

NATURAL CHURCH DEVELOPMENT
QUALITY CHARACTERISTIC VI

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“HOLISTIC SMALL GROUPS”

Since I have been with you here in Coraopolis, I have been impressed a great deal by several of the groups contained in our church. It has become evident to me what these groups mean in your life of faith – whether they are musical groups, study groups, service groups, or association groups. A significant part of who we are as Christians is formed in us by the groups in which we live and work and play.

Indeed, Christian Schwartz’s research in growing and declining churches all over the world has conclusively shown that continuous multiplication of small groups is a universal church growth principle. Furthermore, it has also disclosed what life in these small groups should be like if they are to have a positive effect on both quality and numerical growth within a church. They must be holistic groups which go beyond just discussing Bible passages to applying the biblical message to daily life. In such groups, members are able to bring up those issues and questions that are immediate personal concerns.

Holistic small groups are the natural place for Christians to learn to serve others – both inside and outside the group – with their spiritual gifts. The planned multiplication of small groups is made possible through the continual development of leaders as a by-product of the normal group life. The meaning of the term “discipleship” becomes practical and doable in the context of holistic small groups: the enhancement of the Christian life, not just the rote learning of abstract concepts. (Aside-Covenant Discipleship groups – which you will hear more about as this year goes on – do precisely this!)

One result of their research is highly provocative. They presented the following statement to the pastors they surveyed: “It is more important for us that someone be involved in a small group than attend church.” They asked them to indicate the response that best describes the situation in their church (Aside – Quite honestly, I would not agree with that statement. I believe that attendance and participation in the weekly worship of God is the single most important responsibility of a Christian.) Yet, in fact, their research showed that the “no” answer (my answer) was found in both growing and declining, in qualitatively above-average and below-average congregations – In fact, it was the overwhelming majority response in all congregations. So, we can be sure that a church’s answering “yes” to this statement is not a church growth principle, and therefore, it does not determine the quality index of a church. It is a radical, fringe position. And yet – if we take a closer look at the results of their research, we notice that this “radical fringe” position is much more common in churches with above-average quality than in churches with below-average quality.

This means that there is a greater tendency to give small groups priority over worship service attendance (which is, in itself, a strange alternative) in churches with a high quality index and in churches that are growing numerically.

This still does not make the priority of small groups over worship services a church growth principle, for a principle is something that a church should not neglect under any circumstances. Nonetheless, it allows us to see the level of importance given to small groups in growing churches: they are not just a supplement, like a nice but dispensable hobby.

No, much of the essence of true church life is worked out in small groups. In fact, their research confirms that the larger a church becomes, the more decisive the small group principle will be with respect to further growth.

So, in order to give proper weight to the strategic importance of small groups, the Natural Church Development folks have developed nearly all of their church growth materials so that they can be used in small group contexts. They have found out that there is an enormous difference, for example, between our church's leaders discussing "evangelism", "loving relationships", or "gift-oriented ministry", and having each Christian, while integrated into a small group, go through a process in which he or she experiences the meaning of these terms as they are practically expressed in the life of the group.

In summary, according to this understanding, holistic small groups are the pillars of church growth.