

Small Group Leaders Training Manual

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PASTORING THROUGH SMALL GROUPS

By Bill Scheidler

I. THE DESIRE OF THE CHIEF SHEPHERD (John 10:7-18)

Jesus is the Great Shepherd of the sheep and has certain desires in relationship to the sheep. As leaders, we must all share these desires.

- A. To care for all the needs of the flock (Ps. 23:1; Jer. 23:4)
- B. To raise up strong marriages and families (Mal. 4:6)
- C. To bring each person to a place of personal maturity (Eph. 4:13)
- D. To foster strong inter-personal relationships among the sheep (Eph. 4:16)
- E. To assist and equip each person in finding and fulfilling their place of ministry (Eph. 4:11-12)
- F. To be available to each member of the body for counsel, support, encouragement, and comfort (Ps. 23:3)
- G. To gather lost sheep and integrate them into the flock (Ezk. 43:12-16)

II. THE PROBLEM

- A. The generation in which we are living is working against us (Acts 2:40; II Tim. 3:1-7).
 - 1. Self-centeredness and covetousness
 - 2. Divorce and anti-family mentality
 - 3. Irresponsibility and rebellion
 - 4. Isolation or lack of socialization
 - 5. Educational system and humanistic value system
 - 6. Sexual upheaval
 - 7. Neighborhood crime and general suspicion
- B. The church growth phenomenon compounds the problem. Five changes can occur in a church that grows.
 - 1. The church can become program orientated rather than people orientated.
 - 2. The church can easily slip into pulpit pastoring rather than people pastoring.
 - 3. The church can become an assembly hall rather than an assembly line.
 - 4. The church can become an orphanage rather than a family.
 - 5. The church can become a ministry center rather than a ministry factory.
- C. As a church grows, different structures are needed to effectively minister to the people and assimilate new growth.

III. THE SOLUTION

- A. Moses' solution to overseeing 3,000,000 people (Ex. 18:17-26; Deut 1:9-18)
 - 1. Concentrate in public on the preaching and teaching of the word, focusing on practical principles of living.
 - 2. Divide the congregation into smaller segments.
 - 3. Place over these segments, individuals who are qualified and responsible.
 - 4. Work to train and equip these individuals to feed on their level.
- B. Jesus' solution to feeding the 5,000 (Luke 9:14-15; John 6:10-11)
 - 1. Raise up and invest yourself into teachers.
 - 2. Spend enough time with them so that they share your heart.
 - 3. Give to them that which they need to focus on others.
 - 4. Divide the congregation into small groups.
 - 5. Have the trained disciples feed the small groups.

IV. THE PURPOSE OF SMALL GROUPS

A. Pastoral Care and Discipleship

God has definitely given His church the burden for pastoral care and discipleship. Our desire should go beyond just birthing people into the Kingdom, but it should involve providing effective covering and accountability that precipitates growth, and bringing people to a place of personal fruitfulness and ministry. It is impossible to pastor a crowd in any individual way. The small group approach is a biblical way of feeding a multitude of people.

B. Building Relationships and Fellowship

It is clear that God wants the individual members of the church to be more closely linked to one another so that they can be in a position to better minister to the needs of one another as the Bible clearly directs. This was a top priority of the church in the Book of Acts and the small group helps to keep people from being alone in the midst of a large number of people. This is more important for the more passive, reserved and quiet personality, and yet all will benefit greatly by their involvement.

C. Assimilating New People into the Church

Whether people are newly saved or simply new to the church, there needs to be a means whereby they can quickly feel a part if they are going to be permanently established and genuinely committed to the vision of the local church. It takes several years to feel a part of a crowd, but in a few, brief contacts in an intimate setting, people can feel loved, cared for and needed.

D. Evangelism

God wants every believer to be reaching out to others in their sphere of influence. The small group is a perfect place to introduce new people to other believers in the Body of Christ. Through the small group, it is possible for them to gain the support and the relationships that they need for them to be established.

V. THE VEHICLE—THE SMALL GROUP

- A. The Small Group is an excellent context for Christian virtues and interpersonal relationships to be developed and cultivated.
 - 1. It provides a context where someone new can be identified immediately with other members of the church.
 - 2. It provides a context where people can get acquainted with those who live close to them.
 - 3. It provides a context where people can be made aware of needs in the body of Christ.
 - 4. It provides a context where people can get more intimately involved with each other through practical expressions of love.
 - 5. It provides a context where the people of God can get a vision for the salvation of their own communities.
- B. There are many way in which the Small Groups can be structured to encourage people to get more involved in the lives of others.
 - 1. Focus on personal sharing...not preaching. All personal sharing must be guided but people need an avenue of expression.
 - 2. Have projects involving help within the cell group itself.
 - 3. Have fellowship times outside of the cell group.
 - 4. Take on an outreach project as a cell group.

It must be remembered that the small group is not meant to compete with the other programs of the church. The small group is meant to supplement whatever else is going on and provide that which is not available through any other arm of the church.

THE MAKING OF A SUCCESSFUL SMALL GROUP LEADER

By Bill Scheidler

There is a certain aspect of leadership that is God-given and totally outside of one's control. God does the calling and gifting that is necessary for someone to be involved in a certain ministry. Yet it is also true that certain things can be cultivated by the called person that will render him or her more fit for the task of God's choosing. Any leader who desires to excel in Small Group ministry must give attention to areas of development what will make him or her more successful.

A successful Small Group leader is a:

A. PRAYERFUL LEADER

You can measure your dependence on God by the amount of time you spend in prayer. The leader should be consistent:

1. In personal prayer (I Tim. 2:8).
2. In the corporate prayer life of the church (Acts 2:42).
3. In praying for those over him in the Lord (I Tim. 2:2).
4. In praying for those for whom he is responsible (Phil. 1:4, 9; Col. 1:3, 9; Phm 4).
5. In praying for specific needs that arise among your people (Jam. 5:13-16).

B. DILIGENT LEADER

This refers to a leader who is constant and steady in applying him or herself to the task, is persevering, persistent, industrious and not idle or negligent.

He who has a slack hand becomes poor, but the hand of diligent makes rich. Proverbs 10:4

The hand of the diligent will rule, but the lazy man will be put to forced labor. Proverbs 12:24

The soul of a lazy man desires, and has nothing; but the soul of the diligent shall be made rich. Proverbs 13:4

Be diligent to know the state of your flocks, and attend to your herds Proverbs 27:23

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going. Ecclesiastes 9:10

C. CONFIDENTIAL LEADER (Ecclesiastes 3:7)

A time to keep silence, and a time to speak...

1. The word "confidential" literally means "with faith." When people come to you "with faith" you must not let them down.
 - a. Confident. When people come to you they want to feel confident that you will protect them and their interests.

- b. Confidence. If people are going to have confidence in leaders, they must feel that leaders can be trusted.
- 2. The confidential leader is one who is not guilty of sins of the tongue.
 - a. Talebearing (Lev. 19:16)

You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people.
 - b. Backbiting (Ps. 15:1, 3)

LORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill?... He who does not backbite with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor, nor does he take up a reproach against his friend.
 - c. Gossip (Deut. 5:20)

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
 - d. Whispering (Pro. 16:28)

A perverse man sows strife, and a whisperer separates the best of friends.
 - e. Slander (Psalm 101:5)

Whoever secretly slanders his neighbor, Him I will destroy.
- 3. The confidential leader practices the LAW OF LOVE—Always seeking the best interest of the other person.

Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all sins. Proverbs 10:12

He who covers a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates friends. Proverbs 17:9
- 4. The confidential leader practices the LAW OF FAITHFULNESS—Always remaining loyal to other members of the body of Christ.

A talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter.
Proverbs 11:13
- 5. The confidential leader practices the LAW OF EDIFICATION—Making sure that he only speaks that which builds up and strengthens.

Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Ephesians 4:29-30

D. GRACIOUS LEADER

The following contrast is taken from Frank Damazio's book on *The Making of a Leader*.

THE CONTRAST BETWEEN TRUE AND DOMINEERING LEADERSHIP

TRUE LEADERSHIP

1. Concentrates on influence from **WITHIN** by encouraging, inspiring and motivating.
2. Enjoys a good relationship with co-workers showing respect for the individual.
3. Works with co-workers toward achieving long range goals with concerns for the workers development.
4. Aims to make himself unnecessary.
5. Values the individual workers; encourages and praises rather than condemns them.
6. Desires power **WITH** co-workers, encouraging all input and feedback, and sharing the glory of the results.
7. Is always willing to discuss actions and reasons for those actions (except when circumstances will not allow it).
8. Liberates the individual, encouraging ideas and participation and equips him with tools aiming at definite results.
9. Is a "heart man", portraying a genuine concern for others.
10. Is considerate of others.

DOMINEERING LEADERSHIP

1. Depends on external controls from **WITHOUT** using tactics such as restrictions, rules, regulations.
2. Relates to co-workers from an "I'm superior/You're inferior" standpoint.
3. Demands immediate results, even if it damages the potential in the co-worker.
4. Creates an atmosphere where the subordinate is permanently dependant upon him
5. Has a low opinion of workers, being very critical of other's mistakes.
6. Desires power **OVER** co-workers assuming credit for all accomplishments, and not desiring any criticism.
7. Interprets questions as personal criticism.
8. Limits freedom of the individual, preferring to determine all actions and not truly to train anyone else for the work.
9. Is a "head man", showing little or no human compassion.
10. Is concerned only with himself.

E. FACILITATOR

As a facilitator the Small Group leader is in the position as leader to:

1. Make it easier for others to find meaningful relationships.
2. Make it easier for all the needs of the group to be met.
3. Make it easier for people to find their place in the body.

4. Make it easier for people to identify with the Local Church.
5. Make it easier for people to respond to what the Lord is saying to the church.

In other words, the leader is in the position as a servant to the group to make their Christian goals more easily attained. The leader is a “helper” of their joy (II Corinthians 1:24).

INGREDIENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL SMALL GROUP

By Bill Scheidler

A. NATURAL HOME ATMOSPHERE

The nature of the Small Group ministry suggests the need for a warm, relaxed atmosphere, conducive to spiritual enrichment.

1. Size

The home should be large enough to accommodate the meeting or there is a tight atmosphere.

2. Accessibility

The home should be accessible to people and not difficult to find or approach, if possible.

3. Appearance

The home should be neat in appearance, orderly and, above all, clean.

4. Atmosphere

The home, on the one hand, should not be chaotic, but, on the other hand, it should not be so orderly that no one can relax.

5. Hosts

The Small Group should be hosted by people who have open hearts and an open home who really want to use their home as a ministry.

- a. The hosts should be mature believers.
- b. The hosts should be friendly people, given to hospitality.
- c. The hosts should be those who enjoy the meeting themselves.
- d. The hosts should be people who have their children in order.
- e. The hosts should be people with a spiritual value system (i.e. people are more important than things).
- f. The hosts should be disciplined people who have their home ready when it is suppose to be ready.

B. PRAYER

Prayer should be a vital part of every meeting.

1. The meeting should officially begin with prayer.
2. Opportunity should be given during the meeting to pray for needs within the group.
3. Special needs and concerns that involve the entire church may also be focused on from time to time.

C. SHARING

The sharing of lives is a main burden of the Small Group ministry.

1. Sharing testimonies.
2. Sharing praise reports.
3. Sharing needs and concerns.
4. Sharing in discussion.
5. Sharing of lives both inside and outside of the meeting context.

D. INVOLVEMENT OF THE PEOPLE

One of the goals of the Small Group ministry is to get people involved in the lives of other people. This involvement will take two forms:

1. Involvement in the meeting itself.
 - a. Leading a song
 - b. Opening in prayer
 - c. Praying for needs
 - d. Organizing an activity
 - e. Telephone calling
 - f. Sharing a testimony
 - g. Exhortation
 - h. Bringing refreshments
2. Involvement in each others' lives outside of the meeting context.
 - a. Special needs
 - b. Work parties

- c. Visitor Follow-up
- d. Hospital visitation
- e. Wedding shower attendance
- f. Baby shower attendance
- g. Funeral dinners and assistance
- h. Other practical helps
- i. Personal discipleship

E. FELLOWSHIP AND REFRESHMENT

This is not a secondary function of the meeting but one of the main reasons for the meeting. Quality time should be allowed for open fellowship. Every effort should be made to see to it that quality refreshments are served.

F. MAINTAINING AN EVANGELISTIC SPIRIT

If the Small Groups are going to stay fresh and alive they must keep an outward focus. This involves assisting the leadership of the church to reach out to visitors, new converts, new attendees and new partners.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS AS A SMALL GROUP LEADER

1. Have confidence in God's choice (John 15:16).

- a. Of you as a leader (Eph. 2:10).
- b. Of the people he has placed in your care.

2. Share the vision of the leadership.

- a. Make it your own.
- b. Speak it often to the people; let them sense your personal enthusiasm.

3. Have a goal in everything.

- a. Don't have activities simply for the sake of activities. Focus activities on areas consistent with the purpose of the cell group.
 - Building Relationships
 - Deepening Maturity
 - Equipping for Service
 - Catching a Vision for their Life
 - Giving Opportunity for Service
- b. Know what you want to accomplish in each meeting and/or activity.

This means:

- Planning in advance
- Taking the meeting time seriously
- Making it a quality time
- Making the life group fun

4. Always be positive and be bold.

- a. Christ is with you and He is mighty.
- b. Our old self (timidity) was crucified with Christ.
- c. Christ Who is mighty, lives in you.
- d. We have the Holy Spirit of boldness.

5. See yourself as an extension of the eldership of the local church.

- a. Function as you would imagine them functioning.
- b. Teach only what you have heard from your leaders.
 - Don't teach from tapes and materials that are inconsistent with what you have heard the leadership say.
 - When in doubt, check things out!
- c. Observe the standards for leadership in your local church. In the following areas:

- Alcohol Consumption – What is the leadership standard in your local church?
- Addictive Substances – Please refrain from tobacco, illegal drugs and prescription pain killers, etc. (unless under doctors supervision).
- Entertainment – Please be discriminating in areas of music, movies, media, magazines that would not be in keeping with God’s desire for holiness among His people.
- Attire – Modesty and discretion is the rule. We are representing the Lord. Please refrain from any immodest attire.

d. Minister out of a gracious spirit.

6. Be zealous in prayer and fasting.

7. Always be ready to serve others in love.

8. Be willing to receive teaching and training.

- a. Maintain a learning heart.
- b. Avail yourself of learning opportunities.

10. Be a good example for the life group members.

- a. In the life of the church (prayer, worship, tithing, attentiveness, punctuality).
- b. In day to day living (work, play, hospitality, family relations).

11. Do your best to reproduce the next leaders.

- a. Pick out those with potential.
- b. Spend time with them, discipling them.

12. Always be ready to win souls and draw others into the meeting.

- Visitors in the church
- Converts at the altar
- New partners
- Acquaintances outside of the church—both saved and unsaved

13. Be willing to share the burdens of the weak. Assist in altar ministry in services.

14. Make as much time as you can to have personal fellowship with your people.

- a. Build close relationships.
- b. Get to know their real needs.

15. Have a true shepherd’s heart for small group members (Phil. 1:7-8, 1 Th. 2:4-12).

⁴ But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts. ⁵For neither at any time did we use flattering words, as you know, nor a cloak for covetousness— God is witness. ⁶Nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, when we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. ⁷But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children. ⁸So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us. ⁹For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God.

¹⁰ You are witnesses, and God also, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe; ¹¹ as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, ¹² that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory. I Thessalonians 2:4-12

16. Respect, obey, serve and pray for your pastor and leaders (Heb. 13:7, 17).

ADDITIONAL GUIDELINES FOR SMALL GROUP LEADERS

There are several other areas that are important in relation to the small group for which the leader must be prepared and in harmony with all of the other groups and the leadership of the local church.

A. Children

We want to encourage families to be involved in the small groups. However, it must be understood that it is the responsibility of the parents to supervise their own children during the meeting. If there are several children, the group leader may want to work out a strategy with the hosts and the parents of the children to arrange for an activity for the children during the discussion time. Older children should be encouraged to participate as much as their age will allow.

One option is for an age appropriate Christian DVD to be played for the children in another room. Your local church may have DVD's available in the children's department that may be checked out and returned

B. Gifts of the Spirit

We want to encourage the operation of the gifts of the Spirit in the small groups at appropriate times and within the biblical guidelines of edification, exhortation and comfort (I Cor. 14:3). Please do not allow prophecy that moves into direction, guidance and correction. In addition, do not allow personal prophecy over someone in the group. If someone in your group feels that they have a personal prophetic word for a member of the group, please have them approach the leadership of the church before they share the word so that the prophetic utterance can be judged in a biblical manner by those who are ultimately responsible for the pastoral care of the flock (I Cor. 14:29; Heb. 13:17).

C. Solicitation

The small group is not the place for the promotion of business transactions or the development of business opportunities. The small group should be a safe place where the only agenda is the cultivation of Christian fellowship and the sincere building of spiritual relationships.

D. Inappropriate Discussion

It is not the purpose of the small group to discuss problems or leaders in the church. As a small group leader, please do not allow the discussion in the small group to become a context where people can air their personal grievances or disagreements with the leadership, the vision or direction in the church. Be tactful, but be diligent to maintain the focus of the group and steer discussion back to the appropriate topic at hand. Encourage anyone with a personal grievance to set a time to meet with one of the elders of the church to discuss their concerns.

E. Exclusivity

One of the main purposes of the small group is to be a vehicle for new people to be drawn into a deeper relationship with others in the local church. Look for those who are in isolation to the rest of the group and seek ways to draw them in and connect them. Also be aware of those who seem to gravitate to the same people all of the time. Encourage them to be more group minded in the meeting context.

LEADING A DISCUSSION

By Bill Scheidler

DISCUSSION: A group discussion is a shared, purposive communication transaction in which a small group of persons exchange and evaluate ideas and information in order to understand a subject or solve a problem.

A. PREPARATION FOR DISCUSSION

1. Spend time in preparation to know the material well.
2. Spend time in prayer prior to discussion.
3. Work on an appropriate introduction to the discussion that will arouse interest.
 - A humorous story
 - A testimony of personal challenge
 - A key scripture that will cultivate a corporate desire.
4. Make sure that the room is conducive to a healthy discussion.

B. DISCUSSION GUIDELINES

1. Get people excited about the topic by the way you introduce it.
2. Seek to involve everyone (including children).
3. Watch for those who would tend to dominate.
4. Draw out those who would hold back.
5. Be careful not to let the discussion wander, continually bring it back to center.
6. Listen carefully to what is said.
7. Be prepared to repeat and clarify points for the rest of the group.
8. Be aware when several people want to talk at the same time and give order.
9. Show respect for the opinions of others.

10. Close the discussion by pulling all of the strands together so that one central thought is communicated.

C. ADDITIONAL GUIDELINES FOR THE LEADER

1. Know the people who are involved in the discussion.
 - a. Are they domineering? Do I need to back them off?
 - b. Are they quiet and reserved? Do I need to draw them out?
2. Be willing to remain in the background. The leaders should speak at the following times:
 - To begin and guide the discussion.
 - When asked a question.
 - To clarify a muddled point.
 - To correct an error...gracefully.
 - To add additional information to or to summarize a point.
 - To ask further questions.
 - To inject humor into an otherwise dry discussion.
3. Look people in the eye when they are speaking and be careful to control negative body language.
4. Do not let any member of the group escape without some involvement.
5. Be alive and alert. You are the leader. Everyone else in the group will catch your excitement, enthusiasm and intensity.

The following is Chapter 16 taken out of the book *Growing Strong Churches* by Bill Scheidler.

HOUSE TO HOUSE MINISTRY **Bill Scheidler**

Key # 14 – If a church is to grow and prosper from generation to generation that church must determine to develop house to house ministries.

There are not many specific methods outlined in the New Testament concerning the program of the church. One exception to this is the apparent universal existence of house to house ministry in the New Testament Church.

It appears that this house to house ministry went well beyond individual fellowship among believers. It seems to have included a certain amount of structure to minister to the needs in the churches and to reach out in evangelism.

There is no question that the fastest growing churches in the world today have some form of small group ministry. Is this just another fad? Or have they tapped into a divine principle or a pattern that should be considered by every church seeking to follow the biblical model?

The Great Commission

When Jesus met with His disciples after His resurrection from the dead He spent a good deal of His time issuing orders as the commander-in-chief of the army of God called the Church (Acts 1:1-3).

As you study the four Gospels and the Book of Acts in relation to this time period of forty days, you will find that these commands of Jesus were a little overwhelming, especially when put in the context of these disciples who had recently exhibited a lot of fear and personal doubt.

When you put all of the verses together, it is clear that Jesus commanded them to preach the Gospel to every creature beginning at Jerusalem and ending up at the ends of the earth, to make disciples out of those who responded, to baptize those who responded, to teach those who responded to observe everything that Jesus had ever said, and to pastor His people into maturity and productivity. In their spare time they could heal the sick, cast out devils, raise a few dead people and, if they still had time left over, they could pick up a few serpents along the way (See: Matt. 28:19-20; Mk. 16:15-20; Lk. 24:27; Jn. 21:15; Acts 1:8).

What a challenge! No wonder Jesus further instructed them to wait in Jerusalem until they were empowered from on high. They would need supernatural help if they were going to accomplish this supernatural task. With the help of the Holy Spirit, these once fearful disciples changed the world in their generation.

The commission that Jesus gave to the disciples is a commission that is still on the shoulders of the Church today. Everything that we do as a church has to be done in the light of God's commission in Genesis 1 and Jesus commission to His disciples given after His resurrection.

The Church is God's instrument in the earth today for the fulfillment of His divine purposes. There is no other plan; there is no other organization or group of people to which we can turn for its success.

A Strategy for Success

The Early Church was successful because of two things. First of all they had been obedient to Jesus in waiting in Jerusalem for the empowering of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Their task could never be accomplished in their own strength. The Book of Acts is really a book of the acts of the Holy Spirit in and through the Church.

The Early Church was also successful because they appear to have had a strategy for the fulfillment of the commission. They had a two-pronged attack in fulfilling Christ's charge. This two pronged attack is seen in Acts 5:42 where the early church leaders focused on the public teaching and preaching in the corporate gathering of the church and evangelistic endeavors and they carried the same ministry into the homes of the believers.

They appear to have focused on the large gathering in the courts of the temple (Acts 2:46-47). They appear to have focused on a smaller gathering in the homes of believers to reinforce what was taking place on the larger scale.

This two pronged attack made it possible for the multitudes who had received Christ in the outpouring of Acts 2 to continue steadfast in the apostles' doctrine, in the breaking of bread, in fellowship and in prayers (Acts 2:42).

The Present Day Challenge

It is clear that the church is approaching a day of great outpouring and harvest. Jesus made it clear that before His return there would be a harvest the likes of which the world has never seen. Perhaps this goes against your personal theology. Perhaps as you look around and see what appears to be a rise in the level of wickedness you wonder what the last days will be like.

It is clear in the Bible that while the love of many will wax cold and many will fall away from the faith, the end times will also be marked by the greatest harvest and ingathering of souls that the world has ever seen (Matt. 13:27-30, 39). In addition to a numerical expansion in the kingdom of God, the end times will be marked by a church that has come to full stature (Eph. 4:13-16), is without spot or wrinkle (Eph. 5:25-27 and is a sharp threshing instrument moving mightily against Satan and the kingdom of darkness (Rom. 16:20).

In other words, the end times will be marked by great visitation and revival where multitudes will be swept into the kingdom and added to the church. Christ's parables of the kingdom, Peter's miracle draught of fish and Joel's vision of the latter rain outpouring all seem to indicate that the "glory of the latter house" will far surpass anything that has been seen heretofore.

What does all of this mean for today's church? What does it mean for pastor's in the end times? It surely means many things, but one thing is obvious, the net of the church will have to be prepared structurally to handle what God is about to do.

The Need for a Strategy

Multitudes of people have always brought with them multitudes of problems. In Acts 6 when the number of the disciples multiplied suddenly problems, murmuring and greater needs arose.

What is the church to do? What is the pastor to do? How can the church effectively reach out and also minister to the needs of the people? Can one person standing behind the "sacred desk" one hour per week effectively get the job done? How does one person touch a community? How does one person minister to the lives of 1000, 2000, or 10,000 people? How can a local church handle the very thing for which it has prayed for centuries—growth?

Many churches in the world today have begun to grow rapidly. As they have, they have crossed a line where they have had to make a choice in their ministry. When the local church gets large, five changes can easily take place.

1. The church can become *program orientated* rather than *people orientated*. All of the energy of the pastoral staff must be given to keeping programs going that will hopefully touch people's lives. Soon people can get the feeling that the programs are more important than people and they are only a small part of a massive, insensitive and impersonal piece of equipment.
2. The church becomes guilty of *pulpit pastoring* rather than *personal pastoring*. The pastor preaches a shot gun message on Sunday morning hoping to hit the needs of most of the people, but is never able to minister to the personal needs of any one person. The individual has no personal relationship to his pastor and the pastor cannot even call his own sheep by name.
3. The church becomes an *assembly hall* rather than an *assembly line*. The church is to be a place where people's lives are put together and where that which is missing is put into place. In many large churches, however, it is easy to feel that church attendance and tithing are the only important barometers of spiritual life and that the only value an individual has is to fill a certain spot once a week. As long as he is "not forsaking the assembling" together, he is considered to be doing fine.
4. The church becomes an *orphanage* rather than a *family*. It is difficult to raise children effectively in a group. One or two parents for fifty children will never be able to develop an intimate

relationship and fellowship with those children. Most likely the children themselves will never feel close to either parent or to the other members of the family.

5. The church becomes a *ministry center* rather than a *ministry factory*. When a local church becomes large it is difficult to help each person enter into their unique ministry. We can only offer certain general services to people that will hopefully keep them going for another week rather than effectively equipping the saints themselves to do the ministry.

God is placing a great challenge before the church in these days. It is the challenge of growth. It is fairly easy to assist a group of twenty-five people to become mature men and women of God. But how can one handle a multitude?

God wants large churches. He created the church for growth. All of the principles of God's Word must be workable for small churches and large churches alike. God is raising up an army of trained servants in these days to march effectively against the gates of hell. There must be a way to fulfill His glorious commission.

Toward a Solution

The problem facing the church today is not unlike the problem faced by Moses when he led the people of God out of Egypt and toward the land of promise. Here was one man trying to be the chief counselor and decision-maker for all 3,000,000 people. It sounds absolutely ridiculous when you think about it and yet, sometimes you can be so close to a problem that you cannot see the obvious solution. It took a visit from his father-in-law to pinpoint the problem.

The problem in Israel was serious for a couple of reasons. First of all, Jethro was careful to point out that Moses was going to "wear away" (Ex. 18:23). When a pastor is ministering to a small number of people, he can do it all, and usually does. But as the number of people increases the pastor must begin to release responsibility to others or the burden will become too heavy for him to bear.

When Jethro came to visit his daughter and grandchildren, he had no time to spend with Moses, because Moses was never home. When you pastor 3,000,000 people there is always someone in trouble or going through a difficult problem. Moses loved the people more than his own life. Therefore, he put his own personal needs and the needs of his family after the needs of the people. This left Moses with no time for himself, his family or his personal relationship to God. When you love people and you have a desire to help them, this is usually the result.

Every morning when Moses got up there was a line outside his tent. There were people who needed answers, people whose lives were in turmoil, people who had to make critical decisions about their life and future. How could Moses say no to these people? He didn't! Every day from sun up to sun down (even after sun down) Moses talked, shared and counseled with the people. Day after day, week after week, month after month, it was the same. The waiting line never went away but Moses himself was wearing away.

Jethro did not need a special revelation to know that Moses would never last at this pace. Out of a concern for Moses, his own daughter and his grand children, Jethro had to rebuke Moses for the sake of his life. No one man was ever meant to carry the burden of so many people. "The thing that you are doing is not good" (Ex. 18:17).

In addition to Moses' personal health and family issues, there was another reason why the situation was serious. Jethro saw that what was taking place was not good for the people. People just cannot stand in line day after day without getting frustrated and giving up. If people know that you are too busy for them, they will wait until their problems are so big that only God Himself will be able to solve them. In addition, if the people have to wait so long in line, they will be tempted to not come for help at all or give up before they see a leader.

The Jethro Principle

Jethro saw that as long as Moses was by himself and continued his present approach, the job would not get done and the people's needs would never be met. If this condition were to continue it would ultimately jeopardize the entire plan of God to bring a believing people into the Promised Land.

Jethro proceeded to give Moses some "fatherly" advice, which later proved to be the same advice that God gave to Moses (See: Num. 11 and Deut. 1). He suggested three main changes in Moses' approach. First of all, he suggested that Moses needed to get back in right relationship to the Lord and learn once again how to put the government on God's broad shoulders. Often when we get

busy it is so easy to let that time with the Lord slide. Unfortunately, it is that time with the Lord where we find our strength, our answers and our grace to deal with everything else.

Second, he suggested that Moses take up the mantle of teaching on a corporate basis. Rather than individually trying to teach each person the divine principles they needed to navigate a particular situation, he suggested that Moses begin to publicly teach all of the people in three main areas and in doing so he would equip the people to make their own decisions and to solve many of their own problems, because they would have truth upon which to draw.

He told Moses to teach the people the word, the way to walk and the work to do. That is, he should teach them the Word of God including the principles, commands and precepts. He should teach them how to walk focusing on practical principles of living as a believer. And he should teach them about their personal responsibility before the Lord to be a worker in His vineyard. Every member of the family of God has a work to do.

Third, he suggested that Moses bring others into the work. He encouraged Moses to select qualified individuals who had their own lives in order and delegate some of his responsibility to them. He gave him the principle of team ministry.

Jethro further suggested that Moses place these individuals over groups of people according to their individual capacities whether it be for 10, 50, 100 or 1000. These support leaders would take care of the day today concerns while only the most difficult issues would come to Moses. Moses saw the wisdom in this plan and implemented the suggestion saving both himself and the congregation of the people.

In Jesus' Ministry

Jesus Himself demonstrated the same principle of ministry when He fed the five thousand (Mk. 6:34-44; Lk. 9:14-15). It would be difficult for one person to feed 5000 hungry people. In preparation for the miracle feeding, Jesus instructed the disciples to have the multitudes sit on the ground in companies of 50 and 100. Then he broke the bread, gave it to His disciples who in turn distributed it to the people. It is interesting that John's Gospel emphasizes the fact that they gave the food to those who were sitting down as Jesus had instructed (John 6:10-11).

Jesus had a plan to feed (pastor, shepherd) His people. One person could not reasonably do it all. If all are going to eat to their fill and no one is going to be overlooked, there must be a strategy. Things must be done decently and in order. Ultimately, only those who are cooperating with the strategy will be guaranteed what they need.

In the Early Church

In the early life of the church, multitudes were not the problem—making sure that the pastoral work generated by the multitudes was the problem. Because the hearts of the leadership was that of servants, it became very easy for them to want to be personally involved in every need in the church. When the number of the disciples multiplied this became an ever-increasing impossibility.

As a result, the needs of some were neglected (Acts 6:1-6). An even worse thing occurred, however. Because the apostles were trying to meet all of the needs of the people personally, they ended up neglecting their primary call to prayer and the word. Every one was in effect being hurt because they were so loving. The public ministry of the Word of God was suffering.

They too learned very quickly that “many hands make light work.” They chose other able individuals to share the task of ministering to the personal needs of the growing church. They refocused on their primary function and as a result the Word of God increased and more responded to the Gospel (Acts 6:7).

Today's Challenge

Today the church is facing the same challenge of growth. It is exciting to see the promises of harvest coming to pass. However, as the people come they will come with great needs. The church must be prepared in advance to minister effectively to these needs or we will limit what God wants to do through each and every local church. It is my persuasion that God will only give us the quantity that we can handle.

The solution that Moses found, that Jesus demonstrated and that was discovered by the Early Church is a solution that still works today. That solution could be summarized as follows:

1. Concentrate in public (in the temple) on the preaching and teaching of the Word, focusing on principles of practical living putting the tools in people's hands to be personal problem solvers.
2. Divide the congregation into segments as Jesus did when He fed the five thousand.
3. Place over these segments individuals who are qualified to carry such responsibility.
4. Work to train and equip these individuals to function as leaders in their defined area of responsibility.

The Two-pronged Attack

The New Testament Church had a two-pronged attack in ministering to the needs of the people and fulfilling Christ's commission to make mature ones of all nations. They had the public gathering, which was absolutely vital for the worship life, inspiration and marching orders of the church. They also had a smaller gathering. They continued in the temple and from house to house (Acts 5:42). Paul indicates that he preached publicly and from house to house (Acts 20:20). The corporate gathering is important for the unity of the church and outreach potential. The smaller gathering is important for many other reasons.

There are many aspects of church life that can be fostered by the smaller groups in any local church. Small groups are not meant to be in competition with the larger gathering. On the contrary, the small group should be a tremendous complement to the corporate assembly life. If the small group is designed in such a way that it is competing with the main gathering of the church, it will become divisive, repetitious and perhaps even boring. But if the small group is providing something that is not being touched by any other phase of body life, it will be a source of life and strength.

Multiple Faces of the Small Groups

Small group ministry will take on different forms in different settings depending on the vision of the leadership, the strengths of the local leadership team and the primary focus for such gatherings. Strictly speaking, no plan is wrong and no plan is to be considered universal in its application. The principle of the small group is universal, but the application may vary from one place to another.

Regardless of the primary purpose of the small groups in the life of the local church, they will most likely satisfy a combination of needs. Some of the primary purposes that are met by the small gathering include the following:

1. Pastoral Care and Discipleship

God has definitely given His church the burden for pastoral care and discipleship. Our desire should go beyond just birthing people into the Kingdom, but it should involve providing effective covering and accountability that precipitates growth and brings people to a place of personal fruitfulness and ministry. It is impossible to pastor a crowd in any individual way. The small group approach is a biblical way of feeding a multitude of people.

2. Building Relationships and Fellowship

It is clear that God wants the individual members of the church to be more closely linked to one another so that they can be in a position to better minister to the needs of one another as the Bible clearly directs. This was a top priority of the church in the Book of Acts and the small group helps to keep people from being alone in the midst of a large number of people. This is more important for the more passive, reserved and quiet personality, and yet all will benefit greatly by their personal involvement.

3. Assimilating New People into the Church

Whether people are newly saved or simply new to the church, there needs to be a means whereby they can quickly feel a part if they are going to be permanently established and genuinely committed to the vision of the local church. It takes several years to feel a part of a crowd, but in a few brief contacts in an intimate setting, people can feel loved, cared for and needed.

4. Evangelism

God wants every believer to be reaching out to others in their sphere of influence. The small group is a perfect place to introduce new people to other believers in the Body of Christ. Through the small group, it is possible for them to gain the support and the relationships that they need for them to be established.

5. Releasing People into Their Gifts and Ministries

It is clear from the Bible that every believer has a ministry and they can be used by God to reach out beyond the church walls. They also can function in gifts of the Spirit and can be used to edify the body of believers (I Cor. 12-14). Where do the passages like I Corinthians 14:26 find their fulfillment in the life of a local church where everyone has something to contribute as they come together? In a large and growing church it is impossible for everyone to participate in some way. However, in the small setting, everyone can be involved in some way in any given meeting.

6. Identifying and Multiplying Leaders

Many people are called by God to be leaders in the local church. However, the traditional model of church ministry drastically limits the opportunity for leadership function in the local assembly. Not only does the small group approach open the door of opportunity to many in the congregation to lead in a significant way, but it also affords those especially gifted to be identified and released to greater areas of responsibility. A much higher percentage of the congregation could grow in their capacity for leadership if there were more opportunities open to them at their current level of ability.

7. Accountability and Personal Growth

The small group is a great place to go over the Word that is being emphasized in the corporate life of the church to assist in accountability and seeing that word established in the life of individual believers. It is a place where the more mature believers can serve as a pattern and an encouragement to those who are not living up to their potential in the grace of God.

Models that Have Proven Effective

Because of the obvious strengths of the small group ministry in the local church many pastors have come home from a church growth seminar with great plans to grow their church through small groups only to face disappointment and, in some cases, ruin. Part of the problem is that small group ministry or any other thing that is added to the program of the church cannot just be tacked on to an already full ministry program.

In addition it will take a long time for the people in the church to get comfortable with a ministry that forces them to get out of their traditional comfort zone and enter into a small setting where they will become vulnerable to others. As a result, some pastors have given up in the process.

Some pastors have gone into such programs not being totally convinced, not counting the ultimate cost or not laying the proper foundation for change. In order to minimize some of the negative effects I have done a rather thorough study of those churches that seem to be doing well with small group ministry, that have been doing it for a good length of time and who seem to be having the desired success.

The reason for the study is to discover what these successful local churches have in common. I have discovered at least nine common denominators of the most successful small group churches.

1. The small group ministry is seen as the main program of the church.

Small groups are not an add-on to an otherwise full schedule of activities in the church. If you add small groups you will have to eliminate other phases of church life that you presently have in motion. Otherwise there will be a constant competition for leadership and some of the people will use their other fulfilling involvements as an excuse not to get involved in the small group ministry.

2. The small group ministry must be led, fanned, and envisioned by the senior leadership of the church.

It is a fact that eighty percent of the success of small group ministry is dependent on the senior pastor of the local church. This is not an area that will succeed in a corner and it cannot be delegated to a few fanatics who want to move out on their own in this area. In order for small groups to succeed there must be much pulpit time given to casting a clear vision. There must be ongoing exhortations and testimonies, which will require time in the corporate gathering. This also means that the senior pastor will have to get personally involved in the training of key leaders. But most of all it means that every leader in the church from the top down will have to be committed to personal involvement in the groups.

3. The small groups must meet fairly often.

If the small group is going to have any chance to fulfill the purposes for which it was established, it will have to meet fairly often, preferably once a week. Again this means that the senior pastor will have to look at the overall program of the church to see that the small group is not in competition with a full schedule of weekly services. When adding small groups to the program of the church it should most likely replace one of the other happenings in the program of the church.

4. The small groups must be growth orientated.

One of the greatest difficulties that you will have is multiplying groups. Part of the problem is that people become comfortable in their group and they want things to stay just the way they like them. It's ironical, but groups that do not birth new groups end up becoming ingrown and usually dissolve after about 2-3 years. All groups should be open to new people at all times or they should have a natural life cycle because of the unique purpose of that specific group. Birthing new groups should be seen as a primary purpose from the very beginning. It is even helpful to put goals out that reflect this (e.g. six months to a year).

5. The small groups must become the vehicles through which most care ministry occurs.

Again, when you structure the church around small groups those small groups become ministry centers. You can handle just about everything regarding ministry to the believer through this channel including: personal discipleship, visitor follow-up, pastoral care, hospital visitation, wedding and baby showers and even evangelistic endeavors.

6. The small groups must be small in size.

If the small groups are going to succeed at the purposes for which they are designed, the smaller they are the better. The average size of the small groups should be around 10-12 adults. Once you get to a maximum of 15-16 adults, that group should birth a new group. If a group gets too large most homes become a problem, you can end up with too many children and it ceases to be conducive for adding new members to the group. It can actually become more like a small local church, which is obviously not the goal.

7. The small groups must become the center for the release of the body ministry in the church.

The small group is the care unit of the church where the members of the group take care of the needs of one another. This is where all of the one another's of body life can take place. This is where the

members love one another in tangible ways. They comfort one another, they pray for one another, they edify one another, and they pour out their lives for one another.

8. The small groups must exist for building relationships and a caring, nurturing community both for believers and the newly converted.

Sometimes where small groups get into trouble is when they are used as the primary means for equipping the saints and training leaders. These are functions of the five leadership ministries of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher (Eph. 11:13). Not every small group will have this level of ministry within them and can end up in error if they try to function in this way. In addition the small group is not to become a place of group therapy or counseling. Those kinds of issues are best handled

privately with proper pastoral oversight. The small groups should be focusing on serving the needs of the people coming into the groups.

9. The small group must be a priority function of all of the leadership of the church and every single staff person in the church.

The small groups will not be a success if they are not fully supported by the leadership of the church and other staff members. It will soon be interpreted that if you are more mature or when you have “arrived” that you no longer need the small group. Not only that, but people are more inclined to follow your example rather than your words. All leaders should be actively involved in the small group ministry and they should seriously consider leading such a group.

These are some of the common denominators of successful small group ministries around the world today. Every successful program may not be true to all nine of them, but they will share in a strong majority of them. There are a few other simple observations or issues that affect the small group's success.

- Leaders must be prepared for every meeting so that something significant takes place.
- There needs to be a strong emphasis on training of leaders and every leader must have an intern leader who is being trained to start his or her own group.
- The focus of the corporate gathering is for worship, edification and the equipping of the saints.
- Sermons should be geared toward equipping people to reach out in evangelism and service. Every believer should be equipped to lead someone to the Lord, to exhort and to disciple them. Every believer must be equipped to minister to the felt needs of others.
- Corporate gatherings should be celebrations in honor to God and thanksgiving for the harvest.

Cautions in the Development of a Small Group Ministry

Not everyone who walks down the path of small group ministry finds long-term success. There are often very good reasons for this. Some potential pitfalls can be avoided if we do those things that will maximize our potential for success. Here are ten suggestions that may help you to succeed.

1. Do your homework.

Find the model that is best suited to your situation. This will involve being personally aware of what you are trying to achieve in the groups themselves. Find other churches that are successfully using that model. Visit those churches and study their material carefully. Try to talk to the person who has been most directly involved with the small group ministry and let them share their journey with you including the good, the bad and the ugly.

2. Be convinced yourself.

Do not attempt to get others excited about this new venture until you are fully persuaded in your own mind that this is the way you want to go. First of all, you do not want to get a bunch of people excited about something that may or may not become a reality. They will only get frustrated and you will have created another problem. Second, and perhaps more important, this must be approached as a conviction because there will be many opportunities for discouragement along the way. Third, this cannot be something that you try for a year or two. It is a long-term commitment that may never cease. The specific form that the small group takes may change from time to time but the idea of small groups will be with you forever.

3. Lay a proper foundation.

Do not go into this as a new function of body life without saturating your local church with the biblical basis for what you are trying to accomplish. If people are going to get on board, they must be convinced that this is a superior format to their traditional ideas about “church.” You might even begin a

pilot program with a select few to work out the “bugs” and arouse interest in others. This may be a good way to train some of your first leaders.

4. Go slow.

Take your time establishing this new program in the local church. There is no reason to rush. Give your people time to accommodate their thinking every step of the way. The idea is not to divide your flock. The idea is to bring everyone along with you as you go.

5. Be patient.

Results will not come immediately. It will take some time to reap a harvest from this program. It will take a lot of working the soil, a lot of sowing of seed, a lot of watering and fertilizing, and a lot of pruning. But as you are faithful, results will come. The normal experience is to begin with a certain level of enthusiasm only to see that enthusiasm wear off. The temptation will be to “shut it down.” However, if you will persist through some early challenges and not give up at the first sign of trouble the small group ministry will eventually pay off—big time!

6. Chose leaders wisely.

Choosing leaders is a major key to success. When you release people into the hands of others you must be confident that they will not hurt the flock. In Acts 6 they had specific qualifications for those who would minister to the needs of the people. We must have specific qualifications as well. Leaders must be people who fear God, love the local church, understand their relationship to authority and have demonstrated a true heart of loyalty and faithfulness. This should be their spiritual condition **before** they are selected as leaders (See: I Timothy 3 and Titus 1).

7. Train leaders well.

Nothing will ensure failure more quickly than to give someone a responsibility without a clear job description and the appropriate training for the task. Leaders should be prepared in advance before the program begins and there should be opportunities for further training as time goes on. The senior leadership of the church should be directly involved in such training so that a strong bond is formed with those who will be functioning in their behalf.

8. Stay close to leaders.

Keeping a close relational tie to those who are leading the groups is essential if unity is going to be maintained. It is so easy for leaders to slip into their own world and loose touch with the corporate vision. Relationship is the key to success. Jesus personally spent time with his leaders so that small issues could be dealt with quickly and the needs of those leaders could be met as well. The small group leaders will need a pastoring touch in their lives just as much as anyone else.

9. Monitor the results.

The only way that you can know if you are succeeding is to have some form of evaluation as the small groups progress. Are the groups really doing or accomplishing what you set out to do with them? There needs to be a context where reports can be received, problems can be identified, failures can be evaluated and successes can be honored. Anything that is left to itself will eventually degenerate into something other than its intended purpose.

10. Make course adjustments as needed.

When issues arise that reflect a problem don't be afraid to make minor adjustments along the way. No matter who you are you will not hit the right mixture the very first try. Eventually you should get to the right mix for you, your people, your culture and your specific community. It is important not to develop any “sacred cows” when it comes to how this program functions. Remember, in the Bible we have a general method but not the specific application of the method. The specific application may differ from one local church to another. It may even differ in varying seasons in the life of a specific local church.

A Net for the Harvest

The Bible is clear that in the last days there will be an ingathering of souls much like the miracle catch of fish that Peter experienced when he responded to Jesus' command to let down the net. The local church is to be a net that is let down into the sea of humanity fishing for the souls of men. If the net is going to be successful, it must be properly prepared, it must be washed, it must be mended and it must be cast into the sea.

Small group ministry is a structure that will serve to catch the harvest that God wants to bring into His house. We have an opportunity today to get that structure (net) ready so that when God does move the harvest will be preserved.