

Small Groups Are a Big Deal to Men

By the Rev. Dr. Brent A. Smith Minister, Fountain Street Church, Grand Rapids, MI
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"This is the most transforming experience I've ever been part of," remarked a rough and tumble, Oklahoma cowboy lawyer about three years into the small-group program launched at All Souls Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma in the early 1990s called "Roots and Branches." I had spent some time investigating why large, mega-churches had been so successful at the end of the 20th century, and came away from those encounters convinced that small group development was one of the principal reasons. In 1994 Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow estimated "that there are over 3 million small groups in this country," and the number has only increased since that time.

Why? And why did another South westerner, this time a "million-dollar-a-month" real estate salesman, comment on his profound experience organizing and leading a small group devoted to building a house together with a working poor family: "I truly believe that if Jesus were alive today he would be working here with us." Small groups are a big deal to men.

Our world is characterized by a breakdown of the bonds that past generations more easily established and maintained: family, neighborhood, village, town, and community. Men form their deepest friendships over longer periods of time, through shared experiences. Because of society's mobility and the discontinuity that it brings, men have difficulty establishing and maintaining relationships. "Contemporary small groups, often meeting under the aegis of large congregations, can be seen as a partial response to the breakdown of indigenous communities such as extended families, villages, or intimate neighborhoods," writes sociologist Robert Wuthnow. Small groups can bring men together to foster commitments to one another in a common understanding and help reinforce in men the value of being faithful to those commitments.

"I understand now," said one man after leading his first small group, "why you've talked so much about the need for men to develop strong bonds with other men." The "reason" for gathering the group with which he was working was learning about liberal religion, and it became the means for helping men address their loneliness and loss of relationships.

Human beings are designed for learning, and yet too many religious institutions in our society are set up to control opinion or group process, or restrict what can be learned. Today, learning is seldom prized for the effect it has on forming character. Yet, men especially connect learning with a deepening of religious faith. They want a larger purpose, meaning, and mission to their lives. A man wants to "make his mark" on history, and much of his identity is derived from the stream of history which claims him.

"I want to give my life over to something worthwhile," one man said to me. "I want that something to multiply my sense of who I am. And I want it to be good for others, in a way that is true to each person." In other words, men want to connect with other men in ways that equip them to deal freely and fully with their life experiences. Men do not want "prescribed" answers. They want to be full and free individuals. But they do not want to be alone, either. Men want the support of comrades who help set the conditions of freedom that allow each man to unfold into a fully functioning, free adult.

Small group involvement, sharing, and the development of common purpose help give men a sense of identity. Men know who they are as individuals through the relationships they form with others and with the groups to which they belong. It is their "team" or their "tribe." But men have

difficulty creating these groups. Whether its source is biological or sociological, it is true in my experience: men do not easily initiate connections with other men. They benefit from the fellowship and civilizing influence groups have upon them. But, as a rule men are not good at knowing how to form relational bonds or at initiating the contact necessary to establish them. A church that forms small groups targeted at men--through learning, recreation, building something, or teaching or mentoring something to others--will provide an access to long lasting relationships that men will covet.

"A church that considers itself 'one big family,'" said church consultant Lyle Schaller, "will have a harder time growing than one that thinks in terms of being a conglomeration of groups, classes, organizations, and fellowships. The reason is that the second approach gives newcomers many more ways of plugging into the life of the church."

When the early Free Church pioneers in North America covenanted with one another "to walk together in the ways of God as they are made known to us," they could not have imagined how strong would be the desire today for companionship based in freedom. Many men want to alleviate their loneliness through connecting with others, but not at the expense of the free mind!

Small groups can do this by accomplishing two things: first, by providing a means for men to form mutual, long-lasting relationships that fulfill the best intentions of the Free Church tradition. And, secondly, by providing an atmosphere where personal beliefs can be challenged by history, clarified by practice, deepened by fellowship, and strengthened by the free exchange of ideas.