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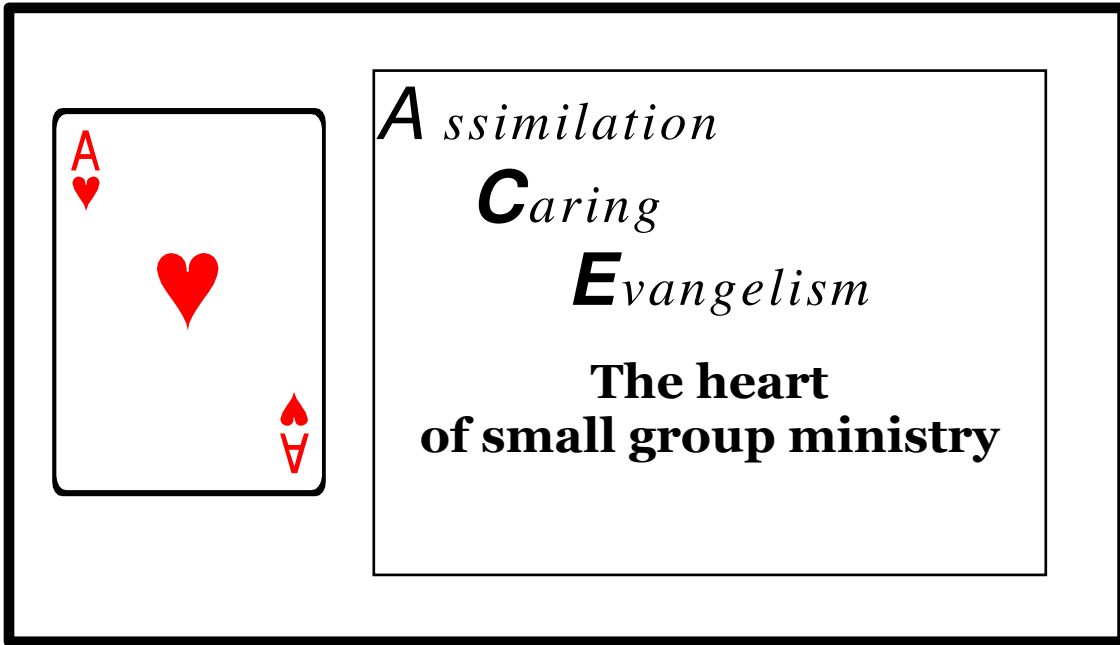
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Acknowledgement

The materials included in this manual are based upon the work of several individuals and little should be consider as original to the author. Several, though certainly not all, of the sources serving the basis for this material are listed in the bibliography. Much of the material came to my attention while attending a **Church Growth Through Small Groups** course offered by Harding University Graduate School of Religion in Memphis, Tennessee.

John Ellas, who taught the class, continually emphasized the place of prayer as dependence upon God, dedication to personal spiritual growth, and sharing the gospel of Jesus with the lost as the basis for all ministry within the church.

Joe Spivy

Small Groups Orientation

What are Small Groups?

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.
Romans 8:29

To be conformed to the image of Christ can be described as the process of _____. Following Jesus' example with his apostles, this process works effectively in a smaller group setting. A small group of five to fourteen (5–14) adult can significantly contribute to the spiritual formation of each individual involved. This happens as they fulfill the directive of the writer of Hebrews encourage one another as they follow Christ.

And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. **Hebrews 10:24-25**

In a medium-sized to larger church¹, like the Grand Central Church of Christ, there is a need for a well organized and managed system to enable the development of relationships that will contribute to the process of spiritual formation. While medium-sized and larger churches have a number of distinct advantages over smaller churches, some have lamented the lack of closeness that they remember having experienced in a smaller church. A small group ministry is one way of fulfilling the need for closeness. In a sense, this is a way for a church that is larger to adapt the best characteristics of a smaller church so that closer relationships will be encouraged.

1. What are some of the perceived advantages of a medium-sized to larger church?

2. What are some of the perceived advantages of a smaller church?

¹ Gary McIntosh divides churches into three size ranges according to Sunday morning attendance: Small (15-200), medium (201-400), and large (401+). Gary McIntosh, *One Size Doesn't Fit All* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1999), 18. It is also helpful to note the way in which John Ellas classifies churches by size. His classifications are based upon a sample drawn exclusively of churches of Christ. Four different Sunday morning attendance ranges are identified and correlated to the size of the church staff (defined part- or full-time ministers in contrast to secretaries and custodians who are classified as support staff): Single (100-199), large (200-399), very large (400-699), huge (700-1250). John Ellas, *Measuring Church Growth* (Houston, TX: Center for Church Growth, 1997), 15-16.

Many have noted that as a church becomes larger it must also become smaller. For this to happen there is need to develop a new way of thinking (a “paradigm shift”) and of viewing the work of the church. Her definition of success may also be altered. It can no longer be assumed that the maxim “bigger is better” is always true. There will be many times when it is discovered that “smaller is better.” Success will be measured not simply in numbers but by how well the ministry or activity aids in contributing to the overall health of the Body of Christ.

**As a church becomes larger it should also
become _____ .**

John Ellas, a recognized authority in church growth, often states, “small groups are not difficult, but they are complex.” Due to their complexity small groups require more effort in the development and ongoing training of leaders. This manual has been designed to assist leaders in developing a clearer understanding of small groups and to aid in equipping them for effective service and leadership.

Small groups are not meant to supplant corporate worship or Bible classes. Larger group gatherings enable us to worship, to proclaim our allegiance to God, to learn the Word of God, and to enjoy some fellowship. Bible classes and seminars alternately provide an excellent setting for the in-depth study of the scriptures and the possibility for closer fellowship. It is in small groups that we can do all these things as we help each other put God's Word into action.

A Biblical and Historical Basis for Small Group Ministry

◆ The early church (the biblical record)

A continual emphasis the American Restoration Movement has been the call to “go back to the Bible.” The book of Acts, a record of the beginning of the church, indicates that the early church met in both large and small groups (2:42-47; 5:42). The Jerusalem church, a very large church (4:4 & 6:7; estimates range from 30,000 to 100,000 members), met in homes on a regular basis (2:46; 5:42). This pattern was so well established that the persecution of the church is recorded as having taken place in both contexts (4:1-3; 5:12, 18; 8:3).



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- 1. What size church was the Jerusalem church?**
 - 2. Where did the Jerusalem church meet?**
 - a.)
 - b.)
 - 3. The early church met, predominantly, in _____ .**

Other passages indicate that meetings in homes were a common practice. Several of Paul's letters include references to those who met in individual homes (Romans 16:15; 1 Corinthians 16:19;

Colossians 4:15; Philemon 1:2). These meetings, which took place regularly, served several different purposes. In Acts 2:42 four purposes for Christians meeting together are specifically mentioned: teaching, fellowship, eating, and praying. Not all meetings are multifunctional. Some appear to have served a single purpose. One example would be the prayer meeting in Acts 12 (12:12). Far from being a modern innovation, small groups have a rich biblical heritage.

◆ **The church for the first 250 years (the historical record)**

Historical records indicate that the church through 199 AD met in homes with some citywide meetings taking place. The citywide meetings would, in many places, have been limited as the persecution of the church grew. It is also interesting to consider how the rulers of the Jews would have reacted to a Christian worship assembly with the observance of the Lord's Supper taking place in the temple courts. The relationships of the Lord's Supper to the annual observance of Passover would surely not have gone unnoticed by those who continued to follow the old covenant.

Until the fourth century there were only a few small buildings (usually remodeled homes that could hold no more than 100 people) that were used as places of meeting for Christians. It was not until Constantine that larger facilities were built or converted from other uses.

◆ **Small groups through the centuries.**

Throughout history, several significant religious movements have begun or seen "revival" during those times where small groups were utilized. In the English speaking world both the Puritans and, later, Methodist began as meetings of in homes (Home Circles) where individuals were encouraged to read and study scripture, pray together, and encourage one another as they tried to follow Jesus.

In China, today, estimates of the numbers of Christians run anywhere from 10 - 80 million.² The vast majority of these meet in homes.

Of the 75 largest churches in the world today, 75 of them utilize small groups. Yes, that's 100% of the world's largest churches (with total congregational membership of anywhere from 25,000 - 1 million) are organized in such a way as to take advantage of the positive qualities and results inherent to small groups that are properly constructed and utilized.³

_____ % of the world's 75 largest churches
use small groups.

² Official, governmental estimates put the number of Christians in China at 10 - 13 million. Others, which probably more accurately reflect those who would call themselves Christian, say it is closer to 60 - 100 million. The difference? The official number includes those who attend the Chinese government approved non-denominational church. The higher number reflects all those who meet in homes but are unwilling to become a part of the government dominated church.

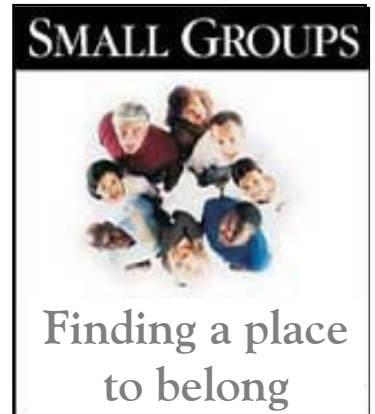
³ Small groups are also known as "cell groups." These will be treated as synonymous terms in this manual.

Characteristics of Good Small Groups:

A good small group will develop a sense of community. Building community takes time and requires certain agreements among the participants.⁴

To successfully accomplish its purpose of **spiritual formation** a good small group will develop all of the characteristics found below.

- **A sense of _____**: a place where I matter
(Finding a place to belong)
- **Honesty**: vulnerability and willingness to bring deepest needs to the group
- _____: all members affirmed and confidentiality maintained
- **Accountability**: mutual caring; at times loving confrontation
- **Responsibility**: meeting needs and having needs met by others⁵



⁴ See "Group Agreement", p. 31.

⁵ David Weidlich, *Small Group Leaders Manual* (<http://churchresources.faithweb.com/sgl/intro.htm>)