

# Small Groups

## an introduction

Suitable for those joining  
or starting a group



Laurence Singlehurst



Other titles in this series:

Empowering People  
Help! I am leading part of my Small Group

### **Small Groups - an introduction**

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# Introduction

You have been invited to join a small group - perhaps called a connect group, cell group, a home group or a life group – their names go on! But what does it mean to be in one of these groups? Or maybe you have been in a group for some while and want to refresh your understanding of what it means to be in one of these groups. What should my expectations be in the context of my involvement?

This booklet seeks to give some biblical background and framework along with a practical understanding of what it might be like to be part of a group. I am using a structure for our thoughts that explores the beliefs and the basic theology that lies behind these groups and then from those beliefs we will extract some values which shape our behaviour. We will then look at the outcomes in terms of our actions as it is very important that our actions are based on beliefs and values otherwise we feel coerced and pushed. If we have embraced something at a beliefs and values level then our behaviours flows from this and feel real. Just in case you are wondering about this process the apostle Paul reminds us of it, *'Be transformed by the renewal of your mind that you may prove what is the will of God.'* (Romans 12:2) He is giving us a picture here that before we do things we need to engage our hearts and minds to understand and then the actions come in the right place.

*Laurence Singlehurst*

# Chapter 1

## Beliefs behind small groups

To understand what a small group could look like in terms of the atmospheres created and the things that could happen in the group we need to take a big step away. By doing this we actually look at a much wider picture and ask ourselves ‘What is God’s dream for us as believers - what are His hopes and aspirations for us?’ Then the small group becomes a vehicle, just like church on a Sunday is. It becomes a part of the process by which God’s dreams for us and others are worked out. So how do we know what God’s dream is? Well of course we find it in scripture and there are a few places in scripture where it seems to be given to us in a very concise format. One of these is found in Mark 12:28, Jesus is asked:

*“Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”*

We can see four places where our love should be focused from these verses.

**Firstly, in this passage of scripture** we perhaps have a hint of God’s dream, the Lord our God is one. God wants us to know what He is like and that in heaven is a God of love and relationship. He is good and He wants us all to understand that and to have an opportunity to love him with all our heart and minds and strength.

This speaks of relationship, of friendship, this speaks of God being with us in the hard times when life is really difficult, it speaks of God being with us in the good times. So church in whatever shape it is found, is here to help us on this spiritual journey and to grow us in our relationship with God. Our small group plays a vital part in this as we will see later.

**Secondly, it is not just a place** where the focus is on us as individuals and our relationship with God. This dream is more than us just loving God, it is God's dream that we might love one another, that we would have an opportunity as Christians to build community. In doing this we show what God is like as He himself lives in a community of relationships as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus said, 'By the love that you have for one another they will know that you are my disciples'. In other words when we listen to one another, when we encourage, when we take care of practical needs we are fulfilling God's dream, we are demonstrating real love and it is our belief that a great place for this to happen is in small groups where relationships can be built.

**Thirdly, we are also to love ourselves.** It is God's dream that each one of us would be whole. Sadly, however strong we are, we all carry some kind of collateral damage from life itself. When this commandment says that we are to love ourselves it is speaking of God's dream of wholeness and healing and that as we participate in church we should be healed and restored as individuals.

**Fourthly, there is another focus of our love here.** When it says love our neighbour it is not just thinking of our fellow Christians but it is thinking of God's wider world. It is God's dream that every Christian could in their own way, through their gifts and their lives, bring a little bit more love, and care into our world and that our lives can make a difference. It is our belief that this is what church

should do and this is what small groups should do as part of the church – they empower you to love others.

So our beliefs encompass something of God's dream but our beliefs also encompass church, this extraordinary organisation that God created - his body. We might want to reflect on what we believe about church and to do this we want to look at scripture, the glimpses that we can see in the New Testament and the early church. We also want to look at some examples from church history and this will give us some understanding of what should be happening in church today. So from the dream we could perhaps draw three strands of DNA that are to live at the heart of church life and are expressed through the lives of each believer.

**Strand 1**            We know that God loves us and we want to know and follow him

**Strand 2**            We love one another and we build caring Christian community.

**Strand 3**            We love a lost world and each one of us seeks to make a difference.

Behind these three strands of DNA is an important implicit understanding and that is that this commandment was given by Jesus for everyone, that we are all called to do these things. It is not just leaders, it is you and I that are called to love God, to build community and to love a lost world.

So what is the nature of church, what are our beliefs around it? Well, the New Testament is not a manual or a text book but it does give us snippets, pictures etc. When we see the early church begin to gather in the book of Acts we see them in two places. In Acts 2:46 they are attending the Temple daily where they listen to teaching and they worshipped. This is their equivalent of our Sunday morning

meeting. Secondly, they met in their homes where they broke bread and had fellowship together; and so church is operating in these two spheres.

Also in the book of Acts we get other pictures of the life of the early church as found in 1 Corinthians 14-26, *'When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. That all things be done for edification.'* Whenever we see the 'each ones' in the New Testament we ask ourselves 'what is the context?' Which of the two spheres is this operating in? Obviously this particular verse is not talking about a big meeting, and, as we all know from Sunday church, this is a wonderful place but it is not a place of personal contribution. A small group is; in a small group I can share my thoughts, my ideas and my hymn.

In the New Testament there is another phrase, 'one another', this phrase comes up over 130 times. Galatians 6:1 *'Bear one another's burdens'*. Ephesians 4:2 *'Forbearing one another in love'*. Ephesians 4:31 *'be kind to one another, forgiving one another'*. Ephesians 5:19 *'addressing one another in psalms, and hymns and spiritual songs'*. And on it goes. We need to think about where these 'one another's' are going to take place? Some could happen on a Sunday morning but most of them are going to happen either on a one to one basis or in the context of our small group. This becomes a natural environment for us to encourage one another.

So we see how important it is to have a context for the 'each ones' and the 'one another's' and as we seek to understand the early church we realise that their small groups were the foundation of church. They met in the large group for worship, teaching and encouragement as and when it was possible, due to persecution or other factors. So in the first 300 years of the church the small group would have been the most important component of church.

However as church became legal and was adopted by the Roman Empire we see the buildings and the Sunday worship becoming more and more important. At first held in a balance and then later on small groups disappearing and church on a Sunday becoming the strongest component part.

If we look at this in more detail we can see that both the bigger meeting and the smaller meeting have strengths. There is something special about worshipping in a large gathering, about being in an environment to hear good teaching. Christians have met on a Sunday for thousands of years and experienced these good things. But there are also things that cannot happen on a Sunday. When we think of real community, of really knowing people's needs, this is hard to make happen on a Sunday. When we think of our own participation and what I might bring as an individual in the context of the 'one another's' or 'each ones', this becomes the strength of a small group. The 'one another's' also imply an accountability, a sense that someone else knows who I am and they encourage me in my walk of faith. If we are thinking of, say, the energy for mission, we all know that someone can stand up on a Sunday and ask us to do this or that but it is very hard to have any real accountability to that type of call. However this can be worked out very practically in a small group that has adopted loving a lost world as an important focus. Here, making a difference where you live and where you work is important, so we can encourage one another to see this challenge happen and have some real follow through around it. This is because of the strength of the relationships that can come in a small group context.

So my belief is that church works best when it expresses itself in the big and the small. Bill Beckham expressed this as a two winged church linking it to the idea of a bird that can soar and fly. If there is just one wing operating i.e. just the big wing, then the bird will

not be able to fly as it was originally designed to do, both wings need to be operating together. History also tells us this is important. Joel Comisky, who has written extensively around church life and small groups in his book '*2000 Years of Small Groups*' shows us how again and again the church realises that just meeting on a Sunday is not enough and this fantastic book gives us a picture of the difference small groups have made to church life down through the centuries.

In the United Kingdom we have our own great illustration of the wonder of small groups. If we go back to the 1730s and look at the church then we see some interesting things. The basic message of church was 'come' and it was all about that Sunday meeting. Most of the ministry and activity of the church was done by the leaders; the church members were mainly passive and the influence of church on the wider society was quite small and its most obvious expression was the Sunday meeting.

Into this stepped a man named John Wesley, an Anglican clergyman who had an encounter with God that so challenged and changed him that he dared to go back to first principles and ask himself questions about the shape, the nature, and the structure of church. He read his New Testament and began to get ideas by seeing what happened in the early church. He met a radical group from Germany called the Moravians and they had all sorts of new ideas and structures. Then, through his meetings in London and Bristol, as people began to hear his message and come to faith, he began an experiment of organising church in two different contexts. He believed all his life in the importance of Sunday and the place of worship, preaching and teaching in this context but he realised that if he was going to fulfil God's dream, as we described earlier, he needed something else. So he created small groups which became known as classes. For John Wesley church began to change, no

longer was the emphasis on 'come' but the emphasis was on 'go' - let's make a difference, let's change the world, let's take this Christian message to every sphere of society to make an impact where we live and where we work. The leaders stopped doing all the work and began to encourage others to do it, the church members became disciples and were active in their faith and the influence got bigger and bigger and bigger.

This new kind of church was held together by the power of the class system as it became known, which was the 'building block' of church life. In your class meeting if you were walking with God you were given your ticket which enabled you to go to church on a Sunday. This church began to grow and over the next 100 years, both through Methodism and through other forms of church at that time, there was a huge spiritual awakening. I believe church in the small, through the class system of John Wesley, had a major part to play in this awakening.