**Serving Christ through groups**

*Guide to setting up small groups .*

*Seventh-day Adventist Church in Northern New Zealand . April 2013*

**Why small groups?**

**The Christian Church began with a small group. Christ chose a small group of 12 disciples. Then he sent them out to minister in sub-groups, two by two (Mark 6:7). More than likely, these groups of two became magnets, or pioneer groups, that attracted other disciples. If the first 12 divided into six groups of two, and each of these groups found and trained ten more, that makes six groups of twelve and would explain the 72 disciples later appointed and commissioned by Jesus (Luke 10). These were then sent out two by two... and this is how the Church developed.**

After Christ's return to Heaven and the dramatic event of Pentecost, the nascent church was made up of large and small groups. Christians gathered on the temple forecourt - one large group for public worship, teaching and witness. In addition, Christians frequently met at home in small groups for fellowship, communion, needs-based ministry and prayer (Acts 2:41-47).

Small-group ministry is an operating principle of the Kingdom of God. The nation of Israel was subdivided into tribes, clans and families. The principle of subdivision is illustrated by Jesus' miracle of feeding the crowd of 5,000 - probably around 15,000 in all, including children.

In terms of organization, 15,000 people was too many even for Jesus! "Have them sit down in groups," he said (Luke 9:14). These groups were of about fifty people. That's a lot more than a house group, but the principle is demonstrated. Small groups made it possible to manage the task of distributing and consuming the miraculously provided food.

The Christian Church can gather and disperse. When it gathers, we have - unsurprisingly - a "congregation". The purpose of the congregation is praise, teaching and celebration.

When the Church scatters, we have small groups with a pioneering spirit and an evangelistic purpose. ***The biblical model in the Old and New Testaments is that of assembly and dispersion***. Under the Old Covenant, daily life, business, worship and witness took place in camps, homes or synagogues - small groups scattered across the land. But according to a calendar and for particular reasons, the people also gathered in large groups for rituals and celebrations.

When the experience of the New Covenant arrived with the advent of Christ and the Christian Church, persecution forced dispersion. There could only be one very large formalized congregation in Jerusalem, and very little activity elsewhere. But instead, believers were forced to form small groups and disperse to regions separated by great distances. In God's providence, this is how the Church developed.

From what we know of Church history, it was two or three centuries before this pattern of combination changed. One way or another, the emphasis was on large congregations. Cathedrals were built to accommodate large numbers of followers, while groups were left by the wayside. "Church", for most, was no longer synonymous with groups of dozens of Christians in active discipleship. Rather, it meant crowds of Christians as formal members.

The problem wasn't that the congregations were large, but that the energy and intimacy of small groups was lost. Members absorbed their religion one day of the week and then lived largely isolated from the church and Christ the rest of the week. The Church came to see its mission in terms of maintaining its status and structure, and keeping its members faithful and supportive.

The model of small-group ministry withered away, just as the mission of proclaiming the Gospel to the whole world was weakened. Praise God, today we are witnessing a renewal of the role of small groups in mission and ministry.

***Question:*** *With the advent of today's Internet society, are small groups less or more important?*

**Adventist context ...**

In the Seventh-day Adventist Church in general, small holistic groups are the lowest-rated characteristic of all the denominations studied in the

natural development of the church. The average score in this category for Adventist churches is 33; the lowest score recorded is 14. Even in congregations that score highly in almost every other area, it's not uncommon to see a score of just 20-21 in the small group area.

On the other hand, small groups were an important part of the early Adventist experience. These groups were called "social gatherings". They focused on relationships and spiritual life - witnessing, prayer, accountability, and singing. Time to get back to our roots?

**"Church at home’’**

Small groups for Christian ministry and evangelism are often called "cells". The word "cell" in this context comes from biology - not from the prison system or the telephone company! It refers to a basic living unit in an organism. This living unit acts in close relationship with other living units in the organism. Its purpose is to sustain, advance and multiply life.

In the Christian faith, the terms "house church", "cell group ministry", and "cell church" are often used loosely and in ways that are more than a little changeable. A church is typically a small group that is a church in itself in all key areas. It may have little or no structure or organization.

Cell ministry can be an important part of a church organized along traditional lines. In this case, the church - as an organized, functioning body - has many facets, and ministry through small groups is one of them. Ideally, in this model, small groups have priority and are designed to have a significant impact.

A cell church is typically located in the middle of these two models, although the term "cell church" does not mean "church". halfway between these two models - although the term is sometimes used for either model (which can be confusing).

A pure cell church is built entirely around small groups, which are the heart and center of its activity. A supporting organization sponsoring a cell church may bring its various groups together on special occasions or according to a regular weekly, monthly or quarterly schedule.

In the context of the support structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, we suggest the value of what might be called a "small group" or a "family-type church".

It is a congregation of fewer than about 25 regular attendees, which rebuilds its ministry (including worship) around the beauty and natural advantages of a small group. The congregation worships and acts according to the inspiration of 1st-century Christians, rather than trying to emulate the "grandeur" and formality of the Christian churches of later centuries.

**The aim of small groups**

Small groups are designed to accomplish that which cannot be accomplished by the church as a congregation within the framework of a large group. The purpose of small groups is to capture and develop the distinctive advantages that were present among small groups in Christ's ministry and in the early Christian Church.

All groups of people have a distinctive character, and the size of a group is a key factor in determining its character. The character of a group of 200 people is different from that of a group of 50. The character of a group of 50 is different again from the character of a group of 12.

What do you think are the main differences in character between a group of 50 people and a group of 10?

**Four objectives for small-group ministry ....**

***1. Discipleship.*** A way to help participants become mature disciples and servants of Christ.

***2. Outreach.*** An impetus to meet and include people who don't usually attend church.

***3. Leadership***. The opportunity to exercise the gifts of ministry and develop confidence in service.

***4. Evangelism.*** An aid and incentive to lead to Christ, as participants develop their gifts and become more attuned to faith and witness in everyday spheres of influence.

Which of these four goals appeals most to you?

Why is this? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Here's the beautiful reality: ***small groups are God's chosen and preferred context in which the Holy Spirit will be poured out!*** The Spirit has reached multitudes, but when we look at the context in which the Spirit arrived, we find it right there with the small groups. See John 20:19-23; Acts 2:1-4.

**Watch out! According to Christian Schwarz in Natural Church Development, the characteristic that has the most potential for a church's ability to grow is ... you guessed it ... holistic small groups. There's more potential in this ministry than in any of the other characteristics - empowering leadership, gift-oriented ministry, passionate spirituality, functional structures, inspiring worship, needs-driven evangelism, or loving relationships. And the influence of the small group reinforces all the other facets.**

**Passionate spirituality is the most critical dynamic; small groups are the most important activity. What relationship do you see between passionate spirituality and small groups?**

**Four key elements for each small group**

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ... . They gave everyone what they needed. ". (Acts 2:42, 47).

Here we see the four practical elements of the true church. Although they apply to the whole congregation, they are particularly applicable to small groups. For today's world, we could express the four essential elements in the following way. ...

***1. Authentic fraternity.***

Participants become part of the spirit of the group by engaging in an activity that ultimately draws attention to Christ and allows his presence to be real.

***2. Meaningful speech.***

Scriptures shape group opinion and motivate action in various types of ministry.

***3. Communion in prayer.***

Prayer - both praise and petition - becomes a natural exercise shared by the group, a feature that can be interwoven throughout the activity and emphasized at certain moments.

***4. A needs-based ministry.***

Participants actively seek the guidance of God's Spirit by seeking out and responding to people's needs - both inside and outside the group.

Which of these four elements is the most natural for you?

Which is the most difficult?

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**Setting up a group**

**Additional practical information**

On the previous page (at the bottom), we have four key elements that should be part of each small group. Can you remember them? Write them down here (if you need to cheat and take a peek that's okay).

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Here are a few other practical elements that contribute to the creation of a good group. For each of them, write a brief commentary suggesting specifics on how the element in question can contribute to the group spirit and help achieve its goals.

5. Worship - including singing

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6. Individual affirmation and appreciation

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7. Individual challenge and responsibility

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**The small group as a "parish**

**If desired, it's possible to build into the design of small-group ministry that each person associated with the congregation is assigned to a group - whether or not they can, or choose to, attend group meetings. In this way, each group is in effect its own "parish" - a designated group of parishioners within the congregation as a whole.**

**The group that actually meets accepts the privilege and responsibility of looking after the spiritual life and needs of its non-participating members. In this way, all members are taken care of; ideally, no one "falls through the cracks".**

8. Laughter - healthy humour

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9. Communication, socialization, follow-up and support between meetings

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**Understand your target**

Who will join your little group? Who could join your small group? And who would you like to see join your little group?

The answers to these questions will help you define the content of your group meetings. There is no set formula. Pray about it, let the Spirit guide you and be ready to make adjustments.

If you're targeting people who rarely or never attend church, your group should be geared towards their interests, hobbies or daily needs. Above all, your group will be an attractive entry point to the Christian faith. Spiritual content can be minimal at first, even limited to a brief prayer and a single Scripture passage.

If your target group consists of people who are already churchgoers or somewhat familiar with the Christian faith, your group can be shaped with a spiritual content. In this case, your group's main focus will be education and service to the community.

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**How to identify content**

When it comes to small groups for ministry, one size does not fit all! There's a wide variety of people out there, and there should be a variety "in here" too.

There are three main ways to form a small group:

**1. Geography.**

Participation will include current church members who live closest to the group's location. In addition, the group will seek God's Spirit to reach out to non-participants who live nearby (neighbors).

The content of such a group is most often shaped along obvious spiritual lines, but not necessarily.

**2. Hobbies and personal interests.**

The group can be established across geographical boundaries as a meeting place for people interested in things like cars or motorcycles, horses, hiking, boating, cycling, music, art or literature. The elements of the Christian faith are not hidden, but they may be subtle at first, and their presence grows with the Spirit's guidance and as participants express their interest.

**3. Living situation and needs.**

The group can be established across geographical boundaries as a place of fellowship for commonly identifiable people such as singles, divorcees, youth or young adults, young parents, single mothers, displaced people, retirees, cultural or ethnic sub-groups, recovering drug addicts or victims of certain illnesses. The elements of Christian faith in the small group will be shaped according to the Spirit's best judgment and guidance, drawing inspiration from those who express an interest or choose to participate.

What kind of small group do you think you should create or belong to? Would it be a group formed on the basis of (a) geography, (b) personal hobbies and interests, or (c) life situation and needs? Why or why not?

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For the group you lead or participate in, do you think direct spiritual content should be (a) prominent, (b) subtle, or (c) something in between? subtle, or (c) something in between? Please explain.

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**Time, time and half a time**

**How long should a small group meeting last?** Good question, and here's an answer: ***90 minutes maximum***. The exception is meetings based on activities that correspond to an interest in subjects such as hobbies, sports or music. Even in these cases, it's important to respect the participants' timetables and have clear agreements on duration.

Again, 90 minutes maximum. It could be less, maybe an hour, but it should never be more. *Start on time*, whatever the audience. And finish on time. It's up to the presenters to make sure. Also let participants know that if they have to leave early for any reason, they should feel free.

**What about refreshments**? Keep them simple, healthy and inexpensive. Water, fruit juice or a hot drink, cookies, cheese, fruit, etc. You get the idea. You know what I mean. Avoid the trap of getting fancy, as refreshments will become a burden.

*Prepare refreshments 15 minutes before the start of the meeting* and inform participants that they can nibble during the meeting if they wish. Finally (and most importantly), put the refreshments away 10 to 15 minutes after the end of the meeting. This signals that it's time for guests to leave.

If you're a guest, leave! Don't linger, *unless* you're specifically invited to stay longer for a particular purpose such as heartwork or prayer.

**Seasons and the division of seasons**

***How many weeks should a small group "season" last?*** For reasons of continuity, a group should meet at least once a week, preferably in the same place.

Some congregations have found suggesting small-group series of at least seven weeks and no more than 10 weeks. Make your decision based on your best judgment, calendar details and the Spirit's inspiration.

At the end of the season, the group, if it wishes, can take a break for an agreed period - perhaps three to six weeks, or perhaps a little longer if necessary to cover an important vacation period.

Suggestion: Avoid a "democratic", time-consuming process for deciding how long a group should run and how many weeks it should break. It's better for leaders to seek prior input from participants, use common sense and good judgment, and propose precise deadlines.

If group members don't have a problem with the proposed times (understanding that it's a proposed time (understanding that it's difficult to get 100% agreement), simply accept the proposal.

**Format selection**

The exact format needs to be chosen carefully and prayerfully. The format depends largely on the type of group and the background of the p a r t i c i p a n t s .

Here's a format suitable for a geographic group with adult participants who are either attuned to the Christian faith, or at least open to its style and possibilities. Note that the order of points 2 to 5 can be modified.

***1. Icebreaker***. Don't forget anything "cheesy", but spend some time de-stressing and bonding. Write up an example approach (perhaps a good question) . . . .

***2. The Word***. A time to focus on one or two clear and powerful verses (or a gospel story), chosen to meet the real needs of the group.

Write an example here. . . .

***3. Prayer.*** Use the selected Bible text as a springboard. Prayer can be planned or spontaneous, depending on the group. Detect participants' readiness to pray; respect any lack of availability.

***4. Witnessing, encouragement, ministry.*** Opportunity to affirm and uplift each other and to provide or plan ministry for specific needs within or outside the group. Important: Focus on ministry and encouragement; ask for needs to be expressed in one or two sentences.

***5. Worship.*** Song, praise, adoration, prayers of praise. Make sure it's all about God! For example, choose songs of praise to God, not just about God.

Now... ... Think about your group, and allocate minutes to each of the five components. The total should not exceed 90 minutes.

1. \_\_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_\_ 3. \_\_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_\_ 5. \_\_\_\_\_\_

Total \_\_\_\_\_\_

**Details, details...**

A good small-group leader-we can all be "good" leaders with guidance and the anointing of the Spirit-will be attentive to the small physical details that can make a big spiritual difference.

***Proximity***. Do the room and seating arrangements allow for a sense of intimacy and face-to-face contact? Are people seated at a comfortable distance without being too far apart? Are everyone seated at roughly the same level - none too low, none too high?

***Environment.*** Avoid visual and auditory disturbance as far as possible. This means turning off the TV, radio or any other music, muted ringtones and cell phones, adjusted blinds, adequate lighting, windows to minimize noise from neighbors or traffic, pets locked away elsewhere. Give 100 percent to the group!

And the temperature - just for participants. Fresh air? General order? (Don't think you have to be perfect when it comes to order, especially if you have children. If you can give yourself 80%, that's already a good mark).

At night, don't forget lighting for safety and a friendly welcome.

**Group growth**

**Six keys to growth**

**1. Intercession with God - prayer.**

**2. Trust in God - confidence.**

**3. An evangelistic mindset - an attitude of reaching out as the Spirit leads.**

**4. Excellent communication - with current and potential participants.**

**5. Basic organization and thoughtful preparation - attention to detail.**

**6. Honest self-assessment - willingness to adapt and make corrections.**

**The principle of multiplication**

- It's not for nothing that we speak of "cellular" groups. What do cells do? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

- Consider this: "If the majority of Christians in a church were integrated into small groups of about six members, if each of these groups won a new person to Christ every year, the size of the church would double in this way in five years!" (Guide to Implementing Natural Church Development, p. 98.)

- It all depends on our attitude. If we don't expect growth, or radiance, then our expectations will come true! But here's the truth: regardless of appearances, obstacles, setbacks or apparent results, we must pray for, prepare for, work for and anticipate the growth God chooses to grant. Am I personally ready to adopt this attitude by faith? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

- First question. Am I ready, in my group, to continually open up to new members? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

- Second question... ... Am I willing for the format and content to be shaped, to some extent, as if new members were present, so that we are always ready to welcome new members the Lord may bring? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

- Third question... ... Am I ready to support the future division of my group, in order to establish a new group that can grow? (It's hard to split up!) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

- Question four ... . Am I ready to give full weight to all four objectives - discipleship, awareness, leadership and evangelism? What is my weak point, in which I could become strong? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**How many people, maximum?**

The ideal group size is eight to ten people, although it takes some time to reach this size, and a smaller number can be greatly blessed. The maximum is 12 people. If a group regularly accommodates 12 or more people, it absolutely must do what cells do!

**A better way to divide ...**

Some groups may choose to split in two when they reach maximum participation. But there's a better method that involves a little less pain. When the time is near, identify a small number of "pioneers" within the group who would be willing, according to the Spirit's inspiration, to leave the group and create a new one. The whole group blesses these people, prays for them, mandates them. Each group then pursues its own particular ministry, following God's call.

**Developing a corporate strategy**

What is a corporate strategy? Nothing complicated or strange. Simply plans and actions designed to make the small group effective in the department.

These plans and actions must emanate primarily from the small group itself, not from the congregation as a whole. Each individual group has the privilege of praying and developing its own unique approach to ministry.

Who should we try to reach? What's the best way to reach them? Where is God at work around us, and how can we participate? How can we exercise our ministry outside group work hours, through special activities such as social gatherings with guests? How can we make our personal witness more conscious and deliberate in everyday life? These are just some of the questions that can help us develop a ministry strategy.

As soon as we start thinking about plans and actions, the demons of time, responsibility, work and energy come rushing back! We sigh and say, "We're already doing so much and juggling so many necessities. How can we do more?"

This is where it's important to relax! While we are privileged to find specific opportunities in ministry that require time and energy, the vast majority of our effectiveness rests on this wonderful but terribly neglected principle... ...

**Christian witness is not just what we do in our extra time. More importantly, it's who we are in the daily course of our lives. Ninety percent of our opportunities for Christ are in our natural spheres of influence in our neighborhood, at work or school, in the community, while traveling, while shopping, at church and in our small group.**

**When we understand this principle and put it into action, we no longer exhaust ourselves trying to "create light". Instead, we appreciate and grow the light Christ has put within us, and we almost constantly pray and seek opportunities to "let the light shine".**

Yes, there are ministry opportunities that take time and require a conscious commitment. But there are also many "ordinary" opportunities that can be integrated with little extra time or effort into our daily lives. A phone call triggered by the Spirit. An e-mail sent to encourage someone. A card sent in thanks. A helping hand. A quick house call. A booklet offered to a co-worker. A question to the water cooler: "I've noticed you're not as cheerful as usual. Is there anything I could pray for?". The invitation from the other side of the fence: "At the moment, we meet once a week for a good time and a simple discussion about the Christian faith. Would you like to join us next Tuesday?

Again, each group should pray and discuss a ministry strategy. But this strategy can be simple. Spreading Christ is first and foremost a matter of attitude and conscious attention. The small group is the ideal place to foster attitude and take time for conscious attention.

**The group leader ... a facilitator, a servant**

The group leader is called by God to exercise leadership that is radically different from a "CEO-President-Preacher-Teacher" role. The group leader is a facilitator, communicator, pray-er, friend, servant and shepherd-pastor.

Think about each of these six descriptions.

Choose the two you like best and comment on them.

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**The natural place**

**The small group is "the natural place for Christians to learn to serve others inside and outside the group - with their spiritual gifts."-** Natural Church Development, p.32

**Serving Christ in my sphere of influence ... ... how groups develop**

**Reread the important principle of Christian witness on the previous page (the two bold paragraphs). Write your own one-sentence version of this principle here - make it personal.**

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**Spheres of influence - friendship evangelism**

A sphere of influence is an area of life in which I am naturally present, known and active. Virtually all of us have **three types of spheres** that arise from our natural circumstances. For each of these three types of sphere, write down a few names of people you could influence for Christ.

1. **Kinship ..**. ... family members, relatives and close friends.

2. **Community ...** acquaintances, neighbors, passers-by, work colleagues, classmates, service personnel such as your mechanic or hairdresser.

3. **Interest groups...** connections established through common interests (e.g. fishing, hiking, music, worship; church can be included here).

Volunteering in the community is a way for Christians to be "salt and light" and develop their sense of humor.

Community volunteering is a way for Christians to be "salt and light" and develop meaningful relationships outside the church. Consider volunteering short-term in a group, or longer-term individually. short-term in a group, or longer-term individually. In New Zealand, an excellent resource is www.volunteernow.org.nz.

**Proximity spheres - how far? how far? ... in search of researchers**

Proximity spheres are a way of identifying people belonging to one of three types of sphere - kinship, community or interest groups - based on how close or far they are. It's not primarily a question of physical distance, but of the quality of the relationship and the frequency with which I can reasonably be in contact with these people. For example, I may be "closer" to someone in one of my interest groups than to someone close to me who lives down the street.

1. ***Immediate sphere*** . . personal connection for at least 45 minutes a week - usually less than 10 people.

2. ***Circulating sphere*** . . intermittent contact, often impersonal, sometimes significant - up to 200 people.

3. ***Potential sphere...*** unlimited; infinite possibilities thanks to the Holy Spirit, prayer and "coincidences".

***Think about*** *the people in each sphere of closeness in your life.* ***Pray*** *that you will be open to the Spirit's guidance regarding the possibility of increasing connection with one person in particular, while decreasing contact with someone else.* ***Believe*** *that God can and will use you to help a "seeker" grow closer to Christ as Savior and Lord.* ***Seek to*** *move from superficial to deep conversation, whenever you are in contact with people in your sphere of influence.*

**Protect a group**

**Pioneers on the move**

Working in small groups is pioneering work. It's about breaking new ground, creating new paths for Christ. This work can be extremely rewarding, but it can also encounter its share of dangers. Here's a list of potential dangers you can think of that any small group may face. . . .

1 .\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

2 .\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

3 .\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

4 .\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

5 .\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**The apprentice (trainee)**

Each group should have not only a leader, but also an "apprentice" or trainee. The apprentice is a leader in training, and someone who can take over if the leader is unavoidably absent.

The apprentice can also provide valuable assistance. For example, he can take notes on each meeting - who was present, who was absent, what points were raised for follow-up, what particular prayer needs or answers were shared (someone else can ask the apprentice to take notes on the meeting). (Someone else could be asked to do this, but it's a task that could be considered for an apprentice). The apprentice could also be considered as a volunteer and community involvement coordinator.

Can the apprentice be the manager's spouse? Yes, it's possible. This could be an advantage. A disadvantage would arise if the husband and wife had an unavoidable scheduling conflict.

If you are a manager or potential manager, enter the name of your apprentice (or potential apprentice) here:

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**About children...**

Are children welcome at group meetings? Generally speaking, yes! It can be a burden for parents to arrange childcare - and a reason not to come. Group members who wish to do so can take turns looking after the children in another room. This is not just babysitting, but a simple activity that doesn't require much preparation: songs, Bible games, a Christian video or just good conversation. The children can join the adults first to break the ice.

**Pitfalls to avoid**

Ideally, a small group includes non-Christians, new Christians and mature Christians. There are pitfalls, but leaders and participants can watch out for and avoid them. Ten pitfalls to avoid... ...

1. neglecting *deadlines* - starting and finishing on time.

2. using *language that is* strange, exclusive or offensive to guests - for example, names, sexism, acronyms, religious clichés.

3. *Embarrassing* a participant - for example, asking someone to pray in the group (or assuming that the person will pray) without knowing whether that person is ready and willing to do so.

4. *Condemn* a guest's personal beliefs or behavior, either directly or by implication. (We can let the Word expose sin, and there's room to hold each other accountable by agreement, but it's not our place to judge or condemn personally.)

5. a compelling need to be right and correct everything - or simply *to dominate* the discussion.

6) Allow a brief time of concentration on the Word to turn into a real Bible study, or a brief time of prayer to *turn into* an extended prayer meeting. (Although these elements are important, they are not usually the aim of cell groups).

7. descend into *argumentation* or doctrinal debate, or enter into politics or pet subjects.

8. *Criticize* your church or any other church.

9. *Assuming* things that might be questioned, for example that a newcomer already accepts the Bible as God's Word, or that he knows how to find Genesis in the Bible.

10. *Spoil* the desired tone of the group by preliminary interactions tainted by tasteless humor or negative conversation - set the desired tone from the outset.

**Difficult task**... ... Identify one or two of the traps that could pose a problem for you! How will you manage your own risk of falling into these traps?

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**An even more difficult task**... ... If you are or will be in charge of a group, how will you react if participants start to fall into some of these traps? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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**About the success ....**

* Success is not our problem - it's God's problem! "Every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).
* Our task is to do what is right and best - to be faithful and wise in following God's leading and seeking the lost.
* Remember that many of God's great servants had to wait patiently for the harvest - but the harvest has come.
* Jesus' ministry, at the time of his death, looked like a disaster! But with the outpouring of the Spirit and the empowerment of the apostles, everything changed.
* One of the reasons why success sometimes eludes us is that we tend to take all the credit. When we are completely willing to give God the glory, He can more easily spread His blessing.
* We must let God determine success in His own way. Our systems and calculations can get in the way.

**There's help! Resources for you.**

- Joel Comiskey, How to Lead a GREAT Cell Group

Meeting (Cell Group Resources™, Houston, Texas; Copyright © 2001 by Joel Comiskey). Practical and easy to understand, full of good advice and ideas. At the end, see the list of additional resources.

- Joel Comiskey, Home Cell Group Explosion (Cell

Group Resources™, Houston, Texas; Copyright © 2002 by Joel Comiskey). Excellent description of what it takes for a group to be truly evangelical. A bit more academic than the first book, but easy to read.

- Kurt W. Johnson, Successful Small Groups: From Theory to Reality (Copyright © 2011 by Review & Herald® Publishing Association). Outstanding advice on approach, dynamics and methods, with an emphasis on the Holy Spirit and prayer.

**Rain gauge**

**A qualitative assessment (rather than a quantitative tool)**

**Group name/location : \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date**

**A - Structure ... rate each statement from 1 to 5, from "Not at all" to "Absolutely, yes".**

1. participants know where and when to meet, who to contact and what to expect \_\_\_\_\_

2. group meetings start and finish on time \_\_\_\_\_

3. physical environment (e.g. lighting, temperature, seating, quietness) is good \_\_\_\_\_

4. the group has an "apprentice" or trainee - an efficient assistant and a leader in training \_\_\_\_\_

5. keeps meetings on track, avoiding distractions and domination \_\_\_\_\_

6. refreshments (optional) are a blessing, not a burden or distraction, at group meetings \_\_\_\_\_

7. children are well looked after at group meetings \_\_\_\_\_

8. strong communication between members and with potential participants \_\_\_\_\_

**B - Format ... rate each statement from 1 to 5, from "Not at all" to "Absolutely, yes".**

1. the format is likely to attract and retain new people, including those who do not attend church \_\_\_\_\_

2. the format includes the four key elements of communion, the Word, prayer and ministry \_\_\_\_\_

3. content helps members grow in their love for Christ and become disciples for him \_\_\_\_\_

4. joy and laughter are allowed and encouraged in group meetings \_\_\_\_\_

5. individual affirmation and encouragement are common in group meetings \_\_\_\_\_

6. empowerment and gentle questioning are appropriately present in group meetings.

\_\_\_\_\_

**C - Interaction . . rate each statement from 1 to 5, from "Not at all" to "Absolutely" .**

1. the group listens to participants' real needs and questions \_\_\_\_\_

2. the group responds to the needs of participants, on the spot or as part of the follow-up \_\_\_\_\_

3. group members are transparent and open about their needs and personal development \_\_\_\_\_

4. when conflict or discomfort arises, it is dealt with promptly and spiritually \_\_\_\_\_

5. the group creates social opportunities outside normal meetings and invites guests to these meetings \_\_\_\_\_

**D - Growth . . rate each statement from 1 to 5, from "Not at all" to "Absolutely, yes".**

1. the group has a strategy of continuous ministry - some plans and actions for growth \_\_\_\_\_

2. attendees are sensitive and welcoming to guests, especially those who do not attend church \_\_\_\_\_

3. the manager seems to adopt a prayerful approach to preparation and facilitation \_\_\_\_\_

4. group leaders and key members often talk about how to influence others towards Christ \_\_\_\_\_

5. key members seem to pray and watch over souls, inside and outside meetings \_\_\_\_\_

6. group members use and develop their ministry gifts inside and outside the group \_\_\_\_\_

7. group members fully accept that one of the group's objectives is to divide and multiply according to God's will \_\_\_\_\_

8. participants understand their spheres of influence and seek out souls in these spheres \_\_\_\_\_

**Any additional comments ...**