

AN OUTSIDER'S EXPERIENCE WITH SMALL GROUPS

FOREWORD: *For the past sixteen years the College Avenue church in El Dorado, Arkansas has conducted a home-based small group ministry called Growth Groups. The format of these weekly one-hour group meetings is straight-forward: each session begins with an invitation for the group participants to make prayer requests, and then a trained and prepared leader directs the group in an in-depth, but conversational, textual Bible study.*

We have found that the informal setting and shared group experience promote a deeper fellowship among church members, while the participatory format of the Bible study, and the life application questions used, invariably stimulate a rich spiritual conversation. The primary purpose of the program, however, is evangelistic: we use the Growth Groups to make connections with outsiders who are not yet Christians and/or who are not members of our congregation.

The following article provides a unique glimpse of the outreach dynamics of small group ministry from the perspective of two such outsiders. It is written by Karen & Tinker Langston, a couple who were invited to the Growth Groups after their initial visit to a worship service at the College Avenue congregation.

The year 1999 was approaching and as usual, thoughts of New Year's resolutions were in our minds. This year would be *different*. We knew *this* would be the year we would find our way back to the Lord after being away for several years. On the first of January we began our search for a church home. First on the list was the College Avenue church. We had heard many good things about them but also knew it to be a sizeable congregation and that intimidated us.

That first Sunday of 1999 we found ourselves at the early service. As soon as we entered the door we were grabbed by Cindy Anzalone, who told us how good it was to have us

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here. We then found our way into the Auditorium and sat down on the right hand side, which seemed to be the side no one else sat on. We can still remember Jean Silliman getting out of her seat to come across and welcome us. Then Don Canady came walking down the aisle and stopped to shake our hands and greet us.

The morning worship was uplifting and we very much enjoyed it. After services were over we went once again into the entryway where we were bombarded by many people who all had the same invitation: "Has anyone invited you to their Growth Group yet? If not, we'd love to have you visit with us." Before we could escape the building we could truthfully answer "Yes" to their questions – we had been invited to many different Growth Group meetings! We had invitations from total strangers to come into their homes that Sunday evening to be a part of this thing called a "Growth Group." One happened to be from a person we did know – Rick Brown.

While driving back home we discussed what we had just been a part of. Great service, nice people, loving attitudes, but really a lot bigger congregation than we felt comfortable with. But we couldn't get over all the talk about those "Growth Groups." Curiosity got the best of us and a little before six that night we were ringing the doorbell of Rick and Teresa Brown's home.

What we found was a small intimate group setting where we could study a well planned lesson yet never felt pressured to participate unless we wanted to. What a unique idea this seemed to be. By the time we left that night we had gotten to know several couples even better.

Private Bible study and baptism soon followed. We had found our home.

We have just finished our ninth year of Growth Groups. I can still remember when the first one ended for the summer we did not want to change and so thought we would just

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go back to the same one when it reconvened. We had come to love our "own Growth Group" so much we wanted to stay with them, but that would defeat one of the purposes. If we had learned to love these 10 to 12 people so much, we could learn to love 10 to 12 new people just as much.

And so it went. After nine years and 90 to 108 people later we have gotten to know and

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love these one time strangers as family. Would we know and appreciate each other as much if not for Growth Groups? I don't think so and I'm glad we don't have to wonder.

If you have not become a part of a Growth Group yet you don't know what you're missing. Nine years ago if we had not accepted that invitation to check out one we might have slipped out without ever knowing what it was like to be an intimate part of a great congregation.

One more "small" contribution that made a difference is a simple action that we sometimes tend to overlook. Nine years later we can still remember who stepped up and said "Welcome to College Avenue. Where are you from? Hope you'll come back." Nothing that had to be memorized or studied – nothing complicated – but a few words that made a scared lonely couple feel welcome and want to come back!

–Karen & Tinker Langston

AFTERWORD: This article illustrates the interaction between the fellowship experienced in our small groups and the spirit demonstrated in our larger assembly.

Participants who are actively seeking to build their group often feel a greater “ownership” of the responsibility to reach out to guests to our worship service. The fellowship built in the small groups can, in turn, help to create a warm and welcoming spirit in the larger assembly.

I was reminded of this recently while conducting a personal Bible study with a couple who have been visiting our worship services. At the end of our study the woman made a revealing comment: “We were reluctant to visit you at first because we are used to a small church, and you have a big congregation. When we got there, though, you had a small church feel that made us feel comfortable.” Her observation reflects one of the side-benefits of small group ministry: as our church gets “big” (i.e., grows in numbers) the most effective way we have found to keep it “small” (i.e., personal) is to provide a format in which small groups of Christians can meet.

I often receive phone calls from the leaders of other churches who are curious about small group ministries, and one of the concerns they sometimes express is: “Don’t you run the risk of dividing the church when you allow people to meet in separate groups?” The article by the Langstons testifies that just the opposite is true: a well-planned small group ministry actually serves to unite the church, because it allows the participants to build strong, personal bonds of fellowship and Christian love. We take four specific steps to avoid cliques and ensure a healthy small group program:

1. When we begin our new cycle of groups each fall every member is free to choose any group they wish, so there is never any question about anyone being excluded. (The only exception is that we reserve the right to ask members to consider changing to another group if any one group becomes over-subscribed, since it is essential to keep small groups around 12 members or less. When our members sign up for a group we ask them to indicate their first, second, and third choices, with the understanding that they may be asked to transfer if necessary.) Other than making such adjustments to ensure an equitable distribution, there are no closed groups.

2. The sign-up form that our members use each fall to indicate their choice of groups also asks them to agree to the following three commitments:

- a. I will support my group by my regular participation;*
- b. I will support my group by having a positive attitude in and out of group meetings (no grumbling, griping, or gossiping!);*
- c. I will support my group by praying for its growth and by taking every opportunity to invite others.*

3. All of the leaders are carefully trained, and all use the exact same material (including a group that meets at our building), so there is never any question in the mind of any individual about the agenda or conversation topic of other groups.

4. Each year we ask our members to choose a new group, and we shuffle the core leadership team of each group (comprised of a leader, co-leader, and host) so that participants are continually creating new bonds. As the Langston’s article points out,

over time this allows our members to gradually build personal relationships with a larger and larger circle of fellow-Christians.

- Karen & Tinker Langston are members of the College Avenue church in El Dorado, Arkansas. The Foreword and Afterword were written by Dan Williams, the preaching minister of that church for the past 26 years.