

Introducing the Congregation to Small Groups

Barriers to the Introduction of Small Groups

As small groups are introduced to the Grand Central Church of Christ there is a need to realize that there may be some objections. Please assume that those who raise objections are as well intentioned and motivated by a sincere desire to follow Christ as are you. Perhaps it would even be wise to “esteem them better than yourself.”¹

When objections are raised, please allow the individual raising them to clearly articulate their concerns. We can’t anticipate every individual objection but these are usually the dominant themes.



1. We’ve never done it this way before (or some variation thereof).

For the most part, Churches of Christ have been built on middle-sized groups (15-80, e.g., Bible classes). These serve an important function but they often have proven ineffective in the development of caring relationships where the “one another” passages are fulfilled. It should be noted that the “one another” passages are not to be understood as *suggestions* but as *commands*. They are, therefore, nonnegotiable and must be honored by the church.

Also, while it may be the case that in her recent past the church has not normally functioned in this way, at least officially, she has done this as evidenced by ample scriptural precedent in the book of Acts and elsewhere (see chapter 1).



2. Isn’t this how the Crossroads/International Church of Christ infiltrates a church?

Surprisingly, to many, the International Church of Christ (Crossroads and Boston are now very dated misnomers for those in the movement) is NOT at fault because of their use of small groups.

Most observers and those who have left this group have testified to the amount of control and submission that were required were the source of the abuse and proved problematic. The model of mutual submission that good small groups should utilize was, too often, ignored. Quality controls are designed into Grand Central’s small groups to guard against this happening.

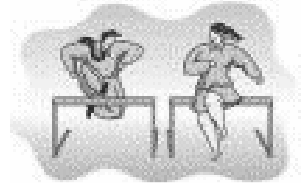
¹ Philippians 2:3

3. I've never seen or heard anything about small groups in the Bible.

As noted in the “biblical and historical basis of small groups” section found earlier in this manual (chapter 1), there is ample evidence of small groups being an accepted (likely, the dominant) structure of the first century church. Care must be taken to note that there is a difference between forms (where God gives great latitude) and function (which is God-directed).

4. Everyone should meet at the building on Sunday nights.

This is an example of viewing our present forms (or methods) as being the only way to please God. Again, the section on the “biblical and historical basis of small groups” should prove helpful in answering this concern. Also, it is advisable to continue to have weekly meetings at the building for those who do not wish to participate in the small group ministry.



5. I have plenty of close relationships with others in the church and I don't see why we need anything like this. This will take us away from what we really need to be doing, worshiping, and the church will just become a social club.

These objections spring from a common background. Those making them may not recognize a need for close relationships. This is generally true of those who are from the pre-World War II generations and of those who have a large family presence within a congregation. Of course, there will be several exceptions to this *general* rule.

The New Testament is full of “one another” passages that are an integral part of the life of the church (see “Caring for One Another” page earlier in manual). The life of a Christian is not limited to those times when we meet together as a large group. Prior to the twentieth century, few churches met for two services on Sunday. This is an example of allegiance to a form (that may serve a good function) that is mistakenly equated with allegiance to God and his kingdom.

Several in the church, especially those born after World War II, recognize a need for quality, community experiences. These are not simply for the purpose of socializing (a part of true fellowship) but also providing a means for encouraging one another in their walk of faith.

Barriers to the introduction of Small Groups (Assessing your congregation)

	Members' Age	
Older -----		Younger
	Congregation's Age	
Older -----		Younger
	Educational Level	
Lower -----		Higher
	Work Environment	
Blue Collar -----		White Collar
	Community Setting	
Rural -----		Urban

Other Considerations for new groups:

<i>Question</i>	<i>Suggestions</i>
What do we expect of our experience in this group?	
When and where will we meet?	Sunday evening/afternoon; Homes
Do we want to have refreshments at meetings?	Yes (keep it light)
Who will provide these refreshments?	Rotate and share this responsibility
How will we handle interruptions (phone, beepers, etc.)?	Agree to not allow interruptions
What will we do about children?	See "What about Childcare?"
May we bring visitors?	Yes
What will we do if the group gets too big (14 or more)	"Birth" a new group
Is it OK to share phone numbers?	Depends

Group agreement

Each small group is asked to consider how the following eight elements could aid in the development of relationships between the various members of the group.

1. **Affirmation.** I will love you, affirm you, and I recognize your right to your opinion. I may not always agree with you or approve of your actions, but you can't make me to stop loving you.
2. **Availability.** I will make myself available to you. *I will make our small group meetings a top priority in my schedule.*
3. **Prayer.** I agree to pray for you regularly and often.
4. **Openness.** I will seek to develop a more open relationship with you. I understand that I am only to confess my struggles, not the struggles or failures of another.
5. **Honesty.** I will strive to speak the truth in love. I will seek to express this honesty in a spirit of sensitivity, compassion and unconditional love so that we may all become more like Christ.
6. **Sensitivity.** I want to understand you and be aware of your needs and feelings. I take seriously my God-given responsibility and privilege to work with Him to encourage you.
7. **Confidentiality.** I understand confidentiality to mean that nothing of a personal nature shared within the group is to be shared with others. This is absolutely essential to the building and maintenance of trust among us.
8. **Accountability.** I ask you to watch my life and to lovingly check on my progress in achieving my personal and spiritual goals so that I might be conformed to the image of God's Son.

I will uphold this Group Agreement and all additional agreements made within this group led by _____ and _____. This agreement will be honored from _____ until _____. At that time a decision will be made whether we wish to continue this group or to be reorganized. Any time a new group is "birthed" this agreement is to reviewed and renewed.

Signatures:

Group Leader

Group Member

Each group member is asked to keep her/his own sheet. No copies are to be kept by the Group Leader or others. This is simply a reminder for each individual member.

NOTE: This sheet is to be shared with each member of the small group. More than anything, the purpose of the agreement is to inform participants what is expected of them as a group member and the attributes needed to encourage personal spiritual growth.

Especially in light of #7 above it should be understood by all that there is no desire to keep a "list of sins" to be used for spiritual coercion. Reports to the office and shepherds should only deal with matters that are non-confidential. To report other matters express permission would need to be received from the individual(s) involved.

Help! There's a Need We Can't Meet!

Your group meetings will aid in the process of assimilation, caring and evangelism. These aims may also be met outside of the confines of the group meeting. Group members may help each other by assisting a group member move, taking flowers and meals to a sick member, serving as a listening ear, or praying over the telephone.

Small group leader must also develop the ability to discern when the burdens of counseling are more than they are able to bear. Your group has certain limitations that are defined by your group's purpose and group agreement. Small groups are designed to promote the spiritual formation of all her members. When one individual's problems begin to so dominate group meetings (more than two) that others' needs are not being met, the group's life and existence may be threatened.

Some individuals require so much effort that if their needs are to be met within the group the rest of the members will not receive the care they need. These individuals are referred to as EGR's (Extra Grace Required) and God loves them too! For the sake of their health and the health of the small group these individuals should be referred to the small groups coordinator, a professional Christian therapist (names can be supplied by the office), staff member or shepherd.

When should a small group leader refer an individual to someone else?

- ◆ when they threaten violence to self or others
- ◆ when their dominance of the group begins to drive off other group
- ◆ when you simply don't have the time or energy to meet their expressed needs

It is hoped more recovery and support groups will one day be available so that more needs can be met within the body of Christ.

Note: The group cannot be sacrificed because of the needs of an EGR. Though some will consider this callused, the needs of the group outweigh the needs of the individual. If this principle is not followed, several individuals will be made to suffer. This is an area that demands strong leadership.

Group Dynamics

There are several factors that can affect the depth and closeness of a group during its lifetime. For instance, if very few people show up one week, communication may break down temporarily and as a result, closeness suffers. Conversely, smaller meetings can allow for an intimacy not normally experienced.

Here are some external, environmental factors that you should be aware of:

Group Size: *The larger the group, the more impersonal it becomes.* In larger groups it is more difficult to be heard and it also easier to hide. An effective leader will be forced to have firmer control of the meeting. This means there will be fewer opportunities for intimacy. Small groups have a greater potential for openness, participation, and intimacy.

One way to still achieve intimacy in a group larger than twelve is to break up into two or three groups for the discussion part of the Bible study and/or for prayer. In this way the opportunities for sharing and participation are doubled.

Frequency of Meetings: A group grows closer with the increased frequency of meetings. Meeting once a month will retard most attempts to develop any appreciable depth of intimacy. Meeting more than twice a month increases the opportunities to develop an intimacy that can encourage and enhance personal spiritual formation. Consider additional meetings at alternate times (group outings, etc.).

Location and Seating Arrangement: A working principle is that *we speak to those whom we can see.* This is why the members of a group should be seated so that everyone can see and be seen. When someone's view of others is blocked he/she may feel excluded. For this reason care should also be taken to make sure that members are all seated at approximately the same eye-level.

Small groups usually meet in homes because a living room provides a more comfortable atmosphere than a classroom. A living room or family room is usually the right size for a small group and the furniture is more comfortable so that members are not distracted by uncomfortable conditions.

Question:

How do you keep the group from becoming a counseling session that focuses on just one person's need?

- 1) Continually emphasize that the group exists for the benefit of all its members. Everyone should be given the opportunity to be heard; therefore, everyone must be brief when speaking so others have the same opportunity to speak. No one should dominate. If you exemplify and enforce this early on, you'll have less trouble later (It is easier to lighten up than to clamp down on an already established group dynamic.).
- 2) Refer to another time and place. When an individual is going through crisis and needs to talk about it, allow enough time for that person to briefly tell the group what's going on. Then provide closure by saying something like this: "Jane, it sounds like you really are going through some struggles. We want to help if we can. After our meeting is over, but before you go home, can we get together and talk and pray about it?"

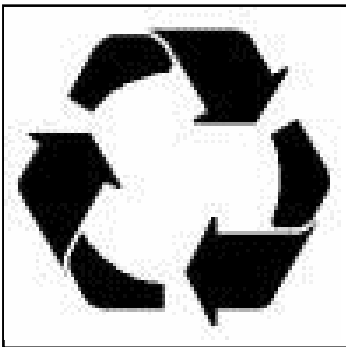
**It is not
all about
"me"**

Options:

- Set up a separate time to speak on the phone. If possible, it is better to speak with them face-to-face. You may wish to seek the assistance of someone else, whose strength is sensitivity, to meet with the needy person.
- If the need is very pressing, one group member might take the hurting member to another room for immediate care and prayer.
- Be prepared to refer some needs to a professional Christian therapist, staff member, or shepherd.
- Never sweep the problem under the rug. Assure the hurting person that you do want to deal with the problem at an appropriate time.
- Never allow the group to participate in an "advice ambush".

Life Cycles of a Small Group

A small group will go through various stages in its life cycle. Small groups at the Grand Central Church of Christ begin with an agreement to meet together for at least 12 months with an option to continue for an additional year (12 months). A healthy group with healthy relationships can expect to experience each of the stages listed below.



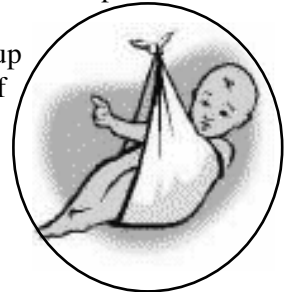
Forming- Initial meetings when members are nervous and unsure of how the small group experience will develop.

Norming- At this point the group members are exploring the boundaries and considering the possibility and advisability of self-disclosure.

Conforming- Group members begin to develop and identify their role within the group. There is now a group identity. Boundaries will be tested and some conflict should be expected.

Performing- Now the group is fun. Meetings are an integral part of the members' lives. For some groups this stage is never experienced.

Reforming- This takes place when there is a re-organization or when a new group is given birth. This is a time when many experience a sense of grief or loss. The last meeting should be a time to celebrate and to share with one another the benefits they have experienced because they were a part of this group.



It should be noted that each time the group changes, it begins a new life cycle. In effect, it becomes a new group. At the group's discretion it may wish to re-visit (and re-sign) the group agreement. When a new member is added, a new group is formed. When a group gives birth to another group, two new groups are formed. New groups will return to the "forming" stage of the small group life cycle and will then begin progressing through the other stages.

What About Child Care?

Small groups are primarily designed for adults. This is an important consideration if members are to develop intimacy and spirituality. In the small group pre-meeting, the issue of childcare should be addressed and agreed upon by all participants.

Studies of those who are involved in small groups have demonstrated that a vast majority of adults (68 - 80%+) prefer that children either not be present during the small group meetings or be present for only a short time.

There are several ways that this issue can be addressed. A few suggestions are found below but each group is encouraged to approach this question creatively.

1. Have each family provide its own childcare.
2. Bring the children to the host home and have a non-group member serve as the babysitter (each parent pays).
3. Bring the children to the host home and have members rotate childcare responsibility.
4. Members trade-off missing meetings to keep children in their homes.
5. Hire a teen to keep children in her home.
6. Let groups rotate weeks that they will care for other groups' children.
7. Build groups so that some don't have to worry about children (homogeneous).
8. Provide activities for children at the building with groups being responsible to make those arrangements.

Some will desire a family devotion atmosphere in small group meetings. Those stating a preference for this should be placed in the same group. Most adults prefer not to include children for the majority of the meeting.

Hosting a Small Group

by Matt Messner

Hosting With Excellence

The Small Group Host has the important ministry of hospitality. They accomplish this ministry by thinking about the needs of the guests. It is the host's responsibility to eliminate distractions that could hinder a person from being able to focus on spiritual matters because of a uncomfortable atmosphere. The host's job is to make sure people feel completely welcomed and wanted. Hosts are likely to be the first people with whom newcomers come in contact, so they have a tremendous opportunity to initiate an atmosphere of love and acceptance to all who walk through their doors. Hosting a small group is an honor, and it must be done with a commitment to excellence.

With this in mind, consider the following guidelines for hosting a small group. It is important that hosts be sensitive to the following issues and able to create an environment that is conducive for a good meeting.

Be prepared. The first task of a host is to greet people when they come to the door. Newcomers are often the first to arrive. Their first impression of a group is critical. An excellent host will be ready well in advance of the starting time to greet people as they arrive. Make sure that the meeting room is **tidy** and pleasant. Also, make sure that the bathroom is **clean** and supplied.

Greet everyone warmly. People come to a small group with any number of things on their mind. Some come from work. Others rushed out of the house while trying to finish a quick meal. A warm greeting from a host can help people shift into the small group setting. An encouraging word can set the tone for an enjoyable evening.

Strike up a conversation. This is especially important for new people. Ask a few questions: "Where do you live?" "How did you hear about the small group?" "How is your week going?"

Be sure you are well supplied. Check to be sure you have plenty of pencils, paper, Bibles, study guides, so forth. Always have an extra chair or two. Have cups available for drinks and plates if you will be serving food.

Pay attention to the details. The following may seem a bit trivial, but careful attention to them will display an extra concern for your group members.

Check the lighting. Be sure the room where the small group is held is well lit. Also, meet in a circle where everyone can see each other's faces to facilitate equal participation and sharing. If your group is using a **TV/VCR** the host should have equipment that works well, has been set up in advance, and can **clearly** be seen by all group members. A black and white 12" TV should not be used.

Adjust the temperature. A room that is too cold can make it very difficult for people to get comfortable. They will be less likely to fellowship. A room that is too hot can cause people to fall asleep. Rooms warm up when warm bodies show up. One expert suggests 67 degrees as an ideal room temperature for groups. Offer to take people's coats when they come in.

Eliminate distractions. Put your **pets** (especially dogs and cats) in a separate room for the evening. Let the answering machine pick up your calls (turn off the ringer), and make sure the children are taken care of. Make sure that the room **smells** good. We can get so accustomed to the smells in our home that we don't notice them anymore: Pet odors, last night's dinner, heavy perfumes, and some room deodorizers. Compensate for what might smell good to you, but is obnoxious to others: Set up a fan to pull air out of the meeting room, providing good ventilation. Also, play soft music as people arrive but turn it off before you begin. Eliminate other potentially disruptive **sounds**.

Is anyone hungry? Food is a great catalyst for building community. Plan to have light snacks or dessert following your discussion. Make drinks available to group members. A great way to involve more people is to have a sign-up sheet for people to bring snacks.

Bibliography

The following sources are recommended for those who are serving in the small group ministry of the Grand Central Church of Christ. Books are available in the church office. See Joe Spivy concerning the availability of these materials.

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