



Organising your small groups

Choices to be made

A48 Articles series: Structures

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This article is concerned with the organisational aspects of any church's small group structure. It is written for a church wishing to review the way this works out or, for a few, to set up such a scheme from scratch. It should prove helpful to church staff and to all group leaders and co-ordinators. It focuses on the idea of *choices* that need to be made.

Introduction

The assumption is that a local church gathers on Sundays, perhaps in more than one congregation. The church will then also meet in smaller groups throughout the week. These two sets of gatherings complement each other.

But this is not a paper on what have often been termed 'home groups' alone. There can be real value in considering all discipleship groups that meet rather than restricting this to one style. So assume a wider structure including:

- children's and teens' groups meeting on Sunday and, possibly, mid-week;
- weekday age-specific adult groups, such as those for seniors or 18 to 30s;
- ministry/mission groups meeting to prepare an activity but also to support each other;
- any Sunday discipleship groups.

Also, even if somewhat different:

- enquirers' courses, often limited in number of sessions;
- prayer triplets;
- gender-specific groups that meet regularly such as a small Mothers' Union or a men's group;
- a toddler parents'/carers' group;
- a Lent series or other short-term set of groups.

In these cases the aims will include learning, discussion, praying and supporting each other. Perhaps the word that sums this up most clearly is 'discipleship' and the context for this will be 'together'.

Such groups may prove to be rather closer to the model of a typical New Testament church, or of Jesus and his inner core of twelve, than larger congregations. If Sunday services are the key public elements of a church's life for worship and teaching, small groups should be the means of promoting practical living.

Groups that are not specifically covered include mid-week church services and events for everyone such as a central prayer gathering, Messy Church, business meetings of all kinds, one-off sessions and those meeting simply to undertake a specific activity such as a work-party.

This is not a tidy division: a church business meeting might include teaching input and prayer. In a small church a central mid-week meeting may effectively be the one 'home group'.

Scripture passages to consider:

- The very early church in Acts 2:42-47.
- The body of Christ picture in Romans 12 (also 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4).
- The 'one another' verses (see Training Notes TN79, *One another teams*).
- The 'purpose of a church' verses (see TN124, *What's the point of church?*)

Choices

This article investigates five areas where choices need to be made. Churches will consider options in the light of a range of factors. There is no one right way. The New Testament churches, from what we can see from the book of Acts and the epistles, were diverse in their structure. But it is

helpful to know the possibilities from which you can make your selection.

It is this author's experience that many church small groups have become tired and predictable, lacking the excitement and potential that they once had. One purpose of this article is to help churches rethink the diversity that is possible and recover something of the sparkle of an effective group structure.

The five areas and their choices are as follows:

- 1 **Purpose and place**
Choices about purposes, place in church life and the vision for the groups' future.
- 2 **Types and names**
Ways of structuring groups include geography, age, maturity and many more. Here are the options and what names they might take.
- 3 **Meetings and group sizes**
Choices about group meetings. Size depends on both purpose and meetings.
- 4 **Oversight and autonomy**
Choices about how much autonomy each group is given to direct its own life within the church.
- 5 **Overview and leadership**
Choices about appointments of an overall co-ordinator and leaders of the groups.

There have been various movements for new types of small groups in churches. House groups were the original idea, then along came 'cell church' and, later, 'mid-sized missional groups'. But the basic idea of a small group remains.

1: Choices for purpose and place

We start with why we establish a group structure, and its place in church life.

A purpose for all groups

If the structure is seen as a whole there should usefully be an overall purpose for all groups. The key ideas for this may involve:

- building community*;
- growth in maturity through Bible learning** ...
- ... and its application to life;
- pastoral care and support;

- prayer for each other;
- drawing in other church members;
- drawing in other contacts;
- the key means of church growth through group multiplication.

*This is especially necessary in a larger church where Sunday congregations are too big to enable this.

**This phrase will be used for the way the Bible is studied in groups, compared with Bible 'teaching' in services, although of course both teaching and learning should go together.

Particular sets of groups will focus on different elements within this list. So a cluster of children's groups may have a purpose that focuses on Bible learning in an appropriate way and having fun together in doing this. A seniors' group's purpose may be more on pastoral care, friendship and outreach. A prayer triplet's purpose is likely to be intercession and personal support.

Groups consist of ordinary Christians seeking to be disciples of Jesus Christ in a confusing and confused world. They realise that they cannot do this in their own strength. They need the Spirit of Jesus Christ within them, the Word of God to direct them, and the company of fellow believers to support them. As disciples they are learners and appreciate the opportunity to engage with each other in a safe setting so that everyone may be honest about themselves and grow in faith.

Groups enable Christians to know, believe, share and grow in the good news of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Church services are a key part of this but run the risk of enabling the congregation to become an audience at a performance. Groups underline the purpose that a church involves everyone in ministry: new Christians and lifelong followers of Jesus, young and old, the confident and the messed up.

Key potential strengths of a small group structure:

- a safe place to build relationships with each other and demonstrate the *koinonia* at the heart of church life;
- a means of applying biblical teaching to the practicalities of daily life: work, home, local community;
- a means of praying for and with each other;
- a structure that enables effective pastoral care throughout the church;
- a way in to help everyone play a part in service, sharing responsibility for building up the body;
- a means of integrating newcomers and reaching out to those outside the church;
- an effective channel of communication between leadership and membership;
- the creation of a balanced structure alongside Sunday services.

Possible dangers include

- a loss of church unity by dividing into groups;
- the separation between those in groups and those who do not wish to belong;

Criticisms of small groups

Various aspects of small groups come in for criticism. Key arguments:

- Groups become one more programme to maintain in a busy church.
- Groups quickly grow stale and newcomer-averse because they lack a challenging vision of growth by drawing in people from outside the church membership.
- Groups struggle when there is a failure by the church to maintain quality control for leadership in Bible study, real care and effective outreach.

The 'cell' and 'missional' models of groups came about to overcome these weaknesses.

Many churches have found that groups fail to seek new members. So it is vital to decide on whether to make this a central expectation of a church's group structure and, if so, how to train group leaders and members to act on this.

- the struggle to find sufficient, suitable leaders;
- groups that become comfortable and inward-looking, blocking attempts to restructure them;
- groups that experience relationship breakdown, with people who are hurt and no longer wish to take part;
- groups that break away from the church's guiding principles, lacking accountability;
- erratic attendance at meetings by busy people at work or in family life.

These lists offer some clues in determining purpose statements to enable groups to remain what you want them to be. What can be done to minimise the dangers?

The place for small groups

Where do small groups fit into the overall church structure? Here are three options.

1 **Sunday services – the way in to small groups**

This is the system most churches operate. You indicate an interest in this local church by coming on a Sunday, first as a newcomer or visitor, then as a regular attender, and then in some form of

membership. As part of that membership you will be offered small groups as another means of belonging to the church.

2 **Sundays and groups – equal partners**

This puts groups in a more prominent setting. The church is said to meet together on Sundays and in groups mid-week (with appropriate wording for children and teens). This means that any discussion about membership includes the assumption that you will be part of a group.

3 **Small groups – the way in to Sunday services**

In this case the groups are the entry point for the church and, later, an expected requirement for membership. Sunday service attendance follows group membership. This was the idea promoted through the 'cell church' movement. Group members invite others to join them although there may also be an introductory group for those new to faith.

Many churches will operate all three somewhere in the structure such as option 1 for home groups, 2 for children's groups, 3 for Alpha-type groups. But some churches make option 3 the norm for all.

It may be valuable to assess the value of Sunday services towards your agreed purpose for the church and then to see how groups can add to this. The purpose of your group structure needs to complement that of your Sunday events, so an assessment of Sundays may be a necessary requirement for finalising your groups' purpose. More generally, if you look at the level

of attention you give and scored Sunday services at 5, would your groups come in at less than 5, 5, or more than 5? What score do you feel they *should* have?

Vision and values

As well as a clear purpose you may well want to define a clear vision of where these groups will take you in the next, say, five years. What are you praying they will look like five years from now? What will have changed if all your prayers are answered?

Both group vision and group values should reflect the church vision and values, if not be the same. Without a vision, expressed as faith in or prayer for a future scenario, groups can settle down without challenge. This is where any expectation of growth from outside the church's membership should be prominent.

Actions to take, choices to make

Choose:

- 1:1 The overall purpose for *all* your church's small groups together.
- 1:2 Variations for each sector of the structure.
- 1.3 Actions to take to avoid the common dangers.
- 1.4 The place in church life and the priority to be given to group growth/outreach.
- 1.5 Values for the groups to adhere to.
- 1.6 The vision to challenge and lead groups forward.

2: Choices for types and names

Here are 11 possible types of small group. You may want to encourage a mixture or opt for a small selection. Several of these overlap. Some should be seen as transitional in that members should move on to something different after a time (which ones?). Some might need to be additional to the main structure (which ones?). You might want to ask whether each type is biblically valid.

1: Friendship groups

You choose your group based on people you know. So if your closest friends belong to Group A you join too because you will feel comfortable there. Many, if not most, structures develop into something akin to this as time goes by.

Strengths

- Relationships are easy because you have self-selected on a friendship basis.
- It is flexible: people have complete control over choice of group.

- It is easy for newcomers to join the group that includes their friends.

Weaknesses

- This begs questions as to what groups should be within a proper understanding of church.
- Groups become cosy and introspective and then refuse to be reorganised.
- Groups become so friendly that they deter new members from joining.

2: Availability groups

You join the one that meets on the day of the week you can manage, or where there are spaces. So the church may have groups for Monday afternoon, Tuesday evening and Wednesday evening. You choose the one whose meeting times work for you.

Strengths

- It offers a range of available slots for you to choose from based on your availability or preference.
- New members are not forced into a meeting day/time that is not convenient.
- It keeps groups at about the same size if new people join where there are spaces.

Weaknesses

- You may have little choice about the group you belong to and its membership.
- The scheme is not built on a more obvious selection and may lack identity.
- If the structure fills up weekday evenings, it is difficult to fit other church events in.

3: Geographical groups

Groups may be based in a locality and designed for people to walk to the venue. So multi-parish benefices might have a group in each village. An urban church might designate areas by clusters of streets. A city centre church might divide the city into broad bands.

Strengths

- People are more likely to see each other regularly and to feel they belong together.
- It can be powerful for pastoral care, outreach and inviting newcomers: each group is responsible for local initiatives.
- It minimises travel – and so has a positive eco-factor and helps those without cars.

Weaknesses

- It may not work neatly if you want to mix ages and keep group sizes the same, or if people move house and do not want to change group.
- Some areas may have a group with several possible leaders, others may have none.
- Anglican churches may face problems if groups meet in another parish.

4: Congregational groups

Groups are formed from each Sunday congregation or church site. So a church with two morning services and a small church plant would form groups within each of these.

Strengths

- It builds each congregation into something akin to a church and aids strong relationships for Sundays.
- It means that there can be a close link between Sundays and groups for teaching and activities.
- It builds congregational identity.

Weaknesses

- It divides the whole church into tight units rather than building cross-congregational bonding.
- People's choices for Sunday services may be different from choices for groups.
- Several people may belong to more than one congregation so group choice is not obvious.

5: Ministry groups

These are made up of people in one ministry who *also* meet to rehearse or prepare: choir/music group, young people leaders, the Messy Church team.

Strengths

- There is already a common bond among members of the group.
- It provides an immediate output for practical service with everyone involved.
- It is clear who should be in the group once you have chosen the ministry.

Weaknesses

- The members can lack breadth of interest and be unable to invite friends.

- Married couples may want to be together but have separate ministry areas.
- Discipleship building takes second place to the urgency of planning or rehearsal.

6: Adult age groups

This will be a natural feature for many churches. There may be one or more seniors' groups for those over 60. Some larger churches will have a special group for those in the 18-30s range.

Strengths

- Relationships are easier to form with similar ages and it aids members inviting friends.
- Groups for seniors may prefer speaker meetings more than group Bible exploration.
- For many younger people a 20s group is more attractive than being in a mixed group.

Weaknesses

- It loses the strengths of mixed groups where different generations can learn from each other.
- Baby-sitting (younger groups) and transport or pastoral care (older groups) can be difficult if everyone needs these.
- It does not work well when the church has few members in specific age groups.

7: Children's and teens age groups

They will normally meet during the main services on a Sunday but may also have a mid-week session for activity.

Strengths

- Clearly, these meet a vital need for age-specific teaching and activity.
- They keep school years together for appropriate learning.
- They show a church's commitment to all ages.

Weaknesses

- If there are very few children or teens, all ages may need to be together.
- Leaders need to come out of the church service and miss the teaching there.
- Sports and school activities draw many young people away from church on Sunday.

8: Employment or interest groups

This puts people together in similar jobs or interests. So there might be a group of commuters, one for those who have a particular interest in green issues and one for young mothers.

Strengths

- Relationships will be easy: people can share issues that others will understand.
- A commuters' group can meet at a convenient time or day of the week.
- There is a natural avenue for outreach in the workplace or in local community groups.

Weaknesses

- The narrow field of interest, cultural similarities and discussions that arise, are likely to endanger a right model of church.
- Married couples may need to join separate groups.
- What does it say to people out of work or bringing up children or retired?

9: Bible experience groups

The structure here allows for different expectations about understanding of the Bible or experience of faith. So there may be a group for new Christians and a group for long-standing believers. Enquirers' groups would be a special case.

Strengths

- The study section of meetings is designed to meet needs and save embarrassment.
- It acknowledges that the Christian life is one of faith development and growth.
- It enables the nurture of young Christians in an appropriate setting.

Weaknesses

- All the leaders may be in one group, with no one to lead the other groups.
- It does not allow new Christians to benefit from seeing the examples of those who are more mature in their faith.
- There is the issue of whether this is a right, biblical model for a church.

10: Gender groups

You split people into groups by gender, whether this is for all the congregation or just for those who would appreciate this.

Strengths

- Some feel more comfortable in single gender groups.
- Discussion is likely to be more specific to people's real needs.
- The structure is more conducive to inviting new single people in.

Weaknesses

- Married couples are split up and cannot belong together.
- Some feel such groups lack the balance and richness of mixed gender groups.
- Some churches run daytime groups but do not cater for women out at work.

11: Mixed groups

In this case groups are deliberately mixed up by the leadership.

Strengths

- This reflects what a church should be like: a picture of variety.
- It enriches relationships that might not be developed in other circumstances.
- It prevents the church dividing up into cultural or age groups on a Sunday.

Weaknesses

- People may feel upset at not being with their peers or friends.
- The structure may break down as new people join and the mix may be lost.
- Some churches have a mainly homogeneous membership so the impact may be limited.

In practice a church may well operate a mix of these possibilities. But it is wise to know and assess the choices you can make.

Actions to take, choices to make

Choose:

- 2.1 The basic model for your home groups, or a mix.
- 2.2 The specific advantages to promote and weakness to avoid (how?).
- 2.3 The overall shape of all your groups in the light of this categorisation.
- 2.4 Generic and specific names you will choose/allow.

Names for groups

Here is a listing of choices for titles for such groups. Think of them either for all the groups being covered in this article (and consider the advantages of this approach), or just for what might be known as 'home groups'.

Generic names

'Small groups'

This does nothing more than indicate size, and that not precisely.

'House groups'

The original generic title for one type of group because of the novelty of meeting in a house rather than a church building.

'Home groups'

A term that is generally favoured over 'house groups' with the added feel of the warmth of a home.

'Core', 'Growth', 'Life', 'Connect' or 'Discipleship' groups

Titles used by churches to indicate purpose, with a dynamic rather than static feel.

'Cells'

The title favoured during the cell church movement, but not used so much today. The idea is based on a cellular structure (rather than the other possible meaning!).

'Missional groups'

The title for somewhat larger groups favoured during another phase of development in the recent past.

Specific names

(Specific age range) group

Sometimes used for a seniors' group or, in larger churches, an 18-30s group. Can also be used for children's groups though most would opt for something more imaginative.

(Geographical area) group

Often used when the structure is based on meeting location: an area or street name.

(Specific organisation) group

Mothers' Union, Boys Brigade, Emmaus, Alpha, Christianity Explored, etc.

(Specific ministry) group

A possible title format for teams of musicians or Messy Church leaders who meet also for discipleship purposes.

(Any choice of name)

For each group within a 'home group' structure.

Children's and teens' groups will use a variety of names. Some come from the external resources used (some Church of England churches have titles for different age groups such as 'Explorers', 'Pathfinders', etc. which come from a CPAS source). Others will invent their own terms, especially for teens' groups where the group itself may choose.

Seniors' groups may be given specific titles too. CAMEO used to be popular (Come and Meet Each Other).

3: Choices for meetings and group sizes

There are a number of possibilities for meeting content but it may be helpful to see these as a mix of three elements: input, response and support. The balance of these will differ depending on the purpose of the group but if one or more of these is very much under-represented the health of the group may be threatened.

1: Input

Here are five possible types of input for a small group meeting.

Speaker/video/online

This includes a visiting speaker giving a presentation, an interactive session, a recorded talk or material available online.

Speaker meetings are normal for seniors' groups and input will be followed by questions or smaller group discussion. Talks will often provide a Christian perspective on a general issue. Video or online input is normal for many enquirers' courses (such as Alpha or Christianity Explored). This will normally be followed by group discussion round tables. Home groups will sometimes use online resources as discussion starters. This means that there is quality input which the group themselves would not be able to provide.

Ice-breaker

Ice-breaker exercises are common in young people's groups as a fun way into a topic, but are also often used in adult home groups before the study of a Bible passage. They are best when teaching something that then relates to the topic under discussion or the Bible passage being explored. Their aim is to relax everyone and put them in a place where they are ready to receive biblical or other input.

Bible study

This term is used to describe a verse by verse study of a passage, often using notes and questions either prepared by the leader from a study booklet or written by the church. It requires the leader to have skill in asking the kind of open questions that draw people out, rather than those that are either so facile that no one says anything ("Did Jesus love people?") or so deep that no one knows what they are getting at.

Bible application

This term is being used to describe a Bible-based study that has more emphasis on practical application to day-to-day life. A typical example

would be a children's group reading one of Jesus' parables and applying it to how everyone might rethink their behaviour at home or school. Another example would be a home group where the members take the previous Sunday's sermon and talk about how this might work out in their work or home environment. The group meeting gives an opportunity to interact with the sermon in a way that is not possible in a Sunday service.

Other input

Some groups may all read a book or see a film and then discuss it at their meeting.

2: Response

Within the meeting there may be a range of responses to such input.

Praise/prayer

Many groups will include a meditation, time of praise and/or liturgical worship. The idea of praise does not have to include singing, and many groups feel too small to do this effectively. Prayer in this context will be for praise or intercession for the world.

Service within the group

One advantage of a small group is that everyone can play a part and not just be leading a session. There can be hosting, providing food, preparing exercises, acting as correspondent with a mission partner and other roles. Some churches will encourage their groups to be opportunities for the use of the more ecstatic spiritual gifts.

Service by the group

Groups may choose a project to undertake together or encourage members to get involved in their local community. Some staff local Good Neighbour schemes, some organise regular litter picking in the area. The group can also act as a support for those involved in local politics or sports ministries.

One common means is to adopt one of the church's mission workers and provide regular correspondence and Skype/Zoom calls. The

worker then becomes, effectively, a member of the group and is prayed for regularly.

Outreach

It is a well-known phenomenon that groups, even those with a clear outreach aim, find this element difficult to maintain even if seen as the priority. But the group can be a powerful forum to encourage all members to invite friends to church or to the group. If the church organises leaflet drops for special festivals and if the group is a geographical one, members can go door-to-door together.

3: Support

A key element of most groups is support and prayer for each other. Some will see this as their primary aim, whereas a group themed more into Bible study might have a different balance.

Intercession / prayer ministry

Most groups will include time to share news of their lives for prayer and this will be followed by a time of open or silent prayer. This can be much more personal and detailed than might occur in a Sunday service or prayer network, but possibly less detailed than in a prayer triplet. Some groups will want to lay hands on members with particular needs at work, in their family or in their community.

Personal support

Groups may demonstrate deep concern for other members and offer practical help for those who need it: meals for those who have been in hospital or who are ill at home and new parents, gardening or other practical work for older members, baby-sitting if this would be welcomed.

Friendship

Groups offer a chance for friendship, especially for those who live alone, and this may extend far beyond the meetings themselves. This will be an important feature for older people and singles.

Meals and refreshments

Most groups will include refreshments – a chance for the host to provide the basics and for a member of the group to bring suitable ‘eats’. Some groups will meet of an evening with a dessert. Many will have a full meal together on special occasions and some groups do this every time. Eating together is a powerful means of building friendship and mutual support and is a key feature of most enquirers’ groups.

Syllabus

Groups need a programme based on a syllabus of some kind. Possibilities.

- Sunday teaching programme – with the groups focusing on practical application, perhaps with questions listed by the preacher.
- All groups following a book of the Bible or Bible theme – based on a group study book which all purchase, or on notes supplied by the church.
- Activity material from an external agency – used mainly for enquirers’ and children’s groups.
- Activity material written by a member of staff – sometimes used for home groups and in a few cases for children’s groups.
- Groups choose their own theme or Bible book.
- Speaker input for those who use this means.

Style and frequency of meeting

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced many churches to video meetings, and although gatherings in person are the ideal, a quick Zoom catch-up week by week can be attractive, provided everyone is online. Otherwise, three options here are:

Weekly

This will be the norm for children’s groups, cell groups and enquirers’ groups. It requires commitment if you are to get the same people there most weeks but otherwise, as with many children’s group these days, the attendance may fluctuate considerably.

Fortnightly

This is a typical frequency for a home group where weekly is more than most are prepared to commit to and monthly does not build trust. It can be run with a central meeting (for prayer) in the weeks when groups are not meeting.

Monthly

Although rather too infrequent for a home group, many seniors’ groups (with a visiting speaker) find this is about right.

Most home groups meet on a weeknight evening, and most seniors' groups and many women's Bible studies during the day. Prayer triplets choose early morning before work or any time convenient for the three.

Size of group

Some people love meeting in a group setting and look forward to a regular session. Others feel apprehensive coming to any such gathering (see Part 4 below). Much depends on size.

If the group consists of eight people, say, compared with a larger group:

- That encourages ownership so turn-out as a percentage of membership is likely to be higher.
- It also encourages trust and vulnerability so people are more likely to share real needs.
- The group can fit into most people's living rooms. A larger group might make those with small homes feel they cannot play their part.
- It encourages quieter members to take a turn in leading a meeting or praying out loud.
- Eight is about the size of a typical business team, so this is a good size for a ministry group.

On the other hand:

- If several people cannot come to a meeting (especially if shift work or business travel means this happens regularly), it can be tough on someone who has prepared a study.
- It only needs one relationship problem or needy member to have a powerful effect on everyone.
- It is more difficult for the group to accept new members.
- If this is a meeting with a speaker, the number might feel embarrassingly small.
- Some need a larger group to hide in.

So a prayer triplet has three people because it is seeking to be an intimate group. But a seniors' group with a speaker, an enquirers' group with a video and an 18-30s group in a large church can be quite a bit larger. Yet there may be others who find larger crowds a real strain but can cope with four or five.

So any idea of an ideal size has to depend on what type of group it is, its purpose and its meetings.

Possibly:

- 2-4 ideal for a group for sharing prayer needs at a personal level;
- 6-10 ideal for a group seeking to apply Scripture to their daily lives;
- 8-12 ideal for a group focusing on Bible study;
- 12+ ideal for a group for general intercession.

But there are other factors to bear in mind.

- **Gender imbalance**

A group that is mainly female may be difficult for one rather shy man to feel comfortable in – and *vice versa*.

- **Singles**

A group of three happily married couples can be hard for one single person in a group of seven. And anyone married today may find themselves single tomorrow.

- **Couples**

Do couples belong to a group together or to separate groups? A couple with a young family often means only one member can come to a meeting, unless you meet in their home with the difficulties of children's bedtimes.

- **Size changes**

There is also the issue of when a group grows bigger than its ideal size or becomes too small to be effective. See Part 4.

In a church with groups with different purposes, it should be clear that the sizes to aim for will differ by the purpose of each group. Why can a church not have a range of different types of groups and therefore different sizes of groups?

Actions to take, choices to make

Choose:

- 3.1 The appropriate balance for each set of groups on input, response and support.
- 3.2 The appropriate elements within each of these three categories.
- 3.3 Your meetings syllabus sources.
- 3.4 Frequencies and use of live video.
- 3.5 The sizes for each cluster of groups.

4: Choices for oversight and autonomy

The success of a small group structure will depend to a great extent on the way the church's Minister(s) and leadership team view its purpose and priority. But there are choices to be made as to what level of oversight is appropriate.

Central oversight

If small groups are going to be part of a foundational structure of church membership, on a par with Sunday services, the leaders must be seen to back the concept with enthusiasm and redefine church life in the light of this. This will then show itself in how small groups become illustrations in sermons, in their prominence in mentions in leadership output, and in the way the church expresses its life on the website and in social media.

Whether the Minister(s) are members of one or more groups is a more delicate matter. They may need to be part of a group, but their presence can have an unhelpful impact on that group's life. Some belong to similar groups but outside their own church.

Oversight from the leadership is a different issue. Here are the outer limits of control that a Minister or leadership can exert on a group structure, applied here to the 'home group' section.

Features of detailed central oversight

- Each group follows the same basic structure for its meetings.
- Each group follows the same common teaching syllabus week by week, set by the leadership.
- This material is supplied as notes and questions to ask.
- The leadership appoint the group leaders.
- The group leaders are trained by the Minister or another staff member.
- Group leaders' meetings therefore involve teaching and training in the system.
- The leadership decide when groups multiply or close down.
- There may be regulations: such as group leaders need to be a married couple or male.
- Group leaders report regularly to the church's leadership, often through a Groups Co-ordinator.

- All groups are reconstituted every three or four years.
- New members are allocated to a group by the leadership.

This has strengths

- A real feeling that everyone is working towards the same discipleship aims.
- The church's vision is clearly worked out in all the groups.
- Sunday teaching and group study can be carefully co-ordinated.
- Group leadership is open to more people because of the guidance given.
- Groups that are growing inward can be restructured.

But also weaknesses

- It could restrict innovation as the groups have so little autonomy.
- It turns away people who do not wish to have such control over them.
- It can lead to either a compliant membership or some groups rebelling and breaking away.
- It risks taking little account of people's differences and maturities.
- It restricts individual choice of a group.

Features of minimal central oversight

- Each group is allowed to decide how and when it meets.
- Each group is allowed to structure their meetings in any way they choose.
- There are no central notes or other support provided.
- Groups appoint their own 'co-ordinators' (rather than 'leaders').
- Little guidance is given to group co-ordinators in materials that might help.
- There is no central training for co-ordinators.

- Co-ordinators' meetings focus on sharing news and praying.
- Groups may grow large or decline and close down.
- New members can choose to join any group they wish.
- Joining a church small group is not promoted by the church leadership.
- The leadership do not monitor groups on a regular basis.

This has strengths

- Groups feel they have freedom to make their own decisions to fit their needs.
- Groups can explore new ways of being together.
- People feel trusted as adults.
- With good leadership groups can be fitted to maturity or age needs.
- New members find a group where they feel they fit.

But also weaknesses:

- Groups do their own thing without working to a church plan or vision.
- Groups become a law unto themselves.
- New people are not welcome in groups that have become cosy.

Why people will not join a group

Even if the leadership is convinced of the value of small groups, there will be a not insignificant proportion of the membership who do not wish to join one. It is important to understand why they feel this way. Possible reasons:

- They find the idea of closeness difficult and wish to maintain a distance.
- They do not want to get drawn into church life too much.
- They have had bad experiences of church small groups in the past.
- Their life or work patterns mean that they are not available for midweek meetings.
- As either parents or older people, they do not wish to come out in the evening (if daytime groups are not on offer).

- Group leadership may prove either ineffective or domineering.
- People do not join a group if the leadership shows little commitment to the idea.

All this seeks to demonstrate is that there are choices to be made in devising the right amount of central oversight. These lists are only examples. A church will probably have a mix, and there may well be a variety of ways in which different types of small group operate, some looking for complete autonomy and others seeking detailed guidance. The point is to understand the choices available and know what you are promoting.

In all this young people's groups may be separate with leaders working together but doing their own thing, or tightly controlled by a member of staff. A seniors' group may be outside the group structure and so not follow the same patterns as other groups.

Those who do not join a group

In practice some people love groups and some fear them. Most churches have found resistance to creating a church of small groups, especially in a congregation where such groups have not been part of the culture when people joined that church. One issue is what to do about those who do not wish to participate.

The issue then arises, who in your church's 'membership' (however defined) is not in a group, unless the leadership decree that group membership is an essential feature of belonging to the church? This is important for reasons of pastoral care and communication.

And what about those on the fringe of church membership who want the relative anonymity of a Sunday service but who simply do not want to go any further than this at present? For them small groups might be threatening and a step further than they want to go. An over-enthusiastic expectation that everyone will join a group might put them off any involvement, including Sunday services.

Some churches take a list of those not in any group and allocate them to be associates of an appropriate group. That means there is some cover for pastoral care, but no insistence that they attend group meetings.

Joining groups

This is another issue related to the degree of central control. There are a number of ways existing church members and newcomers can choose the group they join.

- **The structure gives no option**
A set of geographical groups may mean that any newcomer only has one option for a group to join, whether that meets on a day that is convenient or not.
- **Church leadership or Groups Co-ordinator decides**
This is common in a firm oversight environment. A Home Groups Co-ordinator or the Minister suggests a suitable group based on a range of possible factors.
- **Newcomer tries out and decides**
Here the newcomer is encouraged to try out one or two groups to see where they might fit well, and then to make their own decision. The choice may be restricted to groups looking for new members.
- **Group leader invites**
Here it is up to each group leader to look out for newcomers and invite them to join their group. The obvious difficulty is different leaders rushing to be the first to invite a newcomer to the church and then arguing with another group leader.
- **Members invite friends**
This is the key means of growth from people outside the church membership and would be seen as the main means of organic growth in a system based on the 'cell' principle.
- **Enquirers' follow-up groups**
Those on an enquirers' course often want to stay together when it concludes, forming a new group within the system.

When there is a need for change

It is the experience of many churches that once a group structure is in place it is difficult to reform it as needs change. Home group members object to having their well-formed relationships broken up, children's group leaders are comfortable in their present structure. Here are five signs that some form of reorganisation needs to be put in hand by the church's leadership. If there is minimal central oversight, the danger is that nothing will be done.

When a group gets too large

If a home group has grown to 15 members it is getting too large. But picking the right moment to develop into two groups is not easy. Do it too soon and one of the new groups may prove too small to survive and the original group has to reform. Leave it too long and the group has got

too large to be effective at all and may resist strongly any move to break it up.

The normal text-book solution is multiplication: form two groups out of the old, let them meet together (if you have a large enough home for this) for the start of the meeting and then move into two different rooms for some weeks, before one group moves out.

When a group gets too small

Just as important is to know what to do when a group loses members (because of death, moving away from the area, joining another group, or dropping away from church membership). If a home group has shrunk to five members, it may be time to consider action.

Possibilities include bringing in newcomers not already in a group, amalgamating with another too-small group, closing down and members joining other groups. Much will depend on the purpose and structure of all the groups. For example, a children's group structure may need to be rethought with wider age ranges.

When a group gets set in its ways

This begs the question of who decides that a group has got stuck and on what evidence. It is likely that group members (including, perhaps, the leader) will deny any such accusation and play the victim. Parachuting a new leader in seems heavy handed and may do more harm than good.

If this has happened it may be too late, but to prevent this happening depends on clear purposes, regular leadership reviews, early warning signs noticed or even regular reorganisations of all groups.

When a group wants to disband

This is the opposite of the above and may occur when numbers are small, relationships are not good, or no leader can be found. Whether members are then reallocated to other groups or left without a group depends on many factors.

When all groups are reassigned

(perhaps on a regular basis)

A few churches work on the basis that groups have a three year life, say, and are then reformed. This prevents typical problems arising, but can damage relationships, especially if some groups want to continue as they are at the end of the three-year term.

Reconfiguration of groups is a difficult exercise to undertake, especially if people see it as a surprise move. Many groups will defend their territory and some will continue meeting covertly.

Ways to do it well.

- Make it clear that there will be regular reconfigurations for the greater need of church health.
- Take decisions in leadership groups so it can be seen not as the whim of the Minister or one Groups Co-ordinator.
- Make it very clear what the reasons are for the change and show that they outweigh the costs.
- Consult widely and show you listen to group leaders.
- Expect opposition and hold your nerve.

Actions to take, choices to make

Choose:

- 4.1 Details of support for the structure from all leadership bodies.
- 4.2 Features of central control / group autonomy that would be right for your church.
- 4.3 How to involve and care for those not wishing to be in a group.
- 4.4 Those who decide which group a new member is allocated to.
- 4.5 A strategy for actions to take when groups need to be reconstituted.

5: Choices for overview and leadership

The whole structure needs a co-ordinator and each group needs a leader.

A Groups Co-ordinator

Someone needs to be responsible for the whole group structure. The normal pattern is to have a Groups Co-ordinator but this is usually for the home groups alone. Might there be value in having someone with the wider remit of oversight of all small groups within the church, instead of separating out children's, seniors', enquirers and other groups, even if it is acknowledged that these categories operate in rather different ways?

The pattern here will depend on the size of church:

- **Small**
The Minister as *de facto* Co-ordinator for all groups.
- **Medium**
a church member in this identified role, with another (often on the paid staff) overseeing children's group leaders, the two working closely together.
- **Large**
one member of staff with all groups as one of their key responsibilities, another member of staff overseeing all children's work, another for teens, and possibly a fourth for enquirers' and/or gender groups, all working as a team.

The role of a Home Groups Co-ordinator will depend on factors relating to the purpose of the

groups and the level of central oversight. Core elements include:

- keeping an up-to-date register of the groups and their memberships (perhaps as part of church management system software);
- keeping a record of programmes used, resources available, etc.;
- overseeing all the choices being covered in this article;
- selecting and training group leaders;
- arranging and chairing group leaders' meetings;
- helping new church members find a group to join;
- keeping the groups at a high profile within church life;
- keeping aware of how each group leader is functioning and offering support where necessary.

Then the role might in many cases extend to areas such as:

- writing notes for home group Bible sessions;
- reviewing each group and its leadership each year;
- setting up new groups;

- reorganising the structure as necessary.

Larger churches may need a more tiered structure. Home groups may be divided into two or more clusters each with a co-ordinator, all of whom may then meet with the overall Co-ordinator. The division will depend on how the groups are constituted: by geography, congregations, ministry area, etc. There will be a 'family tree' structure.

The purpose of such a structure will be partly to discuss group leadership, pastoral issues and choice of syllabus and materials to use, partly to offer training and partly to offer personal support and care for the group leaders. There may also be the opportunity for an annual review of each group leader and the offer of training and other means of support.

Role of group leaders

One of the restricting factors for running a group structure is the need for 'leadership' in each group. Some churches may be full of capable leadership-types but who have no time to offer and do not wish to add to their already long list of church responsibilities. Other churches may not have sufficient people who feel confident enough to take on the leadership of a group.

But what kind of leaders might you choose for your groups? Here is a possible selection.

- 1 **A teacher** (*emphasis on presentation*)
Home groups that focus on Bible study need someone who can teach, even if by asking the right questions from supplied materials or notes. Some groups share this responsibility round several of their members. Children's groups will naturally see their leaders as teachers, even if following a set out 'lesson' in printed materials. But such people may be in short supply and this is not the only possible model.
- 2 **A co-ordinator** (*emphasis on administration*)
In many churches the leadership of each meeting may be shared out with different people leading different elements (so one person leads a Bible exploration and another the share and prayer time, and a third acts as host), and/or different people taking these roles on each time. The overall leader acts more as co-ordinator, checking venues, arranging programmes and ensuring people are ready to play their part.
- 3 **A host** (*emphasis on hospitality*)
Here the 'leader' role is simply to invite

people to their home, but this lacks the need for someone to be responsible for each meeting.

- 4 **A pastor** (*emphasis on caring*)
If caring is a key element of the group, the leader may need to be more of a pastor to the group, ensuring that people's needs are met, that practical help for those who need it is put in hand and that no one is left out.
- 5 **An evangelist** (*emphasis on outreach*)
Small groups tend to focus more on internal care more than external outreach. So a leader who enthuses about evangelism may be vital to shift the balance. An enquirers' group will need such leadership in any case.

The choices to be made concern the balance between these five roles (and any others you feel not included in the above). Teachers and evangelists are usually in shorter supply than

Commitment and rotas

While a home group may share the leading of each meeting round members of the group who are happy to undertake required roles, it is unusual for the leadership of the group to be seen as something to be shared round.

But for many church children's groups meeting on a Sunday during part of a main service, it has become more common for those who lead each meeting to do so by rota. So someone agrees to lead a 9-11s group once a month.

Advantages of this approach:

- People are prepared to miss out part of the church service once a month but not more frequently, so this is the only way that recruitment can be successful.
- It can work well if one leader (perhaps a member of staff) leads each week and the volunteers are therefore co-leaders.

The disadvantages:

- Lack of consistency in teaching.
- Lack of relationship between leaders and children – the groups focus on input more than on being together.
- It may lead to families attending more erratically on Sundays through lack of consistency in the children's groups.

co-ordinators and pastors. Different types of groups will need a different balance between these. The leader of a seniors' group with outside speakers probably needs to be a co-ordinator (for the programme) and a pastor (for those in the group).

Home groups may be able to separate out these five roles among different members of the group. Those prepared to 'lead' by fulfilling all five will be in short supply but five members each taking one may be a better way forward. In any case, some groups share out the 'teaching' element with different members leading each session.

Whatever the balance chosen, prepare a simple role definition and person profile for group leaders (or the Co-ordinator if the roles are shared out). And offer an annual or six-monthly review with the aim of allowing leaders to relinquish their role if they feel they need this or if they are becoming stale.

The standard strategy for leadership succession is to appoint apprentices who can take over having been trained on the job. But, for most churches, this is difficult to put into practice as finding even present leaders is hard enough.

Note that leading a home group may well not require DBS clearance as a safeguarding issue, but leading children's and teens' groups certainly will, as will leading any seniors' groups that

include vulnerable adults. The organisation of DBS checks may be a considerable task if significant numbers are involved.

Training leaders

It is wise to make regular attendance at training sessions a requirement for group leadership. This may simply mean coming to regular group leaders' meetings which include a training element, through to annual attendance at an external training conference or day event for the type of groups led. In the latter case the church should have budgets to ensure payment of course and travel are covered.

Actions to take, choices to make

Choose:

- 5.1 The role of a Groups Co-ordinator, prepare role definition and person profile.
- 5.2 The role definition and person profile for group leaders.
- 5.3 Means of appointing, managing and training group leaders
- 5.4 The options for rota or weekly commitment for leaders.

The numerous lists of choices in this article show that there is no one way to run a set of church groups, but this part of a church's structure deserves study and wise decision-making. See it as the key aspect of church life alongside Sunday services to get it into perspective. Use this article as a checklist for everything you may need to consider and choose about it.

You can apply almost everything written to home groups alone, but one purpose has been to demonstrate the value of seeing all small groups in a church as a single, key element of the structure to complement Sunday services.

This article is available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles> then A48. See also Article A47, *15 principles of volunteering*, plus Training Notes TN104, *A grid structure for churches*, and TN119, *Group behaviours to be aware of*. TN79 and TN124 are mentioned in the Introduction.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A48 under Structures (with a link to Planning).

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