

An Exciting Way to Get Involved



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 1:1, 2, 26; Exod. 18:21–25; 1 Cor. 12:12–25; Acts 16:11–15, 40; Acts 4:31; Acts 12:12.*

Memory Text: “Then He said to His disciples, ‘The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest’ ” (*Matthew 9:37, 38, NKJV*).

Someone has said, “There is strength in numbers.” In a sense, that is true. Have you ever noticed that you are far more motivated to exercise if you are doing it with a group of people than if you have to exercise alone each day? Many people join health clubs, gyms, and exercise facilities because they believe that they will exercise more and enjoy it better if they are exercising with other people. In a similar way, God has created us for fellowship. We are social beings, and as with exercise it is true with many things in life: we do better if we have a social support system. This is especially true in spiritual matters.

Throughout the Bible, small groups are highlighted as one of God's methods of strengthening our faith, increasing our knowledge of His Word, deepening our prayer life, and equipping us to witness. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit participated in a small group ministry. Jesus established His small group of disciples, and the apostle Paul traveled the Roman world with his small group of evangelistic companions.

During this week's study, we will focus on the biblical basis for small groups, and you will discover an exciting way to get involved.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 5.

Small Groups—God’s Idea First

Read Genesis 1:1, 2, 26; Hebrews 1:1, 2; and Ephesians 3:8, 9. How do these verses reveal the unity of the Godhead?

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit participated in Creation together. They each had different tasks but worked together in an indivisible union. The Father was the Master Designer, the Great Architect. He carried out His plans through Jesus, as the active agent in Creation in unison with the power of the Holy Spirit. Such a powerful supernatural act is way beyond our comprehension. What we can clearly comprehend is not only the reality of the created world and the cosmos but also that God Himself made it all (*see Rom. 1:18–20*).

Small groups were God’s idea first. Though one has to be careful when using analogies in regard to many of the mysterious aspects of God, let’s use one loosely and say that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit composed the first “small group” in salvation history. They participated together in the creation of the human race and then in its redemption after the Fall.

Compare John 10:17, 18 with Romans 8:11 and 1 Corinthians 15:15. How does the resurrection of Christ demonstrate the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the plan of salvation?

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are united in a “small group” with the express purpose of redeeming the human race. “The plan of salvation had its place in the counsels of the Infinite from all eternity.” —Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 186. There is nothing more important to God than saving as many people as possible (*1 Tim. 2:4, 2 Pet. 3:9*). Small groups may have multiple purposes that we will study in this week’s lesson, but their overriding purpose is to focus on winning lost people to Jesus. That is, by working in small groups we can help not ourselves alone but others, as well. That is, the ultimate goal of our small groups should be soul winning.

Dwell on the mystery of the unity of our God. It’s hard to grasp, isn’t it? Yet, we can still believe in, and trust, what we don’t fully understand, right? Why is this such an important principle for Christians to follow when it comes to faith?

Small Groups in Scripture

The Bible provides numerous examples of small groups praying, fellowshiping, encouraging one another, and laboring together for Christ. These groups give God's people the opportunity to share responsibilities and fully utilize their varied gifts. That is, small groups also can provide the opportunity for the Lord to use each of us more fully.

Read Exodus 18:21–25. What providential counsel did Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, provide that made a significant difference for Moses? Why was this plan so vitally important?

Every individual in the camp of Israel became part of a group of ten, led by a godly official. These small groups were a place for problem solving, but they also were much more. They were places of fellowship where problems could be prevented and spiritual life nurtured. They were places of vision, where God's plans for Israel could be shared. In groups like this, people could form tight and caring relationships that could help all involved work through whatever the issues were that they were facing. No question—then, as well as now, people struggled with things that others could help them with. Small groups provide opportunities for warm, caring fellowship, spiritual growth, and problem solving. It is fascinating that small group specialists tell us that the ideal size for group interaction is between 6 and 12 people. This is the exact size that both Moses and Jesus employed in forming their groups.

Read Luke 6:12, 13; Matthew 10:1; and Mark 3:13–15. What was Jesus' twofold purpose in calling the disciples and selecting them to be part of His small group ministry?

Jesus' purpose in calling the disciples was to prepare them both spiritually and practically for their mission to the world. In fellowship with Him, they would grow in grace. In the context of their small group meetings, they would learn how to minister more effectively. Day by day, as they observed Jesus ministering to the needs of people around Him, they would learn by observation how to use their gifts. The purpose of Jesus' small groups was both spiritual nurture and outreach.

Think about a time when you were involved with a small group of people, whatever the circumstances, who cared about each other and who were working for a common goal. What did you learn from that experience that could help you understand the value of small groups in the context of our faith?

Organized for Service

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12–25. How does the human body provide an excellent illustration of working together harmoniously in small groups?

Paul not only reveals the importance of spiritual gifts in the life of the church, but he also suggests a model of how they can be organized. He discusses spiritual gifts in the context of the body of Christ and how it can work.

A study of anatomy and physiology reveals that the organs of the body are organized into different interrelated systems. For example, the digestive, cardiovascular, respiratory, and skeletal are just a few of the body's complex organ systems. Spiritual gifts are like the different parts of the body. They function best when organized into systems or groups. In fact, in most cases they cannot function alone. Our bodies are not just a lump of separate organs freelancing away at whatever they do. Each bodily function is organized into a tightly knit system that works together toward a common goal.

All this tells us something about the environment in which we can best use our spiritual gifts. It is so easy to get discouraged when we function alone, but when we are part of a small group of people with similar interests and goals, we find that our efforts can be much better focused and greatly magnified. So, small groups provide the best environment to exercise our spiritual gifts and can become the heart of a local congregation's outreach ministry.

Ellen G. White underlines the value of small groups in these words: "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, each gaining courage and strength from the assistance of the others."—*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, pp. 21, 22.

Small group ministry is ordained by God to enable each church member to grow spiritually, experience warm fellowship, and utilize his or her God-given gifts in service.

Reflect on Ellen G. White's statement above. Analyze it phrase by phrase. How can this divine counsel be implemented in your church?

New Testament Small Groups

The New Testament church exploded in growth. In a few short years it grew from a small group of believers to tens of thousands of worshippers. There were many factors that contributed to this influx of believers and this rapid growth phenomenon. Jesus' ministry sowed the seed of the gospel and prepared the multitudes to accept the preaching of the disciples. After Christ's ascension, the Holy Spirit descended mightily on the day of Pentecost on the praying, believing disciples. One of the contributing factors for the rapid growth of the New Testament church was its small group organizational structure. Small groups made a difference.

Read Acts 18:1–5 and Acts 20:1–4. Why do you think Luke listed some of the names of those with whom Paul worked closely?

It is fascinating that Luke mentions some of the names of those with whom Paul worked. To him each one was important. He knew them by name. They mutually supported one another in their outreach ministry. Though the number of names he mentioned was small, that helps prove the point about the importance of working closely with each other, even in small numbers.

Each one of these people surely had gifts that were different from those that others possessed. They came from different backgrounds and cultures. Their ways of looking at things were not always the same, but each one had a valuable contribution to make to the cause of Christ. Their diversities of gifts, backgrounds, and experiences contributed to the growth of the church. They each contributed to the mission of Christ from the richness of their own background and personal experience with Jesus.

Compare Acts 16:11–15, 40 and Acts 12:11, 12. What invitation did Lydia give to Paul immediately after her conversion? Where did both Paul and Peter go after being delivered from prison?

The New Testament believers regularly met in homes. Christian homes became centers of influence and the heart of small group ministry.

Have you thought about beginning a small group ministry in your home or joining with a friend to begin a small group ministry in that person's home? If you are already part of a small group ministry, think about what you can share with your Sabbath School class this week about its benefits.

Small Group Dynamics

Small groups are a vehicle that God uses to grow His church. They are “safe havens” for people to express their problems and discuss mutual concerns. They provide opportunities for spiritual growth in the context of caring relationships. Many non-Christians will initially feel more comfortable in participating in a small group meeting in a home than in attending a traditional church service for the first time.

Read Acts 4:31, Acts 12:12, and Acts 20:17–19, 27–32. List all of the different elements in these New Testament groups. What activities were these groups involved in?

Early Christians met together to intercede for others, pray about mutual concerns, share in warm fellowship, study the Word of God, be equipped for service, help protect each other against false teachers, and participate together in outreach activities.

Small groups make a difference. People uniting their gifts in service, focusing on the power of the Holy Spirit for outreach, are a mighty weapon in the Lord’s hands.

Read Matthew 9:37, 38. What does Jesus say about the harvest, and what is His solution to the problem?

The disciples saw only faint possibilities for the progress of the gospel, but Jesus saw great opportunities. He shared the good news with them that “‘the harvest truly is plentiful,’ ” and then He pointed out the problem: “‘the laborers are few’ ” (*Matt. 9:37, NKJV*). Christ’s solution was to pray for “‘the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest’ ” (*Matt. 9:38, NKJV*). Small groups are an answer to Christ’s prayer and exponentially increase the number of laborers for Christ’s harvest.

The focus of all effective small groups is witness and service. Small group ministry will soon die out if its focus is inward and not outward. If the small group becomes self-serving and little more than a discussion group, it will fail in its purpose and lose the vital reason for its existence. Small groups exist to lead people to Jesus, nurture their faith in Jesus, and equip them to witness for Jesus.

Is it possible that God is calling you to start a small group in your home? Why not begin to pray about what God may be impressing you to do? You may be on the verge of the most spiritually rewarding time of your life.

Further Thought: A number of years ago, a small European church outside of one of the continent's major cities decided that it had to do something significant for the Lord. The church was stagnant. No one had been baptized for years. If the present trend continued, the church had little future. The pastor and his church board earnestly prayed and carefully considered what they might do.

As they studied the New Testament, they decided to establish a small group ministry. Nine lay people in the congregation caught the vision. They committed themselves to pray together and study how to establish their small group ministry effectively. Soon they decided to make each of their homes an evangelistic center. The groups learned to exercise their gifts in various ways. They launched prayer and hospitality ministries. They developed friendships in the community. They reached out in acts of kindness to their family, friends, and to former Adventists. The small group leaders began Bible studies in nine homes with 40 guests in attendance. They were amazed at what the Holy Spirit was doing. Eventually 17 of the 40 were baptized. The testimony of that small, stagnant church is that small groups make an enormous difference. They are one of God's means to involve multiple church members in the mission of the church.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, discuss further the essential elements in each small group as outlined in Thursday's study. In what other kinds of activities could a small group be involved? What are ways in which a small group could help those with special gifts really be able to use those gifts as never before?
- 2 Why is it so important that small groups keep an outward, mission focus? That is, however much a group can help nourish and support its members, why must it always keep central to its purpose the spreading of the gospel? Why, too, should a small group always keep connected with the local church body? Why is that so important?
- 3 Have you ever been a part of or heard of small groups that did not function effectively and eventually died out? Discuss the reasons why you think this might happen.
- 4 Think about the story above, about what happened in Europe with the small group ministry. Why do you think it worked so well? What did they do that was, in many ways, so simple and, yet, so effective? Why, too, might working from the "safer" environment of homes, as opposed to a church building, be an effective way of beginning an outreach to the neighborhood or community?