



Is there a Place for Midsize and Small Groups in (*Southern Baptist*) Sunday School – June/July 07

Whenever I took over the reigns of the 30 and 40 Something Coed group at Kings Baptist Church, I did so with fear and trepidation. The church and the group were fairly traditional. Also, my predecessor, Dave, had been instrumental in growing the group. He was well loved and a great communicator. My wife and I had joined and enjoyed being a part of the group during the previous year.

The group had about 45 persons each week and was well organized. Care groups were in place. New people were being invited and joining every month. Fellowships were planned monthly. I began developing some group leaders/apprentices.

Like many, the group had become content with the way things were. I saw the large number on the ministry list who were not attending regularly or at all. And I noticed that very few in the group were doing more than listening during each week's Bible study.

So after a month of praying over the group, I determined to stretch the group. I arrived early and arranged chairs into eight horseshoes (six chairs in an open-ended circle) in our gathering space. After fellowship and announcement time, I distributed two sets of four assignments and launched the lesson with an overview and questions. Then I asked the groups to choose a reporter/recorder and work on the assigned questions. Then I interspersed brief lecture with group reports.



After a couple of weeks, three group members asked me to go back to the old teaching style. I asked them to hang with me for four more weeks. At the end of six weeks, a couple of those who had asked me to stop the horseshoe groups, came to me and thanked me for teaching them how to do Bible study for themselves for the first time in their lives.

After four months of praying over the group, I realized that some liked the group to be large, but some really liked participating in the horseshoe groups (small groups). So I talked with two of the apprentices (who had facilitated group sessions in my absence) about leading a subgroup of the mother group. Following their prayer and acceptance, I announced to the group that we would be birthing two new groups.

Each of my former apprentices chose group members to serve as their apprentices, and after six months I left the mother group with a new apprentice to birth one of the two groups. My group began with eighteen. One of the apprentices began with twelve. And I placed an apprentice in charge of the mother group. He began with thirty. On our launch Sunday we already had 60. And horseshoes and good group organization continued.



This experience taught me several lessons. First, traditional Sunday School can offer many of the benefits of midsize groups and of small groups. Second, I realized the importance of teaching adults how to do individual (not just group) Bible study. Third, I realized that different people feel more comfortable in groups of different size. Fourth, I was reminded of the value of group and



apprentice multiplication. Fifth, I was reminded about the importance of prayer and dependence upon the Lord and his leadership.

Because I have come to believe that there is a place for midsize and small groups in Baptist Sunday School, I want to offer the following chart. There are several growth transition points between small groups and midsize groups where Sunday School can struggle for identity. A Sunday School group can choose to remain as a small group, but if the group chooses to grow, the center column of the chart can serve as an evaluation tool for potential areas of struggle.

Growth Transition Points at Which Sunday School Can Struggle for Identity

	Small Group**	Sunday School	Midsize Group**
Size	3-14	10-25	15-60
Scope & Depth of Relationships	Can function as extended family within church (Closer with fewer people)	Hangs on too long as an extended family	Can function as spiritual neighborhood within church (Ident. with more people)
Leadership	Small group leaders (i.e. host, care person, etc.)	Waits too long to enlist teams	Team-driven - Community leader w/ leadership team (i.e. care, teaching, socials)
Leader/Group Member Ratio	1/10 - Group leader with average small group around 10 people	Fails to enlist enough leaders to care for larger group	1/10 – Average midsize group has about 30 average with 50 on roster/5-6 team members
When & Where	Usually in homes during evenings, plenty of flexibility	Outgrows the ability of the average home to accommodate the group	Usually at the church w/worship services, some meeting off times or other locations
Identity	The group leader & group make up	Continues to be known by the leader's name	The group's name & group make up
Presentation method/style	Facilitating/discussion; practical & application	Fails to involve an increasing number of participants	Interactive-teaching/discussion; conceptual & application
Care	Provides care as needed; Will hear of more smaller opportunities	Begins to fail to respond because of failure to mobilize caregivers	Provides care as needed; More hands available due to size of group
Prayer	Usually is meaningful – more personal requests, everyone participates	Begins taking too much time for prayer requests	Designed to be meaningful (with the right leader) /Can be superficial (non-personal requests)
Length of group life	Several months to a few years	May struggle to survive due to poor/no transition	Designed to meet for many years
Assimilation	Open Groups: Most newcomers are invited by a group member – Can be awkward to those coming in w/o a connection	Starts not to notice when some members are absent; newcomers may join and not stay	Easy for newcomers to attend while already at church, plus a bigger group makes it easier to blend in
Intimacy Level	Can reach a family feel/ Personal & can be intimate	Cliques become barriers to	Community feel/friendly & social

		community as a whole	<i>Those also tied in small groups crossover→</i>
Atmosphere Room Set-up	Casual – Living room furniture in a circle	Stays too long in undersized space	Informal – usually in “fan shaped” rows or some at round tables
Reproducing Capabilities	Easier to reproduce, but must be strategic	Dealing with other struggles, may not reproduce	Harder to reproduce, must be strategic – takes more manpower and work
Outreach/ Evangelism	Some use “empty chair”, most do not see seekers attend – Targeted groups for seekers do much better	Does not notice relationships no longer draw new people; events are not yet planned	Must be intentional – Periodic outreach/social events provide opportunities to invite seekers
Serving/Ministry Projects	Sometimes encouraged by church leadership/might do periodic projects	Becomes inward focused and struggles to see needs outside of class	Usually encouraged by church leadership/should do projects

**Steve Lizzio is the author of this material in a handout entitled, *Comparison Chart: Midsized Groups vs. Small Groups* from his workshop “The Great Midsized vs. Small Groups Debate: Small Groups Options from within ABFs.

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