



A Co-Emphasis on Midsize & Small Groups – February 07

Many churches begin by doing one thing well, but have trouble doing well when they grow and diversify. The Chapel Hill Bible Church began well doing students. We began on the campus of the University of North Carolina in 1970 and quickly grew to several hundred students. Because the student needs for community were primarily met by campus organizations like Campus Crusade and InterVarsity, there wasn't a great outcry for fellowship by the beyond-college older crowd. They had their one classroom adult Sunday School, a few small groups, and 'large group', a mid-sized monthly community with open sharing, songs requested by the audience, and communion. The church tried geographic groups, but they by nature became more social than nurture.

When the Bible Church moved into their first facility in 1979 a rush of new people made it feel impersonal and we moved to an emphasis on small groups. Over the ensuing decades Sunday morning adult classes with Biblical topics have cycled through, but with three Sunday services and a hundred-space parking lot, children's space co-opted the adults. We have had evening classes with a curriculum emphasizing searching, discipling, serving, and leading. This has gleaned mixed results. Even with childcare and children's programs, few families attend. When we moved into a new facility in 2001, the awkward feeling of not knowing people and the sense of not knowing how to personally grow increased. And now growing children's Sunday program stymies growth for adults in midsize groups.

What to do? We are not canning our small and mid-sized groups. We are planning to meld them together. We recognize that mid-size groups offer the structure of curriculum and regularity, a place where people may be as personal as they desire or they may hover in the back row. And we know small groups have intimacy, opportunity to grow in knowledge, love and mission with Christ and each other. So how do we plan to do this?

- First of all, we are hiring a new Minister of Community Life to bring relationships and community into every aspect of our church life, from small groups to Sunday classes to standing committees to the sound team to Sunday Morning worship. We are excited in having a colleague dedicated to thinking and implementing in this area. My role, as Pastor of Spiritual Life, is to work with him enfolding spiritual transformation into personal and group life.
- Secondly, we will have adult classes on Sunday mornings and weeknights offer small groups out of their times together. Some have already done this (Young Adults have about a dozen small groups). For others this will be a new experience as they move from an exclusively content-driven class to add emphasis on relationships in the class and also in small groups. This seems to offer the best of both worlds with the blending of the strengths of medium and small groups.
- Lastly, we are experimenting with a curriculum within the small group sector that helps all participants to know the essentials of the Christian life, who God is, and the meaning of His Church. Using material from the Center for Church Based Training, one 12-week course would be expected during a calendar year in each small group. In doing this, we hope a common understanding and expectation is developed throughout our church.

Ask me in a year how it is going. My hope is that the by-line of this website will be lived out: 'Midsize groups with Small group options'. It seems to be the best of both worlds.

Randy Russell, Pastor for Spiritual Life, Chapel Hill Bible Church, Chapel Hill, NC