

Think BIG

Think Small Groups

Building Christian Community

David Cox

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INTRODUCTION

You've had a long, hard day, you are tired and hungry, but you are nearly home. You are looking forward to a good meal and the chance to relax, when suddenly the train you are travelling on shudders to a standstill, or the motorway traffic in front of you grinds to a halt. After half an hour, you have hardly moved at all, and home begins to seem a very long way away.

Most likely you don't have to imagine what I have just described, because it's happened to you personally - maybe many times. It's difficult to be patient in such situations, isn't it? After all, railways and motorways were designed to reduce the time we take to get home, not increase it. So even now a lot of time and money is being spent on research to discover what can be done to improve the transport system, because everyone agrees - we can't carry on like this. Especially as we prepare for the twenty-first century.

Sounds like the church?

I wonder - have you found yourself thinking similar thoughts about the church recently? If I am not mistaken, many Adventists are frustrated with what feels very much like a travel delay in the church. This movement started out well. Organisation and structures were set in place and programmes were developed to quickly spread the three angels' message around the world. And there's no doubt about it - what God has accomplished through this church in years gone by is quite remarkable. How the movement has grown and spread world-wide is wonderful.

However, according to expectations, God's work on earth should be finished by now, and Jesus should have come. But we're still here, and in some countries it seems that we're hardly moving forward at all. In fact, if anything, the challenge we face is bigger now than it ever was, even in terms of the sheer numbers of people who either have not heard the Gospel or do not understand it.

Yet, at the same time, the opportunities for sharing the Good News are also greater now than they have ever been. While around the world many countries which were closed to Christianity are now open, there is also a new interest in spiritual things in countries like Britain which for so many years have been resistant to the Gospel. There are more Christians (and Adventists) than ever before; we now have a world-wide radio network (AWR), satellite evangelism, the Internet, and other methods of communication available to us which previous generations did not have. And behind all this, we have the promise of the power of the Holy Spirit, to move us forward. So why aren't we going faster?

What will it take to move us from where we are now - almost home - to where God wants us to be, in heaven with Him, with His work on earth finished? Is there anything we can do that we are not doing?

Time for a gear-change

In recent years there have been many encouraging signs that God is preparing His church and clearing the way for an unprecedented move forward that will take us

through the last part of the journey and home to the promised land. Elton Trueblood, changing the traffic and travel metaphor slightly, suggests there is also something we can do:

“Now, after more than three centuries, we can, if we will, change gears again. Our opportunity for a big step lies in opening the ministry to the ordinary Christian in much the same manner that our ancestors opened Bible reading to the ordinary Christian. To do this means, in one sense, the inauguration of a new Reformation, while in another it means the logical completion of the earlier Reformation in which the implications of the position taken were neither fully understood nor loyally followed.”¹

Maybe the solution to the “traffic jam in the church” syndrome is more simple than we think. Maybe it’s time to change gear. To actually do what we have talked of doing for some time now, namely “opening the ministry to the ordinary Christian.” The question is, how?. This manual was written with the conviction that a large part of the answer is to be found in small group ministry.

Small-group potential

I believe, along with many others, that there is almost unlimited potential for the growth of the church in Christ-centred, Spirit-led, well organised, and intentional small group ministry. I realise, of course, that the term “small groups” is not new to most of us. House groups and cottage meetings have been part of the church for decades. However, the way small groups have developed in recent years and the way God is using them in growing numbers of congregations **is** new, and very exciting. One can only guess at what might happen to the Seventh-day Adventist Church worldwide if small groups were given their proper place everywhere!

I am not suggesting that small groups offer a magic formula for completing the Gospel commission, spreading unity and love in the church, and leading us individually to spiritual maturity. I am simply suggesting that small groups are a divinely ordained means which can help us to achieve these goals.

One might wish that small groups would develop naturally out of warm and loving relationships already thriving in the church, and some groups might actually start that way. In the real world, however, small groups are needed to bring people - Christians and non-Christians - close enough to each other in order for warm and loving relationships to develop and for the sharing of the Gospel to take place.

The purpose of this manual

Through this manual I have simply attempted to provide a very brief introduction to small groups, and an overview of what they do, how they work, and how best to introduce them into the life of a local Adventist congregation. In the process I have made frequent references to a number of excellent and more detailed small-group guide-books by other authors, which are available through Adventist Book Centres and Christian book-shops. I recommend them to you.

¹ Elton Trueblood, *Your Other Vocation* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952) 32, quoted in William Beckham, *The Second Reformation* (Houston, TX: TOUCH Publications, 1995), 15.

Although this is a manual, may I suggest that you read it prayerfully? It may be that God is inviting you to serve as the leader of a small group, or to develop new skills if you are already leading one. If you are not called to be a leader, certainly He wants you to enjoy the blessings that can only be found by getting involved with a small group. He also wants to use you to bless others; and many of the spiritual gifts He has given for this purpose are most effective in the context of a small group.

The challenge of big things to come

One of the most challenging books I have read in recent years is Russell Burrill's book, "Revolution in the Church." Consider this stirring extract:

*"Imagine a church on fire with the power of the Holy Spirit. What would such a church look like? Would it look like **your** Seventh-day Adventist church?*

"In my mind's eye I can picture such a church.....the members are alive with the gospel of Christ. Their services are not dead formalism, but are alive with the Holy Spirit's power as members share week by week what Jesus has been doing in their lives. Each Sabbath the church is rejoicing over new people who have come to know Christ through the ministry of the laity. In this imaginary church, every member has a ministry. There are no idlers in this church, for to be a Christian in this church means to be involved in loving ministry for the Master. Love, joy and peace are seen in the members of this church as they reflect the character of Christ to their community. And the community responds...."²

It sounds like a description of the New Testament church after Pentecost, doesn't it? That was a church of big things - big vision, big experience of God, and big results. There is good reason to believe that a modern Pentecost with results at least equal to those of the first, could be just around the corner.

As the time for Christ's return draws near, God has unprecedented things in mind for His church. Even now, He is working in remarkable ways to move us closer to where He wants us to be in order for us to play our part in His plan. Fresh winds of the Spirit are blowing, bringing renewal and change, preparing us for the big things He has planned for us. And all the signs are that small group ministry is going to play a large part in the working out of those plans.

Please read on, and I hope you will agree. **To think BIG, it makes sense to think SMALL GROUPS.**

*David Cox
Department of Personal Ministries
South England Conference*

² Russell Burrill, *Revolution in the Church* (Fallbrook, CA: Hart Research Center, 1993), 21.

Confession of a Reformer

I know no other place under heaven, where I can have some [friends] always at hand, of the same judgement, and engaged in the same studies; persons who are awakened into a full conviction, that they have but one work to do upon earth; who see at a distance what that one work is, even the recovery of a single eye and a clean heart; who, in order to do this, have, according to their power, absolutely devoted themselves to God, and follow after their Lord, denying themselves, and taking up their cross daily. To have even a small number of such friends constantly watching over my soul, and administering, as need is, reproof or advice with all plainness and gentleness, is a blessing I know not where to find in any part of the kingdom. (John Wesley)³

³ *Journal of John Wesley*, December 10, 1734, quoted in Jimmy Long (co-ordinator) *Small Group Leaders' Handbook* (Downers Grove, ILL: Intervarsity Press), 29,30.

Chapter One

SMALL GROUPS - PART OF GOD'S PLAN

“Let us be concerned for one another, to help one another to show love and to do good. Let us not give up the habit of meeting together, as some are doing. Instead, let us encourage one another all the more, since you see that the Day of the Lord is coming nearer.” (Hebrews 10:24,25 GNB)

Small groups are nothing new in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Our weekly Sabbath School classes are small groups of people. Our decision-making is done by small group committees. We conduct Revelation seminars in small groups. And we do a lot of other things through small groups as well. But as we “see that the Day of the Lord is coming nearer,” it may well be that God is inviting us to look at small groups in a new and radically different way.

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. Now, as we approach the end of time and prepare for the second coming of Jesus, Scripture urges us to focus on the building of relationships that are possible only through small groups. Consider the following:

- ◆ The family unit was the first and most important small group ordained by God. As far as many individual families might be today from His ideal because of sin, the family is still the backbone of society world-wide.
- ◆ 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 more⁴) 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 them; it served as a model for the church of the future in which they would be leaders; but 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)

⁴ On the “600,000 men” mentioned in Exodus 12:37, see Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1958), 334,410.

- ◆ 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 centre 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.

- ◆ Small groups have played an important part in reformation and revival. Howard Snyder maintains that "*virtually every major movement of spiritual renewal in the Christian church has been accompanied by a return to the small group and the proliferation of such groups in private homes for Bible study, prayer and discussion of the faith.*"⁵

One such movement was the remarkable revival which took place in England under the leadership of John and Charles Wesley. John Wesley wrote that "*no circuit (district of churches) ever did or ever will flourish unless there are small groups in the large society (congregation).*"⁶ His twelve-member house-groups became the basis of the later "class-meetings" of the Methodist church, which in

⁵ Howard Snyder, *The Problem of Wineskins* (Downers Grove, ILL: Intervarsity Press, 1975), 164.

⁶ Quoted by John Mallison, *The Small Group Leader* (Bletchley, England: Scripture Union, 1996), 1.

turn may have influenced the development of “cottage meetings” and other forms of small groups in the Adventist church.

- ◆ The Seventh-day Adventist Church began with a strong emphasis on small-groups,⁷ partly because of its Methodist roots and partly because of the inspired counsel of Ellen White.⁸ For example, during Ellen White’s 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.⁹ She subsequently wrote: “*The formation of small companies as a basis of Christian effort has been presented to me by One who cannot err.*”¹⁰
- ◆ 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.
- ◆ In England, approximately one million individuals¹¹ are now involved in Christian small groups, which the Holy Spirit appears to be using to win unbelievers to faith, revitalise the spiritual lives of individuals and congregations, and focus attention on the study of the Bible.
- ◆ In churches where small groups operate effectively:
 - members grow more quickly in spiritual maturity
 - fewer leave by the back door
 - a deeper lever of care and concern is experienced for church and community
 - better cross-cultural understanding exists among members if the church is a multi-cultural community
 - spiritual gifts are more easily identified and developed
 - people with no church background are more easily won to faith in Christ

It is clear, then, that small groups have always been part of God’s plan for men and women, even if they have not always functioned as He intended them to. Indeed, before we end this chapter, let us not miss one very striking detail.

As the plan of salvation has unfolded through human history, three events stand out above all the others in their importance. They are:

⁷ For further information on the place of small groups in the early Adventist church, see Russell Burrill, *The Revolutionized Church of the 21st Century* (Fallbrook, CA: Hart Research Center, 1997)

⁸ For a selection of statements by Ellen White on small groups, see Appendix C.

⁹ For additional comments on Ellen White’s exposure to this and other small group situations, see Kurt Johnson, *Small Group Outreach* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1991), 18,19.

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies, Vol 5* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press), 21,22

¹¹ Peter Cotterell, *Small Groups, Big Results* (Eastbourne, UK: Kingsway Publications Ltd., 1993), 5.

- The Exodus
- The First Advent
- 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, guide us in organising them, and help us to experience their full potential

Transformed

We met in the basement of Toby-Kendall Hall. The T.V. was turned off, and we gathered in a circle on the run-down couches and torn-up carpet. We were a mixed group of new students, seniors, education majors, music majors, quiet souls and outgoing personalities. A Bible lay on each person's lap opened to the book of Romans. As we read and studied God's Word, the truths that we saw transformed us as individuals and as a group. Sometimes we struggled to understand, and sometimes we sat in awe. But each time we met God.¹²

¹² Patty Pell, *Small Group Leaders' Handbook* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 53.

Chapter Two

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)

There are small groups, and there are small groups. They can have either a positive or negative influence on the church.. Small groups have brought new life to many congregations, and hindered the growth of others. Research indicates that 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
- c) operate relationally

Let’s take a closer look at these characteristics of healthy, Christian small groups.

a) Small groups are an essential part of the church’s life and structure.

Many Adventist churches have “tried” small groups, with varying degrees of success. Unfortunately, even the most outstanding success stories have usually been relatively short-lived - after the initial success those small groups have stagnated or died. One reason for this failure is that small groups have usually functioned as an optional extra, tacked on to an already busy church programme, formed to serve a single specific purpose such as evangelism, nurture, prayer or Bible study.

In order for small groups to succeed and be truly effective, however, 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.

While different “sub-groups” can be formed to serve different purposes, the primary small group itself should function as an on-going, basic Christian community.

Elders’ sub-group		Support sub-group (e.g. Mums and toddlers)
Committee sub-group (AYS, Worship, Sabbath School, etc.)	Primary Small Group (Basic Christian Community)	Outreach sub-group (e.g. Literature ministry)
Deacons’ sub-group		Teaching sub-group (e.g. Baptismal class)

Any congregation which develops a small-group network of this kind, which is essential to the church's life and structure, could be described as a small-group church, rather than simply a church with small groups. The groups become the church's principal ministry base, and should be supervised by the pastor or a senior member of the pastoral team.

b) Small groups have a growth mentality

A small group is not just a small number of people meeting together. It is a small number of people (usually between 5-12) who meet together with the specific intention to grow. One particular church in Chicago which grew from just a small number to a membership of over fourteen thousand in less than twenty years, and presently baptises hundreds of "un-churched" converts every year, now operates a network of more than a thousand small groups throughout the city. This is their small group statement of mission:

*"To connect people relationally in groups (four to ten individuals) for the purpose of growing in Christlikeness, loving one another, and contributing to the work of the church, in order to glorify God and make disciples of all nations."*¹³

This statement reflects the thinking of countless growing congregations in which, almost without exception, small groups play a vital part in the growing process. The statement also indicates that small groups function to produce growth in at least three areas:

i. Growth in our relationship with God. Christian discipleship consists, first and foremost, of a relationship of trust, love and obedience toward a Person, rather than agreement with a set of doctrines. One reason why we need small groups is that our personal relationship with God grows not only through private prayer, Bible study and devotion, but also through interaction on a personal, intimate level, in Bible study, prayer and worship.

Small group ministry is based on the Bible's teaching that the church (God's people) is the body of Christ (Ephesians 1:22,23), and that where a small number gather in Jesus' name, He is with them (Matthew 18:20). If Christ is the focus of small group life, the aim of the group should be to grow together, as well as individually, in Him.

ii. Growth in our relationships with each other. We might like to think that people who meet in a group in order to grow spiritually, would naturally grow in their sense of fellowship with each other. It doesn't necessarily work that way. While there is some truth in the saying that "those who pray together, stay together," we know that human relationships are not quite as simple as that.

¹³ Bill Donahue, *Leading Life-Changing Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 21.

Our religious convictions and spiritual concerns come from deep within us. As Adventists we feel passionately about those things which are important to us, such as “Bible truth” and “Bible standards” of lifestyle. From the beginning, we have been a message-driven movement, and we are anxious not to lessen the importance of our message by embracing too wide a spectrum of opinion on certain points of doctrine or issues of lifestyle.

Not surprisingly, in defending our teachings and upholding our standards, we have sometimes been harsh and judgemental toward those who differ with us - even our fellow Adventists - and some have been hurt as a result. Many have left the church simply because relationships have been broken by differences of opinion over doctrine. Others have been discouraged from joining us.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Small groups are committed to building positive, deep and lasting relationships between individuals through a more relational approach to Bible study and prayer. This approach, which is discussed in more detail later in this manual, enables both the vertical relationship (between ourselves and God) and the horizontal relationship (between ourselves and others) to develop simultaneously without compromising what we consider to be important and true.

Jesus Himself gave the spirit of the law priority over the letter of the law, and explained that all revealed truth only has meaning and value when it is understood in terms of our relationships with God and with each other (Matthew 5:21-48; 22:40). So group members who strongly disagree with each other - two Christians, perhaps, or a Christian and a non-Christian - can still develop a strong, positive relationship with each other, while they each endeavour to develop their relationship with God.

iii. Growth of small groups through evangelism. The numerical growth of the church should be a natural concern of every Christian and therefore every small group. Built in to our thinking should be the need to share with others the experience we enjoy, and the desire to be used by the Holy Spirit to lead them to faith in Christ. As suggested by the empty chair in the small group logo, it is the prayer and purpose of small groups to grow in size and number. The principle is that the congregation will grow as groups grow and multiply.

c) Small groups operate relationally

Most if not all Adventist church meetings are based on two styles, or a combination of the two: preaching and teaching. In preaching, the speaker addresses the congregation, while the congregation listens: any response is usually limited to indications of agreement or approval, such as “Amen.” In teaching, the speaker - who does most of the talking - addresses the “students,” who are encouraged to respond with comments or questions addressed to the teacher. Bible study groups, Sabbath School classes, seminars, cottage meetings, etc., have generally followed this teaching style.

Small groups, in order to be effective in all three areas of growth described above, endeavour to follow a relational style which enables members of the group to interact with each other as equals. The following diagram illustrates the differences in these three styles:

Diagrams added at Stanborough Press
(See page 24 in book)

While it could be said that the main function of preaching is to inspire, and the main function of teaching is to impart information (and we often combine both styles), the main function of relational communication is to build relationships by enabling group members to share their insights, understanding and experience with each other. The role of the group leader is that of facilitator, encouraging all within the group to participate, and to keep the study/discussion within the subject and moving towards a suitable goal. Once the group is familiar and comfortable with this style, the leader will often spend no more time talking than any other member of the group.

Katherine's Story

Katherine lived in Soviet Russia, some years before the collapse of communism. Because she was a Christian, she was transferred with several of her Mennonite friends to a labour camp in Siberia. Living conditions in the barracks were extremely primitive. Her bed was a wooden board covered with a thin layer of straw.

Relatives in Canada succeeded after some time in getting permission for her to visit them. They paid for her ticket and she was given a three-months travel visa, although their plan was for her to defect from Russia and never return. Her arrival in Canada was like Alice arriving in Wonderland. As she travelled in their beautiful cars from one splendid house to another, she could not imagine royalty living in more luxury. She couldn't believe that ordinary people could own so many things.

After several weeks, Katharine's relatives were amazed to hear her say that she couldn't wait to return to her home. She did not wish to remain in Canada. "You can't be serious," they responded. "After all you have told us, why do you want to go back to Siberia?"

Katharine's answer was simple. "I don't think I can explain to you why I want to go back. All I can say is that you have all your things, and your whole life seems to revolve around them. Over there we have nothing, but we have each other. I want to get back to my brothers and sisters in Christ where we live for one other."¹⁴

¹⁴ This story is told in Albert J. Wollan, *God at Work in Small Groups* (London: Scripture Union, 1983), 43,44.

Chapter Three

WHY SMALL GROUPS?

“Then Jesus went up a hill and called to Himself the men he wanted. They came to Him, and He chose twelve....” (Mark 3:13,14 GNB)

Small groups are part of life. The small group of the family unit is still seen by the majority of people as the basis of society. The pub is popular not so much because it sells alcohol but because it provides a place for small groups of friends to meet together. Clubs of all kinds thrive because they bring together small groups of people who share common interests in sport, music, fitness, etc.

Small groups have an important part to play in our new life in Christ also. In fact we can identify three important reasons why we need small-groups in our churches.

- a) They build Christian community
- b) They empower members for ministry
- c) They complement large groups

a) Small groups build Christian community.

If there is one thing people in the modern world yearn for more than anything else, it surely has to be a sense of belonging, a sense of community. As Gilbert Bilezikian explains it so well,

“The silent churning at the core of our beings is the tormenting need to know and be known, to understand and to be understood, to possess and to be possessed, to belong unconditionally and forever without fear of loss, betrayal, or rejection. It is the nostalgia for our primal oneness, the silent sorrowing for paradise lost, the agelong pursuit after the encompassing embrace for which we know we were created. It is the search....for the freedom to be who we really are without shame or pretense, for release and repose in the womb-like safety of unalterable acceptance and of overarching love.”¹⁵

Why do we yearn for this sense of belonging? Because we were created for it, and we cannot truly live without it. But sin has robbed us of it, and in our sinful state we can never experience it. However, as our Saviour, Jesus came to restore what was lost by sin. So much of what Jesus said and did was aimed at re-building Christian community, and the experience of the early church is on record to show that it can happen. Through Christ, we too can once again enjoy the kind of fellowship that God intended for us, both with Himself and with each another.

¹⁵ Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House), 15.

In the modern world, the need for such fellowship is probably greater than it has ever been, even among Christians. Consider the following facts:

- ◆ The traditional family unit, while still popular, is no longer as stable as it once was (42% of marriages in the U.K. now end in divorce, and statistics within the church are not so different to those in society).
- ◆ The average person moves home at least three times during his or her working life.
- ◆ Cities and towns are characterised by racial/cultural diversity which often gives rise to prejudice and distrust.
- ◆ The generation gap between the old and the young is wider than ever.
- ◆ Christians often find that they are the only ones who believe in Christ within the family circle or among friends at work.
- ◆ Denominational loyalty, based on a shared belief in “the message” or a set of doctrines, is no longer seen as important as it once was. Christians now sense the need to be committed to each other in a more personal way.

But isn't every Adventist church a Christian community already? Well, compare your experience of church with the early church described in the book of Acts (2:44-46, 4:32-35, etc.) and decide for yourself. Some of today's congregations provide warmer and more accepting fellowship than others, but most, you will probably agree, still have some way to go. Here are three reasons why:

i. Traditional church services do not lend themselves to developing a strong sense of Christian community. Especially in our larger churches, Sabbath services - which are the only services the majority of members attend - consist of hymns, prayers and sermons, and provide little or no opportunity for members to share their experiences with each other and get to know each other well. Even Sabbath School classes and prayer meetings tend to follow an objective question/answer approach to Bible study and a formal approach to prayer.

ii. Many Sabbath morning congregations are large enough for those who attend to feel part of a crowd of joyful Christians celebrating the grace of God; but they may be too large for them to experience a deep sense of community, which is quite a different thing. If provision is not made on other occasions to help members and friends know and feel that they truly belong to the heart of the Christian community, it is difficult to create that sense of belonging on Sabbath morning in many of our churches.

After all, in the limited time available, we can only communicate meaningfully with a limited number of people. It follows that the larger the congregation, the more impersonal it can become. Just consider the amazing number of communication lines that exist, at least potentially, among relatively small

numbers of people. If everyone could speak to everyone else (except themselves!), the equation would look like this:

Ten people: $10 \times 10 - 10 = 90$ communication lines

One hundred people: $100 \times 100 - 100 = 9,900$ lines

Two hundred and fifty people: $250 \times 250 - 250 = 62,250$ lines

It is true that friends meet to talk in small huddles after service, but even these can create an atmosphere of exclusiveness rather than inclusiveness for those who do not belong to such a circle. Every church needs an all-inclusive small group network to help build true, Christian community.

iii. Either we have never learned or we have forgotten, how to create a sense of community between people who are strangers to each other. Lasting friendships may develop naturally over a period of time between Christians who worship and fellowship with each other each week over a period of time. But we need to recognise that, at least in the modern world, New Testament-style community does not, as a general rule, just “happen” by itself in the average church.

We need the styles and skills of communication that are developed through properly-functioning small groups to facilitate a deeper sense of community among all who share in the church’s fellowship.

The admonition to “love one another.” Jesus taught His disciples to “love one another” as He had loved them (John 13:34). He even went so far as to say that it was their love for each other that would convince everyone else that they were true disciples - and if Jesus said it, it must be true. So we believe it. But do we do it? Even more important, can we do it, and can unbelievers see us doing it, the way we “do church” at the moment? We do our best, but we could do better!

Some “One Another” Texts

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

“Honour 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” (ditto)

“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” (ditto)

In the setting of the weekly church meeting where contact between members as a whole tends to be casual, many of these “one another” verses are difficult to apply. It appears they were intended for a rather different setting where relationships operate at a deeper level. And so they were. Those “one another” admonitions were addressed to the small groups of Christians of which the entire New Testament church consisted. In order for today’s disciples to love one another as Jesus said we should, today’s church also needs a network of small groups that will develop the community in and through which that love can be demonstrated.

b) Small groups empower members for ministry.

We believe the Bible teaching of the priesthood of all believers. We also accept that every believer is a minister of Christ - just as much as a pastor is - called by God to serve Him according to the gifts and abilities He has given them. Why, then, is there still a widespread feeling that the full potential of lay ministry has yet to be unleashed?¹⁶ One reason (and no doubt there are others) could well be that our traditional understanding of lay ministry, and consequently the ministry structure of the local church, is limited.

In the past we have sometimes concluded that if members were not actively involved in the work of the church it was because they were uncommitted, busy, lazy or incapable, or they needed more or better pastors to inspire them. To increase and improve their involvement in church life, we have therefore focused our energies on them: educating them (departmental workshops, Bible classes, etc.); motivating them (incentives, rewards, etc.); making them feel guilty (reporting in public, “What would Jesus do?” sermons, etc.); frightening them (Judgement day sermons, etc.); and improving their pastor/member ratio.

But what if the people are not the real problem? What if the majority of church members are committed, are able, and genuinely do want to serve their Lord effectively, but are restricted in what they can do to help move the church forward by factors outside their control? Lyle Schaller, in his book “*The Change Agent*,” recognises this possibility. He writes:

“Unless there is a change in the direction, value system, and orientation of the organisation, frequently there are severe limitations on what can be accomplished by changes in people or by the addition of new personnel.”¹⁷

If that is true, then trying to get church members to work harder or produce better results within the existing definition and structure of lay ministry, or adding more professional pastors to the Conference payroll is not the solution. Rather, we need to look at the ministry system itself - what we actually mean by lay and professional ministry, and how we might change or improve the way we minister together.

¹⁶ This is the consistent finding of questionnaires, surveys and interviews conducted by the author. It is a “feeling” church members have, perhaps born of guilt, but more likely due to the fact that they do not know what their spiritual gifts are (which many admit) and/or what Christian ministry is.

¹⁷ Lyle E. Schaller, Beckham, *The Change Agent: The Strategy of Innovative Leadership* (Nashville:Abingdon, 1972), 175, quoted in Beckham, *The Second Reformation*, 144.

Here are four ways in which traditional views of the church, its ministry and its beliefs, may have limited the involvement of believers in ministry:

i. The clergy/laity mentality. The pastor is viewed as the real minister, trained and paid for the work he/she does; church members see their role as supporters of his/her ministry. Thus there is a low level of lay participation in certain areas of ministry which are seen to belong to the pastor, such as leading Sabbath worship, preparing new believers for baptism, and visiting church members. The church's priorities and programmes tend to reflect and revolve around those of the pastor. When the pastor is changed, the church's programme likely to change.

Such a mentality makes it difficult for many church members to feel that they have an important part to play in the on-going ministry of the church.

ii. The Adventist church stereotype. Regardless of the size of the congregation, churches are expected to operate certain departments, such as Community Services, Youth, Personal Ministries, and Family Life, through which church members can be involved in ministry. Church meetings also tend to be similar world-wide: Sabbath Schools use the same Bible study materials, worship services follow a predictable outline, even prayer meetings share a common format. All this is as good as far as it goes, but with such a stereotype it is difficult for local churches to build their ministries around the gifts and abilities of their members and the needs of the community.

iii. The importance of the Sabbath. Because Sabbath is so important to us, it is easy to conclude that the most important meetings of the week are Sabbath meetings. Not surprisingly, the main commitment lay members are expected to make is attendance at Sabbath services. As far as ministry is concerned, however, the fact is that lay people tend to be spectators, not ministers, at such meetings, however important those meetings may be for other reasons.

iv. The importance of the church building. A similar problem arises from the importance we place on the church building. For many congregations, the church building has become the centre of ministry, because that is where most programmes and services are conducted. Have we forgotten that the church is not a building nor a programme, but the people of God - wherever they are? With limited time to give to the church, potential lay leaders may be so busy supporting programmes "at the church" that there is no time left for them to fully develop their own ministry.

Clearly, we need to change the way we minister at local church level if we are serious about releasing the huge ministry potential of the laity. Introducing small groups is probably the best way of doing this. While there is no substitute for the Holy Spirit in motivating and empowering the church to do what it does, there is no substitute for the correct system either.

Small group ministry is not just an additional feature to add to the church's already busy programme. It represents a paradigm shift which can effectively empower members for ministry, because it:

- does not recognise the unbiblical distinction between clergy and laity, but creates a positive ministry relationship between pastors and members
- has the potential for making full use of all the gifts God has given to the members of the church
- releases pastors for their special work of training members for ministry
- gives each group the freedom to operate according to its needs
- balances the importance of the Sabbath with the importance of the rest of the week to the life and health of the church
- replaces one centre of ministry (the church building) with many (the church building and members' homes)

For more on this subject, see the section on the development of spiritual gifts through small groups, in chapter four.

c) Small groups complement large groups.

Every week, thousands of people take part in what we might call the "football experience." This experience is made up of two parts: the experience with the crowd at the match itself, and the experience with a small group of fellow supporters before and/or after the game. One provides exhilaration, excitement, opportunity for celebration, and a sense of being part of something big and important. The other provides for an exchange of thoughts and feelings, and serves to inspire or console, in anticipation and reflection of the big event. The two experiences are different but complementary. Both are important.

Christians need large and small gatherings too. We need large gatherings for celebration (Sabbath worship, public evangelism, etc.) and small gatherings for nurture and witness through a more personal sharing of our lives with one another (not simply the Sabbath School class, or the spontaneous meeting together of friends who know each other well and have certain interests in common).

What takes place in small groups is different to what takes place in large groups. Structured, formal congregational meetings serve certain purposes, while less structured, informal gatherings serve others. However excellent the congregational events might be, if a congregation has no organised, intentional and inclusive small group network, it cannot move forward in spiritual and/or numerical growth as it would if it had that network. In fact it might well resemble a rowing boat with one oar instead of two, which goes round in circles more easily than forward in a straight line! It's hard to make progress in certain areas without some kind of small group ministry.

An example of how small groups could help us in a practical way is the way we celebrate the Sabbath. In Scripture the Sabbath is associated with rest. Yet for many Adventists, the Sabbath is one of the busiest days of the week. In some churches the Sabbath is filled with activity from beginning to end, and rest does not feature at all. And think how we use the worship hour: sometimes we use it for anything but

worship, and people go home without an awareness of having been in the presence of God.

The fact is we are trying to do in a congregational setting what we could do much better in a small group setting. And in the process, we probably end up not doing anything very well. So think what a difference small groups would make, even to the Sabbath!

- ◆ The celebration of the Sabbath would be more focused. Small groups can carry the main burden of nurturing, teaching, discipling, witnessing, building relationships, etc., leaving the worship hour free to concentrate on celebrating and inspiring. Burrill's description of the church already quoted on page 3 could become a reality. made up of new believers and friends of church members. It's like this sometimes in some churches. It could be like it all the time in all our churches - with small groups blessed and used by God.
- ◆ Larger congregations would be possible. Multiplying smaller congregations may still be the best way to go. But time has changed things, and most people in countries like Great Britain now live in large towns and cities. There may be a place in the Adventist framework for much larger congregations than we have known before now. And where an effective small-group network is in place, such congregations are possible, and even desirable. According to some church growth experts, there is no maximum limit for the size of a church that is built on small groups. Apart from anything else, large small-group churches do not need a correspondingly large paid pastoral staff.

All things are possible, it seems, when properly organised and operated small groups complement a church's large group ministry. In numerical terms, the world's largest church suggests that the sky is the limit when it comes to the growth of small-group churches. The Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea has the largest congregation in the world with over 800,000 members. Yet the Pastor, Paul Yonggi Cho, claims that his church is not only the largest, but the smallest, because from most members' perspective, their church fellowship is only ten to twenty in number. Members meet for celebration and worship in huge crowds in their stadium-like church building, but during the week 650,000 of them serve the church and are served by it through 55,000 small groups. There is no sense of lost-ness or anonymity when people "go to church" because they know and regularly experience the fact that they belong.¹⁸

The pastor of a large American congregation puts it a different way. He says "We can only be a large church because we know how to be a small church."¹⁹ The quality of

¹⁸ Carl F. George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revel, Division of Baker Book House.), 22.

¹⁹ Peter Cotterell, *Small Groups, Big Results* (Eastbourne, England: Kingsway Publications, 1985), 5.

congregational life can be made what we would like it to be, through small group ministry. And where the quality is good, people will be attracted to it.

One Small Group Makes Three

Annette and John²⁰ began attending church along with their mother, because a relative living abroad recommended the Adventist faith to them. It was a difficult experience for them at first. They were young - about eleven and thirteen years of age; they had never been to church before; they didn't know anyone; and to make matters worse, their father didn't approve. He believed in God, but was not a Christian.

Shortly afterwards, their mother was invited to attend a small group meeting a mile or two from their home. They decided to make it a family affair, so Annette and John attended as well. At first they didn't understand much, but the group was made up of all ages, and everybody seemed to accept everybody else for what they were, even if they did prefer to play games and draw pictures sometimes, so they liked going.

To cut a long and interesting story short, within two years Annette and John, with their mother, were baptised and became members of that church. Like other young people, they had their struggles with their faith - and with the church. But here's the interesting thing.

Now, fifteen years later, Annette and John (both married) and their mother are all living in different countries. But they each run a small group of their own in their homes. They still think about that first small group and what it meant to them, how it helped them to find a place in the church. And because the small group experience is just as important to them now, they want to share it with others.

²⁰ Names and some details of the story have been changed to protect identity of the characters

Chapter Four

WHAT SMALL GROUPS DO

“Go, then, to all peoples everywhere, and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19,20 GNB)

Small groups make disciples. At least, that is the objective, because it is what Jesus commissioned His own disciples to do (Matthew 28:19,20). A disciple, by definition, is a fully committed follower of Christ, so we become disciples from the day we decide to follow Jesus, and we remain disciples throughout our lives. At no point will we ever feel that we measure up to all that we know we ought to be: but at every point we can be fully committed to following Him.

Discipleship includes every area of Christian life, every Christian discipline. A disciple is an apprentice, learning from his teacher by observation and practice. And as part of our own learning and growing experience, we are commissioned to encourage others to join us.

A Disciple is One Who

- *walks with God, enjoys a personal relationship with Jesus and seeks to keep in step with the Holy Spirit,*
- *studies the Word of God, constantly growing in understanding and obedience while endeavouring to apply its teachings to all areas of life, and*
- *responds to Christ’s commission, equipped with the gifts He has given, to make other disciples for Him through a life of witness and service in the community.*

We must remember, however, that becoming a disciple of Jesus and growing in that relationship with Him is not quite the same thing as becoming a member of the church or living as a “good” Christian should, even though discipleship may lead, sooner or later, to church membership. It is possible to believe that the Bible is true, be baptised, attend church regularly and do “missionary work,” and not be a disciple of Jesus. Let’s be sure to put first things first, and keep them there. We need to focus on discipleship!

How can we grow as disciples of Christ? And how can we most effectively encourage others to become His disciples? Small groups can help us in a way that nothing else

can. While personal prayer and Bible study and weekend worship services can help us to grow, by themselves they are not enough. Similarly, while public evangelistic meetings and one-to-one Bible studies often lead people to become disciples, by themselves they are not enough. Small groups have a vital role to play also in helping us grow and leading others to discipleship, simply because of the nature of what they do. While each small group will have its own unique identity and mission, if it operates as it should it will most likely include all of the following:

- a) Bible study
- b) Prayer
- c) Worship
- d) Development of spiritual gifts
- e) Pastoral care
- f) Nurture
- g) Witness

All these elements of church life should be happening at a congregational level already, if a balanced ministry of worship, nurture, fellowship and evangelism is in place. Small groups can help to introduce and maintain the same “disciplines” at a more personal level also, as we shall now see.

a) Bible study is relational, and everyone is involved in it.

It is significant that when “*Serendipity*” Bible study material was first published (in the early years of the modern small group movement), one of the principal needs its author identified and sought to address was the “need for applied Biblical knowledge.” He wrote:

“Christians are crying out for help to apply their Christian faith in an increasingly complex world. Knowing what the Bible says isn’t enough - people want to know how to translate this knowledge into action.”²¹

Relational Bible study attempts not only to lead the group to a better understanding of the Bible’s message, but to encourage every member of the group to relate that message to their personal lives in practical and personal ways. The group asks not only, “What does the Bible say about this subject?” but “What is God saying to us through this Scripture?” Group members are encouraged to identify themselves with the characters and stories of the Bible, recognising where they are and where they want to be in terms of their life’s goals.

As has been explained already (page 9, paragraph ‘c’) small groups are intended to follow a relational style of communication. This means that the contribution of each group member is regarded as valid and important, not because the contribution may be “right” or one that others agree with, but because it reflects where the group member is in terms of experience and understanding. This means that a small group can consist of Christians and non-Christians and still grow in their relationships with God and with each other, despite their differences of opinion.

²¹ Lyman Coleman, *Serendipity Leaders’ Guide* (London: Scripture Union, 1985), 5

While Bible study is fundamental to most if not all small group meetings, subjects vary widely. Themes for study are usually chosen by the group, rather than by the group leader, therefore tend to be relevant to the needs and interests of group members.

Bible study is not limited to doctrine, but includes a wide range of subjects relating to daily life (e.g. parenting, self-esteem, etc.), Christian growth (e.g. coping with discouragement, assurance in Christ, etc), and topics of current interest (e.g. abortion, world events, etc). A wide range of pre-prepared Bible study materials for small groups can be obtained from Christian book-shops, and many new materials are being published each year.²²

When we study the Bible in this way - relating our lives to Scripture and each other, two things are likely to happen:

- a sense of accountability between Christians develops, challenging us to grow in our discipleship, and
- Christianity becomes real, personal and relevant, encouraging others who are present to become disciples.

b) Prayer is natural, spontaneous and personal.

Since small groups are part of God's plan for His church, it is only natural that God's guidance will be sought through prayer while they are being organised, while aims and goals are being formulated, and while friends are being invited to join. But the role of prayer in small group ministry goes much further than this.

Informal prayer can make an enormous contribution to the sense of community which small groups aim to create. It was to small, caring, Christian communities, that John counselled believers to "confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." (I John 5:16) Prayer can also be a powerful form of witness. From his prison cell, Dietrich Bonhoeffer this dual function of prayer when he wrote of the Christian fellowship he enjoyed even while in prison:

*"Intercession is the most promising way to meet our neighbours, and corporate prayer, offered in the name of Christ, the purest form of fellowship."*²³

In some cases a separate prayer time may not be included in early group meetings. For example, groups who aim to reach secular/unchurched people will need to recognise that in the early stages of the group, prayer may cause embarrassment to their guests. In such cases, a short and simple prayer might offered by way of response during the Bible study, or in response to a need mentioned by a member of the group. And of

²² A sample list of materials available can be obtained from the Department of Personal Ministries, 25, St. John's Road, Watford, Herts, WD1 1PY.

²³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (SCM Press), quoted in Mallison, *The Small Group Leader*, 136.

course, the core group members will spend much time in prayer for the group outside of group meetings.

Members of a small group quickly get to know each other, however, and regardless of their background, will soon be comfortable with group prayer as a natural part of each meeting. It is important that the form of prayer fits the informal style of small group meetings. Prayer should be the outflow of the sharing that takes place before and during Bible study, and will consist of thanksgiving and intercession which is closely related to the experiences and needs of group members and their circle of acquaintances.

There is no set time, place or style for prayer in small groups. Prayer may well be offered at the commencement of the Bible study, and a time will usually be given to group prayer after the Bible study, but there is no reason why prayer may not “happen” during the study if there is special need for guidance or thanksgiving.

The appointment of a prayer leader is a good way of ensuring that proper attention is given to the development of the prayer life of a group. The prayer leader’s responsibility is to be aware of the needs of the group, keep a record of prayers answered, and organise the periods dedicated to prayer. The assistant group leader, the host/hostess, or a different person can serve in this role. Who does it is not important. How it is done, is. It is the natural, spontaneous, and personal nature of small-group prayer which, like the relational nature of small-group Bible study, helps Christian disciples grow, and inspires others to join them.

c) Worship is meaningful to individuals and the group

In a general sense, worship - responding to God in ways that bring Him honour - involves everything we do, from sharing our faith to showing practical kindness to living a Christ-like life. This is the first and greatest commandment (Matthew 22:37,38) And small groups, which are all about Christianity in everyday life, can develop this concept. Each small group meeting is an act of worship itself.

In another sense, however, worship is the act of adoring God with our heart, soul, mind and strength, focusing on His goodness and greatness to the exclusion of everything else. Small group meetings therefore often set time aside for focusing on Him through prayer, and through singing where that is appropriate. The best worship songs chosen are those that are sung to God and focus on Him, rather than those that are just about Him, and those that focus on our experience of Him.

In congregational worship, the form it takes is determined by worship committees, pastors or speakers, the size and traditions of the church, and other considerations. It is structured, and does not vary much from week to week. There is little or no opportunity for spontaneous response to God as He makes His presence felt to individuals or the congregation as a whole. In such worship, God is honoured by good planning and extensive preparation of a programme that enables a large number of people to focus on His goodness and greatness and respond together. We need congregational worship. Nothing can take its place.

However, God is also honoured and people are blessed as worship is offered to Him in smaller groups. Small group worship, in contrast to congregational worship, is more personal and intimate. It can be planned, but plans may change as individuals or the group as a whole respond to the ways in which God makes Himself known through the Bible study, the prayers, or simply the interaction of the group as they share experiences and thoughts with each other. While congregational worship is usually a response to a sense of God's transcendence and majesty ("God most high"), small group worship is more likely to be a response to a sense of God's immanence and oneness with us ("God most nigh"). Just as we need to be awed by His splendour, so we need to feel the more gentle touch of His hand in our lives.

For people who are tired, distressed and disoriented from the stress of the working day, nothing can provide refreshment and bring life back into proper perspective, better than worshipping God in the setting of a small and caring small group.

d) Spiritual gifts are readily identified, developed and used.

We have already listed several reasons why small groups, as the basic structural unit of the church, can empower members for ministry more effectively than the traditional structure.²⁴ Here we consider an additional reason - the way they help to identify and develop spiritual gifts.

Despite the attention that has been given to the subject of spiritual gifts in recent years through books, workshops, and Sabbath School lesson studies, many church members still do not know what their gifts are, or they do not feel that their gifts are being sufficiently developed and used.²⁵ In small group churches, however, this is less likely to be a problem, because

- ◆ Through the relational dynamics of small groups, members become aware of each other's needs and respond to those needs. Gifts of encouragement, faith, prayer, leadership, etc., naturally manifest themselves. Members become involved in caring for each other during and outside of group meetings. It is difficult for anyone to hide or remain anonymous in a small group.
- ◆ Even if individuals do not recognise their own gifts, they can recognise each others' gifts and affirm them. As members participate in Bible study, and support and challenge one another, they can and should express appreciation for the way in which God touches their lives through their fellowship. We help others to focus on the development of their gifts when we say, "God used you when you..../I was really blessed when you.... I think you have a special gift in that area."
- ◆ Sensitive group leaders can observe how each individual contributes to the life of the group and identify their gifts and abilities, then use those gifts and delegate responsibilities accordingly.

²⁴ See chapter two, sub-section **b)**

²⁵ See footnote for sub-section **b)** of chapter two.

- ◆ The development of gifts is not limited to the availability of a suitable church department for church members to work through. The flexibility of small groups allows each group to develop a ministry style and form according to the needs and gifts of its members.

God touches people's lives through people, by using the gifts He has given them. As those gifts are identified and developed through small group ministry, we can expect that the disciples of Jesus will grow more like Him, and they will grow in number.

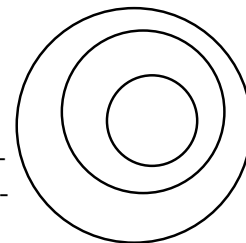
Leadership is one example of an ability/gift which can be more fully developed and utilised through small groups. When Moses looked for leaders for the vast small group network described in Exodus 18, he found them among the multitude of former slaves who followed him. Maybe many of these leaders had already served as overseers and foremen during the period of bondage in Egypt. But the fact remains that at least one out of every ten of those liberated Israelites was a potential spiritual leader.

New Testament models of small groups suggest that this level of leadership potential in the church is constant. Jesus' own small group was twelve in number, and the home churches referred to in the book of Acts could not have been much different in size - the average Jewish house in Jerusalem in 50 A.D. would not have accommodated many more than a dozen people.

If roughly one out of every ten Seventh-day Adventists is a potential leader, we might well ask: "What opportunities for leadership does our present leadership system offer for gifted lay people?" The responsibilities given to local elders, deacons, and departmental leaders, as we presently define them, hardly compare with those listed for church leaders in the New Testament. In apostolic times, lay people - trained and overseen by pastors - carried full responsibility for their own house churches. We need small groups to allow the many leadership gifts among us to develop and be put to full use.

e) Pastoral care is shared. It is now well recognised that small-group churches have a lower level of pastoral care need than churches which operate on more traditional lines. This is simply because small groups provide warm fellowship, a strong sense of belonging, regular Bible study and group prayer support for their members.

Several years ago, a survey²⁶ of various Seventh-day Adventist churches asked members to indicate on a diagram of three concentric circles (representing the church) where they saw themselves. The survey revealed that in both large and small congregations, the majority of church members did not feel part of the "inner circle." Instead, they saw themselves in the outer circle



²⁶ See sample of the survey form in Appendix B. Remember that responses to this question were not necessarily based on members' roles/job descriptions, but on their perception of their relationship with the rest of the church body.

of church life, as if their attendance or non-attendance made little difference, if any, to the church as a whole. On average only ten to fifteen percent placed a mark within the inner circle, indicating that they felt close to the heart of the church, and an important part of its life.

This sense of “not belonging” and isolation from the church body experienced by so many Christians is rare among those who belong to a small group. It is a problem that is prevented before it needs to be cured.

Small groups not only serve to prevent certain needs arising, however: they also meet many needs which do arise. Within the safety of a caring small group, it is quite natural to share certain burdens which we would normally be reluctant to share; and it is quite natural for the group to respond. I have often seen real pastoral care at work as a group leader interrupts a Bible study or prayer session, to give attention to a need that has been expressed, and take time to give counsel, support, encouragement, or special prayer. Genuine spiritual and emotional healing and renewal can result from this kind of ministry.

Because communication in small groups tends to be very honest and open, doubts and questions of faith can also be expressed freely. And it comes as a pleasant surprise to discover, as the group responds, that such things are common - even to mature Adventists! This - and the personal testimony that often follows - is a far more powerful and effective therapy than that which results from a textbook “chapter and verse” approach. When two or three group members admit, *“This is how I felt - this is how Jesus helped me through - and He will help you too,”* how can the faith of the rest not be strengthened!

A more specific form of pastoral care is provided by those small groups which are organised to bring together people with similar needs, for mutual understanding and support. Examples might include groups for mothers with young children at school, divorcees, university students, retirees, etc. (Some larger churches with trained members run recovery groups for alcoholics, divorcees, etc.)

The larger the church, the greater the need for the pastoral care which small groups can provide so effectively. While churches can anticipate a variety of blessings to result from their ministry, here are two specific benefits we can expect:

i. Fewer people will leave the church. Those who leave the church by the back door - especially the young - are not necessarily turning their backs on God. What we call apostasy is often more likely to be a matter of people failing to find encouragement and support when they are going through a crisis. If they find the support they need, they will stay.

ii. Pastors will be able to specialise. The Biblical role of the pastor is that of teacher/trainer, *“(preparing) God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. . .”* (Ephesians 4:11,12). Pastors of small group churches will naturally continue to be involved in a certain amount of pastoral care, but they will be able to give priority to developing the gifts and skills which the Holy Spirit has given to the members of the church. The result will be congregations functioning just as

Scripture says they should - as a body with every part doing what it is supposed to do.²⁷

f) Nurture takes place at different levels in different groups. The dictionary defines nurture as “bringing up, fostering, nourishment.” Christian nurture is the process of growing in Christlikeness and usefulness in His service, and that process continues throughout our lives.

Dale Galloway, pastor of America’s largest small-group church (it grew from a single small group in his own home, to a membership of over 5,000 in less than twenty-five years) came to the following conclusion:

“I believe that people grow at least eight times faster when they’re in a small group and attending weekly worship services....than if they just attended the service itself.”²⁸

As Paul pointed out to Timothy, the Scriptures play an important part in this process, because they are “useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults, and giving instruction for right living, so that the person who serves God may be fully qualified and equipped to do every kind of good deed.” (II Timothy 3:16,17 GNB)

However, no Christian will mature simply by living alone and reading the Bible. Knowledge might increase that way, but wisdom and grace can only grow in the real world of relationships with other people. According to Peter, Christian maturity is demonstrated by “*brotherly affection and love*” (2 Peter 1:7), and that is difficult to express either in solitude or in a crowd. That’s why Christians really grow when they get involved with small groups. It is in small groups that the Scriptures are taught, modelled, and applied to real-life situations and relationships.

Because small groups are flexible, different groups can be organised for people at different stages of their Christian journey, using Bible study materials best suited to their age and experience.

A nurture group is a special kind of small group for new Christians in which more emphasis is given to nurture than in other groups. It’s function is

- **to provide** opportunity for new believers to make friends with other Christians and feel a part of the congregation
- **to identify** gifts and interests as quickly as possible and help them find a role in the life of the church
- **to ensure** that spiritual foundations are properly laid (it takes more than one sermon or Bible study for a new Christian to understand what salvation is all about and develop a genuine sense of assurance in his experience with Christ.)
- **to encourage** daily personal Bible study and prayer

²⁷Romans 4:4-8; I Corinthians 12:12-30; Ephesians 4:16

²⁸ Dale Galloway, *The Small Group Book* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, Division of Baker Book House Co., 1995), 69.

- **to develop** confidence in beginning to pray with other Christians
- **to enable** group members to begin to share their faith

The importance of this kind of intentional nurture of new believers that links them with other believers through friendship, is illustrated by the survey conducted by Win Arn of the Institute of Church Growth, Pasadena, California, a few years ago among 100 new converts. At the time of the survey, 50 converts were active in their church, while the other 50 had stopped attending. The following diagram²⁹ shows the clear connection between commitment to church, and friendships formed during the first six months of church attendance:

Number of New Friends in the Church	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9+
Actives	0	0	0	1	2	2	8	13	12	12
Drops-outs	8	13	14	8	4	2	1	0	0	0

In the group of 50 active members, none made less than three friends, while most made seven or more. In the group of 50 inactive members, only one made more than five friends, while most made one, two - or none. The result? They dropped out! And that gives us one more reason for developing small groups - especially nurture groups - in our churches.

g) Witness takes place informally. We are told that the early church enjoyed “the favour of all the people.” (Acts 2:47 NIV) Evidently something was happening in the church that was attractive to outsiders. People saw that this community was different. They saw that Christians loved God, loved each other, and loved them. This led them to become Christians, just as Christ had promised. (John 13:35)

“Seekers” today who know little about Christianity also need the opportunity to see Christian love in action. And where better can they see it than in a small group as members of the group interact with each other and share experiences with one another. When Christians can speak in a relaxed and natural way of how Jesus affects their everyday lives, unchurched friends can see that Christianity is very much alive.

Friendship between Christians and non-Christians can also develop naturally in small groups. Such friendship is important to the discipling process, not just after conversion, but before! We know that most people who join the Adventist church do so not only because they agree with Adventist teachings, but because of friendship with an Adventist - whether church member, the pastor or the public evangelist. A survey³⁰ published recently which reported that 70% of all Christian converts begin their journey to faith through friendship, suggests that far more emphasis should be given to promoting and developing friendship evangelism in future. Let’s do it.

²⁹ Win Arn, Charles Arn and Carol Nyquist, *Who Cares About Love?* (Pasadena, CA: Church growth Press, 1986), 180, quoted in Kurt Johnson, *Small Group Outreach*, 36.

³⁰ Christian Schwarz, “Loving Relationships,” *Church Growth Digest* (British Church Growth Association: Spring 1997), 10,11.

As Adventists, our aim should not be simply to lead people to become members of the church through baptism and profession of faith. We're a family, remember? And families are built on relationships. It has been said that in order for us to be more successful in leading others to become part of the family, we should recognise the need to develop relationships with them in three separate stages, not one.

The first stage is to make new friends, with no religious strings attached

The second stage is to develop those friendships into Christian friendships as Jesus becomes their Lord and Saviour as well as ours

The third stage is to develop those Christian friendships into Adventist friendships as we invite them to become part of our church family

Small groups make it possible for this progressive development of friendship to take place naturally. They also make it possible for every disciple, however inexperienced, to be involved in helping others to become disciples.

**Why Small Groups Make Witness
Easier**

1. They encourage teamwork
2. They offer a bridge for shy people
3. They are personal
4. They encourage maximum participation
5. They are flexible
6. A minimum of organisation is needed
7. Groups meet where people live
8. Witness is spontaneous
9. They are informal
10. Communication is easier

More on the subject of witness and evangelism in part six.

In Conclusion... Why are small groups so important to the church? Simply because of what they produce. Small groups produce disciples who lead, disciples who work, disciples who contribute to the kingdom of God, disciples who reach the lost, disciples who nurture one another, and disciples who, while they are doing these things, actually enjoy themselves!

A Load Lifted after Twenty Years

Sarai³¹ 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 baptised.

³¹ Names and some details of this story have been changed to protect the identity of the characters.

Chapter Five

SMALL GROUP DYNAMICS

“Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ.” (Ephesians 4:15 NIV)

Warning: small groups are living cells - handle with care! Living things can only grow and thrive in an atmosphere of tender loving care (some churches call their small groups TLC groups for this reason). It follows that small groups cannot be introduced to a congregation by a decree of the church board. Church members are not obliged to belong to one. Every group cannot be expected to conform to a single model. There is no place for force in small group ministry.

It is not only what small groups do but how they do it that is important. We have already established that small groups can do what large groups cannot do. But they succeed in what they do not just because they are small, and not just because of the style or mechanics of how they operate, but because they are governed by certain TLC (tender loving care) principles.

Key Small Group Values

Wherever people relate with each other - at home, college, workplace or church - their relationships are governed by certain values. Just as the rules of a game determine how the game should be played, these values determine whether the relationship between employer and employees is formal or informal, whether the atmosphere at home is caring or uncaring, whether a church is friendly or unfriendly, and whether small groups encourage or stifle spiritual growth.

Small group values are the “rules of the game” - the operational principles which the group considers important, and with which all group members are in agreement. The following values³² are essential for those groups which are committed to growing in interpersonal relationships, maturity in Christ, and sharing what they have with others:

1. Affirmation. Small group meetings require open and honest discussion and participation by all group members in order to be effective. Such participation will only take place, however, if everyone is made to feel that they are valued and appreciated as members of the group, and that their ideas, opinions and questions are valid and important.

³² The values that follow are based on the list suggested in Bill Donahue, *Leading Life-Changing Small Groups*, 88,89. Explanations by the author of this manual.

We all have a basic need to share something of ourselves with each other, for it is only in this way that a sense of community - that vital awareness that we need each other - is developed. Unfortunately, because of our fears and inhibitions and today's focus on independence and individuality, such sharing seldom takes place on a meaningful level in society. But in Christian small groups it can and will take place if we are committed to encouraging one another and growing together in Christ. This encouragement comes largely through affirmation. We want to build healthy self-esteem in one another.

Affirmation is the opposite of denial. We deny people when we ignore them and treat them as if they did not exist, and their words and actions as if they had no value. So we affirm people by treating them with respect, letting them know that they are important to us, and expressing appreciation for their words and actions. Affirming people does not mean that we agree with their opinions or approve of their lifestyle. Affirmation does not prevent debate or even conflict. But when strong disagreements do arise, it ensures that the hostility and antagonism that often accompanies a typical win/lose conclusion is not so likely to arise.

Small group members can affirm each other simply by saying, "I'm so glad you are here," or "Thanks for that insight," or "That's interesting. How did you come to that conclusion?" Contact between members by phone and personal visit is also important. Group leaders especially should let absent members know that they are missed, and that special contributions made or tasks done by regular members were appreciated.

2. Commitment. Group members recognise they are there to serve one another, and agree to make themselves and their resources (time, energy, counsel, even material help if necessary) available to each other. This includes giving attendance at group meetings top priority. Individuals should not join a group if they are not willing to be committed to it. Many small groups use a covenant³³ by which members accept group goals and values and commit themselves to meeting with the group.

3. Honesty. In order for trust to grow among members of a group, and because we are accountable to each other (see point 7 below) they must be willing to be honest with each other. In a small-group setting, this means saying what needs to be said, for the good of the group or for the good of an individual member. According to Jesus, we have a two-way responsibility in this area. If we are aware that someone holds something against us (because of something we might have said or done), we should do what we can to put things right (Matthew 5:23). Similarly, if we have something against someone else, it's our privilege to address the issue and seek reconciliation (Matthew 18:15-17).

It is possible to be brutally honest. However, as we try to live according to the spirit of the law, not just the letter, honesty will never be destructive, but "*speaking the truth in love.....we will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ.*" (Ephesians 4:15) This will not always be easy. Expressing honest opinions in Bible study is relatively simple, and mature individuals can accept advice and even rebuke from the group. But, as Jesus Himself indicated, there will be times when the only

³³ For sample covenant see Appendix E.

correct procedure is to deal with the issue in private, and take it to the group only as a last resort.

4. Openness. This is simply the willingness to be honest about ourselves, to take off our masks and reveal the personality behind them. Unfortunately, because one of the consequences of sin is that people feel they have to hide from each other as well as from God, openness doesn't come naturally to us. Yet close relationships can only develop between people who know each other well - and that means coming out of hiding.

Openness does not imply that we must share every detail of our private lives with everyone else; but it does imply that in a small group we should be able to admit to being human, and not claim - or give the impression - that we are something we are not. It is liberating to be part of a group of people who are at ease with themselves as they share naturally with one another their joys, hurts, ambitions and disappointments. Moreover, people can accept each other more easily if everyone knows that "what you see is what you get."

5. Confidentiality. Openness and honesty will not flourish without confidentiality. But where there is an atmosphere of love and trust, and an agreement that whatever is shared within the group will not be shared elsewhere, group members - even the shy ones - can feel safe being themselves and expressing themselves.

In the early stages of group experience, while members are getting to know each other and friends are being invited to join, communication is naturally at a fairly superficial level, and there is no need to make the matter of confidentiality an issue. This is one of those values that is added along the way to protect the group as the level of sharing deepens.

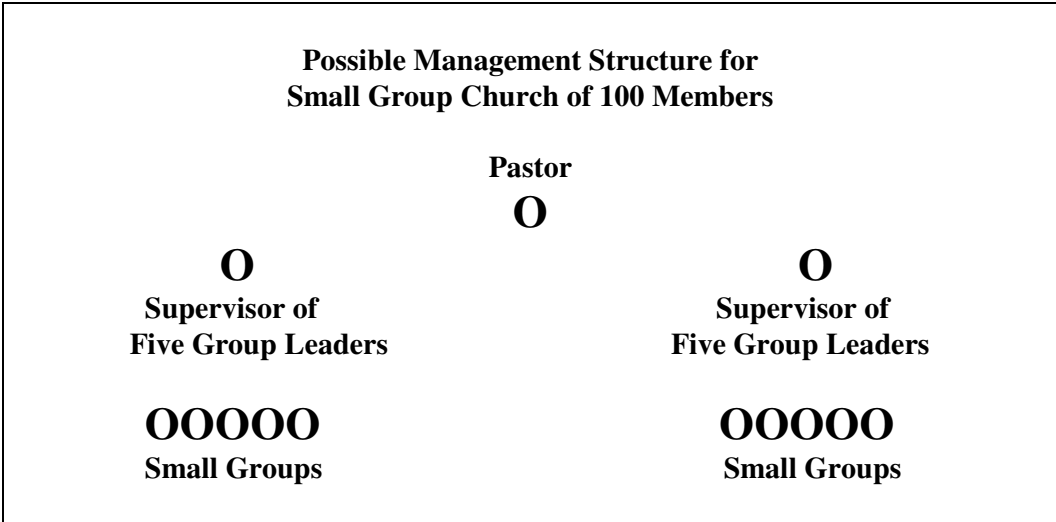
6. Sensitivity. Every member of a group has his or her own unique background, feelings and needs. Even people with much in common - interests, profession, gender, age, race, etc. - soon discover that their differences outnumber their similarities. We are all individuals, and while the aim of small groups is to develop a sense of oneness among different people, it is also their purpose to help each person to grow individually. Sensitivity is the skill of recognising and respecting our differences, especially our limitations. Those limitations include, among other things:

- knowledge of the Bible
- willingness/ability to read the Bible aloud
- level of participation in discussion
- readiness to pray
- readiness to talk about personal experience

The bottom line is that everyone should be able to feel at home in a small group. We have no right to probe beyond what any member chooses to say voluntarily. And where Adventists are interacting with non-Adventists or non-Christians, we must take care not to create an "us and them" atmosphere, or cause anyone to feel more ignorant than the rest. This is one reason why pre-prepared Bible-study booklets or outlines are such a good idea: they make Bible study simple for those who are unfamiliar with it. If

you choose not to use them, at least make sure to provide everyone with the same Bible, and use page numbers for reference as well as chapter and verse. Be sensitive.

7. Accountability. Individuals are accountable to each other for personal growth and the growth of the group. This means we must be willing to receive as well as give help and support, input and feedback. Each group is also accountable to the church for the way it affects the lives of its members and the congregation as a whole. Groups are not independent units, but parts of one church body, connected with each other through an appropriate system of management.



8. Reproduction. Small groups are committed to growth through a somewhat unusual method. They multiply by dividing. They are a reproducible system. Their aim is not to grow as big as possible, but as numerous as possible. This means that when a group has grown to full capacity (maximum is usually twelve members), or has achieved its objective/s, some group members will leave to form a new group and other new members will join, or all members will separate to join other groups. For the sake of the growth of the church, group members are willing to accept the pain that this sometimes involves. Understanding this principle from the beginning avoids the development of exclusive cliques!

9. Relevance. Small groups will only be of benefit if what they do and how they do it is relevant to the lives of group members. Well before the core members of the group (usually five to seven church members) start inviting friends to join them, the goals for the group should be clear, by addressing such questions as:

- ◆ Will the group aim to attract non-Christians, other Christians of other persuasions, or both? Remember, the greater the differences between the people in the group, the more difficult it will be to meet any particular need.
- ◆ Will it be a special interest group for young parents, college students, singles, etc; or will it be a general interest group in which people from different cultural groups can feel comfortable together?

- ◆ What will the group try to achieve short-term, medium-term, long-term?
- ◆ How will the group achieve its goals, and what materials will it use?

Answering these questions will help to make sure that what the group does is relevant to its members. Beyond that, care will need to be taken in the choice of Bibles (a modern translation will usually be best), and language used during meetings (no religious jargon or Adventist-speak please); remember that many don't even know who Jesus is (so when you pray, bear in mind that "You" means more to most people than "thee and "thou.")

10. Relaxed Atmosphere. We learn and grow best when we are enjoying what we are doing. Small group meetings should therefore be occasions when people can relax, laugh together, and enjoy each other's company and the study of God's Word. The Christian life has its serious side, of course. But a tense, over-serious atmosphere that is not tempered with the joy that Christ has promised will not help individuals and groups to grow.

Ten values - they look simple enough, don't they? And they should be. After all, they are the values which governed Christ's ministry. The fact is, they are not as simple as they seem. (Someone said they are more difficult to keep than the ten commandments!) They don't come naturally, so you may find that some people are uncomfortable with them, because they really do represent a major change to the traditional way in which many Bible study and prayer groups have been conducted. It will take time and effort to make changes. But individuals and the church as a whole will be the better for those changes - and that will make the effort worthwhile.

Dentist's Discovery

A member of a small group was so excited about the group meetings that he told his dentist friend about them and invited him to attend. The following Monday evening, the friend was relieved to find, as he was introduced to the other group members, that many of them were fellow-professionals. The person leading the group was a judge. The atmosphere was informal. He felt at ease.

At the same time, he was puzzled. How could educated people accept the Bible as authoritative - as these people did - and talk about Jesus as if He were alive? He raised his concerns with the friend who had invited him. Instead of being defensive or trying to prove anything, he simply said, "Just keep coming to the meetings."

When he attended for the second time, the dentist challenged the group - but they, too, simply encouraged him to share with them what they were reading in the Bible.

Despite his reservations, he continued attending, and enjoyed each meeting. Before very long, he had to admit: "I don't understand what is going on here, but you people have something that I have never seen or experienced before. What is it?"

They replied, "We have the Lord Jesus."

He asked, "How can I have the Lord Jesus?" And there in the small group meeting they were able to lead him to a personal acceptance of Jesus Christ as his Saviour and Lord."³⁴

³⁴ Wollan, *God at Work in Small Groups*, 99.

Chapter Six

SMALL GROUPS IN EVANGELISM

*“And every day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved.”
(Acts 2:47 GNB)*

Evangelism is difficult. Whenever and wherever men and women are confronted with the claims of Jesus Christ on their lives, there will be opposition. Through evangelism the church is engaging in open conflict both with human nature and with “*spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*” (Ephesians 6:12 NIV)

In addition, certain cultural characteristics mean that the process of evangelism is made more difficult in some countries than it might be in others. In Britain for example, we must address at least three specific challenges if we are to be effective in reaching most British people “where they are.”³⁵ They are:

a) The challenge of reaching the unchurched majority.

For a long time now, the large majority of British people have had no connection with the Christian church, except perhaps to attend a wedding or a funeral. In 1851, church attendance was 40% of the population. Now it is down to less than 10% (in many towns and cities it is considerably less than that.).³⁶ Since basic education in Christian teachings has been inadequate in our schools for many years, we have a situation where possibly three generations of people who live in our neighbourhoods have never read the Bible, have no idea what God is like, and no understanding of the Gospel. They are not necessarily atheists; they just don’t know what Christianity is all about.

Over the last thirty years, just a small percentage of those who have joined the Adventist church (perhaps 5-10%) have come from this large majority of the population. Most of our “converts” during this period have been people who already had an Adventist and/or Christian background, or at least a Christian way of thinking. Moreover, as time goes by, our effectiveness in reaching unchurched people seems to be getting less, not greater. This is cause for concern, especially when we recognise that some non-Adventist congregations are winning unchurched people in significant numbers.

³⁵ Please note, by the way, that I am not ignoring the power of the Gospel by focusing on difficulties. I am simply saying that solutions are found (even in prayer) more easily when you know what the problem is.)

³⁶ Peter Brierley, *Christian England* (Eltham, London: MARC Europe, 1991), 30.

Clearly, the distance between Christians and non-Christians is wider than it has ever been, in terms of moral values, lifestyle, and general world-view. In many ways society has changed radically over the last three decades (if in doubt ask anyone over forty!). Life as a whole moves much faster than before. The world is smaller. Communication is instant, more or less. Consequently people's experience of life, their needs and problems are different now to what they used to be. Even our vocabulary has changed, and people express themselves differently through the language they use, the music they listen to, the clothes they wear, their hobbies and interests. Many of these changes are neither right or wrong - they are just different to what we are used to.

The problem is that while society has changed a great deal, our church has changed very little. Much of what we do in church and how we do it is the same as we were doing, well....in some cases for as long as we can remember. And, of course, there's nothing wrong in that. We naturally feel comfortable with what is familiar to us.

But what if our traditional way of doing things actually adds to the distance that already exists between ourselves and our unchurched neighbours? What if we speak a language they do not understand? What if we come across as irrelevant and out of touch with the real world, even if the truths we believe are actually as relevant now as they always were?

It may mean that our Sabbath morning worship service or the church/tent evangelistic meeting is no longer the best or most suitable introduction to the Adventist faith for most English secular people. It may also mean that the small group setting is probably the best way we now have of introducing our unchurched friends to the church we love.

Certainly other Churches in Britain have found that small groups have been an effective way of reaching unchurched people. The *Alpha* movement is an outstanding example of this. In recent years, hundreds of churches through thousands of small groups nation-wide, have successfully used the *Alpha course*³⁷ for small groups, developed at Holy Trinity Church, Brompton, London less than a decade ago. The result: tens of thousands of unchurched people have become disciples of Jesus, and probably more continue to be reached this way than by any other method.

b) The challenge of long-term witness.

The CMF (Christian Missionary Fellowship) which is an organisation committed to planting new churches in many countries including Britain, has observed that in working among people who are non-Christian but receptive, the process of building relationships takes longer here than in other countries.³⁸ This is particularly true in provincial and rural areas, where it takes considerable time for prejudices to be broken down and for a local community to accept a stranger moving in from another area, let alone embrace a new kind of religion! Small groups, however, are tailor-made for this particular challenge. They are the ideal way of establishing, building and maintaining long-term relationships with British non-Adventists.

³⁷ *Alpha course* and other materials (Eastbourne, England: Kingsway Publications)

³⁸ Dan Yarnell, "Where Do We Go From Here?" *Church Growth Digest* (Summer 1997), 8.

c) The challenge of bridging cultural differences.

Where congregations reflect fairly well the cultural mix of the communities in which they worship, visitors from those communities who attend our churches can feel quite comfortable, all other things being equal (such as the issues referred to above). However, where the large majority of the church membership represents a culture that is perceived to be different to that of the majority of those who live in the community, the cultural “barrier” is an additional challenge to be overcome.

As we address this challenge it may be that long-term strategic planning should include the idea of planting different churches to reach different groups of people in society. Individuals gifted and able to cross cultural barriers and become “all things to all men” (I Corinthians 9:19-22) should be found and trained to lead in this kind of evangelism. Meanwhile, the small group offers a setting which is less threatening than a church building, where small groups of people from different cultural or racial backgrounds can meet for the sharing of the Gospel and the building of bridges across cultural divides.

Small group evangelistic opportunities.

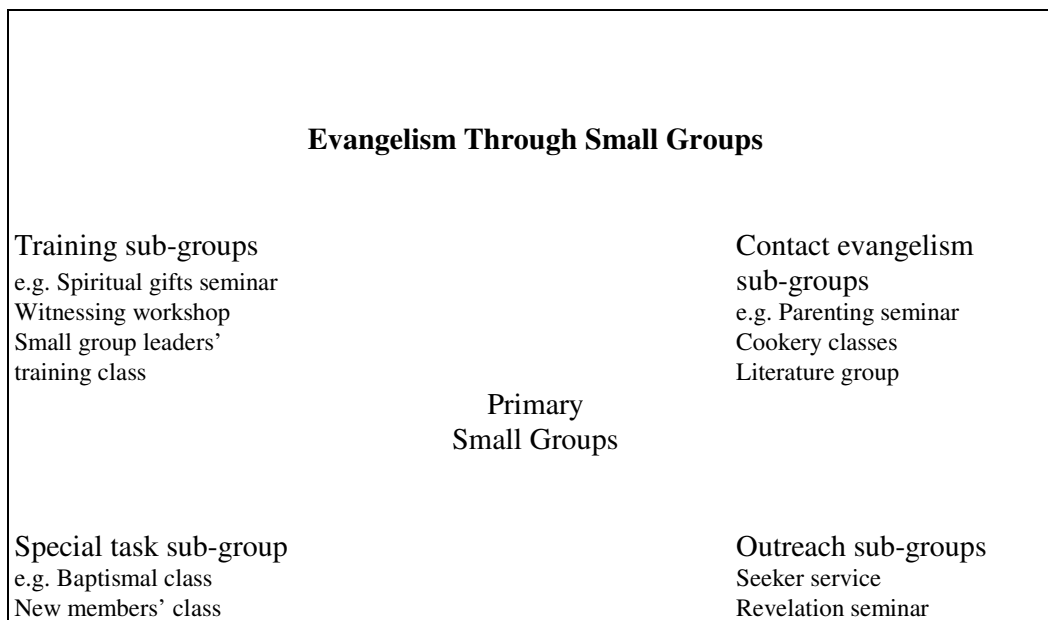
In recent years many non-Adventist congregations both in this country and elsewhere have grown rapidly. Almost without exception, they see small groups as a major reason for their success. If their experience is anything to go by, we too can expect that small groups will prove to be the most effective long-term method of on-going evangelism we have ever developed.. Consider the following statement as a possible explanation for this:

“The evangelistic programmes which will probably command most respect will be those which treat the hearers as persons and respect their integrity; which are able to meet them at the point of their present understanding; which encourage long-term, in-depth involvement with them; which take place primarily out in the world as an integral part of the total ongoing ministry of the Christian community; which readily incorporate new Christians into that ministry and contribute to its spiritual development.”³⁹

Small groups meet these requirements better than most of our traditional approaches to evangelism. And if they can be linked with other evangelistic programmes designed with contemporary society in mind (e.g. culturally relevant public evangelistic meetings and seminars, seeker services, different kinds of churches for different kinds of people, etc.), their evangelistic potential could prove to be unlimited.

Through small groups, there is no reason why every Seventh-day Adventist cannot become involved with evangelism. Even those who have always felt too timid to share their faith with others will soon find the confidence to do so easily and naturally by becoming part of a small group team.

³⁹ Mallison, *The Small Group Leader*, 93



One reason for this is that the primary evangelistic role of small groups is to introduce people to Jesus, explain in practical terms what it means to be a Christian, and help Christians grow in their relationship with Him. Certain doctrinal Bible subjects and lifestyle issues can be better covered in sub-groups, such as a baptismal class.

Small Groups and Special Evangelistic Opportunities. As a church we have many methods of evangelistic outreach, some well-tried, others new and experimental. In most, if not all, small groups could play an important part. Consider the following examples:

◆ **Global mission church planting projects.** In response to our Lord's commission (Matthew 28:19) and John's description of the final proclamation of the Gospel (Revelation 14:6), Adventists have the ambitious goal of planting new churches in every major city and town and among every significant people-group where the church still has no presence. In countries like Great Britain, this presents a major challenge, especially in view of our church-planting experience in the past.

Many of our churches in Britain have never grown much larger than they were when they were planted. They began small, and have remained small ever since. In many cases they were the result of cottage meetings, Branch Sabbath Schools, or public evangelistic campaigns. In most if not all cases, Sabbath worship services (i.e. Sabbath School and Divine Service) were started as soon as there were a handful of people who were willing to meet together, or, where evangelistic meetings were held, Sabbath services were started soon after the subject of the

Sabbath was presented. In retrospect, perhaps this was not the best approach. Possibly the very smallness of those church groups was a factor in limiting their future growth.

This seems to be confirmed by the fact that some church planting experts are now recommending that other kinds of meeting of a more evangelistic nature should continue until seventy-five to one hundred people can form a congregation. Only then should regular celebration-style church worship services be started.⁴⁰ There are two reasons behind this thinking:

- i. Worship services on Sabbath are large-group meetings by nature. The worship format and style followed by most Adventist churches - i.e. the choice of hymns, the preaching of the sermon, the focus on the "bigness" of God, etc. - are designed for large groups. They work better with a large group than with a small group. To attempt to do a "large-group thing" with a small group can therefore lessen its overall impact on the individuals in the group. If those individuals are not already committed to the group (e.g. if they are first-time visitors or seekers), they may not find the experience of worship sufficiently stimulating or satisfying to want to return - however warm the fellowship might be.
- ii. Church worship services are oriented more toward believers than unbelievers. Church members therefore feel comfortable because everything is familiar and they feel part of the family. However, the very things that make members feel comfortable can have the opposite effect on non-members, especially non-Christians. Those who visit our churches may feel threatened because they sense that they are different to everyone else. They also need "space" - the opportunity to simply observe, without being drawn into the group. The smaller the congregation, the more difficult it is to create an adequate comfort zone for non-members, and some are therefore discouraged from attending.

It follows that a better approach to church planting in the future would be to:

- build the foundation of the new congregation through small groups (with whatever methods of public witness work best) to help bring it to a reasonable size before Sabbath meetings become regular church services
- start Sabbath meetings as evangelistic meetings, oriented more to non-members than members until the congregation has grown to an adequate size, or even
- consider continuing Sabbath services as evangelistic meetings indefinitely, while undergirding the growing church with an on-going small group ministry

⁴⁰ e.g. Robert Logan, *Beyond Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, Division of Baker Book House, 1989)

- ◆ **Establishing churches for ethnic minorities.** Further to what we have already observed about the challenge of bridging cultural differences in a general way, we must not forget that there are many ethnic minority groups in our larger cities which our existing churches are not successfully reaching. No doubt this is partly because of cultural and language barriers, and partly because our church programmes are not specifically targeted to meeting their needs. In London, for example, there are large numbers of Chinese, Korean, Asian, Greek and Iranian people, to name just a few, who do not respond to our outreach events.

In recent years, Ghanaian and Hispanic congregations have been planted successfully in that city, just like many others world-wide. But dozens of other groups have yet to be reached. How can we multiply such ethnic churches quickly? One way is to bring paid pastors from overseas to work for their own people. This may be successful, but it is expensive, and therefore not an option for the many groups we need to reach.

An alternative approach is to use small groups. In many cases we have one or several Adventists from such groups attending our churches, most of whom were already church members when they arrived in this country. If these could be trained in small group leadership, ethnic churches led by lay pastors could develop quickly.

- ◆ **The Net Programme.** In some places it may be better to direct interests which develop from this series into small groups, before they are invited to our churches.

- ◆ **Voice of Prophecy/Discovery Bible Schools.** Our approach in the past has generally been to relate with such contacts on a one-to-one basis, before inviting them to church or the big evangelistic meeting. However, after students have become used to Bible study alone at home, many are reluctant (perhaps because correspondence courses attract shy people) to attend public events. Small groups could be one way of bringing several students living in close proximity together much earlier, even for the study of their lessons.

- ◆ **Different contacts in isolated areas.** We might be surprised to discover how many church contacts we have in so-called isolated areas, if only we took time to co-ordinate all the various sources of interest we have. These include:

- isolated members
- relatives and friends of members
- AWR contacts
- former Voice of Prophecy students
- Internet users
- former church members

If we could make suitable training courses available to them just as we do our Bible courses, either by correspondence or Internet, or at centralised venues, we may well find adequate leadership emerging from those contacts sufficient for the development of small groups, even where no professional pastoral supervision is available.

Small Groups and a Finished Work. We have always believed that the closing work of the Gospel before the return of Christ will be similar to its beginning at Pentecost, only more glorious.³⁷ Now is the time to plan for the gathering of that unique harvest.

One reason the Holy Spirit's work in the early church was so productive, was because the small-group system on which the New Testament church was based made it possible for the church to absorb, nurture and develop so many new disciples for ministry so quickly. One wonders what would have happened to that multitude of new believers if that system had not been in place; and one also wonders what will happen when the Holy Spirit works in an even more powerful way in our day, if we have no system that is adequate for what He wants to do. But evidently, we will.

It is significant that Ellen White, in her description of God's remnant people before their deliverance, gives the impression that they await the return of Christ in small groups.⁴¹ Given our understanding of the time of trouble at that time, it is unlikely that our institutions and church buildings will be the focus of our church life as they are now. Now is the time to develop small-group churches that will survive the storm.

Just imagine.....There are enough Seventh-day Adventists in Britain to form (theoretically) over two and a half thousand small groups across the country. If only half our membership were properly trained and involved, there could be 1,250 groups with an average of roughly seven core members each, committed to sharing their faith. If each group made just one new disciple for Jesus during the first year, and the number of groups increased as the number of people increased, there would be 27,000 new disciples after only ten years! That's one and a half times the present membership.

But what if each group made two new disciples each year instead of one? The result wouldn't be just twice as many disciples. At the end of ten years, we would have approximately 103,500 new believers!! What is more, there would be 16,250 Seventh-day Adventist led small groups all over the country, producing by the blessing of God even more astonishing growth each succeeding year.

The principal aim, remember, is to make disciples, not necessarily church members. With this approach to evangelism, it doesn't really matter if people are not baptised and added to the church register after a five week evangelistic programme. What matters is that they are involved, they are attending group meetings and maybe church services on Sabbath. They are growing in their knowledge and experience of God and developing relationships as they study the Scriptures, and sooner or later, they will be baptised. True disciples of Jesus will become church members in God's own good time.

⁴¹ White, *Early Writings*, 282.

From Small to Big in 20 Years

Small group expert, Carl George,⁴² believes an annual growth rate for small groups of 20% is reasonable. That means that a group of ten can grow to twelve, in twelve months.

**It also means that
50 members can grow to
100 in four years
310 in ten years
770 in fifteen years
2,358 in twenty years**

Just a dream....or is it a vision? Such a rate of growth would be unprecedented in Adventist history. Moreover we have learned by experience that souls are hardly won and easily lost. So we are hesitant to dream such big dreams. Yet we also know that “where there is no vision, the people perish.” (Proverbs 29:18 KJV) Whether a prophetic vision or an inspired picture of what God wants to accomplish through His church, the fact is that without a large goal in mind, we will achieve little. The bigger the dream - provided it is realistic - the bigger the possibilities.

It can be done! With God’s blessing, it’s within our reach. It is definitely achievable. It happened before at Pentecost. It’s happening now in some small group churches. We have the promise that the Holy Spirit will make it happen again, with or without us. So what are we waiting for?

⁴² George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future*, 100

Better than a Pastor's Sermon!

A man named Jack once said to me, "When you preached on tithing, I said to my wife, 'I'll never do that! He's just after our money.' And then we went to our small group, and they started talking and sharing about tithing - about the blessings they had experienced since they began tithing, about the excitement they felt in their lives at the realisation that they were partnering with God through their tithing. Before I knew it, I'd signed up to be one of those tithers! Now I can say that it's one of the greatest things that's ever happened in my life. But, pastor, I never would have done it through your preaching. I did it through the sharing of the testimonies in our (small) group."⁴³

⁴³ Told in Galloway, *The Small Group Book*, 67.

Chapter Seven

ORGANISING SMALL GROUPS

“So then, as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without actions is dead.” (James 2:26 GNB)

If you have read this far, you will realise that the development of small group ministry in our churches will mean more than a superficial adjustment to the way we do things at present. We’re looking at a radical change - a transition from an old system to a new and different system. By way of reminder, here are a few of the changes our church members will experience:

- ◆ changes in the role/job description of certain key individuals, such as the pastor.
- ◆ changes in the role of the laity, which some may wrongly interpret as an increase in the burdens/responsibilities they are already carrying.
- ◆ changes in style of and approach to ministry - what we do, and when and where we do it. e.g. Small groups may replace the traditional weekly prayer meeting, though this will not happen in every case.
- ◆ changes in the dynamics of ministry - how we do what we do. e.g. We may need to learn to be more tolerant than we have been in the past, of people of other faiths, learning how to meet people where they are rather than expecting them to meet us where we are.
- ◆ changes in church structure and the decision-making process. e.g. certain church offices may become redundant, and the membership and function of the church board may change

Making changes of this kind is not going to be easy. It’s going to take time, much prayer, and careful thought and planning. So we look now at the process of developing small group churches in two different settings:

- a) in the church that has existed for many years and has well-established ways of doing things, and
- b) in the church that is just being started or “planted” in a new area.

a) Developing Small Groups in Existing Congregations

Most if not all Adventist congregations have had some experience of small groups in one form or another. Some of that experience has been positive, some has been negative. Either way, the fact is that the small group ministry of their past experience

is almost certainly very different to the small group ministry we are considering in this manual. The biggest mistake we could make would be to assume that we already know what small groups are all about. In most cases, developing small groups in existing congregations really means starting from scratch. And that's the best place from which to start working through the following strategy (the following points are not necessarily listed in order of importance or sequence):

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. Develop your understanding of small groups through reading as widely as possible from the more recent leadership manuals that are available.⁴⁴ Most of these are by non-Adventist authors, but they speak from experience, and we can learn from them. (Please don't think that by reading this manual, you need read no further. This is just a brief introduction.) If you have had no first-hand experience with groups, talk with those who have. If necessary organise a "test group" with a few friends or colleagues, or join a group being run by another church (Adventist or non-Adventist).

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

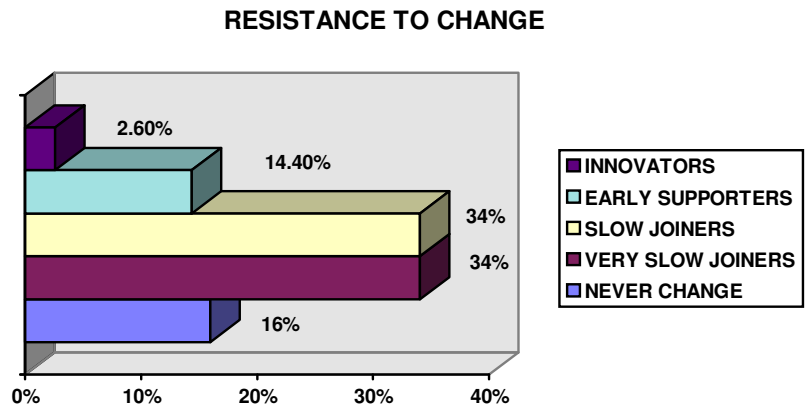
- began with three or four innovators (who remained His closest confidants throughout His ministry)
- gathered a leadership core of twelve (His own small group)
- added a support network of seventy
- built a congregation of 120 believers, who then
- multiplied to thousands after Pentecost

That process took over three years. And we 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

⁴⁴ A suggested basic reading package could include: Burrill's *Revolution in the Church, Radical Disciples*, and *The Revolutionized Church of the 21st Century* as background reading for lay ministry in general; Beckham's *The Second Reformation* for a theological and Scriptural basis for small groups; and Mallison's *The Small Group Leader* for detailed information on setting up and operating small groups in the local church. First three volumes available through South England Conference (PM Dept.) and Adventist bookshops, last two through S.E.C. office and local Christian bookshops.

difficult. The following diagram⁴⁵ indicates that two or three people out of every hundred in the average congregation are what might be described as “movers and shakers.” They dislike the status quo. For them, everything needs to change. These are not the people to ask to help you persuade the church to adopt the concept of small group ministry. They are too radical, and even though they may be right in most (or all) of what they say, the majority do not take them seriously.



It is from among the second group - the 14.4% who will join the movement for change almost immediately - that the best early supporters and persuaders should be chosen. They are open-minded and progressive. The majority of members in the church trust them.

Remember that change may create very strong resistance - that in some churches there are probably substantial numbers who will never fully support any radically new venture. Many congregations have been in existence for a long time and have developed traditional approaches to worship, prayer, Bible study, and everything else they do. Concerned individuals may see the new ideas in terms of apostasy from the truth. We must be sensitive to the opinions and feelings of those who disagree with us.

One obvious reason why change must be gradual is that existing activities and programmes must continue while the transition is taking place. A second reason is that traditional pastoral responsibilities must still be catered for during that period, and cannot be suddenly ignored. Changing roles by 20% each year for five years is one way to implement change at the pastoral level, as suggested in the diagram.

Becoming a Small-Group Church: Pastoral Responsibilities

- Year 1 - 80% current responsibilities, 20% small groups
- Year 2 - 60% current responsibilities, 40% small groups
- Year 3 - 40% current responsibilities, 60% small groups
- Year 5 - 20% current responsibilities, 80% small groups
- Year 6 and onwards according to local situation

⁴⁵ Statistics in Mallison, *The Small Group Leader*, 90

4. Gain the approval of the church. At least in principle, 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.

5. Help others catch the vision. If the church is to make intelligent and positive decisions about small groups, it needs to know the facts. It is helpful to:

- Make good reading material available to church elders, board members, departmental leaders and members with small group leadership potential. Many challenging small group “success stories” and manuals are obtainable suitable for this purpose.
- Conduct small group workshops. Training materials are now available in printed form, on video, and on audio tape.
- Arrange for occasional sermons to be preached on related topics. A series on the early church and the book of Acts, while church members read Burrill’s book, “The Revolutionised Church of the 21st Century” could prove to be an exciting experience.
- 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 preparing simple but attractive posters for the noticeboard
- Arrange for Sabbath School classes to occasionally function on small group lines (after prior instruction of teachers).
- 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.

6. 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. We need to know what we are doing well, and what we are not doing well, if we are doing it 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. "Where have we come from?" i.e. Why was this church started, and what has been achieved in the past?
2. "Where are we now?" i.e. 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?" i.e. 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? i.e. 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 to make the church what God really wants it to be.⁴⁶

7. 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-co-ordinator 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.

8. 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.⁴⁷

9. 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 co-ordinator or a committee.

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

11. 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

⁴⁶ See congregational self-analysis survey, Appendix C.

⁴⁷ See sample mission statement on page

small group ministry. Three leadership teams (leaders, assistant leaders, hosts/hostesses) with the pastor or trainer/co-ordinator can form a small group together, and learn the basics of small group dynamics by role-play over a period of six to eight weeks. 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 while doing some serious study with a manual.

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.⁴⁸ In the long term, we should see group leaders as lay pastors. Some “leaders of ten” will later become “leaders of fifty” or “leaders of one hundred.” 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.

12. 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.

Core groups should spend a minimum of six to eight weeks becoming familiar with small group life, developing a sense of group identity, and through prayer and Bible study developing a sense of group mission - what God wishes to accomplish through the group, who they might invite to join them, etc. Some suggest that since this is a “trial” stage, these groups should meet over a longer period so they can go beyond the “honeymoon” stage and experience the realities (including conflict) of group life. This may be true, but there is also a danger in spending too much time without non-Adventists present. They will help us more than anyone to learn what we need to know!

13. Introduce friends. Well before church members invite their friends to their group, they should find ways of introducing them to at least two other church members in the group. (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.) 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.

14. Core groups invite friends. Small groups grow as church members invite non-church members to join them. The total number in the group should not normally exceed twelve or thirteen, and ideally there should be at least two non-Adventists in each group. Those who are invited will generally be:

- People who attend church who have not made a commitment to Christ or church membership

⁴⁸ Galloway lists fifty topics for in-service and on-the-job training in *The Small Group Book*, 94,95

- Friends and relatives already known to one or more core group members through the sort of social interaction described under '13' above
- 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., 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 the group plans to focus on, 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!

15. Evaluate. No church is going to get everything right first time. Encourage individual groups to evaluate their experience 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.⁴⁹

16. Stay committed to the vision. Visions have a tendency to fade, especially in the face of opposition, or when there are many other things to occupy our attention. Leaders must therefore frequently clarify and build their own vision, through reading, meditation and prayer, and frequently remind the church of its goals, through preaching, testimony, and workshops, etc.

Because of its importance, small group ministry must become the first priority on the agenda of congregations that are working towards becoming small-group churches. Don't be discouraged if problems develop along the way. The devil knows what small groups can do for your church, so he's going to work against them. But remember that small groups are part of God's plan, so are bound to succeed in the end as we follow the guidance He has given.

17. Develop a structure and strategy for growth. There is probably no better management structure for the growing church to adopt than the one outlined in Exodus chapter 18. But growth won't just happen by itself. While group members should be encouraged to build friendships with individuals whom they can invite, other supporting programmes need to be built into the church timetable, including:

- i. Contact activities, by which people in the community have their first contact with the church. These might include concerts, the Jesus video project,

⁴⁹ Sample questionnaires for evaluation and reporting can be found in various manuals, including Mallison, *The Small Group Leader*, 177-179; McBride, *How to Build a Small Group Ministry*, 198; Donahue, *Leading Life-Changing Small Groups*, 137-141.

literature evangelism, exhibitions, street witnessing, radio programmes, welfare programmes and community services of various kinds, Holiday Bible Schools, certain kinds of newspaper advertising, ADRA promotion, etc. Contact activities raise awareness of our existence and create a positive image of the church, but do not involve people significantly in what we are doing.

ii. Entry events, which enable people to enter into a closer relationship with church members. These might include cookery, stress, family life and other seminars which extend over several weeks; contemporary, seeker-style services designed specifically to introduce non-Christians to the Gospel; “Discover” Bible course promotion, Revelation seminars (also a reaping event), etc.

iii. Reaping events, by which individuals already attending small groups, as well as those who aren’t, can be led to a decision. In many cases, people attending groups will make decisions for Christ and for church membership simply through their involvement in those groups, but the larger context of a public evangelistic meeting may be the necessary catalyst for others.

The guiding principle in the development of such a growth strategy is that small group ministry is now at the centre of church life, not on the periphery. This means that the programmes listed above will not seriously intrude on the time given to small group meetings, so that they frequently have to be disrupted while other events take place.

Suggested Timetable for a Church Beginning Small-Group Ministry	
Month 1	Share small-group concept with opinion leaders.
Months 2,3	Share concept with the church through board of elders, church board, seminars and workshops, business meeting. Make reading material, audio tapes and videos available Select first small group leader/s.
Months 4,5	Build and train leadership teams through instruction and modelling. Leadership teams pray for wisdom in choosing core group members.
Months 6,7	Leadership teams invite other church members to form core groups. Build and train core groups through instruction and training. Core group members use social events as opportunities to introduce their non-Adventist friends to other core group members.
Month 8	Core group members invite non-Adventist friends to join.

b) Small Groups and Church Planting

Small groups are ideally suited for planting new churches in unentered areas or among new people groups. The great advantage of starting with this method is that this

naturally becomes the *modus operandus* of the new church as it develops. And there are no established traditions to be changed.

There may or may not be Adventists in the area to assist with such a project, but in either case a similar strategy can be followed. Many of the principles outlined above for transitioning existing churches apply also in this situation, but the following additional guidelines apply:

1. Identify the target group and meet their needs. Although the Gospel is for everyone, we have discovered that everyone cannot be reached at the same time and with the same methods. Different people have different needs, and respond to different programmes. We will have more success in the long-term if we target specific groups of people and build a church suited to their needs.

So - shall we target people who are already Christians, or people who have no knowledge of Christ? Shall we target families with young children or older people, students or businesspeople? Once we have decided to whom our ministry is to be directed, we should take time to become acquainted with the needs of the group. The needs of the target group will determine the small group programme, and eventually the form the church will take (the kind of music it uses, the nature of the worship service, etc.) Robert Logan summarises the importance of this approach to ministry in this way:

“The successful church of the twenty-first century and beyond will be one that learns how to listen to people, establishes a culturally relevant philosophy of ministry, and adapts its ministry strategies to their ever-changing needs.”⁵⁰

2. Make disciples first. The primary goal of small group ministry is the making of Christian disciples. Particularly in a church planting situation, we should not be in too much of a hurry to “get to the doctrines.” The immediate aim, after friendships have been established, is to get as many people together as possible, meeting in small groups

for the study of the Bible and the building of relationships. Once that is happening, other things will follow.

3. Start small. It may seem easiest to simply gather as many Adventists together from other congregations to “start a new church” but in reality that is not starting a new church at all - it is simply transplanting an old one. Importing a ready-made congregation also means importing a traditional approach to ministry, the need for re-education, and resistance to change. A small number of church members committed to leaving their old church permanently - and maybe even moving house and changing job - to help plant a new church, is better than having a larger number involved who later on may prefer to return to their home church.

3. Make Sabbath services relevant. We have a traditional approach to Sabbath worship services which serves us well in most situations. In a church-planting situation, however, Sabbath services will be more effective if they take the form of

⁵⁰ Robert Logan, *Beyond Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1995), 74.

seminars, workshops, while numbers are still small, or evangelistic-style meetings if numbers are larger. Worship/celebration type services which include more congregational singing and participation, should follow later. (See additional comments on this in chapter six under section on "Global mission church planting projects.")

Leadership

It was our custom to serve communion on the first Sunday of every month. We set it up on a table where people could come up, take the elements, and then go back to their seats. The entire procedure was dependent on getting the first person started right so that everyone would follow in the proper order. The system worked wonderfully most of the time. However, there were exceptions.

One Sunday morning, everyone stood. The first person took a step and everyone followed him. Unfortunately, that first person was headed for the bathroom. The entire first row followed him. It wasn't until the second and third rows were stacked up behind them that they figured out they were headed in the wrong direction!⁵¹

⁵¹ Galloway, *The Small Group Book*, 16.

Chapter Eight

SMALL GROUP LEADERS

“We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the Gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.” (1 Thessalonians 2:8 NIV)

Why do small groups need leaders? It might seem a strange question to ask, but it is sometimes suggested that a small group doesn't need to have a particular leader - small groups run themselves and “everyone can take it in turn.” Well, some groups have tried doing it that way, and it doesn't work.

In his small group leadership training course, Colin Marshall addresses the “myth of the leaderless group,” and points out that in fact, there is no such thing as a group without a leader, and where a leader is not appointed, “any kind of group will generate its own leadership.”⁵²

The “myth of the leaderless group” actually stems in part from the fear that some leaders will dominate their groups and stand in the way of free and open sharing between groups members - the very thing small groups are supposed to provide. So they do need leaders, well-chosen and well-trained. Without them, small groups will tend to be unstable, lacking direction and long-term motivation. Even worse, they could end up being leader-dominated!

Remember, small groups are not intended to be casual, unstructured gatherings of Christians who simply enjoy meeting together for one activity or another; they are to be part of the transforming ministry of the church. They are the means through which the laity (the people of God) can fulfill the ministry for which God has ordained them, and in these days become part of the final reformation needed in the church, without which it cannot fulfill its mission in the world. Small groups can help take the church from where we are to where God wants us to be. And that requires leadership.

It may well be that in the Adventist congregation of the future, the most influential people in its life-changing ministry, along with pastors and elders, will be small group leaders. Perhaps small group leaders will be the church elders. For sure, small group leaders will be church leaders in the fullest sense of the word.

Qualities of small group leaders

The New Testament profile of church leaders described in Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus (1 Timothy 3:1-13; 5:17-25; Titus 1:5-16) includes the following relevant

⁵² Colin Marshall, *Growth Groups: A Training Course in How to Lead Small Groups* (Kingsford, NSW, Australia: Matthias Media, 1995), 79

qualifications:

- they should not be recent converts, but mature in the faith
- they should be known for their consistent Christian lifestyle and Christlike behaviour
- they should be gentle
- they should be hospitable
- they should be thoroughly familiar with Christ's teaching
- they should be able to teach

Small group leaders, then, as church leaders, should be both example and teacher within the group.

a) The small group leader as example. Since the first purpose of small groups is to develop disciples, the leader should be an example of a disciple among other disciples. Who qualifies? Fortunately for us, Jesus chose His first twelve disciples from among ordinary people, just as they were. They all had their faults. But even as they were growing in discipleship, they were commissioned to continue the work that Jesus began. That's encouraging for today's disciples. As examples to their groups, group leaders cannot claim and should not pretend to be perfect, but can confidently claim to be sinners saved by the matchless grace of God.

Christian leaders have their faults. They have their struggles, their doubts, their discouragements and their fears. But they have something else besides, that helps them to deal with these things - that helps them to pick themselves up when they fall, inspires them to rise above their failures, and gives direction to their lives even in the midst of their doubts. That something, of course, is Jesus.

I mention this here because small groups depend on authentic leaders for their effectiveness. People are not impressed and won't follow phonies. Authentic leaders acknowledge both their sinfulness and the forgiveness of God (I John 1:8,9). Everyone knows that the sin problems is universal; to deny it makes us liars. What people want to know is how to deal with it. Small group leaders must be able to point such people in the right direction.

Leaders, then, don't have to be perfect. But as the Bible says, "Love covers over a multitude of sins." (I Peter 4:8) It's not surprising, then, that effective small-group leaders are loving people. In fact we might say that they have three great loves in their lives:

- **They love Jesus**, and are secure enough in their relationship with Him that they don't need the leadership position for their identity. They have a clear, simple story to tell of what he has done in their lives.
- **They love people**, and can relate well with them. That doesn't necessarily mean that they will be extrovert, "life of the party" socialisers. It does mean they care for others, are sensitive to their needs, and can communicate with them on a spiritual level, aiming to reflect God's unconditional love for us. They are shock-proof, and they have a kindly sense of humour.

- **They love the church**, and they probably don't see themselves as qualified to lead it. Nevertheless they are enthusiastic about what it stands for, and are willing to give their best for it.

Such giving of ourselves is important. Group leaders be willing to share their own lives, as well as the Gospel. This was part of Paul's approach to ministry,⁵² and was no doubt one reason for his success. Beyond that, group leaders must "lead" by example in the way that they expect group members to participate and relate with each other. If they expect them to be affirming, available, open, honest, and sensitive, etc., toward each other (as described in part four of this manual) leaders must be willing to "model" these values also.

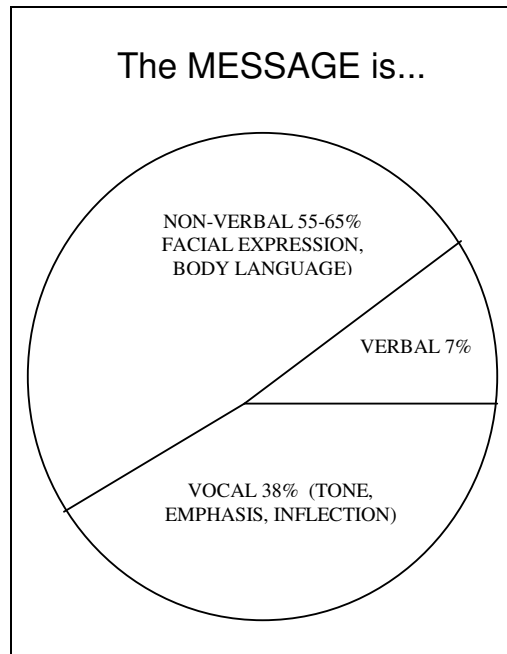
This is one of the most critical areas of small group leadership. Especially during the first few meetings of a new group, its members will probably be reticent to say too much about themselves. If one person (e.g. the leader) shares a personal experience, however, others will readily follow, and the pattern for the future dynamics of the group will quickly be established.

b) The small group leader as teacher. Effective teaching in a small group context involves two skills: understanding and communication.

Understanding. Small group leaders are not expected to know all the answers, and they should never give the impression that they do. So while being a teacher, the group leader is also a learner, eager to learn from others in the group, and encouraging maximum participation. The best group learning takes place, as we have already seen, as every member of the group share together their questions, insights, and experiences.

However, leaders must have a good, all-round understanding of Scripture, its background and structure, its basic teachings, and its great themes. In fact it is an understanding of the great themes of the Bible that make Bible study, especially in groups, so exciting and challenging. Being able to defend our twenty-seven fundamental Bible doctrines is one thing; being able to relate the Scriptures to the overall scheme of things, fit its teachings together as pieces of a divine jig-saw puzzle, and relate them to the much larger challenge of knowing who God is and relating to Him personally, is another.

Communication. It may be stating the obvious to say that the ability of leaders to teach is largely dependent on their ability to communicate. But there is more to it than that. Even though they are teaching through discussion, leaders must be able to guide the group through possible conflict to right conclusions. Communication involves both the giving of useful information, and the building of bridges to enable others to receive and process that information. In practical terms, according to Colin Marshall, *“whether people understand what we say depends to a great extent on how they view us and how they feel toward us. Preconceptions, biases and attitudes all act as filters of communication and distort the message sent and received.”*⁵³



Communication, as the above diagram⁵⁴ shows, is more than words. What we say is less important than how we say it. Body-language - facial expression, eye movements, leaning forward or backward, etc. etc. - is even more important. But who we are is the most important language of all, as we make ourselves known by our attitudes, words and actions combined.

We build communication barriers when we make ourselves out to be something we are not, assume a superior level of importance, and exhibit a condescending or patronising attitude toward those around us. On the other hand we build bridges when we take time to learn and use people’s names, take a genuine interest in their lives outside of group meetings, give them a genuine sense of being important to us, get involved with the informal conversation during refreshments, and convey the idea about ourselves that “what you see is how I am.”

It is significant in this connection that in Paul’s counsel to Timothy regarding leaders, he places “able to teach” next to “gentle and peaceful.” (I Timothy 3:2,3). A small group leader does not force people to participate, but gently seeks to draw them in.

The small group leader’s job description. Beyond the roles of example and teacher, the small group leader usually carries the following specific responsibilities:

- a) cares for the group’s overall goals, agenda and growth in love and unity
- b) leads in Bible study, but often shares this with others

⁵³ibid, 79.

⁵⁴ Mallison, *The Small Group Leader*, 77

- c) identifies abilities and gifts in others and finds ways to use them in group ministry
- d) manages conflict within the group
- e) develops awareness of the spiritual state of each group member, whether Christian or non-Christian, and seeks to facilitate growth
- f) works in consultation with church pastor and others to deal with matters beyond the scope of the group
- g) communicates the aims and vision of the group with the larger church, and those of the larger church with the group where appropriate
- h) keeps the goal of growth through conversion fresh in the minds of members, or delegates this responsibility to someone else
- i) trains assistant leader for readiness to assume leadership in new group
- j) works as a team with the **host/hostess**. This person should be someone who demonstrates a genuine care for people, and the ability to put people at ease. He/she is responsible for one or more of the following, according to ability and time available (duties not undertaken by the host/hostess should be delegated to other group members, not carried by the group leader):
 - welcoming group members
 - leading the “ice-breaker” or initial sharing period
 - the prayer ministry of the group
 - general pastoral care of members

Too hot to handle? All that has been said in terms of group leaders’ qualifications and responsibilities may just look too daunting, and would-be leaders could easily be discouraged from even trying. The consolation is that everyone called by God to lead feels the same way! We should remember that the development of small group ministry is all about opening real ministry to the “ordinary” Christian. And God loves taking ordinary things and doing extraordinary things with them.

Like a Family

Sheila was one of eight students who had met each week for a year as a Christian small group at University. During one of the first meetings the following year, she decided to share her story.

"I need to tell you what's been going on with me and my parents, because you're my family," Sheila began. Surrounded by the friends she now regarded as her brothers and sisters in Christ, she continued: "I've been having therapy for the past few weeks because I've finally decided to face up to what happened when I was a little girl - my father molested me. I have to confront my parents, and I need you to pray for me."

She sat on a seat in the middle of the room, and we gathered round her. Those nearest to her placed their hands on her shoulders. Some could not hold back the tears as they prayed for her and her parents. Several weeks later, while Sheila talked with her parents in the office of her therapist, we gathered in a home to pray. When Sheila joined us after the session, she cried at first. She told us what had happened, and thanked us for supporting her.

We had not only become her spiritual family, but in some ways were functioning more effectively than the family she grew up in. Susan was part of a community.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Adapted from the story told by Nina Thiel, in Jimmy Long, *Small Group Leaders' Handbook*, 39,40.

Chapter Nine

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)

A typical small group meeting will normally last from one hour to an hour and a half, and 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 feature in most meetings.

The place of meeting will usually be a house, rather than the 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 to begin with, 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 of 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-breaker⁵⁶ question or two, or simply on group members’ experiences during the previous week. This “warm-up” period is a very important part of every small-group meeting, and we 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

⁵⁶ For a sample list of ice-breaker questions, see Appendix A.

- 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 well be led by the host/hostess of the group, although other group members can 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.

A large number of pre-prepared Bible study guides are available³¹ which take a lot of hard work out of preparation. They cover most levels of Bible study, from very simple introductory studies on the basics of Christianity, to advanced studies for more knowledgeable groups. They also cover a wide range of topics. Several guides have been specifically designed for a group to use for their first six or eight meetings, to help members get to know each other and build relationships among them. These simple guides help people to become familiar with the style and dynamics of relational Bible study, and I strongly recommend them to 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. (Bible study guides vary, but come with full instructions for the leader.) 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 making sure that you are familiar with the subject and the 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. The Serendipity Bible⁵⁷ is excellent for this purpose: it consists of the NIV Bible text, and plenty of small-group style questions in the margins - right from Genesis to Revelation. 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 that wish to create a “safe” environment for unchurched people, a contemporary English version should be used, such as the Good News Bible or the New International Version. The church should purchase a number of identical Bibles for this purpose, so that page numbers for the

⁵⁷ *The NIV Serendipity Bible for Study Groups*, USA: Zondervan Publishing House, is available from Christian bookshops.

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 free and 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 in small groups should aim to be:

- relational - designed to build relationships, not just pass on information
- relevant to group members' needs and interests
- challenging, intended to change lives
- memorable - leaders should use teaching aids such as flip charts, O/H projector etc
- creative - there are more ways than one to study Scripture

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, and it asks: "*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, and it asks: "*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:

- a) 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?")
- b) 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?")
- c) Singular, not multiple (e.g. Why is it important to be baptised?" not "What does it mean to be baptised, why is it important, and what can we learn from the baptism of Jesus?")

- d) 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 justifications 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 a bit 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...?")

Excellent material on developing good question skills can be found in several small group manuals, such as the Willow Creek guide.⁵⁸

e) 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 no prayer at all during the meeting.

The prayer time in small group meetings can be led by the host/hostess or another designated prayer ministry leader, and there is advantage in the prayer leader keeping a written record (journal) of prayer requests and answers.

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

- i. 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

⁵⁸ Donahue, *Leading Life-Changing Small Groups*, 112-116.

a single prayer with one beginning and one ending. All who wish to can 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.

ii. 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.

iii. 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.

iv. 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.

v. Prayer in two’s or three’s, which enables group members to spend more time praying for each other. Be sure everyone is comfortable with praying in public before suggesting it.

vi 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

As mentioned earlier, 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 should also be in harmony with the informal nature of small group life. As a general rule, prayer that is offered before and during Bible study, or the shared prayer after Bible study that may continue for some time, is best offered while the group is seated. Groups seeking to build a sense of fellowship and mutual support find much help if group members join hands while prayer is offered. There is no need to insist that everyone should kneel for prayer.

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 round that person while they pray for 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 and hot drinks and biscuits are enough.

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

During this first stage, most group members are highly motivated, eager to learn, and confident that the group will result in blessings all round. 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

In this stage, there is a return to reality - the world of real people. We 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 realise 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: Development

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 recognise the possibilities for development and help it 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 Mark
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 (eighteen months) period, 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

4. 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 towards, the earlier enthusiasm can easily fade. A pre-determined 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 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 minimised if:

- a) the group is reminded occasionally that this will happen
- b) a celebration event is organised for the last meeting to recognise 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 organised 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.

*January 31, 1929
Martin Van Buren
Governor of New York*

To President Jackson:

The canal system of this country is being threatened by a new form of transportation known as “railroads.” The federal government must preserve the canals for the following reasons:

One. If canal boats are supplanted by “railroads,” serious unemployment will result. Captains, cooks, drivers, hostellers, repairmen and dock tenders will be left without means of livelihood, not to mention the numerous farmers now employed in growing hay for the horses.

Two. Boat builders would suffer and towline, whip and harness makers would be left destitute.

Three. Canal boats are absolutely essential to the defense of the United States. In the event of the expected trouble with England, the Erie Canal would be the only means by which we could ever move the supplies so vital to waging modern war.

As you may well know, Mr. President, “railroad” carriages are pulled at the enormous speed of fifteen miles per hour by “engines” which, in addition to endangering life and limb of passengers, roar and snort their way through the countryside, setting fire to crops, scaring livestock and frightening women and children. The Almighty surely never intended that people should travel at such breakneck speed.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Herb Miller, ed., “Letter to President Jackson,” *Net Results Magazine*, March 1991, quoted in William A. Beckham, *The Second Reformation: Reshaping the Church for the 21st Century*, p. 19

Chapter Ten

SMALL GROUP FACTS AND PHOBIAS

So - how do you feel about the idea of introducing small groups in your Adventist church, now that you have come to the end of this manual? In conversations with different individuals about small groups, there have been widely differing responses, from wholehearted enthusiasm to wholehearted skepticism. That's not surprising.

Countless people have been greatly blessed by belonging to a group - a few might not be Christians today if it had not been for the new faith they found through meeting with a small group of loving, caring Christians. Some people, however, have been hurt by belonging to a group (Waco might not have happened if it had not been for small groups).

This brief manual was written to help explain what genuine small groups are, how they work, and what they can achieve, in the hope that many, if not all, Seventh-day Adventist congregations in Britain will eventually adopt a small-group approach to church life, and enjoy the enormous benefits they can bring.

But there are a few outstanding concerns to be addressed and questions to be answered which do not naturally belong in previous sections, so let's deal with them here. And once we've dealt with them, all I can say is, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Join a small group and try the experience for yourself! But first, the concerns and questions.

1. "Oh no. Not another cure-all!" One of the most frequent objections to taking small groups seriously is based on the idea that they are being offered as just another instant solution to all the challenges we face as a church.

Well, the answer to that one is "No" and "Yes." "No" because small groups are not a substitute for hard work and commitment, and they will not change anything overnight. Most churches will be looking at a minimum of three years before small groups really begin to have a major impact on the effectiveness of its ministry. Also, small groups are not a "programme" which everyone has to run the same. Small groups are a system - they represent a paradigm shift in our concept of the church. That's the difference.

The answer is also "Yes" because as soon as the first group begins to function properly, positive changes are going to be felt, first by individuals in the group, and then by the church. If the majority of the congregation become involved, differences will be seen and felt in all directions:- quality of church fellowship, numbers of new converts, level of apostasy, sense of corporate ownership, involvement of youth in ministry, etc. etc. That's how it's already working in thousands of churches worldwide; that's how it can work in your church.

2. “They’re a substitute for the Holy Spirit!” If there are problems in the church, the solution is prayer, fasting, and the Holy Spirit, right? Right! - there is no substitute for the power and presence of God among us. But what if small groups are part of His way of coming close to us, one of His chosen methods for guiding, empowering and using us? What if we limit the Holy Spirit by ignoring His counsel and use less effective methods than the ones he has already indicated we should use? There’s no substitute for the Holy Spirit, but there’s no substitute for the right method, either!

Remember, we keep Sabbath on Saturday and encourage others to do the same because it’s Biblical, and part of God’s plan for us. We reject Sunday as the Sabbath because we see it as an unacceptable human alternative. We should return to the small group church concept for the same reason: it’s Biblical, it’s part of God’s plan, and we cannot be as effective in Gospel ministry without it as we can be with it.

3. “We’re just copying other churches.” Well, that may be true. It’s a legitimate concern that we should do something simply because we see other churches doing it. But let’s be humble on this one. Most of what we believe and what we do, and much of our present system of church structure, did not begin with us. We copied it from other churches. And we have never claimed that we have a monopoly on the Holy Spirit - we do believe that God is bigger than we are and is working out His own plan for the world through other organisations as well as our own.

There is no doubt that God is doing something wonderful “out there” - through small groups and other means as well. We believe we should be the head and not the tail; but if we can learn from others, let’s do it.

4. “The old ways are best!” We like the old hymns, the old order of church service - and the old system. We’re familiar with it, we’re comfortable with it. So it’s natural to feel uncomfortable with something that threatens to take the old familiar things away.

But let’s never forget that our church began as a movement of change. Having said what we’ve said in the past about others who teach tradition rather than truth, let’s not fall into the same error ourselves - being so comfortable with ourselves, that we resist the Holy Spirit when he is trying to move us closer to God’s ideal.

The practicalities of small group ministry mean that certain things will need to change, as we have already noted. We can’t work the old system and a new system together. Individual church members can only do so much. Church growth consultant Carl George believes that “*most people can handle only two and a half involvements: leadership of one ministry, solid participation in another, and occasional participation in a third.*”⁵⁴ So someone might serve as an elder, help teach a Sabbath School class, and support the prayer meeting, but to ask that person to do something else besides would mean that nothing would be done properly.

So, yes, small groups mean that something old might have to go to make way for something new. (For example, serving as a church elder might actually mean serving as a small group leader, and nothing more.) But is that a problem if the new is better than the old? And what if the old is not working as well as it once did? It wouldn’t be

the first time that old wineskins had to be replaced with new ones to hold the new wine.

5. “If it’s not broken, why mend it?” Right! Many things in the church still serve us well and may continue to do so indefinitely. Small groups are not intended to do away with them. If intensive, short-term public evangelism “reaping” campaigns work well, let’s continue to use them. If the prayer meeting is a major event that involves the majority of members and is bringing life and power to the church, keep it. Small groups can still serve a useful purpose as a link in the chain between the beginning (the vision) and the end (the achievement) of what we set out to do in areas of fellowship, witness, and worship, etc.

6. “I’m not hanging out my dirty washing!” There’s a real fear that belonging to a small group means baring your soul and letting other people into all the guilty secrets of your life. But that’s not the way it is. The sharing that takes place within small groups takes place spontaneously and naturally, just as it always does among friends. There’s no manipulation, no pressure, just a genuine desire among group members to help and support one another. It’s called “Koinonia,” and the New Testament describes it frequently (e.g. Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37)

7. “What about the children?” Many people may want to get involved with small groups but feel restricted because of their young children. Such people, however, need the blessings of belonging to a small group more than the rest of us! Here are a few ways that existing small groups provide for their members’ children:

- Suitable meetings are arranged at the church while parents meet with their small groups
- One small group arranges to care for the children of another small group, and vice versa, by having meetings at different times
- If there is a separate large room in the home where the group meets, group members take it in turns to care for the children
- Individuals in the church volunteer, or are hired, to babysit
- Children are included in the groups, if everyone is happy with the consequences (!)

8. “We can’t afford this on top of everything else!” Well the good news is, small groups are about the most inexpensive, cost-effective ministry a church could ever have. Hour for hour, pound for pound, we will get more return from our investment in small groups in terms of practical benefits to the church, than from any other investment we might make. At the bottom end, in fact, small groups need cost nothing at all. All you need are Bibles and people. Beyond that, it would pay the church to invest in:

- a few small group guide books for the library
- an overhead projector

- a whiteboard/flipchart or two
- funding for small group study guides as needed (though most people are willing to pay for these if they are used)

9. ***“This means taking one step back to take two steps forward.”*** That’s probably a true observation. The time and effort that it will take to get a fully productive small group system established in many of our churches may mean that not as much time and energy can be given to other things as before. One result of this might be that for the first year or two, there might be a small decrease in the number of baptisms we normally see. The important thing is, however, as chapter six of this manual explained, that from year two or three onwards, baptisms will increase and go on to pass all previous records. We need to see the time and energy spent in setting up small groups as an investment. The bigger the investment, the bigger the return.

In terms of a growing church, isn’t that exactly what we want?

***May God guide you and
prosper His church as you
think BIG by thinking
SMALL GROUPS***

APPENDIX A

SUGGESTED ICE-BREAKER QUESTIONS

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 centre 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 favourite TV programme 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 favourite 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. As a time traveller, 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 still be fun if I could.

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE CHURCH-LIFE QUESTIONNAIRE

In order for the church family to work and grow together, we need a clear picture of how we see ourselves. Please respond to the following ideas according to how you actually think or feel, not how you believe you ought to respond.

___ Visitor ___ Member ___ Male ___ Female
___ Under 15 ___ 16-20 ___ 21-35 ___ 36-50
___ Over 50

A. FELLOWSHIP

1. The congregation here is:

WARM AND FRIENDLY	_____	COLD AND UNFRIENDLY
CARING	_____	UNCARING
ONE UNITED GROUP	_____	SEVERAL "DIVIDED" GROUPS
HAPPY	_____	UNHAPPY

2. In the fellowship of this church I see myself in the circle as shown by "X"

3. Visitors to this church

- a) feel accepted immediately _____
- b) feel accepted after a short time _____
- c) feel accepted only after a long period _____

B. WORSHIP

1. Sabbath School is

INTEREST	_____	BORING
VARIED	_____	MONOTONOUS
UP-TO-DATE	_____	OUT-OF DATE

2. Some don't attend Sabbath School probably because

3. The worship service is usually:

ALIVE	_____	DEAD
CHALLENGING	_____	NOT CHALLENGING
RELEVANT	_____	NOT RELEVANT

4. The music used in worship

- a) Is good at it is _____
- b) Should have variety _____
- c) Should include contemporary worship songs _____

5. Participation of church members in church service is:
JUST RIGHT _ _ _ _ _ INADEQUATE

6. Mid-week "prayer" meeting would be better attended if _____

7. What kind of sermon benefits you most?
Doctrinal ___ Prophecy ___ Current Events ___ Devotional ___ Christian Lifestyle ___
other___

C. WITNESS

1. I believe that every member in the church has a part to play in the witness of the church, and I think I know what my part is, Yes ___ No ___ Not Sure ___

2. The last time I spoke to a non-Adventist about Jesus was:
a) Less than a week ago ___ b) Less than a month ago ___ c) More than that ___

3. The last time I invited someone to church was:
a) Less than a week ago___ b) Less than a month ago___ c) More than that ___

4. In sharing my faith, up till now I feel I have been:

SUCCESSFUL _ _ _ _ _ UNSUCCESSFUL

5. As a church, what do we need most to increase the effectiveness of our witness?
Try and number the following 1 - 6 in order of importance.

- a) More and better training _____
- b) More prayer and commitment _____
- c) More and better publicity _____
- d) More and better witnessing tools _____
- e) A more friendly, united church _____
- f) More lively, relevant worship _____

D. ADMINISTRATION

1. Does the Church have a definite goal/mission which all members know and share in? Yes___ No___
Not Sure ___

2. How about organisation? Is the church.
WELL ORGANISED _ _ _ _ _ DISORGANISED.

WHAT ABOUT THE PASTOR?

What in your opinion should priorities of the church pastor be? Please number the following functions of a pastor 1 to 5 in order of their importance.

Preaching, leading congregation in worship _____

Church leadership and administration (working with church boards, committees, planning, organising programmes) _____

Teaching, training, equipping church members for service _____

Evangelistic activities - personal/public campaign work, Bible studies, calling on non-members _____

Pastoral care - visiting church members, counselling, calling on the sick, ministering to bereaved _____

ANY SUGGESTIONS?

Please state briefly how you think church life here could be even better than it is at present _____

APPENDIX C

ELLEN WHITE STATEMENTS ON SMALL GROUPS

“The formation of small companies as a basis of Christian effort has been presented to me by One who cannot err. If there is a large number in the church, let the members be formed into small companies, to work not only for the church members, but for unbelievers. If in one place there are only two or three who know the truth, let them form themselves into a band of workers. Let them keep their bond of union unbroken, pressing together in love and unity, encouraging one another to advance, and gaining courage and strength from the assistance of the others. Let them labour in Christlike forbearance and patience, speaking no hasty words, using the talent of speech to build one another up in the most holy faith. Let them labour in Christlike love for those outside the fold, forgetting self in their endeavour to help others. As they work and pray in Christ’s name, their numbers will increase, for the Saviour says: “If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in heaven.” Matthew 18:19 Testimonies Volume 7, p. 21, 22

“In the church there was a revival of the missionary spirit. An earnest desire to learn how to work for the Lord was shown. Small companies gathered for prayer and Bible study. All moved forward with harmonious action. Believers went to places where the people have no opportunity to hear the Word of God and gathered the children for Sabbath School. Efforts were made to help isolated families. Plans were laid for these families to meet with other families for Bible study. Thus the way was opened for the light to shine forth from the Word of God.” The Indiana Reporter, 25 February 1903.

“Let small companies assemble in the evening, at noon, or in the early morning, to study the Bible. Let them have a season of prayer, that they may be strengthened, enlightened, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit . . . If you yourselves will open the door to receive it, a great blessing will come to you. Angels of God will be in your assembly. You will feed upon the leaves of the tree of life. What testimonies you may bear of the loving acquaintance made with your fellow-workers in these precious seasons when seeking the blessing of God. Let each tell his experience in simple words. This will bring more comfort and joy to the soul than all the pleasant instruments of music that could be brought into the churches. Christ will come into your hearts. It is by this means only that you can maintain your integrity.” Testimonies Volume 7, p. 195

“A Christian is a Christlike man, a Christlike woman, who is active in God’s service, who is present at the social meeting, whose presence will encourage others also. Religion does not consist in works, but religion works; it is not dormant.” SDA Bible Commentary, vol. 7, 935.

“We meet together to edify one another by an interchange of thoughts and feelings, and to gather strength, and light, and courage by becoming acquainted with one another’s hopes and aspirations; and by our earnest, heartfelt prayers, offered up in faith, we receive refreshment and vigour from the source of our strength . . . All who

are pursuing the onward Christian course, would have, and will have, an experience that is living, that is new and interesting. A living experience is made up of daily trials, conflicts and temptations, strong efforts and victories, and great peace and joy gained through Jesus. A simple relation of such experiences gives light, strength and knowledge that will aid others in their advancement in the divine life.” Testimonies Volume 2, p. 578, 579.

“Preach less, and educate more, by holding Bible readings, and by praying with families and little companies.” “To all who are working with Christ I would say, Wherever you can gain access to the people by the fireside, improve your opportunity. Take your bible, and open before them its great truths. Your success will not depend so much upon your knowledge and accomplishments, as upon your ability to find your way to the heart. By being social and coming close to the people, you may turn the current of their thoughts more readily than by the most able discourse. The presentation of Christ in the family, by the fireside, and in small gatherings in private houses is often more successful in winning souls to Jesus than are sermons delivered in the open air, to the moving throng, or even in halls or churches.” Gospel Workers, p. 193.

“God’s work is to be done in his way and his Spirit. In various places small companies are to consecrate themselves to God, body, soul, and spirit, and laying hold of the throne of God by faith they are to work zealously, keeping their souls in the love of God. The vital current of his love will make itself felt, and will be recognized as from heaven in the good works of his people. Those little companies who know the truth, with one voice should bid their minister go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Each one should seek to do individual work for another. Not one who has tasted the goodness, the mercy, and the love of God, can be excused from working for the souls of others.” Followers of Christ will be Missionaries, Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, 8 January, 1895.

“Although the social meeting is a new thing, yet they are learning in the school of Christ and are overcoming fear and trembling. We keep before them the fact that the social meeting (similar to small group meetings) will be the best meeting in which they may be trained and educated to be witnesses for Christ.” Manuscript 32 1894.

“But on such occasions as our annual camp meetings we must never lose sight of the opportunities afforded for teaching the believers how to do practical missionary work in the place where they may live. In many instances it would be well to set apart certain men to carry the burden of different lines of educational work at these meetings. Let some help the people to learn how to give Bible readings and to conduct cottage meetings. Let others bear the burden of teaching the people how to practice the principles of health and temperance, and how to give treatments to the sick. Still others may labour in the interest of our periodical and book work.” Testimonies for the Church Volume 9, p. 82, 83.

“Why do not believers feel a deeper, more earnest concern for those who are out of Christ? Why do not two or three meet together and plead with God for the salvation of some special one, and then for still another? In our churches let companies be formed for service. Let different ones unite in labour as fishers of men. Let them seek

to gather souls from the corruption of the world into the saving purity of Christ's love." Testimonies, Vol. 7, 21.

"I saw the saints leaving the cities and villages, and associating together in companies, and living in the most solitary places. Angels provided them food and water, while the wicked were suffering from hunger and thirst." Early Writings, p. 282.

APPENDIX D

EXAMPLE OF A RELATIONAL GROUP COVENANT

Our small group gives us the opportunity to develop the relationships and fellowship necessary within the Body of Christ. Genuine biblical fellowship is possible, with God's help, through our individual and mutual commitment. To assist us as group members in achieving the goals of identification, love, caring, and accountability to God, and to guide us in our mutual commitment to one another as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, we agree to abide by the following covenants:

1. **THE COVENANT OF AFFIRMATION:** I pledge to accept you. I may not agree with your ideas or actions, but I will attempt to do all I can to express God's affirming love. I need you; we need each other.

2. **THE COVENANT OF COMMITMENT:** My resources - time, energy, insight, possessions - are at your disposal if you need them. I also pledge to meet with this group on a regular basis.

3. **THE COVENANT OF PRAYER:** I promise to pray regularly for the members of the group.

4. **THE COVENANT OF HONESTY:** I agree to strive to become a more open and honest person, to share my true opinions, feelings, struggles, joys, and hurts as well as I am able.

5. **THE COVENANT OF ACCOUNTABILITY:** I pledge to accept and give counsel if necessary for the growth of the group or individual members of it, realising that it is in "speaking the truth in love, we are able grow up in all aspects unto Him, who is the head" (Ephesians 4:15). I also recognise that as a group we are accountable to the congregation of the church for what we do or fail to do.

6. **THE COVENANT OF SENSITIVITY:** Just as I want you to know and understand me, I pledge my sensitivity to you and your needs to the best of my ability. I want to hear you, see your point of view, and understand your feelings.

7. **THE COVENANT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:** I promise never to divulge anything shared within this group in confidence outside this group. I vow not to ask you to share things about yourself that you would prefer to keep undisclosed.

In full acceptance to these covenants, I affix my name to this document in recognition of my commitment to God and the members of this groups. I shall keep this document as a reminder of this voluntary covenant I have entered into on this date.

Signature

Date

(Your signature is for your own commitment; you retain this document.)

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Think Big, Think SMALL GROUPS

Small groups are important. In what could be described as the two biggest achievements since Creation - the establishment of the nation of Israel following the Exodus, and the establishment of the Christian church following the first Advent of Christ - God used small groups in a significant way. He has used them many times since, and now He is using them again, as He prepares us for the biggest event of all - the Second Advent, and the establishment of His kingdom.

This manual explains what small groups are, what they do, and how they work. It offers practical guidance on how your church can develop a small-group ministry through which you can deepen your relationship with God, grow in your relationships with other believers, and share your faith in a very natural way with people who want to know what Christianity is all about.

I share the belief that this is the way to go. The manual is well-written in a concerned, spiritual and evangelistic tone. The content is excellent. There is a good collection of recommended books and back-up material.

—Bertil Wiklander, President, Trans European Division

A very fine manual. It provides a very clear guide for pastors and members in Seventh-day Adventist churches to shift to small-group based churches. It demonstrates the biblical basis for small groups and adds another voice to the urgent call to recognise the small group as the basic unit of the church.

—Peter Roennfeldt, Ministerial Association Secretary, Trans European Division

One of the very best surveys of the blessings of small group work that I have come across. Written very much for the ordinary member in the local church, and I think it is quite splendid.

—Martin L. Anthony, Personal Ministries, Trans European Division

This manual addresses a concept of church life which, if followed, could bring about the kind of Christian maturity and numerical growth which we have been praying for. Through small groups the arms of the church can embrace every member with love, and every member can be actively involved in making new disciples for the Lord.

—Don McFarlane, President, South England Conference

This manual by Pastor David Cox fills a void in our evangelistic strategy for the twenty-first century. The success of the Protestant Reformation resulted in large congregations and complex administrative structures. This was good but we missed out on the value of the spiritual bonding and dynamics of small groups. They worked wonderfully in the days of the apostolic Church and they will work again as we anticipate the second Pentecost.

—Cecil R. Perry, President, British Union Conference

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I am not entirely responsible for this manual!

To begin with, it may never have been put together had it not been for the members of the first small group I had the privilege of being a part of when I was associated with the Wimbledon Adventist church. They made it such a positive experience that my eyes were opened to the possibilities of small group ministry in the future.

Since then, there have been many other people who have kept the idea alive in our churches by experimenting with groups and sharing their experiences and convictions. My wife Velda has been a special inspiration as she has used her God-given gift of hospitality at home, and led groups involved in women's ministries in various places.

As the vision of small group ministry has grown and developed more recently, I have to thank four individuals in particular: Don McFarlane, for supporting the emphasis on small groups in the South England Conference; and Humphrey Walters, Aris Vontzalides, and Ellis Guthrie for their prayers and enthusiastic commitment to making small groups happen. I am also grateful for the encouragement of the many other pastors and small group leaders who share the vision and are leading their congregations in the direction of becoming small group churches.

A manual like this is not the easiest kind of book to read, so I am indebted to Laurent Grisel who has made it easier with his illustrations, and to Wendy Goodman who has given her creative talent to designing the attractive cover. Thanks also to Donna Bernard, my secretary, who has kept the manuscript in proper order despite the many changes that have been made to it.

When all is said and done, however, if you find anything of value in this volume, it is thanks to the One who made us His children and brought us together as a family in the first place. Small groups are His way of helping us - and His family - to grow.