



## Four Revealing Limitations of Small Groups – June/July 08



I love small groups! As a matter of fact over the years an unwritten rule in our family has been, if you're a Lizzio, you're in a small group. I'm all for small groups! In the fruit of my personal ministry, there has been a purposeful balance of participation in both, midsize groups and small groups.

During 22 years of ministry I have seen an amazing small group movement rise up. In the midst of this journey, I have witnessed a segment of the American church swing significantly toward a "small-groups-only" mentality. I would like to unpack what I see as four limitations or weaknesses of small groups and/or small-group-only strategies ... and how midsize groups can be a great complement to small group ministries in the connecting and discipling of our people.

### **1. Small groups "come and go." Midsize groups can provide a broader identity for during, and in between times of small group life, plus they can provide another potential pool of future small group relationships.**

Willow Creek Community Church, a significant leader in the small group movement stated on their website in the context of their neighborhood model that small groups "come and go." They say that it is healthier to be a part of another body that is larger than the small group, yet smaller than the overall church body.

The Neighborhood Model allows for all expressions of spiritual growth, including small groups. There is power in a small gathering of people joining together for specific purposes and based on affinities. But small groups tend to come and go. The beauty of the Neighborhood Community is that as you come in and out of small group experiences, you are still part of a greater "place-based" community and you still belong, whether you are in a group or not.

- Willow Creek Community Church Website Fall 2007/Winter 2008 ([www.willowcreek.org](http://www.willowcreek.org))

I have had a similar experience with small groups. At the time of this writing, at Hope Church where I serve as the Pastor of Adult Ministries, we have 11 midsize groups and over 60 small groups of all kinds, with about half coming out of midsize groups. Although our midsize groups menu periodically has additions or subtractions, our small groups chart changes, at times, weekly!

Why do small groups tend to "come and go"?

First, most people get tired of being in the same group after a while (average small group life span has traditionally been about 2 years). Whether it is because the group has stagnated, the needs or availability of the members has changed or as what John Ortberg's book title implies, "*Everybody is Normal Until you get to Know Them*", as people get to know each other they find they don't mesh or they can get drained from the drama.

Let's face it; there can often be a shelf life to these relationships. (When there are only 10 people, there are not that many stories to be told). So new people should be added and that will change the dynamics of the group's make up. Yes in theory! But most groups very slowly add members and even fewer ever secure an apprentice to multiply the group, no matter how much we small group coaches encourage it. Most churches have a small percentage of "birthing" small groups that seem to reproduce. So a high percentage of groups just run their course and disband.

Second, many groups never move beyond going from the small group scheduled “meeting” to experiencing real ongoing relationships that gel “between the meetings.” So again, the “shelf life” kicks in again as after a while the group dissolves because of, for some, unmet expectations.

Third, some churches force their small groups to meet geographically. In an article entitled, “5 Small Group Myths”, David Womack’s Myth 2 is “Small groups unite the Christians in a neighborhood.” He states, “People form small groups around centers of common interests; they cluster socio-economically, not geographically.” Yet some churches are telling their people who and who not, their people can connect with by where they live. A larger church in the Cincinnati area went to a geographical small group model around the time I moved to the area. They dissolved most if not all their existing affinity-based small and midsize groups to get everyone in line. I witnessed this from a distance and sensed the pain and anger especially from singles that were flocking to our singles ministry.

Fourth, many groups in today’s world are starting out of “40 Day Campaigns” that recruit people into a six week commitment and then try to get them to stay together. But, many of these people did it either for church unity and/or because it was ONLY a six week commitment so even if the groups make an attempt to continue, many fizzle out. These groups are often started with mostly total strangers so they might not gel for the long term. Another challenge is the “40 day” groups that do decide to continue often struggle with the quality of leadership. Churches are instructed to pick people who are willing to host and can push “a button” of the DVD player. Then if they decide to continue they are herded into “cliff notes” training events or assigned to small group coaches for the long haul. The problem is many of these leaders are not ongoing small group leadership material! They either aren’t shepherds, or mature enough believers to handle the “people issues” or have the skills that are required to lead ongoing groups. Other leaders recruited are more than qualified to lead, but are already overcommitted, so they don’t continue as leaders.

So what happens when people leave their small groups or their group disbands? It usually takes a while to find another potential group. It can take even longer if they were part of a highly dysfunctional group or just had a bad experience or if they were in such a good group experience nothing else measures up.

This is where the belonging umbrella of midsize groups can kick in. At Hope Church in Cincinnati, we have found this to be true for small groups that come out of our midsize groups. The broader identity and belonging base of the midsize group provides an ongoing connection within the church body. These midsize groups can provide the stability, along with a broader pool of people that could be potential for another small group.

## **2. A Small-groups-only strategy leaves out the strength of the “neighborhood.” *Midsize groups fulfill the role of “spiritual neighborhoods” within the belonging and identity sub-structure of the church.***

The Lizzio family resides in Mason, Ohio, a city of about 30,000 people in the northern suburbs of Cincinnati. Our sports teams are the Mason Comets! Within Mason we live in the Tyler’s Station sub-division of about 50 to 60 homes and our street, Lisa Court has 13 houses. I do not know most people by name in the neighborhood, but I wave to everyone coming and going (a few don’t wave back, but I keep waving with a smile!) In Mason, when questioned where you live the standard answer is your sub-division name like Tyler’s Station or Whispering Woods.

America was built on neighborhoods! Of course in urban settings it’s “the hood.” It is interesting how the neighborhood has played a vital identity role within our towns and cities:

Neighborhoods are the building blocks of the community. Within a neighborhood, people form a shared identity, face many similar problems, and are often concerned about the same issues ... Some have established boundaries and formal neighborhood associations. Some are in areas referred to as the charter neighborhoods. Some are newly established developments. Each neighborhood is unique, with its own set of issues and priorities. Neighborhoods are facing a variety of concerns. The Charter neighborhoods may be dealing with aging housing stock. Newer neighborhood might have traffic problems. Beautification may be a concern. Whatever the issues, each

neighborhood needs a vehicle to address the issues so that the community is strengthened and protected.

“Why are Neighborhoods Important” on the Town of Jupiter website, [www.jupiter.fl.us](http://www.jupiter.fl.us)

“Small Group” churches leave out the neighborhood as they go from streets (small groups) to the whole town (worship services or the church directory). I really believe many people feel like strangers within their own churches especially as churches are getting larger and larger. Although some people probably could not verbalize what is missing, they feel the lack of connectedness.

A blog in June 2008 was addressing belonging issues of midsize groups in comparison to small groups and captured one women’s personal experience: (italics are mine)

I agree that it would be uncomfortable starting to go to a small group without having the ABF (*midsize group*) in between to go to. Our church has an ABF, and that is where my husband and I met other couples about the same age, with children about the same age as us, and have become friends with them. It made it easier to be comfortable to go to a smaller group. You also learn from people who have common lives about God and our life stage and our faith.

... Yes I do find that it helps me to know people better in a church with over 1,000 people, because the ABF’s are focused on ages, and you get to know people in your age range (*a lot more then 10!*). Also, if it was just the Worship Service being attended, I would not talk to as many people, or have the interaction with them that I get in the ABF. It would just be a quick “hello” in passing. Also, it helps to know more people then if I was only to attend a Care group, which ours consists of 5 couples.  
- Cassandra S.

Midsize groups averaging attendance of ideally 15 to 60 people function as “spiritual neighborhoods” within the church such as Faith Builders, Family Matters, and Intersect. They provide a level of identification with others either going through similar life stages and challenges or with a common desire for multi-generational relationships or even mutual passions for ministry. There is a sense of strength and durability to these groups as they often meet for many years.

My wife, Cheri, and I are a part of the GPS parents of teen’s midsize community that averages about 35 to 40 in attendance weekly. We are connected with over 40 couples/single parents of teens who identify under the GPS umbrella! We leverage the strength of this affinity-based community to handle our challenges of walking with Christ as we raise teenagers. We also belong to a small group of 6 couples from GPS that meets in homes twice a month for another level of care and ministry to one another. In a small-groups-only church we would probably only be relationally identified with the 5 or 6 couples. What an asset to have picnics, socials and participate in service projects (many hands to do ministry!) with a bunch of these parents of teens and their families!



**3. Small-groups-only churches, by default, devalue the spiritual gift of teaching. *Midsize groups nurture the spiritual gift of teaching and multiply its use within the church body.***

I came to a church that moved from a small-groups-only model, to valuing both, midsize groups and small groups. I arrived at Hope church about a year and a half after they started their midsize group strategy to help connect more people beyond the worship services into community experiences. What I found was a dearth of people who had the spiritual gift of teaching. A common church growth saying is “like attracts like.” This principle also works in reverse as in this case when churches that do not value a teaching ministry will not develop, nor attract teachers. Over the last several years we have had to rebuild this spiritual gift within our church culture.

“Teachers” are not attracted to small groups because these settings are not geared for teaching. As a matter of fact they can find the small group experience frustrating when it comes to Bible study. The gift of teaching wants to dissect the text to bring out deeper meanings, wrestle with words and phrases, and help people understand how the Scriptures are to be lived out. It is a

spiritual gift that helps to equip the church in its understanding of truth, the Word of God, and recognition of false doctrine.

Small groups in most churches are more about facilitating, than teaching. Those in the church with “heart” spiritual gifts like encouragement, shepherding, giving, and hospitality are most likely to lead small groups. Their goal is more of participation and application rather than dissecting a text. Many small groups do not even spend much time in the actual Scriptures if they are using “fill in the blank” studies or watching DVD presentations or focus on applications of a weekend sermon. Other small groups do not have a Bible study as they are “fellowship groups” or “prayer groups” or task/serving groups that might spend a few minutes sharing requests and praying before they hit the parking lot ministry or serving in a three year old class.

The truth is if small groups spend too much time on “Bible study” then some complain that it is at the expense of relationally connecting. While serving at Medinah Baptist Church in the Chicago area, a couple in one of my newer small groups complained about their study through the “Experiencing God” material (a powerful, in depth curriculum that has about 10,000 words on each page!). She said, “The study has been great, but after six months the group still hardly knows each other.” This couple joined a group with a desire to build stronger friendships, so they struggled with the over balance toward Bible study at the expense of relationship building.

Now I am not saying these churches have a sign on the front door that says, “No spiritual gift of teaching allowed!” They don’t have to, just look at the small group leaders in your church and observe their spiritual gifts. When this conversation comes up with other church leaders they have similar results. They can’t name many small group leaders in a “relationally based small group” who have the gift of teaching. And if they do, that group has a stronger emphasis on the Bible study than the others. Count on it.

Churches that have made a strategic decision for a small-groups-only strategy would do well to consider the long term impact of de-emphasizing the systematic teaching of the Scriptures in relation to spiritual formation. Mark Steele, a pastor at Sheboygan Evangelical Free Church in Wisconsin, shares on this issue:

Small Groups do not emphasize Biblical literacy which I feel is a huge need in the evangelical church today. I think this is especially true in churches that are moving to a more topical and application oriented pulpit. When you have a non-expository pulpit and only small groups as a “deeper level” you have nothing for Biblical literacy training – and ultimately you have an evangelical church becoming liberal (may take multiple generations, but the slippage will likely be there). Mid-sized groups have teachers, and they usually have accountability to a pastor or elders, etc. for Biblical and theological content assurance.

Again, one of the strengths of most midsize group strategies is that they place a high value on the interactive teaching of the Scriptures and allow for the gift of teaching to be used in multiple places and settings.

#### **4. Small groups are not for everyone. *Midsize groups provide another “community-based” option to connect people.***

Whether people either don’t feel comfortable in a small group setting or they don’t like the idea of breaking into a circle of 10 strangers, or they had a bad experience, there are just a lot of people who will not participate in a small group.

A small group’s expert who leads a ministry that resources serious small group churches shared with me the results of an informal survey his ministry had conducted with the churches in their network. The survey revealed that “70% of their small group churches had less than 50% of their adults in small groups.”

Joe Myers, in his book, *The Search to Belong*, refers to a study done in the 1960's by Edward B. Hall on what Hall coined "proxemics." Hall concluded "that there are four spaces we use to develop personalities, culture, and communication. These spaces are: public, social, personal, and intimate."

<u>Space</u>	<u>References</u>	<u>Distance</u>
Public		12 feet +
Social		4 to 12 feet
Personal		18 inches to 4 feet
Intimate		0 to 18 inches

While teaching these theories Myers discovered his own application in that these "spaces" could also reflect multidimensional belonging. This led him on a journey, in essence an ongoing dialogue, of how people belong.

One of Myer's points is that community is broader than a small group or a midsize group or a worship service or any other gathering or relationship. He really makes some strong points regarding the overt small group craze insisting that true community and life change best happens in a small group environment. In his writings, he struggles with people being pushed from extremes of public space (worship services) to personal/intimate space (small groups). Myers says he has interviewed hundreds of people who have made "life change" decisions in all the spaces, not just in small group settings.

Joe Myer's findings are far more complex and far-reaching than the scope of this article. If you are like me, you will wrestle with some of its concepts and theories. Its applications, however, have direct implications to this subject. People belong and grow and serve "best," each in their own unique spaces and settings. He has written a follow-up book, *Organic Community* that addresses key principles to building healthy belonging environments.

I must admit for many years of ministry my goal was to get 100% of our people in midsize groups and 100% of our people in small groups. I no longer think this way. We have set more realistic goals of how many in our church culture would grow best in midsize environments and/or small group environments of all kinds including gender-based ministries.

Some in the name of "simplicity" have dumped their small groups or midsize groups or other key connecting ministries. In light of appreciating the unique ways people connect, I suggest we simplify by encouraging our people to be "bonded in community" whether they do it best in a midsize or small group. Although I appreciate the need to de-clog our ministry options at times, does it have to be at the expense of taking away significant ways our people are experiencing community and ministry?

Someday I will write on why I struggle with "midsize-groups-only" strategies so stay tuned!

*Steve Lizzio is the Director of ABF Resources and the Pastor of Adult Ministries at Hope Church in Mason, Ohio. Steve speaks nationally on midsize groups and hosts (with Hope Church) a bi-annual national ABF Conference that waves the flag for midsize group strategies working with small groups. Share your thoughts on this article with Steve at [slizzio@hope-church.org](mailto:slizzio@hope-church.org)*