

## SMALL GROUP MINISTRY DOWN UNDER

An article by the Rev. Bob Hill

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Small Group Ministries seem to be alive and well in Australia. A Google search limited to Aussie sites turns up more than 400,000 entries in a few seconds, and the on-line descriptions of what the various "down under" churches mean by SGM, although more Bible and Christ oriented than most of us tend to be, are very much in line with our understanding of Covenant Groups and their values.

The Croydon Hills Presbyterian Church in the state of Victoria, for example, lists six evening small groups and made up of "8-12 people of varied backgrounds and interests, ages and abilities, meeting weekly for one to two hours." These are "a vital and essential avenue of Ministry in our congregation."

New members are always welcome, the Croyden Hills web site says, and small group members "can testify to the tremendous benefits of personal friendships" established in these groups, but they are not "ends in themselves," and they are not "mini-churches." Their intent is spiritual growth, assistance in coping with every day life, and deeper relationships with others and with God. The Blackburn North Baptist Church in a Melbourne suburb says it has more than 50 small groups that "meet weekly to study the Bible, discuss relevant matters and care for one another."

**The hub of care** The Whitford Church in the Western Australian town of Mullaloo, near Perth, describes itself as "a church of small groups, not just a church with small groups." Their small groups are, they say, "the hub of care, outreach, discipleship, and learning" in their church. The groups meet every other week, or, as we're learning to say here, fortnightly.

The Pacific Parks Uniting Church, a three-year-old start-up in the state where Kristi and I are now living, Queensland, is seeking to use Small Groups Ministry as it works "mostly with the cultures of people in Gen X and Y generations in the North Gold Coast area." Their web page says, "We're keen to create settings where people can connect to each other and God," and they sound a bit like a Unitarian Universalist fellowship group when they add that they hope this will happen "in

informal settings where people just get together without much planning." However, they also say that for them small groups will be the context of Baptism and communion.

**Problems like ours** A report in a newsletter for Sydney Anglicans quotes a minister who is going to "plant" a new church in northwest Sydney as saying "We actually encourage our people to see their small group as equally deserving of the "church" title." He notes that quite a few members of his previous parish, the Orange Evangelical Church, came by way of the small groups. Quickly, though, he adds, "The larger gatherings and the smaller groups are both required for a healthy experience of church and for service opportunities."

Ridley College in Parksville, Victoria, which describes itself as "The Australian College of Theology, Proclaiming Christ Crucified," offers as an elective course in Small Group Ministry. It is described on their web page as "a hands-on unit where the teaching is in the context of a real small group made up of the presenter and other class members. The aim of the subject is to introduce participants to the possibilities and challenges of this vital church ministry."

Judging by the discussions anticipated for this course, Australians have many of the same Small Group Ministry issues that Americans do, including "dealing with difficult members" and "multiplying and growing small groups."

The Orange Evangelical Church mentioned earlier asked their small groups to "come up with their own applications and strategies," but the church also encouraged the small groups to multiply themselves each year. The minister reported that the church had "limited success" with that goal.

**Shared ministry** The John Marks Ministries offers training and consulting to Australian churches and they have published a column by a Baptist Pastor from New South Wales who sees SGM as a means of "decentralising" ministry. He wrote: "Instead of the Minister doing all the ministry, the ministry takes place within the life of the small groups. It is necessary to equip the lay people to do the

ministry so that instead of one person doing all the ministry while the rest of the people are spectators, everyone is doing ministry, caring for each other and using their gifts."

Several Australian church web pages note that Small Group Ministry is not new, since Jesus had 12 disciples and the early Christian church "knew the value of meeting in small home groups for prayer, teaching and fellowship (Acts 2: 46, 5:42, 12: 1 - 17); Colossians 4: 15)."

And one web site noted that "Hebrews 10: 24 - 25 could well be the motto of our small groups: And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Even those of us who are not so Bible oriented can "see the Day approaching," can see times ahead when we are likely to need each other as friends and companions on the way. That's true, it seems, in both hemispheres.

What about the Unitarian societies here? Most, including the one here in Brisbane that claims about 40 members, are affiliated with the British Unitarian Association. Their web pages show no awareness of Small Group Ministry, so far. I was all set to visit the Brisbane group recently (having taken a bit of a holiday from church while getting settled here in this, for us, new country and culture where people drive on the wrong side of the road), but they've shut down for the summer break. I'll try again in February, which is said to be the hottest month of the year here. Bob