

COLLEAGUES:

Small groups have been a staple of faith communities since long before anyone organized workshops on how to lead an effective small group. Jesus gathered together 12 disciples. Jews have long prayed together in a *minyón*, a group of 10.

Today, small groups often function as entry points for newcomers to the congregation—not just as fellowship groups for existing members. Christian marketing publications speak of small groups as "the key to your congregation's survival," and tout them as catalysts for stability and growth.

In fact, modern seekers often expect as much variety from a congregation as they expect from a shopping mall. Small groups can become "specialty shops" offering grief support, parenting skills, teen counseling, and scripture study. Unlike fellowship groups of an earlier day, whose members expected to remain together over time, people looking to address specific personal needs often move from group to group—even to a group in a different congregation.

Small groups can sometimes generate a lot of traffic, without building the long-term relationships that sustain a congregation. On the other hand, in a large congregation the pastor can't always get to know every member. Small groups can provide the personal attention that seekers need and expect.

What roles do small groups play in your congregation? I'd like to know. Let's keep in touch.



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SMALL GROUP MINISTRIES

Mt. Olive Lutheran Church began in 1994 as a few families meeting in a house. Last year, the congregation moved into a new building near Center Grove High School in Greenwood, and now averages more than 150 people for Sunday worship services.

David McClean, the church's pastor since it was chartered in 1995, came to Mt. Olive from Seymour, Ind., where he served a congregation of 3,000 people. McClean embraced the idea of a startup church because

he hoped to recover a sense of personal connection to his parishioners.

"In a church of 3,000 people, you're constantly in crisis mode, constantly doing weddings and funerals," McClean says. "There were times when I didn't know a couple was having marital troubles until I saw the divorce notice in the newspaper."

Mt. Olive, a Missouri Synod congregation, is now in what McClean describes as a transitional phase. Services draw more than 200 people occasionally, but growth has stalled. "Busting through that 200 mark is a matter of sitting down with people and saying, 'How are you doing?' " he says. "People expect that. They still have that mentality that the pastor is their personal chaplain."

But if the church does grow, McClean will have less time for each member individually. His answer to this dilemma? He intends to emphasize his visitation ministry in the short-term and build up the church's small group program in the long-run.

Currently, Mt. Olive offers nine small groups, formed around age and interests. No member is required to join a group, of course, but about half do so. If a group grows beyond 12 members, it "births" a new group. Typically, groups meet once a week in a member's home. At Mt. Olive, these meetings take the place of a mid-week service.

McClean hopes that the groups will ultimately serve as his surrogate. Parishioners will get personal attention—and will find friendship, and establish an intimate connection to the congregation—primarily through their groups. As the church grows, pastoral staff will shift focus to working closely with small group leaders. "The goal is that everyone feels that they're being cared for, though it doesn't have to be me doing it," McClean says.

Small groups were one of the most important trends in church growth in the 1990s. According to sociologist Robert Wuthnow, small groups "reflect the fluidity of our lives by allowing us to bond simply but break our attachment with equivalent ease."

Small groups vary widely in format, and congregations differ about the role of lay leaders and the amount of training they require.

Mt. Olive sent several church members to a workshop conducted by Stephen Ministries St. Louis, a Christian organization that trains lay people in small group ministry (see the related interview). These lay people are now responsible for overseeing and training the church's small group leaders.

Steve Sandvig, executive pastor of Christ Community Church of Carmel, takes a different approach. "Training can be a hindrance," he says. "It can project the wrong idea that there is a best way to lead a small group." Three-fourths of the congregation at Christ Community belong to a small group. "We simply provide some orientation and direction," says Sandvig. "There are many adults who already feel confident leading a group, if I simply help them get organized."

Whatever route a congregation chooses to go with small group ministry, any successful program requires large investments of time and energy.

"You can spend a sizeable portion of your week just developing people and overseeing training," says Mike Bradham, an assistant to the pastor at Redeemer Presbyterian Church. Founded last year, Redeemer draws 100 to 150 people to its church in downtown Indianapolis. At present, Redeemer has four small groups. To develop a thriving small group ministry, says Bradham, "you have to develop some momentum and give leaders a sense of ownership of their groups."

At Mt. Olive Lutheran, McClean finds that he expends a lot of energy trying to justify "why we're doing the small groups. I thought it would be assumed," he says. "I didn't know you had to paint that picture over and over again."

Ted Slutz

STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE

AN INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM MCKAY

William McKay is a Lutheran (ELCA) minister and director of project development for Stephen Ministries St. Louis, an organization that trains pastors and lay people. Its small group program, called the ChristCare Ministry System, is used by 600 congregations representing 36 denominations. Each year, ChristCare has a week-long workshop for training "equippers"—its term for those who coordinate the small groups in a congregation and train the leaders.

Clergy Notes: What happens in the "equippers" workshop?

McKay: We thoroughly ground people in the elements necessary to make the small group system work in their congregations: How do you recruit people to serve as leaders? How do you make sure they have the appropriate gifts for this ministry? How do you train people, and then provide continuing education for them? How do you help them form groups? How do you support them?

CN: A congregation could start a small group program at no cost by conducting their own in-house training. What justifies the cost of your program?

McKay: What are they getting? We train them in the nature and flow of Christian community, the somewhat predictable steps through which community goes. We teach them to be process-oriented and not continually push for results—to trust the process.

We deal with the proverbial 101 small questions that, if you don't have good answers, can scuttle your group. We teach the ins and outs of facilitating a group: making sure everyone participates; knowing what to do if someone tries to take over. We teach trainees how to lead a Bible study in which they aren't the expert providing all the answers. We teach them assertiveness skills.

We teach them to begin "birthing" their group from the very beginning, and to help group members understand that the group will have a life cycle. Eventually the God-blessed ending of the group will be to form two groups. We teach them to bring closure—to understand that the end of a group is a time of loss and grieving.

CN: What are some common misconceptions about small group ministry?

McKay: One is that you don't need a lot of training to lead a small group. Another is that what training you need, you'll get on the job.

Somebody very close to me, a rather shy person, was participating in a small group and was coerced into participating at a level above what the person felt comfortable with. This person walked out and swore never again to participate in a small group meeting. That's the kind of thing that can happen with group leaders who are high on enthusiasm but low on understanding.

CN: Does a small group ministry require a greater investment in training than many congregations imagine?

McKay: While it's easy to start small groups, having a ministry that helps the congregation to accomplish its mission is a lot harder. There may be an urgent directive from the leadership to start small groups, but little thought given to managing the ministry once it is up and running.

What if it works? There are congregations where the small group ministry spreads like a wildfire for a short period, then burns out. Early success creates a whole new set of demands. How do you manage when more people want to get into small groups than you have room to accommodate? Do you run the groups up to 25 members? If you do that, you don't have small groups anymore—you have classes. There are a number of issues that are fairly predictable. But if you don't manage those issues, the ministry can become so troublesome that you will make it go away.

RESOURCES

Christ Community Church of Carmel
4770 East 131st St.
Carmel, IN 46033
(317) 580-9020
www.ccccarmel.com

Mt. Olive Lutheran Church
5171 Smokey Row Rd.
Greenwood, IN 46143
(317) 422-9991

Redeemer Presbyterian Church
310 N. Alabama St.
Indianapolis, IN 46204
(317) 238-5487
www.redeemindy.org

Stephen Ministries
2045 Innerbelt Business Center Dr.
St. Louis, MO 63114
(314) 428-2600
www.stephenministries.org

Stephen Ministries' workshop for training small group "equippers" will be held April 29 to May 5, 2001. The enrollment fee is \$1,675 per congregation. There is an additional fee of \$847 per person, which includes lodging and meals for six days.

The article by Robert Wuthnow mentioned in the essay was published in *Christianity Today*, February 7, 1994. Wuthnow has edited a book as well on the subject: *'I Come Away Stronger': How Small Groups Are Shaping American Religion* (Eerdmans, 1994). The latter contains an essay co-authored by sociologist Elfriede Wedam, a researcher at The Polis Center.

See the Small Group Research Page at <http://celycecomiskey.tripod.com> for articles on the history, development, and theory of small groups.