

Small Group Ministries
MARKETING RESEARCH BULLETIN

Research reviews for church leaders.





Welcome to the *Marketing Research Bulletin*, a periodic report created for all Unity leaders, by the Association of Unity Churches Communications Department. This Bulletin provides valuable information on recent trends affecting church growth.

Information overload is a part of modern life, and data on trends affecting churches is no exception. We created these bulletins to give a quick reading for busy church leaders. We read multiple resources, including books and articles written by church growth experts, business writers and trend watchers in many disciplines. For those interested in greater depth, we

have included listings for further reading. In addition, to make it as practical as possible, we give ideas of implications for churches.

It is with love and awe for ministers, and those leaders who work alongside them, that we dedicate this work. And with blessings!

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This bulletin summarizes information about small group ministry as a way to meet changing congregational needs.

This topic is connected to marketing because it provides ways to meet needs of people, which is the definition of marketing itself. This bulletin gives an overview of the implications and areas of consideration. Further study and training are recommended for anyone interested in beginning a small group ministry, and resources are listed at the end.

Trends

Marketing for churches calls the ministry to identify and meet needs of people in our society. The essence of attracting and recruiting lies in offering ways to meet these needs. After all, a good advertising campaign might increase awareness and even bring people into the church the first time, but if the church does not meet needs, people will not stay. In recent years, many changes in our society accompanied by new attitudes and beliefs have resulted in changing needs. Partly because of the changes, many ministers have noticed that things that used to work in churches are no longer as effective.

As one way to address changing needs, church growth and marketing experts have given considerable focus to small group ministries. What developments have created the need to explore this old idea as a new way to greater effectiveness in ministry? New generations

and unchurched people increasingly make up the constituency of churches. Their needs and expectations require different approaches to ministry:

- An increasing sense of alienation and alone-ness leads to a greater need for community and belonging (more about this later).
- New world views and ways of processing information lead to the need for greater participation in the learning process and in leadership of the ministry.
- In churches of all sizes, small group ministries offer a sense of belonging, hands-on leadership and growth opportunities not as readily available in more traditionally structured churches.

Exploring further the idea of changing needs, a Gallup poll shows six basic spiritual needs identified by people across the U.S.:

- a belief that life has meaning and purpose
- a sense of community and deeper relationships
- a feeling of being appreciated and respected
- a feeling of being listened to and heard
- a feeling that one's faith is growing
- practical help in developing a mature faith

Alienation

What is it about our society that is creating this alienation and need for community? First, marketing researchers note an increasing value attached to individualism, or the idea that people must stand on their own and find their own answers.

Second, greater mobility in our geography, our occupations, and our social circles means that people have weaker connections to their neighborhoods, workplaces and social environments. The faster pace of our lives means that people have less time for activities that used to provide a sense of connection. The diversity of our society is increasing in terms of demographics, lifestyle, and ideas. People are beginning to yearn for a connection with others like them. And finally, the changing family unit means that people find less support from this formerly primary source. All of these forces add up to a need for a safe place to adjust to life experiences, to make sense of them and to find the foundation from which to grow.

The vision

The vision for the small group ministry is that people can grow in their spirituality through discipleship, accountability, and community. In fact, some believe that community is the only way to grow into spiritual maturity. In any case, the greatest opportunity for churches in our time, both inside and outside of Unity, is that small groups can be important in filling all of these needs.

The inviting church

Another aspect of small group ministry speaks to the growth of the church. We know that the unchurched are more likely to be open to a church if someone invites them. The small group provides some help in this effort:

- Many ministries include an “empty chair” in their small groups as

a way to symbolize their openness to including new members. The group gives congregants something special to share with their non-church friends, a more relational, natural place into which to invite friends.

- Because the groups are discussing their faith and spirituality, people simply begin to feel more comfortable speaking about their spiritual lives.
- In small groups, people tend to have a chance to experience first hand how their spirituality fits with their everyday lives, and to experience life-changing results. People get enthused about these results, and often want to share that with friends.

All of these factors add up to participants becoming more comfortable with inviting others. We keep this in perspective by remembering that church growth is not the goal of small group ministry, but rather a by-product.

Research

Robert Wuthnow provided some fascinating research on how small groups are functioning in our society today. Taking a broad perspective, he included small groups of all kinds, whether affiliated with a religious organization or not. Sunday school classes, Bible studies, special interest groups (sports, hobbies) and self-help groups (12-step groups, those facing crisis) - were all part of the study. He found that 40% of the adult population is involved in a group that meets regularly and provides caring

and support for members.

The principal attractions are the informality, friendliness, and caring. The other reasons why people said they got involved in small groups were:

- 73% wanted to grow as a person
- 60% invited by someone they knew
- 46% wanted more disciplined spiritual life
- 43% heard about it through their church or synagogue

Of people who were not involved in a group, 25% said they would like to be. Obviously, the research shows that small groups strike a chord among people today. In fact, the small group movement reaches all segments of society equally. Diversity is one of the hallmarks of small groups – the types, interests, and goals are limited only by the imagination.

What makes these groups work is a healthy tension between structural factors and informality. From members' viewpoint, groups are successful despite leaders and agendas. Yet clearly the organizational support for a group contributes to the creation of a space where the benefits of group interaction are realized. People with the highest satisfaction levels in their groups also noted that at least the following were present: a statement of purpose, a leader, and an agenda. Elected officers, child care, business meetings, something to study in advance and a contract were also important to smaller numbers of people. Sunday school classes and special interest groups seemed to benefit most

from more structure, while self-help and Bible study groups needed decreasing amounts. No single formula is successful for all groups.

Caring and relationships

A full 61% said that their faith had been influenced by their group. Wuthnow found that the caring and the human relationships bring people to rediscover the reality of God. The way that groups provide the space for growth is through encouragement, and by demonstrating love and nurturing. They also allow people to tell their stories, which helps them to adapt and make sense of their lives, and to interpret events so that they see God at work.

The research also found that prayer was the most distinctive activity of groups, and that it linked spirituality into the relationship of the group. Where prayer was included, members felt a greater sense of closeness and caring.

Accountability also proved to be an important element in spiritual growth. In Wuthnow's analysis, when we have a group of friends who know each other, it requires more personal consistency (and resulting growth) than when we have friends who are unknown to each other. By helping to integrate our many roles, it helps to counter the fragmented lives many people lead.

Wuthnow further observed that small groups help increase commitment to one's spiritual life and to the organization. Sixty percent of those involved in church groups said they had

taken a more active part in other church programs, while 50 % had increased the amount of money they gave to the church. They attributed both directly to their small group involvement.

With all the benefits and a better understanding of groups, Wuthnow cautioned about keeping perspective on the limitations of small groups:

- small group ministry must always seek to serve people by enhancing their spiritual
- growth, rather than focusing on the potential benefits as the goal (i.e., increased commitment to the church, membership growth).
- groups must be allowed to develop at their own pace
- leaders should guard against fostering a superficial spirituality that does not challenge members to grow
- small groups should be balanced with worship and service as ministries of the church - groups are not the only spiritual growth opportunity, and participants are not spiritually superior to non-participants

Leadership

The small group model of ministry goes as far back as Moses.

In Exodus 18, we see Moses attempting to “do it all” himself. This is the position in which many ministry leaders of this century have traditionally found themselves, in part due to congregant expectations. Yet Jethro’s advice was to decentralize, to empower more of the people as leaders, at the same time fulfilling God’s

promise of a “nation of priests.”

According to Gareth Icenogle in a course given by the Fuller Theological Seminary, though small groups have been around for centuries, and have enjoyed some popularity in this century, there is a paradigm shift from “programs for small groups” to “every person is given a priestly responsibility.” Again, this ties back to the change in the way new generations, especially, see and interact with the world.

The focus shifts from controlling the ministry from the “top down” and fitting programs to the structure, to developing leaders - what Icenogle calls “center out” leadership. The church asks what each person wants to do in the church, rather than finding volunteers to do what the church wants them to do. In this way, the church itself becomes a relationship in Spirit, as opposed to a structure. The most strategic people in the ministry are now lay leaders of small groups, not paid staff. In this view, the organization revolves around small groups, as opposed to programs, and programs exist to draw people into small groups. (Again, we must keep the balance in mind based on the limitations given in Wuthnow’s analysis.)

The transition

The Exodus from Egypt provides a wonderful analogy for the idea of transitioning your congregation from the old paradigm to the new. The experience focused not only on getting the people to the Promised Land, but on getting Egypt out of the people. There was a lot of

pain and criticism. Even though the people hated Egypt and the Pharaoh, they grieved the loss of both. Moses allowed them a God with a different leadership style, calling them all to become priests.

Make no mistake, this altered the power structure - and as with Moses, many, if not most, people want a pastor in charge to avoid the personal responsibility. As Dale Galloway says, when people put their pastor on a pedestal, the temptation is not only to enjoy it, but to hold onto it at all costs. This may change as new generations arrive with different ideas about leadership. It also changes with increasing spiritual maturity.

There is also a fear of the other extreme, where group leaders take too much “responsibility” and abuse their power. This is why careful planning is important. A system that holds people accountable, empowering them with the vision and ensuring that they have a servant mentality, will minimize abuse. Bill Easum insists that the benefits, and even the necessity, of the new paradigm, far outweigh the risks of an occasional abusive group leader. More on ways of setting up the system follows.

Equipping

An important task for the minister is continually holding the vision up in sermons and articles and acting as role model. At least once a month, the congregation should hear about the vision of doing the ministry through small groups. The minister should also be part of a small group.

The minister, as CEO, should work at recruiting and training the staff and core lay leaders to see their own roles as equipping, rather than doing the ministry for the people. Establishing accountability and holding people to it will also be part of the minister's role.

Selecting and empowering
Let's turn again to the Bible for a model. Jesus hand-picked the disciples - he invited them one by one. (He made no announcement from the platform that he was looking for volunteers!) He trained this group, modeling a good experience and spending half of his time in leader development. He then turned the responsibility over to them to train the next group of leaders. This entire process is what led to their empowerment.

For modern day ministers, ten to twelve is about the maximum number that one person can work with at a time. However, this does not mean we must find that many to start a core group. Finding the right characteristics is more important than any number.

One surprising tip is to avoid selecting all the current church leaders. Leading small groups does not necessarily require the same gifts required in committee or board work. Because the small group is not intended to be a lecture format, the focus is not on content or knowledge of the subject matter. Looking back to the discussion on needs of new generations, learning should emphasize sharing experiences and allowing people to discover for themselves. Small groups also

create the chance for hands-on ministry to one another that is so important to those born after 1946.

For leaders, find people who are committed to their spiritual path, and who have at least half of the following characteristics (Icenogle):

- listening skills
- hunger to learn
- low control needs
- observant and aware of behaviors
- non-judgmental
- self-aware
- teachable and receptive
- able to keep commitments
- assertive
- willing to take risks
- energy for relationships
- sense of humor
- self-disciplined
- in touch with own humanity

Beware those who are gifted, yet lack the servant mentality. Often the entrepreneurs of the congregation who lack the spiritual maturity of servanthood can create problems. Those who wish to control people (both clergy and laity) will find the servanthood of small group ministry threatening. If there is an abuse of power, we must hold people accountable. This is done by establishing guidelines, providing ongoing training and check-in with administrative people.

Training leaders

For small group ministry, the single most important thing any leader can do is to select and train new leaders. In doing so, David Stark suggests allowing those leaders to determine the direction for their group. They will have greater ownership and empowerment if you ask

them the following questions:

- What purpose of a small group would you change your schedule to be a part of?
- What results do you want?
- What community do you want to serve? (i.e., current members, inactives, volunteers, the community at large, etc.)
- What kind of group is your small group going to be?

Mission and vision

Of course, the mission and vision of the ministry are important as a yardstick for what is included in the ministry. At this stage, leaders need encouragement to do things within the scope of the mission/vision - which is why this piece should be a part of the training and empowerment of new leaders. It is also effective to have a list of projects that can be suggested, based on needs within the ministry. If the program of a group falls outside of the vision, it can still be allowed, as long as it does not go against basic beliefs or values. Most small group experts considered in this bulletin agree that we want to find ways to help people follow their dreams and use their gifts, within the boundaries of the church's beliefs and values.

Leader support

While the small group ministry should be driven by gifts and needs rather than hierarchy, it still requires a support system. As the number of groups grows, a "management" team that can provide administration and support for the leaders will be crucial to success. The more this team builds relationships with the leaders, the

better the results. The ideal is to substitute relationships for coercive power. Given all of these points, it is easy to see the importance of recruiting as Jesus did, by hand-picking a core group to begin with. The ministry can then grow from this core group starting their own small groups, yet staying in touch with the management team.

Bill Easum provides further analysis based on Jesus, who spent almost half of his time in leadership development. His primary method was to bring them into relationship and share his life with them. He showed more concern for their understanding ministry than with informational learning. And finally, he trained on three levels: 1) the public, 2) the disciples, on a daily basis, and 3) Peter, James and John, who were with him more than anyone else.

Leadership development

Ken Blanchard suggested that there are four styles of leadership, which describe the flow of apprenticeship. (Blanchard and Hersey, Situational Leadership) In the past, this has not been an important model of the traditional church's process of maturing new leaders, but it gives a framework for leaders developing leaders. These four styles are based on the leader's different levels of involvement in task and relationship oriented behaviors:

- The first type has low relationship and high task behavior. The leader is in the role of preacher. The function at this point is to bring people to the beginning of discipleship.
- In the second type, the relation-

ship has moved into growing importance, and the task lessens slightly. The leader is spending a great deal of time with the followers.

- The third type of leadership is akin to Jesus sending the disciples out two by two. He coached and supported them through practice. In this phase, relationships are still high, while tasks are dropping.
- The final type of leadership has low relationship and low task behavior for the leader. This is when Jesus left the disciples - they were forced to take over at that time. Without this "sending" phase, the disciples could not have reached their full maturity.

This progression suggests one reason why small group ministries must develop slowly. The process begins with taking core leaders through these stages.

Planning

Every small group ministry should be unique. By customizing to ministry needs, the ministry will have a greater chance of success. The key to designing your own is understanding the principles of small groups, not simply the specific practices of any one program. Look at various groups of people in the ministry to see what their needs, gifts and talents are, and then design the ministry accordingly. Marketing research methods such as surveys or focus groups might be helpful in gathering this information.

A smorgasbord of small groups

allows all people to participate with their different gifts. Once leaders are trained, groups can form around areas of interest. Grouping by geography has been cited as a less effective method in middle class Anglo-American culture. You can start with specific topic and time horizons (i.e., 6 or 8 weeks), then start groups from that, perhaps using longer term commitments later.

It takes time to build an effective small group ministry, whether adapting someone else's plan or creating your own. People need to see effective groups modeled before they can embrace it fully. The minister should demonstrate the importance of it by being a member of one, otherwise people won't think it is important. The core group of leaders can be the minister's small group.

Characteristics of small group ministry

In order to foster life change, they meet a minimum of twice a month. Sports teams, committees, study groups - all are small groups, and no one group is more important than another. The components of a small group that have stood the test of time are given in Acts, Chapter 2:

- fellowship
- eating together is important as a spiritual experience
- teaching and study
- relationships that reflect the teaching
- prayer and praise - all forms, including for each other
- pooled resources (not just finan-

cial)

- outreach - service to the larger community

A rule of thumb says that if you have 50 % of your congregation involved in small groups, the ministry is successful. Further, about half of small groups are long term (up to about two years, when things tend to come apart), and the other half exist in shorter time periods. The best approach provides for adding to existing groups - allowing for those that want to stay together. Creating new “seasons” for small groups can help to keep the ministry alive by allowing participation of newcomers. The small group ministry must be ongoing and include lines of accountability, trained leaders, and openness to new members.

Target groups

In several places we’ve mentioned the need to target small groups according to needs of congregants. It may help to understand who are the best prospective members.

At times, people respond to small groups with resistance. The main reason is that it invites personal change. People must give up the primacy of their existing ties (economic, racial, family, etc.) in order to join groups. The stronger the ties, the more resistance to small groups. The cost of getting involved in a small group may simply appear too high, because it may disrupt the status quo.

This is why existing long term members are the least likely to get involved with small groups. On the other hand, people in transition of some form or other are the

most open to groups. The strongest way to get people into groups is by inviting the newest congregants or others experiencing transition. (Of course, people are never forced or pressured into joining a group.) Here are examples of transitions that might lead people to join groups:

- new congregants
- trauma - hurting or grieving
- age or stage - seasons of life that create crises, i.e., parenting teens, empty nest
- stuck in codependency or addiction
- seeking a coach or mentor in the spiritual area
- understanding purpose or meaning in life

Planning and marketing can help here. If they fit closely with your vision and mission, these ideas could be included in training new leaders. The groups could then be designed and promoted around the benefits they provide to people making these transitions.

Implications for Unity churches

- Changing needs in society are affecting how churches operate now and in the future. These changes will intensify with time, because they are driven by new generations.
- Small group ministry represents a new way of being the church that requires a fundamental shift in thinking. This provides an opportunity for the church to become ever more effective in meeting the needs of new generations.

- Starting small group ministry requires strategic planning and forethought. Recruiting and training must be ongoing, carefully planned activities.
- Numerous resources exist for congregations who want to embark on this ministry. Attending workshops and reading will enhance the preparation stages greatly. A list of resources is included in this bulletin.
- If ever the ideas of vision and mission are important, it is in the small group setting. With leadership more dispersed throughout the ministry, this is the main “control,” so it must be strong, specific and passionately upheld.
- There is also much discussion about being in touch with the needs of the congregants in planning for small groups. Marketing research methods will be helpful in discovering those needs.
- Enlist help - especially if you are a senior minister - get paid or unpaid staff to take on administration. The ministry must have a champion to nurture it.
- Know that, even for successful small group ministries, 50 % of the congregation may never get involved - and that’s okay.
- Pray! Keep the focus on serving and helping people to reach their potential.

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