

5 Small Group Myths

Home Bible studies don't always operate by the textbook.

David A. Womack

Home Bible studies are a bit like fireplaces; they arouse wonderful domestic feelings, but we're cautious about leaving them unattended.

After more than two decades of promotion in books, magazines, seminars, and classes, the fact about small groups is that few churches can testify to success. Among the reasons are:

1. We have few role models, at least in our culture.
2. The literature on the subject has promoted the idea without offering practical methods.
3. The American concept of home privacy causes such ministries to develop more slowly here than in some countries.
4. Our American style of church leadership may not encourage lay ministries to develop beyond the immediate supervision of the pastor.
5. Congregations who decide in favor of home ministries become discouraged when they cannot find specifically prepared Bible study materials. If we want to give direction to the teaching, we must adapt materials created for other purposes—and that's too much work.

Yet we cannot escape the reality that many Christians want a small-group experience—and can benefit greatly if the group functions properly. The question is how to make small groups work.

After ten years of experience with thousands of home meetings in dozens of churches as a denominational administrator, I think I know why more churches do not have home programs. The writers and speakers, myself included, were onto a good idea but were simplistic, idealistic, and premature. We approached the subject without understanding the complicated sociological terrain onto which we had so glibly ventured.

Here are five theories I've had to revise along the way:

Myth 1: Small Groups Are a Wonderful Evangelistic Tool.

One of my early misconceptions was about the very purpose of home Bible studies. At first I said, "Home groups are our outreach to the city."

But a couple of years later I said, "While home Bible studies contribute to the total outreach of the church, they aren't directly evangelistic."

Several years and much experience later, I said, "The evangelistic results of home Bible studies are indirect, for the groups draw from the congregation rather than the neighborhood. Home ministries conserve the results of other evangelistic methods."

Most churches that start new programs have outreach in mind, but they soon become disappointed with the evangelistic results. Churches that are successful with home ministries, I

concluded, must do so for their developmental and conservational value, not solely for evangelism.

Then finally it dawned on me: Home Bible studies are a withdrawal from the community into an intimate Christian circle for fellowship and nurture. They are for inreach, not outreach!

(People that *are* brought to Christ through the home meetings usually are drawn to the groups at some moment of personal crisis, where they then experience an answer to prayer. Still, they often come to the church before attending the home group that prayed for them.)

Although home programs are not in themselves evangelistic, they contribute to church growth by strengthening the whole fiber of the congregation. Much as grapes grow in clusters, a church develops by attracting friendship groups around a central stem.

Myth 2: Small Groups Unite the Christians in a Neighborhood.

Another lesson I learned was about the locations of home groups. Like many churches starting home programs, we began by studying the territory and recruiting host homes throughout the community. Then we asked the church people to attend the home fellowship group nearest them.

Obedient as our congregations sometimes are, the plan worked—for about two weeks. After that, people went wherever their friends attended.

People form small groups around centers of common interest; they cluster socioeconomically, not geographically. True, home fellowships are brought together by a common interest in the Bible, love for Christ, and dependence on interpersonal support. Yet, many people share those interests without bonding together in clusters. These common bonds would not suffice in themselves to form a particular small group without some additional commonality that draws people to one another. At the heart of the small-group phenomenon is an interdependence among friends.

This raises the question of cliques in the church. Most of us have heard preaching against church cliques as far back as we can remember. Now we are beginning to understand that cliquing is a natural and desirable gregarious trait that unites a congregation and forms the basis for home ministries. Home Bible studies take advantage of this natural bonding by providing a creative function for friendship groups.

The negative side of this social phenomenon is cliquishness—the temptation to exclude outsiders. Church leaders can avoid this problem by actively encouraging hospitality, posting public invitations to all home groups, and starting new groups as friendship circles develop.

Some center of mutual interest binds a congregation together in love and fellowship; but the church is made up of smaller units, each of which is more or less complete in itself. The force that attracts groups into a church body varies, but it often has something to do with a common ethnic, economic, or social background and lifestyle, a common belief system, and a popular

pastor. The larger church learns to cluster smaller groups into its greater whole by providing nourishment, encouragement, identity, and protection.

Myth 3: Bible Study Is the Certerpiece of a Small Group

In the beginning, I thought people wanted to gather in homes to study the Bible, so I put most of my effort into preparing the lessons. I still write and print a Bible lesson each week and accumulate them into thirteen-week series, but I've learned that people don't come to homes primarily for Bible study.

Rather, they are attracted by their needs for social interaction, the support of caring and sharing friends, and a sense of belonging to a meaningful body of peers. They want a place where they can get good advice and feel free to speak without rejection.

When I realized this, I did the necessary research in small-group dynamics and organized the home meetings to provide for the whole range of needs. Our church's home meetings now have four elements, in this order:

1. Fellowship (conversation and refreshments)
2. Bible study (a prepared lesson)
3. Self-expression (sharing, exhortation, and prayer requests)
4. Prayer (either individually or as a group)

Myth 4: A Small Group Needs One Strong Leader.

The biblical shepherds led their flocks to pasture, but those of today drive the sheep. I soon discovered a similar contrast of leadership styles in home fellowships. Some led out strongly; others nudged around the edges.

Because people need both to hear and be heard, small groups do best with sharing rather than dominant leaders.

The wise shepherd learns to recognize and put bells on certain sheep the flock tends to follow. This keeps the sheep together and simplifies the task of moving the flock from one place to another. Guiding a few bell sheep, and thereby leading the whole flock, is much better than driving with sheep dogs.

Human nature is competitive, and every relationship includes a factor of leading and following. Whenever we put anyone in charge of anything, we establish a power structure in which a certain amount of struggle for domination will occur. It's not easy to find unthreatened and nonthreatening teachers who will lead without feeling ego-bound to rule.

On this score, I am glad I listened to the advice of Korea's Cho Yonggi, who told me to put two teachers in each home, both equally responsible to the pastor. It was a stroke of genius. Neither feels the group is his or hers to control; both must remain loyal to the church and the program. They simply alternate each week, one teaching and the other leading the rest of the meeting.

Another problem was how to maintain quality with teachers who had little or no previous experience and training. Our church overcame this by providing weekly lesson outlines and pastor-taught lessons on cassette. Each week the teacher listens to the thirty-minute tape and follows along in the Bible and a lesson outline. Then he or she takes the outline to the home meeting. We also have a training manual with an accompanying tape.

The method works well, allowing us to use almost any Christian who will accept the responsibility. In fact, we generally do better with humble people who lack some confidence than with teachers trained in other methods.

Myth 5: Small Groups Multiply by Cell Division.

The popular idea compares home groups to amoebas that grow to a certain size and then divide into two equally viable cells. At first I suggested a group should divide when it reached twenty in regular attendance. Well, in the first three years only one group grew that large—and after it divided, only one of the two cells survived. Most groups grew to fourteen or sixteen and stopped.

The idea of church growth by cell division works only on paper. Real groups grow to the size of the available space minus a comfort factor of about 20 percent (to allow for introverts, claustrophobics, and others who resist crowding). In most homes, that means a maximum of not more than a dozen people. The concept of growth is not really a goal in small group dynamics.

So how do we grow? The best way is simply to form new groups. Some people will come from other crowded groups, and the new home with its friendship connections will attract its own following. This is a constantly flowing process as some groups flourish, others stabilize, and still others fade for lack of leadership or cohesion. The experiences are as varied as the people who attend.

Truthfully, a home Bible study network is a living thing that comes and goes, expands and contracts as the years go by. We must expect some groups to fade while others flourish. One group in our church has met continuously for five years—mainly because of steady leadership and practical teaching materials. But others have fallen by the wayside. That is why we must never cease starting new groups.

Why Groups Are Worth the Effort

The best lesson of all was when I began noticing that people who regularly participate in home meetings seldom require pastoral counseling. The small group is a caring and sharing environment that provides excellent psychological and spiritual therapy in addition to fellowship and Bible knowledge. The people receive emotional support, Christian advice, and answers to prayer.

The early church didn't construct a church building for three hundred years. In the beginning of that period, it used the temple for corporate worship, and after A.D. 300 it began to worship in the Roman basilicas, but its basic meeting places were believers' homes. Those nonthreatening,

marginally evangelistic, low-profile leadership gatherings accounted for some of history's best church growth.

Gerald Roles of Calvary Community Church in San Bruno, California, attributes much of the growth of their crowded church to home fellowships. He is fond of saying, "Home Bible studies grow on you."

He is like a number of other church leaders, myself included, who have learned a lot on the twisting, turning road of home ministries. The small groups did not do everything we originally had in mind, but they have surprised us with unexpected success in the maturation and care of our congregations.

That's why I still say with conviction: Every church should be a motivational and training center surrounded by a network of home Bible studies—even if they don't take shape as projected.

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