

## **Individualism and Small Groups in North America**

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Perhaps there is no more fruitful place to search for New Testament community than in the small group movement which has emerged as a significant and deeply studied phenomena within American life.<sup>1</sup> According to Robert Wuthnow's survey, "exactly 40 percent of the adult population of the United States claims to be involved in a small group that meets regularly and provides caring and support for those who participate in it" (1994:45).<sup>2</sup> The following profile lists just who is involved in small groups:

Women are more likely to be involved in small groups than are men in all age categories and in all regions of the country. Older people are somewhat more likely to be involved in small groups than are younger people, controlling for gender, education, and region. College graduates are more likely than those with lower levels of education to be involved in small groups, controlling for other factors (1994:375).

According to the survey by Wuthnow, nearly everyone in our society wants to be able to share their deepest feelings, be in an accepting environment and have loyal friends you can count on (1994:53-54). It is not surprising then that "the most distinctive feature of the contemporary small-group movement is its emphasis on support" (1994:261).

Whereas eighty-two percent of those involved in small groups said that the group made them feel like they were not alone, seventy-two percent reported that the group gave them encouragement when they were feeling down (1994:171). On the other hand,

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<sup>1</sup> Wuthnow, Professor of Social Sciences and the Director of the Center for the Study of American Religion at Princeton University coordinated the efforts of fifteen scholars in a three year study which sampled more than a thousand members and nine-hundred non-members of small groups with extensive survey materials (1994:367-375; 395-421).

<sup>2</sup> In an extensive footnote, Wuthnow acknowledges the skepticism of some who might question this high degree of involvement by saying that as many as a quarter of the respondents might not have a high level of commitment and the input from other surveys which place the involvement of around twenty-nine percent (1994:426-427). Even if the more conservative number of roughly one in three are involved in small groups, it is a very significant percentage within the context of the individualism within North America.

the majority of those not involved in small groups said that “they already have support in more naturally occurring settings” such as an informal circle of friends (1994:183-184).<sup>3</sup>

While the results of this survey are encouraging, society’s core values of freedom of individuality have also affected the small group movement by redefining the meaning of community:

Community is what people say they are seeking when they join small groups. Yet the kind of community they create is quite different from the communities in which people have lived in the past. These communities are more fluid and more concerned with the emotional states of the individual (1994:3).<sup>4</sup>

It is obvious that because of the powerful force of individualism which has laid at the very foundation of American culture, members of small groups “are often faced with dilemma of wanting a more solid, communal form of religious commitment and at the same time picking up the privatized, relativistic messages that infuse their groups from the wider culture” (1994:57). How this duality between individual beliefs and participation in a community is accommodated is outlined by the following remarks by Wuthnow:

What some have called “privatized” values or “individualistic” spirituality is institutionalized in the norms of many small groups. We tell ourselves that faith is essentially a matter of personal discovery and that values are not absolute, universal standards, but discretionary matters about which we can have our own opinions. We then carry these views into our groups as well. A written text of some kind may provide a common framework, but the values it embodies are so general that everyone can read something different into it (1994:200).

According to Robert Bellah, this shadow of religious pluralism has been cast over the American consciousness since colonial times: “The American pattern of privatizing

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<sup>3</sup> As a sociologist, Wuthnow is very aware that small groups play a role in both influencing and being influenced by the wider culture. In the former category of influencing the wider society “small, relatively fluid, low-budget groups have an adaptive advantage in a heterogeneous environment such as the contemporary United States” (1994:23). People can survive the trauma of moving to different parts of the country, leave a spouse or change jobs because they know that any number of diverse groups will be there to support them.

<sup>4</sup> The ambiguity between community and individualism is reflected in the self identities of group members. Whereas eighty-nine percent described themselves as “a people person” fifty-eight percent identified themselves as “a very private person” (1994:192).

religion while at the same time allowing it some public functions has proven highly compatible with the religious pluralism that has characterized America from the colonial period and grown more and more pronounced” (1996:225).

In summary, although the current small group phenomenon is providing critical emotional support to over a third of the society, Wuthnow states that the survey data is unclear “whether the deepening spirituality that people experience in small groups encourages them to move away” from a private and individual view of religion (1994:252).<sup>5</sup>

It is clear that small groups in America have trouble escaping from the strong gravity of individualism which permeates our society. People tend to think and act as individuals, even when they are involved with other people. The next section looks at how the practice of the spiritual disciplines of Bible study, prayer and service affect the lives of small groups.

### **Practicing Discipleship in Small Groups**

If we generally define discipleship as nurturing faith through disciplined Bible study and prayer so that it can be shared in service to others, then how are small groups doing to nurture these personal and corporate practices of discipleship? Wuthnow has found that generally speaking, seventy-six percent of Bible study members had joined their group in order to become “more disciplined” in their spiritual lives. (1994:220).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Roxburgh has noted that pastors have now become part of the helping professions which focus on the welfare of the individual. “Soul care is self-discovery with a loss of larger horizon” (1997:19).

<sup>6</sup> Wuthnow comments that the Protestant work ethic of individual responsibility, hard work and achievement have influenced both the secular culture in America and “our perception of spiritual journeys as well” (1994:225).

Being disciplined in one's spiritual life (1994:17) and commitment to the group (1994:51) are both viewed from a very positive point of view.<sup>7</sup>

On the surface it would appear that small groups provide an ideal environment to grow disciples. The commitment level is high and the need for discipline is affirmed. But when the survey actually investigated what was occurring within the groups a more ambiguous picture emerges. Take for instance the members knowledge of the Bible:

Group members whose spirituality has been deepened by their participation were no more likely than other members to give the correct answer to a factual question that was included in the survey . . . . Thus, we must question what kind of biblical understanding is being fostered in small groups . . . . The weekly Bible study may have lasted for two hours, but only fifteen minutes of the time was devoted to studying the Bible (Wuthnow 1994:243).

It is evident that although groups encourage people to think about spiritual truths “they do little to increase biblical knowledge of their members” (Wuthnow 1994:7).<sup>8</sup> While a more thorough knowledge of the Bible does not in any way guarantee spiritual growth, it is hard to formulate a plan for discipleship which does not incorporate an intimate relationship with Jesus as nurtured by the Scriptures.

In addition to Bible study, prayer is an important spiritual discipline. Praying together was one of the things participants in groups liked best. Prayer requests were often solicited and answers to prayer were brought to the group. Instead of relying on an ordained member of the clergy, prayer is democratized as many members of the group participated and felt a special intimacy with God.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Therefore, “if spirituality is like learning to play the piano, then churches can perform a legitimate role by providing piano teachers, lesson books, and places to hold recitals” (Wuthnow 1994:236).”

<sup>8</sup> For instance, nearly forty-one percent of the participants in small groups felt that Jesus was born in Jerusalem and nineteen percent thought that the book of Acts was in the Old Testament (Wuthnow 1994:244).

<sup>9</sup> If “feeling closer to God was by far the most strongly related” (Wuthnow 1994:385), factor in influencing the faith of members in small groups then prayer probably had a significant part in generating that feeling.

Besides nurturing their faith by Bible study and prayer, members of small groups have participated in service for others. In Wuthnow's research, seventy-five percent of those participating in small groups had invited a friend to attend the group and forty-four percent had been responsible for another person joining the group. In addition, one in nine had been responsible for starting a new group (1994:338).<sup>10</sup> The findings show that small group members tend not to participate in traditional areas of evangelism.

Group members do say they are sharing their faith, but they are not drawn to the formal programs of evangelism that many clergy advocate (knocking on neighbors doors, inviting their friends to church, or perhaps eavesdropping to find poor troubled unbelievers can help). They are not trying to learn techniques for talking to the unconverted or even to gain logical arguments to use in defense of their faith. Rather, they are trying to incorporate some sense of spirituality into their lives so that it will shine through naturally (1994:246).

Active participation in the group also generally corresponded to being more active in other volunteer endeavors (1994:391). There was also a very positive corollary between what story was studied and the effect on relationships and behavior.<sup>11</sup> While it is true that "some small groups merely provide occasions for individuals to focus on themselves in the presence of others" (Wuthnow 1994:6), groups also can generate a significant amount of internal and external ministry. It would seem that at least a good number of group members believe that, "shattered, fragmented lives can only be rebuilt in the company of others" (Wuthnow 1994:168).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> It should not be overlooked that the support previously noted by members of small groups for one another is an important seedbed for extending that support to those outside of the group.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, "one's love toward other people had increased if the group was discussing the Good Samaritan story, while the best predictor of having relationships healed was discussing the Prodigal Son story" (Wuthnow 1994:391).

<sup>12</sup> In another study Wuthnow found that "people who said they feel it is important to develop their own religious beliefs independently of any church were less likely to value caring for the needy than people who took issue with this popular form of religious individualism" (1991:12). That is to say, private spirituality did not readily show itself in public service. On the other hand, "comparisons made possible by other studies also suggest that spirituality begins to move people towards being compassionate only when a threshold of involvement in some kind of collective religious activity has been reached" (1991:13).

From the above findings it appears that caring for others flows more readily when being a part of a caring community than trying to practice it individually. As was seen in the previous chapter and substantiated by modern research, a discipling dynamic must include being an integral part of a community which balances the twin principles of nurturing its own members both the ministry and incorporation of others.

### **Summary of the Individuality of Modernity**

The era of Christendom, which would follow the New Testament period, would develop a unity of doctrine and community. These two commodities were forcefully brought into the very heart of the Holy Roman Empire. The Protestant Reformation and modernity were a reaction against this monolithic process. It rightly stressed that every person should be freely able to read and interpret the Bible and the book of nature.

Perhaps an unforeseen result of this liberation from the constraints of the past removed both the individual from the community and beliefs from the normative. In Canada individuals are increasingly looking for spiritual answers outside the walls of the formal church setting. In America the ideal of freedom for the individual has often conflicted with the missionary discipleship done through community.

The fluidity and ubiquity of small groups have greatly aided in meeting the needs of individuals in a transitional society. Small groups have also been infected with a fair degree of individualism where people are able to seek for personal fulfillment while being in the presence of others.

The spiritual disciplines, although practiced, have at times been superficial in nature. The Bible is not studied so much for content but to provide discussion points for subjective speculations. On the positive side, people who belong in groups greatly value prayer and being part of a community increases participation in ministry.

Whereas this chapter discussed the individual member's involvement with their church here in North America the next chapter will study how the postmodern society is

influencing the church as a whole. For the last half of the millennium, the church has not only struggled to find its place in society, but has been deeply impacted by the plurality of ideas and the fragmentation of the community.

The natural social networks which caused the church to readily form communities of believers in the first century barely exist in modern society. The emptiness of churches in many areas of North America has been produced not so much by people's aversion to God or spirituality but by the deep sociological impact of individualism on the culture. Since organized religion has moved from the center to the periphery of people's individual lives, the church has moved from the privileged status it had attained in the era of Christendom to a more marginal place in modern society.