

# Joy Equipping

**"As each part does its work."**  
Ephesians 4:16-18



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## The Magic of Small Groups

by N. J. Lindquist

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Pastor," I said. "I don't believe this church will develop either in numbers or spiritual maturity unless there is a small group ministry."

He agreed with me. From his recent reading he had decided small groups were needed. "But," he continued with disarming honesty, "I don't really know how."

I believe a lot of pastors and leaders are in the same position. An abundance of evidence shows that those churches who are using small groups effectively are growing in both converts and committed believers. But it is very hard to take the first step, particularly if you yourself have never been involved in a vital support group.

I'm not talking about the Bible study where one person (often the pastor) does all the talking, a few people pray long prayers covering a number of requests, you sing a hymn and go home. I'm talking about small groups of people who become involved in one another's lives.

"I don't need to go to a church," someone said to me recently. "I get enough in my own living room watching the service on T.V." Or what about this statement? "I am blessed by the services at my church. I get everything I need from them." Both of these people have watched a service. Both may have learned more about the Bible or about God and felt spiritually uplifted. But both are missing the point.

The church is not the building. We know that. But neither is it the service on Sunday. The church is the people. Individuals. Those you instinctively like and those you have grown to dislike. Those whose theology you agree with and those you believe to be misinformed. Those who are up front leading the singing or teaching Sunday school and those who sneak out the second the service is over so no one will ask them to become involved. The church is the people.

I'm not a pastor. However, I've spent over 35 years in lay leadership. I've taught Sunday school and junior church,

worked with mid-week groups, edited a church newsletter, set up and superintended several Sunday schools, chaired outreach and CE boards, helped to plant two churches, disciplined people 1:1 and led a variety of small groups. After years of lay leadership, I am firmly convinced that the single most important ministry of the church is achieved through small groups.

What is the role of the church? Paul says it's the equipping of the saints to do the work of ministry. (1.) Which work is that? Making disciples. (2.)

As leaders, we are called to equip the people to do the job Christ put us here to do. And no matter how good the service on Sunday, it will never be enough.

When I was 21, I realized that being a Christian means more than just asking Jesus to forgive me and come into my life. It also means more than an infrequent experience of oneness with Him. It is an ongoing, daily commitment to live as He would have me live, to allow the Holy Spirit to guide me, to relinquish control over my own life. (3.)

I recognized that I couldn't do it all by myself. I needed the encouragement, teaching, and accountability of other believers. (4.) Now I'm not saying God couldn't get me through forced solitary confinement. But the reason why Paul spends so much time talking about the body is because it's vitally important to our Christian walk. And I believe too many of us have missed the significance of the body. We think of the pastor and the music people and the Sunday school teachers and perhaps a few others who have obvious gifts, and we basically ignore all the others whose gifts aren't obvious. Did you know the majority of Christians have no idea what their gifts are? Or that God can and will use them?

How do we discover those gifts? I suggest that it is not by seminars or questionnaires, but by interaction with a few people in small groups.

Acts 2:42-47 says that the early believers were together on a daily basis. Not thousands of them in one place, but a few gathered in one of the small homes of their day to do four things. Listen to the teaching of the apostles, eat together, pray, and care for one another.

Not a formal service, but a small group of individuals living their lives together. I need you. You need me. We need each other. Church is really another name for our extended family. And while calling one another brother and sister has become less common because of overuse and lack of genuine meaning, the reality is that that's exactly what we need.

### **Not the titles - the actions.**

Beginning with an IVCF group at university, I have been involved in small groups on an ongoing basis. Some have been Bible studies where I've learned apologetics and sharpened my knowledge skills. Some have been training groups to assist me in memorizing the Bible and growing in my daily walk. Some have been studies on a topic relevant to me as a woman, wife, or mother. Some have involved both men and women. Some only women. A few have involved just two of us.

Often, I have been in two groups at one time. One in which I was leading young Christians, another at a peer or mentor level where I was growing.

Of these many groups, the best have been those which spent half the time in sharing and prayer, and involved not only Bible study but personal sharing of what God had shown us in the past week as well as accountability and ongoing commitment to one another.

Through this type of group, I saw brand new believers grow to maturity. I saw gifts recognized by their use (not usually by the owner of the gift but by the other group members). I saw faith become strong as prayers were answered. I saw strong bonds develop between people who were outwardly very different. I felt genuine caring as we prayed for friends and relatives who did not know God. And I felt the presence of God, not only at our meetings but also as we became secure enough to reach out to others.

And why not? Jesus chose to work with 12 disciples. He spent three years with them, teaching and training and preparing them to carry on his work.

Paul always had a support group around him. Working together, praying for one another, supporting each other, they were able to turn their world upside down. (5.)

One of my questions has always been how to become like the church in Acts. I believe the answer is small groups.

It's time we started spending two or three hours together on a weekly basis, sharing our joys and sorrows, praying for each other and those to whom we each would reach out, sharing advice and wisdom, growing closer to one another as well as to God, and strengthening each other to into the world and be His witnesses. Are we afraid to test what God could do if we gave Him the chance?

God has chosen to do His work through us. Not me or you, but us together. That's what the body is all about. That's why Jesus said, "They will know you are my disciples by your love for one another." (6.)

### **How do you get started?**

- Read how-to books on discipleship and small groups. (see sidebar)
- Pray for God's guidance as to His will for your church.
- Find a church that has an effective small group ministry and visit it with several potential leaders.
- Get into a group yourself. Pray that God will send you three or four others, either potential leaders or perhaps eager young believers.
- Make sure you include at least an hour of sharing and conversational prayer, and record the prayer items so you can keep praying until there are answers.
- Be sure the Bible study topic is meaningful to your group. A study book where answers are written in is great. Start simple and work up, fitting the content to the level of your people. Never assume anyone knows basic information.
- Follow-up on what people say they want to do so you are accountable to one another

### **Organize three levels of small groups.**

**1. The first level is leadership training and will likely involve one group to begin.** First, the leaders must be trained. The easiest way to do that is by taking part in a small group themselves. Yes, they may need teaching in leadership skills, but more importantly they will need to understand their own need for support from one another. This group should continue to meet at least every two weeks.

**2. The second level is discipleship training.** This is usually for those who have accepted Christ and want to grow into mature believers. It will include new Christians who are eager to learn more as well as some who have been Christians for years. (But a seeker who is interested in this level should not be turned away.)

**3. The third level I call interest groups, but it will have various names within different churches.** Basically, it means a variety of groups appealing to interests within or without the church. Some examples are parenting, finances, substance abuse, study of the pastor's sermon, apologetics, or a book of the Bible. They are hundreds of possible topics, and a few of them will be right for your church and your community. These are open to everyone.

#### **What's the cost of small group ministry?**

Time. It may even be necessary to stop other church programs in order to free people for involvement. It may be necessary to be very creative. Opposition could arrive in many forms. Satan is not fond of small groups. Nor is natural man. A key item in planning small group ministry is prayer. Another is understanding. Make sure you are up front about what will be taking place and why you're doing it. But don't wait for every person to come on board. You have to start with the ones who are ready. The majority of the congregation are followers who want to see evidence it works first. Then there will always be those who resist any change. Love them, but don't hold everyone else back for them.

Because if you really want to turn your community upside down, small group ministry is a very good place to start.

#### **Footnotes:**

1. Ephesians 4:12
2. Matthew 28:19-20
3. Romans 12:1
4. Ephesians 4:14-16
5. Acts 11:26
6. John 13:35

#### **What if Your Church Isn't Ready for Small Groups?**

1. Accept your own desire for the support of a small group.
2. If you are the pastor, you need to have a long talk with god about what your next step is. If you aren't the pastor, you need to gently let your pastor know that you feel this desire.
3. Recognize that the pastor/leaders may feel you're trying to add to their already large workload.
4. Recognize that as part of the body, this may be your passion and your gift. Be prepared to study, document, and use opportunities to learn more.
5. Pray that God will send other people who have the same desire.
6. Be ready for God to use you.
7. Meet with whoever God sends. And yes, two or three of you are enough.
8. Realize you are not meeting to criticize the pastor or your church. What you need is personal support. Share your joys, difficulties, and dreams. Pray for God to speak to you and through you. When the pastor sees the difference in your lives, he may, without a word on your part, change his mind.
9. Start with material that is suitable for the least mature in the group and work from there into more depth. Yes, you can learn from a new believer.
10. Realize that some people associate small groups with cliques. My experience is that if the focus is truly on God's love for us and our love for one another, there will be an automatic growth in outreach and caring for neighbours, family, etc. But if there are a lot of needs in your group, this may take time.
11. Conflict is a stage of growth. If the group is to be effective, you will have to work through conflict to real commitment. Many groups dissolve just when they are starting to get somewhere.