



The tribe of Issachar understood the times and knew what Israel should do

Issachar Ministries UK seeks to be a people who understand the times, listen to the Lord and know what should be done

## ***Resourcing for Prayer Network***

# **Practical Help (1)**

# **The Value of the Small Group**

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January 2015

**From the time when the earliest church communities were formed, small groups of believers have proved invaluable in the growth of the church and the spread of the Gospel worldwide. Their importance is both within the church structures but also where-ever people come together across the denominations.**

### **A Changing Christian Scene**

Unfortunately in a day when big numbers and large meetings are seen as important, far too often the small group can be very much undervalued. In church history in our own country we had a time in the mid 20th century when centralisation and the merging of different doctrines were the fashion alongside larger meetings and services and the small group was belittled.

But today we are seeing a rapid growth in the number of small groups meeting outside, and across, the church fellowships. At a time when the Christian presence appears to be disintegrating, they can come into their own.

### **Characteristics of Small Groups**

It is in small groups that individual Christians can find like-minded people concerned to pray, but also human companionship, support and practical help and can also deepen their spiritual life, growing to spiritual maturity. In these groups, not only are biblical texts read and discussed, different interpretations explored, but insights for daily living emerge from the participants. Practical experience is important, and it is a safe place to ask questions so that head knowledge is developed into true understanding.

### **Composition**

Small groups do not have to be made up totally of believers, it is healthy to have those searching for a faith as part of the group. Explaining 'why you believe' and expressing deep concepts in simple words that can be understood by others, is a very important part of growth in any believer. Two hundred years ago it was in the small class meetings of the Wesleyan Church that new believers made their commitment to their Lord and then went to the church to declare this publicly.

## Size of Groups

The ideal size of a small group is between 10 and 20 - if they grow larger than that they should think of dividing so that they can multiply!! All sizes of meetings are important for Christians - but all have a different purpose. The Gospels, particularly Matthew, give many examples of different sized groups doing different things - recognising that Jesus knew something about 'group dynamics'! He gathered together the 5,000 for a celebration event when he told them parables and fed them and gave the Sermon on the Mount; he instructed and tasked the 70 into practical service so that they could go out; he had a small group of 12 disciples who were constantly with him (like one of our small groups) and he had an intimate group of 3 or 4 who were closest to him. To each of them he related differently.

All aspects of church life are included in these biblical models and you may be able to identify more - but these 4 are all necessary. If we are wise we should never try to make one fulfil the task of the other or restrict our Christian presence to one or other but we should be able to find our place in any sized group with different expectations.

## Opportunities

Such is the value of small groups that they form the nucleus of many organisations which can serve larger meetings and can have a number of different purposes. Practically all new ventures start with the commitment of a small group of people sharing a common interest.

## Small Churches and Small Groups

A small church is not necessarily a small group - and vice versa. The two terms are not necessarily synonymous - a community needs to change as it grows (or shrinks) or it will lose its effectiveness and as we have already said the church and the group have other differences. People who prefer small churches often imagine that they could not happily be part of a large church as they could not bear such anonymity. They fear that they will lose the intimate relationship of people they know well and will be lost. They look with horror at the largest church in the world in Seoul, which has over half a million members. But if you ask the leaders of Yonggi Cho's church how they avoid the problem of anonymity they say that such a criticism is not relevant. The church has developed a system of independent cell groups with a maximum of 12 members in each into which all church members are integrated.

We may not have churches the size of those in Korea but this principle, which lies at the root of the Korean church, has a universal application. Small Christian groups are not just a nice hobby, take them or leave them. They are indispensable. In such groups much of what goes to make up a church faithful to Jesus Christ is found together.

## Comments

***Those who are actively part of a small group may have something they can share with others that will encourage others to be effective in this time of change. Do send your thinking and experiences to Ingrid and we will see how we can share this with others.***

*This paper come to you as part of the Issachar Ministries Resourcing for Prayer e-mail in January 2015  
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