

Lake Cities Community Church
Pastor Craig Schill
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Small Groups: Big Impact!

Tammy and I had not been away for years, and we needed a break. The problem is that we could not afford a break. And then the phone call came. The person offered us a free vacation in San Antonio. Three days and two nights, plus food vouchers. It was as if God Himself was calling.

All that was required of us... is that we sat through a couple hour time-share presentation... Now I know what a time-share presentation is, and that there would be some pressure to buy – I had said “no” to all previous offers – but we really needed a break.

...However I can tell you – these people took high-pressure sales to the next level. It had never been so hard to say “no.” They used all the best sales techniques. They pressured without apology. They anticipated every objection with a persuasive response. They had three people working us over, during a several hour period. Like tag-team wrestlers, wearing us down with better and better deals. Our only saving grace at the time was an empty bank account. We must have said “no” 50 times, before they sadly agreed to let us out of the room - and then as we were heading out the door, there was one last person, who offered us a final package that was even more affordable and – they were practically giving the timeshare to us – and we said “no” one last time. What an experience!

You may not have known it, but this morning you have entered into a timeshare presentation. I would love to persuade you – not to buy into a hotel or resort - but to buy into a Community Life Group. A true “time share” - for there is no money involved – only

the *sharing of your time* with other Christians. I would love this morning, to anticipate your objections and overcome them, and to make it hard for you to say “no” to small group ministry.

My strategy this morning is first to explore the theology of small group ministry. Second, to look at the history of small groups over time, and third we will come to application.

THEOLOGY

Let's begin with theology and the question “**why**” do we have Community Life Groups in our church? Community Life Groups or CLGs are our small group ministry. It is vital that we continually ask the “why” question because small groups easily fall into that category of things that we automatically feel churches are “suppose to do.”

In answering the “why” question, many people go to Scripture and point out example of small groups of people in various stories. For example, one person I read pointed out that Noah went on the ark with his family – BINGO – an early small group! Or Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego together in captivity in Babylon – another small group! Even God, someone point out, exists in the community of the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. A divine small group.

But this does NOT seem to me to be to be sufficient evidence to justify what we call small group ministry. Merely the existence of small groups in the Bible does not mandate their use in the church, does it? There is a difference in description and prescription. Sometimes the Bible is just describing reality, not prescribing a command to follow.

The closest, I believe, we come to a mandate for small group ministry in the Bible is Jesus' calling of the 12 disciples. The disciples were with Jesus for three years as he taught and shaped them. And then, just before Jesus ascended into heaven he said, "Now you go and make disciples..." But even there – are we to copy what Jesus did exactly? Taking 12 individuals into our homes for a three year residential program? No – that is not the point. Discipleship can take on many different forms. One-on-one, small group, large group.

And so, it is my conclusion that there is no biblical mandate to do small group ministry. Does it surprise you that I would say that? Aren't I trying to persuade you to buy into small groups? But there is no bible passage that I can find that says that the church **must** organize itself in small units of believers for this or that purpose. Or, to say it another way, a church that does not have small group ministry is not a church in sin. Do you see what I am saying? It is not a moral imperative, to have or to be in a small group.

Well then, back to my question; WHY do we have Community Life Groups – here at Lake Cities? Let me answer that question now and give to you what I believe to be a strong theological reason for why we do what we do with CLG ministry. I will read some verses now from the Bible. Not about Daniel, Or Noah, or the 12-disciples... but about you and me.

The Bible says: "Be at peace with **one another**." (Mark 9:50) "Love **one another**, even as I have loved you." (Jn 13:34). "Be devoted to **one another** in brotherly love." (Rom 12:10). "Give preference to **one another** in honor." (also Rom 12:10). "Let us not judge **one another**." (Rom 14:13). "Accept **one another**." (Rom 15:7). "Admonish **one another**." (Rom 15:14). "Serve **one another**." (Gal 5:13). "Bear **one another's** burdens." (Gal 6:2). "Be kind to **one another**." (Eph 4:32). "Regard **one another** as more important than yourselves." (Phil 2:3). "Comfort **one another**." (1 Thess 4:18). "Encourage **one**

another.” (1 Thess 5:11). “Stimulate **one another** to love and good deeds.” (Heb 10:24).
“Confess your sins to **one another** (Js 5:16), and pray for **one another.**” (Js 5:16). “Be
hospitable to **one another** without complaint.” (1 Pet 4:9). And we could go on and on.

These verses DO constitute moral imperatives, commands for how we are to treat one another in the church – love, serve, be kind, bear burdens, comfort , confess, pray for one another and so on.

And the question facing church leaders on a practical level is “WHEN.” When will we have the time to care for one another in this way? When will you have time to hear about the burdens someone is caring, so you can help care for them? Probably not during the two-minute meet and greet. When do you have the opportunity to put up your hand and say, “I am in pain. I am depressed. I am hurting and I don’t know what to do!” Probably not while stacking food at the Needy Children’s food pantry. When do we have time to really listen, and talk and pray and interact with one another?

At Lake Cities – the specific time designed for deepening relationships is in our CLGs. The worship service is designed for us to worship God. Outreach events are designed for us to share God’s love with others. Sunday School is designed to equip us to live the Christian Life. Community life Groups are designed to give us time and opportunity to love one other. To go deeper with one another.

Now of course love is not limited to small groups by any means. Care and meaningful relationships can and should occur in other settings as well. But at least we know that in this one place. In a safe setting with people committed to you. A place where confidentiality is understood and trust is built – we can begin to fulfill the one-another

passages of Scripture – and that, to me, is the theological and biblical reason why CLGs are so important.

Why should you be involved in a CLG? **Because this is our time-share.** When we have and take time to share with one another in Christian love. That is the primary goal and purpose.

HISTORY

Let's turn now from theology to history. Saddleback Community Church's small group training starts with this quote: "Through the history of the church, small groups have played a vital role. From the time of Christ to today, these values have changed countless lives and helped the church to grow and reach thousands while at the same time give the closeness of a well knitted community." – Saddleback Community Church.

Now I will admit that prior to preparing this sermon I had given very little thought to the history of small groups. But I found the study to be fascinating and compelling. Let me give you some examples.

A Lutheran pastor Philip Jakob Spencer, in 1663, had a church ministry and his small group ministry was described this way: "He gathered in his own home a group for the cultivation of the Christian life through the discussion of the Sunday sermons, prayer, and the study of the Bible (Latourette, 1975:895). Back in 1663 they were doing sermon response questions – I love that! Why for the cultivation of the Christian life. His groups included both prayer and Bible study.

Another example is The Puritans, both in England and in America. They were also big supporters of small group ministry. Diana Bennett, at Christianity Today's website Smallgroups.com writes: The Puritans called their small groups "private meetings." They

were most effective for developing an individual's spirituality. Meeting at least weekly, there were several reasons for these gatherings. (1) In such a small group, Christians could more easily express "love for one another" (2) As a community of prayer, the group could exercise "earnest prayer for the Church." (3) By "timely exhortation" members could apply the Gospel to others. (4) The groups gave members the opportunity to engage in "instructing and teaching one another." (5) They could be a means of God's grace "in comforting those that be sad" or in mourning.

I can visualize the puritan leaders asking the same question I did. **When** do we have time to and opportunity to love one another, to pray for one another, to exhort one another, to instruct one another and to comfort one another? Yes – in a small group setting. I am told that early snack sign up sheets were also found with this manual for small group ministry.

One more example - John Wesley was the founder of Methodism, but did you know that small groups were key to his success? Diana Bennett again: "Wesley challenged each small group with the key principles of New Testament Christianity: personal growth, accountability, and spiritual stewardship, doing so by "bearing one another's burdens" and "speaking the truth in love." Wesley made sure every believer was engaged in a small group, and through this powerful movement, the English society was largely transformed."

When you join your CLG, you are not joining something that has only been around since the 1970's, but you are joining an expression of church ministry that God's people have found helpful for hundreds of years! Again, where is the best place, according to Wesley can we intentionally bear one another's burdens and love one another personally?

He required everyone in his churches to be in a small group. And that is my goal for this year as well, 100% participation.

APPLICATION

Which leads us now to application. Who can guess my application? No surprise there - Join a Community Life Group! Now we have had good participation in our small group ministry over the years, about 80%, and I thank God for that. Most church big or small, strive to break 50% participation. This is our fifth year doing small groups and I thank God for the impact our small groups have had.

Let me explain in more detail what I am asking from you, as you consider joining. First – I'm asking for some of your time, and this is probably the major reason why people do not sign up. We are all busy, there is no doubt about that. Here is your commitment. CLG's normally meet twice a month and they usually meet for two hours, which is about a four-hour commitment each month more or less. Now because we don't meet in the summer, this commitment is about 8 months long. 8 months x 4 hours a month. I am asking for a 32-hour commitment. Compared to 8,760 total hours in a year, this is actually a fairly small commitment, but the benefits can be significant and eternal.

I hope that now you are ready to take this little form and fill it in. As I read the leaders, please stand. The Agape group is co-lead by Micah and Rhonda Foster and Chuck and Terry McDonough. The Ahava group is being led by Ali and Judy Master. The Charis group is being led by Tammy and I. The Hased group is being led by Allen and Cindy

Johnson, and the Koinonia group is being led by Malcolm McGregor. Descriptions of the groups are in your bulletins, any specific questions can be directed to the group leaders.

Can we thank our CLG leaders now?

Conclusion

Tammy and I really wanted to buy that timeshare. We like the idea of timeshares, but we just couldn't afford it – the price was too high. Involvement in a time-share doesn't cost anything – just your time and a willingness to share your life with others.