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A Small Groups Manual

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Second Edition

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NOTE: In an effort to recognize that both men and women are co-heirs of God's grace, we have chosen to use alternating gender pronouns in this document. However, we do recognize and embrace gender specific roles in scripture.

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Introduction

Maybe you have experienced it at some time or another, the excitement of a small group that is clear in purpose, honest in its discussion, probing in its questions, and joyful in its unity. But how do we recreate this “magic” in our discipleship groups? What is the catalyst that sparks our love for one another and brings an addicting foretaste of life in the Kingdom of God? What is it that makes the group so productive and challenging?

The New Testament Basis For Small Groups

From the beginning of His ministry Jesus revealed His intention to call together His believers into a group or Body, His church. The very meaning of church is “a group of people who are gathered or called together.” The Greek verb, related to the noun ekklesia, means “to call out of [their houses]” or “to assemble together.” In other words, Jesus desired to see those who followed Him join together. In Matthew 16:18 He affirmed His intention to “build my church.”

After Jesus’ resurrection the believers naturally continued to assemble together, first in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1ff., 46-47) and later throughout Judea and Galilee (Acts 9:31). The first Gentile converts gathered in the home of Cornelius (Acts 10). Throughout the New Testament, references are made to gatherings of believers in private homes (Acts 2:46; Romans 16:3-5; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2). In fact, for the

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first hundred years most Christian gatherings were in homes.

Paul's concern for building a Body of Christians is evident in his letters. He established churches (Acts 14:23,27, 15:3-4,41, 16:5) and urged them to grow in love for one another (I Corinthians 12-14). He wrote that only by Christians joining together could the Body of Christ be complete, not lacking any of its members. Like Paul, the author of Hebrews emphasized the importance of Christian unity (10:25).

Jesus not only recognized the value of Christians joining to form churches but also the value of smaller groups for deeper fellowship and Christian maturity. Jesus gathered a select group of 12 disciples from within the church to learn by being with Him and to prepare them for leading the larger Body of believers (John 15:27). The Apostle Paul was known to have similar, intimate associations with men such as Timothy, Silas, Titus, and the elders in Ephesus. These disciples learned simply by being with their mentors, and they learned far more than basic theology—they learned a new lifestyle.

Finally, Jesus recognized the value of small groups for evangelism (Matthew 9:9-10; Luke 5:27-29, 19:5-7). In these meetings relationships were not so intimate and committed as in Jesus' group of disciples, but the small groups still provided an atmosphere of personal sharing and discussion.

Why Have Small Groups?

So much has been said in the last few years about the purpose of small groups for Christian disciple building that it almost seems unnecessary to discuss it again here. Yet, if

we do not have a clear vision of our purpose, we are unlikely to fulfill it; therefore, a quick review is necessary.

Jesus of Nazareth had only three years to tell the world that He was its promised Savior, yet He chose to spend most of this time with twelve common workmen. What greater testimony could we have to the power of a small group? As we seek to teach others the gospel of Christ, we need to learn from the example of our Master Teacher.

When one considers the practical advantages, the wisdom of Jesus' method becomes clear. In fact, as Carl Wilson has pointed out, "Historically any revitalization of the church has taken place when the importance of sharing in small groups has been rediscovered."¹ Both the 18th century Methodist revival in England and the more recent East African revivals are examples of this trend.

The goal of disciple building is to help people grow up in the image of Christ; it is to help them become obedient to His Word. Small groups provide the interpersonal context in which a person can become a "doer" of the Word and not a "hearer" only. Many truths of the Christian faith are interpersonal values that, to be truly learned, must not only be understood intellectually but also be practiced in relationships. Love, forgiveness, service, generosity—these virtues are meaningless apart from personal expression.

Second, like mentoring (i.e. one-to-one disciple building or Life Coaching), small groups allow the time, individual attention, and supportive environment needed to enable each person to face the challenges of God's Word and to understand and apply truth in his life. Yet small groups can be more effective than mentoring alone because each group member can be ministered to by several people and often discussion includes more varied ideas and thoughts.

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Another practical advantage of a small group is that the wisdom and experience of the leader is shared on a more personal and effective level than in a lecture. As he models the truths he teaches and shares how he has struggled with them in his own life, others will better understand how to apply them to their lives and will be more motivated to do so.

The small group leader will have credibility when he seeks to correct, exhort, or guide a disciple because he has already established a trusting, loving relationship with him. He will also be able to judge the disciples' needs and progress more readily. Thus, disciple building leaders, church elders, or teachers are enabled to "shepherd" or "oversee" the spiritual lives of the congregation, as they should according to their proper biblical function. They are enabled to watch over the growth of each individual with fatherly affection (I Thessalonians 2:10-11; Colossians 1:28-29).

Finally, small groups are vital because it is here that we really learn what it means to function as the Body of Christ. Much of our time in large groups or one-to-one is spent learning how to grow in our personal walk with the Lord. But in small groups we not only grow as individuals, but we also grow in our unity as a Body and our ability to work together as God's family. We learn to appreciate each other's gifts, to bear burdens, to forgive, to confront. We learn to comfort one another, to confess to one another, and to encourage one another. In short, through the intimacy of small groups, both the Body and its members are built up into the "fullness of Christ."

The Different Kinds Of Small Groups In The Church

Small groups have existed for some time in most local churches. But not all small groups are the same. The sewing circles of pioneer churches, the Sunday School classes that began at the turn of the last century, and the (relatively) modern home fellowships are all examples of small groups within the local church. But they are all different from each other. One of our purposes here is to differentiate between the kinds of small groups. In addition, we will show how each type of small group can be helpful as a tool for building disciples.

Although there are many kinds of small groups, most can be categorized into four broad types: 1] Knowledge-Oriented Groups, 2] Community/Fellowship Groups, 3] Ministry/Activity Groups and 4] Intentional Disciple Building Groups. This four-fold grouping is somewhat artificial since almost every small group has elements of all four types. But the four categories will help us better understand the dynamics of small groups and learn how to balance the various elements.

Each of these groups plays an important role in church life and can facilitate the ongoing growth of disciples. In fact, if they are utilized as part of a progressive strategy they become indispensable elements of a comprehensive program of disciple building.

We will look at how this can best be achieved, but first let's explore some of the main characteristics of each type of group.

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Knowledge-Oriented Study Groups

The primary goal of a knowledge-oriented small group is to communicate information or content about a particular subject. Many of these groups follow a simple lecture format, but the most effective combine lecture with active group discussion. By utilizing this interactive format, the leader is able to focus more specifically on addressing questions that may arise.

The small group Bible study with a strong emphasis on teaching and intellectual understanding of Scripture has appealed to many Evangelicals because it fits our desire to transmit truth. In many churches, biblical studies are no longer an exclusive focus. In an attempt to foster a more comprehensive Christian worldview, subjects such as weight-loss, financial planning, child-raising and even automobile repair are offered as part of the training and educational curriculum. Though often presented in a classroom format, the content is often adapted for a small group to increase accountability, support, and interactive discussion.

This approach promotes in-depth Bible study and allows the teacher to share the results of her personal study. More content can be presented in less time, and the leader can challenge the disciples in new areas of "unfelt" needs, as well as guide them in areas of "felt" needs. However, this school-like approach can give the impression that correct ideas and doctrine are more important in the Kingdom of God than love for the people involved. If this happens, people are sometimes judged by the depth of their understanding rather than their love for God and others.

In spite of personal sharing by the leader, she may be viewed as the "expert" and put on a pedestal which others

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feel they can never reach. Moreover, if application is allotted only the time left over after teaching, and if questions and discussions are used mainly to see if group members “got” the correct conclusions, we are in danger of changing minds, not lives. Some time may be spent on application of the truths taught and almost always prayer is included. But an emphasis on communicating information is necessary, and this often leaves little time for other elements.

There are situations where a knowledge-oriented approach is essential. However, disciples need more than knowledge to grow. They also need a community where needs can be expressed, prayers can be offered, and care can be given.

Community/Fellowship Groups

The community or fellowship group is a second category of small group. Growing in popularity in recent years, they provide an opportunity for Christians to meet together for the primary purpose of finding fellowship and support. Many of these groups meet away from the church campus in homes, offices, or local restaurants. Members feel this “neutral setting” helps foster an environment that encourages Christians to be less formal and more transparent.

In addition, this setting often helps visiting non-Christians see the reality of Christian life and makes the transition to the broader church community easier. With a strong emphasis on encouragement, sharing, and unity, these groups have become a weekly spiritual oasis for many weary people. For many churches the community group is a strategic part of evangelism and church growth. Meaningful

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relationships are always attractive to those searching for purpose and community.

Often geographically centered with members coming from the same neighborhood, these groups can have other demographic similarities such as being primarily comprised of singles, or middle-aged, or young couples, etc. These similarities allow for increased empathy and understanding. In addition, similar lifestyles make the challenging task of coordinating busy schedules less formidable.

The openness and joy often found in these community groups can act like an “evangelistic magnet” attracting people who are searching for genuine community and relational connections. It is no wonder that as the early church met “house-to-house” many came to Christ. This relational evangelism often results in rapid growth and the formation of new groups. Some group leaders specifically focus on this expansion dynamic by urging members to pray that an “empty chair” would soon be filled with a new member.

Because of the constant influx of new members, these groups often span a range of spiritual maturity. This diversity of spiritual age has both pros and cons. Young Christians intermingle with older Christians where they find support and wisdom. In turn new converts bring enthusiasm and zeal for the Christian life that older Christians find refreshing. But intermingling spiritual maturity levels can limit the subject matter discussed and the challenges to obedience. What is appropriate for older Christians might overwhelm new Christians. Conversely, what new Christians require may not challenge more mature Christians. Truth must be broadly applied to avoid these extremes, thus limiting specific accountability.

The advantage of these groups is that Christians learn truth within the context of “real life experiences.” Through the example, insights, and encouragement of others, they find new truths not only with their minds but also with their emotions, commitments, actions and experiences. In addition, leadership is usually shared by several in the group so many get an opportunity to grow in ministry skills.

A limitation of these groups is that they may dwell on the same problems over and over without any new or challenging content or without any strategic way of helping the members move toward a deeper maturity. This lends to spiritual entropy with the group ministering at the level of the least mature member. The introduction of mentors who are able to help individual Christians progress toward maturity can address this deficiency. We at WDA call this Life Coaching. (For more information on how to utilize mentors/Life Coaches in a small group see WDA’s *Disciple Building: Life Coaching* manual.)

Sometimes these groups tend to lack clear leadership and direction. There is often genuine love for one another and for Christ, but there is not a balanced commitment to grow in service to God and experiential knowledge of His broader Kingdom. The result is that many of these groups start strong but eventually disband.

Ministry Activity Groups

A third type of small group present in many churches is the ministry activity group. These groups usually form around a specific ministry-related task or a burden or common interest that group members share. The pioneer community quilting circle was more than a place for women to sew. It was also a social support system where friendly

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conversation within a close-knit (no pun intended) circle of friends offered comfort and feelings of accomplishment.

In a similar way church members who sing in the choir, landscape the grounds, visit the sick, or fill holiday baskets find a sense of support and community around a shared ministry task. These groups function in much the same way as the community group, but the difference is the initiating motivation. With the community group there is a need for fellowship and support that often leads to a ministry element. In the ministry group, initially the common purpose of ministry is paramount, but eventually this emphasis can become balanced by a sense of supportive community.

There are as many types of ministry activity groups as there are types of ministries in the church. Perhaps the most familiar is the prayer meeting. Here members assemble to intercede for the needs of the church. This often small band of intercessors finds support and comfort from one another as they minister together. In addition, they are encouraged as they see God do wonderful things in answer to their prayers, thus building their faith and trust.

Intentional Disciple Building Groups

In examining many approaches to disciple building, only one strives to balance the understanding of truth with forming loving relationships in the midst of an active ministry: it is the method of Jesus. At times Jesus instructed His disciples in new knowledge or new skills. But often He questioned them, gave them tasks to try, told them open-ended stories, answered their questions, let them take positions of leadership and taught them through daily conflict and interaction. In short, He helped His disciples

both hear and experience truth at the same time. They learned it in such a way that they were never the same again. In our disciple building, we must be careful to imitate not only the teachings of Jesus but also the way in which He taught.

Small groups that strive to help a Christian develop in Christlike character and conduct as they achieve specific goals related to the disciple building process are a fourth type of small group. These groups are called intentional disciple building groups. In this type of group there is always a strategic task or objective related to spiritual development that the group is striving to achieve. The goal may be to evangelize the lost, establish spiritual foundations, equip for ministry, or help people recover from past experiences that produced emotional trauma. But in each case there is a strategic intention. When the goal is accomplished the purpose of the group is achieved and the group can be either disbanded or reformed around another strategic objective.

Larry Richards has pointed out that, "Much education is concerned with helping people know what their teachers know. Christian education is concerned with helping people become what their teachers are."² In order to bring about this true disciple building, we must both teach truth to our disciples and help them live it out in the midst of relationships. This was the mystery and glory of Jesus' incarnation: "the Word became flesh." In disciple building there is a delicate balance between strengthening one's understanding of truth and growing together in love. "If I have all knowledge... but do not have love, I am nothing" (I Corinthians. 13:2); but also, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word." (John 14:23)

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The ultimate intention of the disciple building process is to produce disciples who are capable of loving the same way Jesus loved. This process is very complex because it involves changing the very motives that influence our everyday choices. We must be taught truth so that it sets us free from false notions of who we are. We also need to be continually placed in situations that (quite literally) force us to choose whether we will trust God as we lay down our lives for Him and others, or choose instead to benefit our selfish nature. This choosing of truth over falsehood is a demonstration of the faith that sanctifies us.

Of course God is sovereign over the process of our sanctification, for “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” These good works of unselfish love are overseen by His own Spirit. But He also appoints disciple builders, skilled workers who come alongside us to encourage, exhort, and teach us to obey everything the Spirit of Christ and the Word command us to do. This teaching must be intentional, shaping us gradually but inexorably toward the very image of the One who first called us. This teaching takes place in many venues and structures within the church, but small groups that are intentional are a vital part of the disciple building process. There are two distinct types of intentional disciple building small groups.

- **Restorative Groups**

The first type is related to helping disciples identify and recover from the emotional and relational damage of past sins or trauma. Divorce, death of a loved one, abuse, or other emotionally damaging events may require special approaches to healing. Constructing a safe environment where members are free to be open and honest should be an

integral part of any disciple building small group, but nowhere is it more imperative than in a restorative small group.

- **Progressive Disciple Building Groups**

The second kind of intentional small group is similar to what Jesus used to train His disciples. These groups are called progressive disciple building groups. Though containing many of the characteristics of other kinds of small groups, these groups are unique because they are formed around the specific maturity level of the group members. Actually there are five different types of progressive disciple building small groups corresponding to five different phases of Christian growth to maturity. (See *Disciple Building: A Biblical Framework*, WDA.) Maturity does not mean that someone has arrived at spiritual perfection or been completely formed as a Christian. It means that a disciple has been trained how to put into practice all the truths Christ commanded. We cannot honestly say that we are fulfilling our Lord's Great Commission unless we have a plan to train disciples to progressively put His truth into practice. The progressive disciple building group is central to that goal.

Putting truth into practice involves more than merely imparting information to someone. Helping a disciple obey God's Word in order to transform her character is a complex process similar to raising children. A good parent understands that children must grow over time through a process that involves modeling, discipline, nurture, and other important elements. In a similar way, disciple building must be grounded in genuine relationships between less mature and more mature Christians. In addition, prayer, teaching, and appropriate accountability challenges that include real life experiences of ministering to others are

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integral to the process. We refer to this comprehensive method of disciple building as The R-CAPS® approach. It is described in more detail in *Disciple Building: A Biblical Framework*, WDA.

Progressive disciple building small groups are an integral part of this systematic discipleship approach. These groups aim at helping Christians assimilate and apply the truths appropriate for their particular level of maturity. Each group functions best when it is integrated with a Life Coaching program, a guided approach toward developing spiritual disciplines, and a systematic, tiered program for teaching “everything whatsoever Christ commanded.”

WDA produces materials to enhance the spiritual disciplines (devotions, journaling, meditation, fasting, etc.) of the Christian, delivered as Pocket Principles® and Guided Discussions. In addition, the *Disciple Building: Life Coaching* manual is available in order to help mentors learn how to design specific growth projects for small group members.

These five progressive disciple building groups can be inserted into the existing programs of a local church or community ministry forming a kind of progressive “discipleship escalator” within the broader framework. They allow individual Christians to rise at their own pace in progressive phases toward a point of being fully trained and more Christlike. We hope this “school of disciple building” will become a part of every local church or community of Christians.