

Small groups over the internet

I am sure none of us expected the changes that have hit our nation and the church since the epidemic began. One change is how do churches do small groups as we can no longer meet together. Many churches have looked at how small groups could work on the internet via Zoom and similar platforms.

As this situation develops it has become clear to me that some of the existing structures for small groups are not suitable for the internet with them being too long and clunky in their delivery. We need something similar but more dynamic and more relevant for this time.

I am reminded of the work that I did with my friend James Featherby in the city of London 20 years ago where we developed groups that were easy to lead, based on John Wesley's ideas of bands and classes. These groups had a simple structure to enable them to function. And that was 3Ps - Presence, Pressure and Purpose. More of this in a moment.

These groups operated out of the same DNA as other groups. Drawn from the great commandment they had a certain DNA; that is there should be a Godward focus; a community focus - reaching out and encouraging other believers; a missional focus - reaching out to loved ones and neighbours in the widest sense of that word and, lastly, that they would be participative in that the great commandment is something every Christian is called on to do and in that sense we will all participate.

But not only were we keen on a certain DNA these 3P groups also encompassed the values of the wider small group movement. Phil Potter in his book *'The Challenge of Cell Church'* describes these values in this way:

A is All involved. That these groups are about every member in ministry, every member having a voice and a sense through our prayers that God can use everybody in that small group at that time. And that the presence of God operated and was felt through the ministry of each person.

B is Becoming disciples. That these small groups, these 3Ps encouraged people to develop their walk with God, to understand the journey they were on and to support one another on that journey.

C is Community. That as Christians meet together they form community, as they share with one another they bond together. Over the years I have realised this can work not only when we met together and can see one another but when we meet over the internet and share our pressures, difficulties and joys. Community also works in that the sense of openness and intimacy bonds the participants together in a common experience.

D is Doing evangelism. Being missional, reaching out to others and loving our neighbour is fundamental to faith and every small group needs to have an element where that is active and happening.

E is Encountering God. These 3P groups begin with an act of presence that in some way the process of God is acknowledged in that gathering. And through the experience there is hopefully a God connection and a sense of God's strength and grace to every member of that group.

This material is also expressed in more detail in my book *'Small Groups – an Introduction'* available from our website [here](#).

The 3Ps - Presence, Pressure, Purpose

In John Wesley's bands and small groups these three elements can be clearly seen. So if you imagine having a Zoom call lasting about 40 minutes (which is how much you time you usually have in the non-professional setting) - it is also the right length for the concentration levels most people have for internet groups - we would see that an act of Presence might take 5 to 10 minutes, sharing Pressure (and/or Praise if you feel this is more appropriate in your group) maybe 30 minutes, and looking at Purpose 5 to 10 minutes.

Presence

So, what do I mean by Presence? This could be a member of the group sharing a 5-minute thought from scripture. In a recent meeting my friend Mark Eddison shared some thoughts from Psalm 91 which talked about the deadly pestilence and how we were not to fear. It was very powerful. Or it could be a story that someone shares of an encounter with God and God's grace or perhaps an uplifting song. Cell UK have developed a resource '*40 more Creative Ideas for Small Groups*' which is a tin of cards which illustrate non-musical worship ideas and these would work very well over the internet. They encourage people to reflect on nature, on beauty, on scripture and give non-musical ways to worship and respond back to God. This is an act of Presence acknowledging God in the meeting. They are available from our website [here](#).

Pressure (Praise)

The one thing that we all aware of today as never before is Pressure. A recent example in my small group is where some members were facing real fear. What happens if I get Covid-19? What happens to my family, my children? A very real sense of waking up in the night and feeling anxious. Or perhaps it is the pressure as was shared in the group of a small company that was owned by one of the members, should he furlough his staff, would his company make it? Suddenly it looked like 30 years of work might disappear. Or it could be the pressure felt by the two members of the group who had 98-year-old parents one of whom was in care home and wondering whether they would see them again. There are many pressures that this situation brings to us but when we share them, when they are put out into the open, the group becomes a safe place, it is the body of Christ and as the members pray for one another, encourage one another and care for one another suddenly the pressure is halved. God's grace is released into that situation.

Purpose

It is interesting that both in the church world and in the nation at large we realise that we have a new Purpose - to care for one another. The Chancellor expressed this very well in one of the early Government press conferences and we have seen a huge response out in the nation of people finding purpose to care for others and be active in their community. Of course, this is something we the church should be leading in and we want to encourage every member of our 3P group not to become overwhelmed by the pressure or the lockdown but in whatever way they can to find purpose and to reach out. We have seen many examples around the country of church members doing this, setting up WhatsApp groups for their street, becoming an NHS Volunteer or just being a good neighbour letting people know that they can shop and help them.

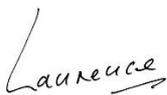
Our purpose also includes prayer. Our government and all governments around the world need prayer and wisdom more than ever. We can also think of how we can encourage other members of the Christian community through phone calls and Zoom groups. And, as has been well said by many in the nation, it is the time to love our families. It is also an opportunity to encourage people to visit church

through all of the wonderful live streaming taking place on Sundays. Thousands of unchurched people are visiting church perhaps for the first time and this is amazing. We can find purpose in generosity, for those of us who are able, there are worldwide needs which we can give to, needs in our neighbourhood or perhaps individuals that we know whose entire source of income has disappeared overnight.

I believe that Bands based on 3Ps, Presence, Pressure and Purpose are an ideal structure for today. They can be done in 40 minutes; one person could be asked to do the Presence and perhaps host the meeting and then in a sense the meeting leads itself. We can then share what we are facing in Pressure or use this time for Praise and when we have done that and prayed for one another we can move to the Purpose and hear what each one of us is finding at this time and encourage one another in that and pray. If the group is between 6 or 8 people maximum this can be done in about 40 minutes. There is also a facility within the Zoom framework for break out groups so that if you have more than 8 people in your Zoom call you can break them down into 2 or 3 groups for 20 minutes and they share their pressures within that breakdown group. They come back for common purpose.

Cell UK is committed to helping and supporting these groups. We will be holding regular webinars through Zoom. Look to our website for times and how to get an invitation to join.

Yours

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Laurence".

Laurence Singlehurst

www.celluk.org.uk

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