

**The Power of Small Groups**  
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*Small group formation is part of a quietly growing trend in many countries where the cultural focus has always been the importance of the individual as a self-made and independent man. The human need for community and connectedness is surfacing in a time when loneliness and isolation has become the norm for many.*

### The Missing Piece

We live in countries where resources abound, where technology surrounds us, and where many material comforts are at our fingertips. Yet something is missing. In our quest for bigger and better we have gradually neglected our affective needs, and often viewed these needs as insignificant compared with our careers, and the quest for the so called 'good life'. We work longer and longer hours without giving any thought to our emotional and spiritual needs. Our extended families usually no longer live close by to provide us with supportive interpersonal connections. Our isolated nuclear families struggle by themselves trying to sort out their personal problems while not knowing if they are the only ones experiencing such a situation. Families fall apart. Our jobs often require that we commute long hours and/or that we uproot ourselves and relocate. Our organizations have become large, impersonal and dogmatic. Some people feel that they are living lives of anonymity. We are left with an ache and a desire for something more.

In earlier times community gatherings were places where people came together to celebrate, nurture, encourage, and console one another, but today face to face interactions within the community have become rare. It is this breakdown of traditional support structures and our basic need for intimate support and community that are giving impetus to the formation of thousands of small groups in western culture. Robert Wuthnow in his book, *Sharing the Journey*, refers to the small group movement as 'a quiet revolution'. There are groups that are hobby or interest-based, business networking and mastermind groups, groups that provide support for a variety of life situations, and groups who gather to deepen and enrich their prayer and spiritual life. These groups are now playing a major role in society.

### Benefits of Small Groups

Why are people looking to join small groups?

- Research indicates that people who participate in even one small group cut their odds of dying next year. There is a lot of evidence that support groups reduce anxiety, depression and isolation. The emotional support provided by the group reduces stress, which has a positive impact on health.
- Support groups provide a place for people to give and receive both emotional and practical support as well as a place to exchange resources and information.
- Groups that are made up of people with common concerns and interests and experiences can help others see that they are not alone in their situation.
- People are more likely to participate in discussions in a small group where there is more opportunity to talk.

- People in small groups encourage each other and become genuinely interested in the welfare of each other.
- Small groups become a life anchor and a source of strength for those who feel cut off, isolated and lonely.
- A small group may be "a safety net" where one can go and be fully welcomed without fear of criticism and judgment.
- Small groups listen and provide a medium for honest sharing of personal experiences and feelings for those who wish to share.
- A small group may be an educational opportunity for some to learn life strategies and coping skills.
- Small groups can fill up your tank with energy so that you are able to return to life's daily struggles feeling supported and uplifted.
- Just knowing that there is a group session scheduled for the week can provide one with a sense of peace and security.

### **The Small Christian Community**

Many church communities and/or parishes have grown so large that members of the congregation often feel alienated and distant from each other. Many are seeking ways to go deeper into their prayer life and are looking to gather and dialogue with others about the experience of Scripture in their lives. For as long as three hundred years after the death of Christ the first Christians gathered in homes in small groups to share the first letters and memories of Jesus. The creation today of small prayer and Bible groups is a rediscovery of Christianity's original roots.

*For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them. Matthew 18:20*

### **The Success of Any Group**

A trusting and co-operative atmosphere in a group is necessary for someone to have a positive and fulfilling experience. Stephen Covey tells us that relationships of all kinds are built on and sustained by trust. Developing a climate of trust takes time, but it is absolutely essential to create an environment where people feel comfortable enough to share their personal stories and insights. A spirit of co-operation toward a common goal is also required. The focus must always be the welfare and benefit of each member. Attentive listening to each other without judgment creates a risk free atmosphere and encourages each person to be himself. One needs to feel welcomed and accepted just as he is. Group members must interact, dissent, question, and support one another's decisions in a way that is positive, that builds confidence and promotes the group's success (Limas). It is this comfort level that fosters the personal and spiritual growth of each individual and that contributes to the success of the group.

There are over 400 distinct types of support and self help groups in the US and Canada. They include business mastermind and networking groups, support groups for health and care giving, common interest groups, and spiritual and personal development groups. Internet social networking, blogging and teleconferencing also bring people together, but it is the actual personal meeting and camaraderie of face to face communication in a comfortable setting that is most conducive to building community. There is no replacement for the satisfaction and

fulfillment that personal human contact and fellowship brings. Interpersonal relationships bring balance to life.

### **Finding the Right Group**

If you feel that you would benefit from joining a small group, and have decided what your needs are, you will need to do a search of what's available in your area. One of the best ways to start is talk to others who have been members of similar groups. Check local newspapers and community listings. Religious organizations and health professionals usually have good resources. Business networking groups often run mastermind groups. Internet searches are very helpful. Magazines or e-zines related to your topic can provide good leads and links.

It is also wise to take some time and consider the following:

- Are you interested in a formal or informal format?
- Do you want to be with people of similar age and/or concerns?
- What location is convenient for you?
- Does the meeting schedule suit you?
- Do you know what the rules and expectations of the group are?
- Will the meetings provide you with information and resources that you need right now?
- Is the membership fee within your budget?
- Will you be comfortable sharing and participating?

Small groups have the power to sustain one through all areas of life's difficult times. 'Going it alone', 'toughing it out', and 'keeping a stiff upper lip' are phrases we are all too familiar with. They often lead to emotional breakdowns, and stress related illnesses. These are the attitudes that only cartoon super heroes are able to sustain as they leap tall buildings with a single bound. Few human beings, however, can exist in isolation, stoically travelling through life surmounting problems alone. Human beings are meant to be in relationship and to provide support for one another. It is not a sign of weakness to be part of a loving and caring group. There is nothing wrong with admitting one's dependency on others for support. The benefits of small group participation are too great to pass by.

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