

Small Group Ministry in Small Congregations

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Small Group Ministry or Covenant Groups offer tremendous gifts and also presents specific challenges to small congregations. Small churches have been defined variously as those under 150 total members, or those whose average Sunday attendance is 50 or less. These small churches are often labeled family size churches. They resemble a large extended family in terms of their activities and how they operate as a system. Typically these congregations get together for Sunday services, over shared meals, and to recognize rites of passage such as births, graduations, marriages, and deaths. Members know each other by first name and know each other's histories, or at least they believe they do.

I have pastored two congregations of 70 or fewer members who have been admirably ambitious at times in their programming: forums, adult education group, itty bitty Sunday Schools, choirs and social action projects. These extra activities are typically quite challenging to the active core of members who hold everything together. These leaders are often exhausted by the numbers of responsibilities they take on, from painting the sanctuary, to preparing the potlucks, to being worship service leaders. By the time it comes to personal theological exploration, spiritual growth, and building intentionally intimate community, these stalwarts have run out of steam.

That's where Small Group Ministry comes in. It provides safe, regular, structured opportunities for reflection and self-care. As one member put it, it's an oasis in a sea of upkeep and crisis. Members in some small congregations tend to get locked into roles based on how long they've been involved in the congregation. Small Group Ministry is highly effective in mixing people together so that the informal and formal leaders can be involved as peers with those who have wandered in more recently. In addition, instead of just cycling through endless chores to maintain the congregation, Small Group Ministry can make it

easier for members to take on simple service projects inside the congregation. In planning service projects, members old and new share the visioning and the responsibility. They also experience the reward of a tangible, completed project. Small Group Ministry in these tenacious communities can also inspire targeted involvement outside the congregational walls through their service projects. In their groups, members research, develop, act on, and reflect together on their experiences serving the larger community.

In supporting a Small Group Ministry program, the role of the minister or designated leader in a lay-led small congregation is crucial. The minister can urge deliberate conversations, offer an inspiring vision of Small Group Ministry, create the groups, and train the facilitators. In contrast to a large congregation, in a small congregation typically there is less history and routine around activities that are not done as a whole body. Thus in a small congregation, the minister's role is just as significant, if not more so, in forming and sustaining a Small Group Ministry program.

In the two congregations where I witnessed and helped with Covenant Groups, I noticed several challenges. The primary pitfall is the tendency of members to resist breaking up into a group any smaller than the number that typically shows up for worship and potlucks. The challenge in these congregations is for members to begin to change their culture and to see the benefit of deeper connections among even fewer people. Geography can be a problem for the many small congregations in rural areas, where members must travel great distances to be with each other. Many members are reluctant, understandably, to travel more than once a week to attend a function besides the galvanizing Sunday morning event. To minimize the travel distance, groups have been formed based on the geographic location of members. A downside of this approach is that some of the benefits of random mixing of people can be lost. An

additional issue is ensuring that these geographically based groups stay connected to and feed into the whole congregation and liberal religious movement.

Another challenge is that of pastoral care. Pastoral care in small congregations is usually performed by the minister, informally by lay leaders in the “extended family” of the congregation, and sometimes by a caring committee. There is a tension between having the pastoral care needs handled at the most local level by members of the small group versus keeping the minister, lay leaders and the caring committee in the loop. On more than a few occasions, I only heard of a serious health situation after it had gotten critical. The challenge is for groups to stay in regular conversation around pastoral care to ensure effective ministry for all.

When Small Group Ministry is thriving in a small congregation, every aspect of the religious community is enriched. Members are coming to know each other better and are forming deeper connections. Individuals are being spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually fed on a regular basis. Service projects benefiting the entire congregation are being undertaken by more individuals, lessening burn-out among the few. These small and mighty beacons of liberal religion are more energized to imagine acts of social justice, now possible through the bright cells of connection and compassion that Covenant Groups generate.