

Lesson 9: The Powerful Potential of Small Groups

Introduction Welcome to lesson 9 of module 3 which will be the beginning of a series on small group evangelism. With lessons 1-8 we have set the stage for this topic. Let's have a quick review! Lesson 1 ("God's Plan for His Church") dealt with the vision and the values of the church. As a review please write down the vision and the seven values of the church.

Vision: _____

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

In Lesson 2 ("Principles of Evangelism") we studied the cycle of evangelism and developed an integrated mission concept, which reflects biblical principles. Then in lesson 3 ("When God calls and means you") we considered the fact that God calls every believer to win other people for Jesus. Finally, in lessons 4-8 we looked at evangelism in the context of forming relationships and studied how we can lead our friends to Jesus.

The Problem Many Christians would like to have this kind of experience, but only remember the frustrating experiences in mission work. Maybe they helped at evangelistic meetings, which were poorly attended despite the high costs for advertising and resulted in very few baptisms. Or perhaps they tried to talk about their faith, but the other person didn't want to hear about it. The fear of experiencing these type of frustrations over and over often holds us back from trying to win people for Jesus and typically results in only a few church members being active in mission work.

The Reality in the Early Christian Church The reality in the early Christian church was completely different. They worked according to a plan, which turned the world upside down in one generation. Back then it was common for believers to lead people to Jesus and they did it in a fascinatingly simple way. In fact, the very same method can be implemented today and will radically change our reality. It is a way...

- in which everyone can participate regardless of how much experience they have.
- which makes it easy for people to get to know Jesus.
- in which many friendships can be created between church members and guests.

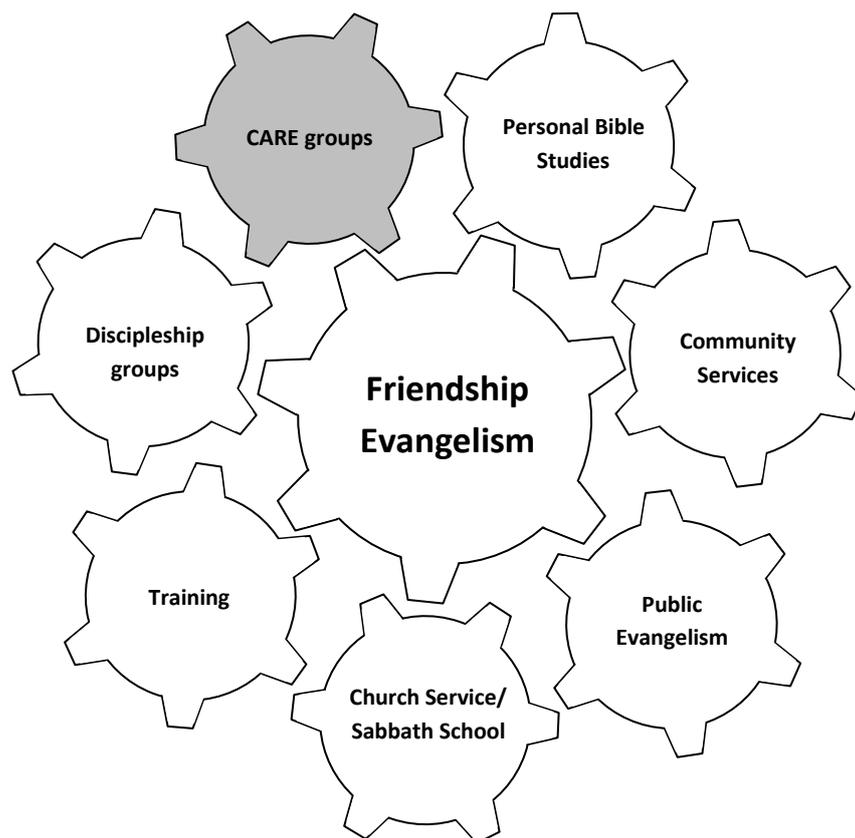
- in which friends and church members can grow in faith.
- in which church members can be effectively trained and immediately implement what they have learned.
- that isn't expensive and doesn't lead to complete exhaustion.
- that runs throughout the year instead of being a short presentation series or outreach activity.
- that is easy to implement and fun.

**CARE groups
are the
Answer**

All of this can be achieved through CARE groups (evangelistic small groups). CARE is an acronym that stands for **Christ's Attitude Reflected in Everyone** and implies

- that we care about what God says,
- that we care about each other and
- that we care about lost people

In a CARE group people can experience genuine Christian fellowship and get to know Jesus. In addition, a CARE group creates an environment in which church members can also grow spiritually. Care groups are a crucial element of our integrated mission concept.



In the following lessons we want to learn how to start and lead a CARE group so that it will become a real living cell in which people can get to know Jesus and decide to follow Him. But before we do that, it is important to study the basis for small groups in the Bible as well as in the writings of Ellen White. We will also take a look at history to see the impact that small groups had in the past.

1. Small Groups in Israel

When God delivered Israel from Egypt He wanted to make them into a people that would live by His principles. They were to demonstrate that God’s law is the basis for the happiness of each person and the well-being of a whole nation. God’s laws dealt with every aspect of their daily lives. God also made provision for the organization of millions of people. His organizational structure for the people of Israel included large, middle-sized, and small groups. The Israelites belonged to tribes, clans, and families. The importance of small groups is especially clear in the advice given Moses by his father-in-law, Jethro, and which Moses promptly implemented. How did Moses divide up the people?



Exodus 18:13-
27

With each Israelite belonging to a small group a lot was accomplished. For one thing they took on responsibility as a small group and managed many matters themselves. If there were questions that the small group couldn’t solve then they went to the leader of the larger group they belonged to. Thus only the most important questions were brought to Moses. Under such conditions, consider how many people were given leadership responsibilities! If we only count the men (more than 600,000), there must have been around 80,000 leaders – men that took on responsibility, carried burdens, and grew in their capacities.

2. Jesus and Small Groups

When we look for small groups in the New Testament, we immediately find Jesus and His 12 disciples. Jesus organized His disciples as a small group – obviously because He could best accomplish His purpose in this manner. For Jesus this small group was the best structure for fellowship, Bible study, prayer, teaching, training, and service. In addition, we read repeatedly in the gospels how Jesus went to people’s homes and had fellowship with them. He went to the home of Peter, Matthew, Jairus, Simon the leper, Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Zacchaeus. (Matthew 9:10; Mark 1:29; 5:38; 14:13; Luke 10:38; 19:5,9) When Jesus sent out His disciples He told them to follow His example. “And when you go into a household, greet it. If the household is worthy, let your peace come upon it. But if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.” (Matthew 10:12-13)

3. Small Groups in the New Testament church

The first Christians followed Jesus’ example and chose a small group structure for the church. For them there was no artificial division between a church building in which church life took place and private homes in which private life took place. The believers dedicated not only their lives, but also their houses. Thus the church consisted of many small home churches in which a deep, authentic family like fellowship was lived out. There were no church buildings in which the believers

could come together. The largest and most important part of church life took place in these home churches. Paul mentions them over and over again in his letters. (Romans 16:3-5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 1-2) This structure was a significant reason for the strong growth in the early church. As a result, the early Christians experienced time and again people giving their lives to Jesus and becoming disciples in their very own homes.



Read the following Bible texts and write down the description they give about the fellowship of the early believers!

Acts 2:42-47: _____

Acts 5:42: _____

Acts 12:12: _____

Acts 20:8,20: _____



Think about it: What advantages did these house churches have?

Advantages of House Churches

The house churches of the early Christians had many advantages:

- The early Christians lived in close fellowship, which made it easy to constantly invite friends.
- This practical Christian fellowship was an environment which made it easy for their friends to make a decision for Jesus and His church.
- The house churches were the ideal place to grow in faith and to learn how to share the gospel.
- Each person could contribute with their talents and skills.
- The believers knew each other so well that they could help and support one another.
- The large number of home churches made it easy to take in new believers.
- When a church got too big it was simply divided. Thus new leaders were always needed, who had been trained in the home churches.
- In times of persecution the church was very flexible. If it became impossible to meet in one place as a church then they simply met in other homes.

4. Small Groups in Church History

In the fourth century, when Christianity became the official state religion of the Roman world, home churches started to disappear and church buildings became the places of worship. Spiritual authority slowly shifted to the clergy, who showed little interest in believers finding spiritual nourishment among other believers worshipping in their own homes. This was the cause for the spiritual decline of the church.

During the Middle Ages there were groups like the Waldenses or the Hussites, who were consistently persecuted by the Roman Catholic church and thus forced to practice their faith in hiding. Their meetings took place in private homes just like the first Christians. This gave them spiritual power and helped them hold on to their faith during terrible times of persecution.

Small groups also played a very crucial role during the reformation. They sparked revival, gave strength, and offered a spiritual environment in which the believers could preserve their newly aroused faith. These small groups emphasized a personal relationship with Jesus, the authority of the Bible, discipleship, mission work, and the general priesthood of all believers. But then history repeated itself. As reformed churches became state churches more emphasis was placed on the need for full-time clergy and believers stopped meeting together in their homes. In many cases it resulted in stagnancy of faith and spiritual decay.

The so-called Methodist classes, which John Wesley established, are especially noteworthy. When he preached he organized the believers into small groups, the so-called Methodist classes. These groups consisted of 10-12 people, who didn't live far from each other. They met weekly and spoke very openly about their faith, their temptations, and their victories. They experienced strong spiritual growth through these small groups. During the time of Wesley no one could be a Methodist if they didn't want to be a member of such a small group. Later when the Methodists gave up this principle they lost their spiritual power and became a church.

5. Ellen White on Small Groups

When we studied about the importance of fellowship for spiritual growth in lesson 9 of module 2 we saw how important social meetings were in the life of the early Adventists. They shared with each other, talked about their experiences and concerns, they sang and prayed together, and encouraged each other.

The Adventist church also received important counsel while Ellen White was living in Australia (1891-1901) helping to build up the young Adventist church. A number of years before she arrived in Australia, Stephen N. Haskell and a team of co-workers had begun mission work there. Their mission strategy consisted of small group Bible studies in homes, literature distribution, and public lectures. When Ellen White arrived in 1891 there were already 700 church members.

During her stay in Australia, Ellen White witnessed a special revival among the protestant churches in Melbourne. The pastors in Melbourne, and the surrounding area, met together to pray for a spiritual awakening among their church members. They received so much strength from these meetings that they decided the church members should also meet in small groups to study the Bible, pray together, and have fellowship. As a result 2000 study groups were formed in Melbourne alone. In 1903 the pastors invited the American evangelist R. A. Torrey to hold evangelistic meetings in Melbourne. The outcome was an extraordinary revival. No doubt she observed these developments with great interest. During this time God inspired her with a landmark statement:

Quote #1

“Why do not believers feel a deeper, more earnest concern for those who are out of Christ? Why do not two or three meet together and plead with God for the salvation of some special one, and then for still another? In our churches let companies be formed for service. Let different ones unite in labor as fishers of men. Let them seek to gather souls from the corruption of the world into the saving purity of Christ’s love.

The formation of small companies as a basis of Christian effort has been presented to me by One who cannot err. If there is a large number in the church, let the members be formed into small companies, to work not only for the church members, but for unbelievers. If in one place there are only two or three who know the truth, let them form themselves into a band of workers. Let them keep their bond of union unbroken, pressing together in love and unity, encouraging one another to advance, each gaining courage and strength from the assistance of the others. Let them reveal Christlike forbearance and patience, speaking no hasty words, using the talent of speech to build one another up in the most holy faith. Let them labor in Christlike love for those outside the fold, forgetting self in their endeavor to help others. As they work and pray in Christ’s name, their numbers will increase; for the Saviour says: “If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in heaven.” Matthew 18:19.” (*Testimonies to the Church, vol. 7, p. 21*)

Quote #2 “Let there be in every church, well-organized companies of workers to labor in the vicinity of that church.” (*Christian Service, p. 72*)

Quote #3 “Let small companies assemble in the evening, at noon, or in the early morning to study the Bible. Let them have a season of prayer, that they may be strengthened, enlightened, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. This work Christ wants to have done in the heart of every worker. If you yourselves will open the door to receive it, a great blessing will come to you. Angels of God will be in your assembly. You will feed upon the leaves of the tree of life. What testimonies you may bear of the loving acquaintance made with your fellow workers in these precious seasons when seeking the blessing of God. Let each tell his experience in simple words. This will bring more comfort and joy to the soul than all the pleasant instruments of music that could be brought into the churches. Christ will come into your hearts. It is by this means only that you can maintain your integrity.” (*Prayer, p. 198*)

Quote #4 “To all who are working with Christ I would say, Wherever you can gain access to the people by the fireside, improve your opportunity. Take your Bible, and open before them its great truths. Your success will not depend so much upon your knowledge and accomplishments, as upon your ability to find your way to the heart. By being social and coming close to the people, you may turn the current of their thoughts more readily than by the most able discourse. The presentation of Christ in the family, by the fireside, and in small gatherings in private houses, is often more successful in winning souls to Jesus than are sermons delivered in the open air, to the moving throng, or even in halls or churches.” (*Gospel Workers, p. 193*)

Small Groups in the Adventist Church It is interesting to note that in the parts of the world where the Adventist church is growing rapidly small groups play a central role. It is especially apparent in the countries of central and South America, where the leaders of the church have put a lot of effort into promoting evangelistic small groups. They are training small group leaders and providing training materials and Bible studies for the small groups on a very large scale. The growth in these countries does not happen by chance. It is the result of this focus on personal evangelism.

Not *if*, but rather *how* We don’t need to ask ourselves anymore *if* small groups are important for our church. This question was answered long ago. What we need to consider is *how* we can build up these small study groups. In the coming lessons we will take a practical look at this question.

Challenge

1. Continue to pray for the 5 people that God has put on your heart.
2. Talk in your discipleship group about the possibility to start a CARE group.

