

## CHAPTER TEN

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### DEVELOPING A SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

“Well, how did it go last week?” asked Ted Ward. Lisa was the first to report: “I have some great news. You know how we prayed that my job situation would be resolved? Well, I talked with my boss, and he’s transferring me to the layout department.” “Hey! That’s great,” said John, “I’ve had good news too! Do you remember how we’ve been praying for this big project I’ve been working on? Well, I finished it two days before its deadline, and my supervisor was really pleased.”

“I wish I could report some good news,” said Randy, “but my job’s still a hassle. After the fire last week, I’m sure they want to ax someone in our department for negligence. In addition to all this trauma at work, my mom’s still in intensive care at St. Luke’s Hospital.”

Sarah was next to speak: “I wish you’d continue to pray for my new schedule. I’ve worked it out with the school for the bus to pick up the kids at my mother’s house. That way I can drop them off on my way to work and pick them up on my way home. But by the time we get home, finish dinner, and do homework, I’m ready to pass out!”

“Thanks for sharing that, Sarah. Rearing three kids by yourself is a real burden, and we’re proud of the way you’ve been handling it.” Ted then asked: “How are things with your mom Kathy?” “She’s finishing up her second round of chemotherapy now, but I still haven’t talked to her about Christ. It’s funny, I can talk with my neighbors about the Lord, but I have difficulty starting a conversation with my own mom.”

Who are these people? Ted Ward’s a carpenter who lives with a serious health challenge. Though only thirty-five years old, he has rheumatoid arthritis, and at times he has trouble holding on to his tools. He wonders what the future holds. Lisa works in a graphic arts department, and her boss had assigned her to a couple of projects with which, as a Christian, she felt uncomfortable. John is a computer programmer who works for one of the large companies in town. Randy works for a large chemical company, supervising one of their major operations. Sarah, recently divorced, just moved back into the work world as a secretary in a downtown office.

These individuals are everyday, ordinary people. While very different; they have one thing in common. They are Christians who meet together regularly for Bible study and mutual encouragement. Their types of burdens are not exceptional; rather, they are typical of the average person attending our churches. Yet week after week many believers carry their burdens without anyone else aware of their hurts.

### ***Why Home Bible Studies***

While campus services of worship and instruction are important for spiritual growth, decentralized small-group meetings in homes are equally profitable. Small groups provide a *vehicle for Bible study*. During a sermon or Sunday School lesson, people listen to the discoveries of the pastor or teacher. In a small group, however, participants go beyond passive listening. Members usually prepare their lesson in advance, and members expect to discuss the text together. Learning is enhanced through personal study and group interaction.

Home Bible studies typically develop into *cell groups for prayer*. While every member of the church and every missionary on the field need prayer, we usually intercede more consistently for people we know personally. The sharing of requests and prayer for each other makes the typical group meeting deeply meaningful.

Home fellowships can also become a *means for congregational caring*. Some people make friends easily, but others in the church find it difficult to build relationships. I am not surprised when I hear a person admit, "I've been attending the church for a year now, and I still don't have any friends here." Since this is common for many newcomers, it is essential that we do not leave the bridging of friendships to chance. The congregation that encourages participation in small groups is further along in developing a caring base for its entire membership.

Home Bible studies provide a *format for disciple-building*. We rarely know the maturity level of a person who only attends a worship service. But people who have participated in home Bible studies are able to their materials and share them with others. The process of teaching faithful people, who in turn will teach others, occurs most naturally through the small-group format.

The decentralized groups establish *extension sites for ministry*. Many unchurched people will never be drawn into the aquarium called the church. Becoming fishers of men necessitates going out to the waters of our jobs and neighborhoods where non-Christians live. Many people are warmed to Christ through personal relationships and led to him through participation in a non-threatening, informative Bible study. The homes of our members, and even of nonbelievers, are great ministry sites away from the larger church campus.

Small-groups meeting in homes also encourage a *non-professional approach to ministry*. The corporate service typically requires study, preparation, and participation only on the part of the professionals. A church that has a comprehensive small group ministry, however, invites many folks into lesson preparation and leadership. Through this structure people begin to understand that they are responsible for their own spiritual development and for the growth of one another.

How does a church that is interested in starting a cell group ministry move their plans from the drawing board into homes? The ingredients for a healthy small group ministry include: a structured program; an assigned study group; an

intentional curriculum; a flexible approach; a consistent format and a trained leadership.

### ***A Structured Program***

At First Church the pastor was afraid of home Bible studies. After all, “Who knows what kind of heresy my people may get into?” At best, he thought the groups might end up just a pooling of ignorance: “There is no way to control those groups once they get started; they just turn into cliques disruptive to the church.”

Pastor Smith’s concern is typical of many ministers, but the benefits of a cell group ministry far outweigh potential disadvantages. In fact, if the program is well-structured it will minimize and even eliminate potential problems. Unfortunately, many programs are started without much advanced planning. Consequently the home cell ministry becomes stagnant, or ceases all together.

A better approach is to first ask questions that will give direction to program planning:

- ♦ How long will groups remain together (nine months, two years)?
- ♦ How frequently will they meet (weekly, semi-monthly)?
- ♦ Who will lead them?
- ♦ What will the participants study?
- ♦ How will the groups be supervised?

At Keystone Church the pastor wanted to begin a small group ministry, so he shared his vision and rationale with the board of elders. Upon their approval, Pastor Jim put an attractive description in the church bulletin, inviting people to indicate their interest in joining such a group. As people contacted the church, he personally went to their homes and explained the nature of the program. Pastor Jim told them that the group would meet weekly for nine months (during the school year). He showed them the materials that they would be studying and explained that their participation would require a commitment to weekly preparation.

The pastor was concerned that the first group be a winner. Jim was warned by other pastors of the danger of starting too quickly, or beginning several studies simultaneously. He decided to lead the initial group himself, and through the course of the first year, work closely with someone he was praying would lead another group next year. His plan was to have two groups the following year, and four the year after that. If strong leadership did not materialize, however, he would not sacrifice a quality small group experience, but running several studies poorly.

Since Jim was in touch weekly with his Bible study group, he was able to keep track of how they were progressing spiritually. But as successive groups were begun, he was concerned with supervision of the studies and the spiritual growth of the participants. It was in November that Jim came across an advertisement promoting a conference on small-group ministries. He attended the national seminar and recognized the need for a coordinator for Keystone’s growing cell ministry. Jim began to meet monthly with the group leaders, but eventually he turned this position over to John Blanca, one of his group leaders who had obvious administrative gifts.

Today Keystone has eleven home study groups, and John meets monthly with the Bible study leaders. At each meeting the facilitators give him a written report that updates him on each group. Their report summarizes group progress and notes

any significant happenings of which the coordinator or pastor should be aware. The strong home Bible study ministry at Keystone Church did not happen by accident. Pastor Jim, the board, and the group leaders answered the five important questions listed earlier. Their ongoing planning and supervision will also assure an effective cell group ministry for years to come.

### ***An Assigned Study Group***

Some churches prefer to organize their cell ministry with homogeneous groups, while others prefer groups comprising couples and singles, those newer and older in Christ and at various stages of life. For example, a church that uses electives in its adult Sunday School, may want friends in similar life-stages to meet in home groups. On the other hand, churches that have stage-graded adult classes may prefer a cross-age approach to the Bible study ministry. I have worked with both types of groups and prefer groups with diversity.

When Pastor Lee Smith publicized the start of a new small group in his church newsletter, twenty people responded with interest. Systematically, he and an “apprentice” (a leader in training) met with them to present the requirements for participation. He then informed them that, if they were willing to make the commitment, he would call them when a new group was formed.

Since Pastor Lee had a couple from his previous group, the Rogers, who were willing to lead a home study, he planned to start two new groups. He wanted to mix the groups because people in different situations can more greatly enrich one another.

Lee made sure both he and the Rogers had singles and couples, those younger and older in age, as well as people newer and older in Christ. For example, Earl and Suzanne Rogers’ group included a couple in their twenties, three couples in their thirties, one couple in their fifties, and three singles—two in their twenties, one in her thirties. One of the singles was a woman with two elementary age children; one of the couples in their thirties had just recently come to the church; while the couple in their fifties were charter members.

The diversity in Earl and Suzanne’s group was rewarding. Over the course of their two years together they became more than just a study group. They developed into an extended family. An occasional picnic brought their families together, and the group was able to edify and encourage each other in many ways.

### ***An Intentional Curriculum***

A structured cell group ministry will give careful attention to the materials used for study. Groups are not formed first, and then asked what they would like to study. Many churches find it best to start a new group with an intentional curriculum in place, or at least the initial study already determined. Groups will develop their own personality, and within their charter have a relative amount of autonomy. Supervision of the groups is maintained by the appointment of leaders, the length of group commitment and curricular offerings.

While a church may want to establish “fellowship groups,” which are loosely structured, “study groups” will have greater intentionality. Home Bible studies

should have a purpose for meeting and the purpose reflected in the curriculum. For example, congregants attending a home Bible study for the first time would profit from a Bible basics study. The Navigators *Design for Discipleship* provides seven books which are excellent for a one or two year study (depending on whether meetings are weekly or semi-monthly). Other quality series include resources from Serendipity House, NavPress, Neighborhood Bible Study and Willow Creek/Zondervan Resources.

Channeling every first-time participant through a Bible basics course serves two purposes. First, it records who in the congregation has a foundational understanding of the Christian life. Second, it reveals the people capable of leading others through the basics. In fact, a number of people have used Book One of *Design for Discipleship*, in a one-on-one Bible study to lead a nonbeliever to Christ.

After the initial basics Bible study, topics for subsequent studies vary greatly. Groups have studied the Life of Jesus, the Book of Acts, Philipians, or James. There are material on marriage, money management, evangelism, and personal spiritual development. Course offerings are determined by the expressed needs of people and the collective goals of the church. In the promotion of these subsequent studies, people are reminded that the new groups are only open to those who have completed the basic Bible study.

Materials for group participants are best purchased by the church and distributed though the Bible study leaders. The church that asks individuals to go to a bookstore to purchase the lesson materials can count on some people showing up for meetings unprepared. A better procedure is to maintain a supply of frequently used materials at the church. While this takes an initial outlay of cash, all the expenses of these materials are recovered when class members reimburse the study leader. In addition, people who want to take a friend through a one-on-one study can contact the church when books are centrally located. A structured curriculum helps establish a stable home Bible study program.

### ***A Flexible Approach***

People differ from one another, as do their schedules. When I first began to coordinate home Bible studies, my format was fairly rigid. For example we only offered Bible studies—no support groups or service groups. And we only offered couples groups and intergenerational groups. But time revealed the advisability of greater flexibility. This lesson was impressed upon me during one weekend meeting.

While speaking at a men's retreat, I was surprised to learn that nearly half the group had been Christians less than two years. During our meals together several of the men shared how they had come to know Christ. Most of them had received Christ through men's small group Bible studies.

Up until this time I had always encouraged couples to participate together in studies. My concern was for family time. But this church had discovered that men are less open to talk about Christ (or pray our loud) when they are in a mixed group. While the church had groups for couples, they also provided groups just for men and just for women. Subsequently, I have seen the value of launching men's groups, women's groups, and many mixed groups.

Flexibility is also related to frequency of meetings. While many groups meet weekly, other groups have profited from semi-monthly meetings. Continuity

develops more quickly in a weekly meeting, but some people simply cannot make that time commitment.

Some churches have maintained (and some churches are beginning) a midweek service for adults. The formats vary from a “New Community” worship and preaching service, to discussion groups, to small groups meeting on or near the campus. A flexible approach recognizes that for some people the on campus midweek hour is preferred to a home setting. And since home groups are only open to those who covenant for the duration of the group, a midweek service provides a place for those who can only attend periodically.

Consistency in the quality of group life is facilitated by carefully selecting leaders, using an intentional curriculum and setting group expectations in a covenant. At the same time, since personalities and schedules vary, flexibility in approach encourages both greater participation and more intimate sharing.

### ***A Consistent Format***

Once a church has structured its program, composed new groups, and selected its curriculum, it is ready to begin actual meetings. Many working with home Bible studies have found that two-year *duration of commitment* is beneficial. It can take up to six months for group camaraderie to develop. But going beyond two years can lead to a fixed group dynamic and ultimately stagnation. Furthermore, if multiplication of community through group life is a congregational goal, then the birthing of new groups is encouraged by the two year limit.

Two nine-month terms, with the summer off in between, is an optimal commitment. Many people are reluctant to commit to anything for two years. People’s circumstances change so often that for some a lengthy commitment will discourage them from any involvement. People who have made a nine-month commitment, however, and have found their experience meaningful, are likely to make a second nine-month commitment to the same group.

The *meeting time* of the Bible study should remain consistent. If a 7:30 to 9:30 meeting is best for the participants, then the study should begin promptly at 7:30 for the long-term welfare of the group. A group that delays in getting started will typically delay in closing. When busy schedules press upon group members, and they fear they will finish past 10:00 p.m., they are more likely to stay home. When the ending hour is honored regularly, members are not afraid to participate, even when their schedules are tight.

A consistent *meeting location* is also beneficial to a study group. Typically, a home is selected for its room size and central location. Some leaders prefer to have a study in their own homes. Sometimes, other factors will determine the location—such as using the home of a couple who has their young children already in bed. Once the site is determined, however, consistency of location will encourage consistency in attendance. If a rotation of homes is involved, a monthly schedule is preferable to a weekly rotation. However, neither encourages regular attendance as much as a permanent location.

A consistent *meeting schedule* will guarantee enough time for study, prayer and fellowship. Many groups have found it beneficial to begin the evening with Bible study while everyone is fresh. The sharing of praise items and concerns for prayer then leads naturally into intercession. Short, conversational prayer encourages even

the timid to participate. Some groups have experienced the benefit of outreach projects, and have worked these into their weekly meetings. Sessions are usually concluded with refreshments. A typical home Bible study schedule would therefore include:

- ◆ Bible Study (60 minutes)
- ◆ Sharing and Prayer (30 minutes)
- ◆ Strategies for Outreach (10 minutes)
- ◆ Refreshments (20 minutes)

Consistency in *outreach projects* is energizing to a study group. A group that focuses only on its own needs becomes very introspective and turns stagnant. On the other hand, a group that's always looking for ways to minister to others remains fresh and vibrant.

For example, one group used as its outreach project the sharing of Christ with nonbelievers. The group's goal was to memorize one of the "Four Spiritual Laws" (and supporting references) each month, ultimately sharing the overview with a friend. In another study group, members were challenged to write a note of appreciation to a non-Christian. This not only helped the members express thanks for a specific act of kindness, but helped them build bridges for further sharing. Another home Bible study rented a film on the life of Church Colson and then invited friends to a barbeque and showing of the film. Another home group purchased support bars and installed them in the bathroom of a recently handicapped shut-in. Hundreds of such outreach projects will stretch people and infuse enthusiasm into their groups.

A consistent format of Bible study, sharing, prayer, and outreach contributes to an effective home Bible study ministry.

### ***A Trained Leadership***

The success of any home Bible study is critically related to the effectiveness of its group leader. The most carefully selected group, using the best material, in an ideal location, will nevertheless die in the hands of a poor leader. Let me illustrate by introducing you to Jim Wilson and Bill Robinson.

Jim Wilson enjoys the Bible; he has studied it for years. In fact, if you were to ask Jim privately, he would admit that he wishes that he could have been a preacher. When Jim was asked to lead a group, he jumped the opportunity.

Jim's group started out with great enthusiasm, but eventually members trickled away until only five remained. Jim has a high view of Scripture, and he does not believe doctrinal error is tolerable. Several times he quickly "corrected" answers from his group that did not agree with his view. Jim's comments such as, "No, that's not right; look at the verse again," led some younger Christians to believe they couldn't interpret the Bible.

A leader needs sensitivity and skill to field a wrong answer and move the group to discover the correct truth. Praise for good interpretation builds learners; rebuke for poor interpretation discourages them. Unfortunately, Jim felt he had to teach on every issue. He was not really a catalyst or leader; he was a lecturer. It is important for leaders to allow group members to make their own discoveries from

the Scriptures, and then praise them for their efforts. The Bible study exists for the group, not the leader.

By way of contrast, Bill Robinson was concerned that religion not be “forced down people’s throats.” When he became a home Bible study leader he would often allow his group to wander from the subject of study. Since Bill did not want to offend people, he also overlooked incorrect responses. While the group members enjoyed their time together, they were not learning how to interpret the Bible. Though Bill’s demeanor was opposite that of Jim, he too was an ineffective teacher.

Leaders must lead; they are responsible for guiding their classes. Strong leaders keep their groups on target, yet help them avoid overdependence. Through carefully worded questions, a leader can guide students into discovery and then affirm them for those discoveries.

People recruited to lead small groups should have already participated in groups themselves and have demonstrated leadership capabilities. The Church of the Open Door learned this lesson the hard way. Pastor Jim Thomas had just returned from a conference in Northern California and was excited to develop a home Bible study ministry. In his first year he began two groups; in the second year he added three more. But toward the end of that second year, three of the studies were limping along because he used leaders who were not effective. Trained leadership is essential for a meaningful home Bible study program. The following autumn only two groups were started, but with competent leaders who had participated in previous groups.

The best way to disciple a person for leadership is to let them participate in a group for two years under a good leader—this is the faith community model of learning. In addition to this apprentice type training, most churches offer a once a month leaders and coaches (a coach is a leader of five small group leaders) training time. These leaders have found that their time together produces a healthy camaraderie. They encourage each other and pray together for the members of their groups. Trained leaders who are motivated, encouraged and affirmed assure the success of a small group ministry.

### ***Conclusion***

In the early church the believers met together in homes to eat, fellowship, learn and pray. In fact, for 300 years church sites were in the homes of believers. Today, because of numerical growth, diversified programs and a culture which associates a bona fide institution with a building, Christians meet on centralized campuses. Yet warmth and attractiveness still surround home meetings.

Large congregational gatherings are great for worship and preaching, and Sunday Schools are profitable for instruction. However, intimacy among Christians is limited in these larger assemblies. While some pastors are fearful of home groups, and others are at a loss as to how to develop them, people still long for community, and the church still needs a well rounded discipleship ministry. Many churches serious about edification and evangelism have capitalized on small-group ministries.

Home Bible studies are not just another bandwagon. They are not going to disappear overnight. While structure and format may vary from church to church, people will continue to associate together in small groups, just as they did in the early church. And when these small groups meet visibly in neighborhoods and at job

sites (not cloistered behind institutional walls), perhaps then, too, seekers will see the new life and joy of these believers, and we'll be able to say "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).

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## **A Checklist for Home Bible Studies**

Does our church have. . .

- ? A Structured Program
- ? An Assigned Study Group
- ? An Intentional Curriculum
- ? A Flexible Approach
- ? A Consistent Format
- ? A Trained Leadership