



# Introduction

When I read the stories of the church of the first century recorded in Acts, I have two responses. First my heart is stirred with hope and fresh vision. I see what the church can be because it was once that way. The stories of community, passionate prayer, miracles and risky lives instill new fever to seek God all the more as an individual as a church.

The other response is not as positive. When I read about the experiences of the churches of Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus and others I also see what the church of this century lacks. Don't get me wrong; I am not seeking a return to the first century nor do I think that Luke's account of the early church prescribes a uniform model for all future generations that will magically open the door to such experiences. However, the early churches experienced something that most churches I encounter lack.

When I read those stories, I am inspired not because I see a plan for doing church nor a deep theological foundation. Rather, the radical life that the early Christians experienced—God's presence was manifest, his people shared life together, individuals voluntarily sacrificed for one another and growth spontaneously occurred—both gives me hope for the church and frustrates me as I see how far most churches are from this

experience. We have great church strategies, and we are not lacking in sound theology—for the most part. Strategies and theology do not stimulate new passion. Fresh experiences with God like those found in the New Testament do.

For almost fifteen years, I have been talking with church leaders who are seeking for such experiences. They don't necessarily use this language. They say that want to become a small group church, a Groups of 12 church, a church of small groups or even a New Testament church. However, when you ask them what spurred them to begin this search for a new way of being the people of God, almost all of them express a longing to lead a church that provides a fresh God experience that might generate a modern-day New Testament story.

## The Experience of Relationships

In the Spring of 1999, Jim Egli, (a close friend and former Director of Training at TOUCH® Outreach) and I held a walking meeting. As we wandered around the field of an old dairy farm that had been purchased by a church, one question dominated our discussion: why do so many churches struggle with developing effective small group structures? Many church leaders came to our conferences or went to conferences hosted by churches, but few were seeing the success with groups that they had been promised.

The church on whose grounds we were walking was a typical example. The senior pastor had a clear vision providing dynamic life experience through small groups as he saw in the New Testament. The church members had received training from some of the leading experts in the field. The senior pastor started with one prototype group to model group life, exactly as the books and the experts said, but the church was stuck. The church tried and tried but could not get over the hump and take the few groups it had started and develop the kind of experience that was envisioned.

George Barna reports that seventy percent of the senior pastors his organization surveyed stated that small-group ministry is “central to the overall success” of the church’s ministry. Barna argues, “Since tens of thousands of Protestant churches have staked their future on the success of small groups to deliver effective ministry to their adherents...the triple

zero decade will be a make-it-or-break-it period for small groups.”<sup>1</sup> If Barna is right on these counts, and churches are struggling, then these pastors need more than a hope for a different church experience. They need more than a small group structure developed at the mega-church in a growing suburb in a major metropolitan area. They need answers to questions that have rarely been asked. On that day, Jim and I asked a foundational question: “Why do some churches succeed in making small groups work and produce relational church life while others do not?” This question spawned a series of subsequent questions that consumed me for over three years. It sent me on a journey to ask different questions of pastors. I sought out churches that were experiencing a taste of this dynamic life through small groups. And I sought out churches that had struggled to make the life work. The responses of the leaders of these churches formed the seedbed for the book that lies in your hands.

## Small Groups or Relationships

One of the primary results of my interviews has caused me to rethink the premise of small group ministry. I have found that while most pastors seek desire the experience of the first century church, they shift their focus on a strategy or structure. Small groups are crucial, they conclude; therefore, hope is placed in developing an effective small groups structure. However, the experience that Luke reported were not the result of a small group structure. While they met in small groups, this form of meeting no more produced those experiences any more than a read apple peeling makes an apple taste delicious. The form of small groups is crucial, but if the more fundamental core is not present, then the form is powerless.

At the core of groups that experience a life that resembles experience recounted in Acts is relationships. All successful small group models are built on a foundation of relationships. A few years ago, a leader I coached shared that the relationships in her group were going very well. She explained the concern that she might confuse her leadership task with her relationships, because she enjoys the relationships so much. She saw ministry as a task and therefore made it much harder than it really is. I told her, “You are leading through your friendships, not apart from them. God uses friendships to bring people into maturity.”

Dr. Phillip Sell, professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and

former pastor of a small group church, explains how he had to label the vision as a relationship-based church. This model of church life contrasts with the program-based church, where a church creates programs to meet needs, the entertainment-based church where people come to catch a spiritual high every week, and the content-based church, where the church is a “teaching center” for people to attend every Sunday. Sadly, small groups will be forced to fit into the model of programs, entertainment or content, unless the core experience of the relational church is understood.

Therefore the goal of the small group system is to develop a model for people to be connected to God, to be connected to one another, and to raise up disciples in a relational manner. This is the heart of the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Some pastors have placed all their focus on the structure and made the change in structure the final goal. Some churches call themselves churches of small groups, small group churches, or G-12 churches, believing that they have found the ideal model and that other models don’t measure up. Such churches take great pride in the fact that they are returning to a truly biblical model of church organization.

But in the end, labels matter very little. Experiencing the relational life of God with one another is what counts. Floyd Schwanz, a former small groups pastor with Dale Galloway at one of the pioneering small group churches in North America, puts it this way, “Don’t talk about being cell-based because it sounds like another program (and we have too many of those already). Focus instead on being more relational through small groups.” I consulted with one group of church elders a few years ago and explained the different ways to set up small group structures. I shared with them how they could become a “pure” small group church. One elder piped up, “I have no interest in being a ‘pure’ small group church.” The elders stated that they wanted to develop a structure that promoted the values of biblical relationships. They were not interested in labels, categories, or comparisons. At first, I thought the two were synonymous, but since then I have concluded that I missed the point.

Pastors and church leaders must seek to understand the different structures and determine what will work best for them. But the vision ultimately is about relationships, not about fitting into the proper category or developing an ideal structure. The ways in which churches organize their small group efforts will be different for almost every church.

## Why a Relational Church?

In my book, *The Relational Way*, I challenge the myths that hinder churches from experiencing the relational life and propose a vision for equipping people to enter this life. Yet my message in that book is not that new. Many others have said similar things in different ways. For instance, after surveying over 1000 churches around the world, Christian Schwarz found eight church health factors, one of which is holistic small groups. He concludes, “If we were to identify any one principle as the ‘most important’—even though our research shows the interplay of all basic elements is important—then without a doubt it would be the multiplication of small groups...”<sup>2</sup> Pollster George Gallup said, “Nothing is more important for ministry today than small groups.”<sup>3</sup> George Barna predicts the trend in the church that, “Tens of thousands of Sunday Schools will close down in favor of small group and Net-based ministry.”<sup>4</sup>

Popular Christian commentator Chuck Colson wrote, “No Christian can grow strong and stand the pressures of this life unless he is surrounded by a small group of people who minister to him and build him up in the faith.”<sup>5</sup> My former professor, J.I. Packer, has stated, “How can God’s one family, locally and denominationally separated, be enabled to look like one family?...by wisdom in structuring house-churches and small groups within congregations.”<sup>6</sup>

Other theologians have made a similar point. Howard Snyder wrote, “It is my conviction that the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit is most likely to be experienced when Christians meet together informally in small-group fellowships.”<sup>7</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood the importance of life together in the church when he wrote, “But if there is so much blessing and joy even in a single encounter of brother with brother, how inexhaustible are the riches that open up for those who by God’s will are privileged to live in the daily fellowship of life with other Christians.”<sup>8</sup>

These arguments for life in Christian small groups seem to line up with life in the early church. The early Christians:

...devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer...every day they

continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:42-47).

The early church leaders were following Jesus' ministry model. Jesus focused most of His ministry on small group leadership, spending the majority of His time with the twelve apostles while never neglecting the crowds and other disciples. In fact, 51% of Jesus' words in Mark are addressed to the twelve apostles.<sup>9</sup> The Apostle Paul followed a similar model of ministry when he said, "You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house" (Acts 20:20). Even Moses used a similar model of ministry when he organized the children of Israel into groups of 1000s, 100s, 50s, and small groups of 10s because he was being worn out trying to minister to the entire nation by himself.

Dr. Ralph Neighbour has been a pioneering voice for holistic small groups since the 1970s, stating, "We must recognize the activity of the Holy Spirit in the small group movement and seek to use it for the harvest of precious souls. No other form of church life promises to harvest at the same rate the population is growing."<sup>10</sup> The church cannot continue to accomplish its God-ordained mission with traditional methods in a world population that is multiplying exponentially.

## Do Relationships Work Today?

Alister McGrath, Anglican theologian and professor of theology at Oxford University, estimates in his book *The Future of Christianity* that as many as 75 million people are part of churches that base their lives on small groups. Small groups, when done well, produce great results. Churches around the globe are proving this. Some of these churches number over 100,000 with tens of thousands of small groups.

Most of the churches that are seeing phenomenal small group success are located outside the West. This has led some to conclude that Western cultures are not conducive to small group development and churches should adopt other approaches. While the churches in Europe and North

America do not boast of such astronomical numbers, it is hard to argue against the impact that relational small group life is having upon the church in these individualistic cultures. Over the last twenty years, there has developed an underground movement of relationship-based churches that are growing small groups in a consistent but non-spectacular fashion. In addition, the primary church models that sponsor conferences all promote small groups as a crucial part of their strategies.

One of the reasons these churches in the West are seeing success with small groups is because the individualists within these cultures are dying for community. People look for community in anonymous chat-rooms, discussing ideas with faceless people who cannot judge them. Others look for it at work, helping the United States become one of the most over-worked nations in the world. They use money to gain acceptance from others through fancy cars or oversized, empty houses and endless parties. Millions of other people sit in front of the television watching reruns of sitcoms like “Friends,” “Seinfeld,” “Cheers,” “M.A.S.H.,” and “I Love Lucy.” They try to live vicariously through the television characters, hoping to get a taste of close friendship, to go to a place where “everybody knows your name,” to understand what it feels like when people really know one another—all the troubles and victories, the attractive features and the warts—and they still accept and love one another.

The Apostle John wrote, “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also might have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). The church must provide a context where lonely, searching people can find friends who not only know their names but also know their hearts. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a relational message. Truth without fellowship is a lie. The church no longer needs stories like this:

A faithful Christian man led a sales clerk to Christ while out buying clothes. He told his pastor about this experience, but when the pastor asked him what the man’s name was, the Christian responded, “I have no idea.” The pastor asked if he was going to visit the man in the store again. The Christian responded, “I never thought about that.”

Sermons about Christ preached at people who lack life together are

“sounding gongs” and “clanging symbols.” The church has the opportunity to share the content of the gospel while at the same time providing a place for people to truly experience the love of God. Whether or not churches in the West ever produce small group growth like that seen in other cultures matters little. Groups work because they change lives.

## Which Small Group Model Is Best?

Small group models abound: the small group church, the meta-church, the 5x5, the pure Jethro, the Groups of 12, the J-12, the G-12.3, the D-4, the interest group model, the hybrid model, and others currently in development. Up until a few years ago, the focus lay upon the 5x5 model, which has been used to describe the model developed by Yonggi Cho in Seoul, South Korea. Most have started with that model and then have developed new models from it. Many are asking if they have the right or best group model.

Michael Green performed research on the Anglican cell group churches found in Southeast Asia. In his book, he does not talk so much about models as he does about the life he observed in these churches. He describes these churches as:<sup>11</sup>

- Groups of vibrant and multiplying communities of believers.
- Places where every cell group is seen as a church, set in its neighborhood to impact it. (This does not mean that these groups are separated from the authority and direction of a local church and large group celebration).
- Places where every cell group leader is a pastor, who always has an assistant.
- Churches where growing groups launch new groups with trained leaders.
- Places where many different kinds of groups can be launched including family cells, children’s cells, youth cells, business people cells, coffee-shop cells, and of course home cells.

Evidence does not reveal the existence of an ideal model. Different churches use different tactics to make small groups work. But in every



working small group model are Green's five elements. With the diversity of models that have arisen over the last few years, it has become quite clear that the key is not found in one model but in the values and principles that support all of these models.

It is tempting for people looking at these spectacular models to fall prey to the "magic model" theory. They attend conferences and go home thinking that the answer is found in copying the model. Many churches have tried to force their members into a certain model and the people found small groups artificial and controlling. Models help people visualize how small groups work, but God did not design His church to be a clone of an ideal church, just as He did not design human beings to be clones of an ideal human.

In addition, naturally we associate specific language with specific models. For instance, many small group churches call their groups "cells" and some of the churches have been labeled as "cell churches." These labels have been used by some to judge others and to promote an exclusive vision. In fact, the first edition of this book was called *Making Cell Groups Work*. I retitled the second edition because many are missing the point of the relational nature of the small group church because they are hung up on certain words.

## How Does a Church Go from No Groups to Experiencing the Relational Church Life?

*This question summarizes the purpose of this book.* When pastors and church leaders travel to model churches and observe what they are doing with small group, they leave with a sense of excitement and vision. They often leave with something else: a sense of being overwhelmed because the vision is so different and the methods are so radical. They often feel like they have been looking at a watermelon and must eat it whole.

Yet model churches did not develop overnight. They didn't try to eat the watermelon in one bite. They took a journey from no small groups to a relational life that results in expanding groups. It is not enough to understand what the final watermelon looks like. Pastors and church leaders need to understand the journeys of these model churches just as much as they need to grasp the end result. They need to hear how these

churches began, the lessons they learned, the mistakes they made along the way, and the surprising successes they found. These model churches have pioneered the journey of developing a relational way of being the church. By hearing these journey stories, others can avoid many mistakes and quickly develop a working small group base. When they only see the watermelon, they feel pressured to leapfrog over the journey and immediately force a small group system into existence.

This book aims to cut the watermelon into eight stages so that other churches will be able to eat it one bite at a time. It provides an 8-stage process for leading a church from no small groups to effective, expanding small groups. This process aims to do four things:

**Provide a chronological process to help a church get started.** These eight stages identify where to begin and provide steps for moving forward. They reveal the order in which watermelon should be eaten so that church leaders do not try to change everything at once.

**Answer eight questions that pastors commonly ask when they are trying to understand small groups.**

Question	Answer
1. What is my first step?	Discover the Mission (Stage 1)
2. How do I get people on board with the vision?	Develop Vision and Strategy as a Team (Stage 2)
3. Will small groups work in my church?	Assess Your Church's Current Reality (Stage 3)
4. How do we prepare the church for small group success?	Prepare the Church Through Transformation (Stage 4)
5. How do we start the first groups?	Launch the First Group(s) with Kingdom-Seekers (Stage 5)
6. How do we experience dynamic small group community?	Generate Small Group Momentum (Stage 6)
7. How do we establish small groups as the base of the church?	Establish the Hidden Systems that Support the Small Groups (Stage 7)
8. How do we mobilize groups to reach people?	Expand the Small Groups to Reach the Unreached (Stage 8)

This process will serve as a navigational guide for the journey toward becoming a relational church through small groups that work. This journey is similar to that of a ship sailing to a new destination. Much goes into a sea-going voyage, including pre-sailing preparation, gathering information, charting a course, recruiting crew members, navigating around islands and continents that impede the path to the port of call. The eight stages will serve as a travel guide for leading people into life-transforming, God-filled, adventure-loving, risk-taking, people-caring, lost-seeking, leader-developing small groups.

**Help you practically implement the vision that I wrote about in *The Relational Way*.** While this book will prove helpful to you by itself, if you first work through my other resource, you will see how they work together.

**Help a church that already has small groups move beyond structures and develop a relational system.** I recently talked with an experienced small group pastor who confessed, “I have to go back and address some key factors that I skipped in Stages 2 and 3.” When pastors describe what is going on in their groups, they often express that small groups are not yet expanding; they are more like “holding” cells. Many have implemented groups and inadvertently skipped key steps in the 8-stage process. When reading through each stage, pastors and leaders will be able to assess steps that they skipped and then make plans for addressing them.

**Provide practical levers.** Levers are “small, well-focused actions that can sometimes produce significant, enduring improvements, if they’re in the right place.”<sup>12</sup> It is not enough to do things right; leaders must do the right things right. At the end of each stage is a list of levers that will help propel a church through that stage and on toward the destination of becoming a relational church. They point to other books, training resources, tools, and activities that will help a church on its journey.

## What is the Basis for the 8-stage Process?

After Jim and I walked and talked that day, I spent more time listening to pastors. I asked questions to determine why groups work in some churches and fail in others. Pastors have shared their successes and

their failures. They told me what they did right and what they wished they had done differently. These stories have revealed much about small groups that has worked and much that has not. This book synthesizes the information from the stories.

These interviews led me to inquire about the ways leaders guide organizations through change. The eight stages presented in this book loosely correspond with the eight stages that John Kotter, a Harvard Business School professor, presents in his book, *Leading Change*. Principles from other key thinkers on leadership and change have been inserted throughout the eight stages. While this book draws from the best learning of the business world, the process is firmly based on experience in small group leadership and interviews with pastors across North America, and is rooted in the theology of the Word of God.