as acceptance or approval.
- A desire for power or authority over others.

- A desire and need to be always in the center of whatever is happening.

Individuals should not serve as leaders if their desire and motivation is not to assist the group in reaching its goals and fulfilling its purpose for existence.

Functions of Successful Leaders:

Here are functions of a leader that are basic to positive leadership. A successful group leader:

- Seeks to develop personal relationships with each member of the group, by spending quality time with them to understand their unique contribution to the group.
- Gives each member a genuine sense of being important to them.
- Is sensitive to the needs, feelings, and personalities of the members and affirms their individuality.
- Continually models love, trust, and acceptance as normal behavior for Christians.
- Will truly be a facilitator and guide the flow of the discussion, attempting to involve all in a non-threatening manner.
- Encourages members to listen to, accept, and respect those holding a view that differs from the leader's or other member's.
- Guides the group through possible conflict to right conclusions.
- Assists the group in growing and in accomplishing its mutual goals.

Small Group Meetings

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42 NIV).

In Brief.

We will begin with a very brief graduated survey and then go to an expanded view of small group meetings that will include more details:

Suggested order for a small group meeting:

Total Time **90 minutes**

Sharing Time **15 minutes**

Discuss the Week’s Activities
Ice Breaker/Sharing Questions
Depending on the type of group, may
do ministry planning if it applies.

Bible Study Time **60 minutes**

Prayer Time **15 minutes**

Conversational or other type of prayer,
including prayer for new people to invite

Characteristics of a small group meeting:

- The seating arrangement is in a circle rather than a row. A living room or kitchen table is an excellent location.
- It is key that no one sits outside the circle, or the dynamic will be lost.
- Good lighting is necessary for study and for developing a warm atmosphere.
- Choose a location that will provide the fewest distractions and interruptions. Children, pets, telephones, television, radios, etc., can disrupt your study group.
- Usually the group is 3-12 people. If there are more than 12 people, divide the group into two or more groups in the home in which you are meeting or start a new home group/s.
- It is important to begin and end on time or some members may stop attending.

Expanded.

Now for the expanded view:

A typical small group meeting will normally last from one hour to an hour and a half. While in many respects there should be no such thing as a “typical” small group meeting (may they never be predictable, “same as usual” events), certain details will be featured in most meetings.

The place of meeting will usually be a house rather than a church. The lounge is the most suitable room, with chairs and perhaps floor cushions arranged in the semblance of a circle. Some groups prefer to sit around a table in the dining room. The room will be comfortably warm (not too hot, not too cold), and well-ventilated.

As guests arrive, they are warmly welcomed by the host/hostess. Refreshments are served if people have come straight from work or for other reasons would welcome a hot or cold drink. The host/hostess informally introduces those attending for the first time, and creates a friendly, relaxed atmosphere as group members chat together before the meeting proper starts.

Meeting formats vary between groups, but all follow a certain basic outline, including an ice-breaker exercise of some kind, Bible study and (usually) prayer, and refreshments. Many groups also include a specific period of time for praise and worship through singing.

At the close of the meeting, details for the following week’s meeting are shared, along with any other group activities planned.

Now let’s take a closer look at the essential parts of a small group meeting.

a) The Ice-breaker.

The meeting begins with ten to twenty minutes of sharing within the group, based either on a pre-prepared ice-breaker question or two, or simply on group members’ experiences during the previous week. This “warm-up” period is a very important part of every meeting, and one must resist the temptation to “get into

the Bible study” as quickly as possible. Pre-prepared questions are useful, especially during the first few weeks of a new small group’s life, because:

- They enable everyone (even the most shy) to say something (For a sample list of ice-breaker questions, see Appendix).
- They are often lighthearted, so they help the group to relax.
- They help members get to know each other on a more than superficial level.
- They can provide an introduction to the Bible study topic.

The ice-breaker section may be led by the assistant leader or perhaps the host/hostess of the group, although other group members can also share this responsibility.

b) The Bible study.

This may last for 30 - 45 minutes (or more if the group has previously agreed on a longer time period), and will be led by either the group leader or one or more group members appointed beforehand.

If pre-prepared Bible study guides are obtainable, they take a lot of hard work out of preparation, and are best to use as they provide a guideline to follow and give the group members something to take home for continued study. They also help people to become familiar with the style and dynamics of relational Bible study, making them good for new groups and new group leaders. At the start of the Bible study, every member of the group should be given a copy of the outline, and pens or pencils should be made available if written answers are required. In most cases, Bible texts are included in full, so Bibles are not needed, and non-Christians are spared the embarrassment of not knowing where to look for a text.

If you decide to use some of these pre-prepared materials in your group, don't think there is nothing for you to do before the meeting. Study leaders must always be well prepared, even if this means simply going over the outline in detail and becoming familiar with the subject and aim of the study.

Groups which choose to do without pre-prepared material should guard against a too casual, unfocused approach to Bible study, even though the "Bible only" method is probably the best for able and experienced leaders.

As a general rule, a short passage of Scripture—not more than a chapter—is better than a long passage for each group meeting. Many single chapters can be studied more than once.

Each person in the group should have a Bible. For groups who wish to create a "safe" environment for un-churched people, a contemporary version, if available, should be used. The church should purchase a number of identical Bibles for this purpose, so that page numbers for the texts can be given rather than the references. Once a group is familiar with the Bible, it is an advantage if different members use different translations. No one should be asked to read aloud until it is quite obvious that the person is willing to do so.

Unless the group is following a very basic outline, group members should be encouraged to do a certain amount of homework between meetings. Reading the assigned passage every day between meetings is a good form of homework. Different individuals can be asked to research and share findings on small segments of the passage.

Whatever the approach to Bible study, the topic for a given period of time should be chosen by the group or core group, not just the leader.

In summary, Bible study time in small groups should be:

- Relational—designed to build relationships, not just pass on information
- Relevant to group members' needs and interests

- Creative—there are more ways than one to study Scripture
- Challenging, intended to change lives

The Right Kind of Questions:

Good questions are essential to dynamic small group Bible study. Actually, there are only two basic questions involved in relational Bible study.

- The first is a question for the mind: *“What is the Bible actually saying?”* All true Bible study must ask this question. Often with the help of various Bible study aids, the aim is to discover what actually happened, what God was actually saying at the time, to whom He was saying it, and why.
- The second question is for the heart: *“What is God saying to me/us through this scripture?”*

Bible study will make no difference to our lives or our relationships—with God or with other people—if we do not apply it. Through relational Bible study we learn to ask such questions as: *“Where am I in this story?”* *“According to this passage, what does God want me to feel/say/do in order for my/our relationship with Him and with each other to grow?”*

The two basic questions mentioned above will, of course, be asked in many different ways. Other questions will also be used to create dialogue and discussion.

Good questions for this purpose include those that are:

- 1) Open-ended, not closed (e.g. “What is involved in becoming a disciple?” not “What are the four steps we must take to become a disciple?”)
- 2) Not leading—they don’t suggest the answer (e.g. “What is this verse saying about Jesus?” not “Jesus was the Messiah, wasn’t He?”)
- 3) Singular, not multiple (e.g. “Why is it important to be baptized?” not “What does it mean to be baptized, why is it important, and what can we learn from the baptism of Jesus?”)

- 4) Simple, not complex. Questions may be profound, but they shouldn't be unnecessarily complicated (e.g. "What's wrong with just keeping the rules in order to be saved?" not "In Paul's letter to the Galatians, what theological problem did he imply those first century Christians were struggling with in terms of the relationship between justification and sanctification?")

In relational dynamics, even when group members ask questions, the leader ought not to answer them. The leader's task is to lead—lead the group to discover truth and gain insight by thinking and working things out for themselves. Often, the best way to answer a question, or to go deeper into a previous question, is to ask another question, using:

- 1) Extending questions ("Would you like to say anything else about that?" or "Could you go into a bit more detail?")
- 2) Clarifying questions ("Could you explain that more fully? What do you mean by that?")
- 3) Justifying questions ("Why do you think that is true?")
- 4) Re-directing questions ("What does the rest of the group think?" "Jane, what do you think/feel about this?")
- 5) Reflecting questions ("That's an interesting point. Are you saying that. . . ?")

c) Prayer.

At least ten minutes will be set aside for prayer, usually after the Bible study. Some groups will regularly want to spend much longer than this. With other groups it may become apparent to the leader during a particular meeting that more time is needed for prayer than usual, so the time given to Bible study may be shortened. With still other groups, such as those just beginning with several non-Christian guests, there may be little or no prayer at all during the meeting.

The prayer time in small group meetings can be led by the assistant leader, the host/hostess, or another designated prayer ministry leader.

There is advantage in the prayer leader keeping a written record (journal) of prayer requests and answers.

Forms of prayer:

Prayer in small groups can follow a variety of forms, including:

- 1) **Conversational prayer**, which is probably the most popular, and the best suited to small group dynamics and values. Conversational prayer is exactly that—a conversation between the members of the group and God. It consists of a single prayer with one beginning and one ending. All who wish to may make short contributions to the prayer once or several times as the prayer leader introduces different aspects of prayer such as adoration, thanksgiving, confession, and petition. The prayer leader ends the prayer with “Amen.”

In conversational prayer, spoken prayers can be interspersed with suitable prayer songs started spontaneously by any member of the group. Periods of silence may be quite common, as the group seeks an awareness of God’s presence or a knowledge of God’s will. Time spent in this very relaxed form of prayer may vary from a few minutes to a much longer period.

- 2) **Chain prayer**, which involves each person praying in order around the group. Embarrassment for those who do not wish to pray can be avoided by suggesting that such individuals can simply touch the next person as a signal that the prayer can move on.
- 3) **Written prayer**, which is especially helpful for those who are nervous about praying in public. The entire group can occasionally be asked to prepare written prayers beforehand as a way of bringing creativity and variety into the prayer life of the group.
- 4) **Responsive prayer**, which is also prepared beforehand, copied, and distributed among the group. In this form of prayer, the leader expresses adoration, praise, petition, etc., and the whole group follows together with appropriate responses.

- 5) **Prayer in twos or threes**, which enables group members to spend more time praying for each other. Be sure everyone is comfortable with praying in public before suggesting it.
- 6) **Communal prayer** such as the Lord's Prayer, which is read or recited by the whole group together. Such prayers are useful if they add variety without replacing the more informal styles mentioned above.

One of the features of the small group meeting is the presence of the empty chair. Christian members of the group will pray constantly that the group will grow as God fills that empty chair.

The position chosen for prayer generally should be in harmony with the informal nature of small group life. However, the prayer position that is culturally acceptable for the group also should be taken into consideration. Usually, prayer that is offered before and during Bible study, or the shared prayer after Bible study that may continue for some time, is offered while the group is seated. The culture of the group will ultimately help to determine the prayer position. (In countries influenced by Eastern Orthodox tradition, Christians *always* stand whenever prayer is offered.)

Occasionally, a member of the group may mention a special prayer need. In such cases there is much to be gained if the other members of the group can gather around that person while they pray for him or her, and, if it is appropriate, the two or three individuals who are nearest can lay their hands on the shoulders of that person. This kind of special prayer ministry, however, must always be conducted sensitively. Not everyone, especially newcomers, will feel comfortable with it.

d) Refreshments.

These are usually served at the end of the meeting, allowing group members the option to leave, or stay and chat informally. Refreshments can be served at the beginning of the meeting instead, especially if some members arrive straight from work, or have to arrive over a period of time. The advantage of ending with refreshments is that it enables the group to "wind down" from the study/prayer period. Either way, a refreshment period is an

important element to successful small group meetings, and should be included whenever possible. It helps people to relax while talking, and sometimes causes barriers to be broken down that would otherwise inhibit the growth of relationships. For this reason, some groups make their first meeting a social one at which strangers can get acquainted through a pot-luck type of meal followed by suitable games.

A word of caution: keep the refreshments simple. Except for special occasions, cold or hot drinks and cookies or fruit are enough.

e) Watch the time!

Whatever else the typical small group meeting might include, and however the time might be divided (once the group has decided how long meetings should last), two final rules should be faithfully observed if the small group is going to grow:

Rule One—Start on time.

Rule Two—End on time.

The Small Group Life Cycle

At the outset, congregations developing small group ministry should understand that small groups mean constant change as they grow and divide and fulfill their usefulness to the church. One reason why small groups have not worked in the past, and why some church members have not wanted to belong to a small group, is that commitment to a small group is seen as a permanent thing. It is not. Small groups are temporary.

The life expectancy of small groups is limited. Like body cells, small groups don't last forever. Small-group churches which have gained experience over several years generally agree that a fairly average small group has a life expectancy of from twelve to eighteen months. Generally speaking, groups should not continue longer than two years. The life of a small group consists of four stages, as follows:

Stage One: Adventure or Exploration.

During this first stage, the members are just beginning with the group. They are asking such questions as “Do I belong?” “What is expected of me?” “What can I expect from others?” Yet, most group members are highly motivated, eager to learn, and confident that the group will result in blessings all around. Some have called this the “honeymoon” stage, and like any honeymoon, it is temporary, and should be enjoyed, however unrealistic the expectations may be.

Stage Two: Discovery or Transition.

The members are more comfortable with one another and beginning to venture out and “test the waters” to see if the group is a safe place to belong. The members begin to relax and enjoy one another. In this stage, there is also a return to reality—the world of real people. They discover that group members are human and all have their warts. “No gain without pain” now looks closer to the truth; concepts of accountability and growth look more like hard work than fun; and the idea of getting together regularly for several weeks or months means real commitment. Leadership may be challenged. Some group members drop out, possibly to find another group more to their liking. This stage has to be accepted for what it is, and the group has to realize that a “perfect” small group with no problems is probably the one small group where no growth or changes for the better can take place.

Stage Three: Action or Development.

The group members are comfortable with one another. They are very open in sharing their personal opinions and have developed trust and acceptance. Once initial problems have been resolved and group members have accepted the rough with the smooth, growth can begin to take place as the group’s strengths are set against its weaknesses, and its varied talents and gifts are identified and matched with its goals and targets.

At this stage the group leader can begin to share some of his leadership responsibility with other members. The group may also start looking for ways in which it can serve the community in a

more general way, as well as its own interests. The role of the leadership team during this period is to recognize the possibilities for development and help them to happen.

The development stage is by far the longest of the four stages. This means that it has potential for stagnation instead of growth, and degeneration into routine predictability instead of ongoing challenge. For this reason some small group experts are now advising that the group should meet during this stage for several short periods, following a sequential series of Bible study units, rather than attempt to continue without a break for the duration of the group's life.

An Example of Sequential Bible Study Units for Small Groups:

Unit One. Six studies to build group identity

Unit Two. Six studies to explore basic Christianity

Unit Three. Six studies the Gospel of Mark

Unit Four. Six studies on the Gospel of John

Unit Five. Eight studies with help and hope for every day

Unit Six. Twelve studies on living in the end

Unit Seven. Six studies on prayer

Unit Eight. Ten studies on great teachings of the Bible

Unit Nine. Six studies on Ephesians (focus on Church)

A parents' group, for example, could meet during term time then break for the school holiday periods. Each unit of six, eight, or ten weeks could then be devoted to a different topic of general interest. These units might cover, say, a total of sixty-two weeks out of a seventy-seven weeks period (eighteen months), allowing time for breaks in between. Remember that the group chooses the topics as they go along; they are not chosen beforehand by the leader (except for the first series of studies, which is usually chosen by the leadership team). The advantages of this approach are:

- members are more willing and able to commit themselves
- members can leave the group at the end of a unit if they are unhappy with the group

- new members are only added to the group at the commencement of new units.

This saves the group from the disruption of the deepening fellowship that takes place if visitors are constantly joining.

Stage Four: Maturity.

In the majority of cases it is probably true to say that a small group can only do so much for its members and no more. After a number of people have spent eighteen to twenty-four months together in weekly Bible study and fellowship, it is time for them to move on to the challenges of a new group, in which further growth can take place. In this fast-moving world, we quickly get bored and complacent. Without a time related goal to work toward, the earlier enthusiasm can easily fade. A predetermined termination point can serve as that goal in time. Even if the group does not grow numerically or conversions do not take place, members can enjoy the sense of satisfaction of knowing that they have stayed the course, and have grown together in their relationships with each other and with God. The value of such growth in the long term cannot be measured.

Most groups, however, can expect tangible things to happen, and growth and multiplication to occur. And they are much more likely to happen if they are planned for and prayed for within a certain period of time than if no time element is involved. Many groups can expect to grow from a starting point of, say, eight members, to their full capacity of ten to twelve members within a period of eighteen months. And the group must be ready for this culmination period when they will decide whether to form two new groups, or separate and join other existing groups. Naturally, there will usually be some reluctance to terminate meetings. But the trauma of the experience can be minimized if:

- a) the group is reminded occasionally that this will happen;
- b) a celebration event is organized for the last meeting to recognize what has been achieved, and thank God for it;
- c) group members are reminded that friendships continue, even if the group doesn't;
- d) a reunion gathering is organized a few weeks later;

- e) occasionally all groups meet together for thanksgiving and sharing, and Sabbath worship is frequently used as an opportunity for informing the congregation of what God is achieving through small group ministry.

From a practical point of view, when a group has reached the point where it is ready to divide and spawn a second group, the assistant leader of the original group becomes its leader, and the leader of the original group becomes the leader of the new group. Both groups can, if there is sufficient space, continue meeting in the same home for a period of time, using different rooms. After several weeks, there should be no difficulty in moving one of the groups to a new home.

To think big, think small groups. God will richly bless as your church continually and perseveringly trusts Him for wisdom and guidance as you follow His directions in establishing and operating small groups. *“The formation of small companies as a basis of Christian effort has been presented to me by One who cannot err.”*²

Appendix

SUGGESTED ICE-BREAKER SHARING QUESTIONS³

(Note: It is often most helpful to the discussion to ask a question that relates to and will lead into the discussion topic of the day.)

1. Where were you living between the ages of 7 and 12 . . . and what were the winters like?
2. How did you heat your house during this time?
3. What was the center of warmth in your life during this time? (This can be a place in the house, a time of year, or a person).
4. When did God become a “warm” person to you and how did it happen?
5. What is your favorite TV program and why?
6. If money were no problem, and you could choose one place in the world to travel for a week, where would that place be and why?
7. Who is your number one advisor in life and why?
8. One of my biggest pet peeves is _____.
9. People might be surprised to find out that I _____.
10. You have three wishes. What would you wish for?
11. If you suddenly lost your eyesight, what would be the thing you missed seeing the most?
12. What is the most daring thing you have ever done? What made it so daring?
13. My favorite way to waste time is _____.
14. What do you miss most about childhood?
15. What day of your life would you most like to relive? Why?
16. What’s the smallest space you’ve lived in? What was it like?
17. Just for the fun/thrill of it, before I die I’d like to _____.

18. If I were a time traveler, I would most like to visit _____ because _____.
19. Next year looks better to me because _____.
20. Next year may be a problem because _____.
21. I will probably never _____, but it would be fun if I could.

Endnotes:

¹ *Testimonies, vol. 7, pp. 21, 22.*

² *Ibid.*

³ From David Cox. *Think Big. Think Small Groups: Building Christian Community*, p. 80.

Small groups have always been part of God's plan for church members. Small group Bible study is a great way to build relationships between participants and God. This booklet walks you through the life cycle of small groups. It outlines how to effectively incorporate small groups into your church, the characteristics of successful leaders, an overview of meetings, and how to bring small groups to maturity and begin a new cycle. To think big, think small groups!

For lots more Personal Ministries resources visit www.sabbathschoolpersonalministries.org. This website has an extensive library of downloadable articles and activities to enhance the preparation of Personal Ministries leaders.

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