

# Eleven Reasons Why Home Fellowship Groups Fail

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The need for effective small group ministry is implied in the New Testament. If the local church is to truly develop the spiritual gifts of its members, and mobilize the terrific power of the Holy Spirit to work through a trained and experienced laity, if it is to facilitate true relationship-based community, it will need to organize smaller groups where these can be fostered.

Xenos Fellowship, an independent church in Columbus Ohio, has centered its ministry in lay-led, small home group ministry since its beginning in 1970. Using this focus, Xenos has grown from a handful in 1970 to well over 3000 today. Their small group ministry has also resulted in good morale on the part of the 400 lay home fellowship leaders, all graduates of the 2 year graded training course for leaders.

Because of this success, other pastors often call on the Xenos staff to consult regarding how to establish and/or manage small group lay ministry in their own churches.

Through these consultations, we have discovered that small group ministries are not a novel idea at all. In fact, most evangelical churches seem to have tried to establish a network of small groups at one time or another. At the same time, most of these efforts are disappointing to some degree-- Leaders often ask us, "What have we been doing wrong?"

We think these frequent failures are not the result of divine opposition to the idea of small groups, or the fact that, "our kind of people aren't right for this sort of thing." Instead, we think there are a number of good theological and practical reasons why these groups do not do as well as they could.

## **1. They are often not based on New Testament theory**

Both New Testament example and principle argue for small home-sized groups as a key feature of the local church. In the area of biblical example, Acts 2:46 states that the Jerusalem church met "in the temple" and "from house to house . . ." Concerning the meetings in the Temple, we know that Solomon's portico was probably quite large, and could have accommodated even the several thousands that were a part of the Jerusalem church. Thus, in Jerusalem, they held both large and small group meetings.

Clearly, they did not feel the large meetings were enough by themselves. It should be obvious that an impersonal atmosphere will result if we only hold only very large meetings. The local church should encourage a network of close relationships in its congregation because real community must be based on close relationships. Smaller group meeting formats such as those described in this passage would be ideal for fostering such relationships.

In another case, Paul reminded the Ephesian elders that he had exhorted them both "publicly and from house to house." (Acts 20:20) In this passage, "publicly" probably refers to the school room of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9). But Paul did not limit his speaking ministry to the large meeting place, even though one was available. He also worked "from house to house."

Paul apparently refers to several home churches in the city of Rome (Rom. 16: 4, 10, 11, 14, 15.). In I Cor. 14:35 he mentions "churches" in the plural, after having already referred to "the church of God which is at Corinth," (I Cor 1:2) in the singular.

It seems clear from these and other references that operating a cluster of home churches in each city was common practice. These home groups continued to work together under the same elders. It is probably significant that no church buildings have been found from the earliest period of the church (33-- 150 AD.), and even those from the second century were homes with a large room built in. Every church with a building faces the challenge of resisting people's tendency to view the building as the church. At Xenos, we have refused to build or to expand our building until we see a high degree of involvement in home groups. Otherwise, by expanding the building we would only worsen the problem of superficial involvement in the

local church. Currently, the elders at Xenos set a goal of 80% involvement in home groups, and so far, God has allowed us to maintain that rate of incorporation.

New Testament principles surrounding the issues of body life, spiritual gifts, and the fact that real spiritual ministry is the business of every member in the local church can not be effectively brought into practice in a large group setting. (see Rom. 12; I Cor. 12,14; Eph. 4:11-16; Col. 2:19) The church must provide smaller group settings where relationships can grow between members so they will be able to discover each other's needs. Only then will they be able to meet those needs on an individual level.

Unfortunately, when churches attempt to initiate a small group ministry, they sometimes fail to teach and persuade their people that the purpose of the meeting is to practice these biblical principles. The result is sometimes a wrong impression on the part of most participants. Members often feel that the meeting is primarily intended as a social gathering, a support group, or a place where "my needs can be met," rather than "a place where I can develop a ministry."

The first order of business in beginning this kind of ministry is to launch a teaching offensive in the church. The goal would be to establish an understanding and a vision of the New Testament model and the spiritual goals associated with lay mobilization in the minds of the participants.

## **2. The wrong criteria are sometimes followed for the selection of leaders**

The Bible teaches that spiritual criteria must be used to select leaders. The qualifications of a deacon (I Tim. 3:8-13) would serve well for the initial selection of leaders of home fellowship groups. Too often, however, the church will designate men and women for leadership on the basis of secular abilities, job status, levels of financial giving, or seniority in the church. The result is usually a meeting that is not very spiritually edifying or appealing.

After leaders have been selected on the basis of character and knowledge, they should also be evaluated on the basis of actual function, or role. When Jesus says "my sheep hear my voice," he is giving us a basic way to recognize a good shepherd. A Christian's leadership cannot be authenticated until someone is willing to follow him/her.

In many of our churches, it may be very difficult to determine who our authentic leaders are. This is because they have not had ample opportunity to try their hand at leadership. In these cases, we will have to pick leaders on the basis of the best criteria possible. Later, when lay-led groups are in place, it should be possible to evaluate the effectiveness of the work done by the more committed members of the group. Other things being equal, the more effective workers should be the first to be moved forward.

## **3. Frequently, insufficient authority is given to the leaders**

If the home fellowship is to be fashioned after the Biblical examples of house churches, then the leaders of the groups should be allowed to run their groups the way the leaders of the New Testament house churches ran theirs. Since the New Testament instructs readers to respect their leaders and to follow their lead in the running of the home church, we can assume those leaders had many decisions delegated to them. (I Cor. 16:16; Heb. 13:17; I Thess. 5:14)

Sometimes, churches impose a structure upon the small group that is too restrictive. This structure may include a pre-planned curriculum for study, and a long list of policy restrictions. The effect is usually to stifle initiative and sap motivation. The leaders realize very quickly that they are functioning as agents for the existing leadership of the church, but that they themselves are leaders in name only. When the church requires the home group leaders to check in on virtually all decisions, it clearly suggests that they are incompetent to make their own decisions. Sometimes they are incompetent, but the church must see the challenge in this, rather than accepting the status quo.

Similarly, pre-planned curriculum often actually scripts the meeting and requires little creativity or expertise on the part of group leaders. Indeed, the main reason for scripting the meeting is usually the feeling that group leaders have no expertise of their own. Such lack of expertise points in turn to a weak equipping ministry in the church. Failure to train leaders to a sophisticated level results in leaders who must be led by the hand at all times. When this happens, leaders (often highly competent and educated at their secular jobs) realize that anyone could follow the simple script, and consequently, they are not challenged. They lose interest in leading, and begin to call on the leadership to be passed around the group. They fail to take possession of the role of home group leader as a worthwhile life goal. We believe churches are often too impatient when trying to move from a program-based model to a home group model of church life, and therefore they grossly underestimate the level of training and equipping needed to develop effective leaders. Impatience may also signal lack of commitment, because in-depth equipping is expensive in both dollars and man hours for the church's leaders. See #7 below.

We don't believe the central leadership of the church should forsake all control over the actions of home fellowship leaders, because lay leaders are usually not as well trained as seminary graduates, or as experienced as the church's top leadership. Therefore, it is necessary to carefully weigh which areas are left to the discretion of the home leaders, and which areas need to be cleared with the higher authority of the church. The point in making this decision is to arrive at a balance that will prevent serious errors from occurring (even though we never have a guarantee that all problems can be prevented), while delegating real decision-making authority to the home fellowship leaders.

#### **4. The groups may have an unhealthy inward-focus**

Small groups are often set up with the ultimate goal of fellowship or personal support rather than evangelism or mission. While quality fellowship and support is one of the rewards of small group ministry, it is an inadequate basis. If we have only fellowship as our goal, the group is corporately self-centered, or self-focused. Thus, it's no surprise that such groups are prone to division and discontent. This is because outreach and mission are the natural context within which fellowship should occur.

When a group of people occupy themselves with each other to the exclusion of the outside world, discontent is sure to follow. We should be unwilling to consider the option of handling outreach at the large meeting and limiting small groups to a fellowship role. The group may not engage in outreach at its weekly meeting, but they have to work together and pray together on some shared mission.

Acts 2:46 says that the Jerusalem church was "breaking bread from house to house" but does not mention evangelism. However, this is a moot point, since the passage does not mention where evangelism did occur. On the other hand, in I Cor. 14:24, Paul clearly contemplates "unbelievers" entering a meeting which is an interactive meeting-- apparently a home church (see vs. 26,34).

#### **5. There is often no provision for church discipline within the small group**

In cases where home fellowships are set up with no provision for church discipline, a very distressing and familiar pattern emerges. Some people are attracted to small groups for the wrong reasons. There are those who come to exploit others, or simply to use the group to become the center of attention.

The impact of such people is greater in a small group than it would be in a large meeting. As a result, the whole character of the group can be altered to such an extent that it becomes difficult to attract new people, or even to hold the interest and loyalty of the productive members. The New Testament provides a solution to this kind of situation. Those members who are willing to damage others or themselves are to be confronted in love about their attitude and/or actions (see I Thess. 5:14; Matt. 18:15). If they are not responsive, a legitimate amount of pressure can be applied--even to the point of removing them from the group.

According to the Bible, this kind of discipline in love should be normative (I Cor. 5). The application of discipline should be gracious, and suited to the needs of the individual, as well as the group. In order to prevent abuses or legalism, the eldership should be consulted in cases where an ultimatum may be issued.

Churches worry about angering people if they practice discipline. This concern is legitimate. But while we will anger some by exercising discipline, we endanger all by failing to exercise it. Worst of all, those being disciplined miss out on one of the important provisions for growth in the New Testament.

Small group attendance is a privilege in the church. Participation should have conditions attached, such as no anti-social or disruptive behavior. Otherwise, the small groups become soft, unruly, and unappealing.

## **6. All groups may be the same, rather than diversified and matched to their members**

For some reason, churches generally devise and execute a plan for small groups that features only one kind of group. We did this too. But not any more! Now we see that family aged people need a different type of group than students or singles, etc.

Why should a large church (or even a small one) have only one type of group? Creativity on the part of leaders and planners could probably result in a number of models for meetings, featuring different sizes, different formats, different purposes, and different commitment levels. Every church should be different.

## **7. There may be no adequate equipping offered to would-be leaders**

The Bible does not allow the local church the option of telling its people to go away for their training. According to Eph. 4:11,12, it is the responsibility of the leadership of the local church to provide quality training in Christian work ("the work of service") to its own people. When the leadership of a church decides not to have a small group ministry because its "laymen" are too ignorant, this is not an excuse - it is an admission of guilt!

For many churches, the first step toward a successful home fellowship ministry would be to establish a full year-long course of in-depth theological and practical ministry training for the proposed leadership group. We find that most churches try to get by with a five or ten week training series which is inadequate for sophisticated leadership responsibilities. People will take longer training courses if they can break up the training into modules, and if they view taking these classes as fun. This is why we need to put our best communicators and leaders in as teachers in this training.

If a church already has an adequate supply of leaders who have some biblical knowledge, it would be preferable to hold this training while small groups are in progress, so they can immediately use the knowledge they learn. This prevents the accumulation of "dead knowledge" and also avoids creating the impression that Christian work is more difficult than it really is.

At the same time, we should be clear that completing the training course will not necessarily result in an assignment as a home group leader. That decision will have to also depend on other considerations such as character development, and a record of self-sacrificing service to others.

Finally, aside from classroom training, each home group should develop its own program of personal discipleship and ministry training. The classes should be viewed as supplemental to the grass-roots discipleship practiced at the home group level.

## **8. The church may set no multiplication goals, and may have no good plan for multiplying home groups**

In many cases, a home fellowship's existence is viewed as an end in itself. As mentioned earlier, this lack of mission-mindedness has a negative effect on the group. In order for groups to be spiritually healthy, they need a purpose greater than themselves. On the other hand, good small groups tend not to stay small. Thus, when a house fills up with people, much of the interactive character of the group is lost. In addition, outreach tends to dwindle because there is no room for new people.

In cases like this, it is natural to divide the group in order to preserve the small size of the group, while at the same time, reaching more people.

Unless the church propagates a vision and a plan for planting new groups which encourages outreach, discipleship, and equipping, home fellowships tend to resist multiplication. The status quo is always more comfortable than the change and risk that come with growth.

We should establish ground rules that help to insure success for both newly planted groups, with a minimum of disruption to the relationships that have been developed. Otherwise, the system will tend to stifle initiative and punish success. In other words, the view of the leaders might well be, "the faster our group grows, the sooner we get to part ways with the close friends we have made so far."

Good planning should make it possible for close friends to stay together most of the time, thus minimizing the disruption involved in planting new groups.

### **9. Small groups are sometimes viewed as peripheral rather than central to the life of the church**

In some churches, the large worship meeting and/or teaching meetings are viewed as essential, but the home group is considered an option--helpful to some, but not necessarily normative for healthy involvement in the local church.

As pointed out earlier, this view ignores the Biblical point of view that the local body depends on the individual function of each and every member (Eph. 4:15,16). We need to resist the temptation to dilute this teaching (for instance, teaching that giving money on Sunday, or serving as an usher could fulfill the intent of this passage). If we allow this kind of superficial understanding of church life predominate, there will be no strong motivation to exercise real spiritual gifts, or to make small group ministry succeed.

If the church fails to establish a vision in the minds of its members for full involvement, the result will likely be a very poor level of participation in the home fellowship program. Often, only those with little to do will spend the time it takes to become meaningfully involved. To obtain the help of our most gifted members, we will need to teach that involvement in home mission and fellowship is an exciting opportunity to finally realize the full extent of normal Christian experience.

The leadership in the local church must cultivate a mentality, or consensus in the church which places an appropriate emphasis on this kind of ministry. Such a consensus can be created without resorting to legalism. The leadership must truly believe in the concept themselves, and be willing to teach and practice it in their own lives.

### **10. They are sometimes viewed as a threat by the pastor(s) of the church.**

Pastors might fear home groups for several reasons. False teaching is always a danger, but this is why the Bible teaches the need for "overseers" or elders. The elders should also train the "lay" work force so that they will be able to teach sound doctrine. Pastors also worry that a small group network may not be effective, thus leading to disappointment in the church. The record of home fellowships in recent years has been mixed, and somewhat disappointing. But we can see from this list some reasons why.

Some leaders may prefer the control that they have when they are the only leaders in the church. This feeling is understandable, especially when a pastor is already having trouble controlling the situation in the church. However, we need to see at this point, that a quality small group ministry would not increase the work load of the pastor in the long run. The key to maintaining quality ministry even for a growing church, is to delegate work to other members. Pastors who succeed in establishing a successful and vital small group network do not see their own leadership eroded at all.

The man or woman of God must pass judgment on his/her own attitude, admitting that a willingness to inhibit others' ministry for the sake of establishing his/her own is most censurable. The fact that we may feel threatened in our position in the church is no excuse! We have been placed where we are in order to facilitate others' ministry, not to inhibit it.

### **11. Home groups are often introduced in a programmatic, not a natural way.**

One church after another has reported that they formed a plan, presented it to the church, started a dozen home groups and got dismal results or even strong resistance from the congregation. We suggest not approaching home groups this way, because it is unnatural. Home groups should grow in an organic way, not be thrown into existence through a massive program. Instead, the best way to introduce home groups in our opinion is:

Identify a handful of people who understand and hunger for the vision of home-based fellowship. This could take some time, as leaders may have to persuade some that this approach is biblical and exciting.

Once that group is identified, the leaders of the church should begin meeting with them in the first home group. Usually, a single home group is preferable, as the future opinion leaders in the church need to get on the same page about what a home group is and how it works. Plead with the senior pastor to be a part of this group. Planning meetings are not the answer here. Only meeting together and trying different formats and approaches will lead to the consensus you need. Group members should be encouraged to share with non-members their experiences and vision for these kind of groups. If the group is full and others are unable to join, their frustration will actually serve as motivation later when more groups are available. Calling on people to wait will not hurt the project, especially if you make it clear that they are welcome and you are eager to work them in as soon as possible. Keep a waiting list.

During this first year, the leaders should devise and implement a series of courses for future home group leaders. People waiting to joining a home group should be urged to take advantage of the classes while they wait. If you have a lengthy waiting list, explain that those who take classes will be the first to qualify for participation in home groups. During this period, the church should come to realize that participation in home groups is not a duty or an added burden, but a priveledge.

When the first group is full and people are ready (this could take months or a year or two) the group should divide and plant another group or groups. Then others can be again invited to join. We believe the natural pattern for adding members to existing groups is personal relationships, not geography. Churches that base home groups on geography usually find that the groups lack cohesion because people don't know each other. Allow people to invite their friends and relatives to their own group, regardless of where they live in the city.

At first, the leadership may want to supervise additions to home groups. Later this will be unnecessary. The point is to try to assure success by getting the best people into home groups in a mix that promises success. Avoid filling groups with only hard cases.

Using a system of collegiate review, allow and encourage groups to plant other groups when they are ready. Group leaders should participate in some type of oversight system. Avoid pressuring groups to move too fast, but also refuse to accept a mentality that says "We're satisfied staying the way we are."

Through multiplication of home groups you can see large numbers of groups formed within a few years. The larger congregation will naturally want to participate in something they hear others are enjoying. Have members of successful groups share their testimonies at your worship service and elsewhere. Build excitement gradually for the home group project. Give people a sense that they have arrived once they get to join a home group.

The lesson learned at Xenos during the past few years is that the New Testament model is not only theologically preferable- it is also capable of yielding New Testament results!