

# WHY JOIN A SMALL GROUP?

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There has been a lot of encouragement here at Stanley Park Baptist for people to join a small group. We Seniors—and I speak as a Septuagenarian—don't adapt well to change. We belong to that class who say, "We've never done it that way before!" And that applies doubly to the way we do church. Unless there is a pretty good reason, we're not about to change!



Let me tell you, my friend, there are many good reasons for becoming part of a small group in the church, and I'll lay out some of them for you. I'll also tell you what you can expect if you join a small group. I'll start with the second first.

## **All You Ever Wanted to Know, But Were Too Embarrassed to Ask!**

While we hear a lot about small groups—Pastor Peter has even preached about them—they remain an elusive and mysterious matter. Before I join, I want to know what I'm getting into! So, what can I expect if I join a small group?

## **What is a "Small Group"?**

A small group is a group of at least four adults—preferably six to ten—and no more than a dozen, who get together for fellowship, worship, sharing, and learning on a regular basis. Most small groups meet in a home (although, on occasion, a small group may use a church room). Sometimes it is the same home each time; sometimes, people take turns hosting it (it's really up to the group!).

There are generally some ground rules by which the group operates. They include:

1. *Everyone attends every meeting unless providentially hindered.* That is, the group takes precedence over other things going on. It is *not* something I attend if there's nothing else going on! Groups usually meet on a weekly basis.
2. *What happens in the group stays in the group.* It may not be Las Vegas, but confidentiality is the name of the game. Gossip spells death to a well-functioning small group. People need to be able to be open and share what is going on in their life without worrying about it being broadcast all

over the area (and especially throughout the church!). Judgmentalism is forbidden.

3. *Each group member prays regularly for every other group member.* Prayer is foundational to small groups, just as it is to all of the Christian life. While it is impossible to pray regularly for everyone in the church (even if it is a church of only thirty or forty), it is possible and vital to pray for the six to twelve group members.

4. *The group is always open to new members.* While it takes time to assimilate new members in the group, it is the primary focus of the group—to reach out to and include new folks.

5. *The group is not an end in itself, but only a means.* The purpose of a small group is to multiply (or, at least, add). People should be attracted by the winsomeness of the small group and desire to be a part of it. The camaraderie, help, prayer, etc., is a means to fulfilling the purpose. Once the group reaches a large enough number, it should divide into two groups.

### **What do small groups do?**

There are basically five aspects to small group life. They include: fellowship, Bible study, sharing, prayer, and mission. While not all five elements may be present at every meeting, the majority should be there, and all should be present on at least a bi-weekly basis.

☑ **Fellowship.** Fellowship in popular parlance is a time for having fun together and for sharing enjoyment. It may be food, beverage (non-alcoholic), on occasion a meal, games, ice-breakers, etc. It helps people to relax and prepares them to come together for the serious stuff.

☑ **Bible study.** There are an abundant number of studies on the market, but it is best if the various small groups in a church study the same material (that has been approved by knowledgeable leadership). It may be a Bible book study, a topical study, or a doctrinal study, etc. Make sure that it is acceptable to the church's leadership and that it is not a product of some televangelist (of whom many are not following orthodox biblical faith, and many others ride particular theological hobby-horses that are not profitable for Christian life and practice). If it is a Bible book study, it would be helpful to have church leadership provide a list of supportive resources both on-line and in book form to supplement whatever material is being used.

☑ **Sharing.** A vital (must be) weekly aspect of the small group meeting is sharing. It is important to the well-being of participants that each

one be empowered to share concerns, fears, illnesses, problems with family members, job difficulties, and so on without being shut down (beware of responding to someone with “I know just what you're feeling!” That's a shut-down! Better to respond, “I'm so sorry to hear that. That's really tough!”).

☑ **Prayer.** The greatest number possible—preferably, all—should participate in prayer. Sentence, or brief paragraph, prayers are preferable to long, drawn-out prayers that travel over hill and dale until everyone is exhausted! A good resource with which people should become familiar is the book by Rosalind Rinker, *Prayer: Conversing with God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983). It can be had quite cheaply in used Christian bookstores. It is an excellent guide to group praying. Prayer should follow sharing.

☑ **Mission.** Mission is putting discipleship into practice. Its technical name is *praxis*. The group accomplishes a helpful project together. It may be as small as a fund-raiser for a local charity (such as the pregnancy crisis centre, food bank, or sharing with another small group in planning a short-term mission trip internationally). It may be initiating and sustaining a ministry within the church. The possibilities are endless. Make sure that you leave lots of time for planning, and get the proper church approvals needed.



## Why Join a Small Group?

There are innumerable benefits to joining a small group—even at your venerable age! Let's consider some of them.

☑ **You will feel much more a part of the family of God.** It is possible to attend a church service every Sunday and never make a friend—certainly not in-depth friends. It is impossible to attend a small group on a weekly basis and not make a number of friends! Many folks who participate in small groups maintain that a major benefit has been the number of deep and abiding friendships that have been achieved. As one man puts it: “We have become closer than family!”

You will discover that your needs and difficulties are not unique—we're all have problems. It's good to be aware that others are enduring

similar troubles, or have survived them and been taught spiritual principles in the process. We are taught to love each another, to support each another, to pray for each another, to accept each another, to bear each another's burdens, and to stimulate and challenge each another. God does not intend anyone to live a solitary Christian life.

☑ **You will learn more about the Bible and understand it more fully.** If you have ever paid sharp attention to a sermon or biblical teacher, you have probably had questions that popped into your head, leading you to want to ask, “But what about . . . ?” or something similar. And of course, you couldn't ask!

You will find such opportunities in your small group Bible studies and discussions. Questions are invited. And you will be challenged to put what you learn into practice.

☑ **You will be able to make a difference in others' lives.** If you only receive from people, then you miss at least 50% of God's blessing on your life. Never forget that Paul reminds us—and this was not in regard to money—the weak, that “we must help words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (Acts 20:35). When you start to use the Spirit-given abilities you have received as a believer in order to help other people, then your Christian life will grow full and joyous. Your small group is the context in which such giving may occur.

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☑ **Small groups are biblical, historical, and practical.** Remember that Jesus himself accomplished his most important ministry through small groups. There was the band of the Twelve. He mentored them with both verbal and practical instruction. They formed the foundation not only of that first church in Jerusalem, but of the universal Church. There was the band of three—Peter, James, and John—who were even more his intimates. Peter and John provided the initial leadership of that first church (until they were succeeded by James, Jesus' brother).

Many of the earliest churches were small groups meeting in homes or even—during times of persecution—in the catacombs (underground cemeteries). The initial Anabaptists in Switzerland met in homes, avoiding persecution by Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Reformed Church

leaders. John Wesley founded his very successful Methodist movement on small groups.

We are told by psychologists that small group learning is one of the best ways of communicating ideas to masses of people in a lasting way.

### **How to Join a SPBC Small Group**

If you would like to be involved in practical Christianity—in a context where you have mutual support, intimacy, and fun, along with solid training in the Christian faith and life—and if you want to be able to do this at a regular time that you find convenient (whether morning, afternoon, or evening, on a week-day or week-end), contact the Church Office at (519) 576-1100. Nidia will be happy to take your contact information and interests, and pass them along to one of our small group leadership. They will get in touch with you about joining one of our existing groups, or about becoming part of a new group. Don't be hesitant. As they say in the Nike commercials, “Just do it!” You'll be glad you did!