

# **SIX SERENDIPITIES OF EVANGELISTIC SMALL GROUPS**

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A “serendipity” is a pleasant surprise, an unanticipated additional benefit. Six years ago our congregation began an evangelistic small group ministry. Our primary goal for our “Growth Groups” was, and is, to provide a comfortable, non-threatening, home-based Bible study program that we could use to introduce non-Christians to the Lord and to His church. The groups have met that need admirably, enabling our congregation to grow by 10% in 2000 and another 15% last year. In addition to outreach, however, along the way we have discovered several “serendipities” of evangelistic small groups.

**1. LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT.** This ministry has retained its focus on reaching outsiders and promoting the spiritual growth of the participants, but over the years we have discovered a powerful serendipity in the leadership abilities it can develop in those who serve as group leaders. For example, two years ago our congregation appointed additional deacons. When we reviewed the list of men who now lead our various ministries we realized that 18 out of 22 deacons were currently serving or had previously served as small group leaders. In addition, so have both of the new shepherds we have ordained since the beginning of this ministry.

While leadership development was not one of our objectives, it is clear to see in hindsight that the spiritual functions of small group leadership- taking weekly prayer requests and leading petitions on behalf of others; using our prepared, verse-by-verse

discussion guides to facilitate the group's Bible study; encouraging other Christians to work together as a team to invite outsiders; and, welcoming outsiders and helping them to grow in their understanding and to make the transition to committed believers- are all faith-building activities that can help individuals absorb more of the servant spirit of Christ and equip them for greater ministry responsibilities.

**2. FLEXIBILITY.** We provide prepared discussion guides because we strongly feel that all our small groups should follow a uniform program of teaching. In terms of logistics, however, our groups can have almost unlimited flexibility in their choice of meeting times, places, etc. With more than twenty groups, doesn't this become unwieldy? Not at all. Each of our groups is built around the nucleus of a leader, co-leader, and host. If the leader has to be out of town, he simply asks the co-leader to take over. If both the leader and co-leader must be absent, the group members are free to visit another group or attend the assembly at the building. If the host is unavailable, the group leaders may secure another home from among the group's members or simply announce that the group will meet at the building.

Our groups are given the option of meeting at any time they wish, other than Sunday morning or Wednesday night. While most choose to meet on Sunday nights in order to avail themselves of the children's programs we offer at the building, some groups with older participants have found it advantageous to meet on Sunday afternoons, while others pick a weeknight.

Our members are spread out over a large geographical area. Many drive for thirty miles or more, one way, to reach our building. By locating our groups strategically we can provide gatherings that are much more convenient for these members than returning to our building on Sunday night. Such groups also make it easier for us to reach outsiders who might not be as motivated to initially make the drive to our town. We have also taken advantage of the flexibility of the program to create groups in the community room of apartment complexes and in “half-way houses” for recovering alcoholics.

**3. OUTREACH OWNERSHIP.** Have you ever invited non-Christian friends to a church meeting and desperately prayed, “Please, please, let someone other than me show an interest in them”? Have you ever worked with evangelistic prospects and persuaded them to attend a worship service, only to be frustrated when church members merely gave your visitors a passing nod before returning to their own friends? The old adage “What’s everybody’s business is nobody’s business” is, sadly, often true in congregations: it is too easy for members to assume that the preacher, or the elders, or *somebody* will speak to the guests.

When people belong to a small group that is actively seeking to bring in outsiders, however, they are more likely to feel a greater sense of outreach ownership that can transform the way they respond to worship visitors. For example, last year a young couple moved into our area and visited our congregation for the first time. The following Sunday, as my wife and I had them in our home for a meal, the man remarked: “I

thought you might like to know, when we visited your church last Sunday, we received two invitations to lunch and three invitations to something called a ‘Growth Group’”!

**4. UTILIZATION OF NEW MEMBERS.** When a person becomes a Christian we immediately seek to get them actively integrated into the fellowship of the church. From an evangelistic perspective, this has mixed consequences. The longer a person is a church member, the more likely it is that they will have rebuilt their social network around their fellow Christians. While this may be helpful in strengthening the believer, it has the unfortunate byproduct of reducing their potential to share the gospel. We thus face a paradox: while we want to strengthen and ground converts in their new circle of fellowship, we also do not want to cut them off entirely from their active connections with unbelievers.

One serendipity of small groups is their potential to tap into the existing social networks of new believers by providing them with an opportunity to invite their old friends to meet with, and learn from, more mature believers. A strategy for realizing this potential is to follow the example of Levi (Luke 5:27-32) and intentionally use recent converts as hosts. Even brand-new Christians can host a group in their home. In fact, we discovered by accident that it isn’t even necessary to be a church member in order to host a group! A couple of years ago we had come to the end of our spring series and were ready to break for the summer. When the group leader announced that he would be creating a new group in the fall and would need a host home, a couple who had only recently begun to visit the group, and who were enjoying the study, spoke up and

volunteered to host the group in their home! That leader took them up on their unexpected offer, conducted a personal Bible study with them over the summer, and today the father is a group co-leader and all in the family are faithful members of the church.

**5. MORE TIME FOR EVANGELISM.** When our program first began the groups met on various nights during the week. A year of dealing with various logistical problems regarding our children forced us to reconsider that schedule and, after much deliberation, our elders decided to provide teaching programs for young people at our building and to allow groups to meet on Sunday nights. This change in our format was not without some apprehension on the part of our shepherds, since it was a major departure from our traditional Sunday evening preaching service format.

Such a transition can create unexpectedly ambivalent feelings in a preacher, as well, as he sees church members happily going off to their groups instead of traveling to the church building as before to listen to his words of wisdom! However, what could be a threatening experience for a preacher soon becomes a liberating one, as he discovers an important serendipity of a Sunday night group program: the extra time it provides him during the week.

A nationwide survey indicated that the average preacher spends around 10 hours on each sermon (John C. LaRue, "Preaching: The Pastor's Perspective," *Your Church*, November/December 2000, p. 80.). Based on my experience and observations over more than a

quarter-century of ministry, that figure sounds about right. Thus, with both morning and evening preaching services, around 20 hours of the typical preacher's workweek is devoted to sermon preparation. Take an informal and confidential poll of preachers (as I have) and you will quickly learn that Sunday nights are widely considered "killers"; that is, the pressure of producing a second quality sermon, in addition to myriad administrative responsibilities, can lead to frustration as the preacher feels tied down to his office.

If a congregation moves to a small group format on Sunday nights, however, and if the church secures the use of a good small group curriculum, the preacher is liberated from his desk and freed to spend more of his time in direct evangelism. This is not an insignificant benefit: the 8 to 10 hours gained can, in effect, give the preacher the equivalent of an extra day each week that can be spent visiting newcomers to the community, following up on visitors to worship, setting up and conducting personal Bible studies, organizing outreach efforts, etc. In other words, using a small group format can free the preacher to be more of an evangelist, spending less time preaching primarily to the saved and more time teaching personally to the lost!

We still utilize the traditional preaching service format during the summer and holiday periods, when our groups take a recess. And in addition to our groups we always offer a class on Sunday nights at the building for those who prefer to come to the building, for out-of-town visitors, and for those who were not able to observe communion that morning. I strongly believe in preaching, because it is still God's power to save

(Romans 1:16), and therefore I strive to present the very best lessons possible in our Sunday morning assembly. While I am convinced there will never be any substitute for the public proclamation of the gospel, however, I have come to realize that a small group format can provide an excellent complement to my preaching ministry. As much as I enjoy preaching, I enjoy even more seeing souls brought to the Lord, and using this format liberates me from behind my desk and allows me to get out in the “highways and byways” more often.

**6. DEEPER FELLOWSHIP.** While I cherish the experience of meeting with the whole body of believers and nothing can, or ever should, take the place of the congregational assembly around the Lord’s table, using our small groups provides a qualitatively different format that promotes a more informal interaction and a rich fellowship. Simply put, the discovery-oriented nature of the Bible study encourages and allows a level of personal participation that cannot be equaled in the larger class and worship assemblies at the church building.

Small groups can be organized to serve many different purposes, and fellowship is certainly one legitimate goal. My own observation, however, is that churches that initiate a small group ministry with the primary aim of enriching fellowship will never achieve much evangelistic success, while churches that make evangelism the overriding goal of their small groups will experience fellowship as a serendipity. After all, people who gather weekly to pray together about individuals they are inviting to their group, and who engage in a shared discussion about God’s Word at each such gathering, are creating

deep bonds of spiritual kinship. Moreover, visitors who are welcomed into such an evangelistically-focused group invariably experience a warm reception.

Those of us who have been disciples for some time often underestimate the power of Christian hospitality in such settings. “Bob,” a recovering addict with a rough background and appearance, was brought to a group by “Pete”, a new Christian who was himself a recovering addict and former criminal. It was not until much later, after Bob had become an active member of our church, that he revealed how overwhelmed he had been at the welcome he received in the home-based group. Bob confided, “When I first came here, I figured you would think I was just casing the joint.” Thanks in part to the hospitality of the hosts, Bob today has a vibrant faith and is active in leading others to the Lord.

In another of our groups an older widow formed a special bond with a family of non-members who began attending, and especially with the two teenage boys. When that family began attending our worship services at the building, they were made more comfortable in the transition from small group to congregational assembly by the knowledge that this woman would be there waiting for them. The fact that they could always count on having a friend from their group to sit with in worship assisted in their eventual assimilation into the Lord’s body.

Conclusion:



I realize that the term “small group ministry” is technically a misnomer, because “groups” don’t minister; people do. We have found, however, that a small group format can make such ministry by our people more possible and more likely. And I am not claiming that simply offering a small group program will by itself guarantee that these six serendipities will automatically occur. No church program will “run itself,” and as I have asserted in a previous article (“Maintaining ‘Quality Control’ In Small Group Ministries”, *Church Growth*, November/December 2000), the decentralized structure of small group ministry demands especially active direction and leadership. While this ministry requires careful organization and continuous oversight, however, we feel that it offers such a unique and effective complement to the church building oriented, large worship assemblies, that it is worth the extra effort.

In our view the ultimate goal of our small groups will always be to build up the entire church and to lead the lost to active membership in the body of Christ. To that end we continually strive to keep our focus on outreach. The additional benefits we have experienced are simply serendipities that make this ministry even sweeter!