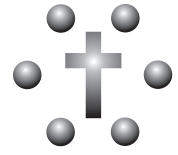




# Starting and Coordinating Small Groups

## Quick Start Guide 2



This resource sheet is for Ministers and Kirk Sessions or for any person or group delegated by the Kirk Session to either start or coordinate small groups. There is a definite need for someone or a group of people to perform this role. This resource aims to give some pointers to help perform these tasks acknowledging that we may plant the seed to start groups and water them but God makes them grow (1 Corinthians 3:6).

### Sowing the seeds: starter ideas for small groups

- Decide the purpose of the groups – are they to be home groups, church based groups, evangelistic groups (e.g. Alpha or Christianity Explored), specialist groups (e.g. GriefShare) or a combination of these.
- Evangelistic groups normally start from scratch.
- Specialist groups start when a specific need is recognised – leaders must be trained specifically for these groups.
- Home groups often require the most effort to get going. Here are some ideas – you could try one or all of these:
  - ⇒ Start a **pilot group** with an already trained and experienced leader (this gets the ball rolling).
  - ⇒ Start several groups with trained and experienced leaders – read on for advice on coordinating.
  - ⇒ Start a group or groups out of an evangelistic group – this works well because members will already be used to group discussion. Evangelistic type groups can also be used for people who have been Christians/church attenders for years but never really grown in their faith – announce them as a faith ‘refresher’.
- It is important when starting home groups to communicate clearly to the congregation how joining the group can benefit their walk with God and what happens when they meet – a personal testimony from someone who has been in a small group (perhaps when they were in another congregation) could be helpful.

### The right kind of soil: encouraging people to join small groups

There can be a reluctance to join a small group on the part of people who for years have been used to the more passive nature of a Sunday service or midweek. Some reasons for this with suggestions to answer them are:

- They don't see the need – explain this perhaps using the resource ‘Why Small Groups?’ – use real life stories.
- They are afraid to reveal their theological/biblical ignorance – this is why programmes like Alpha which do not demand extensive biblical knowledge on the part of the members are a useful starting point.
- They are afraid to pray out loud (a very common fear)- when announcing the groups make sure it is emphasised that there is no expectation to do this (but hopefully group members will grow in this area).
- They don't like the fact that something other than being passive is being asked of them – when promoting the groups, teaching on true discipleship and the joy as well as the challenge of growing in faith in Jesus could help.

The points above highlight the need for small groups for spiritual growth. Those who become members of the first groups are showing godly courage in doing so in a way that is counter to the prevailing culture. Once groups gain momentum it will become the norm to be in one and people will wonder why they were reluctant in the first place – sometimes people who are most resistant to small groups becomes their greatest advocates!

## Water regularly: encouraging and managing growth of small groups

Once one or two groups have started how are more formed? Setting a target, for example, of having 75% of those who attend Sunday morning services in home groups could be helpful. Here are some pointers on growing groups:

- Pray! It is God who gives the growth.
- A much advocated idea is that a home group can grow and then divide into two and then divide again. This sounds wonderful in theory but doesn't necessarily work in practice. To increase the effectiveness of this try:
  - ⇒ Making sure potential new leaders are being equipped in existing groups
  - ⇒ Keeping close friends together in the new groups to lessen the trauma of dividing
  - ⇒ Encourage dividing in not less than two years and sooner than four – too soon and the group doesn't grow in depth of relationships and too long and it becomes harder to divide.
- Often it is better just to start new groups although these may require leaders who have been equipped in groups that are already running.
- One Presbyterian congregation took the radical step of stopping and then re-forming groups when they became too cliquy! Training leaders and communicating the purpose of groups can avoid this (see below).
- If it is planned to re-start or to make major changes make sure that groups are informed well in advance!

## Tending the garden: maintaining healthy small groups

Some signs of unhealthy small groups are: being cliquy, a leader or group at odds with congregational leadership, a lack of growth or desire for evangelism/mission, an emphasis on social activities, Bible study but no prayer or pastoral care, a leader who teaches unhelpful theology, a lack of openness in group sharing, etc. (the opposites of these are signs of vibrant Christ centred groups). This is not an exhaustive list but raises the question of how unhealthy signs can be prevented or cured. Oversight of small group leaders is essential. Some suggestions are:

- Having **two** leaders not one per group (perhaps one has the main responsibility for Bible study and the other for pastoral care or alternatively they could share Bible study by taking it on alternative weeks).
- Having an **elder** in every small group (not necessarily in leadership although it should be noted that elders should be able to teach – 1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:9) – and having every elder in a small group.
- Providing initial and regular on-going **training** for leaders in pastoral care, leadership and teaching the Bible.
- Providing **support** to leaders through regular meetings with the person or group of people responsible for small groups where leaders can share their concerns, be prayed for and given direction where necessary.
- Making sure that every group leader is **equipping potential new leaders** and allowing group members **to test and exercise their gifts** in leading Bible study, showing hospitality (encourage meeting in homes other than the group leader's), pastoral care, intercessory prayer, worship, evangelism, etc.
- If necessary **exercising church discipline** by removing a leader if they refuse to correct erroneous and harmful teaching and/or are not willing to rectify serious pastoral harm that they have caused.
- Having a rule of **avoiding talking about church issues** in groups.

For further information on equipping group leaders see the resource 'Leading a Small Group' as well as the other specific resources on Bible study, pastoral care, etc.