

The Importance of Mid-size and Small Groups in the Church  
Dr. Jerry Nelson

It has been my belief and my confidence for many, many years that you men and women, and the others who lead our adult communities and small groups, are the bread and butter, the meat and potatoes, the blocking and tackling, the major means by which the mission and vision of this church is carried out.

If that sounds like flattery, I assure you it is not.

As you would expect, I will never depreciate the role of preaching in the lives of God's people.

But it is apparent from God's Word that the Spirit of God uses many means to bring us into conformity to Christ's character.

Our mission is not unique to this church – it is the mission given to every church.

Yes, it is often stated in different ways but they all address the same goal – making disciples, or as we say it, “helping people become faithful followers of Jesus Christ.”

**Over many years my constant question has been how to help make that happen.**

I know I have told this story in too many settings but I know of no better to illustrate a fear of mine:

A man was showing his new shoe manufacturing plant to a friend of his. He showed him the warehouse with the finest raw materials, the production line with state-of-the-art equipment, the packing and shipping department, the management offices and introduced him to the brightest and most talented staff every assembled for such a task. After seeing the magnificent facilities and equipment and talent, the friend asked if he could see some of the shoes they had manufactured. The man replied, “Oh, we haven't made any shoes!”

God forbid that we should invest thousands of hours and millions of dollars in what we call “church” and make no “shoes!” God forbid that

we should invest hours and dollars for nothing of eternal value or for nothing that the local Kiwanis club, health club or YMCA could do cheaper and better.

Philippians 2:14-16 “Do everything without complaining or arguing, <sup>15</sup> so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe <sup>16</sup> as you hold out the word of life--in order that I may boast on the day of Christ **that I did not run or labor for nothing.**

As servant-leaders among the people of God we forever bear a great responsibility:

Galatians 4:19 “My dear children...I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you,

Again, How do we help make that happen?

Yes, it is as simple as teach the word and pray.

But organizing the church for maturity and mission, as the first disciples found, is a bit more complex than that.

For centuries new churches have looked to the earliest church to get an idea of not only what to do but even how to do it.

And so we read Paul’s instruction to several churches about ethics, about church structure, about problem-solving, about worship and so on.

Many years ago I developed a philosophy of ministry in the broadest terms:

Jesus is King, His Kingdom is people and His method for making disciples is people.

Jesus is King and his Word is truth.

His Kingdom is people - it is not yet geography but human hearts and lives.

and His method for making disciples is people. (not programs, or texts alone, but people! His Kingdom is people

Another way I have said that is: The Spirit of God uses the Word of God in the context of the People of God to shape our lives into the image of Christ.

## **But how is that worked out in a real church?**

Acts 2:42-47 “They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. <sup>43</sup> Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All the believers were together and had everything in common. <sup>45</sup> Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. <sup>46</sup> Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

What we observe about the structure of the ministry is that the believers met together regularly in at least two settings:  
in the larger congregation in the temple and in smaller groups in their homes.

Now no one that I know attempts to build from this passage a dogmatic theory about how church must be conducted but it is illustrative of what even common sense, and now group dynamics teach us.

There are things that more likely happen in larger groups and others that happen more likely in smaller groups.

Many years ago Peter Wagner wrote an article entitled, as I recall it, **“Celebration, Congregation and Cell.”**

In that title he captured for me a structure that I saw could fit the various needs of people in a local church.

## **CELEBRATION**

Yes, I know there is something very special about worship in an intimate setting with a few friends but few would argue that worship in a large group has a power to inspire and to strengthen our faith.

Celebration is largely directed toward God.

We come together to enhance the celebration, to encourage each other in our praise, and to make the most significant statement we can make to our God about our love and thanksgiving for and to him.

## **CELL**

At the other end of the size spectrum is “cell.”

And most of us know the advantages of the intimacy of the small group.

The willingness to **speak frankly** of our own lives and into the lives of others is made possible in a small group that won't happen with when too many are present.

In the small group there is time to discuss **how the Scripture applies** to our particular situations.

**Prayer** can be more specific because the trust level can be higher.

## **MANY CHURCHES DO ONLY WORSHIP (CELEBRATION) AND SMALL GROUPS (CELL)**

Unlike the past with Worship, Sunday School and Wednesday night prayer meeting, many churches have moved entirely to Celebration and Cell – to the larger corporate worship experience and the smaller fellowship/Bible study groups.

## **IMPORTANCE OF MID-SIZE GROUPS**

But I think Wagner hit on something very important when he also described the “congregation” size gathering of God's people.

**Social advantage** – difficult to meet in the large Celebration gathering; and difficult to meet many others in the small group setting.

The CONGREGATION size (15-60) group gives us access to enough other people to find those with whom we can identify and build an authentic relationship.

### **Bible Teaching advantage**

Earlier I said I believe the Spirit of God uses the Word of God in the Context of the People of God to form us into the image of Christ.

The teaching of the Word is central to that.

### **Word-intake has been greatly reduced:**

When I was a child it was common for a Christian to be engaged in the reading or teaching of the word at least 5 or more times per week:

The Worship-Sermon, Sunday School, Sunday Evening, Wednesday evening and in his own family or personal study.

Today in churches with no Sunday School, no Sunday evening service, no mid-week service and few involved in small groups and in family or even personal study of the word, engagement with the Word is reduced to one time (if the church they attend teaches the Bible).

We need mid-sized groups that focus first of all on the teaching of the word.

### **EACH SIZE GROUP BRINGS A STRENGTH**

Experience has taught me that all three – Celebration, Congregation and Cell – give a fuller experience to encourage spiritual growth – spiritual formation.

At the risk of over generalizing, I see each of the three settings strongest in certain ways:

- Celebration –Worship in the context of the Proclaimed Word.
- Congregation – Teaching of the word line-upon-line and precept-upon-precept.
- Cell – True spiritual fellowship in the light of the Word.

### **YOU ARE FRONT-LINE SOLDIERS IN BATTLE FOR SOULS**

I began by saying in other words that you are the front-line soldiers in our battle for people's souls.

In your mid-size and small groups:

- You can address people in **interactive** ways that I cannot in the Celebration setting.
- You can **develop relationships** with people and encourage others to do so – the kind of relationships that will allow for spiritual conversation.
- You can **know people** in ways that allow you to pray for them, not generally, but specifically.
- You can **know where people are in their relationship with Jesus** and encourage and challenge them.

### **ONE-ON-ONE MENTORING OR JUST FRIENDSHIP**

I would add to the three size groups already mentioned, yet a fourth:

One-on-one!

What is needed is for us to encourage more and more of these relationships.

I have observed through the years the kind of spiritual ministry you have had and are having in the people of this church.

How many stories need I tell to convince you of the importance of your week-in-and-week-out service to God's people?

I know something of **the hours some of you**, probably many of you, **have spent in crisis intervention** as a marriage was falling apart, a job was lost or a child was dying.

I know something of how **you kept faith alive by your love and prayers.**

**I know men** who will attest to the vital role you played in their remaining faithful to Christ and to their wives.

I know **women who will confide that were it not for your teaching**, your prayers, and your counsel they would have despaired.

**TESTIMONIES OF GOD'S WORK IN YOUR LIFE THOROUGH OTHERS!**

**How many of you would stand** and give testimony to the importance and power of others in your spiritual life?