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INTRODUCING "GOSPEL CARE" SMALL GROUPS
INTO A LUTHERAN CONGREGATION

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June 1, 2005

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CONCORDIA SEMINARY
ST. LOUIS

INTRODUCING “GOSPEL CARE” SMALL
GROUPS
INTO A LUTHERAN CONGREGATION

A MAJOR APPLIED PROJECT SUBMITTED TO
THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY DEPARTMENT
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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ABSTRACT

Spiritual care in Lutheranism has been viewed primarily as the responsibility of the pastor. The small group movement has challenged this assumption, encouraging laity to participate.

This project investigates small groups in light of Lutheran theology. It studies pertinent Biblical passages, the history of Pietism, contemporary small group sources, and several congregations with small group programs. Research is also done on Zion Lutheran Church of Pevely, Missouri.

Results indicate that with the proper theological distinctions and applications lay-led small groups can provide spiritual care in a Lutheran context in a way that complements the work of the pastor.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

“What do you like most about Zion?”

As we sat in a circle in our family room introducing our partners to the group, sharing responses they had given us to the questions we were told to ask, I listened especially closely to each member respond to that question. I had put it on the get-acquainted questionnaire because I wanted them to share their feelings about this congregation, but also, as the new pastor of Zion, I wanted to learn more about this place and its people. And I did.

“What do you like most about Zion?”

This question was among several I gave to small groups of church members during a series of get-acquainted dinners. Our family hosted these dinners when I first came to serve as pastor of Zion Lutheran Church, Pevely, Missouri back in the spring of 2001. The survey called for us to pair off after dinner and ask questions of a partner in an interview format. Afterwards we reconvened the whole group (10-20 people) and shared our partners' responses. When it came to this particular question: “What do you like most about Zion?” the majority of members at each dinner responded with a common theme. Their answer was, “The people!”

These people and this ministry were new to me at that time. Now that I have served them for over four years I am better qualified to offer my response to the above question. “What do you like most about Zion?” I agree, “The people.”

These people are very supportive of one another. They always seem to be willing to serve when needs arise. They love to sing hymns like, “Brothers and Sisters in Christ.” I believe their desire to support one another is a response to the gospel of Jesus Christ that they have grown to love and appreciate as their source of hope and life. But this is not an isolated phenomenon I have observed. In fact, I have noticed it everywhere I have served as pastor. Christian people are tremendously motivated and gifted to care for the needs of one another.

Among “these people” is also where some of the most effective applications of the gospel are made. As a congregation, the focus of our life together in Christ is the divine service. There the called and ordained minister of Christ proclaims the word of the God and administers the sacrament of Christ’s body and blood. In this way, Christ serves his people. These people also serve one another with the gospel. I have observed that as lay Christians become more versed in Scripture and more clear on its effective application, especially in making theological distinctions (e.g. between “law and gospel” and between “the two kinds of righteousness”), they have the potential to become very helpful to one another in reaching out to spiritually care for each other’s needs.

However, there is something else I have observed among lay people—not only at Zion but also in my pastorates elsewhere. None of these congregations have effectively utilized a ministry structure or polity that is designed to capitalize on the use of lay peoples’ gifts for caring for one another. Yes, such caring and Christian service does happen. In some places, at some times, it even seems to happen frequently.

It happens naturally as a fruit of the gospel, a gift of the Spirit in Christians’ lives. Yet outside of the service of lay elders who assist the pastor, this kind of spiritual care

has not been formally recognized and facilitated among and by lay people. In fact, the structures put in place to see that people are cared for in the church have traditionally focused solely on the pastor.

Where attempts have been made in recent years to involve lay people in simple but intentional ways of caring, such as serving as greeters to people entering the building for divine service or offering words of welcome at a designated time before the formal service begins, these efforts have been very helpful. This suggests congregations could develop more ways to encourage members to support one another.

In this regard I offer one additional observation: As a pastor I find more and more that I am limited in being able to effectively express care for large numbers of people. I may care very much, but I may not know the particular circumstances. I may even know the situation and want to give personal support, but am limited by the amount of time I have to carry out all of the forms of service I am called to render. So I am faced with this question: Why should I limit how much people can be given gospel care in this congregation by being the singular instrument of such care? This project details how to lift such limitations on personal gospel care and describes one way in which to utilize the gifts of God's people in a manner which complements my service with the gospel as a called and ordained servant of the word.

Before formally introducing this project, it is necessary to define a key term: "gospel care."

A Key Term: “Gospel Care”

The Lord gives sinners new life through His mercy. In view of the gospel of his mercy—the forgiveness earned by Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection—his people have a new way of life. As St. Paul teaches, they are devoted to one another, they comfort, care for, pray for, and take responsibility for the needs of one another:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. ... Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn (Romans 12:1, 10-15).

This new life Paul describes comes to the sinner by faith given by the Holy Spirit in the ministry of the gospel and sacraments. As the Lutheran Confessions teach, “To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel. It teaches that we have a gracious God, not through our own merit but through Christ’s merit, when we so believe” (AC V, 2,3).¹

Having the “mind of Christ” (Philippians 2:5), Christians desire to offer humble service to one another. Their desire is to seek and save the lost and to build up the baptized (saved) in the righteousness of Christ, to lift up the downhearted in the face of suffering and death, to equip fellow saints for service to the needs of others, to strengthen the faithful to persevere in the face of the devil’s attacks, in short, to encourage one

¹ *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), p. 42.

another to stand firm in the faith unto life everlasting (cf. Matthew 24:13). This new way of life will often be referred to below as “gospel care” or “the gospel care way of life.”

The Need: To Cultivate Gospel Care Among the Laity

As important as gospel care is, surprisingly, there is little formal cultivation of the gospel care way of life among laity in Lutheran congregations. That is not to say there is no gospel care. It is not even that there is no formal, established, traditional, method of gospel care. In Lutheran congregations there are formal structures to provide for gospel care through the office of the holy ministry. Yet providing care through the services of the pastor is often the only intentional effort congregations make for providing gospel care. Lay people or the “priesthood of the baptized” (which I will discuss below) are also called by God. They are called by God to care for “one another” in the gospel. However there are usually few structured programs which seek to provide gospel care by the laity.

Nonetheless, offering gospel care is a way of life among Christians. Within families, congregations, neighborhoods, and any place where people gather bearing the name of Christ, the Holy Spirit indwells, giving out the blessings of Christ (cf. Matthew 18:20). The desire to exercise gospel care for others may not be evident, and in fact, it may not intentionally be acted upon because of various stumbling blocks and barriers. As St. Paul confessed, “For I have a desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out” (Romans 7:18b). Yet the desire is there along with the fruits of the Spirit (cf. Galatians 5:22-23). A structured program that would seek to cultivate the gospel care way of life among lay people could help to manifest the fruit of the new life in Christ. Such a polity or structure would not be intended to abrogate the natural structure of the family as a

divinely instituted place for gospel care among Christians. It would rather be there to enhance and encourage mutual consolation with the gospel in the home.

In instituting the holy ministry our Lord provided the exercise of gospel care through the pastoral office of word and sacrament. Through the public ministry our Lord binds men to preach the gospel “in season and out of season” (II Timothy 4:2). The church has ordained pastors to be stewards of the gifts of Christ and to oversee gospel care among the believers they are called to serve. While the called and ordained servant of the word is charged with the public proclamation of the gospel and administration of the sacraments, he is not the only provider of gospel care among the baptized. Unfortunately, many congregations are organized with the pastor as the sole spiritual caregiver. Lutheran church polity² generally does not provide a structure for the intentional exercise of the vocation of priestly gospel care.

As noted above, this is true in the congregation I currently serve as pastor, Zion Lutheran Church in Pevely, Missouri, and was so in every congregation I served previously. The formal involvement of laity is normally limited to serving on various boards and committees, teaching Sunday school, carrying out evangelism programs, and the like. Lay people DO encourage one another in the gospel as they interact naturally in families and other groups. However, it has not been considered a formal function of lay people to provide gospel care for one another. Outside of Sunday school, where lay people are often leaders or teachers, neither has there been an intentional program within these congregations where one can expect this to take place. Again, many believe providing gospel care to be solely the pastor’s work in any formal sense. This is in part

² The term “polity” will be used in a broad sense throughout this project. In this way it refers to over all organizing structures, not to specific forms of church government.

because the laity recognizes that the minister has been well trained for this work. Since such a structure has not been in place for laity to assist with gospel care neither has training been provided for them to do so. There are now available several programs that seek to provide training for lay leaders of small groups. Some of these will be described later in this project.

My contention is that one of the consequences of formally confining gospel care to the purview of the pastor is to limit the opportunities for such care. Time constraints normally restrict the minister's personal care to extraordinary circumstances. Birth, marriage, death—as pastor we meet people at the milestones of life, not always on the long marches in between.

Another problem is that this attitude can inhibit individual Christians from living in the word and living out the new life of faith in the dynamic power of the gospel. As Robert Kolb writes,

Believers serve as agents of his re-creative word as they share this Word of life. They serve as the priests who build bridges of life from God's Word, with its message of new birth in Christ, to the specific kinds of dying that plague those whom they encounter. They speak God's Law, and they give living voice to his Gospel, as they take his universal message and focus it on individuals. For congregations this takes place in the sermon. For individual acquaintances it occurs in the conversation and consolation that believers share with one another and with unbelievers in the situations of daily life.³

Our traditional polity provides a formal location for the gospel care given by the minister in the sermon in the divine service. Why not consider providing a place that cultivates mutual “conversation and consolation” among the laity?

God's Word does not restrict gospel encouragement, care and comfort to called ministers. All Christians are called into a life of faith in baptism and are made members

³ Robert Kolb, *The Christian Faith* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 207.

of the royal priesthood (Revelation 1:6). In the priesthood of the baptized, God calls Christians to encourage one another in the faith (cf. I Peter 2:9ff.). As already noted, this takes place freely among Christians as the gospel bears fruit in their lives—with or without a programmatic structure. However, there is a need for congregations to provide intentional and formal opportunities for members to carry out this priestly vocation under the oversight and care of the called minister.

The Purpose: To Consider Using Lay-led Small Groups to Provide Gospel Care

This project will investigate a type of program in which a congregation may provide structured opportunities for the baptized to give personal care to one another with the gospel. The type of program in view is a congregation-wide system of gospel care small groups. The groups are generally led by lay people. The leader of each is under the spiritual oversight of a pastor for the sake of doctrinal soundness in service to the gospel.

Specifically, the goal of my project is:

To determine whether Zion Lutheran Church should work toward incorporating a congregation-wide system of lay-led gospel care small groups into its church polity.

Since Zion does not have a comprehensive plan to provide ongoing, regular times and places for lay members to care for, comfort and build up one another with the gospel of Christ, this study will seek to determine whether a system of small groups among the members would provide this.

Ministry Context that Led to My Interest in Small Groups for Gospel Care

Small groups have become increasingly prominent in the life of Christian congregations. Lutheran churches are no exception to this. However, the notion of utilizing a comprehensive system of small groups to provide gospel care is still relatively new. Here is a brief description of how I encountered this idea.

In over sixteen years as a parish pastor I have observed the essential need for personally encouraging people with the gospel. I have struggled with the reality that the parishes I have served did not provide deliberate opportunities for members to provide such encouragement for one another.

About ten years ago I attended a small group seminar presented by the Pilgrimage Training Group. The presenter impressed upon us that in most congregations the pastor is considered the primary and often sole purveyor of gospel care. The presenter argued persuasively that this often served to hinder churches in retaining active members and/or receiving new members beyond a definite number. The reason for this is because it is impossible for a pastor to personally provide gospel care for more than a certain number of people on a regular basis.

Two summers ago I enrolled in DM-950 “Small Group Ministry and Lifestyle Evangelism” as part of my Doctor of Ministry course work. There I was further introduced to the rationale and practice of small group ministry.

Since attending the training seminar I have started and led several small groups. One was in a former parish, the others at Zion Lutheran Church of Pevely. I have also encouraged members to start their own groups under my pastoral care. In these groups I have had the blessing of having gospel care applied personally to me by fellow believers

and have observed others benefit tremendously from the gospel witness being given to them by fellow lay people. These experiences along with the needs of Zion Lutheran and other Lutheran churches have prompted me to take up this study.

Addressing the Need to Establish a Sound Lutheran Doctrinal Basis

Before determining whether such an approach to congregational polity is right for Zion, it is initially the purpose of this project to determine whether a small group program can be carried out in a manner consistent with Lutheran theology and practice. As a minister who freely maintains a *quia* subscription to the Lutheran Confessions contained in the Book of Concord, it is very important to me that my pastoral practice grow out of sound Lutheran doctrine.

An essential foundational part of this project will be to identify characteristics of a small group polity that are consistent with and faithful to Lutheran theology and practice. These findings will be used to analyze various small group programs currently in use by churches. The intent of the research will be to learn whether such a program exists that can be adapted to faithfully serve the ministry of the gospel at Zion Lutheran Church. The culmination of the project will be a presentation to the members of Zion to help them determine whether or not they might choose to work toward a congregation-wide system of lay-led gospel care small groups.

The hope is that this project can serve not only Zion Lutheran Church but also the church-at-large by demonstrating whether or not lay-led small group gospel care can serve as a faithful resource for the ministry of the word. My desire would be to determine specifically whether or not it can be a valid complement to the office of the ministry in a manner consistent with sound Lutheran theology and practice, and also to

show whether it is a faithful way to cultivate greater gospel care among the priesthood of the baptized. There is presently a certain amount of skepticism as to the theological soundness of lay-led small group systems in Lutheran congregations. I believe this project could help identify problems and pitfalls in some programs, and perhaps show how others can be implemented in a manner faithful to Biblical, Lutheran theology and practice. If this is true, I hope to show how the presence of small groups can actually help the pastor better carry out his calling, and at the same time enable the laity to fulfill their callings to love their neighbors with the gospel.

The Process: To Investigate the Propriety of Lay-led Small Groups for Gospel Care

The process for conducting this project will include both library and field research to determine the propriety of lay-led gospel care small groups in a Lutheran congregation. The library research will survey the relevant Biblical teaching, historical background and current literature on “small group ministry”⁴ Field research will be done on Zion Lutheran Church to determine its potential need for and receptivity to a congregation wide structure of lay-led gospel care small groups.

More specifically the methodology of this project includes the following:

- *Describe the theological distinctions that shed light on whether lay-led gospel care small groups are appropriate for a Lutheran congregation. This includes the doctrine of the two kinds of righteousness, the proper distinction of law and gospel, and the doctrinal relationship between the office of the public ministry

⁴ The phrase “small group ministry” is the commonly used designation in literature referring to small groups in Christian churches. I, however, do not prefer this phrase because it confuses the distinction between the office of the public ministry and the service of laity. Therefore, “gospel care small groups” will be used to refer to the structure being proposed by this project. When referring to current literature, however, the common designation will be retained.

and the royal priesthood as revealed in the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.

*Do a survey of Scripture passages that describe the work of the Royal Priesthood specifically indicated in the “one another” passages in the New Testament.

*Do an historical survey of the place of small groups in Martin Luther’s writings and in the age of Pietism.

*Determine the overall propriety of small groups in a Lutheran understanding of the ministry.

*If small group programs are deemed appropriate, identify characteristics that are consistent with and faithful to Lutheran theology and practice.

*Survey contemporary literature on small group ministry in order to describe what is required to have a reliable and useful system.

*Assess various contemporary small group systems or programs currently in use in Lutheran churches to determine their value and propriety for a Lutheran congregation.

*Assess the understanding of and attitude toward lay-led gospel care small groups by congregational members who have participated in such groups, and also those who have not participated in such groups.

*Analyze Zion’s openness to adopting a congregational small group system, realizing the requirements in time, talent, and financial support to implement and sustain such a program. Determine what obstacles might need to be overcome to for approval to take place.

*Prepare a presentation employing the results of the study to Zion Lutheran Church for their consideration of whether this is a workable and beneficial approach for them to adopt.

*Assess the value of the research and presentation for the congregation in determining whether or not to adopt a congregation-wide gospel care small group ministry system.

The Parameters of the Project

In approaching this project I am operating with certain theological and methodological assumptions. I also realize that the scope of the study will be controlled by limitations in my ministry area.

Gospel care should always be in conformity with the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures as confessed in the Book of Concord. It will especially be guided by the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. It will always acknowledge that God works through the means of grace which are administered by the ordained ministers of the gospel. The work of lay people in proclaiming the gospel grows out of their new identity as Christians, not because of a duty they must fulfill in order to possess their identity as the redeemed (See the section on the Royal Priesthood of the Baptized below). Gospel care will always be linked to the office of the ministry whether it is proffered by the minister or under his supervision. To speak of the office of the ministry is to speak of the work of Christ. The called and ordained servant is simply the delivery instrument of our Lord's gospel.

The major assumption with regard to the field research for this project is that it can best be carried out through qualitative research methods. In-depth quantitative

research methods are ruled out because of the researcher's lack of training and experience, and because there are not the resources available for providing proper statistical analysis of data. Further it is believed that qualitative research will provide more helpful conclusions because of the small sample and the need to rely on powers of observation to draw inductive conclusions. As the research progresses more light will be shed upon the viability of small groups for faithful gospel care. The belief is that a grounded theory can be brought forth from the data collected through the research.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PROJECT IN PERSPECTIVE

In this chapter I will offer a biblical and theological rationale for a church polity that incorporates congregation-wide gospel care small groups in a Lutheran congregation. I will propose ways in which the Christian support and service of the lay people (in their God-given vocations, see below) can be increased using the structure of small groups led by trained lay leaders. As will be explained, these small groups meeting weekly or bi-monthly can provide places for spiritual growth, personal care and accountability, shared prayer, guidance and meaningful service opportunities. They support the work of nurturing members, welcoming new people and witnessing to the unchurched. They are supervised and supported by the office of the ministry and also support the pastor in his personal life and vocation.

For the sake of clarity it is important that several key theological distinctions are drawn. Below, I will explain the distinctions between law and gospel, between the two kinds of righteousness, and between the service of laity and the pastoral office. I will also describe the relationship between the ministry of the pastor and the service of lay people; and will demonstrate how the life and teaching of the church is manifested as all live out the “rule of faith” in an intimate life together in the gospel. This will all be done to create an opening for a polity that incorporates lay-led gospel care small groups in Lutheran confessional theology and practice, which has historically looked upon this type of approach with suspicion.

Small Groups in the Lutheran Tradition: Theological Challenges

In recognizing that gospel care through small groups has not typically been provided for by traditional forms of Lutheran polity the question arises—why not? To state the question more precisely for our purpose: Is lay-led, small group gospel care theologically incompatible with confessional Lutheran theology? This gives rise to further questions: Do lay-led small groups undercut the authority of the office of the ministry? Do such gospel care groups make the ministry of the gospel a subjective, anthropocentric work instead of pointing to the objective promises of God given in the means of grace? Along this line many more questions could and indeed should be asked.

If one surveys both the current writings of those advocating “small group ministry,” as well as, the earlier history of those calling for small groups in the historical movement known as “Pietism,” it is generally noted that their promotion of these groups is often not associated with what typically characterizes confessional Lutheran theology—an emphasis on the means of grace and the office of the ministry. However, it will be my contention below that this does not mean that such a marriage of confessional Lutheran theology and a church polity that encompasses lay-led gospel care small groups is not possible.

Contemporary Proponents of Small Groups: A Theological Challenge Today

Before I touch on the place of Pietism in this argument, I will address briefly the theological challenge of contemporary proponents of small groups outside of the Lutheran tradition. As noted above, the approach to Christian living in much of the current literature is not explicitly anchored in the promises of the gospel. While Bible

study plays a significant role in these small groups, it is frequently characterized by an appeal to God's law as the central focus of the Christian faith.¹

In many of the contemporary approaches to small groups, the proponents are simply being consistent with their general doctrinal approach is not means of grace oriented, which places the emphasis on the "Christian in action" over against "Christ in action."² Similarly, one would also expect to find in the congregation-wide worship services—outside of their small group ministry—the same approach. But does the misuse indicate there can be no proper use?

Theological concerns, in fact, do not play a prominent role in much of the contemporary literature. Unless one wants to focus on that fact that there is never any references to the place of the means of grace in the life of the church. As stated small groups have developed in traditions that operate with a different theology than confessional Lutherans use. Perhaps the main reason that theological concerns do not play a prominent role is that this movement is *more about structure and polity* than

¹ An good example of this law-based approach is seen in the covenantal theology often employed by small group churches. Gareth Icenogle in a work that is more theologically reflective than most of the "how to" small group books writes, "If the broken human community **chooses to accept** God's gracious and personal embrace of restored divine-human community, God works at the redemptive process of restoring and completing the human community by re-interjecting divine community in the midst of human community. The return intervention of divine community into the human dilemma is **covenantal. ... As humanity is willing to respond** to this gracious invitation to reinvest in the presence of God, humanity takes on a redemptive form of family with God in their midst"(Emphasis added). *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry* (Inter Varsity Press, 1994), 372. Another example of this is the decision theology also typical of many in the small group movement. A narrative example of this is offered by Paul Yonggi Cho, who writes, "When she attended the cell meeting for the first time, the woman was immediately impressed. ... She did not give her heart to Jesus that first meeting, but she was drawn back. Then a few meetings later she surrendered her life to the Lord, and she soon joined the church. Not long afterward her husband began to come to church too. Eventually he met the Lord, and the marriage was saved." *Successful Home Cell Groups* (South Plainfield, New Jersey: Bridge Publishing, Inc., 1981), 60. It is interesting to note that "saving" the marriage seems to receive the biggest emphasis in this narrative.

² An excellent critique of this type of theology is found in Harold Senkbeil's book, *Sanctification: Christ in Action* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1990).

theology. Many of the works (and there are many) are simply “how to” manuals.³ The structure they propose can potentially be used to propagate any kind of doctrine. The need for small groups arises out of a sociological context in which traditional forms and structures may no longer serve to provide a more personal application of doctrine—whatever the doctrine. (This societal dynamic will be discussed below under “The Relational Needs for Small Groups.”)

One additional concern with regard to much of contemporary literature on small groups is the tendency to justify the use of such groups on dubious hermeneutical grounds. In their zeal to promote small group life in a congregation it has been popular to use various descriptive passages of Scripture as a mandate to authoritatively prescribe a small group structure in a congregation. While it is true that Jesus had only twelve disciples, and while it is true that Jethro told Moses to select leaders of “smaller” groups to help him manage his work, and while it is true that early house churches were often small groups of Christians, there is no divine prescription that the church employ a small group structure.⁴ Except for the “twelve” that Jesus chose (but not because this was to be the proto-typical small group), the Biblical characters operated in the particular size of groups they did for various socio-dynamic reasons just as we do today. In the realm of

³ Many, many examples could be cited, such as, *Building a Church of Small Groups: a place where nobody stands along* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2001) or *The Small Group Book*, (Tarrytown, N.Y., Fleming H. Revell, 1995) or *Seven Myths About Small Groups*, (Downer’s Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1991). Many other such titles are listed in the bibliography.

⁴ William Beckham claims that Jesus designed a small group approach for us to follow. He describes how an otherwise uninvolved parishioner named Eddie can become active if we follow Jesus’ design for the church: “Jesus designed the church with a small group context in order to make the Eddies of the church a productive part of the body of Christ. No wonder we see so few [uninvolved] Eddies in the pages of the New Testament. Eddie couldn’t hide behind activities taking place in huge buildings. The first century church met in small home groups, maybe even in Eddie’s home. Eddie had to participate” (p.48). Later in the book he designs a strategy for small groups based on the numbers of people Jesus spoke to and that Paul ministered to. Beckham’s error is not in arguing for the usefulness of small groups but in grounding his case in biblical prescriptions that are not present. (William Beckham, *The Second Reformation: Reshaping the Church for the 21st Century* [Touch Publications: Houston, 1995], 48.)

church polity, which is an adiaphoron, it is through the use of “ministerial reason” that we seek to determine the best human structures needed to carry out the Lord’s work in today’s cultural context. As Robert Wuthnow points out,

Small Groups today may be likened to the band of disciples who followed Jesus, for example. But few small group members nowadays follow their leaders from town to town, few blend into the multitudes as he preaches and heals the sick, and few are prompted by their group experiences to become missionaries and martyrs. It is for this reason that small groups must be placed in their specific cultural context, and their contributions and limitations evaluated within their setting.⁵

Pietism’s Small Group Tradition: A Theological Challenge from History

Another significant theological challenge to the appropriateness of lay-led small groups for orthodox Lutheranism, however, comes from the heritage of Pietism. The well-known and extensive use of small groups to propagate this movement raises serious questions for those considering the same in a confessional Lutheran context. Below I will posit a description of Pietism, especially as it relates to the use of small groups within churches. My desire is to show that in a positive way Pietism helps us better understand the usefulness of small groups for the church, but that in other ways Pietism stands as a warning against what can potentially go wrong in the use of small groups in the church.

Understanding Pietism

In preparing to describe Pietism’s impact for small groups, it is important to first clarify what we mean by this term. In this essay I use it to refer to the historical

⁵ Robert Wuthnow, *I Come Away Stronger* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1994), 349. An extensive look at Wuthnow’s research findings on small groups is included in Chapter 3 below.

movement that began in eighteenth century Europe, the generally accepted father of which is Phillip Jacob Spener. But this term may also be used dogmatically to refer to a particular type of false teaching.⁶ In this way to be “pietistic” means to locate the certainty of salvation in the subjective response of the person; in his “piety,” as it were.

Understanding the historical movement known as Pietism is no simple matter⁷. I find it easier to view from a variety of perspectives. From an anthropological point of view Pietism seemed to be more concerned with the psychological response of faith than matters of doctrinal truth.⁸ One can also look at Pietism as a sociological phenomenon. Albrecht Ritschl and Ernest Troeltsch used this approach, arguing that the chief characteristic of Pietism was that it gathered people together into small groups in

⁶ An example of this is found in “Liturgy and Pietism—Then and Now” by John T. Pless, who writes: “The pietism of Spener and Francke was to have far reaching effects on the liturgical ethos of Lutheranism, not only in Germany and Scandinavia but eventually in North America. While pietism may not be the direct source of the liturgical chaos that has come upon North American Lutherans, it surely has provided contemporary Lutherans with an orientation which is predisposed toward an anti-liturgical bias.” Notice that he uses the term first in a dogmatic way and then as an historical reference in the second sentence. John T. Pless, “Liturgy and Pietism—Then and Now” *LOGIA* VIII: 4 (Reformation, 1999), 22.

⁷ Dale Brown puts it this way: “Pietism has been one of the least understood movements in Judeo-Christian history. Despite Pietism’s tremendous influence on Christian life in the United States, the lack of Pietist studies constitutes one of the greatest gaps in American church historiography. This void may partially account for the misunderstanding described by Paul Tillich: ‘What is Pietism? The term is much less respectable in America than in Europe. There the words “pious” and “pietist” can be used of people, but hardly in America, because here they carry the connotations of hypocrisy and moralism. Pietism does not necessarily have these connotations” Dale Brown, *Understanding Pietism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmanns, 1978), 3, quoting Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, ed. Carl Braaten (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 284.

⁸ Some of the disputes between the Pietists and the Orthodox could possibly have been avoided if this perspective was taken. As Stoeffler explains, “Behind it (Loescher’s thought) is the obvious fear that pietistic enthusiasm for Christian conduct might play havoc with the established understanding of the temporal succession of events in the *ordo salutis*, thus giving man the initiative in salvation. What Loescher did not realize, of course, was that the Halle men, against whom he constantly polemicizes, had no such intention. The fact was that they operated essentially with psychological rather than ontological categories and hence felt the orthodox distinction to be nothing but needless pedantry, it being clearly impossible to distinguish between divine and human agency in the human psyche.” Ernest F. **Error! Main Document Only.**Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1965), 66.

opposition to the institutional church.⁹ Stoeffler, however, prefers to simply view it as a multifaceted historical movement with several discernable themes:

“The fact is that Pietism cannot be understood in terms of externals, whether they be Ritschl’s conventicles or Troeltsch’s sect-type. Any attempt in that direction inevitably leads to misunderstanding and caricature. By its very nature the essence of Pietism cannot be completely identified with socially perceptible forms. It had no one system of theology, no one integrating doctrine, no particular type of polity, no one liturgy, no geographical homogeneity. Yet, as has already been mentioned, it presented a discernible historical unity. In the face of these facts wherein did its essence consist?”¹⁰

Stoeffler lists the following four characteristics of Pietism:

- 1) “In the first place, all Pietists agreed to the fact that the essence of Christianity is to be found in the personally meaningful relationship of the individual to God.”¹¹
- 2) “A second basic characteristic of historic Pietism is to be found in its religious idealism.”¹² “They did not, as the heresy hunters alleged, attempt to substitute conversion and sanctification for justification. What they did wish to stress was the fact that justification is meaningless from the point of view of the individual who needs salvation unless it is personally appropriated in a fiducial commitment.”¹³
- 3) Pietism carried an emphasis on the study of the Bible.¹⁴
- 4) Pietism was “oppositional to the prevailing norms of faith and life in the church.”¹⁵

Below, I will show how Pietism demonstrates the value of small groups for nurturing faith life and providing gospel care. Then we will look at the potential pitfalls the Pietism brings out with its tendency (especially later) toward subjectivism.

⁹ “To Ritschl, Pietists were essentially those queer Christians who endeavored to apply monastic piety to Protestant church life by means of conventicles (Ritschl, A. *Geschichte des Pietismus*, Vol. II, pp.1-3.) To Ernest Troeltsch of more recent days they were in essence the people who preferred a Christianity of the ‘sect-type’ over against the ‘church-type’. While he concedes their influence upon Protestant Christianity he characterizes Pietism as displaying ‘a great deal of genuine, warm, and self-sacrificing piety, but’, he continues, ‘it also displays that pettiness of religious groups which compensates for detachment from the worldly influence, they (the Pietists) strive to attain it by personal scheming and intrigue, and they give vent to their passions in all kinds of religious bickerings’. (Troeltsch, Ernest. *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*. 1950, Vol. II, p. 715.)” Ibid., 12-13.

¹⁰ Ibid., 13.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 16.

¹³ Ibid., 17.

¹⁴ Ibid., 20.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Pietism Shows the Potential Usefulness of Small Groups for the Church

In describing the need to cultivate gospel care among the laity I noted previously that the desire to reach out to one another with the gospel is always there in principle among Christians, but often ecclesiastical structures that provide the opportunity to do so are not. Through small groups, or conventicles, Pietism sought to do this.

In his *Pia Desideria*, Spener described a vision of church life that involved members gathering in small groups to learn the Word of God and to pray for one another. In their conventicles they would encourage their brothers and sisters in the faith to live according to God's will and to rely on the promises of God to do this. Unlike what often happened in later Pietism, Spener encouraged members to rely on the efficacious word of God, and the promises of their baptisms, and the blessing of the Lord's Supper.¹⁶ He held to a vision of small groups that grew out of larger church life and was designed to encourage the believers to live out their faith by personally encouraging one another with the gospel. These groups would often be places where the laity could revisit the prior Sunday's sermon in an attempt to further apply it to day to day life or to simply read and comment on Scripture or a devotional writing.

¹⁶ Spener writes, "We also gladly acknowledge the power of the Word of God when it is preached, since it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith (Rom. 1:16). We are bound diligently to hear the Word of God not only because we are commanded to do so but because it is the divine hand which offers and presents grace to the believer, whom the Word itself awakens through the Holy Spirit. Nor do I know how to praise Baptism and its power highly enough. I believe that it is the real 'washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit' (Tit. 3:5), or as Luther says in the Catechism, 'it effects forgiveness of sins, delivers from death, and grants (not merely promises) eternal salvation. Not less gladly do I acknowledge the glorious power in the sacramental, oral, and not merely spiritual eating and drinking of the body and blood of the Lord in the Holy Supper. On this account I heartily reject the position of the Reformed when they deny that we receive such a pledge of salvation in, with, and under the bread and the wine, when they weaken its power, and when they see in it no more than exists outside the holy sacrament in spiritual eating and drinking." Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, Trans. Theodore G. Tappert, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 63.

In response to a church and society that was supposed to be “Christian” but often manifested a very decadent way of life, Pietism sought to help Christians live a more pious life.¹⁷ This is a goal shared by all who have been brought to faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ, but is continually a challenge, as Christians are always *simil iustus et peccatur* (sinner and saint simultaneously) in this life. In the small groups, Spener believed one could nurture what we might call the subjective response of the Christian life to the objective promises of the Word of God.

The usefulness of small groups for nurturing faith life seen in Pietism can also be found in their application today. However, there are also potential theological errors that can arise. This we also learn from Pietism.

Pietism Showing a Potential Pitfall of Small Groups in the Church

In response to a real (or perceived) tendency in the church of its day to make use of the Word and Sacraments *ex opera operato*, Pietism functioned to encourage a subjective response to the objective promises of the means of grace. Through sermons, devotional literature, hymns, and the use of small groups it encouraged Christians to live out their lives in reliance on the God’s Word and in obedience to the same. However, while trying to address one problem, Pietism often manifested another. It mis-focused

¹⁷ Theodore Tappert describes this in the Introduction to his translation of Spener’s *Pia Desideraria*. He notes, “In spite of the outwardly flourishing condition of the church, there seemed to be little evidence of genuine Christian life. At least, this was the complaint that was widely heard long before Philip Jacob Spener was born.” Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 8.

the emphasis of the Word of God from the gospel's promises to the law's demands. This is where the dogmatic description of "pietistic" finds its meaning.¹⁸

The potential pitfall seen in Pietism is that while there is a desire to nurture the subjective response of the believer to the objective promises of the gospel, there is also temptation to locate the certainty of one's forgiveness, life and salvation in the response of the believer. By stressing the pious life lived in response to the gospel, it was easy for Pietism to leave the gospel promises of Baptism and the Lord's Supper behind. If what really mattered was living a good Christian life, then the work of the pastor in administering the means of grace seemed not so important. What at times got lost in Pietism was the point that the power of salvation and the will to live a godly life come only from the external gift of the gospel, given out in the ministry of word and sacrament.

¹⁸ This was the real problem of Pietism, which lay not in its formal structures but in its failure to distinguish the two kinds of righteousness (see below) or to say it another way—to mingle justification and sanctification. This is brought out by Stoeffler as he quotes Friedman to correct another misperception of Pietism (when viewed from a theological, not sociological perspective), namely that John Arndt and not Philip Jacob Spener is its historical patriarch:

"In a sense," says Friedman, "Arndt can be regarded as the real 'father of Pietism', who transformed the doctrine of the Word, as Luther understood it, into an ethical doctrine, and thereby changed the experience of justification into one of sanctification." This fact is also asserted by Koepp who calls him "the originator of this great phenomenon which comprised a hundred years." That Arndt has not generally been so regarded is the result of the notion popularized by Ritschl that somehow Pietism and conventicles must go together. Since Arndt did not hold conventicles, he was not a Pietist. The superficiality of this conception of Pietism has been previously referred to" (emphasis added). Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism*, 202-03. Stoeffler quotes R. Friedman, *Mennonite Piety Through the Centuries*, 1949, p. 24 and Koepp, W. "Johann Arndt und sein 'Wahres Christentum', in *Aufsätze und Vorträge zur Theologie und Religionswissenschaft*, Heft 7, p. 19.

John Pless points out how this led to problems in worship life. He notes this in quoting Jeremiah Ohl: "Whatever deficiencies there may have been in the church life of Lutheran orthodoxy, it cannot be claimed that pietism is a return to Luther. Pietism was seeking something new. Jeremiah Ohl summarizes the outcome of pietism's search as it relates to worship: '...in a word, what Pietism set out to do finally resulted not in bringing about again a proper union between the objective and the subjective, but in the overthrow of the former and the triumph of the latter. The sacramental and the sacrificial were divorced, and the sacrificial alone remained. Public worship ceased to be a celebration of redemption, and became only an act of edification.' Pless, "Liturgy and Pietism—Then and Now," 19. Pless quotes Jeremiah Ohl, "The Liturgical Deterioration of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *Memoirs of the Lutheran Liturgical Association IV* (1901-1902), 70.

Such a “pietistic” (dogmatically speaking) approach can be found everywhere in the visible church and was certainly manifested in all the different aspects of Pietism. One such place that it could be seen was in small groups. The key question for us is, “Did Pietism’s ‘small group polity necessarily lead to the subjectivistic theology it sometimes manifested?” The answer has to be “no.” While it will not be disputed that small groups can be places to manifest a pietistic approach, they can also be fertile ground for encouraging one another with the gospel and its promises. The same applies to other forums where Christians gather, be they individually for private prayer or in large group assemblies for worship. Any of these can be places where the gospel is either properly used or is misused.

A Lutheran Response to the Theological Challenges: Key Distinctions

In order to guard against potential errors related to a small group structure, I will make several key distinctions below and seek to apply them as criteria for evaluating appropriate gospel care through lay led small groups. The theological distinctions I will focus on are: a) between law and gospel, b) between the two kinds of righteousness (*Coram Deo* and *Coram Hominibus*); and c) between the pastoral office and the priesthood of the baptized.

Distinguishing Law and Gospel in Gospel Care

The certainty of salvation for the Christian is located in the external promises of the gospel ministry.¹⁹ The same can be said of the ability to live the Christian life. It too finds its response-ability in the gospel promises. The prior section showed that one can easily fall into the trap of legalism when emphasizing the Christian's response to the gospel. Legalism is where one looks to his or her supposed keeping of the law of God for certainty of salvation and for the power to live the Christian life. In order to avoid this it is important to keep the law and gospel properly distinguished and in right relation to one another. It is to an understanding of that distinction that we now turn.

The law requires our perfect obedience and complete fulfillment to be acceptable to God. Its effect is to always accuse the sinner of sin and to call for eternal judgment. The gospel is the work of Christ, who came to save sinners by his incarnation, death, and resurrection from dead. The fruit of Christ's saving work are given out in the ministry of the gospel and the sacraments. Is the law then no longer needed by the Christian? No. While it always accuses, it does not only accuse. It also guides and directs the Christian to do those things that are pleasing to God; which is what the Christian wants to do, anyway.

In providing gospel care, a Christian desires to encourage other Christians in doing what they want to do according to their new nature, that is, follow God's law. Yet,

¹⁹ As is noted in the Lutheran Confessions: "To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel. It teaches that we have a gracious God, not through our own merit but through Christ's merit, when we so believe" (AC V, 2,3). *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 42.

as St. Paul teaches, “The good I want to do. That I do not do” (Ro 7:15 NIV). So Christians encourage one another with the gospel. This includes proclaiming the law and God’s judgment when one finds a brother or sister caught in unrepentant sin. It also involves offering guidance from God’s law to those seeking instruction for serving the neighbor and glorifying God. The Biblical ideal is that the Christian see the gospel as the source of his or her salvation and good works and, therefore, will frequently appeal to God’s promises in Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord’s Supper for encouragement in the faith.

If a small group is to provide gospel care it needs to maintain this distinction between law and gospel. That means the gathering of Christians in such a group needs to be centered in the promises of the gospel and sacraments. For that reason, I believe that gospel care small groups do well to begin, “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” This invocation recalls Baptism and its promises. Baptism should often be appealed to for encouragement of one another. Also, group members should exhort one another to receive the Lord’s Supper frequently and remind their fellow Christians of God’s promise given there. The external word of God’s forgiveness should be the basis of all expressions of love, but it must also be vocalized and freely shared with one another. Exhortation to private confession and absolution with the pastor is another key resource for receiving the mercy of God. In keeping the means of grace as a foundation stone we can guard against groups becoming focused only on horizontal expressions of encouragement and at the same time will deepen and magnify the love of God.

Distinguishing law and gospel helps to guide gospel care. We now turn to a second distinction, between the “two kinds of righteousness.” This provides a helpful context in which this care is provided.

Distinguishing the “Two Kinds of Righteousness” in Understanding Gospel Care

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship” (Ro 12:1 NIV). The Lord gives sinners new life through His mercy. In view of the gospel of his mercy—the forgiveness earned by Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection and received by faith—his people have new life before him and a new way of life with others.

Therefore, St. Paul further teaches Christians to:

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn (Ro 12:10-15 NIV).

To speak about God’s merciful activity on behalf of sinners (Romans 12:1a) and about the activity of brothers toward one another (12:1b, 10-15) is to speak of two kinds of righteousness. To draw this distinction, Martin Luther wrote in the preface to his 1535 commentary on Galatians, is to do “our theology”:

This is our theology, by which we teach a precise distinction between these two kinds of righteousness, the active and the passive, so that morality and faith, works and grace, secular society and religion may not be confused.²⁰

Charles Arand affirms Luther’s claim that the two kinds of righteousness form the conceptual framework for “our theology” by showing that is precisely the position that

²⁰ *Luther’s Works*, vol. 26, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 7.

Philip Melancthon takes in the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*. In his work, “Two Kinds of Righteousness as a Framework for Law and Gospel in the Apology,” Arand explains,

What is meant by the two kinds of righteousness? Theologically, to be righteous is to be human as God envisioned in creation, and again in redemption. One might modify the Athanasian *dictum* to say, “God became fully human that we might become fully human.” The distinction between two kinds of righteousness rests upon the observation that there are two dimensions to being a human creature. One dimension involves our life with God, especially in the matters of death and salvation. The other dimension involves our life with God’s creatures and our activity in this world. In the former we receive righteousness before God through faith on account of Christ. In the latter, we achieve righteousness in the eyes of the world by works when we carry out our God-given responsibilities. Kolb has suggested that we refer to the former as the righteousness of identity; the latter as the righteousness of performance or character.²¹

Maintaining a precise distinction between the passive righteousness of faith “before God” (*coram Deo*) and the active righteousness of works “before man” (*coram hominibus*) is critical in the proper teaching and application of the Word of God to sinners. This is especially important when exhorting Christians to serve one another in love as I propose gospel care small groups should do. The active righteousness pursued in loving service can easily lead to misplaced trust in oneself *Coram Deo*, which is what was warned against in the discussion of Pietism.

The significance of the distinction between the two kinds of righteousness goes beyond guarding against misplaced trust and the mingling of law and gospel. It also recognizes that Christians are called, even exhorted, to an active righteousness *coram hominibus*. They are to follow God’s law as his will for life. His will always directs one outwardly in love toward God and one’s neighbor. “Love the Lord, your God with all

²¹ Charles P. Arand, “Two Kinds of Righteousness as a Framework for Law and Gospel in the Apology,” *Lutheran Quarterly*, XV (2001): 420-21. Arand refers to Robert Kolb’s “Luther on Two Kinds of Righteousness.” *Lutheran Quarterly*, XIII (1999): 449-465.

your heart, soul, and mind. And your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37, 39). This is also taught in the “one another” passages of the Word. In these texts, Christians are called to serve one another in love. In this way they are exhorted to live the new life they desire to live according to their new birth of water and the Spirit.

The “one another passages” listed below issue a call to such a righteousness *coram hominibus*, that is, in one’s “horizontal relationships.” As Kolb explains, “The horizontal relationship has bound us to the rest of creation as people who are held accountable for exercising God-given responsibilities in an adult manner toward other creatures, human but also animal, mineral, and vegetable.”²²

For service in horizontal relationships God providentially places us in the company of families, communities, and congregations. In families, we are given specific vocations (that is, divine callings to serve) in relation to our family members. In society, we are also given vocations according to the created gifts we have been given and the needs of our community that we see around us. In a congregation we are also called to serve in proportion to our created gifts, which the Spirit uses for edifying the Body of Christ and furthering the Kingdom of God. It has been argued above that one area of congregational service that is not generally provided for is the application of gospel care to one another by laity. That is generally recognized in church polity only to be the work of the called and ordained servant.

However, when one considers the prominence of what can be called the New Testament “one another” passages, the lack of congregational structure promoting intentional gospel care among laity appears as a significant deficiency in Lutheran polity.

²² Kolb, “Luther on Two Kinds of Righteousness,” 453. Kolb makes the distinctions between vertical (before God) and horizontal (before man) relationships, as well as, that of a child (before God) and adult (before others) relationships in illustrating Luther’s two kinds of righteousness.

Consider these passages below which often appear in the latter portions of the Epistles where the Apostolic writers give intentional encouragement to all Christians to exercise gospel care. This same emphasis is picked up by Martin Luther in the Table of Duties located toward the end of his Small Catechism.

“One Another” Passages

Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. (Jn 13:14 NIV)

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (Jn 13:34,35 NIV)

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other. (Jn 15:12-17 NIV)

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. ... Live in harmony with one another. (Ro 12:10, 16 NIV)

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. (Ro 13:8 NIV)

Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way. (Ro 14:13 NIV)

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. (Ro 15:7 NIV)

Greet one another with a holy kiss. (Ro 16:16 NIV)

...so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. (1Co 12:25 NIV)

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Gal 5:13 NIV)

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. (Gal 6:1,2 NIV)

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. (Eph 4:1,2 NIV)

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Eph 4:32 NIV)

Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Eph 5:19-21 NIV)

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Php 2:3,4 NIV)

Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. (Col 3:13-16 NIV)

May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. (1Th 3:12 NIV)

Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. (1Th 4:9 NIV)

Therefore encourage each other with these words. (1Th 4:18 NIV)

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.... Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. (1Th 5:11,13-15 NIV)

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. (Heb 10:24 NIV)

Keep on loving each other as brothers. (Heb 13:1 NIV)

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. (Jas 5:16 NIV)

Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. (1Pe 1:22 NIV)

Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. (1Pe 3:8,9 NIV)

Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. (1Pe 4:9,10 NIV)

This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him. (1Jn 3:11-15 NIV)

And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. (1Jn 3:23 NIV)

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. (1Jn 4:7-12 NIV)

These passages clearly indicate God's will for horizontal relationships, for righteousness *Coram Hominibus*, for one another. The "one another" exhortations are generally in the context of fellow believers. While it is God's will that we love all people, there is a special emphasis on encouraging, serving, being accountable for one another in the church. It is with this in mind that we now turn attention to gospel care

small groups in light of the office of the ministry and the priesthood of the baptized.

Below, this distinction will be investigated to determine the propriety of small groups for Lutheran ecclesiology.

Distinguishing The Office of the Ministry and the Priesthood of the Baptized in Locating Gospel Care

To speak of the office of the public ministry and the priesthood of all believers is to speak of those who serve and are served in Christ's church. Another way to say it is that these are the locations in which gospel care take place. The "church" in the New Testament literally refers to the "assembly" (*ekklesia*) of the people. The Lutheran Confessions define the Christian church as "the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel" (AC VII, 1).²³

The Holy Spirit created the New Testament Church through the apostles' ministry of the gospel and the sacrament of baptism at Pentecost (Acts 2). This was in response to the mandate of our Lord Jesus Christ given to the apostles prior to his ascension to the Father: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always to the very end of the age" (Mt 28:19-20 NIV). From the earliest days, the members of the Church "devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Ac 2:42 NIV).

The apostles taught and served the people with the gifts of Christ. The people also lived out lives of service in witness, fellowship, and prayer. Below, I will describe

²³ *The Book of Concord*, 42.

the relationship between the ministry of the pastor and the priestly service of lay people in the Christian church. In order to demonstrate some of the differences and similarities between the service of pastor and people, I will describe certain situations in which people need to be cared for in Christ. Then I will ask, “Would this be under the exclusive purview of the office of the pastor or may God’s priestly people serve these needs?” In line with the issues I raised in my Introduction, I want to indicate that there is often much more that “the people” can be doing to provide gospel in a congregation.

The Office of the Ministry

The work of the pastor in a Christian congregation is often described as the office of the ministry. In our Lutheran Confessions we hold that this office is established by God to create and sustain faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior: “To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel. It teaches that we have a gracious God, not through our merit but through Christ’s merit, when we so believe” (AC V, 2,3).²⁴

In speaking about the pastoral office, we are not speaking about the person of the pastor, but rather about a particular calling into which the Holy Spirit places qualified persons. The one serving in the office of the ministry is simply God’s instrument. God is the creator and sustainer of the assembly of believers. Therefore, it is taught in Scripture that called and ordained servants of the Word are there to serve the Christian assembly of believers. They are to carry out this vocation through the ministry of preaching, teaching,

²⁴ Ibid., 40.

administering the sacraments, overseeing the doctrine and life of the congregation, and equipping God's people for works of service.

To get a sense of the objective character of this office, I will use pastors themselves as an illustration. As a pastor I serve in the office of the ministry. Yet I too need this office for the sake of my own life of faith. In this paper I am not going to discuss how effectively a pastor can be a pastor to himself.²⁵ Yet I know that the discipline of serving in this office and being put under orders to apply the Word of God to God's people serves my own spiritual life, as well. I too need the body and blood of Christ that I consecrate in Holy Communion. I too need to be given the Holy Absolution that I announce in the divine service. I too was Baptized by a called and ordained servant of the Word for the remission of my sins. All people, ordained ministers included, need God's service given out in this divinely established office "to obtain such faith."

In the New Testament, there are several terms used to describe this one office of the ministry. They include "overseer" (bishop or *episkopee*): "If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach" (1Ti 3:1-2 NIV). Another term for one holding the pastoral office is elder²⁶ (*presbyteros*): "Paul and Barnabus appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust" (Ac 14:23 NIV). In Acts 20:17 and 20:28 we observe that "overseer" and "elder" were used

²⁵ The divinely instituted office of the ministry is to serve the entire church, which includes those who serve in the pastoral office. It is the belief of this writer that the church should also provide pastors to their pastors.

²⁶ The use of the term "elder" in the New Testament in referring to the Pastoral Office is different than how it is currently used to refer to lay leaders in congregations.

interchangeably as applying to this one office. Other terms used to designate it in the New Testament include “leader” (Hebrews 13:7), “pastor” (Ephesians 4:11-12), and “minister” (Colossians 1:23).

This one office is God’s instrument for creating and sustaining his church through the means of grace, his word and sacraments. What results from it is the assembly of the holy people of God, a people reconciled to God through faith in Christ Jesus, a people with the promised inheritance of eternal life in heaven, and a people who desire to serve their Lord and Savior. It is part of the calling of the pastoral office to equip the people of God to do the works of service they desire to do in response to his gracious favor: “It was [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:11-13 NIV).

In the New Testament there is another very prominent term for “God’s people” or the “assembly” of believers. It is the royal priesthood of all believers. For the purpose of pointing out its origin in baptism, in this paper, I will frequently refer to this as the “priesthood of all the baptized.” It is to that topic that we now turn to observe the divinely given activity of “the people” in a Christian congregation.

The Royal Priesthood of all the Baptized

Scripture often describes the assembly of Christians as the holy or royal priesthood. Note the following passages:

“You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1Pe 2:5 NIV).

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1Pe 2:9 NIV).

“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen” (Rev 1:5b-6 NIV; see also 5:10).

This is a very helpful description of the assembly of believers because it shows them in relation to their Lord and Savior. God’s people are given fellowship with Him through the ministry of reconciliation discussed above. This fellowship is given by the righteousness of Christ *Coram Deo*. Out of that relationship they respond to God in sacrificial service and in loving care for others. The desire to serve comes with the gift of a new heart to all who believe in Christ. God’s priests are intermediaries between Him and the world. They are representative persons. Before God they represent people in prayer. Before others they witness to the love of God in Christ Jesus. We can describe the work of the priesthood in terms of three primary functions: prayer, witness, and service.

Prayer – priests speaking to God for people

Witness – priests speaking to people for God

Service – priests offering sacrificial service to others

While the ordained ministers of Christ are called to preach and teach the gospel publicly, all Christians are led by the Holy Spirit to respond as God's priests in spreading the Word and saving gospel of God to others. Martin Luther, who helped reintroduce the Biblical teaching of the royal priesthood, indicated this in his commentary on Psalm 110:

When we were made Christians through this Priest and his Priesthood [namely through Christ] and in baptism, we were by faith incorporated in Him, we were also given the right and power to preach and profess the Word we received from Him before everybody, everyone according to his station and calling. For, though we are not all in the public office and calling, still every Christian should and may teach, instruct, admonish, comfort, reprove his neighbor with God's Word whenever and wherever he finds someone in need of it; for instance, a father and mother, their children and servants, a brother, neighbor, citizen, or peasant the other.[sic] For a Christian certainly can teach the other one who is still ignorant or weak and admonish him with the Ten Commandments, the Creed, Prayer, etc., and he who hears it is in duty bound to receive it from him as God's Word and join in confessing it publicly."²⁷

To speak about the priesthood is to speak of a state of being before God that spills out in witness to others. Thomas Winger identifies this in his exegetical study on the priesthood of the baptized. He writes,

The *proprium* of the priesthood of all the baptized has been repeatedly emphasized as a being and a doing, founded upon and growing out of Baptism: being the elect people of God, and doing priestly work. The priesthood of all the baptized is derived likewise from the High Priesthood and once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. Thus the priestly sacrifice is not propitiatory but is a sacrifice of thanksgiving in response to what Christ has done. The sacrifice of the body of priests is *coram Deo*: liturgical praise and thanksgiving to God, extolling back to him the Word of what he has done for and given to men. The work of this priesthood is primarily towards God, both in the Liturgy, and in the liturgy of daily life; but such sacrificial life always spills out in witness towards men outside the community of faith. Such an emphasis stresses that the activity of the priesthood flows out of the priestly character which is conferred by God as a gift.²⁸

²⁷ Quoting from *Luther's Works*, on Psalm 110, verse 4; St. L. V:1038, Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 3, (St. Louis: Concordia): 441.

²⁸ Thomas Winger, *The Priesthood of all the Baptized: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*, STM Thesis for Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. (May, 1992): 119.

While Winger indicates that the priestly response is liturgical praise and thanksgiving to God, I believe we can say that this vertical praise is also expressed in horizontal service to others. Consider again St. Paul's exhortation: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship" (Ro 12:1 NIV). What follows upon this passage from the apostle is a flurry of "one another" passages directing priestly service toward the brother. Many other such priestly mandates can be found in passages like, "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph 5:19-21 NIV) or "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col 3:16-17 NIV).

Kolb shows how Luther put this priestly service in the context of the "mutual conversation and consolation" of believers in his Large Catechism:

When "some particular issue weighs on us or attacks us, eating away at us until we can have no peace; or when we "find ourselves insufficiently strong in faith," then Luther advises laying our troubles before another believer "at any time and as often as we wish." From fellow Christians believers receive "advice, comfort, and strength." For "by divine ordinance Christ himself has placed absolution in the mouths of his Christian community and commanded us to absolve one another from sins. So if there is a heart that feels its sin and desires comfort, it has here a sure refuge where it finds and hears God's Word because through a human being God looses and absolves from sin."²⁹

²⁹ Charles P. Arand and Robert Kolb, *Lutheran. What Does That Mean? An Introduction to a Lutheran Way of Thinking* (forthcoming): 57. Used by permission.

As seen in the Luther references above, the biblical teaching of the royal priesthood has been confessed by Lutherans from the earliest days. Christians' priestly service has been prominent in the church and the home in many ways. There has often been an emphasis on the priestly work of parents in leading their households in devotions, prayer, recitation of the catechism and so forth. Priestly service has been rendered in teaching Sunday school and Bible classes. Many Christians offer service on congregational boards and committees. There is also a renewed awareness in many congregations of all of the various vocations Christians have, that they are called to offer sacrificial service in society, the home and congregational life. Through evangelistic programs and a whole multitude of witnessing events, Christian priests have formally taken part in "speaking to people for God." This also happens in unstructured and informal ways with friends and neighbors in the course of daily life. Another manifestation of priestly service is seen in the use of "prayer chains" and organized prayer services. Below I will unpack the concept of using lay led gospel care small groups to provide a locus for priestly work. Before I do that, however, I must first speak to the relationship between the pastoral ministry and the priestly service of God's people.

The Relationship Between the Pastoral Ministry and the People's Priestly Service

Sometimes there is perceived to be a tension between the office of the ministry and the priestly service of God's people.³⁰ When one considers carefully the biblical

³⁰ Jobst Schoene argues that this has its roots in the church adopted a democratic form of church government, "Even more influential was the political situation in Europe and elsewhere in the middle of the last century. In that time the Pietistic view of the royal priesthood (which stressed a group of true believers inside the church) shifted. Now the royal priesthood was understood as an expression of democracy which developed in society. In the realm of the state, since the parliament represents the people and limits the rights of the sovereign, the church was thought to be governed in the same way. Synodical conventions and respective meetings on the parish level were considered the places where the royal priesthood could be

teaching on these doctrines, this tension goes away. In the office of the ministry, the pastor serves the royal priesthood sacramentally with the gifts of Christ, while the priesthood offers sacrificial worship of faith and praise. Again, Winger on the distinction:

Ultimately the role of the priesthood is discovered in the distinction between sacrament and sacrifice. All that it means to be “priestly” is given sacramentally; all which the priesthood does is a sacrificial response. As we saw in our exegetical study, this becomes a question of external entailment. Luther is content to include the use of the Word under the priestly vocation when it is received, or used sacrificially. The sacramental use has been placed into the Office of the Ministry, which uses it for the benefit of the priesthood. Thus “priesthood” for Luther is first a holy, Spiritual character given by God through Baptism; and secondly, it is a calling to the worship of God through the sacrifice of faith and praise.³¹

Being a priest of God, therefore, is none other than being a Christian, a member of the assembly of believers given faith sacramentally through the ministry of the Word. The minister himself is a member of the priesthood. He is also placed into the special office where he serves as an instrument of God to carry out the holy ministry.

One might say that Christ’s ministry (not the minister) creates the priesthood through baptism. As God’s new creations, his priests desire to serve him. Along with a multitude of services offered to God and others, the highest service is to support the ministry of the Word. Through call and ordination God leads the church to place certain priests into his office of the ministry. In regard to the baptized priest who is also an

represented, where the royal priesthood could exercise its rights, and where the royal priesthood could control the pastors. So the priesthood of the believers became competitive with the office of the holy ministry. Now the royal priesthood’s job was to limit the rights of the ministry and to control the pastor. What a strange development! Secular endeavors and intentions moved into the church and her doctrine. The royal priesthood was no longer understood exclusively from a scriptural foundation but from the pattern given by secular society and its needs. The New Testament did not have in mind a competition between the royal priesthood and the office of the holy ministry.” Jobst Schoene, *The Christological Character of the Office of the Ministry and the Royal Priesthood*, (Plymouth, Minnesota: LOGIA Books, 1996): 15.

³¹Winger, *The Priesthood of all the Baptized: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*, 173-74.

ordained minister his vocation as a pastor is just one form of service he offers sacrificially to God. He may also offer the priestly service of being a husband, father, city council member, Boy Scout leader, a good neighbor, and so on.

Being a member of the priesthood and desiring to fulfill the ministry of Christ's church, God's priests have always been called to use their gifts in service to this mission. Such service also supports the work that the minister is called to do. While there are certain functions unique to the office of the holy ministry, there are others that are not.

Below I will present some scenarios for consideration. These are to help clarify what falls in line with the work of the royal priesthood and what is specifically a function of the pastoral office.

Scenarios for Service in the Priesthood and the Ministry

Scenario #1

Albert was in the hospital and was suffering from a terminal illness. He sent word to the church that he desired to receive holy communion. It also came to light that his wife had lost her driver's license recently and was not able to make it to the hospital. Albert and Martha no longer had children living in the area. With Albert in the hospital, Martha would not be able to get to Sunday divine service. How might the church help? Answer: The minister's call makes him the only one to consecrate holy communion for Albert. However, other members may call on him at the hospital and offer prayers and Scriptures to encourage him in the faith. The royal priesthood in this congregation will want to help provide transportation for Martha to the hospital and to divine service. The minister, as part of the priesthood, may offer such service, but it is not his responsibility alone.

Scenario #2

Jane is having troubles in her marriage to Jim. She is struggling with her lack of feelings for him after many years. They have been going to a counselor. He has helped them see things they need to work on to make their marriage stronger, but she needs spiritual encouragement and prayer. How might the church help?

Answer: Through attending divine service she can be offered spiritual encouragement through the preaching of her pastor and attendance at holy communion. In private confession and absolution from her pastor she can receive forgiveness for “the sins she knows and feels in her heart.” However, Jane may also be helped by Christian friends who pray for her, offer encouragement and help hold her accountable to what she is called to do as a Christian. If it was believed that spiritual support in this kind of scenario has to be exclusively done by the pastor it can greatly curtail the amount of personal Christian care congregational members receive.

Scenario #3

Pastor Schmidt is struggling to find enough time to study, pray, and prepare sermons and Bible classes amidst all of the demands on his time in preparing bulletins, newsletters, making hospital calls, counseling, and visiting the sick and shut-ins. What can the church do to help?

Answer: While the church could call another pastor to share in the duties, good stewardship calls for them to first recognize what tasks Pastor Schmidt is having to do that could be done by a lay person. Obviously the office work could be taken by a secretary or volunteer. Elders and other members could assist in the priestly service of prayer and visitation to supplement the work of the pastor. This is not unlike what the

early church decided to do in Acts 6 when they appointed deacons to offer priestly service for the church. As will be seen below, some of the pressure on Pastor Schmidt's time might be alleviated through the care provided in a small group ministry. Such groups can provide a place for prayer and healing, as well as, providing Bible study leaders, who under the pastor's supervision, could lead Bible studies without the pastor having to be present.

A Lutheran Theological Application: Small Group "Gospel Care" Offered through Priestly Service under Ministerial Oversight

In the section that follows, lay-led small groups under the supervision of the pastor will be described as places where the priesthood of the baptized can carry out gospel care for one another. To be faithful to God's design for the ministry, we now consider the oversight function of those in the pastoral ministry.

Priestly Service in the Church is Overseen by the Pastoral Ministry

As the scenarios given above illustrate, the service of the royal priesthood in the Christian congregation can alleviate some of the limitations of time strictures for those in the pastoral ministry by taking on some of its functions. In fact, it can be argued that to utilize the gifts of God's holy people in service to the ministry will greatly enhance the quality and amount of pastoral care people receive.

In order for this to happen in a faithful manner, the minister needs to oversee the teaching of the Word and to then trust the Word to do its work. It is one of the particular and unique functions of the office of the ministry to oversee the doctrine and life of a congregation. The term "overseer" clearly communicates this function. As was already noted, the minister is also called to "prepare God's people for works of service so that the

body of Christ may be built up” (Eph 4:12 NIV). Therefore, when sharing the functions of the ministry that are not exclusive to the pastoral office, the ministry should do so after equipping the priesthood to faithfully carry out such tasks—like offering prayers for the sick or hurting, leading devotions or Bible study, or offering Christian counsel. This oversight is carried out primarily through catechesis and the ongoing ministry of the Word in the divine service. Having instructed the priests in the faith and knowing their competency in the Word of God, he then must trust the Word of God to be effective as it is shared by members of the priesthood.

Therefore, oversight and trust are both needed. Ministers should not micro-manage the priesthood, but they also may not abrogate their responsibility to catechize, equip and oversee their doctrine and life. This will become very important as we begin to speak about the priestly service of God’s people in small groups. Before we head there, however, we will first consider the divinely created small group in which gospel care is manifested among laity—the Christian family.

Priestly Service in the Christian Family

Priestly service in the home is defined by various divine mandates throughout the Scriptures.³² The home as a place for Priestly service has been a prominent part of the Lutheran tradition from the time of Martin Luther forward. We note that he writes in his small catechism: “As the Head of the Family Should Teach Them in a Simple Way to His Household.”³³ In this way, he guides the familial small group in gospel care through the catechism. Robert Kolb writes, “Luther believed that God had entrusted the Word to

³² Note the mandates to parents in Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Ephesians 6:4; and to spouses in Ephesians 5:21-33.

³³ *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 9, 13, 16, 21, 28, 30.

all believers for their use in their own lives and the lives of fellow Christians, starting with their family circle. For instruction in that circle he designed his Small Catechism.”³⁴

It is beyond the scope of this project to further elaborate on the priestly service that operates in the created small group, known as the Christian family. However, it cannot be stated too strongly that God’s design for the life of the redeemed is to both give and receive gospel care in families. Just as it will be argued that congregations do well to incorporate lay-led gospel care small groups in their church structure, they do even better to encourage gospel care in Christian families. In fact, the human structuring of small groups, in many ways, serves the callings of priestly service within families. There has been many a spouse that has observed that a husband or wife is a more faithful servant in the home as a fruit of participating in a Christian care small group.

Luther on Small Group Gospel Care Beyond the Family

Gospel care given to one another by believers in families is certainly part of God’s design for the priesthood. However, other gatherings of Christians may also carry out this priestly work. Again, we hear Luther’s remarks on believers providing gospel care for one another individually or in small groups. In a sermon to the congregation at Wittenberg on Matthew 18:15-20, he said:

Here Jesus is saying that he does not only want [the condemnation of sin and the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins] to take place in the church, but he also gives this right and freedom where two or three are gathered together, so that among them the comfort and the forgiveness of sins may be proclaimed and pronounced. He pours out [his forgiveness] even more richly and places the forgiveness of sins for them in every corner, so that they not only find forgiveness of sins in the congregation but also at home in their houses, in the fields and

³⁴ Charles P. Arand and Robert Kolb, *Lutheran. What Does That Mean? An Introduction to a Lutheran Way of Thinking* (forthcoming), p. 56. Used by permission.

gardens, wherever one of them comes to another in search of comfort and deliverance. It shall be at my disposal when I am troubled and sorry, in tribulation and vulnerable, when I need something, at whatever hour and time it may be. There is not always a sermon being given publicly in the church, so when my brother or neighbor comes to me, I am to lay my troubles before my neighbor and ask for comfort... Again I should comfort others, and say, 'dear friend, dear brother, why don't you lay aside your burdens. It is certainly not God's will that you experience this suffering. God had his Son die for you so that you do not sorrow but rejoice.'³⁵

In this passage, Luther gives a clear description of what I described as gospel care in Chapter One. In this reference he has in view a more or less spontaneous gathering together of Christians for gospel care as needs arise. It is felt that one can increase the potential for this to happen if there is a regular gathering for mutual consolation in a small group. While not a divinely created structure like the family, humanly devised polities that serve church life are also part of a godly use of created gifts, namely the ministerial use of reason in determining ways in which to care for one another.

It might be asked if Luther ever advocated a regular gathering of Christians in small groups for the purpose of gospel care. In his 1526 introduction to his German Mass, Luther described three kinds of divine service. The first, in Latin which had been the practice at that time; the second, in German which was the language of the people; and third, was a small, private gathering in homes. He writes:

The third kind of service should be a truly evangelical order and should not be held in a public place for all sorts of people. But those who want to be Christians in earnest and who profess the gospel with hand and mouth should sign their names and meet alone in a house somewhere to pray, to read, to baptize, to receive the sacrament, and to do other Christian works. According to this order, those who do not lead Christian lives could be known, reprov'd, corrected, cast out, or excommunicated, according to the rule of Christ, Matthew 18 [:15-17]. Here one could also solicit benevolent gifts to be willingly given and distributed to the poor, according to St. Paul's example, II Corinthians 9. Here would be no need of much and elaborate singing. Here one could set up a brief and neat order

³⁵ Ibid., 57-58. Kolb is quoting WA 47:297,36-298,14

for baptism and the sacrament and center everything on the Word, prayer, and love. Here one would need a good short catechism on the Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Our Father.³⁶

Luther never follows up on this suggestion as far as we know. His views on the call to the office of the ministry and administration of the sacraments developed beyond what is considered as a possibility here. However, the main reason this vision of an early Luther “small group” did not come to pass was likely because the laity was not capable of leading it. As Gert Haendler writes, “But Luther wrote this in the subjunctive mood. It is a case of possibility, of an ideal. The reality was quite different.”³⁷ As Luther commented pessimistically on beginning such small groups in his day,

But as yet I neither can nor desire to be in such a congregation or assembly or to make rules for it. For I have not yet the people or persons for it, nor do I see many who want it. But if I should be requested to do it and could not refuse with a good conscience, I should gladly do my part and help as best I can. In the meanwhile the two above-mentioned order of service [Latin and German Mass] must suffice.³⁸

Haendler further notes, “But at that time, 1526, [Luther] in no way thought the time had come; on the contrary, he feared, ‘it would turn into a mob.’”³⁹

The question this raises today is, “Has the time come?” In Luther’s day there was widespread illiteracy, including Biblical illiteracy. Today that is not the case. There are also many resources and training programs for small group leaders. There is a vast amount of direction and support available to address what Luther feared in his day. It is this writer’s belief that the time has come to incorporate lay-led gospel care small groups into a Lutheran polity.

³⁶ LW 53, 63-64.

³⁷ Gert Haendler, *Lutheran Ministerial Office and Congregational Function*, trans. Ruth Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981): 80

³⁸ LW 53. 64.

³⁹ Haenler, 80.

Structuring for Priestly Service in Congregations through Small Groups

How a congregation sees its mission and how it is structured to carry out that mission will have a bearing on how it cares for its people. In Chapter III, we will describe the current structure and leadership of Zion Lutheran Church of Pevely. In preparation for the study of Zion, we will consider the priestly service that can be rendered through structuring a congregation for small group ministry.

The service of the people is maximized when structures are in place to support and encourage priestly service. In congregations in my church body this has traditionally taken place through voters' assemblies, church councils, boards, committees, Sunday school staff, and the like. These are task-oriented groups for priestly service. They often serve admirably, being administered in a "top down" leadership style.

An additional way in which more and more churches are utilizing the service of the royal priesthood is through a small group system in which trained lay leaders convene regular gatherings of groups of five to twelve people. They meet not only for works of service, but also for prayer, study, and fellowship in the Word of God. These groups are under the oversight of the pastor, who also sees to their leadership training. In terms of service they function in a "bottom up" leadership style, where groups choose to take on certain tasks and services of their own choosing based on the expressed and perceived needs of the congregations. This form of priestly service will be considered in Chapter Three where I will review current literature related to congregational small group theory and practice.

Summary

In this chapter I have attempted to demonstrate the proper theological distinctions necessary to formulate a congregation-wide lay-led system of gospel care small groups in a congregation that are consistent with orthodox Lutheran theology. Specifically, I have attempted to draw distinctions between law and gospel, between the two kinds of righteousness, and between the office of the pastor and the priestly service of the laity. In the following chapter I will review current small group programs in an attempt to determine what could be a helpful small group approach at Zion Lutheran Church, Pevely, Missouri.

As has been shown from our discussion of Pietism, small groups can lend themselves to fostering gospel care among the laity, but may also lead to problems if a proper focus on the gospel and means of grace is not maintained under the oversight of the called and ordained minister. It has also been indicated that much of the material for small group ministry comes out of theological traditions that are not consistent with several key tenets of Lutheran theology. Therefore, it is necessary to choose an approach which maintains (or can be adapted to maintain) the aforesaid Lutheran theological distinctions. Provided below is a set of questions designed to assist in this matter.

A Theological Tool of Assessment to Guide Lutheran Congregations in the Use of Lay-led Gospel Care Small Group Programs

The following questions are designed as a theological tool of assessment to guide Lutheran congregations in the use of lay-led gospel care small group resources and programs. Does it:

- 1) seek to build up the members of the group through the gospel of Christ?

- 2) identify the gospel as the forgiveness of sins before God earned by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ promised in Baptism, Absolution and Holy Communion?
- 3) provide gospel care by calling members to be devoted to one another, study Scripture together, comfort, care for, pray for, and take responsibility for the needs of one another?
- 4) serve as a place of healing for troubled consciences through gospel care for one another?
- 5) receive support from and operate under the oversight of the called and ordained minister(s) of Christ in the congregation?
- 6) hold that lay leaders serve according to a human arrangement and as fellow members of God's royal priesthood, and therefore do not serve Holy Communion or Baptize in group meetings?
- 7) complement and support the work of the called minister(s) of the congregation?
- 8) encourage fellow Christians in their daily vocations?
- 9) promote unity in the body of Christ?
- 10) support the larger body of the congregation and its mission?

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the discussion thus far I have stressed the need for both the pastoral ministry and the service of “the people” in a Christian congregation, also known by the Biblical designation, the “royal priesthood.” Through the ministry of Christ handed down by the apostles (“the apostolic ministry”) God calls people to faith and into the priesthood. In the priesthood God’s people offer sacrificial service, prayer, and witness to others. There are also functions of the pastoral ministry that the priesthood assists in carrying out as they are equipped and supervised by the pastor. In many of our congregations (Zion of Pevely being no exception) the church enjoys a high level of service by the laity. However, this service has traditionally not involved assisting with the ministry of personal spiritual care. It will be demonstrated below that there is a great need for this kind of personal care and that it can be offered in part through a structure of small groups specifically designed for spiritual care of members. It will also be demonstrated that this care can be offered not only to existing members but also to help assimilate new members into the life of the congregation, to witness to the unchurched, and to provide avenues for meaningful Christian service in the congregation and community.

There is now a large body of literature extant on small group programs for use in Christian congregations. The review below does not attempt to cover this in its entirety. Rather, it organizes the literature under topics that make the case for lay-led small groups in Christian congregations followed by a description of several of the programs that are promoted for use in churches. This will be accompanied by assessments of the

usefulness and theological appropriateness of these programs, drawing on the questions posited at the end of Chapter Two.

Before the various programs are considered, I will first survey the work of Robert Wuthnow, a well-known sociologist from Princeton, who in the early 1990s conducted a comprehensive study of the small group movement. Because of the significance of his work, his findings will command a greater portion of the literature review.

Robert Wuthnow's Small Group Research

Robert Wuthnow's multiyear research project on small groups, funded by the Lilly Endowment and administered by the George H. Gallup International Institute in Princeton, is unique among small group studies. Unlike other sources that rely heavily on anecdotal evidence, Wuthnow and his associates conducted comprehensive systematic statistically-valid sociological research to assess the effectiveness of small groups concerned with spiritual formation. His results are published in *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community*.¹ His ethnographic studies from the same project are reported in *"I Come Away Stronger": How Small Groups are Shaping American Religion*.² Wuthnow's research and conclusions will be summarized below in an attempt to better understand this growing movement and to learn about the opportunities it creates along with the challenges it presents.

It should be pointed out that the Wuthnow study does not approach the subject from a religious perspective. His work lies in the realm of the "kingdom of the left

¹ Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York: The Free Press, MacMillan, 1994.)

² Robert Wuthnow, *"I Come Away Stronger": How Small Groups are Shaping American Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). In describing the importance of this research, Wuthnow writes, "Countless books and pamphlets tell us about the formal expectations of their proponents, but we must draw on information about what actually goes on in small groups to see how well they realize these expectations" (p.349).

hand.” It is a study of the manifestations of human community as it takes place in small groups. This is valuable for my study because it assesses the need for community, a need which is part of our common humanity, part of our character as God’s creatures. If Wuthnow’s research is correct, it validates the need for Christian small groups as a locus for manifesting the true community which we share in Christ.

A Cultural Realignment

Wuthnow writes, “This book argues that the small-group movement is beginning to alter American society, both by changing our understanding of community and by redefining spirituality.”³ In making this bold claim, he notes that “the small-group movement has been successful because it fits so well with trends already at work in American society, and that its success will, in turn, further these trends.”⁴ Therefore, small groups have become a major part of American life because the culture has evolved in that direction.

The small-group movement is part of a series of cultural realignments, as described by Wuthnow:

At the start of the eighteenth century, American religion underwent its first period of realignment. The state churches that colonists imported from Europe were disestablished. Denominational pluralism, later protected by a constitutional separation between church and state, was the result. During the nineteenth century a second major realignment took place. The hegemony of a few Protestant denominations was undermined. Faith became more democratic and more thoroughly American. New denominations proliferated, congregation autonomy and diversity were strengthened, and Catholics and Jews gained a place alongside Protestants. Now, at the end of the twentieth century, denominational structures are waning considerably. Increasing numbers of people have switched from tradition to tradition to tradition. Clergy are under increased pressures to compete with other congregations for members. And the basis of competition has altered significantly, from doctrinal or liturgical distinctions to programmatic

³ Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey*, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

appeals. Small groups provide greater variety and allow greater freedom in selecting the religion of one's choice than ever before. They make faith more fluid, championing change itself, and creating modular communities that can be established and disbanded with relative ease.⁵

This realignment coincides with a yearning for community on the part of many Americans that is so strong it calls into question our alleged "rugged individualist" heritage. Wuthnow notes that "the attachments that develop among the members of small groups demonstrate clearly that we are not a society of rugged individualists who wish to go it entirely alone but, rather that we are a communal people who, even amidst the dislocating tendencies of our society, are capable of banding together in bonds of mutual support."⁶

The breakdown of the family and other traditional structures have left a vacuum that is now being filled in-part by the rise of small group communities. But Wuthnow is quick to point out that they cannot replace them: "The movement may help us adapt to the emotional pressures of living in a diverse, individualistic society, but it cannot truly replace the traditional communities that we have lost. ... To their credit, they provide us with small portable sources of interpersonal support. Their weakness lies in their inability to forge the more enduring bonds that many of us would like or to strongly resist the fragmenting forces of our society."⁷ Small groups, whatever their overt purpose may be, tend to supply emotional and spiritual support. Families serve for rearing children, sexual pleasure, maintaining a material household, and in addition to providing mutual physical care, they give individuals participation in a larger identity. Small groups do not

⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

⁷ Ibid., p. 16.

exist for these purposes. But they can help support individuals to function better in families, as already noted in Chapter Two.

The changing atmosphere of church life and the need to support individuals and families in enhancing a sense of community has led many churches to pursue what is frequently described as small-group ministry. Again, Wuthnow writes, “Religious leaders, sensing the dysfunctional behavior and pain that come when people lack the care and support they need, increasingly are pointing out how desperately the American public needs to rediscover community. ... Certainly, this yearning for community is one of the significant forces behind the recent rise of the small-group movement.”⁸

History of the Movement

The modern day small-group movement developed on a national scale in the 1960s with “T-Groups” (Training Groups) used in business. Encounter Groups grew out of group therapy theory in the counseling field. These types of groups quickly spread to religious communities.

Small groups are nothing new for the church. They have existed in church and society from the very beginning. Already noted is the divinely established small group called the family. There are references throughout the Scriptures to small groups for various purposes, from administration through material support to worship. Throughout its history, the church has used small groups for all of these purposes and perhaps more. Sunday Schools are used for education. Missionary societies are used for mission work. Youth groups are used for youth ministry. Even committees are used for administration. The list goes on. What is distinctive about the recent small-group movement is its

⁸ Ibid., p. 36.

underlying purpose. It is deliberately oriented to cultivate community, support, and relationships between the members of the group. The leaders of the movement have drawn on group dynamic and process research that focused on mutual interaction, whereas small group models used in the church were primarily task-oriented or utilized a more traditional didactic model.

The development of the modern small-group movement has also been fueled by what Wuthnow calls a new epistemology, where knowledge is “generated by the group itself through discussing the personal views of its individual members.”⁹ The old paradigm for gaining knowledge relied on an authority figure transmitting knowledge to an audience. The leader of such a group was a lecturer. Today’s small groups are led by facilitators. In truth, both approaches to gaining knowledge are used in small groups today. They tap into the subjective and objective methods of learning.¹⁰

In the 1980s and 1990s, small groups began to be touted as a means to an important end—church growth. Wuthnow notes, “As evidence that such hopes are not unfounded, discussions of small groups always get around sooner or later ... to the example of Dr. Cho’s church in South Korea. It grew to more than a half million members—all because of small groups. Every pastor seems to have a personal anecdote that proves the same point.”¹¹ This will be discussed at more length under the heading of “Challenges of the Movement.”

The Small Group Movement Today

⁹ Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁰ According to Dr. Ed Hogan, to learn subjectively is to be a subject that is fed knowledge, as from a lecture. To learn in an objective manner is to learn from experience. Since members of small groups frequently share their experiences with group members, who offer support and counsel, they are also places where objective learning is supported. (Dr. Hogan, neurologist at St. Louis University Medical School, related these insights in a personal conversation.)

¹¹ Ibid., p. 350. See more on Dr. Cho’s church below.

According to Wuthnow's research in the early 1990s, 40 percent of the U. S. population claimed to be involved in "a small group that meets regularly and provides caring and support for those who participate in it."¹² Of the remaining 60 percent, over half saw themselves joining a small group within the next year.¹³ His research further showed a strong commitment to these groups, with most of them (76 percent) having been existence for over five years.

The types of groups studied and the estimated numbers nationwide of members and groups are as follows:

*Table 3.2*¹⁴
ESTIMATES OF VARIOUS TYPES OF GROUPS

	Estimated Number of	
	<i>Members</i>	<i>Groups</i>
Sunday school classes ¹⁵	18-22 million	800,000
Bible study groups	15-22	900,000
Self-help groups	8-10	500,000
Special interest groups		
Political/current events	5-10	250,000
Book/discussion groups	5-10	250,000
Sports/hobby groups	5-10	250,000

These are admittedly broad categories and among these groups there is great variety. As Wuthnow notes, that is the nature—and part of the appeal—of the small groups:

Whether it be Sunday school classes, Bible study groups, self-help groups, or other special interest groups, leaders have tried hard to 'differentiate the product' in order to reach the widest number of people with the widest array of possible needs. The idea is to have something for everybody. Downsizing is the secret. Because most groups are small, there can be an almost infinite variety of them.¹⁶

¹² Ibid., p. 45.

¹³ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁵ The difference between "Sunday school classes" and "Bible study groups" is that the former encompasses the traditional church class formed primarily on older didactic models while the latter reflects the more recent emphasis on group sharing and support.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 76.

The research bears out that the prominence of small groups in our society is related to people's desire for community and emotional support. Consider the following results:

From *Table 2.3*¹⁷
MEETING THE NEED FOR COMMUNITY
*Percentage of Group Members Who Have (A) Felt Each Need
 and (B) Met Each Need Fully*

	A	B
Being able to share deepest feelings with someone	94	57
Having people in your life who give you deep emotional support	98	66
Being in a group where you can discuss your most basic beliefs and values	90	50
Having friends you can always count on when you're in a jam	97	64
Being part of a group that helps you grow spiritually	90	53
Having people you can turn to when you feel depressed and lonely	96	62

Wuthnow offers these thoughts on the above data: "It is not surprising that so many people have experienced these needs. The fact that these needs are so widespread, though, is clearly one of the bases from which the current interest in small groups has sprung."¹⁸ Later he posits an explanation as to why small groups can be such significant sources of support for their members:

Small groups nurture our self-esteem, at least in small ways, because the other people in the group take us seriously. They listen, they accept, they empathize, they support. They give us all the things we never find in everyday life. Why? Because they are not everyday life. They are not the source of our employment. We don't share bank accounts. We don't bear mutual responsibility for the welfare of our children. We don't go to bed with them at night. But the people we share with in groups are nevertheless significant enough that we value what they say. Their caring means a lot.¹⁹

The Small Group Movement in Churches Today

In addition to the human support, in a church setting encouragement is tied to the care of Christ through the gospel. Such a gospel care-oriented small group offers a place

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

for spiritual growth and support from God. This conclusion is strongly supported by Wuthnow's research on Bible study groups²⁰ which indicated that of the participants...

95 % say they feel closer to God
 92% say the Bible became more meaningful
 91% claim they are more able to forgive
 89% say they were enabled to forgive self
 83% say they received answer to prayer
 81% learned how to share their faith.

In churches today small groups are the place where people can “bare one's soul” and express the need for support. This is not necessarily the case in the typical church environment, as Wuthnow states,

The only problem now is that many churches have become so respectable that people dare not admit that they have ever done anything [that] was ever wrong. Church becomes a place to serve on committees and show off one's social skills, not to tell how being at wit's end necessitated learning about God. For this reason small groups play a vital role: they make it acceptable to tell about pain and confusion.²¹

The research indicates that no one religious tradition has the corner on the small group market that “people in small groups do not differ substantially from the total U.S. population in their religious preferences. About the same proportion of group members, for example, are Southern Baptists as in the general population, and the same is true for other kinds of Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Catholics, and Jews.²² The only significant differences between the two populations are with people claiming no religious preference and those with a religious preference (understandable since over half of small groups are religiously based) and between religious conservatives and liberals. Wuthnow notes, “Religious conservatives are more

²⁰ Ibid., p. 230.

²¹ Ibid., p. 284.

²² Ibid., p. 111. For example, Lutherans make up 4% of the U.S. population and 5% the small group population. Among other denominations the percentage never varies by more than one point.

likely to be involved in small groups than are religious liberals. Yet many of these self-proclaimed conservatives are members of mainline Protestant churches or of Catholic parishes.”²³

For clergy, leadership in small groups is different from that exercised in the more traditional tasks of preaching, teaching, and administering the sacraments. In *Sharing the Journey*, we read:

In those [traditional] roles, the pastor represents the sacred, serving as an instrument of the divine and having divine authority for interpreting scripture, performing sacred rites, and communicating church teachings. As a planner and leader of small groups, the pastor’s role is more that of an administrator. Someone with management skills could perform the task just as well. Moreover, the pastor generally is not physically present when the groups meet. Absence may make the heart grow fonder, but it also means that group members serve much more directly as their own priests rather than looking to the clergy for authoritative answers.²⁴

While this broadening of lay leadership and participation is often seen as a good thing, there are dangers one must be aware of (see below). One example is worth noting here. As Wuthnow states, “Group members can attribute authority to anything that fits readily with their own experience, including the affirming words of friends in their group. This new focus ... can significantly trivialize the nature of divine wisdom and authority.”²⁵

Additional Findings of Wuthnow’s Research

Below are several more tables summarizing results of the small-group research project. These show: a) why people join church-based groups, b) the typical characteristics of small groups, c) more information on the support provided by groups,

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 102.

²⁵ Ibid.

d) perceived consequences of group involvement, e) activities that helped group members, and f) data on informal groups (circles of friends).

Table 4.5²⁶

CHURCH-BASED AND OTHER GROUPS		
<i>Percentages of The Members of Each Kind of Group Who Say the Following</i>		
	<u>Church-Based Groups</u>	<u>Other Groups</u>
Joined to become more disciplined in spiritual life	68	15
Heard about it through church	76	7
Think of self as deeply religious	87	53
Are on a spiritual journey	60	37
Group has influenced faith	81	31
Felt God's presence in the group	86	38

Table 5.1²⁷

TYPICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF SMALL GROUPS	
<i>Percentage of All Group Members Who Say Their Current Group Has Each of the Following</i>	
A leader	90
A stated purpose or goal	84
A name	76
An agenda or schedule	75
Elected officers	57
Business meetings	53
Something to study in advance	49
A membership fee	26
Child care	26
A contract that people have to agree to	18
A term after which it disbands	13

Table 5.2²⁸

MEMBERS' EVALUATIONS OF THEIR GROUP				
<i>Percentage of All Group Members Who Rate Their Own Group on Each Characteristic</i>				
	<u>Excellent</u>	<u>Good</u>	<u>Fair</u>	<u>Poor</u>
Making newcomers feel welcome	51	41	6	0
Well prepared leaders	43	44	8	1
Having people who trust each other	41	49	6	1
Addressing important issues	38	44	11	2
Respect different points of view	38	51	8	1

²⁶ Ibid., p. 120.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 135.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 143.

Drawing everyone into the discussion	37	47	11	1
Making me personally feel appreciated	35	49	13	0
Helping other people outside the group	29	37	19	5
Having members faithfully attend	28	47	22	2
Having everything working smoothly and efficiently	27	54	16	1
Meeting emotional needs	24	43	21	3
Having members hold each other accountable	13	34	24	9

Table 6.1²⁹

SUPPORT RECEIVED FROM GROUPS

Percentage of Group Members Who Say They have Received Each of These Kinds of Support from Their Group

Made you feel like you weren't alone	82
Gave you encouragement when you were feeling down	72
Helped you celebrate something	51
Helped you through an emotional crisis	43
Helped you make a difficult decision	38
Helped you out when someone was sick	38
Brought meals for your family	23
Provided you with physical care or support	21
Provided you with babysitting or child care	12
Helped you overcome an addiction	7
Loaned you money	4

Table 8.1³⁰

PRECEIVED CONSEQUENCES OF GROUP INVOLVEMENT

Percent Who Say They Have Experienced Each of the Following as a Result of Participating

Feeling better about yourself	84
More open and honest communication with others	79
More open and honest with yourself	78
A deeper love toward other people	73
A better ability to forgive others	71
Has helped me to serve people outside the group	69
A better ability to forgive yourself	69
Feeling closer to God	66
The Bible becoming more meaningful to you	57
More understanding of persons with different religious perspectives	55

²⁹ Ibid., p. 170.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 229.

Helping in sharing your faith with others outside the group	55
Answers to prayers	54
Healings of relationships	44

Table 9.1³¹

ACTIVITIES THAT HELPED MEMBERS

Percentage of All Group Members Who Say Each is Very or Fairly Important

People in the group giving you encouragement	86
Hearing other members share their views	85
Seeing love and caring acted out in the group	84
Seeing how to apply ideas to your life	80
Having a leaders who could answer your questions	80
Having one person in the group who you could discuss things with	79
Hearing people tell stories about what worked/what didn't work for them	78
Having someone in the group that you admire and try to be like	58
Studying particular lessons from the Bible	54

Table 6.2³²

ACTIVITIES OF INFORMAL GROUPS

Proportions Who Say Their Circles of Friends Do Each of the Following

See each other socially	95
Support each other emotionally	92
Give each other gifts	71
Work on projects together	67
Live in the same neighborhood	51
Know each other from high school or college	44
Help each other financially	40
Provide child care for each other	39
Have any regular meetings	18

Concluding Thoughts on the Wuthnow's Study

Wuthnow's research "lends clear support to the view that the movement is a major phenomenon in our society. It is major not only in terms of numbers, but because it builds on historical precedents, adds new elements, adapts to a diverse social environment, and draws strength from established institutions."³³ As was shown in the

³¹ Ibid., p. 259.

³² Ibid., p. 185.

³³ Ibid., p. 122.

results above, his study demonstrated that there is a tremendous need for community in American life, a need which, as will be further shown below, is being met in Christian small groups. Even though Wuthnow's own approach lay in the realm of the "kingdom of the left hand," its conclusions are valuable for my study because it validates the need for human community. True human community is given in the gospel of Christ. Therefore, gospel-care small groups may indeed be a valuable resource for meeting the need for our life together and a place for loving "one another" in Christ.

The Need for Small Groups

With Wuthnow's research in mind, we can observe in other current literature that much of the impetus for this burgeoning movement comes from societal dynamics, combined with new opportunities to utilize the gifts of laity through well-developed programs and support for small groups in congregations. The current literature on small groups reflects the proliferation of interest in this approach. A sampling of the large body of literature on small group programs will be investigated below. It will be done under topics that make the case for lay-led small groups in Christian congregations followed by a description of potential problems that small groups can lead to if not addressed. Guidance will then be offered to prevent problems and maximize the use of small groups. After this, several of the programs that are promoted for use in churches will be presented. Finally, there will be an assessment of the usefulness and theological appropriateness of these programs, drawing on the questions posited at the end of Chapter Two and the insights gained from Wuthnow's study and the overall literature review.

The Pastoral Care Need for Small Groups

In his book, *The Second Reformation: Reshaping the Church for the Twenty-first Century*, William Beckham calls a church that is structured for spiritual care with the focus primarily (if not exclusively) on the pastoral office a “one-winged church.”³⁴ He argues that the traditional structuring of churches has promoted spiritual care primarily in terms of a large-group experience focused on the worship leader. He contends that this makes for church life that falls far short of the level of Christian care that could be present if the church were structured differently. He believes that there is Biblical precedent for intentionally providing small groups (or cell groups) where members actively care for one another as part of a congregation’s regular ministry. The small groups represent the other “wing” along with the large-assembly “wing” in a healthy church structure.

To me personally the need for this second “wing” has become increasingly apparent as I realize how many hurting people need the care and support of others facing personal challenges. In the Sunday divine service, one may hear a reading, a sermon, or a hymn verse that encourages him or her in the faith. A person may receive the body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of their sins every Sunday. These are essential for the Christian life. But if the person needs individual, focused encouragement in the face of family strife, or support after losing their job, or a place to go to share a personal confession in order to hear the absolution of Christ, they are guided by our current structure to seek out only the services of the pastor.

³⁴ Beckham, *Ibid.*

Helping people in need is something that pastors very much want to do.

However, a pastor will not be able to meet these needs nearly as effectively by himself as he would along with a whole host of God's priestly people working with him. Pastor John Messmann, in a presentation entitled, "A Lutheran Pastoral Appraisal of Meta Church," shares his frustrations regarding the time limitations pastors face when having to provide personal spiritual care for large numbers of people:

"The time spent in one-on-one pastoral care, both at my office and at the sickbed, is by God's grace fruitful and satisfying. Nevertheless, I am continually aware that for every hour spent with one member, another 2,000 are not receiving that same attention. The haunting question becomes, 'How badly does a person need to hurt, or how boldly do they need to demand the pastor's attention, before they will receive the personal pastoral care of God's Word?' In addition, it often occurs to me that the people with whom I do spend personal pastoral time have not needed a 'called and ordained servant of the Word' with a Master's Degree to meet their need. A biblically prepared and spiritually sensitive Christian or group could have provided the same attention, and indeed much better attention than I."³⁵

Small groups enable a congregation to provide a form of care without calling additional pastors. In some respects, such groups can even serve in ways that pastors cannot. Consider the following points:

- 1) Multiple small groups can adapt to the various spiritual needs of their members. For example, a women's small group led by a woman which focuses specifically on the spiritual needs of women can serve in ways that a male pastor cannot. Such a group can provide a greater sense of empathy, understanding, and shared experiences. In short, it can provide a stronger, more natural sense of community. One aspect of community that can readily exist in a small group is a sense of shared

³⁵ Pastor John Messmann, D. Min. "A Lutheran Pastoral Appraisal of Meta Church," Presentation to the Student Convocation, Concordia Theological Seminary—Ft. Wayne, Indiana, March 9, 1994. Page 3.

suffering. Whether it is a women's group, a singles' group, a couples' group, older adult group, or simply a group of Christians that gather together for mutual support in Christ, sharing one another's burdens can help to ease the load and reduce the sense of isolation and loneliness.

- 2) Small groups, in making use of many and varied gifts and experiences of the Royal Priesthood, keep the congregation from becoming too dependent on the pastor's *personal* gifts. There is a tendency to rely on others who get things done, and in doing so a model of "learned helplessness" can easily develop. Depending on groups rather than the individual who serves as pastor allows them to utilize the richness of the body of Christ in providing spiritual support.
- 3) When the minister is not viewed primarily in terms of his personal abilities, his service can be seen more for what it is according to his divine call, that is, as a servant of the word in the office of the ministry. This has the benefit, paradoxically to some who view small groups as a threat to this office, of de-emphasizing the individual and elevating the office. One example of how this complements lay-led gospel care small groups would be that members of a group might encourage one another to trust the absolution spoken by the minister in the divine service as well as echoing that absolution to a wounded conscience uncovered in the small group gathering.

- 4) Small groups support gospel care in a manner that makes for good stewardship--stewardship not only of talents, but also of financial resources. The only regular or recurring cost may be that of providing study materials, training, and organization. With members volunteering their time as leaders and meeting in existing structures (churches, homes, restaurants, etc.), expenses are kept to a minimum.

There is a tremendous need for personal gospel care in our churches. As Wuthnow's research bears out, personal gospel care is one of the main services small groups can offer to their members.

Closely akin to this is the need for human care through personal relationships. It is to that we now turn.

The Relational Need for Small Groups

In our individualistic Western culture people often view themselves as very isolated in spite of (some would say because of) their reduced distance to other individuals. As our sinful condition manifests itself sociologically in separation from others, we yearn for relatedness in the midst of a relational famine. This takes place more often than we might think and certainly more than we would prefer. This can even take place in a congregation of God's people who go to holy communion together, yet fail to manifest that communion in their lives together. Giving in to the devil, we conceal ourselves, wanting to appear that we have overcome sin. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer states, this leaves Christians alone in their aloneness:

He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone. It may be that Christians, not withstanding corporate worship, common prayer, and all their fellowship in

service, may still be left to their loneliness. The final breakthrough to fellowship does not occur, because though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout, as sinners. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners...so we remain alone with our sin...the fact is that we are sinners!... In confession the breakthrough to community takes place. Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of a person."³⁶

It is in the church where reconciliation with God and others is given. Here people live in Christ-centered fellowship as they reconcile with each other through the gospel. Small groups in congregational life can promote this kind of gospel care. They provide the opportunity for what Julie Gorman refers to as "true community." In *Community That is Christian*, Gorman shows that God's design, as is taught in the Scriptures and experienced by his people, is that we live in community with others. Our triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit--has fellowship in himself. He has fellowship with his people. His people have fellowship with one another. This allows for the cultivation of true Christian community with fellow Christians in care groups. She notes that earnest fellowship that can be found in Christian small groups allows for honest conflict and experiences "pain in proximity" will deepen and grow:

True Community is also shaped by reality and sacrifice. In Mary Wolff-Salin's phraseology, there is pain in proximity. And true community is not the place of bliss and harmony that some would envision as the ideal. The bubble bursts for the one who believes that true Christianity is the absence of conflict and difference. In reality, both interest and ongoing vitality in relationships are born out of the freedom to share who one really is. This necessitates sharing the positive as well as the negative. Honesty will inevitably lead to conflict. True community provides the security and boundaries to work through conflict in the climate of committed love. When it is evident that members are aware enough about the others to work through honest differences their awareness of the reality of community is enhanced."³⁷

³⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), pp. 110-112.

³⁷ Julie Gorman, *Community That is Christian* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1993), p. 99.

Small groups within a congregation can provide an environment for safe and meaningful relatedness. In the large assembly of worship, one can receive peace and reconciliation with God through the forgiveness of sins in word and sacrament. However, in the large group, public setting it is difficult to give and receive encouragement on a personal level. One needs the safety of a small, confidential group to allow self-disclose and create a situation of mutual care in a sustained regular setting. Small groups afford more time and access to one another's lives so that such an atmosphere of freedom can be cultivated and grow.³⁸

It is important to note, however, that simply supplying a small group structure is not at the heart of such community. Reinhold Hutter argues that this freedom to relate to one another on a deep level cannot exist simply by providing an arbitrary social structure and gathering like minded people together. Nor does the structure merely provide a place to look for companionship. It is rather a place that gives genuine freedom born of continuing conversion by the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ:

Genuine freedom, therefore, presupposes communal practices of ongoing reception that include practices of remembrance, instruction, interpretation, discernment, discipline, and discipleship. ... the enactment of genuine freedom presupposes and requires the existence of distinct communities in which these practices of reception concretely occur. These 'communities' can neither be conceived as aggregations of likeminded individuals for limited purposes nor (as is occurring most lately) as a panacea for the loneliness, isolation and inner emptiness of the late modern individual. Oddly enough, these communities cannot be called for as another thing to be done, achieved, and put into place—managerially so to speak—but can only be received as the result of a continuing conversion.³⁹

³⁸During my research on this paper I saw an old friend. In the course of our conversation he shared how his small group at church helped him deal with the death of his wife and how study of the Bible had become much more meaningful through the group sharing. I had not told him of my interest in this topic.

³⁹ Reinhard Hutter. "(Re-)Forming Freedom: Reflections 'after Veritatis splendor'," *Modern Theology* 17:2 April 2001, p. 147

While Hutter has in mind the entire congregation or even greater Christendom, his words ring especially true for Christians gathering in small groups where the temptation is always to look to “our” community. Fellowship and community with one another must always be in Christ for others.

In a small group atmosphere of freedom in the gospel Christ’s gift of forgiveness is not only received but passed on. In *Sharing the Journey* we see how this works in considering the story of Frank:

Forgiveness of this kind is facilitated in small groups not so much by people in the group saying “I’m sorry” to one another, but (as this example suggests) by venting their anger to the group about some person outside the group until they gain some distance from that person. Ironically, groups nurture this process in two ways, both of which require individuals to shoulder more responsibility rather than less. In the first place, individuals learn to recognize that part of the problem is theirs. The individuals also realize that it is in their interest to forgive the targets of their anger. An example of realizing that part of the problem is yours was given by Frank in discussing his divorce. “I left my wife and I was convinced that most of the problems in my life were because of her. This woman was a royal pain. And she was a good woman, it’s just that she drove me crazy. I didn’t hate her, I just wanted her to die. I used to hope that she would just go die. And now we have a reasonably good relationship and when our kids do stuff, she’s there and I’m there and she wrote us a note when we got married, when my present wife and I got married.” He said the group he is involved with has “said to me that it is my responsibility to forgive her. It’s absolutely essential that I forgive her. And I can see that my attitude has changed one hundred percent. Absolutely a hundred percent.”⁴⁰

In Frank’s case his relationship with the group enabled them to speak words of admonition that he was able to heed because of the acceptance he was shown. He was allowed to express his anger in the security of the mutual support of the group.

One of the most significant ways that small groups provide for the mutual support of the group members is through prayer for each other. This was clear in Wuthnow’s

⁴⁰ Wuthnow, p. 249.

findings: “Of all the activities asked about in the survey, prayer turns out to contribute most to the likelihood of people experiencing love and caring in their groups.”⁴¹

Small groups provide a learning ground for prayer and support through prayer. Members learn to pray “out loud” and “from the heart” as they hear the word of God, as the Holy Spirit impresses it upon their hearts the truth of the gospel. The natural response is prayer. Another way the life of prayer is supported through small groups is that members observe others praying and are encouraged to participate themselves. As they share their prayer requests it also becomes a time when people find it easier to open up and share their needs and personal stories. Again, Wuthnow, “People in groups tell stories about themselves in the course of discussing other topics such as a book on child rearing or a recent novel they have read. But in many of the groups we studied, stories came up most frequently and with the greatest candor as part of the time the group devoted to prayer.”⁴²

The Evangelistic Need for Small Groups

The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ, as our Lord mandated to the first apostles (Matthew 28:19-20). The power to bring people to faith is the proclaimed Word of God, as St. Paul teaches,

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How then can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (Romans 10:13-15)

Preaching takes place in many different contexts. Usually, we think of it in the large group assembly of worship. However, for evangelistic purposes it may be more

⁴¹ Wuthnow, p. 265.

⁴² Ibid., p. 297.

effective to invite unbelievers to small groups where they can hear the Word in a comfortable context that is conducive to asking questions and sharing personal information. John Messmann argues that evangelism through small groups is very important in contemporary American society,

The people encountered by our Lutheran church members are frequently Biblically ignorant, relationally impaired (many, with fractured and broken nuclear families), and cynical towards all institutions, including the church. Many of these people would never be inclined to attend a Divine Service where Law and Gospel are preached. Even among those who do, there is an increasingly “foreign” mind-set, in heart and culture.”⁴³

In the Divine Service, which is focused on the baptized and catechized, the church often assumes an unrealistic level of biblical understanding by the unchurched. Even where there have been conscious attempts to bridge this information gap, such a large group setting precludes the opportunity for questions and doesn’t allow for discussion of personal issues. These discussions could address significant underlying reasons why the person has not been in church in the past. They provide opportunities to share the law and gospel and to apply them to people’s specific situations. In such places the Holy Spirit has great opportunity to work saving faith in the hearts of unbelievers.

There are practical concerns that must be taken into account, however, if small groups are going to be used effectively in evangelism. Caution against inversion of means and ends by using small groups as a “church growth method” will be offered below. Also, it must be considered that unbelievers may be asking a completely different set of questions than believers. It may be best to state up front that such a group will focus on inquiry into the Christian faith or survey the most basic doctrines of the faith.

⁴³ Messmann, p. 5.

In many Lutheran churches, adult catechesis or new member instruction classes often become gospel care small groups when the opportunity is presented for personal sharing and mutual prayer in an encouraging environment. These can often set the stage for participation in gospel care small groups when one later becomes a communicant member.

The Service Need for Small Groups

Not only do Christians desire to offer support and spiritual care for the needs of others, they desire to serve in any way they can using their God-given talents and gifts. As noted above, God gives each Christian a multitude of vocations in which he or she serves the neighbor. A Christian may be called to serve as father or mother, as dentist or drafter, as councilwoman or police officer, as church treasurer or trustee, to name only a few. Small groups not only support people in their various vocations, they can also provide an opportunity for a group of Christians to work together on specific projects.

Many congregations recognize that giving groups and individuals more and more latitude to use their talents creatively in service to others produces a tremendous and joyful outpouring of priestly service. Thomas Bandy describes how this can work with groups in a congregation: “The most significant thing to remember in the permission-giving organization is that these groups and mission teams are trusted and equipped to manage their own mission. They do not depend on others to manage their mission for them. They discern, design, implement, and evaluate their own mission work.”⁴⁴

To operate with Bandy’s thesis, it must be assumed that these groups and their leaders are well catechized and work closely with the pastor and other congregational

⁴⁴ Thomas Bandy, *Christian Chaos* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), p. 127.

leaders. The idea is not for groups to become independent of the congregation, but rather to work together in a spirit of trust and freedom that enables them to carry out the mission of the church in the places they live. Instead of waiting for the pastor or church council to meet a particular need that arises in a congregation, the members of a small group can work together to meet such a need. For example, a men's Bible study at Zion Lutheran identified a need for a Men's Spiritual Retreat. They decided to organize and sponsor this retreat, asking the pastor only to come and lead Bible studies. They otherwise handled all of the arrangements. This group has now sponsored men's retreats for three years.

Organizing and carrying out projects like the retreat are occasional benefits but not requirements of small groups. The service need for small groups is probably better entitled, "The Service Opportunity of Small Groups." Just as service to the neighbor occurs wherever Christians live, when the same Christians gather in close fellowship around the Word of God there becomes a desire to reach out together to meet the needs of others.

Small group members not only offer service as part of their group, these individuals tend to work in their congregations at a much higher rate than those not in these groups. Wuthnow writes, "We saw in that survey that 56 percent of the people who were regular participants in small fellowship groups had donated time to religious organizations (probably their churches) in the past year, compared to only 14 percent of the people who had not participated in fellowship groups."⁴⁵ This does not mean that small groups can be started to make more people active participants in church life, but it

⁴⁵ Wuthnow, p. 330.

is clearly one of the by-products of small group gospel care that people have more desire and energy to serve others.⁴⁶

The Bible Study Need for Small Groups

Small group Bible study has become a very popular way to study the Word of God. Utilizing well-informed materials, a lay leader does not have to be a Bible scholar⁴⁷ to facilitate a very helpful discussion of the teachings of the Word of God. The opportunity for questions and discussion make it a very effective learning experience. In the security of the group covenant, members of a small group can discuss the Word of God on a personal level that is not possible in a large group setting, no matter how learned the lecturer is.

It was noted above that the development of the modern small-group movement has been fueled by a new epistemology where knowledge is generated through group discussion. Small group leaders teach by sharing information and by facilitating discussion where members apply the lesson through sharing their stories and perspectives,

The biblical narratives, repeated in group discussions, provide templates for interpreting the meaning of personal experiences. By doing so, the narratives become more deeply understood and more available for practical application. “One of the drawbacks of sermons, no matter how rich they may be,” writes pastor Dale Galloway, “is that they do not lend themselves to feedback and discussion. In the home cell meeting, questions are asked and dialogue and discussion take place. There’s not only knowledge in the hearing of the Word of God, there is the practical application of it to the daily life.”

⁴⁶ “The members of small groups are quite often prompted to become more active in their communities, to help others who may be in need, and to think more deeply about pressing social and political issues. These findings came as a surprise to me. I had expected small group members to be turned inward, devoted to their own emotional needs...” (Robert Wuthnow, p. 346.)

⁴⁷ Even so, the leader needs to have a decent command of the subject and be able to seek out further information from the pastor or another authority on the Bible. “More than half (56 percent) of all group members whose faith had been influenced by their group said that it had been very important to them to have a leader who could answer their questions.” Wuthnow, p. 267.

“We did a book on women of the Bible,” recalls Karen. “We compared biblical passages about women in the Bible and related them to today.” Doing that, she explained, forced her “to kind of relate it to my own personal life.” A man who experienced something similar in his Sunday school class provided the following illustration: “During a recent class we talked about issues of brokenness. And people shared from their life issues of brokenness and we compared them to people in the Bible, like David struggling over a lot of his broken issues of being crowned king and then having Saul chase him for years and his indiscretions with Bathsheba. What does all that mean? And so we [contemplated] a lot of the broken experiences of our lives with those in the Bible and said, ‘Well, what does that mean?’”⁴⁸

This last question recalls the common interrogative in Martin Luther’s Small Catechism, “What does this mean?” It also reminds us that small group Bible studies need to flow from a solid doctrinal foundation. This is important not only for the sake of accuracy in Biblical interpretation and application but also in order to keep gospel care at the center of life in the small group in the same way that the gospel of Jesus Christ is at the center of Biblical revelation. For this purpose leaders need to be trained in the basics of good theology and provided resources that they can trust to reflect orthodox teaching. All of this needs to be under the care of the called and ordained minister who is charged with oversight of the doctrine and life of the congregation.

As has been demonstrated above, there are a wide range of needs that small groups can help to meet in churches today. Through their variability, adaptability, intimacy, supporting structures, accountability, spiritual growth opportunities, and economy, they can help to meet needs for gospel care, relationships, evangelism, service, and Biblical study. As Wuthnow has aptly noted, “downsizing is the secret.”⁴⁹ It is the size of the group that provides a context in which these traits can flourish.

⁴⁸ Wuthnow, p. 311.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 76.

Small groups, however, are not a panacea for the church. They also provide challenges and, like many powerful tools, are open to misuse. It was noted in Chapter Two that there are many opportunities for theological error in a small group approach. There are also potential practical pitfalls that can disrupt congregational life if one is not made aware of them. Below, we will posit some of these.

Challenges and Potential Problems of Small Groups

By employing a small group structure, a congregation can meet several needs for its members and better serve its mission in a variety of ways. Yet there are potential problems that must be considered and guarded against. Below, I will describe some of those and offer suggestions to address them. I will again be relying heavily on conclusions based on the research of Robert Wuthnow.

Potential Pitfall 1: Small Groups as a Panacea for Today's Congregations

With the excitement over small groups and their success in today's context, there is a tendency to view them as THE way to structure a church. Using the two-winged analogy mentioned above, this approach would seem to cut off the other wing and make for a structure as unbalanced as what one has with no small groups. Wuthnow addresses this question in suggesting the place of small groups as "mediating groups":

In my view, a balanced assessment of small groups requires careful consideration of what they can and cannot do. The concept of "mediating groups" that has been advanced by some social scientists seems like a particularly helpful way of sorting out these differences. Small groups mediate (stand in between) the individual, on the one hand, and the massive institutions of which our society is composed, on the other hand."⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Wuthnow, p. 349.

It is also important to keep in mind that a small group merely offers a context in which the gospel can be shared. The structure itself is not a “magic bullet” that produces church growth. In fact, as has already been pointed out, to employ small groups simply to try to gain more members is an inversion of means and ends. A group exists for the individuals who attend, not for the sake of churchly “bottom-line” goals. Again Wuthnow, “Astute religious leaders will recognize that small groups must be allowed to develop and mature at their own pace. Nothing is likely to be more disruptive than to have an ambitious member of the clergy setting growth goals that group leaders are expected to meet.”⁵¹

One additional caution that needs to be stressed here is that small group involvement is not for everybody. For some people their past experiences, their emotional needs, or their present circumstances mitigate against their participation in such a group. Structures like small groups need to be functional in order to be worthwhile for the participants. This structure or program is put in place to serve people, not people to serve the structure.

Therefore, to guard against this “panacea pitfall,” congregations must see small groups as part of a larger structure of church life. They must also recognize that they are social structures that serve the mission of the church, but they are not in themselves means to church growth, nor will they meet the needs of every member.

Potential Pitfall 2: Inviting a Subjective Conception of God

Since small groups provide an excellent environment for providing personal support for individuals, and since members want to be supportive of each other, there is a

⁵¹ Wuthnow, p. 351.

temptation to compromise truth for the sake of superficial mutual affirmation and comfort. This is especially dangerous as one seeks divine encouragement by viewing God in purely subjective categories. When that happens Wuthnow points out, “God is now a buddy:”

The advantage of this conception of God, as most group leaders we talked to see it, is that God becomes more relevant in individuals’ daily lives. The disadvantages are less apparent, but are nevertheless worth considering. One is that God ceases to be a supreme being who is in all respects superior to humans. Rather than being the inscrutable deity of the Reformation, for example, God is now a buddy. God no longer represents such awe-inspiring qualities as being infinite, all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly righteous. God is now on the same level as yourself, except perhaps a little warmer and friendlier.⁵²

To stand against making the Christian faith into “my religion” and God into a being of our own making, small groups must be guided by a clear confession of the orthodox, Christian faith. Small group leaders must be well-grounded in Lutheran doctrine and the material used must also serve true doctrine. It is also helpful for the groups to employ some objective elements in their regular practice. For example, a group might incorporate into group prayer use of the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, a litany, or other set or written prayers to complement the prayers of the heart offered by participants.

Potential Pitfall 3: Undermining the Pastoral Office and Sacramental Ministry

In Chapter Two, I made the case that lay-led gospel care small groups do not in themselves undermine the office of the public ministry. In fact, they can be a helpful complement to the pastoral office. However, if small group ministry programs do not make a clear distinction between the “sacrificial” work of the royal priesthood and the “sacramental” duties of a called and ordained minister, if they do not distinguish between

⁵² Ibid., p. 238.

the “gospel response” gospel care of the priesthood of the baptized and the divinely established ministry of word and sacrament, then the blessing of the ministry and the objective promises of the means of grace will fail to be received.

While Lutheran small group practitioners may assume these distinctions come through to people by way of catechesis and corporate worship, it seems to me that if one does not acknowledge the relationship between the pastoral office and the royal priesthood in the context of lay-led small groups, one misses a great opportunity to accent the gifts of word and sacrament. In fact, one should not only clearly indicate the complementary relationship between the pastoral office and the work of the priesthood, but also make regular use of the promise of word and sacrament in providing care for one another in small groups.

Further, small group leaders will want to see pastoral oversight as part of gospel care for the congregation as a whole. The authority of the called and ordained minister is to deliver the word that forgives and retain sins, that maintains sound doctrine which keeps the congregation Christ-centered, and that gives all the glory to the Holy Spirit for creating and sustaining faith through word and sacrament. When this is done there should be no fear of lay-led small groups driving a wedge between themselves and the pastoral office. In fact, the groups really magnify and bring out the promises of the word and sacraments as they personally apply those to one another.

Potential Pitfall 4: Misreading and Misapplication of Scripture

The use of Scripture in small groups has been shown to be of great benefit to members. Within a group, members can dig deeply into Biblical texts and collectively

consider their practical application. This can guard against the tendency in a large group to simply listen to a reading without regard for personal application.

There is, however, a danger in a more subjective approach to Bible study. In *Sharing the Journey*, we are warned against misreading and misapplying Scripture for the sake of purely practical application. This can end up disconnecting Christians from the broader ecclesiastical tradition and fail to consider Biblical truth for its own sake:

As we have seen, small groups frequently orient their members toward thinking of spirituality less in terms of ecclesiastical tradition, less in terms of theological knowledge, and more in terms of practical experience. Small groups encourage many members to regard biblical wisdom as truth only if it somehow helps them to get along better in their daily lives. Groups generate a do-it-yourself religion, a God who makes life easier, a programmed form of spirituality that robs the sacred of its awe-inspiring mystery and depth. The “application” that a group member draws for his or her life becomes more important than whether that application is grounded in truth. Each believer becomes capable of deciding which combination of beliefs to emphasize and does so mainly by drawing on personal experience rather than by paying any special attention to the clergy or to the collective, historic wisdom of the church. In simplest terms, the sacred comes to be associated with small insights that seem intuitively correct to the small groups rather than wisdom accrued over the centuries in hermitages, seminaries, universities, congregations, and church councils.⁵³

To maintain the truth of God’s Word while also seeking to practically apply it a group needs biblically sound materials and a leader who can faithfully utilize them. Here, pastoral oversight should include regular contact with leaders in order to keep a group grounded in Biblical truth. The leader, when he or she does not have the answer, should be able to take Biblical questions to pastors and Biblical authorities. Here, use of the internet can be very helpful in forwarding questions to the pastor for a response. Another helpful aid to guarding against this pit-fall is to use “doctrinally approved” Bible study materials that are designed specifically for lay-led small groups. Unfortunately, there is not a wealth of orthodox Lutheran materials designed for this use. As will be

⁵³ Wuthnow, p. 357-58.

noted in the report on the research done for this project, Lutheran small group practitioners frequently lament the scarcity of such materials.

Potential Pitfall 5: Contributing to a Group-centered Congregational Culture

Ever since Pietism's use of "Ecclesiolai in Ecclesia" (church within a church), it has been known that small groups can potentially develop to be at odds with the larger congregation. There are also contemporary examples of small groups veering off in divergent directions, with members sometimes leaving the church. Less severe, but still a problem, is a small group culture which becomes socially cliquish. Just as individuals are prone to be self-centered, groups within a congregation can develop a group-centeredness that can be detrimental to congregational life.⁵⁴ In fact, a healthy group will always be helping its participants to be more productive members of families, churches, and society. Prayer life in the group will always be oriented to both group members' needs and needs outside of the group.

Small groups, therefore, need to be tied into the larger group structure together in the congregation and church body. There are some wonderful ways that small groups can serve gospel care, but they are limited, as is any other serving structure. Groups also need to be allowed to fail or "die off" when necessary. Trying to keep a group going simply out of fear of failure is not a salutary approach. There are often life cycles to groups. When it lives out its cycle, or when circumstances change so drastically that it

⁵⁴ An example of this in a mission setting was observed in a nearby congregation that was planted using small groups. After the church planter formed several tightly-knit groups he tried to bring them together as a congregation. They found that people in the groups tended to separate off with their small group members and not join in with the others present. They eventually had to make a concerted effort to disband the groups for the sake of the congregation.

becomes untenable, then it should not be kept “on life support” simply to keep it from dying a natural death.

Potential Pitfall 6: Inadequate Supporting Leadership

Leadership of a group involves both structure and implementation. Structure is necessary to give the group a framework in which care and support can be offered. A leader is also needed to keep the group on track and to help facilitate the support that small groups are able to give.

Structuring a small group is an art, but *Sharing the Journey* teaches us that it works best when it does not dominate thinking: “Leaders need to be aware that small groups’ function is best fulfilled when structure is kept in the background. Too many plans, goals, and tightly organized agendas will kill the spirit that animates small groups. Members, in contrast, need to be more aware of implicit group norms that drive people away or that prevent needs from being openly discussed.”⁵⁵ As the research indicates, “...the important finding is that caring and informal friendships are the key to an effective group, not following some elaborate management plan.”⁵⁶

Having a competent leader guiding the group is also important to a healthy small group. In the section below, I will review some of the current suggestions for small group structure and leadership. But just as with structure, leadership can also be overemphasized. The term “facilitator” is apt for a small group leader. Another appropriate term is “host.” He or she does not need to be an authority on the Bible or Christian doctrine to be a good leader. Leaders do, however, need to have supporting people they can go to with difficult questions or concerns that are raised by the group.

⁵⁵ Wuthnow, p. 365.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 344.

They also need to be comfortable speaking AND being quiet in the group. A leader needs to be punctual in both convening and ending the group session. They also need to be committed to checking up on members when they are not present. This should always be done in a spirit of “we’re here for you”, not “where were you!”

Part of a congregational program must be to recruit, train and support small group leaders. Guidance on this is offered below. It is worthy to note that a pastor need not, and probably should not, be the person who oversees this program and its structure. His training and his call make him an authority that can be sought out for guidance on Biblical and theological questions, as well as addressing personal care needs raised by the group, as was discussed above. He is also very important for promoting groups as a way of providing care in the congregation. But he need not be the overseer of the small group program.

Concluding Caution—a Balanced Perspective

In my final reference from Robert Wuthnow I offer his concluding caution about how to maintain a balanced congregational structure which incorporates small groups in ways that can be of service to gospel care and mission. He argues for churches...

...to include small groups as part of a broader, multipurpose program of ministry. Such a program should present a balanced assortment of opportunities for learning, worship, and service, as well as, fellowship. Small groups should not be the principal activity of the church nor the program that receives greatest emphasis in terms of pastoral time or lay involvement. They should be oriented toward fellowship and caring, but their members should be encouraged to participate in classes and to seek religious instruction in other settings, they should take part in worship services and the sacraments, and they should be encouraged to be of service through their work, in their neighborhoods, and through volunteer activities. Religious leaders should be cautious in using small groups instrumentally to meet targeted levels of church growth. Larger churches are not necessarily better churches. Nor are small groups the secret of success in all settings. An emphasis on numeric success requires special caution, moreover,

where “whatever works” to achieve this goal comes to be seen as more worthy or even as being closer to the truth, than other activities whose results may be more difficult to measure. Religious leaders need to take careful stock of what they want the church of the twenty-first century to be and to ask whether small groups can become vehicles for preserving ancient truths and for deepening theological wisdom or whether these groups will only make spirituality more palatable to a secular society.⁵⁷

Small Group Ministry Strategies

Christian ministry in small groups has been going on from the earliest days when the apostles and other early Christians first met in homes.⁵⁸ There have also been movements throughout the history of the Christian church in which gathering in small groups for bible study, prayer, and fellowship has been emphasized. Such a movement has begun again following the tremendous effect of the small group or cell group ministry pioneered by the Yonggi Full Gospel Church in South Korea.⁵⁹ Since that time many churches have enhanced their ministry by incorporating small groups into their churches. Many churches are now striving to become churches *of* small groups.

In response to the desire to begin small group ministry there have been numerous books written on strategies for implementing and carrying out such a program. One of the best known works is *Prepare Your Church for the Future* by Carl George.⁶⁰ He advocates an approach called “meta church.” This model structures the activity of a congregation around open cell groups that grow as more members come in. They then intentionally multiply into more groups, always keeping the group size small. These groups are led by lay people who are in turn overseen by other leaders. Each leader has a

⁵⁷ Wuthnow, pp. 363-64.

⁵⁸ “Every day [the believers] continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people” (Acts 2:46-47a NIV).

⁵⁹ For a description of this remarkable story see: Karen Hurston, *Growing the World’s Largest Church* (Springfield, Missouri: Chrism, 1994).

⁶⁰ Carl George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (Tarrytown, N.Y.: Fleming H. Revell, 1991).

supervisory leader who has a limited number of leaders under his care. The idea is that no group gets too large to lose the small group, personal care dynamic. The members of the various groups still come together weekly for the large group worship celebration. The goal is to be large enough to celebrate (large group activity) but small enough to care (cell group setting).

It is not my intent in this paper to describe with any detail specific strategies or structures for implementing small group ministry. In addition to George's book, there are many others one may consult. Several of these are included in the Bibliography.

As an additional resource I have included in Appendix 1 outlines from class notes from DM-950 The Church in Mission Through Small Groups and Lifestyle Evangelism taught by Stephen Wagner at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis in June 2002.

Small Group Ministry Programs

Even with the help of having quality small group ministry resources available on the market, starting a small group ministry can be very demanding. It requires a great deal of time and energy. The learning curve on implementation and operation of such a ministry can be substantial. Learning through trial and error can be very costly. Mistakes made from lack of experience can severely hinder support for such a ministry in the future.

Where it is practical, congregations may want to call into service a church professional to specialize in small group ministry. He or she would need special training for this since many church seminaries and colleges do not offer it. There are now a number of places that offer seminars and conferences for this purpose. A description of several of these offerings is listed in Appendix 2.

Another important resource can be found in small group support ministries. These effectively aid pastors and congregations through training and support services for lay people. One such organization especially popular among Lutheran congregations is Stephen Ministries of St. Louis.⁶¹ They operate their ChristCare Program to serve the small group ministry needs of congregations. This program proposes to assist by doing the following:

1. Finding and keeping qualified people to direct small group ministry
2. Designing a simple, workable, administrative structure
3. Assuring an ongoing supply of trained and supervised small group leaders
4. Helping small groups move beyond superficiality
5. Making sure people in such groups get the right care⁶²

They carry out this plan by providing week-long lay and pastoral leadership training for those who will be equipping, training, and overseeing the small group leaders. Those who complete the special training at the Stephen Ministries headquarters then return to their congregations as “equippers.” Their purpose then becomes the training and support of small group leaders in the congregation. Stephen Ministries continues to provide support services for the leaders and groups. This program is very training intensive. It demands a large investment of time and energy from those who commit to be leaders.

⁶¹ A personal email I received from Joel Bretscher of Stephen Ministries included the following information: “Of the 800+ congregations with ChristCare Group Ministry, 232 of them are LCMS and another 186 are ELCA -- so more than half of the total is Lutheran. ... So there seems to be a hunger for small group ministry within the Lutheran denominations.”

⁶² Taken from *ChristCare Groups: Circles of Care with Christ at the Center* printed by Stephen Ministries of St. Louis, 2045 Innerbelt Business Center Dr., St. Louis, Missouri 63114-5765.

Besides ChristCare and the other resources listed in Appendix 2, I will highlight one other resource for congregational small group development—Lifetogether. As with Stephen Ministries, this is a popular resource among Lutheran small group practitioners. This company was pioneered by Brett Eastman, who worked with small groups at both Willow Creek Church and Saddleback Church, arguably the two of the most prominent churches of small groups in the country, before beginning Lifetogether. Lifetogether represents what might be called a “campaign approach” to small group ministry. This is the model used in the very popular “Forty Days of Purpose” campaigns recently employed by many churches. This format seems to work well with the busy American public that is often reluctant to commit to an enduring group. However, what many churches find is that people stay with these groups after the initial campaign.

It is very different from ChristCare in how it approaches leader training. With Lifetogether there is no seminar or class to attend. The training materials are incorporated in the DVD which carries the lesson. Groups are led by hosts who utilize this resource, which has guidance for the leader incorporated into every lesson. These lessons include messages from various preachers who are popular with many of the churches that actively encourage small groups.

Members, however, need to be comfortable with the DVD approach. Another issue that Lutheran small groups face is that while the format is very user-friendly, the messages lack the emphasis of Lutheran theology. Although they carry a practical message, they may at times not be Christ-centered so much as Christian-centered. There will also be no intentional use made of the sacramental promises of the Word of God since Lifetogether does not subscribe to sacramental theology. This is evident in the Five

Key Purposes of the Lifetogether groups. In *Winning in Life Together* Brett Eastman says that one participates for:

1. **Connecting** in life with a few friends and family on a deeper level than ever before in the context of a small group community (fellowship).
2. **Growing** in my spiritual journey through the encouragement and accountability of a few friends to help me be more like Christ (discipleship).
3. **Developing** my unique SHAPE for the purpose of ministry to others, not just my own selfish ambitions (ministry).
4. **Sharing** my life mission with others, because it's scary and difficult to do alone (evangelism).
5. **Surrendering** my heart to God and others for prayer and support as an act of worship to God (worship).⁶³

Summary of Library Research Findings

In this paper thus far I have demonstrated:

*The proper theological distinctions necessary to formulate a congregation-wide lay-led system of gospel care small groups in a congregation that is consistent with orthodox Lutheran theology. Specifically, I have attempted to draw distinctions between law and gospel, between the two kinds of righteousness, and between the office of the pastor and the priestly service of the laity.

*That the Christian support and service of lay people at Zion Lutheran Church, Pevely, Missouri can be increased using the structure of small groups led by trained lay leaders.

*These small groups can be a place for spiritual growth, personal care, shared prayer, and meaningful service.

⁶³ *Winning in Life Together: God's pathway for living a life of purpose.* by Brett Eastman. Located online at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/smallgroups/articles>

*They would serve to nurture and support members, welcome new people, and witness to the unchurched.

*They would be supervised and supported by the office of the ministry.

*They would support the pastor in his personal life and vocation.

It has therefore been shown that there can be a faithful use of lay-led small groups to provide gospel care in Lutheran congregations like Zion Lutheran Church in Pevely. In order for this to occur, however, it is necessary to establish criteria for appropriate application in a Lutheran ministerial context. As has been shown from our discussion of Pietism, small groups can lend themselves to fostering gospel care among the laity, but may also lead to problems if a proper focus on the gospel and means of grace is not maintained. It has also been indicated that much of the material for small group ministry comes out of theological traditions that are not consistent with several key tenets of Lutheran theology. Therefore, it is necessary to choose an approach which maintains (or can be adapted to maintain) the following aforesaid Lutheran theological distinctions.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE DESIGN OF THE STUDY

One could say this project had its beginning when I was a lonely college student searching for identity and meaning in my life. That was twenty-five years ago. I began to find those things in the Lutheran Student Center at Southwest Missouri State University, where relational Bible studies were a major feature of college life. I grew spiritually and relationally with fellow students. I also learned to pray in a group setting and was moved to greater levels of service. It was there that I first led a Bible study as a lay person. It was in part through those experiences that I was led into the ordained ministry.

The seeds of this project continued to germinate as I moved on to Concordia Seminary and studied to be a pastor. I was thoroughly instructed in Lutheran theology and came to see it as providing the theological and hermeneutical keys to understanding the truth of God's word.

In the next phase of my life, that germinating seed began to struggle with breaking through the thick crust of a traditional approach to church polity that seemed to mitigate the use of lay-led gospel care small groups as an intentional feature of church life. My first call was to a campus ministry, where I found myself torn between two seemingly different approaches. One was the "traditional" Lutheran approach to church and ministry which saw the pastor as the sole (intentional) provider of gospel care in a congregational setting through the objective ministrations of word and sacrament ministry and private pastoral care. The other was the Bible study approach that had been

helpful to me at college. These Bible studies had at times been led by pastors, but also by lay people.

Now as a campus pastor myself I led Bible studies in the “tradition” I learned at the Lutheran Student Center, that is, using a format more relational in nature. But I was also able to provide in-depth instruction, blending both my theological background and relational experiences. However, there was very limited intentional effort to involve leaders other than myself.¹ The Bible studies were thus limited by two factors: wanting them to be relational and needing to have a pastor as the leader. The relational aspect limited the group size to that of a “small group.” The pastoral leadership limited the number of groups to what the pastor could handle.

This struggle, which I had not yet consciously identified, continued for me when I moved into a more traditional parish. It was during my next pastorate, at St. John’s Lutheran Church in Monett, that I began to see the seed of this project begin to push through to the surface of congregational life. As is the nature of any blossoming, it was only a fragile beginning. While I was serving at St. John’s, the Board of Elders sent me to a small group seminar run by the Pilgrimage Training Group, a small group ministry organization that went around the country doing seminars at a nominal fee. Based on my prior experience and more out of a sense of curiosity than anything else, I went. What particularly struck me was that the presenter was an Episcopal priest who described how small groups work can work well in a traditional and liturgical church. It was in a private conversation with this leader following the presentation that I first came to see how lay-led gospel care small groups could actually be a complement to the office of the public

¹ As the ministry developed, some young men decided to prepare to study for the ministry and some of them began assisting in a limited capacity in leading Bible studies.

ministry. I saw how the small groups could provide a place for offering care with the gospel in the sense of the “mutual consolation of the brethren.” Small groups could serve under the pastor’s supervision for the sake of theological soundness, but without his “hands on” leadership of each group. This leader pointed out the limiting effect of the traditional approach where the pastor has to be the main gospel “care-giver.” He related that this limits most congregations to an average attendance of about one hundred and fifty, because one person generally cannot effectively provide personal care for more people than that. If there are lay-led gospel care groups functioning, however, gospel care can take place without the pastor being personally involved in every situation. This not only provides a way for Christian laity to give love and support to one another in Christ (something, as I noted previously, that they desire to do—it is a gift of the gospel). It also demonstrates that being the pastor of people does not also mean that the congregation is structured in a way makes him the sole or even, in many cases, the primary giver of personal care to the members. It actually places the office of the public ministry into a more objective role as teacher and overseer of the public doctrine and as the one called and ordained to provide the ministry of word and sacrament. Of course, the pastor, along with all of the members of the royal priesthood, continues to offer personal support and encouragement to whomever he can. But gospel care is no longer limited by his availability.

The germinating seed of this project began to break through to congregational life while I served as pastor in Monett. After that “seminal” seminar I started a relational small group Bible study. But I only started only one. And I started it for me and whoever might be interested in receiving personal gospel care in such a setting. After I

accepted the call to my present place of ministry, that Bible study, which had flourished while I was in Monett, attempted to continue without me as the leader. In the absence of another experienced leader and without any congregational supporting structure, it eventually died during the extended vacancy. I had started a small group, but I had not incorporated small groups into the regular life of a congregation.

The next stage of growth came through my involvement in the Doctor of Ministry program at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis after I moved to Zion Lutheran Church in Pevely, Missouri. There I started another small group Bible study, but again did not seek to go beyond this one group. As with the group in Monett, it functioned well for me and has been very well received by the members. During my doctoral studies I took a class on small group ministry taught by a Lutheran pastor who served a congregation which had a congregation-wide system of small groups. During my extensive reading for this class, as well as through insightful lectures and class discussions with brother pastors interested in this approach to gospel care, I gained an appreciation for both what congregational systems of small groups can do in extending gospel care to more and more people and also that this has not been integrated into our Lutheran understanding of church and ministry. I learned that the available literature was heavily focused on programmatic instruction and when it did bring in Scriptural or theological bases for the practice that it often reflected a hermeneutic and theology quite foreign to a Lutheran understanding. However, based on my experiences and increasing knowledge of small group theory and practice, I became increasingly convinced that a Lutheran approach to lay-led, gospel care small groups could be developed as a congregation-wide form of church polity. There simply had been precious little done to bring this about. I could

start to see the seed beginning to grow up into a productive planting of the Lord, but it was still more a matter of vision of what “could be” in my pastorate because I had not yet done the work to begin taking my congregation in that direction.

After having taken the research methods class in preparation for my Major Applied Project I decided that “Introducing Gospel Care Small Groups Into a Lutheran Congregation” would be a good project for me to undertake. Perhaps, as a result of this project I might see the actual planting come forth and begin to bear fruit.

Having presented my personal background that led me to embark on this project, I will now offer the design of the study. You can see inherent in the design my twin concerns: effective relational Bible study that operates within the Lutheran theological tradition. The study is designed to see if this is possible. It is also designed to introduce these two concepts to my congregation.

Design of the Study

“Implementing Gospel Care Small Groups Into a Lutheran Congregation” is a study that requires the researcher to develop an in-depth knowledge of small group polity, of Lutheran theology, of traditional Lutheran polity. It also requires an awareness of the congregation’s level of understanding of what small groups could do for it if implemented, awareness of potential pitfalls of small groups, insight into the congregation’s openness to such an approach and its willingness to invest in developing and maintaining a congregation-wide system of small groups.

In the library research phase I extensively examined the theological issues related to small groups in the Lutheran tradition. I surveyed a large amount of Biblical data,

considered the historical context, and examined the current literature. That prepared me for the study whose design I describe here.

For this type of study I chose a qualitative method of research because it fits well with the goals of my project. In this approach the primary agent of data collection is the researcher and those assisting him. It is arguably a subjective approach. Certain tools must be skillfully developed to assist the researcher, like interview questions, surveys, evaluation tools, etc. This holistic approach is designed to observe the subjects in their natural setting in order to gain a greater awareness of their perspectives as they relate to the practice or possible introduction of gospel care small groups in Lutheran congregations.

This approach also affords the use of samples that have been purposefully selected. It is beyond the capability of this researcher to study the entire population in most of the target audiences of this study. Without the tools and statistical capabilities needed for quantitative research it is further not possible to use such methods in evaluating a statistically representative and valid sample. Therefore, the purposive sampling of qualitative research is preferred in this study.

Using qualitative research is also the first choice in my study of small group interest because it affords an inductive analysis of data. This approach is not to objectively test out a hypothesis, but to reveal outcomes, some of which are unanticipated. It is more discovery than confirmation. For example, in conducting interviews as part of a descriptive survey, the researcher finds that the interview questions may change over the course of several interviews. By gathering this kind of data, the researcher is able to develop a theory that is grounded in the revealed result. Unlike an *a*

priori theory which locks the researcher into one particular paradigm, this approach allows the data to move the researcher and his theory in whatever directions the results indicate. This is sometimes known as an “emergent design” approach.

The particular design for qualitative research used here is that of a descriptive survey. This approach is particularly helpful because the researcher continues to gain more understanding as the data collection continues. In this case, it is also preferred over other forms of qualitative research, for example, ethnographic studies or participant observation, because it affords the gathering of information in a relatively short period of time using limited resources. Since the pastor of the congregation is the primary researcher, it is also believed that it would be very hard to use him in participant observation in a way that would not significantly affect the data.

The descriptive survey that follows involves four parts:

- 1) A study of Lutheran congregations currently using congregation-wide small group systems,
- 2) A survey of a large population segment of Zion members,
- 3) Interviews with Zion members who have been a part of small groups, and
- 4) The survey of the level of knowledge gained about small groups through a presentation given to members of Zion’s adult Bible class.

My presentation that follows gives the design of the study in the present tense. It describes the procedures necessary to carry out this field research in any congregational setting.

A Study of Lutheran Congregations Currently Using Congregation-Wide Small Groups

This phase of the study is done by interviewing small group practitioners in the field. These are the leaders of churches that have congregation-wide systems of small groups and are themselves charged with overseeing the program. I originally considered developing a research tool to have members of these congregations also participate in a survey in order to determine the perceived effectiveness with their congregation's respective programs. However, I came to the conclusion that the information I needed could be more efficiently gathered from the small group practitioners within those congregations because they were experts in their field and worked intimately with the administration, leaders and members of the small groups in their congregations.

This part of the study requires the researcher to develop interview questions, to locate potential small group congregations, to locate potential subjects for the interviews and secure their permission, to set up a time for the interview, to describe the project and give appropriate assurances of confidentiality, to conduct the actual interview, to write up the responses in a detailed summary, to send copies of the summary to each interview subject for verification of accuracy, to receive responses from subjects verifying the accuracy of the data, to analyze the data, to assimilate the data for the purpose of the final presentation to the congregation, and to reach conclusions to be shared as part of the Major Applied Project.

To Develop Interview Questions

To develop the questions used in the interview of small group practitioners, it is advantageous to have competency in Lutheran theology and in current small group theory

and practice. He does not need to be an expert in the field to be able to ask questions that are helpful for gaining knowledge and understanding from the experienced practitioners he is interviewing. Here is where the theological studies and literature review are very helpful. Further, the researcher must have knowledge of how to develop relevant questions. This understanding may be gained by a research class, like DM-995 [Project Research and Writing], and by resources that guide one in research methodology like *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*² and *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction*³.

As one learns in qualitative research, the questions may change as the research proceeds. The researcher needs to be flexible in moving in the direction the data is taking. Therefore, the questionnaire tool is a helpful guide, but it may need to be revised as the results direct.

To Locate Potential Congregations

In order to locate potential congregations to study, the researcher needs to develop a list of congregations that have an intentional small group system. For this project the list includes only Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LC-MS) congregations. The reason for this is because of the importance placed on theological and historical concerns that are specific to Lutheran congregations in general and LC-MS congregations in particular. Further, the goal specific to Lutherans and the place of ministry studied is an LC-MS congregation.

² Nancy Ammerman, Jackson Carroll, Carl Dudley, and William McKinney, *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998). Especially helpful is chapter seven, “Methods for Congregational Study.”

³ Corrine Glesne, *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction* (New York: Longman, 1998). Chapter Four: “Making Words Fly: Developing Understanding Through Interviewing” is very good for both developing interview questions and learning how to conduct an interview.

The LC-MS does not have an intentional effort underway that involves gospel care small groups.⁴ Neither is there a published listing of all LC-MS congregations with intentional systems of small groups. Developing such a list of congregations requires “word of mouth” contacts. Other sources of information are independent organizations that work with congregations in the area of small groups. One particularly helpful source in this regard is Stephen Ministries, Inc. of St. Louis that assists over two hundred LC-MS congregations with small groups through its ChristCare program. For word of mouth contacts, one must call around to find churches with developed programs. Through these churches, the researcher can likely gain more contacts because the practitioners are generally in contact with others in the field.

To qualify for this study, the LC-MS congregation needs only have an intentional congregation-wide effort in using small groups to provide spiritual care and nurturing for its members. No other criteria are necessary. Therefore, as soon as such congregations are located, the contact can be made. For the purpose of this study I decided to interview between five and ten congregational leaders in order to obtain adequate data.

To Locate Potential Interview Subjects and Set Up the Interview

In order to locate potential subjects for the interviews one simply needs to contact the congregation. The initial contact may be with a pastor or a secretary who can direct the researcher to the appropriate person within the congregation. In conversation, the researcher should introduce himself, describe the nature of the call, and then ask for time to briefly describe the project. That may be done in the first call if the subject has time or

⁴ The LC-MS does currently have an intentional small group program called “sg².” However, this is explicitly for the purpose of evangelizing the unchurched, not for nurturing existing members in gospel care. For more information go to the LC-MS website: lcms.org.

it may be necessary to call back later. As soon as time permits, the researcher should briefly overview the project and describe how the subject can be helpful as an experienced practitioner in the field by participating in an interview. Also, assure the practitioner of confidentiality and that he or she will be asked to verify the accuracy of the information collected. Indicate as well the estimated length of time of the interview, which can be conducted over the phone. Then one is ready to secure permission for the interview. When permission is granted, set up the time to conduct the interview.

To Conduct the Interview

The interview itself may be conducted over the phone without difficulty. This is important because of the rarity of such programs—many of the subjects do not live in the immediate vicinity or even the same state. After making contact with the interviewee, restate the purpose of the project and the role his or her interview plays in the research process. Assure the caller that there are specific questions that will be asked, but they are encouraged to offer additional information as they see fit. The questions vary between being open ended to looking for categorical answers. When conducting the interview, it is important for the researcher to keep the conversation moving and driving toward completion. It may be necessary to ask the same question in different ways in order to clarify what is being asked. Also, the questions should not lead the respondent toward a particular response. However, they may presuppose that the respondent has something pertinent to say, then ask them to make a comment on the matter.⁵ When necessary, probe with additional questions to get more complete results. Take copious notes on the subjects' responses. Avoid drawing conclusions at this time. Keep all of the focus

⁵ For a helpful discussion on the difference between leading questions and presupposition questions, see Glesne, 71-72.

simply on drawing out and gathering information. If the subject gets off track, gently pull the conversation back to the pertinent subject. This is not typically a problem with busy people who are interested in completing the interview in a timely manner. A good rule of thumb is that the interviewer should talk less than the respondent.

To Provide a Detailed and Accurate Summary of the Interview

In order to provide a detailed and accurate summary of the interview, it is best to write up the summation as soon as possible after the interview. This can be done using the copious notes taken during the interview and also relying on the inferences drawn from responses. The text may best be presented in a prose form since the encounter was a conversation and discussion of the results should not be overly systematized but rather read in narrative form. After completing the summary, send them to the respondent and ask that they verify the accuracy of the report. Then wait for their response before entering it into the final data pool.

To Analyze the Data

Analyzing data from a qualitative study has a subjective character to it that is often not recognized in quantitative analysis. However, in some respects that may be a more objective response. In the data analysis, not only the data, but the context of the data collection, as well as the role of the researcher and subject, is taken into account. Data analysis involves the process of coding, “which is a progressive process of sorting and defining and sorting scraps of collected data (i.e., observation notes, interview transcripts, memos, documents, and notes from relevant literature) that are applicable to

your research purpose.”⁶ Coding all of the data should be done in a manner that first accumulates into analytical categories so that it can be studied to see how it relates to the various pieces and to the whole. It is comparable to sorting out and clumping together puzzle pieces which are assembled to reveal more of the underlying big picture. There is no illusion, however, that this is a purely objective process. The predetermined issues which focused the study will also help focus the analysis of the data.

In analyzing the data from the interviews, there are several key questions which all of the various respondents will answer. Their answer to these questions will provide important data which can lead to helpful conclusions. For example, whether or not a church employs a professional staff person to oversee the small group program, and if so, how many hours does this person spend on the program each month. The answer to this question can be very important for a congregation considering developing such a program. Also, what programs or companies might the church look to for guidance? And why that particular program or company? This requires the assembly of some very effective references for congregations. The results of this data are then arranged in a report that will help guide the direction of the researcher. As Thumma notes, “The idea is to sort out, reorder, and reconstruct the information in a systematic and disciplined manner so that you will be able to draw generalizations, summaries, and comparisons from the material.”⁷

To Use the Data’s Conclusions in the Final Presentation to the Congregation

In order to use the conclusions reached on the basis of the data in the final presentation it will need to be organized and interpreted in view of the audience and

⁶ Ibid., p. 135.

⁷ Ammerman, 233.

setting of the presentation. In this case, the audience will be lay people that have some inductive knowledge of small groups but are not familiar with the professional terminology used by practitioners. For example, it cannot be assumed that they would know the distinction between a “church with small groups” and a “church of small groups.” They also possess a well-grounded but basic knowledge of Lutheran theology. However, some are likely not aware of possible conflicts between their theological tradition and the popular and growing practice of small groups in churches today.

Another aspect of the final presentation is the need for brevity. Based on the timing and the nature of the forum through which it will be presented, there is not a great deal of time for the presentation itself. Therefore, the information reported there will be limited in scope so as not to overwhelm the audience with too much information in too short a period of time.

The presentation of the findings, just as with the research, needs to move toward a definite purpose. The reporting of the information needs to serve the purpose of leading members of Zion to reflect on the potential benefits of expanding the small group program(s) at Zion.

To Use the Data in the Final Conclusions of the Major Applied Project

The data and analysis of the interviews with small group practitioners in Lutheran congregations will be an important part of the final presentation of the MAP. These are the individuals who must personally wrestle with the theological inconsistencies in many small group programs, who regularly face impediments to small group activity in some aspects of the Lutheran tradition, and who are intimately connected to the leadership of small groups in their congregations. They know “what works” in a practical sense and

what does not. They are committed to what small groups can mean for churches and therefore are willing to offer advice and suggestions to congregations just starting out. Perhaps most importantly, they are very willing to help others learn from their own mistakes.

A Survey of a Large Population Segment of the Members of Zion Lutheran Church

Another key aspect of the study was a survey of the membership of Zion Lutheran Church of Pevely. This is to assess the potential for expanding gospel care small groups at Zion. It is administered at the close of a Sunday Divine Service prior to dismissal and collected that same day as they leave the church. The process involved developing and administering the survey, collecting and organizing the responses, and correlating and analyzing the results. These were then used to prepare the presentation for the congregation and as part of the MAP conclusions.

To Develop the Survey

The purpose of the survey is to assess the congregational membership's level of experience with small groups and the impact those groups have had on them. It is also to find out what interest there might be in small group expansion at Zion and their willingness to invest resources—financial or otherwise—in leadership development. In developing this survey the researcher has in view the upcoming presentation on small groups. In order to develop that presentation it will be helpful to assess beforehand the congregation's experiences in and attitude toward small groups.

To Introduce the Survey at the Close of the Sunday Morning Service

Once the survey has been developed and readied for distribution it is then ready to be applied. The survey could be mailed out or even emailed. However, it is believed that the most efficient and effective way to administer it is at the close of a Sunday service. There you reach a large percentage of the active population of the congregation. It can be administered and collected as part of the same event. It also provides an opportunity for personal instructions to be given to everyone at the same time. After the members fill out the survey they then leave it there. It is important to discourage people from taking it home to fill out because they either will not return it in a timely manner or not return it at all.

To Organize and Analyze the Data

After the surveys are returned, the accumulated data must then be coded and placed into analytical categories. As mentioned above, this is like sorting and grouping puzzle pieces in an effort to begin seeing their potential relationships with one another and through those start to see how they might fit together. Then the researcher can start putting the pieces together to reveal the bigger picture exposed by the project.

The survey is designed with an eye toward the data analysis to come. For example, the first question asks whether the respondent has been involved in a small group. The next question relates to experience as a small group leader. These are key categorical variables that will direct the analysis of the data. The survey results of all the respondents who have been involved in a small group were grouped together for some parts of the analysis. The same is true for those who have had experience as a small group leader. Another aspect of this analysis is that some of the data is obtained simply

to inform the presenter for the sake of the final presentation, while other parts of the gathered information will be directly related back to the membership. Some of the data will reflect attitudes, other parts will give specific guidance of future action.

To Use the Data in the Locating Interview Candidates, Preparing the Final Presentation and MAP Conclusions

A feature of this survey is that the last question is used to locate candidates for the congregation member interviews. The request is for those who have small group experience to indicate their willingness to be interviewed as part of this study. This result then necessitates further contact, as noted below in the discussion on congregational interviews.

The data from this survey will provide some specific elements of the congregational presentation. It will be used to show overall attitudes of members, their level of experience, and their interest in expanding small groups. It will also be used in the MAP conclusions to suggest future action at Zion Lutheran Church of Pevely.

Interviews with Members of Zion

In order to gain a more in-depth and personal understanding of the experiences of Zion members who have participated in small groups, interviews are conducted. The goal of these encounters is to learn the extent and impact of small group involvement on the individuals, as well as what they personally found challenging. Further, their opinion is sought about whether Zion needs more groups, whether Zion should invest financially in this approach, and to what extent the pastor should be involved. They are also asked for specific suggestions for expanding small groups at Zion.

The process for conducting these interviews is as follows: Locating and orienting a person to do the interviews, contacting the subjects and setting up the interviews, conducting the interviews, writing up summaries of the interviews, analyzing the results, and using it in preparation of the final presentation and the MAP conclusions.

To Locate and Orientate a Person Who Can Conduct the Interviews

Someone other than the pastor should do these interviews. It is thought that his presence at the interviews might affect the respondents' ability to provide open and honest answers due to their wanting to give "right" answers rather than real answers. The person who is sought out to do these interviews needs to be someone people are comfortable talking to, someone who is aware of the overall project and how these interviews fit in, and someone who understands interviewing techniques or is willing to learn. Since finding an experienced interviewer may be difficult, tutoring the individual will probably be needed. He or she also needs to have copies of interviewing questionnaires for each person to be interviewed. A helpful approach to tutoring this person might be for the researcher to first interview him or her. In this way, the future interviewer can see how the interview might be conducted. Afterward, there can be a debriefing of the interview in which the new interviewer can ask questions to clarify what the researcher is looking for in these interviews. A discussion of fundamental interview techniques may also serve as a helpful guide.

To Contact the Subjects, Set-up, and Conduct the Interviews

In order to keep the researcher out of the process and to begin to cultivate the relationship between the assisting interviewer and the subject, the interviewer makes the

contacts with the persons with whom he or she will be speaking. The names are supplied by the researcher using the data collected in the congregation-wide survey.

If the pool of volunteers is larger than ten, criteria will need to be established by the researcher to determine which persons to use. The criteria should be designed to make this sample as representative as possible. For example, there should be a mix of newer and long-standing church members, a balance of men and women, representatives from various small groups, etc. As mentioned above, the fact that this is qualitative research does not require this be entirely objective or statistically sound in order to arrive at exact results. However, it is felt that such a balance will provide a more realistic picture. It will also give an idea of how experiences may differ based on the individual's own personal demographics.

Once the names and phone numbers are passed along to the interviewer, he or she may proceed in a manner similar to that previously outlined in the interviewing of small group practitioners.

Since the assisting interviewer is likely a volunteer working for the researcher, it might be a good idea for the sessions to be tape recorded. If this is not possible, then the interviewer will want to take detailed notes to pass on to the researcher who will be writing up summaries of the interviews. If the interviewer has the time and is capable of writing summaries, then he or she should do so. These, along with notes and recordings, could help the researcher in preparing his own summaries of the data.

To Write Up Summaries of the Interview Data

The researcher will use the data collected by the interviewer to prepare summaries for use in analyzing the interviews. The more data that is available, the more detailed the

summaries will be. These summaries can then be sent to the interview subjects to verify their accuracy.

To Analyze the Results

The results of the interviews will provide a more in-depth level of knowledge than that gained by the congregation-wide survey even though it is more narrowly based. For example, in the survey the respondents can indicate a certain level of small group involvement. In an interview, the person can describe the extent of that and use personal stories to illustrate the perceived impact of small groups on his or her life. A further factor would be that the interview results should not only say whether people are for small expansion at Zion, but why or why not. It could be that they like small groups, but they think there are already enough groups.

As noted above, the data needs to be coded, organized, and placed into the context of the project's purpose.

To Use the Results in Preparation of the Final Presentation and MAP Conclusions

These results will not only assist in assessing attitudes, but also (with the person's permission) be able to provide stories and personal illustrations of the impact of small groups. This could be very helpful for the congregational presentation. However, the presenter will need to be careful to gain permission and to carefully choose illustrations. He will want to guard against sharing information that may distract some listeners because of possible personal relationships or conflicts.

This information will also be used in preparing the MAP conclusions as they relate to guidance for future activity at Zion.

The Survey of Zion Members Who Were Given a Presentation on Small Groups

The culminating feature of the congregational research is a presentation on small groups given to members. The final part is an appeal for the hearer's input for the future of small groups at Zion. Following the survey will be an evaluation of the effectiveness of the presentation in raising awareness and affecting attitudes toward small group expansion at Zion. For the sake of efficiency, the presentation may be given to a regular gathering of church members who meet in a forum conducive to such a presentation. A large group adult Bible class is a potential medium.

To Design the Presentation and the Evaluation Tool

The presentation is designed using results of library research, interviews of small group practitioners, and surveys and interviews of members. Its goal is to provide an overview of what gospel care small groups can do for congregations, as part of this is a desire to inform the hearers of potential Lutheran theological concerns and to share some insightful results of the congregational study. This will help to offer a vision of what small groups might do for Zion.

The mode of presentation is to be visual and descriptive. The preferred approach uses a Power Point presentation projected onto a screen for the audience. This way there can be visual images to supplement the oral lecture. Assistance may need to be sought in developing the presentation with its visual effects. A computer with the necessary software will need to be used. It also needs to be capable of being interfaced with the projection system for the presentation.

The evaluation tools should be a simple survey that measures very basic responses to the presentation. It should help to determine the effectiveness of the presentation in raising awareness and affecting attitudes toward small group expansion at Zion.

To Give the Presentation

To give the presentation a projection system will need to be secured. It must be set up and coordinated with the computer which carries the Power Point presentation. It will likely need to be a portable computer.

In announcing the presentation it is important that introductory comments do not detail the specifics of the evaluation so as to not unduly influence the audience in terms of the presentation. The presentation should be made in an efficient manner that does not deviate significantly from what was prepared. Therefore, extended discussion should not be encouraged. The reason is so that an accurate evaluation of the presentation content can be made. Those viewing the presentation need to be assured that there will be time in the future for more discussion. The estimated time of the presentation should be about 20 minutes.

To Evaluate the Presentation

The evaluation tool should be passed out immediately following the presentation. Since this is a very simple instrument, it should not take a significant amount of time to complete. The presenter should assure the respondents of anonymity and that it is very important simply to provide honest feedback. Emphasize that there are no “wrong” answers. Have the recipients turn in the surveys as they leave and thank them for their efforts.

To Analyze the Evaluations

Analysis of this data should proceed in a manner similar to that described above for the congregational survey. However, it is noted that the data given here not only assesses attitudes, but also the effectiveness of the presentation.

To Use the Evaluation Results in the MAP Conclusion

The evaluation results will be helpful for the MAP Conclusion, especially as it relates to future direction for small group gospel care at Zion Lutheran Church of Pevely.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESEARCH TOOLS AND METHODOLOGY

For this study I chose a qualitative method of field research. The primary agent of data collection is the researcher and those assisting him. It is a subjective approach although certain tools must be skillfully developed to assist the researcher like interview questions, surveys, and evaluation tools. This holistic approach is designed to observe the subjects in their natural setting in order to gain a greater awareness of their perspectives as they relate to the practice or possible introduction of gospel care small groups in Lutheran congregations.

This approach also affords the use of samples that have been purposefully selected. It is beyond the capability of this researcher to study the entire population in most of the target audiences of this study. Without the tools and statistical capabilities needed for quantitative research it is further not possible to use such methods in evaluating a statistically representative and valid sample. Therefore, the purposive sampling of qualitative research is preferred in this study.

Using qualitative research is also the first choice in my study of small group interest because it affords an inductive analysis of data. This approach is not to objectively test out a hypothesis, but to reveal outcomes, some of which are unanticipated. For example, in conducting interviews as part of a descriptive survey, the researcher finds that the interview questions may change as he conducts several interviews. By gathering this kind of data, the researcher is able to develop a theory that is grounded in the data. Unlike an apriori theory which locks the researcher into one particular paradigm, this approach allows the data to move the researcher and his theory

in whatever directions the results indicate. This is sometimes known as an “emergent design” approach.

The particular design for qualitative research used here is that of a descriptive survey. This approach is particularly helpful because the researcher continues to gain more understanding as the data collection continues. In this case, it is also preferred over other forms of qualitative research, for example, ethnographic studies or participant observation, because it affords the gathering of information in a relatively short period of time using limited resources. Since the pastor of the congregation is the primary researcher, it is also believed that it would be very hard to use him in participant observation in a way that would not significantly affect the data.

The specific research instruments used for this study are: 1) Interviews of small group practitioners in Lutheran congregations currently using congregation-wide small group systems, 2) A survey of a large population segment of Zion members, 3) Interviews with Zion members who have been a part of small groups, and 4) The survey of the level of knowledge gained about small groups through a presentation given to members of Zion’s adult Bible class.

Research Instrument Development

A survey of the current literature revealed that most “studies” of small groups have utilized little more than anecdotal evidence. The prominent exception, of course, is Robert Wuthnow’s multiyear research project on small groups which was extensively reviewed in Chapter Three.¹ In preparation for my field research I was able to make a

¹ Robert Wuthnow, *“I Come Away Stronger”: How Small Groups are Shaping American Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). In describing the importance of this research, Wuthnow writes, “Countless books and pamphlets tell us about the formal expectations of their proponents, but we must draw on

personal call to Dr. Wuthnow to discuss small group research. Based on his helpful suggestions, insights gained from a research methods class, and my study of literature on conducting qualitative research I developed interview questions for two different target groups, a survey for gathering information, and another survey for both evaluating a presentation and gathering information.

Questions Used in Interviewing Small Group Practitioners

In preparation to interview small group practitioners in Lutheran congregations, I devised in advance the guiding questions given in Appendix 7. The purpose of the questions was to enable the person interviewed to provide a description of small group life in their ministerial setting, as well as, gather insights from their professional expertise. Of particular concern was to learn about their experience with various contemporary small group systems or programs currently in use in Lutheran churches to determine their value and propriety for a Lutheran congregation. Below is a brief description of the rationale for the questions used in the interviews.

Demographics

Questions designed to gain a description of the ministry setting are given first. General information about the size and location of the congregation, about the duration and extent of the small group program, along with specific demographics on the program within the congregation (average group size and duration and cost to the congregation) were also placed at the front of the interview questionnaire. These are questions numbered 1 through 8, and 10. They are designed to measure how committed a congregation is to

information about what actually goes on in small groups to see how well they realize these expectations” (p.349).

small groups and also how effective (in numbers) they have been in forging the groups congregation-wide. These more structured, closed-ended questions were also placed at the beginning of the survey to make it easy to begin the conversation and to begin to stimulate more analytical thinking by the subject for future questions.

Purpose and Mission

The first open-ended question is number 9: “Describe the purpose of your groups and share any mission statements or slogans that help define them.” This question likely has to be restated in a variety of ways in the interview. It is very important for gaining an understanding of the philosophy of the small group program as it relates to the congregation’s overall mission.

Staffing

The next set of questions on staffing and oversight (#11, 12, 13) address concerns that congregations considering the implementation of such a program need to seriously consider. It does not ask for a rationale for having paid versus volunteer staff, but the accumulated data it will provide describes how congregations with such programs tend to operate. The commitment to staffing can then be compared to the level of activity and success in a given congregation to help determine its value for the program.

The questions as to the involvement of the pastor in the small group program (#14, 15, 16, 17) is a key part of the theological component of this study. It also provides a practical description related to congregational staffing as did the prior set of questions. These questions are designed to learn the extent, nature, and value of the pastor’s involvement. Within this section there are also questions that lead to a perceived

understanding of theological connections between the word and sacrament ministry of the congregation and the “gospel care” that takes place in small groups.

Program Resources

Having discussed the extent and nature of the congregation’s small group program, the questions now turn to resources used by the congregation for program design, and leadership training and support (#18, 19, 20, 21). The question of potential systems or programs is very important for guiding a congregation considering a new program. This research can help inform on the most up-to-date and useful resources available. Several example programs are provided to illustrate the question, but these are only provided as examples. With the vast numbers and rapid entrance of new programs coming on the market the researcher cannot be aware of all potential systems. (If I were to revise this questionnaire for future use, however, I would definitely add “Lifetogether.com” to this list. My research results presented in Chapter 7 will show that this is considered the “cutting edge” program by today’s practitioners.) Questions of leadership training and support were included in this block of questions on small group resources because that is the primarily what these programs offer. It is also interesting to find out if congregations can provide these without using an outside program resource.

Relationship with the Congregation

Having considered the relationship of small groups with the pastoral ministry, the next two questions look at their relationship with the congregation as a whole (#22, 23). Are intentional programmatic connections made? What impact have small groups had on members in fulfilling the congregation’s mission? A listing of examples of the impact

was devised based on what small groups claim to provide for their members and what congregations see as important elements of their mission. The type of response here is for the subject to simply indicate if the groups had an impact. The interviewer can then check off those items that apply and write in any others that may be mentioned.

Suggestions

The final set of questions (#24, 25, 26) are open-ended questions designed to solicit from practitioners out in the field insights that would be helpful to congregations starting a small group program and further to give suggestions to appropriate agencies of the church-at-large on how to provide support for congregations using small groups. These include the seminaries, publishing house, and denominational leadership. One other entity not included that should be added would be the denominational colleges that train the types of leaders that often administer small group programs.

Zion Member Survey

In order to assess the overall understanding of and attitude toward expanding small group ministry at Zion, a survey was developed for use at the close of a Sunday morning service. It is designed to help determine members' willingness to invest time, people, and financial resources in an intentional congregation-wide effort at small group ministry. The survey is provided in Appendix 3. It is noted that there are only eight content-oriented questions and all are closed-ended. Some are yes/no, others are multiple choice. This approach was taken because of the large sample of subjects and the limitations for processing such a large amount of data. The more open-ended, subjective responses to similar questions will be gained from interviews of a much smaller sample

of members. The results of this survey will help inform the development of the presentation to the congregation at the close of the project's field research. What follows is the rationale for the survey questions.

Question 1 – Have you been involved in a small group group (3 to 20 people) that meets regularly (weekly or monthly) for Bible study, prayer, fellowship, and personal support (for example, at Zion this includes small group Bible studies, XYZ, YAH, Mary/Martha, Women's Guild, MOPS, etc.)?

Question 2 – Have you been a leader of such a group?

How to ask the first question is very important. As noted by Wuthnow in his research, to get an accurate assessment of small group involvement we have to define what we mean by small groups. For the purposes of my audience, I gave only a very basic definition of group size and frequency of meetings with an allusion to the main purposes of small groups that provides support for the Christian life. I didn't use the term "gospel care" because of the difficulty of defining it in this context. Rather, I stated examples of such groups at Zion. This enabled the participants to directly determine their involvement (if they are or have been in one of the groups) or by analogy determine that they have been in a group like that at Zion in the past or at another congregation.

A word on Zion's present groups: Because Zion has not made any formal plans for small group ministry or set out specific goals for its groups, these groups fit a general definition of small groups as used by Robert Wuthnow. However, they do not all have the preferred elements of what most intentional small group systems call for nor all of the preferred elements of what I envision for such a system at Zion. While they are organized for support and fellowship, they also have other purposes that may exceed the typical goals of "gospel care" small groups.

The question of group involvement and leadership is intentionally placed at the beginning of the survey in order to assist in the coding and organizing of data in the analysis process.

Question 3 – How long have you been a member of Zion:

Under 2 years 2-4 years 4-15 years Over 15 years

This question is designed to assess a possible correlation between the length of membership and the level of involvement in small groups. Do long-standing members participate (and/or lead) at a lower or higher rate than newer members?

The period of 15 years was chosen as the upper limit because of the particular history of Zion. In 1989 Zion began a new chapter in its history. After a very tumultuous period followed by an extended interim of nine years, Zion again called a full-time pastor. Since that time the congregation has enjoyed fifteen years with much greater stability and growth. Those who have been members prior to and during the difficult years certainly have a high level of ownership in life of Zion. They form an important element of Zion's membership. Those who have become members during the last 15 years also form an important element of the congregation. They joined during a more stable period. They are also committed to Zion and its ministry.

Question 4 – Since Christians are enabled to love and support one another through the power of the gospel, small groups can provide a place to give personal support to fellow church members while sharing in the Word of God and prayer. Although Zion currently has several small groups, do you think there is a need to make more groups available?

a) For existing members Yes No

b) For new members Yes No

This question is very important to the project. It is designed to learn about interest in expanding upon the current ministry with more small groups. It does not ask

about groups in general. It does not judge the level of satisfaction with the current groups. Rather it focuses on adding new groups.

Question 5 – If you answered “Yes” on 4 a) or b), what kinds of groups do you think would be helpful for Zion to start? (Circle as many as you like)

BIBLE STUDIES, for...

Singles Couples Seniors Young Adults Men Women Anyone

FELLOWSHIP & SUPPORT for...

Singles Couples Seniors Young Adults Men Women

OTHER SUGGESTIONS: _____

This question builds on the prior one. It is to give more specific direction in identifying the interest in particular types of groups. Examples of groups were listed for the sake of clarification. While an open-ended “OTHER SUGGESTION” category is provided this question still functions like a closed-ended question, which is sufficient for this survey.

After using this particular question in the survey, however, I found that it has a problem. Its responses are difficult to interpret precisely. If I had it to do over again, I would not have listed the “Anyone” category under “BIBLE STUDIES, for...” This causes confusion because people may mark a particular category and then also mark “Anyone.” Some people may mark “Anyone” and no other categories, presuming that their response indicated they favor expansion in any and all categories. This was not a difficulty in the “FELLOWSHIP AND SUPPORT for...” section because I inadvertently left off the “Anyone” category.

Question 6 – Small groups are usually hosted by lay people with “behind the scenes” support from a church professional or pastor. There are training programs and easy to use materials for lay leaders. Do you feel that financing such training and material would be an important investment for Zion?

Yes - No - It depends on the cost

Since a congregation's willingness to implement new programs often corresponds to its willingness to invest financially in the program this question was included. The choices offered indicate either a strong willingness or unwillingness (saying "Yes" or "No" without even knowing the cost) or an openness to considering it ("It depends on the cost").

Question 7 - Circle which of the following has your congregational small group (at Zion or another congregation) helped you with:

- +evangelism and witnessing your faith
- +spiritual growth through Bible study and discussion
- +assimilation into feeling like a part of the congregation
- +personal encouragement in time of need or otherwise
- +enhanced prayer life
- +support for being a better servant to your family, church, and/or community
- +helped you identify your gifts for serving others
- + Other: _____

Question 7 is the first of the two final content-oriented questions, both are designed for members with experience in small groups. This one assesses the impact small groups have had on the person.

Question 8 - In what ways, if any, has your participation in a small group been a struggle for you?

- | | |
|---|------------------------------------|
| Finding a meeting time for your schedule | Finding a meeting place |
| Worries in sharing confidential information | Not having a prepared leader |
| Lack of commitment from group members | Not being able to find a leader |
| The meetings lasted too long | The group out-lived its usefulness |
| Lack of support from the pastor for the group |from the congregation |

This question is to determine problems Zion members have encountered with participation in small groups.

At the end of the survey, an additional request is made of members with small group experience, that they indicate whether or not they would be available for an interview as part of this research. A separate sheet to provide personal information is

attached. This is to be separated to provide anonymity for the survey, yet give contact information for potential interview subjects.

Zion Member Interview Questions

The interview questions (Appendix 5) were formulated in order to gather information on the duration and extent of experience with small groups. They were also designed to elicit responses as to the impact small group participation had on the individual and to determine what might be challenges to small group participation based on the member's experiences. The questions further looked to find out the respondent's opinions toward adding more small groups at Zion and what those might be, and to what extent there was willingness to financially support small group leadership training. The pastor's perceived role was also surveyed through these interviews, as well as, suggestions for increasing participation in small groups at Zion. As with the other research tools mentioned thus far, the responses are to be used to help inform the final presentation to be made to the congregation.

The interview questions in many respects are similar to the congregational survey questions. Some are identical. The difference is that in the interviews they are open-ended in order to elicit a descriptive and personal response. The only additional types of questions were related to the perceived need for pastoral involvement and suggestions for increasing participation in small groups (See #10 and #11, Appendix 5). Because the rationale has already been shared in the design description of the survey, it will not be done here.

Before moving on to the final presentation and its evaluation tool, I believe it is important to say a word about what information that I was **not** looking to gather in these

interviews. The same also applies to the aforementioned survey. Even though I am interested in investigating the potential for a congregation-wide system of small groups at Zion, I did not ask for opinions about this either on the congregation-wide survey or through these interviews. My research of the current literature and especially my interviews with small group practitioners (Appendix 7), along with my own experience as pastor at Zion, led me to conclude that the members of Zion are not sufficiently aware of what a congregation-wide system of small groups might entail and provide. Therefore, it would not be feasible to get a helpful response as to how such a system might work for Zion. Instead, the respondents were simply asked about their attitude toward adding more groups to what Zion currently has.

To ask the question of whether or not to simply add more groups is very different from asking whether or not to have a congregation-wide system of small groups. Many small group practitioners prefer to use the terms—“a church with small groups” versus “a church of small groups”—to distinguish between churches that simply have small groups from churches that use a congregation-wide system to provide gospel care for all members. The introduction of this concept to Zion members is done in part through my presentation to members of Zion’s Sunday morning adult Bible class (Appendix 9). Yet even there, only a beginning can be made in affecting this sort of paradigmatic shift in thinking. It is to the design of the evaluation tool for the final presentation that we now turn.

Survey for the Evaluation of the Congregational Presentation

The evaluation tool (Appendix 10) is designed to be a simple survey that measures very basic responses to the presentation. It is to determine the effectiveness of

the presentation both in raising awareness and affecting attitudes toward small group expansion at Zion. It is designed to garner results that can provide direction to Zion in the area of small group development. It is presented below with comments on its design.

Question 1 - Your awareness of what small groups can do for congregations:

	Unaware	Somewhat	Aware
Before the presentation:	1	2	3
After the presentation:	1	2	3

This is the first of three scaled questions used to compare the effectiveness of the presentation. It measures awareness prior to and following the presentation. For more accurate results, it is important that respondents were not notified about the specific kinds of questions that would be asked following the presentation.

Question 2 - Your awareness of particular Lutheran concerns in using small groups:

	Unaware	Somewhat	Aware
Before the presentation:	1	2	3
After the presentation:	1	2	3

This scaled question measures and the awareness of particular Lutheran theological concerns before and after the presentation.

Question 3 - Your attitude toward expanding small group ministry at Zion:

	Don't Expand	Possibly Expand	Definitely Expand
Before the presentation:	1	2	3
After the presentation:	1	2	3

The last scaled question measure an attitude. It compares how the subjects felt about small group expansion at Zion before the presentation to what they felt after viewing it.

Question 4 - What was the most helpful aspect of the presentation, if any?

Question 5 - What suggestions do you have to improve the presentation?

These are very open-ended questions. The first seeks to determine what may have been particularly helpful about the presentation. The second give guidance for improvement. Both questions are looking for responses give concrete information on how to better the presentation.

Question 6 - Do you think Zion should put together a task force to prepare recommendations for increasing small group activity?
YES NO UNDECIDED

Appropriately, this is the final question. It calls for a specific response that can guide Zion in the next step—potentially toward developing a congregation-wide system of small groups. The possible responses were chosen to indicate whether the subject had a definite opinion (“Yes” or “No”) about increasing small group activity or was yet undecided.

CHAPTER SIX

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROJECT

The actual project implementation took place between March 10th and 27th, 2005. After years of experiences that led me down this path of studying small groups and months of focused preparation on my Major Applied Project, the field research took place in an efficient, positive, and productive manner. When I completed the project and began evaluating the data, I found the results helpful for me and for my congregation.

Below is a detailed description of the events of those days in March that led to the results that can be studied in Chapter 7. The events follow closely the theoretical description provided in Chapter 4 and utilize the research tools whose design is given in Chapter 5. It all builds upon the preliminary findings of the theological and historical study and the survey of contemporary literature.

I believe that the timely execution of the study was due in part to building the anticipation of Zion members for taking part in the project. They allowed me to take a semi-sabbatical in January of 2005 to focus on preparation. I wrote about the MAP in my January church newsletter article. Members of my small group had been praying for the success of the project for months. When it was time for the research to be done, they were almost as ready as I was to get it done.

The phases of the project will be described using a topical outline in seven steps: 1) Formulating the Plan, 2) Learning from the Experts, 3) Learning what Zion Thinks, 4) Hearing from Zion Members, 5) Giving Members Something to Consider, 6) Finding Out What They Learned, and 7) The Next Step. This roughly follows a chronology, however, some parts of the project were being completed simultaneously, for example, interviews

of small group practitioners by me and of Zion members by my interview assistant were both happening at the same period of time. The two survey dates, March 13 for the congregation-wide survey and March 27 for the survey/evaluation of the presentation, roughly form a frame within which the rest of the project was completed.

Step One – Formulating the Plan

I began considering the research design of this study back in the summer of 2002 when I took DM -995, Project Research and Writing, as part of my doctor of ministry studies at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. When I did my MAP proposal, I explained the approach to qualitative research in the manner of a descriptive survey. That proposal was accepted by the doctor of ministry committee in the winter of 2003 for me to commence the project in the spring of the same year.

The library research phase spanned a year and half. (The unexpected length of this phase was due in part to my increasing duties in a growing parish—and in part to naïvely thinking that I had to write the “final word” on this subject for my MAP.) During the summer of 2004 I also took DM-901, Contemporary Issues in Theology. This course helped me pull together my theological approach for the contextual chapter. Another course, DM-950, The Church in Mission Through Small Groups and Lifestyle Evangelism, that I had taken in the summer of 2002, also helped with this. Some of the class notes are in Appendix 1.

Armed with the knowledge from these studies, I was able to formulate a workable plan for field research to assist me in achieving my MAP goal in the context of my own ministry at Zion Lutheran Church, Pevely. The research and my goal intersected in the study “Introducing Gospel-Care Small Groups in a Lutheran Congregation.”

As I continued to envision how this would best be accomplished at Zion, I considered not only what effect Zion might have on my project but what effect the project may have on Zion. During my library research and even as my field research proceeded with interviews of professional practitioners I modified the approach I originally planned to take in surveying the parish. Instead of having the culmination of the project be a formal congregational decision on whether to adopt a congregation-wide program for small groups, it was instead to provide research results that could then be taken to the appropriate board, which could then call for action by the congregation. I chose to do this in order to remove the MAP itself from the congregational political process because I believed that it would be difficult for members to vote objectively on something they knew was connected to one of my graded projects. I also altered the type of initial congregational action I was proposing. Instead of proposing that the congregation take an up or down vote in its first formal action, I am suggesting they form a task force to study my findings and then broadly share those with the congregation before proposing any formal action. I chose this route for two reasons. One is that my interviews with practitioners showed me that a vision of congregation-wide small groups takes a while to catch on with all who are not used to the concept. It is not a form of polity they are accustomed to. The other is that the lay member task force approach helps create broad-based ownership in a project. Instead of this being simply “the pastor’s idea” it is something that they as a congregation are potentially adopting (through their peers on the task force) even before it goes to a formal vote of the decision-making body, which in Zion’s case is a voters assembly of all confirmed members 18 years and older.

There was one other significant modification made in my design following the MAP proposal. I decided not to try to measure members' perceived level of "gospel care." I could not determine an effective or objective way to do this. More significantly, I decided that it was not particularly relevant for my research that I do this. Further, even if we could determine the current level of "gospel care," there would be no way to do an objective gap analysis because of the difficulty in determining the ideal level of gospel care needed. Therefore, the instruments were focused on measuring the congregation members' experience, understanding, and attitude in relation to small groups.

The final plan for field study came into place during my January 2005 sabbatical. It is outlined in detail in Chapter 4. The next five steps describe how it proceeded.

Step Two - Learning from the Experts

In order to learn from experts in the field I interviewed seven small group practitioners serving seven different congregations. All but one of these were paid professional church workers. The one volunteer, however, is highly committed and was designated to me by the pastor as the person to represent the small group program for their congregation.

Designing the Questions

In preparation for the interviews I formulated the questions listed in Appendix 7. My rationale is given in Chapter 5.

Locating the Churches and Interview Subjects

The pool of respondents was determined on the basis of their denominational affiliation with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LC-MS) and their having an

intentional small group ministry program. The survey was limited to LC-MS congregations because of agreement in public doctrine with Zion Lutheran Church of Pevely, which is also an LC-MS congregation. This is important because many of the issues related to gospel care small groups as described in this project presuppose a concern for certain doctrines of the Christian faith that are characteristic of Lutherans and in some case the LC-MS in particular.

Since the LC-MS does not have a listing of congregations with intentional small group ministry programs I first sought out churches in the St. Louis area by contacting congregations well-known for their small groups. Some of the practitioners at these congregations were then able to give me references to other congregations with small group programs. Additionally, I was able to gain a few references from Stephen Ministries, a company that assists many LC-MS congregations with their ChristCare small group program.

Setting up the Interviews

For each interview I contacted the church by phone and asked for the person responsible for their small group program. I then contacted this individual and explained that I was calling as part of a research project I was doing for my doctor of ministry studies. I explained the purpose of my research and how interviews with practitioners fit into the overall study. I indicated that my published results would be anonymous and that I would seek verification of the interview's accuracy from each subject. I mentioned that the interview would take approximately 30 minutes (I started off saying 15 to 20 minutes but quickly learned that was insufficient). I then asked their permission for an interview

over the phone at a time convenient for each subject. Each person I contacted gladly gave permission for an interview.

Next, I set up the time for the interview. In some cases we moved to the interview during that initial contact. In others, I called back at an agreed upon time.

The Interviews

I conducted seven interviews. The average length of the interviews ended up being approximately one hour. The information gathered registered the extent of their churches' small group programs, what kind of staffing they provide, to what extent the pastor of the congregation is involved with small groups, what connections are made to the congregation's sacramental ministry and other church programs, what resources they use, and what impact they believe small groups are having on their congregation. Guidance based on the respondents' professional experience was also obtained for the sake of congregations considering implementing an intentional small group program. Finally, there was a question about what might be further supplied by denomination-wide agencies (denomination leadership, seminaries, publishers, etc.) to assist congregations in small group gospel care.

One of the issues I encountered during these interviews is that terminology can frequently carry multiple meanings. So far in this project I have made an effort to define "gospel care small groups." In this paper I have identified this term for the sake of theological accuracy in the Lutheran tradition. However, among practitioners "small groups" are often less clearly defined theologically. They often use terms like "nurture groups" to distinguish from service groups, from committees, and from social groups in the congregation. Frequently, gospel care small groups are referred to as "small group

Bible studies” even though they may do more than just study the Bible. The practitioners with whom I discussed small groups did not use my carefully defined theological term to refer to their groups, but on a sociological level their understanding of small groups was consistent with mine.

At the close of the interview I thanked the practitioner for his or her helpful contribution to this project. I indicated that I did not have any means of repayment other than sending them results of my research. I took the respondent’s email address in order to send this to them. I also asked permission to send them a summary of the interview and asked that they send back a verification of its accuracy.

Verifying the Accuracy

I emailed a typed summary (Tables A8-1,2,3,4,5,6,7 in Appendix 8) to each of the people interviewed and asked for any corrections that might need to be made. They then sent me a response verifying the accuracy of the write-ups. Every subject responded. The only corrections I received were with regard to some typographical errors and the misspelling of a person’s name. Note that in the descriptions presented in Appendix 8 the names of the churches and respondents changed for the sake of confidentiality.

Utilizing the Data

After completing all of the interview summaries and verifying their accuracy, I coded and organized all of the data into data tables (Tables A8-A, B, C, D, E, F, G). This I then used for analysis purposes. The results not only have a bearing on my overall conclusions, they helped to guide the formulation of my congregational presentation.

Step Three – Learning What Zion Thinks

In order to learn what the members of Zion Lutheran Church of Pevely thought about small groups, I conducted a congregation-wide survey involving the worshipping community. This was one of three studies done to help determine the need for and interest in a system of lay-led, gospel care small groups at Zion. The others are described in Steps Four and Six, below.

Designing the Survey and Selecting the Date

I prepared the survey questionnaire listed in Appendix 3. My rationale is given in Chapter 5. After determining the length of the survey, I selected the close of a weekend's Divine Services for the occasion of its completion. I designated Saturday, March 12 and Sunday, March 13 as the dates. I designed the services that weekend to end about ten minutes earlier than usual to make time for the survey without disrupting the scheduled activities that followed.

Administering the Survey

At the close of the services I asked ushers to hand out the survey forms to all persons present who were high school age or older. I gave some basic instructions as the ushers handed them out. I read and commented on the "word about this survey" which read:

"A word about this survey: It is part of a class that Pastor Thompson is taking at Concordia Seminary. The results will only be used to assess the potential for this type of ministry program. It does not establish any policy. Simply offer your honest opinion. **Your assistance in this work is greatly appreciated!**"

I emphasized that this was for my class and not for the setting of policy for Zion. In my explanation, I also pointed out that there was a sheet attached to the survey on

which those with experience in small groups may volunteer to participate in personal interviews as part of this continuing study. I made it clear that the survey was to be turned in separate from the volunteer sign up. I then provided an opportunity for questions. There were no questions (members are experienced in filling out surveys at Zion, plus some may not have felt comfortable asking questions in a large group setting). The respondents were asked not to identify themselves on the survey.

All adults were encouraged to take the survey, including visitors (since this was done before dismissal and since the survey was only to determine trends and not to have statistical precision I felt that the few visitors participating wouldn't skew the data). In fact, the visitors indicated they were visitors on the survey and some did not participate at all.

Members deposited the completed surveys in designated places at they left. This was in two separate piles. One was for the survey proper, the other for the names of those willing to be interviewed.

Compiling and Utilizing the Data

One hundred and thirty-one surveys were completed and turned in. I then coded and compiled the data and organized it for analysis. This is provided in Appendix 4. The results were then used in preparation of the congregational presentation. This would be the first public reporting of the findings to the congregation.

Step Four – Hearing from Zion Members

Ten members of Zion Lutheran Church of Pevely, all of whom have participated in small groups that provide gospel care, were interviewed. The purpose was to help determine the need for and interest expanding gospel care small groups at Zion.

Designing the Questions

In preparation for the interviews I formulated the questions listed in Appendix 5. My rationale is given in Chapter 5.

Selecting the Interview Assistant

Eight of the 10 interviews were conducted by a person other than myself. The purpose of this was to allow for freer responses by participants, with the thinking that a person responding to the pastor about an activity of which he is supportive may skew results.

The two interviews that I conducted are the first two listed in Appendix 6. The first one was done with the person who later conducted the other 8 interviews. This was to test the usefulness of the questions for gathering relevant information and to serve as an illustration of how I hoped the interviews would go. It further gave her a sense of what it felt like to be interviewed.

The other interview of a Zion member I personally conducted was done because of his unavailability at the time my interviewer was conducting her interviews. However, because of a prior “open and honest” relationship with this person it was not felt that his results would be skewed.

The individual who conducted the other interviews has experience in gospel care small groups, both as a participant and a leader. Further, she understands my approach to

gospel care through small groups because we have discussed it on several occasions. However, prior to this she has not been experienced in interviewing. After being interviewed by me, we then discussed the interview for the purpose of helping her conduct future interviews. She felt relatively confident that she could do an adequate job, which I believe she did. However, after receiving the results of the interviews I believe the project would have been better served if I had arranged for the conversations to be tape recorded. I found when writing up the results from her notes that there were gaps in information that I did not have when I wrote up interviews from my notes following my interviews. The results were valid, but they may have been even more helpful with the inclusion of some of the information that was omitted.

Determining the Participants

The participants in the interviews were determined based on the respondents to the congregation-wide survey. The interviews were of members who have had experience in gospel care small groups and indicated a willingness to be interviewed (See Table A3-1 in Appendix 3). There were thirty-one volunteers. The field was narrowed to 15 potential interviewees, 8 women and 7 men, based on the following criteria: Only one person per immediate family, an equitable distribution between men and women, a balance between the various groups at Zion, and a balance between longstanding and newer members. A follow-up letter was sent out to all who volunteered to be interviewed thanking them for their willingness and indicating that not all would be called on. In the letter I explained the criteria for selection to help them understand why some would and others would not be chosen.

The reason that a sample of volunteers experienced with small groups was chosen is because the purpose of these interviews is best served by experienced and willing participants in small groups. The information gathered here was to aid in preparing the presentation given to the Bible class. The results of that presentation provided an evaluation by a sampling of active members which did not select respondents on the basis of small group experience; whereas the interviews did so.

Setting Up and Conducting the Interviews

I gave the list of 15 names and numbers of potential subjects to my interviewer and instructed her to contact 5 women and 5 men on the sheet. I gave her more names than she needed in case she was not able to make contact with some of them. However, when she was not able to make contact with one of the men she forgot that she could have contacted one of the others on the list. As I explained, that is why I did that additional interview.

She set up and conducted 8 of the 10 interviews. She took notes on the responses and then passed on the results to me.

Compiling Data, Preparing Summaries and Conclusions

Utilizing the notes I took and those supplied by my assistant, I compiled the data, wrote brief summaries, and made concluding comments on the significant aspects of each interview.

Utilizing the Results

The results of these interviews were taken into account in the preparation of the congregational presentation. Unlike the survey, there was not any “hard” data to present.

I could have utilized some of the testimonies on the impact of small groups in my presentation. However, I chose not to do so in the interest of limiting the length of the presentation. If I were to do it again, I believe I would have supplied some of this material in order to put a more personal face on the presentation. I may still use it in future presentations. If I do so, I will ask permission from the subject to use his or her story.

Step Five – Giving Members Something to Consider

In order to give the members of Zion Lutheran Church helpful information on the potential benefits for expanding small groups, on March 27, 2005, I gave them a formal presentation with visual effects. This was the culminating feature of my library and congregational research. The final part of it was an appeal for the hearers' input for the future of small groups at Zion. Following the survey I took an evaluation of the effectiveness of the presentation in raising awareness and affecting attitudes toward small group expansion at Zion (See Step 6, below).

Designing the Presentation and Selecting the Date

The presentation was designed using results of library research, of interviews of small group practitioners, and of surveys and interviews of members. Its goal was to provide an overview of what small groups can do for Zion and to inform members of potential Lutheran theological concerns. It was also to share insightful results of the congregational study, and to offer a vision of what small groups might do for Zion.

The mode of presentation was visual and descriptive. I used a Power Point presentation projected onto a large white board. Assistance was in developing the

presentation and its visual effects was given by my daughter, Marie Thompson. We used my laptop computer and Microsoft PowerPoint, 2003 software. It was able to be interfaced with the projection system I borrowed from Christ the Vine Lutheran School for the presentation. A copy of the presentation is provided in Appendix 9; also included is an outline used as the basis for the visual presentation.

For the sake of efficiency, I chose to give the presentation to the regular large group Sunday adult Bible class. The date I chose was March 27, 2005. This date also happened to be Easter Sunday. The timing of this presentation is another thing I would, in retrospect, have done differently. Because of family activities on the holiday, a number of regular Bible class members were not present. Attendance was at about 80% of the average. This lower percentage did not affect the validity of my presentation evaluation. It only meant there were fewer members of Zion to view it. Many who missed it requested that I give it at another time, as well. I intend to do that.

Making the Presentation

I announced that I would be giving the presentation at Bible class the week prior. I secured the services of the projector from Christ the Vine Lutheran school and set it up on Sunday morning. I was assisted in this by Vicar Jeff Ries of Zion.

At the beginning of class I gave introductory comments. I did not detail the specifics of the evaluation so as to not unduly influence the audience and how they evaluated the presentation. The presentation was done quickly and effectively. Even though several people wanted to raise questions and enjoy discussion (as they are accustomed to in Bible class), I did not deviate significantly from what I prepared. My goal was to limit the presentation so that I could get an accurate evaluation on the content

of the preparation. I assured the members that that there would be time in the future for more discussion on this topic. That seemed to satisfy them. The presentation lasted just under 25 minutes.

Step Six – Finding Out What They Learned

In order to evaluate the Power Point presentation (Appendix 9) given to the members of the adult Bible class at Zion Lutheran Church on March 27, 2005, a survey evaluation (Appendix 10) was administered immediately following.

Designing the Evaluation Tool

I designed the evaluation tool to be a simple survey that measures very basic responses to the presentation. For more on the design rationale, see Chapter 5.

Administering the Evaluation Tool

The survey was distributed following the presentation. I announced that this is a very simple instrument that will not take much time to complete. I assured them that their responses would be anonymous and that was important to provide honest feedback. I emphasize that there are no “wrong” answers and that my grade for this did not depend on the perceived success of my presentation. I then thanked them for their help and gave them time to fill out the survey.

Thirty-one people viewed the presentation and all remained to fill out the evaluation. They left them at a designated location as they left the classroom.

Compiling the Results of the Evaluation Tool

The data collected from this evaluation was next coded and organized to show the current levels of awareness and attitudes and to indicate the success of the presentation in raising these levels. These results are given in Appendix 11.

Utilizing the Results

The results of this evaluation (See Appendix 11) were used in writing the concluding portion of the Major Applied Project. They will also be used to guide the future direction for small group expansion at Zion Lutheran Church of Pevely (Step Seven, below).

Step Seven – The Next Step

Based on the results of the survey evaluation of the congregational presentation, which overwhelmingly called for a task force to study expanding small groups at Zion, I will share these results with the Zion Board of Elders at their April 18, 2005 meeting. I plan to recommend the Elders offer to the Zion Church Council at their April 26, 2005 meeting the request that such a task force be formed by Zion's Voters Assembly at their May 15, 2005 meeting.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PROJECT EVALUATION

During March of 2005 I conducted field research for my project, “Introducing Gospel Care Small Groups Into a Lutheran Congregation.” I made four studies: 1) Interviews with Small Group Practitioners in Lutheran Congregations, 2) A Survey of Zion Members, 3) Interviews with Zion Members, and 4) An Evaluation Survey of the Zion Member Presentation. The design and account of this research is given in the three prior chapters. A detailed presentation of the results of each study are given in Appendices 4, 6, 8 and 11. Below is a summary of those findings.

Interviews with Small Group Practitioners in Lutheran Congregations

The research tool and detailed results of the study are given in Appendices 7 and 8. In Appendix 8 there are two sets of summary tables. Tables A8-A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, and J give topical summaries combining all of the interviews. Tables A8-1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 give summaries of each individual interview. Before sharing a narrative summary of these findings, I will say a word about how these results met my expectations for a descriptive survey, and that even though I offer results at times in a statistical format that these are not to be taken to be quantitative in a formal sense.

About Reporting Qualitative Findings

Since my research is that of a descriptive survey, it should be considered that I was looking to experienced practitioners to learn what they are doing with small groups and what they can teach us about their theory and practice of small groups. I was also

seeking out their suggestions for congregations considering small groups and advice for the Synod-at-large in supporting congregations with these groups.

Since this is qualitative research, I was not looking for statistical trends. For example, it may or may not be significant that all of the churches studied have an average weekly attendance at worship of over 500 members or that six out of seven are in a large metropolitan area. It may or may not be significant that only one pastor is directly involved in the program (and he is involved primarily in the same way that their lay volunteer leaders are involved). It may or may not be important that five out of seven congregations had a paid staff person overseeing small groups. With my research what is important is how the practitioners describe their programs. What they provide is advice and guidance more than examples of “sure fire” systems that other congregations should copy. Finally, my research focused specifically on what can be learned about connecting small groups to the ministry of the Gospel and sacraments as confessed by Lutherans. That is because my intent was not to “jump on the bandwagon” of small groups, but to learn what value there might be in this form of polity for the sake of the ministry in the confessional Lutheran tradition.

The information I gathered was some of the most helpful of my research. After these interviews I was led to modify the approach I was originally thinking of taking at Zion in introducing small groups. I learned that using small groups is more about a “way of thinking” in congregational life than a program to adopt. In fact, I learned that if one takes a purely programmatic approach, he may find his church serving a program rather than it serving them. This is a fluid and evolving field. Yet I believe it can be properly understood in service to Lutheran theology and practice.

Practitioner Interview Findings

As described by the small group practitioners, the congregations reported on are all large parishes. They have weekly attendance ranging from 700 to 2,400 members. All but one is located in a large metropolitan area. As previously noted, there was no systematic attempt to try to relate congregational size to the likelihood of have a small group system. However, because the findings seemed to indicate a relationship between employing a professional staff person and the numeric success of the small groups, that the size of the congregation and its ability to employ additional staff may be a factor. Also related to size is the fact that in a large congregation it is not possible for a pastor to provide the level of personal pastoral care that he could in a much smaller congregation. Therefore, small groups enable a congregation to respond to these needs in such a setting.¹

The data on the groups indicate that percentage of members in groups can vary a great deal between congregations. The low end is 5% and 8% and the high is 30% and 55%. For the other eight congregations the number is 15%. The average size of the groups runs consistently around eight persons. The average lifespan of the groups tends to be limited to two years for these congregations. This group lifespan is shorter than I expected to find based on my reading of Wuthnow's research. Perhaps the shorter span is based on the fact that these groups are part of a larger system, that their goals serve the system, whereas, Wuthnow studied many groups that were stand alone and not part of a broad-based organized program.

¹ While small group systems tend to be developed in a large churches it is my contention that since they utilize the gifts of the royal priesthood in caring for one another that a proactive approach would call for the development of small groups in a congregation regardless of its size.

The findings on the percentage of people involved seems to be related to the kind of staffing support provided by the congregation. Those churches which employed a staff professional (all of which work at least 60 hours a month) had a much higher percentage of members involved in small groups. And while paying a staff person to oversee the program seems to be a requisite expense, there are relatively few additional program expense. The few thousand dollars invested in program costs make up a very small percentage of these large church budgets. This supports the contention by Wuthnow that small groups are very economical, utilizing homes, existing facilities and a lot of member participation to operate.

The philosophy of the small group programs in these churches consistently desire to use lay people to provide a way to care for the congregation members. While they do not use the term “gospel care” (see Chapters 1 and 2), this is essentially what they look for these groups to provide. With several of the congregations they use small groups to replace the function of care that has typically been assigned to lay elders. They also see small groups as an intimate part of the congregation’s mission. The more highly developed programs do not have mission statements for their group program. They simply state that they use groups to fulfill the congregation’s mission. Several also like to use the term “a church of small groups” versus “a church with small groups.”² The former designation calls for small groups as an integral part of the church structure or polity.

² “A church of small groups” and “a church with small groups” are terms that reflect a philosophical distinction. The reality is that congregations that view themselves as “a church of small groups” do not actually have all of their members in groups. In my research, for example, there was only one congregation where over 50% of the members were in small groups. In these congregations they strive to intimately connect small group life to all aspects of church governance and church life except for the large worship assembly.

These findings support my approach to providing lay gospel care that complements the work of a pastor. Several of the practitioners indicated that it is not possible for their pastors to provide this level of personal care. That is due in part to the size of the church, but it is also a result of the various gifts of members and how they are also equipped to care for one another.

Surveying the types of programs these churches used provided some new insights for me. Prior to my research I perceived that a highly organized and intensive small group leader training approach, like that found in the ChristCare Small Group Program of Stephen Ministries, Inc., was the best route for establishing a successful program.³ I found that the churches with the largest percentage of people in small groups, however, utilized a campaign approach, like that of Lifetogether. In the campaign approach members commit for short stretches of time to be in a group. The group is encouraged to continue after the campaign, but it is not required. Also, the small group leader is supplied with resources that are easily used with training built in to each lesson. This approach requires shorter term commitment both from members and the leader. As members begin to see the value in the caring that takes place in the groups, they begin to give a stronger commitment. As one of the experienced practitioners related the weakness of this newer campaign approach is that members do not always develop the deeper level of support that some of their older groups had, but it is worth it because so many more people have gotten involved in group life. They also noted that the campaign approach is focused on getting people into groups that had not previously been involved. The hope is that once they experience gospel care in a small group that they will then continue participation in a group beyond the length of the campaign. Even when that

³ I still see the training found in a program like ChristCare to be valuable for the top level leaders.

does not happen though, the participants have begun to develop habits of care for fellow church members and personal bonds that will continue beyond the lifespan of the group.

The discussions on programs I had with practitioners show how this area of church life is continuing to evolve programmatically. What was the program of choice a few years ago is now out of date. As one practitioner pointed out in his advice to churches considering adding groups, it is important to approach the notion of small groups not as another program, but rather as a way of thinking about church. In that way, one can pick and choose resources which serve the goal of lay-based gospel care.

The interviews described the pastor's involvement in very similar ways. Each congregation saw his role as supporter of small group staff and as promoter of the small group program within the congregation. All but one saw his promotion as essential to the success of the program. There was also a high level of agreement in the pastor not being involved in working directly with small group leaders, not overseeing the program, and generally not involved in curriculum selection. These duties are relegated to small group staff.

The high level of responsibility of the program is perhaps why congregations without professional church workers employed to operate the program tend to struggle. The lack of pastoral involvement is also seen as a potential area of concern in light of the fact that most of the resources for small group life come from sources outside of the Lutheran tradition, and often reflect a different theology. Another area of concern is the fact that there is very little intentional effort to show the relationship between the work of the pastor and the leader of small groups. Not surprising, but also a concern, is the fact that there is not intentional effort to connect gospel care to the gospel care provided

through the means of grace. Several of the practitioners lamented strongly that the LC-MS does not provide small group process materials. In order to have successful small groups the materials has to fit a small group context, but the materials they use do not reflect Lutheran theology. As popular example of this is the campaign used by several of these churches known as “The Forty Days of Purpose.” As one practitioner said, “We need a Lutheran version of this.”

The impact of small groups in these congregations was generally strong (see Table A5-F “Impact of Small Groups on Members and the Congregation’s Mission” in Appendix 8). They positively impacted evangelism, spiritual growth, personal support, prayer life, gift identification and service to the church. Support for families and service to the community saw some success, but not as much as the other aspects. An interesting observation about one of the churches where there is great turmoil and the program is not well-organized is that the small groups still provide great support for their members. It seems to indicate that there is something intrinsically successful about providing formal opportunities for Christians to care for one another in a confidential environment. As Wuthnow pointed out in his research, finding the perfect program is not the key to success. Rather, the small group dynamics themselves make this possible. The particular congregational system is not so important.

This notion is reflected in the advice given by many of these experts in the field. Introducing and supporting small group life is a matter of casting and maintaining a vision of how lay people can provide care for one another and then giving them safe places in which to bring this about. Having a staff person is also important. It not only provides a well-trained leader, but it symbolically states that small groups are important

to this congregation, that they are a part of the regular operation of the parish. One other particularly important insight is also related to congregational structure. For a parish to have a successful program it needs to “wrestle with program versus community” in how the congregation is structured. The traditional polity of most churches calls for many program boards and committees. These require a large amount of lay leadership, which siphons off leaders from the community-based small groups. Congregations with successful programs have either sought to reduce the number of people involved in program committees or have tried to transform them into support and service groups. This matter will be discussed in more details in the concluding chapter which follows. Other helpful insights from the small group practitioners are provided in detail in Table A8-G.

The final question put to the practitioners was to solicit their guidance for the church-at-large. Their suggestion lay in two areas: provide small group process materials that reflect Lutheran theology and teach seminary students to understand small group process thinking. These and other insights gained from the experts in the field will be expanded on in my conclusions.

To summarize the interview findings, I list them in 7 categories:

- 1 – Lay-led small groups can be a significant source for gospel care.
- 2 - Professional staffing is important to program development.
- 3 – Small groups should be introduced as a way of thinking about church life and that programs simply support this. There is not one ideal program.
- 4 – Congregations must wrestle with organizing their polity to reflect small group community development versus leader-intensive program boards.

5 – The “campaign approach” seems to work best for expanding participation to a much larger number of members, according to the practitioners interviewed.

6 – There is a definite need to employ a Lutheran theology of small groups in order to provide gospel care in this tradition.

7 – There is a need for Lutheran resources and church leader training in small group process.

Zion Member Research Results

Three studies were done of Zion members. First there was a congregation-wide survey, followed by interviews with members involved in groups, and finally an evaluation survey following a presentation I made to members of the Sunday Bible class on small group ministry.

Zion Member Survey Results

The results of the survey detailed in Appendix 4 show an overall high level of interest in and a positive attitude toward small groups at Zion Lutheran Church of Pevely. Over 60% of the subjects surveyed currently are or have been involved in a small group. The size of the sample is significant with 131 respondents to the survey. This reflects a large majority of the regular worshipping community. In 2004 the average attendance was 201, including children not represented in this survey. The rate of involvement is about 20% higher than the national average reported by Wuthnow in his 1993 study. However, since Wuthnow’s results indicated that a large percentage of small groups were of the Bible class or Bible study type, it is likely that the percentage of active churchgoers (which was the target of this survey at Zion) that participate in small groups would be considerably higher than the 40% rate for the general population.

Zion also registered high numbers in that a nearly a quarter (24%) of those involved in groups have had small group leadership experience. I also found it interesting that long-time members have been involved in small groups at roughly the same rate as newer members. In a traditional congregation like Zion, one would not necessarily expect to find such a high degree of involvement in small groups among the older members.

In regards to the question regarding interest in making more groups available the responses are quite favorable. Those with experience in groups are for adding new groups for existing members at a 64% rate and for new members at 77% rate. Those without group experience are not overall favorable for new groups for existing members (38%), but are essentially neutral (51%) toward more groups for new members. The overall percentages are 55% for adding groups for existing members and 69% for adding groups for new members.

These findings indicate that while there is strong support for small groups it is not congregation-wide. As will be shown in the interview data, several members who are very supportive of small groups do not think that expansion is necessary at Zion. This indicates that while they know about the benefits of small groups, they do not have a vision of this being a congregation-wide system to provide gospel care.

The types of groups members feel need to be added are given here in order of preference: 1) Couples, 2) Young Adults, 3) Singles, 4) Seniors, 5) Men & Women Groups. Since Zion already has two men's and women's small group Bible studies, and we recently began a senior's group, it is not surprising that these reflect a lower priority than couples, young adults and singles, which currently have no functioning group.

Perhaps the most telling responses to the survey were the large number of positive indications of a willingness to invest financially into small groups through leadership development. It is noteworthy that only 13% of respondents registered a negative response with the highest percentage coming in the affirmative (49%). Adding in the “Depends on the cost” category, there are 87% of respondents that indicated a willingness to invest in this program if the cost is right. It was a surprise to me to see that even among those without experience in small groups there were still many more willing to consider financially investing in small groups than not willing.

The final two questions, filled out by those with small group experience, give specific indications of the impact small groups have had on participants, as well as, struggles they have faced. As far as impact of small groups, two categories stand out: spiritual growth through Bible study and support for being better servant to others. The other categories all indicate an impact at the same rate: evangelism, assimilation, personal encouragement in crisis, enhanced prayer life, and identifying gifts of service. Of the struggles participants have faced, the number one challenge is finding a meeting time that fits their schedules. This is true for 25% of all respondents to the survey. Second, is concern about commitment of group members (12%) and, third, are worries over sharing confidential information (8%).

A summary of the findings of the congregational survey are as follows:

- 1) Many Zion members have been involved in small groups, with a relatively high number with leadership experience.
- 2) Just over a majority interested in small group expansion. More vision casting is needed for this to become a congregation-wide approach.
- 3) The priority of groups to be added are 1-Couples, 2-Young adults, 3-Singles

- 4) There is a strong willingness to provide financial support.
- 5) Impact of small groups have been especially great for i) spiritual growth through Bible study, ii) support for Christian living.
- 6) The number one challenge for small group participation is scheduling, number two is commitment of members.

Zion Member Interview Results

Zion member interviews are chronicled in Appendix 6. These are individuals with small group experience who volunteered to be interviewed as part of the congregational survey. A summary of the results are presented below under the pseudonym for each subject.

Sally

- *In Sally we see how people can grow spiritually through small groups--confidential personal support, topical Bible study, and prayer for others are keys for this growth.
- *She is also an example of how one can become a small group leader or facilitator simply from being a part of a successful group.
- * She believes that challenges for promoting more groups include: time constraints and peoples' lack of understanding of the value of groups.

Philip

- *From Philip we see the importance of small groups for developing close relationships.
- *He also shows the need for Bible study materials that promote this.
- *He stresses strong commitment from group members for its success.
- *He too indicates that time constraints are a significant challenge.
- *He stresses the need for pastoral oversight and support.

Ruth

- *Ruth shows that long-time members who are willing to try small groups find that they like them.
- *She shares how small groups give opportunity to deepen faith through study and conversation.
- *She is another person who says that scheduling and time constraints continue to be a huge challenge for everyone.
- *I believe her thinking about Zion not needing more groups is indicative of many long-standing members who have a hard time envisioning growth in this area.

Peter

*That long-time members can have life-changing experiences through small groups is illustrated by Peter.

*He sees the need for more groups so more people can experience what he has.

*Leaders must be properly trained and focused of Biblical truth according to his perspective.

*He also believes that time constraints are a challenge to overcome.

Naomi

*Naomi further indicates that time constraints need to be dealt with.

*Publicity and promotion need to be done better in her opinion.

*Faithful attendance is also very important.

Matthew

*He shows the importance of small groups in assimilation. Matthew has gotten to know several members through small group involvement.

*He receives a lot of support from his group to face his daily struggles.

*It has helped him learn to pray in a conversational way with the Lord and to pray more often.

Martha

*She indicates that small groups are a place that people can receive support even if they may otherwise have trouble opening up.

*They can be places that help people grow in the Word according to her testimony.

*Some of the challenges people face are babysitting and transportation, according to Martha.

Samuel

*Samuel says that small groups can be a draw for people to become members of Zion.

*Small groups have had a positive impact on his prayer life and the ability to witness.

*He believes that it's not easy for many people to see how a system of small groups might work.

Sarah

*According to Sarah, small groups are excellent for assimilation and connecting with other members, especially if a new member.

*Her experience is that small group fellowship can give confidence to use talents to serve in different ways.

*She also believes that it is difficult to envision participation growing to where new groups are needed.

Luke

*Luke shows that lifelong members can grow in new ways through small groups.

*He likes to see small groups focus on specific areas, like parenting.

*Again scheduling is a challenge, according to Luke.

*In his opinion, more publicity and promotion need to take place at Zion.

The following common themes surfaced in the course of these interviewees:

- 1) Time constraints are a major challenge to overcome.
- 2) Pastoral involvement is very important.
- 3) Funding of leader training is a worthwhile investment.
- 4) Groups are a great source of support and encouragement.
- 5) Promotion of the benefits of small groups and regular publicity need to be increased.
- 6) Many members see difficulty envisioning how participation could increase to where we need more groups.

Zion Presentation Survey Results

On March 27, 2005 I gave a presentation to the members of Zion's Sunday morning Bible class. The visuals and script of the presentation are given in Appendix 9. Afterwards, an evaluation survey (Appendix 10) was administered. The results are presented in detail in Appendix 11. What follows is a summary of those findings.

There were thirty-one members who viewed the presentation and all filled out an evaluation to determine its effectiveness in raising awareness and affecting attitudes toward small group expansion at Zion. It was also designed to garner results that can provide direction to Zion in the area of small group development. There were six questions. The first three were scaled questions set in a comparative "before and after" format to determine the effectiveness of the presentation. The next two were open-ended short answer questions. The final question was multiple-choice. These last three questions were designed to guide Zion in the area of small group expansion.

Measuring Awareness Of and Attitude Toward Small Groups

As to the first question regarding the awareness of what small groups can do for congregations the responses indicate that the majority were “somewhat aware” prior to the presentation and over a quarter of respondents considered themselves “aware.” This is not surprising for the adult Bible class is made up of many active members of Zion, several of whom are in small groups. The presentation proved effective in increasing awareness as 18 respondents moved up one level and another 3 moved up two levels in awareness. Only one person who could have potentially increased in awareness indicated they failed to do so.

The second question measured the level of awareness of Lutheran theological concerns for the use of small groups. Only 4 respondents indicated that prior to the presentation they had a good awareness of theological concerns. Almost half were not aware of concerns at all. Most of the rest were only somewhat aware. The presentation succeeded in increasing awareness of Lutheran concerns with regard to small groups. It made three quarters of the respondents more aware. The majority moved up one level, while another quarter moved two levels. Only 2 people who could have increased in awareness did not do so.

The final scaled question was designed to measure the attitude toward small group expansion at Zion. It was particularly important in light of the previous survey and interviews of Zion members where a number of respondents who were favorable toward small groups, none-the-less indicated they felt no need to expand above the current number of groups. This was also born out by the fact that before the presentation only a third of this group of people highly committed to spiritual growth indicated a strong desire to expand small group Bible studies. The presentation was successful in changing

the attitude of most of the rest of the respondents. Over half of the members indicated the presentation increased their desire to expand groups at Zion. Therefore, after the presentation, 25 of 30 indicated they desire to “definitely expand” small group ministry at Zion. Following the presentation there were only 4 people still in the category “possibly expand” and no one was definitely against small group expansion.

These results indicate that the presentation was successful in raising awareness of what small groups can do for a congregation and also in increasing the desire to expand small groups at Zion. It also raised theological concerns that members need to be aware of when using contemporary small group programs and materials.

Guiding Zion in Small Group Expansion

The next two questions afforded members the opportunities to give input on improving the presentation for future use.

Two-thirds of the respondents indicated what was most helpful about the presentation. The answers, however, varied widely. The only grouping of very similar responses was in regard to people liking the visual character of the presentation. Four respondents registered this preference. Of the other 17 responses there were several that found learning about the theological concerns helpful. Many of the others simply appreciated learning more about what small groups can do for a congregation. For the actual responses see Question 4 in Appendix 11.

Even though it was an anonymous survey, members were not so forthcoming in offering suggestions for improvement in the presentation. There only 5 responses. Two asked for more time for the presentation. Others indicated a desire to have more people

view it and to have people personally testify how groups have helped them. One person wanted me to accentuate my conclusions.

The final question was meant to be a springboard to the next step. It surveyed whether members felt that a task force should be appointed to prepare recommendations for increasing small group activity at Zion. The responses were overwhelmingly in favor of this. Ninety percent of the subjects said yes, 10% were undecided and no one was opposed to the idea.

Concluding Thoughts on the Survey Evaluation Results

The fact that this was an anonymous evaluation indicates there should be no reason to doubt the veracity of these results. It should be considered, however, that this represents a group of people who are very dedicated to spiritual growth. Therefore, it should not be expected that the entire population of Zion will be this favorable to small group expansion. This data is helpful in evaluating the effectiveness of the Power Point presentation in its goals of increasing awareness of small group benefits and potential theological concerns. It is also helpful in guiding the responsible boards at Zion in considering a task force to study and make recommendations on small group expansion.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The laity of Zion Lutheran Church in Pevely participate very actively in the life of the congregation in many ways. I believe that using the structure of small group ministry investigated in this project could greatly enhance the priestly service of the people. Before I offer my concluding commentary on the impact this project has had on me and what it can mean for other pastors and congregations I would like to put a face on this concept by offering a brief description of what gospel care through small groups might look like at Zion, Pevely for a member we will call Paula.

The Case of Paula¹

Zion members, Pete and Paula, are attending the Sunday divine service. They enjoy hearing the Word of God and receiving Holy Communion with their brothers and sisters in Christ. As they receive these gifts of Christ, they are built up in the faith. After the service they visit with their friends, engaging in light conversation before they attend Bible class.

After class, another member named Fred catches them before they leave. He asks them to consider attending the small group Bible study at his house on Wednesday. He had asked them a couple of weeks ago and they said they would think about it. Pete said he was too busy, but Paula indicated she would try to come.

That turned out to be a rough week for Paula. She had problems with a co-worker who had been critical and unkind toward her. Her brother was diagnosed with a heart condition. And Pete had worked late every night trying to finish a project at work.

When Wednesday night came she was not feeling like going to a Bible study and hanging out with a bunch of church members. She was tired. She wanted to relax and maybe watch a movie to take her mind off of all her stress. But she had told Fred she would try to come. There wasn't any schedule conflict to keep her away. So she decided to go.

Arriving at Fred and Janet's house, Paula wondered what this group would be like. She had served on some church committees and attended various fellowship activities, but nothing with a small group like this. She figured there would be Bible study, but beyond that didn't know what else to expect.

Fred and Janet introduced her to the others there, some of whom she knew as acquaintances at church. She counted eight people in all. After some milling around and

¹ These are fictional characters to help illustrate the point.

some social conversation, another person, Francis, called everybody together. What happened next was a unique experience for Paula.

Francis led a devotion and Bible study on their pastor's sermon text from the prior Sunday. The members began to freely share how this impacted their lives. There were personal comments by people. One confessed how he was struggling with sins of anger toward his boss. Others offered encouragement from God's Word. One person promised to call and check on the struggling member in a couple of days. After the Bible study, each person offered prayer requests. Paula was humbled by hearing about the struggles that her church members were facing. These same people that she always saw as so prim and proper on Sunday morning now appear very much like she sees herself—struggling, often uncertain, and simply needing to be loved and supported. When her time to share came she felt like she too could ask for prayer for herself in dealing with her feelings of weakness and despair.

Francis asked each person to pray for the one on their right as they went around the room. While Paula was uncomfortable at first with the idea of saying a prayer out loud, she felt very good about what took place when it was over.

Afterwards they enjoyed some refreshments. But the social conversation somehow felt more meaningful to Paula. She was more at peace than when she came. Before leaving, Fred asked her if she would be coming back. She said she would. He asked if he could hold her to that. She said ok.

Next week when Paula and Pete returned to Divine Service it had new meaning for Paula. She heard the same Word of God and received the same gift of Holy Communion, but it seemed to penetrate more into her everyday life. She also had a much closer bond with her brothers and sisters in Christ. They are just like her.

The case of Paula is an example of gospel care being given in a small group of lay people. Nothing in the illustration goes against Lutheran theology and practice. And yet, most churches do not seek to facilitate this kind of activity. Few churches, including my own, have a polity that promotes lay-led gospel care small groups. Below, I will share how this project has made an impact on me and Zion to help bring this about in our congregation. I will also share what impact this could have on other congregations. Finally, I will offer some reflections on further work that can be done by pastors, seminary professors, District and Synodical officers, and publishing houses.

The Impact on Me as a Person and a Pastor

This is the largest academic project I have ever undertaken. I have read thousands of pages and spent hundreds of hours in reading, writing and research. It has taught me how to identify a significant need in the area of pastoral ministry. In this case, I believe it is not only a need for my ministry and my congregation but for the church at large. I have gone through a process designed to address that need which required a high level of scholarship and the use of sound field research techniques. It was to be sure an exercise that has taught me a great deal about how to do reliable research. On top of that, I believe it has made a significant contribution to my abilities to serve as a pastor. And more importantly, it has prepared my congregation to potentially benefit from a new and transforming approach to gospel care through a congregation-wide system of the lay-led gospel care small groups.

Impact on Zion Lutheran Church of Pevely

The future path now laid out based on this project is for Zion to work toward adopting a formal system of lay-led small groups. The results of the research and availability of presentation that has been proven to be successful in promoting the benefits of small groups now guides the leaders of Zion into the decision making process. The recommendation to appoint a task force to prepare recommendations for expanding lay-led small groups will go to the Board of Elders with the hope that they will make the recommendation to the Church Council. Then the Congregational President will appoint the task force. My vision is that the task force will use the results of this study and the presentation to prepare the congregation to take concrete action. Here is how I envision that process moving forward in stages:

Stage 1 – Task force of lay people appointed,

Stage 2 – Task force utilizes the findings of this study and builds on it in researching the potential for small groups at Zion,

Stage 3 – The task force formulates a plan to propose to expand small group gospel care at Zion,

Stage 4 – These findings are presented to the congregation in an open forum in order to receive feedback from the general membership,

Stage 5 – The task force further modifies the plan based on the feedback they receive,

Stage 6 – The proposal is then brought to the Voters Assembly for action,

Stage 7 – If approved, an implementation team is appointed by the congregation to begin the small group program,

Stage 8 – After the program has successfully been implemented a committee is established to maintain the program and requisite constitutional changes are made based on the new structure.

Another impact on Zion will occur when the members of Zion see the results of their participation in this process, when they see measurable results in terms of ministry expansion. When they put to use the findings of this study in bringing about a congregation-wide system of small groups for gospel care, they will see the benefit of such thoughtful and diligent ministry research and planning. They will see that carrying forth the mission of the church, which happens only by the work of the Holy Spirit, occurs in places where the Spirit guides members into diligent action.

Impact On Other Congregations

As with Zion, Pevely, there is a tremendous potential for benefit to the ministry of other Lutheran congregations. As this study has shown, the practice of using lay-led small groups has long been looked upon with theological skepticism in Lutheran circles. This bias dates back at least to the days of Pietism. From a purely theological point of

view this project will have served a practical end if the theological case has been successfully made for the propriety of lay-led gospel care small groups in a Lutheran context. If it convinces another faithful Lutheran pastor and congregation of the soundness and capability of such a polity, then it will have had an impact. The more such pastors and congregations that begin to take this approach, in a sound Lutheran manner, the more we can begin to make use of this beneficial approach to gospel care.

As the practitioners I interviewed testified, this is not simply a new program for churches to adopt. It is a different way of thinking about how the gospel can be shared in a Lutheran congregation, using the resources of the royal priesthood along with the services of the called and ordained pastor. Yet it is not so different. Because the approach I recommend and the only one I endorse, is that done in a manner complementary to the office of the public ministry, and in a context in which the minister and the church-at-large are supporting sound theological instruction and practice. That leads me to my conclusions for the agencies of the church.

Reflections on Further Work that Can Be Done

This project has shown that small group gospel care proffered by laity for one another has not had a significant place in the confessional Lutheranism. It has been viewed with suspicion since the days of Philip Jakob Spener, when he first encouraged such activity. Indeed, we learned from Pietism that small groups can make a positive impact on spiritual life, but they can also lead to theological error and discord. Yet the abuse does not nullify the proper use.

It has been shown that lay-led gospel care groups can serve the work of Christ. One would not know this, however, by looking at a Lutheran seminary course listing or a

Lutheran publishing house catalog. Neither would one know it by looking at the activities of the synodical boards and committees. It simply has not been a significant aspect of Lutheran church life.

On the other hand, Lutheran congregations that have adopted the small group approach find that they must learn from those outside the Lutheran community. They also must develop their own small group process materials, or rely on those from non-Lutheran sources. They can then adapt them for use in a Law/Gospel context.

There is much that can be done to support small groups from a Lutheran perspective. If one follows the guidelines I laid down in Chapter Two, materials could be developed that meet the process needs of the small group approach and the theological needs of our confessional Lutheranism. Lutheran small group practitioners attempt to do this on a regular basis. However, if the materials are going to adequately support a Lutheran perspective, then pastors and other trained theologians are going to need to take part in the discussion and development.

For this, I do not believe we can simply look to our Lutheran publishing houses. As one of the small group practitioners interviewed pointed out, they require a market to promote their resources. A large enough market does not yet exist. I believe the place to begin having an impact on the broader church body is at the seminary level. I offer as an example the seminary with which I am most familiar. Concordia Seminary in St. Louis has offered a Doctor of Ministry course in small group ministry. Some of this seminary's fieldworkers are involved in congregations that have small groups. Yet I am not aware of any formal instruction or guidance offered as part of the regular master of divinity curriculum.

To bring small groups into the main stream of Lutheran theology will be no easy task. Good confessional scholarship needs to take up the discussion for the tide to begin to change. My hope is that in some way the arguments put forth in this paper can begin to take hold in our Lutheran community. If they do, then the example of Paula I offered to begin this chapter would become more the rule than the exception.

APPENDIX 1 - Small Group Ministry Class Notes
From DM-950 The Church in Mission Through Small Groups and Lifestyle Evangelism

I. Basic Components: establishing an effective small groups ministry within a congregation requires knowing the basic components of a successful program. They are:

1. Nurture/Spiritual Growth Component. This is often some form of Bible study or application.
2. Worship. This involves prayer and possibly singing praises to the Lord.
3. Community/Fellowship. This seeks to enhance relationships. It may also involve intercessory prayer.
4. Mission/Service. This is where the group members use their talents to serve. It helps keep the group from turning in on itself.

II. Important Ratios. There are tried and true findings indicating what kind of ratios make for a successful program within a congregation:

- A. There should be 7 groups for every 100 people.
- B. One group should be added for every 5 existing groups.
- C. At least 20% of the congregation should be in a group in order to reach “critical mass” as a congregation. Once this target is reached, small group will be received as a vital part of the ongoing ministry of the congregation.

III. Rogerian Model for the development of intimacy within a group (reported by the Vineyard Ministries International, “kinship” groups)

1st Step: Milling ar when people don’t know what to talk about.

2nd Step: Resistance to personal expression.

3rd Step: Sharing in “past tense terms.” Giving your history.

4th Step: Expression of negative feeling. The response to the negative person by the group will often determine if they keep coming. If accepted, they can go to a deeper level of sharing.

5th Step: Expression of personally meaningful information.

6th Step: Expression of immediate interpersonal feelings.

7th Step: Develop a healing capacity in the group. It becomes “shock-proof.”

8th Step: Self-acceptance.

IV. Pitfalls to Avoid: If these persist they can kill small group ministry:

- A. Poor leadership.
- B. Aimlessness.
- C. Forced participation.
- D. Superficiality. Pat answers. Right versus wrong answers. Leader isn’t transparent.
- E. Individualism. “It’s about me.” Easily inconvenienced by others.
- F. Competition. Don’t make room for new people.
- G. Total Spontaneity. No fixed start or end time.

V. Basic Needs of People in Small Groups:

1. A sense of belonging.
 - a. No objection to their presence.
 - b. Sincerely welcomed.
 - c. Needed for themselves.
2. They have a share in developing group goals.
3. To feel that the goals are attainable and make sense.
4. To feel that what is being done has purpose and meaning itself. People are looking for a “place of significance.”
5. To share in developing the norms/rules/expectations of the group.
6. To know in some clear fashion what is expected of the small group members.
7. To have responsibilities that are challenging. Something bigger than the individual.
8. To see that progress is being made toward reaching the group’s goals.
9. To be kept informed.
10. To have confidence in the small group and the leadership.

VI. Recruiting Leaders for Small Group Ministry. Consider the following:

- A. Who is faithful?
- B. Who understands and supports your/the church’s vision?
- C. Who is eager to learn?
- D. Who is God pointing out?
- E. What person/couple seems to be the natural leaders of a small group/team?

- F. Does this person/couple have the ability to train others?
- G. What specific skills do they have?
- H. What criteria are you going to use to determine your release?
- I. Who would be a good candidate for being trained to minister alongside you?
- J. Who will this person/couple choose to develop?

VII. Steps for beginning a small group ministry in the local church:

1. Decided the purpose of your small groups.
2. Realistically assess your resources.
3. Evaluate the additional time and energy demand of small group ministry.
4. Leaders must also be members of a small group.
5. Teach the entire congregation about the theory and practice of small group ministry. Tell stories that inspire passion about the value of small groups.
6. Start smart.

VIII. Factors which limit church growth through small groups:

- A. Insufficient number of groups (see ratios above).
- B. “Koinonitis” (*Koinonia* gone sour). A lack of sensitivity to outsiders.
- C. “Overweight.” Small groups get too large.
- D. “Sociological tissue rejection.” Tried to squeeze someone into a group that is not a good fit.
- E. “Pioneer land rights.” Resistance to newcomers.
- F. “Old age.” Fail to recognize the lifecycle of the group.

IX. Introducing Conversational Prayer in Small Groups:

1. Limited time for prayer requests.
2. Use conversational tones in audible prayer.
3. Cultivate a consciousness of God's presence.
4. Be brief.
5. Focus on one topic, one person at a time.
6. Agree in prayer.
7. Be spontaneous. May use rote prayers, but don't be totally dependent on them.
8. Allow for silence.
9. Pray with and for each other.
10. Try to pray for each member of the group.
11. Expect God to guide.
12. Be creative. For example, use 3X5 cards for requests and take home during the week.

X. Breaking the "200 Barrier" in worship:

1. Adequate group life. 7 groups per 100 people (12 years and older)
2. A specific, adequate inclusion plan.
3. Effective, adequate professional staffing. One staff person per 150 members and regular attenders. "You get what you get ready for."
4. A specific, effective leadership recruitment and training plan.

APPENDIX 2 – SMALL GROUP MINISTRY SEMINARS AND CONFERENCES

The resources listed below were all recommended by the small group practitioners which I interviewed as part of this project. They are all available online.

1. Serendipity House Seminars

They provide seminars, books and other resources to help train small group leaders. Here is an example of one of their adds on their website, <http://www.serendipityhouse.com>:

How to be A Great Small Group Leader
Producing Potent, Purposeful Groups

We heard you!

Many of you requested we reconsider our seminar system. You told us your busy schedules wouldn't allow you to give up eight hours. You told us a registration fee of \$99.00 was just too much. In fact, you told us you wanted a free seminar. You church leaders even requested we make our seminar financially feasible enough that you could bring your entire team. You told us you wanted enough training so you could leave the experience capable of leading your own group. What did Serendipity House do? We did precisely what you requested and rebuilt our seminar experience to meet your needs.

2. Stephen Ministries, Inc.

They provide the ChristCare Small Group Systems. ChristCare provides intensive training of Small Group Equippers who are trained to train and support small group leaders in congregations. Here is an example of a promotion from their website, http://www.stephenministries.org/ChristCare_Series:

Stephen Ministries' Small Group Ministry System: The ChristCare® Series



The ChristCare Small Group Ministry System provides the structure, training, and resources that congregations need to organize a lasting, effective small group ministry (called ChristCare Small Group Ministry) in the congregation.

ChristCare Small Groups are gatherings of three to twelve people that meet once a week or twice a month for 60 to 90 minutes and focus on four activities:

1. Community building and care
2. Biblical Equipping™
3. Prayer and worship and
4. Missional service

ChristCare Small Group Ministry provides congregations with a highly effective tool to carry out Jesus' Great Commandment to love one another and Great Commission to make disciples.

3. Lifetogether

This is one of the most popular small group resources today. It has been pioneered by its founder Brett Eastman, who has established the “campaign approach” as one of the best ways to introduce small groups in congregations. Here is an advertisement for their training course which, like most of their resources, is distributed on DVD. Their website is <http://www.lifetogether.com>.

The Doing Lifetogether series has become one of the best-selling small group curriculums of all time, with over one million copies sold. This Silver Medallion winning Purpose Driven® Group Series provides your group(s) an overview of the five biblical purposes found in the Great Commandment and Great Commission. This series could be studied one six-week session at a time or you could study one of the five purpose series, or have your group study the entire One Year of Purpose series over time. Either way, this Connecting with God’s Family six-week series is a great choice to deepen one of the five purposes and take your group to a whole other level of relational intimacy.

4. Willow Creek Association

Willow Creek Church based in Barrington, Illinois has one of the largest small group programs in one of the largest churches in the country. They offer seminars to train small group practitioners in other congregations. Here is an advertisement from their website, <http://www.willowcreek.com>:

Across the continent and around the world, churches are realizing anew the vital importance of small groups—in building authentic Christian community that is a key component in producing genuine spiritual growth and life change.

Whether you’re leading just one group or providing direction for an entire ministry, the Small Groups Conference 2005 is a great way to recharge your spiritual batteries, gain practical skills, new insights, and a rededication to the critical truth: Life transformation happens best in small groups!

APPENDIX 3 – Survey of Zion Members

SURVEY OF ZION MEMBERS ON THE POTENTIAL NEED FOR A CONGREGATION-WIDE SYSTEM OF SMALL GROUPS

A word about this survey: It is part of a class that Pastor Thompson is taking at Concordia Seminary. The results will only be used to assess the potential for this type of ministry program. It does not establish any policy. Simply offer your honest opinion. **Your assistance in this work is greatly appreciated!**

Circle your best answer.

1. Have you ever been involved in a small group (3 to 20 people) that meets regularly (weekly or monthly) for bible study, prayer, fellowship, and personal support (for example, at Zion this includes small group Bible studies, XYZ, YAH, Mary/Martha, Women's Guild, MOPS, etc.)?

Yes No

2. Have you ever been the regular leader of such a group?

Yes No

3. How long have you been a member of Zion:

Under 2 years 2-4 years 4-15 years Over 15 years

4. Since Christians are enabled to love and support one another through the power of the gospel, small groups can provide a place to give personal support to fellow church members while sharing in the Word of God and prayer. Although Zion currently has several small groups, do you think there is a need to make more groups available?

a) For existing members Yes No

b) For new members Yes No

5. If you answered "Yes" on 4 a) or b), what kinds of groups do you think would be helpful for Zion to start? (Circle as many as you like)

BIBLE STUDIES, for...

Singles Couples Seniors Young Adults Men Women Anyone

FELLOWSHIP & SUPPORT for...

Singles Couples Seniors Young Adults Men Women

OTHER SUGGESTIONS: _____

6. Small groups are usually hosted by lay people with “behind the scenes” support from a church professional or pastor. There are training programs and easy to use materials for lay leaders. Do you feel that financing such training and material would be an important investment for Zion?

Yes - No - It's depends on costs

If you answered “Yes” on question #1 at the beginning of the Survey, please continue with questions 7, 8 and 9. If “No” then you may turn in your survey. Thank you!.

7. Circle which of the following has your congregational small group (at Zion or another congregation) helped you with:

+evangelism and witnessing your faith

+spiritual growth through Bible study and discussion

+assimilation into feeling like a part of the congregation

+personal encouragement in time of need or otherwise

+enhanced prayer life

+support for being a better servant to your family, church, and/or community

+helped you identify your gifts for serving others

+ Other: _____

8. In what ways, if any, has your participation in a small group been a struggle for you?

Finding a meeting time for your schedule

Finding a meeting place

Worries in sharing confidential information

Not having a prepared leader

Lack of commitment from group members

Not being able to find a leader

The meetings lasted too long

The group out-lived its usefulness

Lack of support from the pastor for the groupfrom the congregation

Other: _____

9. For the class, Pastor Thompson also needs to have short interviews conducted with people who have been or are currently part of a small group either at Zion or another congregation. Please fill out the attached sheet and hand it in separately from this survey.

When you have completed the survey, please turn it in. Thank you!

If you have been or are currently part of a small group either at Zion or another congregation, please fill out the information below.

Pastor Thompson needs to have short interviews conducted with a certain number of people who have been involved with small groups. Filling this out does not mean you commit to one of these interviews. Only a sampling of people will be contacted.

Name: _____

Best phone number to reach you: _____

Are you willing to participate in a short interview at your convenience: Yes No

Are you currently in a small group at Zion?

Are you currently in a Christian small group with another church or group?

Have you been a member of a small group at Zion in the past?

Have you been a member of a Christian small group at some other place in the past?

APPENDIX 4 – Zion Member Survey: Data and Analysis

The results and an analysis of the data is given below. The description of the presentation, the results and analysis of the survey are presented in italicized type and double-spaced prior to and within the text of the survey.

1. Have you ever been involved in a small group (3 to 20 people) that meets regularly (weekly or monthly) for bible study, prayer, fellowship, and personal support (for example, at Zion this includes small group Bible studies, XYZ, YAH, Mary/Martha, Women's Guild, MOPS, etc.)?

Yes No

Results: 131 Responses Overall: Yes – 82, 63%; No – 49, 37%

Saturday: Yes – 16, No – 13

Sunday: Yes – 66, No – 36

Length of Zion membership in years of those who said ...

“yes” to small group involvement: under 2-54%, under 15-60%, over 15-65%

“no” to small group involvement: under 2-46%, under 15-40%, over 15-35%

There were 131 usable surveys turned in. There were three surveys that didn't answer this first question. This made them usable since group involvement was the basis for the rest of the questions. Even though some of the 131 did not fill out other portions of the survey, they were still usable for the questions they answered.

The rate of involvement in groups by Zion's members is about 20% higher than the national average reported by Wuthnow in his 1993 study. However, since Wuthnow's results indicated that a large percentage of small groups were of the Bible Class or Bible study type, it is likely that the percentage of active churchgoers (which was the target of

this survey at Zion)that participate in small groups would be considerably higher than the 40% rate for the general population.

2. Have you ever been the regular leader of such a group?

Yes No

Results: 82 responses (100% of those who said “yes” on the first question)

Overall: Yes-20, 24%; No-76%, 76%

Saturday – Yes-2, No-14

Sunday – Yes-18, No-48

This is a higher percentage of people with leadership experience than I expected.

3. How long have you been a member of Zion:

	Under 2 years	2-4 years	4-15 years	Over 15 years
<i>Results:</i>				
<i>112 Responses—All:</i>	<i>24,21%</i>	<i>12,11%</i>	<i>21,19%</i>	<i>55,49%</i>
<i>#1 “No” responses:</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>#2 “Yes” responses:</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>36</i>

It is interesting that those members who have attended for over 15 years have been in small groups at such a high rate. Zion is a traditional Lutheran congregation. One would not necessarily expect to find such a high degree of involvement of long-time members.

4. Since Christians are enabled to love and support one another through the power of the gospel, small groups can provide a place to give personal support to fellow church members while sharing in the Word of God and prayer. Although Zion currently has several small groups, do you think there is a need to make more groups available?

a) For existing members Yes No

Results: 111 Surveys All: Yes-61,55%; No-50,45%

#1 Yes Response: Yes-64%, No-36%

#1 No Response: Yes-38%, No-62%

b) For new members Yes No

Results: 105 Surveys All: Yes-72,69%; No-33,31%

#1 Yes Response: Yes-77%, No-23%

#1 No Response: Yes-51%, No-49%

The responses are favorable for beginning new groups, especially with new members in mind. Those with experience in groups are favorable for new groups for existing members at a 64% rate and for new members at 77% rate. Those without group experience are not overall favorable for new groups for existing members, but are essentially neutral toward more groups for new members.

5. If you answered "Yes" on 4 a) or b), what kinds of groups do you think would be helpful for Zion to start? (Circle as many as you like)

BIBLE STUDIES, for...

Singles Couples Seniors Young Adults Men Women Anyone

FELLOWSHIP & SUPPORT for...

Singles Couples Seniors Young Adults Men Women

OTHER SUGGESTIONS: _____

Because of the design flaw using the “Anyone” category¹, I applied the tallies marking “Anyone” to all of the categories. That assumes respondents meant Zion should have Bible studies for each particular group. However, they could have meant that they believe any member of Zion needs a Bible study but not in any particular type of group. In other words, that “Anyone” represents a particular type of group. I did not take that approach because in my viewing of the data in the context of each survey, many of the respondents appeared to be favorable toward designating particular groups. One additional reason for my decision to add the count from the “Anyone” category to all of the others is that when I did so the results for the “BIBLE STUDIES, for” heading mirrored almost exactly the results for the “FELLOWSHIP & SUPPORT for” heading. See below how rankings of the categories are virtually the same.

Results:

“BIBLE STUDIES” Rank

- | | |
|----------|--------------------------|
| <i>1</i> | <i>Couples (28)</i> |
| <i>2</i> | <i>Young Adults (18)</i> |
| | <i>Singles (18)</i> |
| <i>3</i> | <i>Seniors (11)</i> |
| <i>4</i> | <i>Men (8)</i> |
| <i>5</i> | <i>Women (7)</i> |

“FELLOWSHIP & SUPPORT”

Rank

- | | |
|----------|---------------------|
| <i>1</i> | <i>Couples (38)</i> |
|----------|---------------------|

¹ See the discussion of the survey in the Research Tools and Methodology Description (Chapter ?) as to why this is a design flaw which adversely effected the results.

- 2 *Young Adults (37)*
- 3 *Singles (32)*
- 4 *Seniors (30)*
- 5 *Women (20)*
- 6 *Men (18)*

Zion currently has two men's and two women's small group Bible studies. We have also started a new group for seniors that meets monthly. There is no currently functioning group specifically focused on Singles, Young Adults, or Couples. The survey results appear to indicate members see a need to address this deficiency with new groups for these areas.

6. Small groups are usually hosted by lay people with “behind the scenes” support from a church professional or pastor. There are training programs and easy to use materials for lay leaders. Do you feel that financing such training and material would be an important investment for Zion?

Yes - No - It's depends on costs

Results: 120 Surveys Overall: Yes-59(49%), Depends on costs-46(38%), No-15(13%)

#1 Yes Response: Yes-42 Depends on costs-31 No-5

#1 No Response: Yes-17 Depends on costs-15 No-10

The 120 surveys which answered this question indicate a high level of interest in financial considerations. It is noteworthy that only 13% of respondents registered a negative response with the highest percentage coming in the affirmative (49%). Adding in the “Depends on the cost” category, there are 87% of respondents that indicating a willingness to invest in this program if the cost is right.

It was a surprise to me to see that even among those without experience in small groups there were still many more willing to consider financially investing in small groups than not willing.

If you answered “Yes” on question #1 at the beginning of the Survey, please continue with questions 7, 8 and 9. If “No” then you may turn in your survey. Thank you!.

7. Circle which of the following has your congregational small group (at Zion or another congregation) helped you with:

The results of this question are given in tally form next to each category. Only two categories stand out. They are highlighted below. This indicates that respondents valued “spiritual growth” and “support” as offering the greatest help from small groups. The other categories received many votes, but interestingly they all came in with very similar totals.

Total Responses

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| 32 | +evangelism and witnessing your faith |
| 52 | +spiritual growth through Bible study and discussion |
| 33 | +assimilation into feeling like a part of the congregation |
| 30 | +personal encouragement in time of need or otherwise |
| 33 | +enhanced prayer life |
| 43 | +support for being a better servant to your family, church, and/or community |
| 29 | +helped you identify your gifts for serving others |
| | + Other: _____ |

Again a ranking of responses seems to be the best way to assess the results.

8. In what ways, if any, has your participation in a small group been a struggle for you?

33 Finding a meeting time for your schedule

16 Lack of commitment from group members

10 Worries in sharing confidential information

6 Not being able to find a leader

5 The meetings lasted too long

5 Lack of support from the congregation

3 or less Not having a prepared leader, The group out-lived its usefulness,
Finding a meeting place Lack of support from the pastor

Standing out above all responses is the challenge of finding a meeting time that fits the participants schedules. Based on 131 surveys turned in, right at 25% of all respondents indicated that this was a challenge.

A distant second is a lack of commitment from group members. With 16 votes it amount to 12% of respondents. With the third being concerns over confidentiality at 10 votes or 8%.

APPENDIX 5 – Zion Member Interview Questions

NAME: _____ INTERVIEWER: _____

1. How long have you been a **member** of Zion:

Under 2 years 2-4 years 4-15 years Over 15 years (# of Years _____)

2. Please indicate your present small group **involvement**:

Are you currently in a small group at Zion? Yes No

If so, which group:

Are you currently in a small group with another church or group? Yes No

If so, which group:

Have you been a member of a small group at Zion in the past? Yes No

If so, which group:

Have you been a member of a small group at another place in the past? Yes No

If so, which group:

3. Tell me about the **extent** of your involvement in small group(s). (For example, How long a member? How many groups over the years? Were you a leader? A helper? Etc.)4. Share the **impact** that small group involvement has made on you.

(TO THE INTERVIEWER: THE FOLLOWING ITEMS MAY SPURE ON SOME COMMENTS)

How it may have helped you growth spiritually

How it may have helped your prayer life

How it may have helped your witnessing to others

How it may have helped you better serve others (family members, neighbors, congregation members, etc.)

How it may have helped you give and/or receive personal support

Other: _____

5. In your opinion, what was most **challenging** about being in a small group?

(FOR INTERVIEWER: LEAVE THIS OPEN ENDED, BUT USE THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS AS EXAMPLES OF HOW THEY MIGHT ANSWER.)

- | | |
|---|------------------------------------|
| Finding a meeting time for your schedule | Finding a meeting place |
| Worries in sharing confidential information | Not having a prepared leader |
| Lack of commitment from group members | Not being able to find a leader |
| The length of meetings | The group out-lived its usefulness |
| Lack of support from the pastor for the group |from the congregation |

Other: _____

6. Although Zion currently has several small groups (men's and women's Bible studies, XYZ, XYZ Parents, YAH, Women's Guild, Mary/Martha, MOPS), do you think there is a need to try to make **more groups** available...

- a) For existing members? Yes No
- b) For new members? Yes No

7. *If they answered "Yes" on 6 a) or b) --* What **kinds of groups** do you think would be helpful for Zion to start? (Circle as many as you like)
 (FOR INTERVIEWER: AGAIN, JUST GIVE THE FOLLOWING AS SOME EXAMPLES TO SIMPLY SPURE THEIR SHARING.)

BIBLE STUDIES, for...

Singles Couples Seniors Young Adults Men Women Anyone

FELLOWSHIP & SUPPORT for...

Singles Couples Seniors Young Adults Men Women

OTHER KINDS OF GROUPS...

8. Have you ever been the regular **leader** of such a group?

Yes No

9. Small groups are usually led by lay people with “behind the scenes” support from pastors. There are training programs for lay leaders. Do you feel that **financing** such training would be an important investment for the congregation?

Yes - No - It's depends on costs

10. How involved do you feel the **pastor** should be in overseeing the groups in the following areas:

*Doctrinal soundness for Bible study

Very // Somewhat // Not necessary

*Assisting the leaders with questions or concerns

Very // Somewhat // Not necessary

*Recruiting and training leaders

Very // Somewhat // Not necessary

*Obtaining resource material for leaders

Very // Somewhat // Not necessary

*Promoting small group activity to the congregation

Very // Somewhat // Not necessary

*Other:

11. As you think of the current ministry at Zion...

Do you have any suggestions for increasing participation in small groups? Yes No
If so, what are they?

Can you think of any particular challenges to increasing participation? Yes No
If so, what are they?

APPENDIX 6 - Congregation Member Interviews: Data and Analysis

In results below, the names of the respondents have been changed for the sake of confidentiality. The responses were gathered using the questionnaire provided in Appendix 5. The analysis of the each interview follows the interview summary (Tables A6-1 to A6-10). The analysis is in italicized, double-spaced text.

Tables A6-1. Member Interview with Sally.

Interview by Pastor Mart Thompson. March 14, 2005

Sally has been a **member** of Zion for 67 years. She moved away for a few years.

The **extent** of her involvement in small groups is as follows:

While she was living in another state she was active in a small group women's Bible study for 3 years.

When she moved back to Zion she helped to start a small group women's Bible study which she has been leading for about 3 months.

The **impact** that small group involvement has had on her includes:

*Spiritual growth through topical Bible studies that helped strengthen faith and made it more personally meaningful. It helped her think more deeply and made her more aware of the message. This was a big growth area for her! It helped her beyond what personal devotions did in the past.

*Prayer life was enhanced through personal prayer requests being shared. She learned to pray in a more sincere and detailed way so that she feels like she is truly conversing with God. Through hearing others requests, she has become more aware of others' needs.

*In the area of witnessing to others she still feels inadequate. However, she does witness by praying for people's spiritual life.

*She believes that small group Bible studies really help with personal encouragement and support. In the group they can talk about personal things. Sharing helps you see you are not alone and it helps you support one another in a safe environment. You also hear good solutions to problems and how people share what works for them.

The most **challenging** thing about being in a small group she believes is time constraints. However, now that she is retired this is not a problem for her.

She believes Zion has a need for **more groups** at this time. However, she believes that many people don't see the need. But if they would just try it they would like it. She especially feels it would be helpful for new members.

Kinds of groups: She believes Zion needs groups for everybody, but there is a real present need for something for young adults who tend to drift away after confirmation.

She is a group leader. She also believes that **financing leader training** would be an important investment.

She believes the **pastor's involvement** is very important for: assisting leaders with questions or concerns, recruiting and training leaders, obtaining resources for leaders, promoting small group activity to the congregation. She didn't feel it necessary for the pastor to oversee doctrinal soundness for Bible study (Knowing her, this doesn't mean she isn't concerned to have this, but she sees these groups as focusing more on support than teaching doctrine.)

One thing Zion should consider in starting more small groups would be to survey people's interest in topics.

Summary:

Sally is a strong supporter of gospel care small groups which have had great impact on her life. She first got involve at another church and now brings her experience with groups to Zion. She is now a group leader. She likes topical Bible study, confidential sharing and support which helps her with advice and showing her that she is not alone. The biggest challenges to promoting small groups are time constraints and people not seeing how groups can help them. She thinks everybody would benefit from small groups, but especially young people who tend to fall away after confirmation. She believes that leadership training is a worthwhile investment. She believes the pastor's involvement is very important in many ways. She suggests surveying people's interest in topics to help begin new groups.

Conclusions:

**In Sally we see how people can grow spiritually through small groups--confidential personal support, topical Bible study, and prayer for others are keys for this growth.*

**She is also an example of how one can become a small group leader or facilitator simply from being a part of a successful group.*

** She believes that challenges for promoting more groups include: time constraints and peoples' lack of understanding of the value of groups.*

Table A6-2. Interview with Philip.

Interviewed by Mart Thompson. March 25, 2005

Zion membership – 4 years

Involvement and Extent of participation in a small group(s)

He has been a member of several small group Bible studies. Some have been at Zion. Others include an interdenominational couple's Bible study and a neighborhood Bible study. Combining all the groups, he has been involved about 13 years, with about 5 years as leader.

Impact of the Group on Person

Spiritual growth – How it may have helped you growth spiritually

Some have been very impactful, uplifting, and encouraging. They have not been as strong teaching knowledge of the Bible as establishing a Christian foundation for daily living.

Prayer life – Causes to have a stronger prayer life not only in the group but outside of it.

Witnessing – It helped. For example, we felt like the Lord was using our involvement in the Bible study where some of the participants experienced life changing experiences. Relationships developed beyond the Bible study because of the Bible study.

Service – It helped as parents in parenting. Learned Christian principles for parenting. Helped others in the group.

Personal Support – Some participants were friends going in and those relationships strengthen and others were strangers and it developed a good bond with them.

Challenging about being in a group

The most effective ones were weekly and finding the time has been a challenge.

Finding good leadership materials and curriculum.

Lack of consistency in attendance.

Not as much sharing and body in recent Bible studies as experienced earlier in their life and marriage.

Are More Groups needed at Zion

Yes for both new and existing members.

Kinds of Groups needed at Zion - Experiential Bible studies that reflect small group process.

Financing Leader Training – It depends on the cost

Pastor Involvement (v-Very Important, s-somewhat important, n-not important)	
Doctrine – v	Obtaining resource materials – s
Assisting leaders – s	Promoting small group activity – v
Recruiting and training leaders – s	Others –

Suggestions to increase participation – no

Challenges to increasing participation – Getting commitment for regular attendance

Summary:

Philip, as with Sally, had small group experience elsewhere before joining a group at Zion. He also has served as a leader. Small groups have especially helped him in establishing deeper relationships with other Christians. In these relationships he experienced a lot of support. He sees several challenges for successful small groups, including time constraints and lack of commitment for regular attendance. Further he sees the need for more relationally oriented small group materials than the CPH materials we have used. The pastor plays an important part, especially in doctrinal oversight and promotion of groups.

Conclusions:

**From Philip we see the importance of small groups for developing close relationships.*

**He also shows the need for Bible study materials that promote this.*

**He stresses strong commitment from group members for its success.*

**He too indicates that time constraints are a significant challenge.*

**He stresses the need for pastoral oversight and support.*

Table A6-3. Interview with Ruth.

Interviewed by Betty Broombaugh. Week of March 21

Zion membership – For 60 years

Involvement and Extent of participation in a small group(s)

Presently at Zion - Women's Bible study on Wednesday night, Mary/Martha

Past at Zion - Cottage Bible study

Impact of the Group on Person

Spiritual growth – Built up faith, deeper understanding of Bible

Prayer life – Prayers for others help

Witnessing – More confidence to share faith in the group, but it also spills over to outside the group at work

Service – Learning about the Lord helps you encourage family to attend church and Bible study or read the Bible

Personal Support –Increases faith and given strength from the group. Can talk about problems and receive support from members. It builds you up.

Other –

Challenging about being in a group

Scheduling of meetings with other church activities.

Pray in Bible group as an individual is a challenge.

Length of time between Bible study meetings.

Are More Groups needed at Zion

No.

Kinds of Groups needed at Zion

Financing Leader Training - Yes

Pastor Involvement (v-Very Important, s-somewhat important, n-not important)

Doctrine – v Obtaining resource materials – v

Assisting leaders – v Promoting small group activity – v

Recruiting and training leaders – s Others –

Suggestions to increase participation – n

Challenges to increasing participation – Time scheduling, especially parents. Short meetings

Summary:

Ruth, a Zion member all her life, has taken advantage of small group opportunities when they have arisen—several years ago with Cottage Bible studies and currently with evening women’s groups. These groups have helped her deepen her faith and also give her a place to talk about what the Bible means to her. She sees scheduling as a challenge, along with getting people to open up for group prayer. She is one of the few small group participants who do not think Zion needs more groups. I don’t believe that she is against small group growth, however.

Conclusions:

- *Long-time members who are willing to try small groups find that they like them.*
- *Small groups give opportunity to deepen faith through study and conversation.*
- *Scheduling and time constraints continue to be a huge challenge for everyone.*
- *I believe her thinking about Zion not needing more groups is indicative of many long-standing members who have a hard time envisioning great growth in this area.*

Talbe A6-4. Interview with Peter.

Interviewed by Betty Broombaugh. Week of March 21

Zion membership – 33 years

Involvement and Extent of participation in a small group(s)

Present at Zion – Men’s Tuesday morning Men’s Bible study (over a year)

Young at Heart Group on occasion

Impact of the Group on Person

Spiritual growth – major impact on spiritual life. A change in his life. Comfortable, feels part of the church body.

Prayer life – A big involvement. Now able to pray out loud in a group.

Witnessing – Given confidence and the ability to speak about his beliefs

Service – Able to comfort others, especially able to explain his faith

Personal Support – Able to have confidentiality, less stress in his life, able to ask and give advice.

Other – Confident, less stress, not worrying so much. He has a peace now.

Challenging about being in a group

Praying aloud, was a challenge to overcome it. Through begin involved in Bible study able to talk about his spiritual life now. Holy Spirit is very important in His life.

Are More Groups needed at Zion

Yes. Bible study groups, not just a social club

Yes. Just teaching Lutheran doctrine and way of thinking.

Kinds of Groups needed at Zion

Especially for Men and Women.

Other kinds of groups – sharing expertise – cooking, carpentry, etc.

Women's retreat is needed.

He has been a group leader at the Men's Retreat

Financing Leader Training – Yes.

Pastor Involvement (v-Very Important, s-somewhat important, n-not important)

Doctrine – v

Obtaining resource materials – v

Assisting leaders – v

Promoting small group activity – v

Recruiting and training leaders – v

Others –

Suggestions to increase participation – Yes. Small groups could recruit new members or testify on what the small group has done for him.

Challenges to increasing participation – People's work schedules. Need to have different times of meetings. Make sure of trained leaders.

Evaluation:

Peter has been a member since marrying a Zion member years ago, but it has been through his involvement in small group Bible study for a little over a year that had the biggest spiritual impact on his life. Through learning what the Gospel means and having discussions about it his life has been changed, is at peace with more confidence. He is comfortable with himself and able to pray out loud in a group and to speak about his beliefs to others. He sees a need for more groups and participation and as the pastor as very important to the program. He also stresses proper training of leaders and scheduling issues as important challenges to address.

Conclusions:

**Long-time members can have life-changing experiences through small groups.*

**He sees the need for more groups so more people can experience what he has.*

**Leaders must be properly trained and focused of Biblical truth.*

**Time constraints are a challenge to overcome.*

Table A6-5. Interview with Naomi.

Interviewed by Betty Broombaugh. Week of March 21

Naomi has been a member of Zion for 2 years. She is a trained Lutheran School teacher and currently works in religious publishing.

The extent of her involvement includes:

At Zion- Mary/Martha Circle (monthly), Circle of 8 (fellowship)

She has been a leader, helper and participant in groups.

Impact

Spiritual growth – Depends on the group. Have to be in the Word. Use God's directions.

Prayers for the needs of members.

Prayer life – Praying for other people and knowing their needs.

Witnessing – Given opportunities to witness to members using the Word to help.

Service – More aware of others needs and can do more to help as a group.

Personal Support – Sharing, especially in Mary/Martha group, helps to share with others.

Challenging

Scheduling and preparation. A need for more publicity about the group. Well-planned leadership is needed.

More Groups

Need more groups for existing members who are no yet connected.

Need more groups for new members. There is some improvement in this area.

Kinds of Groups

Especially for singles and couples.

She notes that support and fellowship groups should be using Bible study and devotionals

Add – A shepherding group to make calls and visit with people who are sick or elderly.

This is beyond what the pastor and vicar do. Also, evangelism materials could be dropped off in subdivisions or with prospective members.

Financing Leader Training—Yes, More confidence develop & more will become leaders

Pastor Involvement

Doctrine – very

Obtaining resource materials – somewhat

Assisting leaders – somewhat

Promoting small group activity – not nec.

Recruiting and training leaders – very (at first)

Others –

Suggestions to increase participation – Better explanation of what the group or projects are doing or studying. What is the goal or mission of the group.

Challenges to increasing participation – 1) Time is an issue, 2) Getting information in a timely way through bulletin or newsletter, 3) Attendance of small group members

Summary:

Naomi is an active but relatively new member to Zion. She is a trained Lutheran school teacher and now works in church publishing. She has not had as extensive involvement in nurture-oriented small groups as others, only participated in groups that meet monthly, but do involve a devotional and prayerful component. Because of her background she is often sought after for boards and committees, which leaves less time for gospel care groups. Challenges to address: time constraints, getting information out through church publicity and program, and encouraging faithful attendance.

Conclusions:

**Time constraints need to be dealt with.*

**Publicity and promotion need to be done better.*

**Faithful attendance is very important.*

Table A6-6. Interview with Matthew.

Interviewed by Betty Broombaugh. Week of March 21

Zion membership – less than 2 years

Involvement and Extent of participation in a small group(s)

Thursday evening men's Bible study for about 3 months

Impact of the Group on Person

Spiritual growth – Being with brothers, sharing problems and encouragement, makes him feel he is in the right place in the Bible study at his age. He has grown tremendously

Prayer life – Taught him to pray more directly, each day and evening. Increased as his way of life, praying 5 to 6 times a day.

Witnessing – Able to witness to his friends, but would like to do more. Show friends how God has helped him in his life.

Service – Able to serve others better than before Bible study

Personal Support – Has given support and received support from his brothers

Other – Helped him to stay in the Word. Keep him focused with the Lenten Services.

Zion has been a wonderful blessing for him.

Challenging about being in a group His willingness to open up to his group. Has overcome and is able to talk to his brother now.

Are More Groups needed at Zion

Yes for both existing and new members.

Kinds of Groups needed at Zion Especially for Bible study for singles and fellowship groups for all different folks.

Financing Leader Training – Yes.

Pastor Involvement (v-Very Important, s-somewhat important, n-not important)

Doctrine – v

Obtaining resource materials – s

Assisting leaders – v

Promoting small group activity – v

Recruiting and training leaders – s

Others –

Suggestions to increase participation – Yes. He would support increasing small groups Ask people to join small groups. That groups are available and group members talk to other members about joining a Bible study group

Challenges to increasing participation –

Summary: Matthew is very new to Zion and joined a small group right away. There he receives a lot of support from his brothers in the faith. It's a place to share problems and receive encouragement. He has learned to pray more directly and more often. It has helped him to stay in the Word and stay better focused in the right direction.

Conclusions:

**Shows the importance of small groups in assimilation. Matthew has gotten to know several members well which most new people don't do.*

**He receives a lot of support for his daily struggles from his group.*

**It has helped him learn to pray in a conversational way with the Lord and to pray more often.*

Table A6-7. Interview with Martha.

Interviewed by Betty Broombaugh. Week of March 21

Zion membership – 44 years

Involvement and Extent of participation in a small group(s)

Present at Zion - Women's Bible study, Mary/Martha Circle (2 years, treasurer)

Past at Zion – Cottage Bible studies

Impact of the Group on Person

Spiritual growth – Learning in Women's Bible study and now doing Bible study at home which didn't do before

Prayer life – Including others in prayer, using a list to help pray for others more often

Witnessing – not at all, only if someone initiates the topic, then can talk

Service – Knowing people in the group helps get to know how might help

Personal Support – It reminds her God is here for her

Other –

Challenging about being in a group –

1) To open up. Doesn't talk too much.

2) Length of meetings. Mary/Martha are night meetings

Are More Groups needed at Zion

Yes for existing members

No for new members

Kinds of Groups needed at Zion

Singles and young adults just out of high school

Financing Leader Training -

Good investment

Pastor Involvement (v-Very Important, s-somewhat important, n-not important)

Doctrine – s

Obtaining resource materials – s

Spiritual growth – Gives a deeper understanding and personal relationship with Jesus.

Prayer life – Given a different idea of who to pray for – his family and others

Witnessing – A better understanding of Scripture makes it easier to talk to others, to show them the promises of Christ, too.

Service – Realize God has given him many gifts and allowed him to share with others.

Personal Support – Helped to understand that God provides many blessings and to look to God to help rather than himself.

Other –

Challenging about being in a group

Scheduling around his work. Does have times when he would like to question, but finds he is too shy.

Are More Groups needed at Zion

No for existing and new members.

Kinds of Groups needed at Zion

Financing Leader Training – Yes.

Pastor Involvement (v-Very Important, s-somewhat important, n-not important)

Doctrine – v

Obtaining resource materials – v

Assisting leaders – v

Promoting small group activity – s

Recruiting and training leaders – s

Others – Pastor's classes drew them to Zion and the small groups

Suggestions to increase participation – No.

Challenges to increasing participation – Lack of leaders.

Summary:

Samuel becoming a member was due in part to his involvement in a small group. He has found he has grown in understanding of God's Word which has helped him in many ways, including prayer life and witnessing. He sees as a challenge: lack of Bible study leaders. Interestingly, he indicates no need for new groups. But again, this is likely do to a lack of vision of what might be at Zion.

Conclusions:

**Small groups can be a draw for people to become members of Zion.*

**Small groups have a positive impact on prayer and the ability to witness.*

**It's not easy for many people to see how a system of small groups might work.*

Table A6-9. Interview with Sarah.

Interviewed by Betty Broombaugh. Week of March 21

Zion membership – 6 months (attended 8 months prior)

Involvement and Extent of participation in a small group(s)

Mary/Martha, Women's evening Bible study, Circle of 8

Open to leading the Mary/Martha Circle and have led evening Bible study

Impact of the Group on Person

Spiritual growth – Yes. Through closeness of the people in the small group and getting acquainted helps to grown spiritually closer with members of the small group.

Prayer life – Better in prayer life

Witnessing – Better than before

Service – Started the Living Last Supper Drama

Personal Support – Help with advice given to and received from others

Other –

Challenging about being in a group

Scheduling of group meetings with other church activities interfering.

Are More Groups needed at Zion

No for existing and new members

Kinds of Groups needed at Zion

After saying no to new groups, she thought of having one on Saturday after the evening service. Possibly a half an hour or so.

Also suggested having some type of sport group.

Financing Leader Training -

It depends on the cost.

Pastor Involvement (v-Very Important, s-somewhat important, n-not important)

Doctrine – v

Obtaining resource materials – s

Assisting leaders – s

Promoting small group activity – v

Recruiting and training leaders – s

Others –

Suggestions to increase participation – n

Challenges to increasing participation – Yes. Time scheduling.

Summary:

Sarah is another new member that has become better assimilated through involvement in a small group. Like many new people she was looking for ways to connect with people. Beside the spiritual growth she likes the fellowship and support she experiences in the group. It has also given her confidence to use her talents to serve in other ways at church. Like some others she thinks we have enough groups.

Conclusions:

**Small groups are excellent for assimilation and connecting with other members, especially if a new member.*

**Small group fellowship can give confidence to use talents to serve in different ways.*

**Difficult to envision participation growing to where new groups are needed.*

Table A6-10. Interview with Luke.

Interviewed by Betty Broombaugh. Week of March 21

Zion membership – 46 years

Involvement and Extent of participation in a small group(s)

XYZ Parents (4 years)

Impact of the Group on Person

Spiritual growth – Topics in XYZ parenting helped spiritually raise his daughters, especially considering they go to public school

Prayer life – learn to ask God when making decisions

Witnessing – XYZ parents groups has given him opportunity to share his faith and family life with fellow workers

Service – More aware of people's needs, more receptive and willing to help

Personal Support – Received support from members of XYZ Parent group who help each other deal with situations that occur in families

Other –

Challenging about being in a group Getting people involved, especially new members.
Time for meetings with family schedules. Hesitant about sharing confidential information, depending on the group.

Are More Groups needed at Zion
Yes for both existing and new members.

Kinds of Groups needed at Zion
Singles, especially for college age.

Financing Leader Training -
Yes.

Pastor Involvement (v-Very Important, s-somewhat important, n-not important)
Doctrine – v Obtaining resource materials – s
Assisting leaders – s Promoting small group activity – v
Recruiting and training leaders – s Others –

Suggestions to increase participation – Each group promote what they do to the congregation by sharing more information.

Challenges to increasing participation – People not being familiar with groups and their availability. Also scheduling conflicts.

Summary:

Luke has been a lifelong member of Zion and has recently discovered that through a small group parents can encourage one another. His involvement has made him a better parent and helped him better share his faith with others. He also sees scheduling as a major challenge and the need for better publicity and promotion of groups.

Conclusions:

**Lifelong members can grow in new ways through small groups.*

**Small groups can focus on specific areas, like parenting.*

**Again scheduling is a challenge.*

**More publicity and promotion need to take place at Zion.*

Common themes with interviewees:

Time constraint challenges.

Pastor involvement very important.

Funding of leader training.

Support and encouragement from groups.

Promotion of the benefits of small groups and regular publicity.

Difficulty envisioning how participation could increase to where we need more groups.

APPENDIX 7 – Small Group Practitioners Interview Questions

GENERAL INFORMATION

1. What is your church and where are you located? _____
2. What is the size of your community?
 Under 1,000 1,000-10,000 10,000-100,000 Over 100,000
3. What is the size of your WORSHIPPING community?
 Under 100 100-200 200-500 Over 500

SMALL GROUP DEMOGRAPHICS

4. How long has your congregation had an intentional small group ministry program?
 Under 1 year 1-5 years 5-10 years Over 10 years
5. What is the average size range of your small groups? _____
6. How many groups do you currently have active? _____
7. What is the average age of your groups? _____
8. What is the estimated percentage of the congregation involved in a group? _____
9. Describe the purpose of your groups and share any mission statements or slogans that help define them.
10. What is your congregation's annual cost for small group ministry? (budget or other sources) \$ _____

STAFFING AND OVERSIGHT

11. Is your program run by paid or volunteer staff, or both? _____
12. Do you require a trained church worker to oversee the program? Yes No
13. On average, how much time does your paid and volunteer staff devote to supporting and overseeing the program?

THE PASTORAL MINISTRY

14. Is the pastor involved in overseeing and supporting the program? Yes No
 If Yes...Does he.... Help choose curriculum? Yes No
 Work with group leaders? Yes No
 Help in any other way? Yes No
 How much time does he devote to the program on a monthly basis? _____
15. Is there an attempt to define the relationship between the work of small group leaders and the calling and work of the pastor of the congregation? Yes No
 If Yes, how is this done?
16. Is there an intentional effort to use small groups to support gospel care by making connections to the sacramental ministry of the congregation? Yes No
 If Yes, how is this done?
17. How important is pastoral leadership to the success of the small group program?
 ___Very important ___Somewhat important
 In what ways is it important?
 ___Not important

SMALL GROUP RESOURCES: SYSTEMS AND SUPPORT

18. Do you use a specific small group ministry system or program? Yes No
 If Yes, what is it?
 ___ChristCare (Stephen Ministries)
 ___Willow Creek Ministries
 ___Group Publishing
 ___Pilgrimage (NavPress)
 ___Your own developed program

___ Other: _____

19. Do you provide formal training for your small group leaders? Yes No
20. Are leaders met with regularly for support and oversight? Yes No
21. Are leaders provided with Bible study and other leadership resources? Yes No

SMALL GROUPS AND THE CONGREGATION

22. Are steps taken to connect small groups with the larger congregation? Yes No
If Yes, what are they?
23. In your opinion, how have small groups served the congregation's mission in the following areas:

+evangelism

+spiritual growth of members

+social assimilation of members

+personal care and encouragement with the gospel in time of need

+personal prayer life

+support for families of participants

+identifying ways a person can serve

+service to church

+service to community

+ Other: _____

STARTING A SMALL GROUP PROGRAM

24. What important lessons have you learned about starting and maintaining a small group ministry program?
25. What advice do you have for a congregation considering starting a small group ministry program?

26. In your opinion, is there more that can be done by the LC-MS, the districts, Concordia Publishing House, or the seminaries to support small group systems in our congregations? Yes No

If Yes, what might that be?

APPENDIX 8 – Small Group Practitioner Interviews: Data and Analysis

The research is summarized in Tables A8-A, B, C, D, E, F and G. Analysis follows each table using italicized, double-spaced text. The summary write-up of the interviews then follow in Tables A8-1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7. The names of the churches and interview subjects have been changed for the purpose of confidentiality.

Table A8-A Congregational Demographics

Church*	Church Abbreviation	Community Size	Average Weekly Worship
Garden of Eden Lutheran	GEL	Large/Metropolitan	700
New Jerusalem Lutheran	NJL	Large/Metropolitan	900
Fishers of Men Lutheran	FOM	Large/Metropolitan	900
Antioch Lutheran	ALC	Large/Metropolitan	2,400
Bethsaida Lutheran	BLC	Large/Metropolitan	700
Place of Hope Lutheran	PHL	Large/Metropolitan	750
Run the Good Race Lutheran	RGR	Town of 6,000 (Lutheran college town)	1,117

*Church name is changed for anonymity.

Table A8-B Small Group Demographics

Church Abbr.	Number Of Groups	% of Members in Groups	Years with Groups*	Avg. Group Size	Avg. Group Lifespan
GEL	27	15%	2 ½	8	2 yrs
NJL	115	55% Many non-members, too 1,100 total in groups weekly	12	8	3 yrs
FOM	50	30%	10 (Tremendous growth last 2 yrs using the "campaign" approach)	10	10yrs for some 2 yrs for many
ALC	90	15%	7	9	2 yrs
BLC	7	5%	2	8	2 yrs
PHL	32	15%	10 for youth 5 for adults	7	2 yrs
RGR	20	8%	8	8	6 yrs

*With an intentional small group program.

Notes: The campaign approach popularized by "40 Days of Purpose" has given many congregations a significant boost in small group activity in the last two years.

Table A8-C Small Group Staffing and Support

Church Abbr.	Paid Staff	Paid Staff Hours	Prof. Trained LC-MS Church Worker	Volunteer Staff	Budget for Small Groups
GEL	Yes	70 hrs/month	Yes	Yes	\$2,500/yr
NJL	Yes	120 hrs/month	Yes	Yes	\$10,000/yr
FOM	Yes	60 hrs/month	Yes	Yes	\$2,500/yr
ALC	Yes	160 hrs/month (additional staff 40 hrs/month)	No	Yes	\$10,000/yr
BLC	No			Yes	\$2,000/yr
PHL	Yes	120 hrs/month	Yes	Yes	\$3,000/yr
RGR	No	(But pastor is a "volunteer.")		Yes	\$3,000/yr

Notes: In most all churches members pay for their own Bible study and curriculum materials.

Table A8-D Small Group Program Philosophy

<u>Church Abbr.</u>	<u>Small Group Purpose</u>	<u>Leader Training</u>	<u>Programs Used</u>	<u>Intentional Connection w/ Other Congr. Programs</u>
GEL	Striving for spiritual care traditionally done by Elders	Yes	Various, tailored for congr.	Yes
NJL	Members "shepherd" one another in sg's Use congregational mission: "Love like Jesus"	Yes	Started with "Meta-Church" model Moved to "campaign approach" using Lifetogether material	Yes (through coaches)
FOM	Fellowship in Christ and care for one another Connecting members & non-members in relationships Actively working to use for care traditionally done by elders	Yes	Lifetogether material and "coaching call" where Lifetogether gives him support	Yes (through coaches)
ALC	Extension of pastoral care through community Carry out congr. Mission Statement through sgs: "Creating environments for individuals to connect with Jesus Christ & one another." Slogan: "The life of the congr. is in the group."	Yes	Started with Stephen Ministries' ChristCare, but not develop their own using the pastor's Sunday adapted for sg process	Yes (very intentionally)
BLC	Carry congr. mission out through sgs: "To help people discover their place in God's heart through Bible study, worship, and prayer.	Yes	Use ChristCare program. Use only Bible in sgs Planning to try "campaign"	Yes
PHL	Frontline of pastoral care through sgs Want to be "church of sgs" Gone to "missional-based" constitution, making program boards into "spiritual communities"	Yes	Willow Creek seminars Lifetogether campaigns Started with ChristCare	Yes
RGR	Bible study, encouragement, service, and prayer Nothing structural or church-polity	Yes	ChristCare	Yes

Notes: Too much training for lay people with Stephen Ministries. Like Lifetogether because is user-friendly and requires less commitment from lay leaders. They learn by doing. Only problem with Lifetogether is sometimes theologically not Lutheran and also often too light on Scripture for some Lutherans. Campaign approach fits well with typical busy American lifestyle. Requires a short-term time commitment.

Except for ALC, the other churches expect their sg leaders to seek out curriculum resources suggested by the staff or which they find on their own. ALC provides tailored sg materials weekly by the staff person which she prepares based on the pastor's sermon.

Table A8-E Pastoral Involvement

<u>Church Abbr.</u>	<u>Pastor's Role</u>	<u>Distinguish Pastor & Group Leader Role</u>	<u>Connection to Sacramental Ministry</u>
GEL	v, z, zz Not: w, x, y Other: leads a sg	Assumed	Nothing intentional
NJL	v, z, zz Not: w, x, y Other: Sometimes coordinates w/ sermons	Assumed	Nothing intentional
FOM	v, z, zz Not: w, x, y Other: in a sg	Made clear through Bible class & catechesis	Nothing intentional
ALC	v, y, z, zz Not: w, x	Made clear through sermon Connection	Nothing intentional
BLC	v, z, zz Not: w, x, y	Assumed (except pastor does commission leaders)	Nothing intentional
PHL	v, z, zz Not: w, x, y	Assumed	Nothing intentional
RGR	v, z Not: w, x, y, zz	Assumed	Nothing intentional

Key for Pastor's Role: v-gives support to sg staff person; w-directly works with sg leaders; x-gives direct oversight to the program; y-regularly helps choose curriculum; z-promotes small groups to congregation; zz-deemed essentially important as promoter

Even though there were not intentional connections made between small group ministry spiritual care and the sacramental ministry of the congregation, several of the practitioners indicated a desire to have material that could help in this area.

Table A8-F Impact of Small Groups on Members and the Congregation's Mission

Church Abbr.	Better Witnesses	Spiritual Growth	Social Assimilation	Help in crisis	Personal Prayer	Support for Families	Identify Gifts	Service to Church	Service to Community
GEL	X	X		X	X	X	X (higher \$ giving)	X	
NJL	X (w/ campaign approach)	X	X (use sg for new member classes)	X	X	X	X (higher \$ giving)	X	(developing)
FOM	X	X (better able to express faith)	X	X	X		X	X	X
ALC	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	
BLC	X	X		X	X		X	X	
PHL	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
RGR	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Table A8-G Advice and Suggestions for Congregations and Synodical Institutions

Church Abbr.	Advice for Congregation Starting Out with Small Groups	Suggestions for Support from LC-MS Institutions
GEL	Hard for Lutherans to see sg value as is not part of Lutheran tradition Need to change congr. culture, not see as a program but a congr. Lifestyle Don't get discouraged. Celebrate progress Need sg "champion" other than the pastor with his busy schedule	Small group process Bible studies w/ Lutheran theology System for resource sharing by Lutheran sg leaders
NJL	Terminology is important (e.g. use "host" not "leader" to not imply one needs to be an expert) Campaigns are an excellent way to introduce sgs to people who haven't been involved before Traditional congregational polity with boards/Committees can take lay leader time and energy from sgs	Small group process Bible studies w/ Lutheran theology
FOM	Learn from the experts. Go to seminars, etc. Give continual support to leaders Emphasize as part of the congregation's purpose When first starting, don't need paid profession but may need after gets going	Small group process Bible studies w/ Lutheran theology Would like to see in a video format
ALC	Have a staff person who receives a stipend (no matter how small) along with a desk so that there is a visible staff presence that says, "Small groups are important." The church must wrestle with "program versus community" needs and realize that to do sgs you may need to take a different approach to boards and committees. There is not enough time for leaders to do both sgs and cmts.	No thoughts. They can supply their own resources They do assist some seminary by taking them through sg training
BLC	Don't get discouraged when people don't want to get involved Takes a lot of prayer and effort First year was hardest for them. Adjust as go along (The have shortened ChristCare training from 40 to 20 hours)	Small group process Bible studies w/ Lutheran theology Lutheran pastors and teachers taught to think in terms of sgs
PHL	Overwhelming at first, so just start somewhere Well-trained director of sgs Failure is part of the process Training and supporting group leaders is key	Seminary students need to be taught to think in terms of small group process Small group process Bible studies w/ Lutheran theology
RGR	Beware of asking for too much commitment of time and energy with volunteers, esp. families with children Great Christian support can come from sgs!	LC-MS needs to change attitude toward sgs, until that happens it will not be feasible for CPH to produce materials

Table A8-1 An interview with Adam

Interview with Adam from Garden of Eden Lutheran (GEL)

Adam is trained as a DCE and a portion of his time is designated for Small Group Ministry

3/10/05 40 minutes

GEL is located in the suburbs of a large metropolitan area. About 700 attend worship on a weekend.

GEL has had an intentional small group program for two and a half years. The average size of the groups is five to ten people. They currently have 27 groups designed to build community and provide gospel care by lay people. This number does not include purely task-oriented service groups or groups that meet for fellowship or Bible study only. The average age of most of these groups is about 2 years. About 15 % of the congregation is involved in a small group.

The church invests \$2,500 a year into small group support, along with designating 35% of Adam's time for overseeing the small groups at LCR. This amounts to about 70 hours a month. In addition to the Professional Church Worker leadership provided by Adam, he works with a Small Group Leadership Team of 4 volunteers.

The pastor at GEL is involved in a supporting role, but not directly overseeing the small groups. He delegates that to Adam, but they meet together frequently to discuss the work. The pastor leads a small group and is involved by promoting the groups and sharing the congregation's vision for providing care through small groups. (GEL is moving toward a polity where small groups provide the kind of care that traditionally has been done by a Board of Elders). The pastor does not get involved with curriculum selection, and he does not meet regularly with small group leaders. The pastor's care of members focuses primarily on "extra-ordinary" cases of pastoral care, e.g., hospital visits, funerals, etc. The pastor's leadership in small groups is primarily that he makes it a part of his vision for how people are cared for at GEL, not in "hands on" administration.

They do not make an intentional effort to connect the small groups with the sacramental ministry of the church. There is no direct connection with the corporate worship of Word and Sacrament.

GEL does not use a specific small group ministry system or program. Adam pulls together curricula and works with the system they have devised for their congregation. This involves formal training of leaders, meeting with leaders for support and oversight, and supplying them with resource needs.

The small groups at GEL do work toward connecting their members to broader congregational life. Adam feels that small groups are serving the congregation's mission by helping members in the areas of evangelism, spiritual growth, giving and receiving care from members, personal prayer life, helping to be a better steward and better servant

in the home and the church. For them small groups are not focused as an assimilation tool for new members, and there isn't an intentional focus on service to the community through small groups.

Insights that Adam has discovered about starting and maintaining small groups at GEL is that it is difficult to help a lot of Lutherans see the importance of small groups. It does not seem to be part of the tradition and expectations of Lutherans. If people are comfortable in the traditional expectations of Sunday worship as the primary way of receiving gospel care, they tend not to be interested in the small groups. He said the need is to change the culture.

Adam's advice to those starting small groups includes never being disappointed on the results. Consider whatever happens as a success. Also, do not view small groups as a "program," rather as a way of "being" a congregation, not just something else we have to do. It's a congregational lifestyle. He also said that there needs to be a congregation "point person" or "champion" to promote and move the program forward. Adam believes this should be someone other than the pastor, because of the pressures on the pastor's time.

Adam believes that there needs to be more small group Bible studies and materials from a Lutheran perspective. He thinks even having a resource center or means of Lutheran small group leaders sharing Bible studies and resources they have written would be great. He said it would be nice to have something like the old Youth Ministries Bulletin (example - Discovery Bible Studies) that he used years ago in youth ministry.

Adam indicated a desire to see a final copy of the MAP for insights he might gain for his work.

Table A8-2 An interview with James

Interview with James from New Jerusalem Lutheran Church (NJL)

James is trained as a DCE and a portion of his time is designated for Small Group Ministry

3/10/05 1:30 minutes

GENERAL INFORMATION

NJL is located in the suburbs of a large metropolitan area. Over 900 attend worship on a weekend.

SMALL GROUP DEMOGRAPHICS

NJL has had an intentional program of small groups for 12 years. The average size of the groups is between 4 and 12 people. The currently have 65 active groups for adults and 50 active groups for children and youth. About 50% to 60% of the members are involved in

a small group. But they also have a lot of non-members that attend their groups. Because of this their small groups attendance (1,100 weekly) exceeds their worship attendance. The average age of the groups is about 3 years, but there are many older and younger groups, as well. Most groups meet off-site. In addition to staffing costs, James estimates NJL spends about \$10,000 a year on materials and support.

They have no specific mission statement for the small group program, but rather use the congregation's overall mission statement: "Reaching and equipping people to think and act like Jesus."

STAFFING AND OVERSIGHT

NJL has both paid staff and volunteers in leadership of their small group program. 70% of James' duties are devoted to small group administration. He works with a multitude of coaches; each of which oversees about 5 groups and leaders. James is a trained church worker. NJL prefers that he is, but it is not a requirement.

THE PASTORAL MINISTRY

The pastor at NJL is not directly involved in overseeing the program, but he does play a vital role as the "vision caster" and also works with James on the topics and messages for small group studies. They will sometimes coordinate the pastor's Sunday messages with the small group topics. James estimates the pastor devotes about 10% of his time to small group administration. He notes that pastoral support and promotion of small groups through sermons and announcements is vital for a "church of small groups" like they have.

At NJL they see their small groups as extensions of pastoral care. They are the "front-line" form of care. The pastor is involved with visiting and calls, but cannot assist all the people like small groups are expected to do. There is an intentional effort to have members shepherd one another with the gospel in small groups in the spirit of their mission statement: "Love like Jesus."

SMALL GROUP RESOURCES: SYSTEMS AND SUPPORT

NJL began their small groups using the Metachurch Model of Carl George. In the last year they have begun moving toward a small group "campaign" approach using materials from LifeTogether by Brett Eastman. They like these because the leader training and small group sessions are all on DVD and are very easy to use. They find no problems getting leaders because of the easy-to-use materials. He noted that it is easier to get people involved in the campaign approach, where small groups meet for 6-7 weeks several times a year. The potential down side, he said, was that they may not provide for the deeper level of interaction that is found in groups that meet weekly over a long period of time.

When asked about Stephen Ministries, he noted that, in his opinion, there was too much training for leaders in a classroom setting. NJL uses more “on the job” training.

SMALL GROUPS AND THE CONGREGATION

NJL works to actively connect small groups to the congregation through the coaches who work with group leaders. In a very limited number of times, the church professional has had to step in to help with a problem. Also, the pastor and church actively promote small group involvement in worship services.

Small groups have served the congregation and its mission in the areas of evangelism (especially now with the campaign approach), spiritual growth of members, social assimilation (use small groups in new member classes), personal care and encouragement with the Gospel, personal prayer life, support for families (he noted many stories of how small groups have helped the member and his/her family), identifying ways to serve (they recently used small groups to survey interest in helping with church programs and activities and received an overwhelming response), and giving to the church (runs about 50% higher among small group members over those not in groups).

One growth area under consideration is encouraging service to the community. This is being researched but is not yet implemented.

STARTING A SMALL GROUP PROGRAM

The important lessons they have learned at NJL is that terminology is important. For example, they are steering away from using the term “leader” because it implies the person has to be an expert. They prefer the term “host” instead.

Another suggestion is that campaigns are an excellent way to start and promote participation by people who have not been involved before.

James also noted that one challenge in a traditionally structured congregation with lots of boards and committees is that those activities can take too much time and energy from the people who would be good small group leaders. It’s hard to do both. The direction they have gone is away from that structure to a “board of directors” approach that uses less people.

James expressed that the LC-MS could definitely do more to provide Lutheran materials for small groups. He indicated that there are many people who could provide great content for Bible studies, but that it would need to be in an appropriate small group format.

Table A8-3 An interview with Andrew

Interview with Andrew from Fisher of Men Lutheran Church (FOM)
 Andrew is trained as a DCE and a portion of his time is designated for Small Group
 Ministry
 3/14/05 40 minutes

GENERAL INFORMATION

FOM is located in a large suburban area. About 900 worship on a weekend.

SMALL GROUP DEMOGRAPHICS

FOM has had an intentional small group program for over 10 years (actually quite a bit longer without the same intentionality). There was a major push forward a year and a half ago with the use of a small group campaign (“40 Days of Purpose”). The average size of the group is about 10 people. The length of time groups have been in existence range from over 10 years to about a year and a half or less. About half of the present groups have developed in this shorter period using “campaigns” in the LifeTogether system (see below). About 35%-40% of the congregation is involved in a group. They currently have about 50 active groups among adults.

A word on how they do campaigns: There is a big push in the fall to get everyone involved. People from existing groups are often encouraged to lead a new group at this time. Afterwards some of the new groups stay together with the new leader and some leaders go back to their original group. There is another campaign in the spring but it is not emphasized as much as the fall one.

Andrew shared that FOM’s purpose for their groups is to connect people to the body of Christ. This means connecting current members and non-members in relationships. Their goal is fellowship in Christ and care for one another. Also, they look to the small groups for spiritual growth. However, FOM also emphasizes more content-oriented Bible classes for spiritual growth in addition to the small groups. The eventual goal of the small groups is to replace the “Spiritual Life Groups” where congregational elders oversee a list of members (“care list”). When a person joins a small group, his/her name goes off of a care list because the small group provides the care. Andrew believes the small groups work better than the old system. In the old system members are contacted by their elder when they missed three consecutive Sundays. But that “checking up” was the primary sum and substance of the care. With the small groups, people pray and interact with one another around the Word of God. This provides more effective personal spiritual care. Besides staffing costs, FOM invests about \$2,500 a year in small groups. The members of the groups pay for their own curriculum materials.

STAFFING AND OVERSIGHT

FOM's small groups are overseen by Andrew, who is trained as a D.C.E. About one third of his time (15 hours a week) is designated for small group oversight. His work includes training volunteers using the "Hosting LifeTogether"(CL) series. Andrew works with a volunteer "Community Leader" who works about 10 hours a month. The CL oversees 6 Coaches who themselves oversee group leaders (which they prefer to call "hosts"). The Coaches are expected to spend about 10 hours a month working with the hosts they are assigned to support.

THE PASTORAL MINISTRY

The pastor at FOM supports but does not oversee the small groups. He neither chooses the curriculum nor works directly with small group hosts (leaders), but he is very important to the program through his promotion of it through sermons and public comments. Andrew said that he believes the pastor of a small group church needs to view himself as the "small group pastor." At FOM, he is himself a member of a small group.

The distinction between the pastor's work and the work of small group leader is believed to be clearly understood at FOM. There is no practice of sacramental ministry in small groups. And the doctrinal instruction at FOM teaches the distinctive functions of the pastoral office.

An emphasis on gospel care by promoting connections to the sacramental ministry of the congregation is not an intentional aspect of FOM's small groups. However, the curriculum materials (e.g. CPH Bible studies) used by a particular group or the group leaders may bring in these emphases.

SMALL GROUP RESOURCES: SYSTEMS AND SUPPORT

Andrew has researched various systems and has settled on LifeTogether (LT). FOM uses their materials. Andrew is part of a "Coaching Call" with LT, which FOM pays for. His critique of LT is that it has excellent training resources and an easy-to-use format. He believes their "campaign approach" is effective. He also noted, however, that it is too light on Scripture for some lifelong LCMS Lutherans.

I also asked him about ChristCare of Stephen Ministries. He felt that it was outdated.

Using LT resources, he provides formal training for leaders (hosts). And as mentioned, hosts are supported through the coaches.

SMALL GROUPS AND THE CONGREGATION

FOM takes steps to connect small groups with the larger congregation through the coaches and through using small groups to encourage greater involvement in various congregational activities.

Andrew indicated that small groups have been positive in enhancing participants' Christian life and fulfillment of the congregation's mission in the following areas: Evangelism, spiritual growth, social assimilation, especially personal care in time of crisis (many stories about how groups have pitched in to help their members), personal prayer life, identifying ways a person can serve, increased service to the church and community. He also noted that members are better able to verbally express their faith, now that they have a safe place in which to develop this skill.

STARTING A SMALL GROUP PROGRAM

Based on his experience, Andrew's advice to those starting a small group program is to learn from the experts. Do not "reinvent the wheel." Learn from seminars and programs like Willow Creek and LifeTogether. He also said their needs to be continual support of hosts. Coaches are very important. And he said that there must be a continual emphasis on small groups as a major movement within congregational life.

For a congregation just starting out, there doesn't need to be a paid professional at first. But once a program is going, this will likely be necessary to provide adequate support for hosts.

Andrew shared that it would be helpful if CPH would publish small group friendly Bible study resources utilizing the excellent content of our theology. The problem with current resources is that they do not fit with the small group approach. He also would like to see this in a video format.

Table A8-4 An interview with Priscilla

Interview with Priscilla of Antioch Lutheran Church (ALC)
March 15, 2005 25 minutes

GENERAL INFORMATION

Priscilla is Director of Relational Ministries at ALC which is located in a large metropolitan area. About 2,400 worship on a weekend.

SMALL GROUP DEMOGRAPHICS

ALC has had an intentional small group program for 7 years. The average size of a group is 9 people. They currently have about 90 groups. The average age of a group is about 2 years. Priscilla estimates that 30% to 40% of the congregation is in a small group.

ALC sees the small groups as one of the ways of carrying out the congregation's mission statement, which is "Creating environments for individuals to connect to Jesus Christ and one another." A common slogan they use is "the life of the congregation's ministry is in the group."

In addition to paid staff, ALC devotes about \$10,000 annually for small group support. The staff supplies their own weekly small group curriculum based on the sermon for that week.

STAFFING AND OVERSIGHT

ALC uses both paid and volunteer staff. Priscilla devotes about 50% of her time (she works an 80 hour week) for small group leader training and developing curriculum. This is about 40 hours a week that she spends on small groups. ALC also employs a person for 10 hours a week who assists with tactical issues, data management, etc. Volunteers consist of coaches and leaders. The coaches assist and provide support for the leaders.

THE PASTORAL MINISTRY

At ALC the pastor is not directly involved in small group ministry support. He leaves the running of the program, the curriculum, recruiting and management of leaders to Priscilla and her staff. However, he plays a key role by having small groups as part of his vision for ministry. He has "the ear" of the small group leader and provides sermon resources for small group curriculum development. He also promotes small groups through sermons.

Small groups are seen by ALC as an extension of pastoral care. They emphasize that such care happens in community. There is also an intentional effort to connect small group involvement with the worship life of the congregation. Priscilla noted that small group participants are more regular in worship life.

SMALL GROUP RESOURCES: SYSTEMS AND SUPPORT

Priscilla noted that ALC started with ChristCare and has since transitioned to using their own program. She uses LifeTogether training resources for coaches. Leaders have also attended Willow Creek conferences for small group leaders. Yet she writes the curriculum used by the groups.

ALC provides group leaders with training, personal support, and leadership and Bible study resources.

SMALL GROUPS AND THE CONGREGATION

ALC takes intentional steps to connect small groups with the larger congregation. Small group members have enhanced the carrying out of the congregation's mission in the

following areas: evangelism, spiritual growth, assimilation, personal care in crisis, prayer life, identifying ways as person can serve, service to church.

STARTING A SMALL GROUP PROGRAM

Priscilla shared the following insights based on her experience:

*Definitely have a staff person who receives a stipend (no matter how small) and has a desk so that he or she is a visible presence that says “small groups are important.”

*The church will need to wrestle with “program versus community” needs. Since there are only so many hours people can devote to small groups AND serving on boards and committees, the church is going to need a structure that enables people to have time to devote to small groups if they are going to be a successful component of congregational life.

When asked about support the seminaries and Synod could provide to small groups in congregation, Priscilla had no particular thoughts. Unlike other congregations, ALC has the resources to develop their own materials. She mentioned that, as a service to the church at large, she regularly works with seminary students in taking them through their small group training.

Table A8-5 An interview with Mary

Interview with Mary from Bethsaida Lutheran Church (BLC)

Mary is a trained volunteer Stephen Ministries Equipper and helps oversee small groups

Interviewed 3/18/05

GENERAL INFORMATION

BLC is located in a large metropolitan area. About 700 worship on a weekend.

SMALL GROUP DEMOGRAPHICS

BLC has had an intentional small group program for about 2 years. They use the ChristCare program of Stephen Ministries. They currently have 7 active groups. The average group size is 8 members. The average age of the groups is 2 years. There are about 55 people in the groups out of a church membership of 1,800. They currently invest about \$2,000 a year in small group ministry.

Mary shared that the program’s purpose is to carry out the mission statement of BLC through small groups. BLC’s mission is: To help people discover their place in God’s heart through Bible study, worship, and prayer. While leaders may use small group resources, they encourage their members to use only the Scriptures for small group studies.

STAFFING AND OVERSIGHT

BLC's program is run by volunteers using the ChristCare model. The pastors do attend the equipper training so that they are familiar with the program, but it is directly overseen by the lay equippers. Leaders of the small group ministry program do not need to be trained church workers (except for Stephen Ministries training).

Besides the initial training of equippers by Stephen Ministries (one week) and leaders by equippers (20 hours), Mary indicated that the 3 equippers spend about 10 hours a month in program oversight.

THE PASTORAL MINISTRY

The pastors' role in the small group program is that of supporting and promoting it through sermons and personal encouragement. Mary estimates it requires only about an hour a month of the pastor's time. However, the pastor's show of support is very important for the successful promotion of the program.

At BLC the pastors commission the leaders as part of a service. However, there is no other intentional effort to define the relationship between the work of the pastor and small group leader. The distinctions are basically assumed.

Also, BLC does not make an intentional effort to use small groups to support gospel care by making connections to the sacramental ministry of the congregation, unless this happens to be a part of the Bible study.

SMALL GROUP RESOURCES: SYSTEMS AND SUPPORT

As noted, BLC uses ChristCare (Stephen Ministries). They also have a MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) group, and they are open to any kind of activity that encourages involvement in small groups. They plan to use the 40 Days of Purpose campaign in the future. They are also checking out LifeTogether materials.

They do offer training and support of leaders through ChristCare. They do not supply curricula, but as noted they encourage groups simply to use the Bible.

SMALL GROUPS AND THE CONGREGATION

The only formal steps taken to connect small groups with the larger congregation is through the public commissioning of leaders.

Mary believes that small groups have made a positive impact on members and their ability to fulfill the congregation's mission in the following areas: evangelism, spiritual growth of members, personal care and encouragement with the Gospel in time of need, personal prayer life, identifying ways a person can serve, service to church and most recently in grief support (through a new small group for that purpose).

STARTING A SMALL GROUP PROGRAM

Based on her experience, Mary has the following suggestions for a congregation considering starting a small group ministry program:

- *Don't get discouraged when people don't want to get involved (be committed to 5 years to build up the group)
- *It takes a lot of prayer and effort.
- *For them, the first year was the hardest for recruiting people to be leaders.
- *Adjust as you go along. They lowered the leader training from 40 to 20 hours because it was perceived as demanding too much time.

In Mary's opinion, congregations would benefit from having the Synod or CPH put out small group ministry curricula. It would be good for pastors and teachers to be taught to think in terms of small group ministry. Also, it would be nice to have the "40 Days of Purpose" rewritten with Lutheran theology.

Table A8-6 An interview with Esther

Interview with Esther, D.C.E. and director of small groups at Place of Hope Lutheran Church (PHL)

March 22, 2005 45 minutes

GENERAL INFORMATION

PHL is located in a large metropolitan area. About 750 worship a week.

SMALL GROUP DEMOGRAPHICS

PHL has had an intentional small group program for youth for 10 years and for adults for 5 years. Esther has been there for 13 years and saw the need for a small group program from the beginning of her time there. But the congregation did not see the need and there wasn't full support from the pastoral staff. Since she was in charge of youth ministry she began a small group program for youth with the hope that it would also influence adults to want to go in the direction of starting small groups. And that is what, in fact, took place.

The average size of PHL's small groups is 6-8 people. They currently have 32 small groups, with 22 of the 32 being only a year and a half old. The tremendous growth in groups happened through use of the Purpose Driven Life Campaign (She noted that even though there were some theological issues with it, the approach to using a campaign is what really made it successful. They enjoyed mobilizing and implementing this successfully. However, she also commented that with the growth being that dramatic, it has made it a struggle to adequately support the groups.)

About one third of the worshipping community at PHL is in a small group. They have just recently gone to a church structure with a “mission-based” constitution which is designed to “get people out of meetings and into ministry.” The idea is to use small groups to be the way to get things done. PHL wants to be a “church of small groups” instead of simply “a church with small groups.” This involves retraining program boards to be spiritual communities that are not only action-oriented groups, but also meet spiritual needs. This fits in with the second level of group involvement. Using the Willow Creek terminology they have:

101 level – Social groups

201 level – Boards and Committees that do tasks but have devotional and care components to their meetings.

301 – Classic Bible study small groups

Currently PHL spends about \$2,000 a year on curriculum and \$1,000 for training and seminars. The group members pay for their own curriculum. The only additional cost is Esther’s salary.

STAFFING AND OVERSIGHT

PHL’s program is run primarily by Esther. They are developing a coaching system to get lay people involved in helping to support the leaders. She is a trained Professional Church Worker, as is required by PHL for its staff. With her other duties, she estimates she spends about 30 hours a week on small group work.

THE PASTORAL MINISTRY

At PHL the pastor is very supportive of the small groups, which Esther believes to be essential to the success of the program. He actively promotes and includes small group references in preaching, etc. He is also an active member of a small group. However, he does not directly oversee the program, choose curriculum, or work with group leaders. Through involvement in his own group he spends about 4 hours a month at small group activity. However, with their new constitution, he works with the church leaders in a small group sort of way. So his involvement is really more than just the Bible study group he is in.

PHL sees small groups as the front line of pastoral care where “shepherding” happens among the Priesthood of all Believers. With a large congregation the pastor is not able to do all of the pastoral care work. Small group leaders are trained in confidentiality issues and how to seek out assistance in difficult cases from Esther, who then may go to the Pastor. However, there is a distinction made between group leaders and the authority of the pastor. Also, they do not have sacramental acts in small groups as these are conducted by the pastor in worship.

Esther related that group members are expected to be involved in regular Word and Sacrament worship. There is no intentional effort to use small groups to support gospel care by making connections to the sacramental ministry of the congregation. However,

Esther indicated that it would be nice to have small group resources that helped to do that.

SMALL GROUP RESOURCES: SYSTEMS AND SUPPORT

PHL began small groups using Christ Care from Stephen Ministries. Her training in that approach is still their basic paradigm for group ministry, but they now use a lot of other materials. They use LifeTogether resources because of their excellent process-oriented materials, which also help people in Christian living. Other resources include: Video-based Zondervan resources, some Serendipity material (although not as popular because tends to run a little shallow for members' tastes), information gained from Willow Creek resources, and more.

Esther provides formal training for leaders twice a year. There is also training built into the LifeTogether materials. She sends out regular emails to her leaders and, as previously noted, they are working to develop a coaching program to support leaders. She also reviews and supplies curriculum resource ideas for leaders to use.

SMALL GROUPS AND THE CONGREGATION

PHL uses small groups as a communication tool for the congregation, which is also very effective to call people to action. Any time a big program needs to be promoted they sell it through the small groups.

In Esther's opinion, small groups have served PHL's mission in positive ways by furthering members in their work of: evangelism, spiritual growth of members, social assimilation of members, personal care in time of crisis, personal prayer life (positive, but would like to see more growth), identifying ways a person can serve, service to church, service to community. Additional points Esther made were that small groups have given people a more positive spirit about their church and members are more connected to the church and to one another.

STARTING A SMALL GROUP PROGRAM

Based on her experience, Esther had the following suggestions to those thinking about starting a small group ministry program:

- *Realize it will be overwhelming at first so just start somewhere.
- *The person who leads it needs to be well-trained in small group program (Her training with ChristCare was very helpful for her as a leader.)
- *Realize that failure is part of the process and that some groups will work and others will not.
- *Training your group leaders is very important.
- *Staying connected to leaders and supporting them as they learn on the job is just as important.

In response to my question about could there be more done by LCMS institutions like seminaries and CPH, Esther noted the following:

*Seminary students at their congregation usually have to be taught to think in terms of the small group process. They don't get that at the seminary.

*It would be nice if CPH would publish materials that used the small group process. Much of CPH material is difficult to adapt for small groups. Yet she would like to have more theologically sound materials that would teach a proper sacramental theology. She often has to use non-Lutheran materials which are often not as theologically sound. However, she did note, that using those materials, like "The 40 Days of Purpose" gave them an opportunity to teach by pointing out some theological problems in those materials.

Table A8-7 An interview with John

Interview with John from Run the Good Race Lutheran Church (RGR)

John is the Senior Pastor and also works with the small group program as an Equipper in the Stephen Ministries ChristCare program

3/23/05 61 minute interview

GENERAL INFORMATION

RGR is located in a community of about 6,000 people. It is also near a Lutheran University. RGR worships an average of 1117 on a weekend. Currently John is the only pastor of the congregation. He shared that they have staff shortages due in part to the fact that RGR has been experiencing a great deal of conflict in recent years because of some traumatic and very polarizing events.

SMALL GROUP DEMOGRAPHICS

RGR has had an intentional small group program for 8 years, ever since they entered into the ChristCare program of Stephen Ministries. This program started shortly before John arrived and was up and running when he got there 6 and a half years ago. However, RGR also has a number of small groups that predate this program, some groups are as old as 20 or 30 years.

The mission of RGR's small groups reflects the approach of ChristCare. When they first began their groups they developed the following vision statement which still applies today: An alive and growing group of people whose purpose and goal is to help others know, love, and serve Jesus Christ, where group members work together to make their group an inviting and welcoming place, a place where you meet together to study and apply God's Word to daily life, a place to pray for and be prayed for and to act out your faith in service to others.

The average size of the groups is about 8 members. And while some groups have been around much longer, the average age of the groups is about 5 or 6 years. RGR currently

has about 20 active groups. John estimates that group members make up about 8% of the congregation. The likely spend about \$3,000 a year on the program, depending on how many equippers are being trained that year. Each equipper costs about \$1,000.

The number of groups has gone down in the last few years. John shared that he believes the decline has happened in part to the conflicted environment, but mainly due to a loss of lay leadership because of it being an overly taxing commitment for most. In the ChristCare model the program is overseen by equippers who have received intensive training. RGR has trained about 15 equippers since they began the program, but now they only have 3 active equippers, including John. He noted that the equippers have also trained about 50 to 60 small group leaders but that they now have only about 20 who are actively leading groups.

He also noted that they had targeted members in the age range of 20 to 40 years old, but that they have not successfully reached this group. The reason seems to be that their time commitments in other areas like work and family have prevented them from becoming involved in ChristCare small groups. This has also been true for equippers and leaders in this age group, which has led to much of the attrition in the leadership.

John also acknowledged that there are quite a few other groups that meet, independent of ChristCare and are not under the oversight of the congregation's leadership. He estimates that there could be upwards of 20 such groups.

STAFFING AND OVERSIGHT

John indicated that the program is run by volunteers. There is a head equipper separate from the pastor that oversees the program. Although John is both a pastor and an equipper and is very involved in the program, he does not see himself as overseeing it in a direct sense. He sees himself as being well-informed and an important source of support for ChristCare at RGR. Between the 3 equippers, John estimates they put in about 15 hours a week in running the program.

RGR does not require a trained church worker to oversee the program. However, John indicated that such would be nice. With the current level of conflict in the congregation, however, they have been advised against expanding staff at this time.

THE PASTORAL MINISTRY

As noted, the pastor does not directly oversee the small groups. Neither is he involved in choosing curricula for the groups. John pointed out that one of the currently vacant staff positions is a pastoral position which is charged with overseeing nurture ministries. Yet as an equipper John meets with and helps train leaders. He is an equipper for a SEA group (S-support, E-encourage, A-accountability). He is also a member (but not leader) of a small group. That group's "missional project" is to personally encourage him and a Lutheran teacher (also in the group) in their work of ministry. Between participating in a

group and serving as an equipper, John estimates he spends about 15 to 20 hours a month for ChristCare at RGR.

John believes that RGR sees a definite distinction between the work of the pastor and the leader of small groups. However, members see him as very supportive of ChristCare. Some members like this, others do not. He noted that this is related to the larger issues of conflict at RGR.

There is no intentional effort to use small groups to support gospel care by making connections to the sacramental ministry at RGR. However, John noted that ChristCare's emphasis on Biblical equipping makes strong use of God's Word in group meetings.

As to the importance of pastoral leadership to the success of the small group program John sees it as important but not essential. His reasons are that during the vacancy, before his arrival, ChristCare was going well without pastoral leadership. However, with a pastor present in the congregation, the lay leaders feel that it is very important for him to be actively supportive of the program for the sake of promotion.

SMALL GROUP RESOURCES: SYSTEMS AND SUPPORT

RGR uses Stephen Ministries' ChristCare program. They have also used extensively the Serendipity Bible as a source for small group Bible studies.

They provide formal training for small group leaders using the ChristCare model. Leaders are given regular support and encouragement through the ChristCare SEA group. However, leaders are on their own for Bible study resources. As part of ChristCare they are trained in how to find appropriate resources.

SMALL GROUPS AND THE CONGREGATION

RGR does take steps to connect small groups with the larger congregation. Small groups are promoted through the congregation's ministry and groups are used to promote other programs of the congregation. For example, there are parent groups that support the school ministry.

In John's opinion, small groups have had a positive impact for members in fulfilling the congregation's mission in the following areas: evangelism, spiritual growth, social assimilation, personal care and encouragement with the Gospel in time of need (very positive!), personal prayer life, support for families of participants, identifying ways a person can serve, service to church and community (through ChristCare "missional projects).

STARTING A SMALL GROUP PROGRAM

Based on his experience, John's advice to a congregation considering starting a small group ministry program is related to leadership commitment. If your small group

ministry is going to require intensive leader training, those who receive this training must be committed to lead for the long haul. The problem they have had is that ChristCare involves a huge commitment of time and energy for training equippers especially but also leaders; yet most of their equippers and leaders have ceased to participate because of commitments in other areas of life. He compared their withdrawal to training a pastor who then quits after a short period of time. (He did note, however, that in most cases the leaders fulfilled their initially agreed upon commitment of two years. However, after that commitment was up, they typically did not continue to serve.)

Another lesson related to this is to realize that 20 to 40 year olds have a lot of time demands that may prevent their involvement in a group.

On the positive side, John related that there is “great power in small groups.” By that he means that members of these groups give great support to one another. There is a sense that they would do battle for each other. In the confidential seal of the group has developed a great bond and collegial relationship that makes for a lot of support.

In John’s opinion what is needed in the LCMS is for an attitude change in regard to small groups. He thinks that the church body feels threatened by small groups, fearing not only that lay-led groups may teach or do the wrong thing, but that their success might diminish the importance of the pastor. He believes that until this attitude changes, CPH will not be able to cost-effectively produce materials to help small groups.

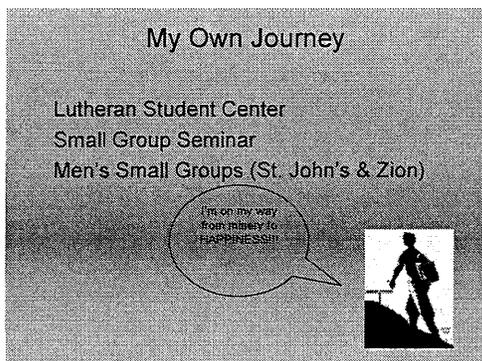
APPENDIX 9 – Zion Presentation

The presentation was given to the Zion Lutheran Church Sunday morning adult Bible class on March 27, 2005. There were 31 members present. The presentation was given by Pastor Mart Thompson. It was approximately 20 minutes in length. Following the presentation the members filled out a survey evaluating the presentation and gauging the level of awareness, understanding and interest in small groups at Zion.

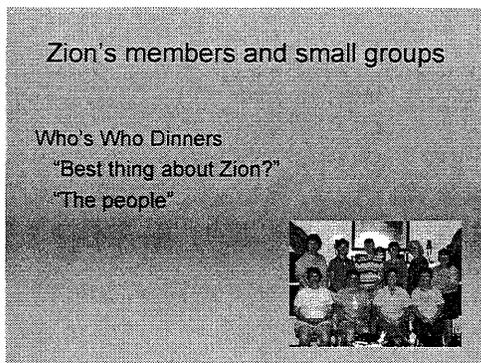
The power point slides are given below in the left hand column. Below each slide are notes relating comments made by the presenter. Questions were not encouraged for this presentation because of time constraints and also because of the desire to evaluate the presentation on its own merit. However, because of interest in further discussion, members were assured that we would return to this topic in the future. The design of the presentation was done by Marie Thompson.



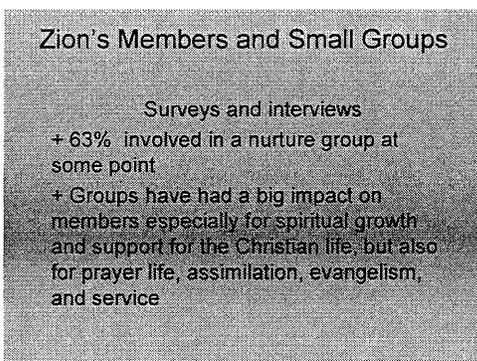
The presentation was introduced by connecting to the fact that they had just two weeks prior filled out a congregation-wide survey and that several church members had been interviewed on the subject of small groups.



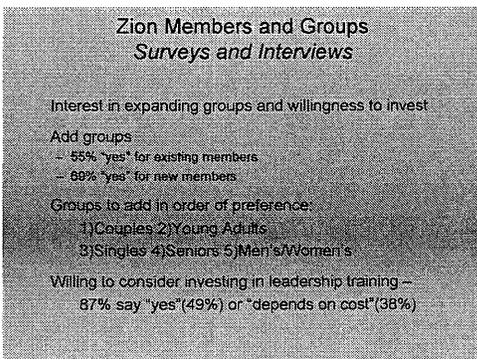
To put the presentation into personal context, I shared my own experience that led to my interest in small groups. First, I related my experience in college where I was a part of small group, relational Bible studies. Then I spoke of my experience as a pastor or going to a small group seminar. I also related my experience of starting and being a part of men's small groups at two of my parishes. I then pointed out that I have never tried to expand to a congregation-wide system of small groups.

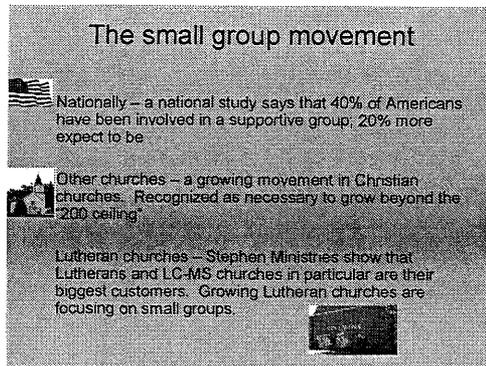


This slide introduces two aspects of my presentation. It describes the first small group experience I was a part of at Zion. The "Who's Who Dinners," were small group get-acquainted dinners host by my wife and I when we first came to Zion. We hosted 16 of these with an average of 15 people attending. The small group format was very well received. The second reason I included this slide was to share the results of one of the questions that was always asked in the course of those dinners: "What do you like most about Zion?" The response better that 80% of the time was: "The people." I then shared that "the people" supporting and encouraging one another in the gospel is what small groups are all about.

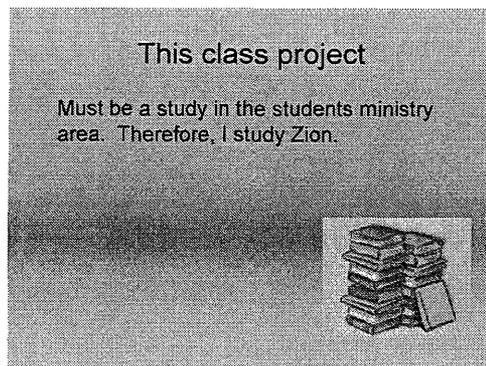


The next two slides provides some of the key results of the congregation-wide survey given two weeks prior. I shared how it seems to indicate a strong interest in small groups and small group expansion. I noted that the level of interest was even greater than I expected.

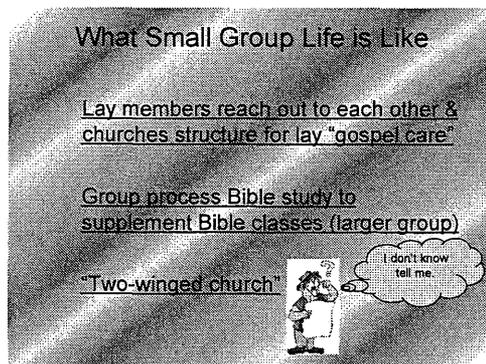




With this slide I gave a brief overview of the small group movement on the national level (sharing some of Robert Wuthnow's study), on the Christian church level (sharing insights I gained from the small group ministry class I took at Concordia Seminary), and on the Lutheran church level (sharing statistics from Stephen Ministries and my own experience through interviewing small group practitioners).



I once again shared with them the purpose of the Major Applied Project and requirement to do research in one's area of ministry.

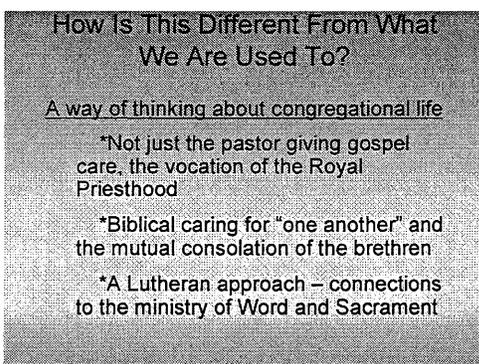


This slide was the occasion for me to help members distinguish between Zion's current level of involvement with small groups and what I am envisioning in expanding small groups to be a major part of how gospel care is given and received at Zion. I first indicated how this is an intentional effort to involve laity where traditionally only the pastor was expected to work. Second, I spoke of the difference between a group process oriented Bible study and the lecture format of our typical Bible classes (such as the one they are in). Finally, I uses the image of the two-winged church to share the vision of a church having both the large group Divine Service

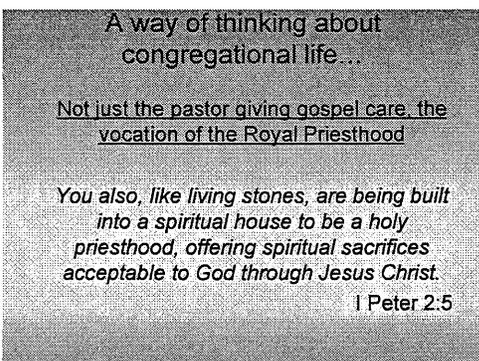
led by the ordained minister and the complementary small group led by lay people in caring for one another.



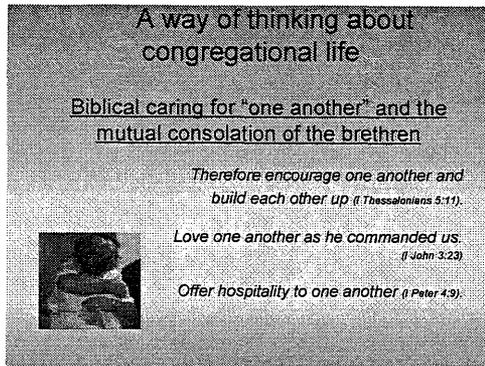
With this slide I shared the 4 typical aspects of nurture oriented small groups. They are: 1) Spiritual growth through relational Bible study and discussion, 2) Personal support in a confidential climate, 3) Prayer offered by members of the group for one another and others outside the group, and 4) Strength for service to others within and outside the group.



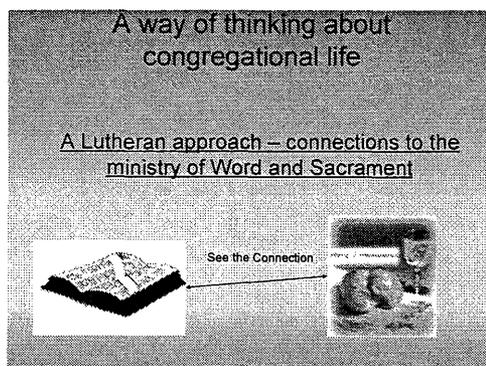
This slide introduces the next 3 slides. In this part of the presentation I sought to explain the theological basis of how small groups serve members.



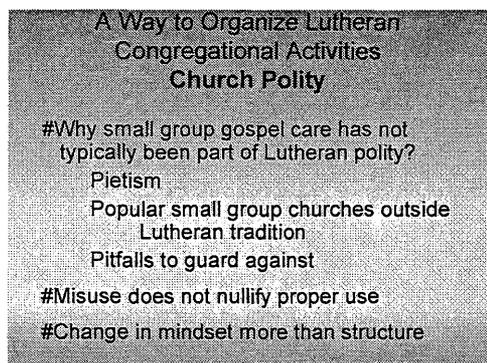
This slide relates the theological basis for lay involvement as a complement to the office of the public ministry, a point expanded on in the next slide.



This slide gives some of the “one another passages” which mandate Christians to care encourage, love, and care for one another in Christ.

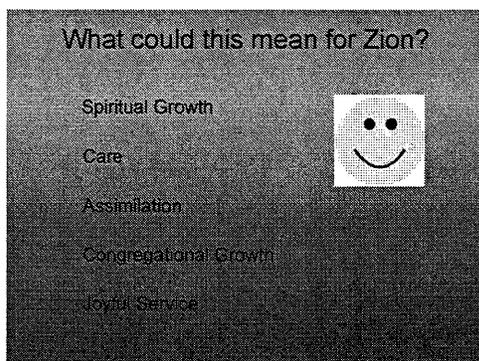


This slide further describes what I believe to be the proper foundation of small groups in the Lutheran theological tradition—always connecting gospel care to the ministry of word and sacrament. At this point I noted that small group materials on the current market do not make these connections. In the next slide I attempt to describe why this is.

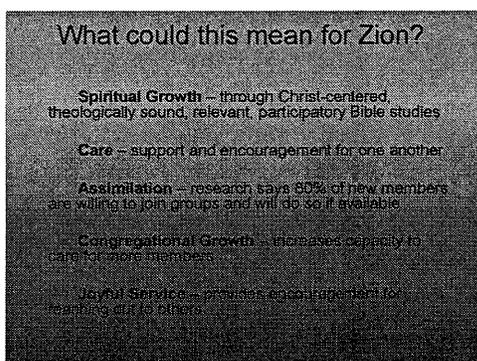


With this slide I show the members what lay-led, gospel care small groups have traditionally not been a part of Lutheran congregational polity. I shared only briefly that the Lutheran Church’s experience during the age of Pietism has tended to bias confession Lutheran against small groups. I also noted that the leaders of the small group movement and the producers of small group materials come from theological traditions that differ significantly from Lutheran. After briefly describing some of the pitfalls we must avoid based on the abuses, I shared that these do not automatically disqualify small groups from appropriate use in a Lutheran context. I further shared that even though we are talking about polity, that is still a matter of

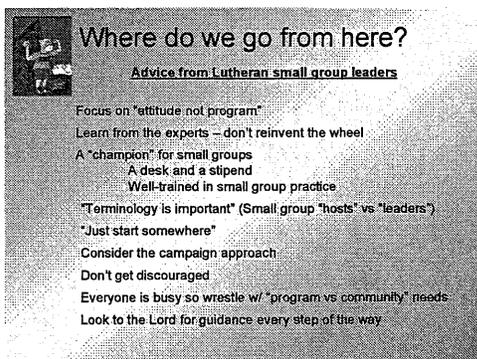
mindset more than structure. It is still about seeing the place of laity encouraging one another with the gospel as a necessary complement to the pastoral ministry of word and sacrament.



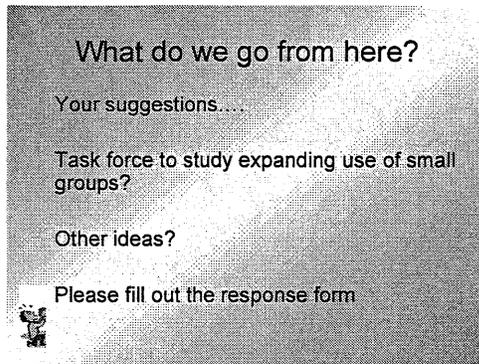
Nearing the end of the presentation, I then sought help the members envision what an expansion of small groups could mean for Zion.



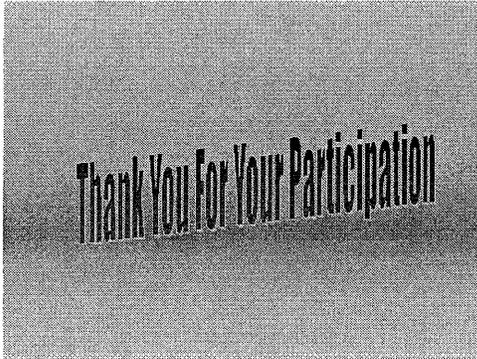
Here I detailed this vision, focusing on spiritual growth, care, assimilation, congregational growth, and service.



With this slide I ask them to begin thinking about how we might move in this direction. Here I simply read some of the very helpful insights I gained through my interviews with small group practitioners. These were read with little or no comment so as simply to stimulate thinking. There was great desire for discussion at this point. However, as previously noted I assured them that we would return to this topic in the future.



Finally, I wrapped up the presentation by raising the question of forming a task force to study how Zion might expand their use of small groups. I also asked them to think of other ways we might do this. Then I had them fill out the survey and evaluation. All attendees willingly took time to fill out and hand in the survey. This survey and the results are provided in APPENDIX 7.



I again thanked them for taking part in this project.

Table A9-1. Power Point Presentation Outline

I. Why all of this talk about small groups?

My own journey

LSC, Small Group Seminar, Men's Small Groups (St. John's & Zion)

Zion's members and small groups

Who's Who Dinners "Best thing about Zion?" "The people"

Surveys and interviews

63% involved in a nurture group at some point

Groups have had a big impact on members especially for spiritual growth and support for Christian life, but also for prayer life, assimilation, evangelism, and service

Interest in expanding groups and willingness to invest financially

Add groups -- 55% for existing members

69% for new members

Groups to add in order of preference:

1)Couples 2)Young Adults 3)Singles 4)Seniors 5)Men's/Women's

Willing to consider investing in leadership training –

87% say either "yes"(49%) or "depends on cost"(38%)

The small group movement

Nationally – a national study says that 40% of Americans have been involved in a supportive group; 20% more expect to be

Other churches – a growing movement in Christian churches. Recognized as necessary to grow beyond the "200 ceiling"

Lutheran churches – Stephen Ministries show that Lutherans and LC-MS churches in particular are their biggest customers. Growing Lutheran churches are focusing on small groups.

This class project – do a study in the students ministry area

II. What small group life is like

Lay members reach out to each other & churches structure for lay "gospel care"

Group process Bible study to supplement Bible classes (larger group)

"Two-winged church"

Typical components to lay led "gospel care" small groups

Spiritual growth through Bible study and discussion

Personal support and encouragement for daily living

Prayer for one another and other people

Strength and inspiration for service (family, congregation, & community)

III. How is this different from what we are used to?

A way of thinking about congregational life

- *Not just the pastor giving gospel care, the vocation of the Royal Priesthood
- *Biblical caring for “one another” and the mutual consolation of the brethren
- *A Lutheran approach – connections to the ministry of Word and Sacrament

A way to organize Lutheran congregational activities – Church Polity

- #Why small group gospel care has not typically been part of Lutheran polity?
 - Pietism
 - Popular small group churches/outside Lutheran tradition
 - Pitfalls to guard against
- #Misuse does not nullify proper use
- #Change in mindset more than structure

IV. What could this mean for Zion?

Spiritual Growth – through Christ-centered, theologically sound, relevant, participatory Bible studies

Care – support and encouragement for one another

Assimilation – research says 80% of new members are willing to join groups and will do so if available

Congregational Growth – increases capacity to care for more members

Joyful Service – provides encouragement for reaching out to others

V. Where do we go from here?

Advice from Lutheran small group leaders

Focus on “attitude not program”

Learn from the experts – don’t reinvent the wheel

A “champion” for small groups

A desk and a stipend

Well-trained in small group practice

“Terminology is important” (Small group “hosts” versus “leaders”)

“Just start somewhere”

Consider the campaign approach

Don’t get discouraged

Everyone is busy so wrestle with “program versus community” needs

Look to the Lord for guidance every step of the way

What do we go from here? Your suggestions....

Task force to study expanding use of small groups?

Other ideas?

APPENDIX 10 – Survey/Evaluation of Small Group Presentation

RESPONSE TO THE SMALL GROUP PRESENTATION

1. Your awareness of what small groups can do for congregations:

	Unaware	Somewhat	Aware
Before the presentation:	1	2	3
After the presentation:	1	2	3

2. Your awareness of particular Lutheran concerns in using small groups:

	Unaware	Somewhat	Aware
Before the presentation:	1	2	3
After the presentation:	1	2	3

3. Your attitude toward expanding small group ministry at Zion Lutheran Church:

	Don't Expand	Possibly Expand	Definitely Expand
Before the presentation:	1	2	3
After the presentation:	1	2	3

4. What was the most helpful aspect of the presentation, if any?
5. What suggestions do you have to improve the presentation?
6. Do you think Zion should put together a task force to prepare recommendations for increasing small group activity?

YES

NO

UNDECIDED

APPENDIX 11 - Survey/Evaluation of Small Group Presentation: Data and Analysis

The following evaluation was presented on Sunday, March 27. It was given after the members were given a presentation on the background and benefits of small groups in Lutheran congregations. There were 31 members present¹. The results and analysis of the survey are presented in italicized type and double-spaced within the text of the survey.

1. Your awareness of what small groups can do for congregations:

	Unaware	Somewhat	Aware
Before the presentation:	1	2	3
After the presentation:	1	2	3

<i>Results:</i>	<i>Before</i>	<i>After</i>	<i>Number Of Responses</i>	
	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>0</i>	
	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1</i>	
	<i>3</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>9 respondents unmoved</i>
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>	
	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>18 respondents moved one level</i>
	<i>1</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>3 respondents moved two levels</i>

Responses indicate that even before the presentation many (17) were somewhat aware of what small groups can do for congregations. One quarter (8) indicated awareness; while only 5 responded as unaware. This is not surprising for the adult Bible class which is made up of many very active members of Zion, a few of whom are in small groups.

The presentation did prove to be effective in increasing awareness, as 18 respondents moved up one level and another 3 moved up two levels. Only one person who could have potentially increased in awareness failed to do so.

2. Your awareness of particular Lutheran concerns in using small groups:

¹ March 27, 2005 was Easter Sunday and Bible class attendance was down somewhat because of the holiday. However, because this survey is designed to measure the effectiveness of the presentation I believe the lower number of participants does not negatively affect the results.

	Unaware	Somewhat	Aware
Before the presentation:	1	2	3
After the presentation:	1	2	3

<i>Results:</i>	<u>Before</u>	<u>After</u>	<u>Number Of Responses</u>	
	1	1	0	
	2	2	2	
	3	3	4	<i>6 respondents unmoved</i>
	1	2	5	
	2	3	11	<i>16 respondents moved one level</i>
	1	3	8	<i>8 respondents moved two levels</i>

Only 4 respondents indicated that prior to the presentation they had a good awareness of Lutheran concerns in using small groups. Almost half (13) were not aware of these concerns at all! Another 13 were only somewhat aware.

The presentation succeeded in increasing awareness of Lutheran concerns with regard to small groups. It made three quarters of the respondents (24) more aware. Sixteen moved up one level, while another 8 moved two levels. Only 2 people who could have increased in awareness did not do so.

3. Your attitude toward expanding small group ministry at Zion Lutheran Church:

	Don't Expand	Possibly Expand	Definitely Expand
Before the presentation:	1	2	3
After the presentation:	1	2	3

<i>Results:</i>	<u>Before</u>	<u>After</u>	<u>Number Of Responses</u>	
	1	1	0	
	2	2	2	
	3	3	11	<i>13 respondents unmoved</i>
	1	2	2	
	2	3	13	<i>15 respondents moved one level</i>
	1	3	1	<i>1 respondent moved two levels</i>

After the presentation 25 of 30 respondents indicated they desire to "definitely expand" small group ministry at Zion. Eleven of these indicated they already felt that

way before the presentation. Just over half of the people indicated the presentation increased their desire to expand groups at Zion. Following the presentation there were no respondents who were not for expansion.

4. What was the most helpful aspect of the presentation, if any?

Responses:

visual presentation (4 responses) // breaking down reason for small groups // explained in detail // hearing about "six week" groups // importance of small-group studies // remember to connect with Word and Sacrament // understanding all the options for our congregation // seeing how small groups can benefit Lutherans // doctrinal differences in other groups // books need to be written for the LC-MS // results of our local survey // the application to Zion (also the graphics) // showing the importance for spiritual nurture for both lay people and our spiritual leader (pastor) // listen first // didn't really know anything about small groups // showing progress in moving forward to accomplish small groups as a reality // the different approaches that have worked // increased awareness of small group activity

These responses indicate a large variety of helpful aspects of the presentation. The only consistent comments, however, were with regard to visual presentation (4). Yet, many of the comments tended to relate to theological concerns. Based on these responses and those given to question 2 above, it appears that understanding the theological issues was the most helpful part of the presentation for this group.

5. What suggestions do you have to improve the presentation?

Responses:

give more time than 20 minutes for explanation and discussion (2 responses) // open presentation to those not in small groups // accentuate your conclusion // have people involved in small groups witness (testify to the benefits)

Only 5 people gave suggestions for improvement. However, they suggestions are worth noting. I believe there would have been more respondents indicate a need for

more discussion time if I had not stressed that I was intentionally limiting the time for now, but that we would likely return to this subject later.

6. Do you think Zion should put together a task force to prepare recommendations for increasing small group activity?

<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>UNDECIDED</u>
28	0	3

Based on the overwhelming support for putting together a task force to prepare recommendations for increasing small group activity at Zion, there is a clear mandate to move forward with this next step.

Conclusion:

The fact that this was an anonymous evaluation indicates there should be no reason to doubt the veracity of these results. It should be considered, however, that this represents a group of people who are very dedicated to spiritual growth. Therefore, it should not be expected that the entire population of Zion will be this favorable to small group expansion. That determination is better made using the results of the congregation-wide survey (Appendix 4). This data is more helpful in evaluating the effectiveness of the Power Point presentation in its goals of increasing awareness of small group benefits and potential theological concerns.

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