

LEADING DIFFERENT SMALL GROUPS DIFFERENTLY IN THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

Reduction of D. Min. Thesis
Wesleyan Missional Small Groups: Three Crucial Attributes
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ABSTRACT

Wesleyan Missional Small Groups

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Mixed methods (simple exploratory and participatory action research) study explored ways congregations can draw upon both the United Methodist heritage and the missional approach to foster spiritual formation using small groups that make sense to the postmodern culture and lead to behavior changes.

Three crucial attributes of vital, faith-forming small groups are: creating authentic community (belonging – engaging one another), engaging the Holy Spirit (believing – engaging God), and helping participants make applications to their daily lives (behaving – engaging real life). Congregations must do the hard work of contextualizing these and hold all three together for small groups to empower spiritual growth.

Introduction

My experience as a pastor in the United Methodist Church is that many local churches struggle to offer effective pathways to help people grow spiritually. Often churches expect that Christian discipleship will be a natural product of the church's traditional functions of worship, age programming, Bible studies, fellowship groups, outreach opportunities, administrative roles, and service on local teams that support church functions. While these opportunities can help people grow spiritually, they usually fail to foster consistent spiritual growth; people can do them and still not grow spiritually!

For the purposes of this study, spiritual growth is understood in terms of a change of heart that is evidenced in a change of behavior. This understanding draws upon the Wesleyan heritage of sanctification and John Wesley's call to inward (personal) and outward (social) holiness, or as he often put it, "holiness of heart and life."¹ As Christians grow in their faith in Jesus, that growth is evidenced in changes in their behaviors in their daily lives.

Small groups are a recoverable vehicle within the United Methodist tradition for effective and compelling spiritual formation in our current context. In fact, purposeful small groups are what is often missing among congregations where spiritual growth is stagnant. This research suggested a number of characteristics and elements that leaders may want to design intentionally into small groups. It also identified a number of successful components that other churches have been using in small groups that help foster faith formation. Perhaps most importantly, this study found that three attributes are crucial if small groups are to nurture spiritual growth: creating authentic community (belonging – engaging one another), engaging the Holy Spirit (believing – engaging God), and helping participants make applications to their daily lives (behaving – engaging real life). Further, the three attributes need to be present and held together in each group, for it is their combination that helps nurture spiritual growth. Church leaders need to adaptively change what happens in small groups if the groups are to foster spiritual growth in holiness of heart and life. They intentionally must include all three attributes, keep all three together, and do the hard work of contextualizing them for their own settings.

Research Question and Lenses

In this research project, I explored ways that United Methodist congregations can draw upon both their own United Methodist heritage and a missional church understanding to foster spiritual formation using small groups that make sense to the current, postmodern culture and are usable in my local ministry context. My research question was:

How might a participatory action research intervention which draws on the United Methodist heritage of using small groups, framed within a missional perspective, be used to help cultivate faith formation group experiences in my local ministry context?

What is needed for contexts like mine is a way of utilizing small groups that makes sense in mainline church traditions, draws upon our United Methodist small group heritage, makes sense to our wider communities, and truly fosters spiritual growth. My research project attempted to design and test attributes of small groups in an actual local church setting.

I used four theoretical lenses to interpret my research. Perhaps the most foundational theoretical lens for this project was social networking because it studies the relationships that connect people and can provide the framework for exploring how people relate in small groups. A particularly relevant part of this research to my study was how social network theory explores the

¹ For example, see "Thoughts upon Methodism" in John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley, ed. Albert Cook Outler (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984), 9:529, or "Advice to the People Called Methodists," in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 9:123-124.

social structures of relationships and how they affect beliefs and behaviors, linking them not to the characteristics or attributes within the individuals themselves, but to the interactions and relationships between the nodes. The work of Nancy Katz, along with David Lazer, Holly Arrow, and Noshir Contractor helped to explain these relationships.² Katz et al. apply social network theory specifically with small groups, studying how people naturally structure themselves within groups (explained in terms of “ties”) and how the group norms are shared and enforced.³ The work of Joseph Meyers, Edward T. Hall, and Peter Block helped interpret how people feel a sense of belonging and relatedness in small groups, as opposed to simple connectedness.⁴ James W. Fowler’s work in faith development theory pointed to the need for relational contexts for nurture that are provided in small groups.⁵ The group experience provides a broader context for spiritual formation not possible when alone. Again, spiritual formation is about changed behavior.

A second important theoretical lens was the broader postmodern culture missional small groups seek to engage. David Bosch provides an important lens that helped define what postmodernism is and how it offers a critique within our culture against the certitude of modernism.⁶ Patrick R. Keifert’s fact-value split helped explain how within our culture, the values of postmodernism are not applied consistently.⁷ As difficult as it is to understand our postmodern culture, there is opportunity for churches to draw upon postmodern perspectives in order to offer small groups that make sense to and touch the deep yearnings of those in the local neighborhoods. Both Miroslav Volf and David Tracy offer intriguing suggestions that can be used to do this, particularly drawing upon the value of participation of postmodern culture.⁸

Open systems theory helped missional small groups to organize themselves so they intentionally are shaped and formed for and by those who are in the wider community. Particularly important for my study is Peter Senge’s and Emerald Jay D. Ilac’s work on learning organizations, referring to the learning that takes place by those who make up an organization.⁹ Margaret Wheatley argues that leaders should draw upon the natural capacity of self-organization that is inherent within systems.¹⁰ Landon Whitsitt adapts open-source models to suggest an open sourced church.¹¹ In true

² Nancy Katz et al., “The Network Perspective of Small Groups: Theory and Research,” in *Theories of Small Groups: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Marshall Scott Poole, Andrea B. Hollingshead (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005).

³ Nancy Katz et al., “Network Theory and Small Groups,” *Small Group Research* 35, no. 3 (2004): 307.

⁴ Joseph R. Meyers, *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Youth Specialties, 2003); Joseph R. Meyers, *Organic Community: Creating a Place Where People Naturally Connect* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007); Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990); Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008).

⁵ James W. Fowler, “Faith Development at 30: Naming the Challengers of Faith in a New Millennium,” *Religious Education* 99, no. 4 (2004).

⁶ David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series; No. 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

⁷ Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis, MN: fortress Press, 1992).

⁸ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, Sacra Doctrina (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998); David Tracy, *On Naming the Present: Reflections on God, Hermeneutics, and Church*, Concilium Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994).

⁹ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, Rev. and updated. ed. (New York: Doubleday/Currency, 2006); Emerald J. D. Ilac, “Learning Organization – Organizational Learning: What Is the Difference?” http://www.researchgate.net/post/Learning_Organization-Organizational_Learning_What_is_difference (accessed November 6, 2014).

¹⁰ Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1999), 15.

¹¹ Landon Whitsitt, *Open Source Church: Making Room for the Wisdom of All* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2011).

hospitality, argues Keifert, strangers new to the congregation are valued as gifts sent by God to help and impact the congregation.¹² Missional small groups intentionally need to invite new people in from the wider community.

Practice theory was the fourth theoretical lens. Engaging in certain practices and activities can be very powerful in bringing about lasting changes in behavior. Pierre Bourdieu's work on *habitus* connects a person's behavior with that person's previous experiences.¹³ Learned habits are reinforced by the cultural structures of groups. Sherry B. Ortner's work with the connection between practice and structure can help small groups serve as a part of people's defined and defining structures.¹⁴ The connected work of Jean Lave, Étienne Wenger, and Seth Chaiklin on how people learn within what they coin "communities of practice," suggests how groups that share practices together can make learning a reification process that happens in the practices of everyday life.¹⁵ From a theological perspective, Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass explore how theological beliefs are lived out through practice. Forming practices help shape a person's behavior and beliefs.¹⁶ Finally, Craig Van Gelder points to how both theory/theology (*theoria*) and practice/practical wisdom (*phronesis*) shape personal and communal formation (*habitus*).¹⁷

In addition to theoretical lenses, I drew upon four biblical lenses for this research project. The biblical concepts of spiritual growth and discipleship can shape how groups explore faith formation. Growth, particularly as developed in the New Testament epistles, is a process. Paul describes this growth toward the desired perfection in love as growing to become more like God (2 Cor. 3:18, Rom. 8:29, etc.). Paul and the other epistle writers use the image of physical growth to describe spiritual growth (Eph. 4:11-15, 1 Cor. 14:20, Heb. 5:11-6:1, 1 Pet. 2:2, etc.). Another image for this growth used in the New Testament is the image of mature plants bearing fruit (John 15:5, Col. 1:10, 2 Cor. 9:10, 2 Pet. 1:5-8, etc.). This growth, as stated above, is a partnership of both the work of the individual and the work of the Holy Spirit within the individual.

Another biblical lens for spiritual formation is understanding discipleship as following. Jesus called his first disciples to *follow* him (Matt. 4:19, 16:24). Jesus taught the disciples from everyday life situations, helping them grow in living situations that emerged during daily life *along the way*. This pushes the understanding of faith formation small groups beyond just meeting together in a study to actually doing life together. The Christians in the book of Acts were called "followers of the way" (Acts 9:22, 19:23, 22:4, 24:5, and 24:14). This phrase describes discipleship as a way of life, a form of daily living. Jesus' followers continued to live life together (Acts 2:42-46). Spiritual formation comes from living life together, with the accountability of shared practices. Discipleship as following comes in everyday life, in what followers of the way do each day.

A third biblical lens is the healthy, holy habits that link behavior to spiritual growth. Second Pet. 1:5-6 prescribes adding to faith the practices of goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, and godliness. Paul describes in Rom. 5:3-5 the growth from suffering to perseverance

¹² Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger*, 59.

¹³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

¹⁴ Sherry B. Ortner, "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no. 1 (1984); Sherry B. Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power and the Acting* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2006).

¹⁵ Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Learning in Doing (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, Learning in Doing (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Seth Chaiklin and Jean Lave, *Understanding Practice: Perspectives on Activity and Context*, Learning in Doing (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

¹⁶ Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002).

¹⁷ Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 99.

to character to hope. Also, the early Christians in Jerusalem continued in the practices of teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42). Often behavioral changes are seen as the result of spiritual growth. Biblically, however, there is a witness of behavior changes leading to spiritual growth. Jesus sends his followers out as witnesses into the wider world (Luke 10:1-17). Yet this sending does not seem to be the result of spiritual formation. Spiritual growth takes place within Jesus' followers when they connect with others, practice faith sharing, and live their lives among others. After the Gospels, the New Testament continues to show that healthy, holy habits foster spiritual growth. Actions, practices, and patterns of behavior that the early Christians did together helped them grow in their following of Jesus (Acts 2:42-46, Heb. 20:24, 1 Cor. 11:1, etc.). Richard Foster helps identify and apply these spiritual disciplines, both those done individually and those done corporately; they are disciplines that can take place in small groups.¹⁸

The fourth biblical lens is building deep relationships with outsiders. Key biblical motifs are service to others, seeing those usually overlooked, and building relationships with new people. Strong biblical examples of this are Jesus, Paul, and the Apostles. Spiritual formation happens when believers interact well with outsiders. This interaction, however, needs to include building deep, ongoing relationships slowly over time that share life together. Not only does this build credibility within the wider community, it also builds the faith of those in the group. Missional small groups need to find ways of living out and about, among the wider community, sharing life together.

Four theological lenses for my research were employed. A Wesleyan understanding of sanctification holds that Christians continually grow in grace and holiness. For John Wesley, salvation is a relationship with God, a process toward loving God completely, and a partnership between God and the individual. The Christian faith was practical divinity, and therefore faith held within the heart necessarily produces in the life of the believer actual holiness: holiness of heart and life, or, inward and outward holiness. Wesley's genius, however, comes in the small group method he implemented specifically to assist the Methodists to pursue holiness. He placed every Methodist in a small group, with the expressed purpose of encouraging holiness of both heart and life. The members utilized ongoing mutual accountability as the context for sharing their experience of how they lived out their faith in their daily lives. The class meeting became Wesley's method for behavioral change.

The social relationship of the perichoretic Trinity informs the nature and interplay of the community and connectedness of faith formation small groups. Gary Simpson helps focus God's mission in the world as a relationship of *communio*, inviting people into communion with Godself.¹⁹ Michael Welker frames this relationship in terms of people's need for intimacy with God.²⁰ Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile speak of the church not as imitation of the Trinity but as participation in the Trinity.²¹ This means relationships among people are changed and restored through relationships with God. Small groups, then, can be contexts in which to experience the authentic relatedness for which God created people, particularly when open to new people.

Hospitality as welcoming the stranger, pushes missional small groups to authentically engage the other. Hospitality becomes a way of receiving God through an encounter with the other. M.

¹⁸ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 20th anniversary ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

¹⁹ Gary M. Simpson, "No Trinity, No Mission: The Apostolic Difference of Revisioning the Trinity," *Word and World* 15, no. 3 (1998).

²⁰ Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, 1st English-language ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994).

²¹ Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation*, The Missional Network (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

Scott Boren describes the missional way of relating as ways of sharing life together.²² Robert D. Putnam, David E. Campbell, and Shaylyn Romney Garrett speak about this kind of connection in personal relationships that can interlock even with people with different beliefs.²³ Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk describe the importance of deep listening; the primary approach to strangers is not to share information with them but to receive the other as a gift from God.²⁴ Christine D. Pohl and Gilbert I. Bond add that this also means to listen deeply to the scriptures, the nature of the ministry focus, and the tacit understandings and practices of hospitality of the group.²⁵ Whitsitt's image of "open source" helps groups to invite the other in as a forming participant with the authority to help design and shape the ongoing life of the group.²⁶

The last theoretical lens that helps inform this research project is the framework of accountable discipleship for small groups developed and published by David Lowes Watson and Steven Manskar through the United Methodist General Board of Discipleship (GBOD). Watson drew upon his research of the early Methodist class meetings under the leadership of John Wesley and proposed that accountable discipleship, a distinguishing characteristic of early Methodist class meetings, can be adapted for use in small groups among Methodists again today.²⁷ He called this adapted form of Wesley's mutual accountability, "covenant discipleship."²⁸ Steven Manskar continued Watson's work in covenant discipleship and offered an accountable discipleship small group format called Covenant Discipleship Groups.²⁹ These small group experiences, he argues, can be contexts that both create experiences of public works of piety and mercy, as well as hold participants accountable to private works of piety and mercy. Manskar grounds small groups in the United Methodist tradition on the dual foundations of grace and holiness.³⁰ These two foundations bring transformation in the lives of individuals through three dynamics Manskar identifies as believing (faith belief in God), belonging (love-relationships with others), and behaving (living in obedience).³¹ These three are powerfully nurtured in covenant discipleship small groups and, when held together, lives are changed.

Methodology and Design

The methodology for my research project was a two-stage, mixed methods concurrent approach. The first stage was a simple exploratory project using qualitative interviews over the

²² M. Scott Boren, *Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community That Makes a Difference in the World*, Allelon Missional Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010).

²³ Robert D. Putnam, David E. Campbell, and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, 1st Simon & Schuster hardcover ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

²⁴ Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World*, Leadership Network Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

²⁵ Christine D. Pohl, "A Community's Practice of Hospitality: The Interdependence of Practices and of Communities," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002); Gilbert I. Bond, "Liturgy, Ministry, and the Stranger: The Practices of Encountering the Other in Two Christian Communities," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002).

²⁶ Whitsitt, *Open Source Church*.

²⁷ David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: It's Origins and Significance* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1985).

²⁸ David Lowes Watson, *Covenant Discipleship: Christian Formation through Mutual Accountability* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1991).

²⁹ Steven W. Manskar, *Accountable Discipleship: Living in God's Household* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2000), 16.

³⁰ Steven W. Manskar, *Small Group Ministries: Christian Formation through Mutual Accountability*, Guidelines (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press 2012).

³¹ Manskar, *Small Group Ministries*, 10.

phone with leaders of seven different churches who oversaw their small group ministries. These churches were selected from across the country because they were already using small groups effectively for faith formation and to engage the wider community. Qualitative interviews allowed a more in-depth look at a few scenarios.

The second stage was a participatory action research (PAR) mixed methods transformative research project within my own ministry context. I began by administering the same baseline quantitative questionnaire to two groups, as a baseline measure for two longitudinal panels. The questionnaire surveyed how effectively people felt our small groups both fostered faith formation and engaged people in the wider community. The first set was administered among a census of the thirty-six most active congregational leaders. The second group was a census of the seven members of my PAR team.

The PAR group met twice a month for ten months, ending August, 2015. Our interventions included practices that we did individually when apart, as well as activities we did together as a group when we met. The information learned from other churches in the first stage helped the PAR group understand better how other churches were using small groups effectively.

I concluded by administering two end line quantitative questionnaires among the same two groups that served as the end line measure of the longitudinal panels. I also conducted a concluding focus group with the participants in the PAR small group. This protocol explored the group's learnings from this project, particularly focusing on possibilities from this small group model that might be usable in other settings.

Using a PAR methodology was advantageous for the substantive part of this project because I desired to experiment with different ideas to see what might be used in small group settings, particularly in my own ministry context. As this required discernment, collaboration, experimentation, and reflection, PAR was a good fit.

I analyzed the qualitative data using a modified version of Kathy Charmaz's guidelines for coding qualitative data, as she describes in *Constructing Grounded Theory*.³² The quantitative data of my research project were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. I entered the data from the questionnaires into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to perform statistical tests.

Findings: First Stage

The qualitative research of my first stage helped identify current realities and best practices among the seven churches interviewed. Unsurprisingly, the complexity of the small group organization and oversight increased as the numbers involved with small groups increased. Churches that placed high value on small groups also provided plenty of resources to support groups and their leaders. Most noticeable was the use of paid staff to provide oversight, support, coaching, and resources, both to initially develop and also in continuing the small group ministry. Even so, small groups arose somewhat organically and chaotically, and staff had to work hard to organize what was emerging. All churches felt that their small group ministries were still works in progress and needed more training among the leaders to foster a better small group ministry.

The coding of this qualitative data also revealed among the churches a fairly consistent employment of the components of relationship building, caring for group members, studying Scripture, making application to daily life, prayer, acts of service, and connecting with the wider community. Options and variety among small group times, locations, topics, and formats also seemed to be very important. These churches had a widely-shared expectation for people to be in

³² Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006) 55-60.

small groups that was promoted by the senior staff and in worship settings, which created a church culture of being involved in small groups. These churches valued groups as the primary pathway of spiritual growth within their churches.

Rather than experiencing a simple linear development of small groups, my findings suggested a continual process of creating and recreating, of ongoing interplay among the developing, designing and supporting components. Staff and volunteers invest heavily through continual training that couples instruction with modeling, through the intentional development and support of small group leaders, and through providing a wide variety of resources and materials made available to leaders and participants.

The interviews also identified that in these churches, participants are drawn not only into the small group ministries, but they also affect and help recreate them. The participants themselves are formed and re-formed as they grow in spiritual maturity and community by being involved in small groups. Groups tend to spend a lot of time on fellowship early on, and only feel comfortable to share applications to their personal lives and deep sharing after trust and safety are established. Serving components, which may be named as a priority from the beginning, may not actually be added until the group feels comfortable working together. Spiritual growth, building community, and sharing life together are the primary values for those who engage in the small group ministry.

Small group ministries continually were being formed and reformed in the seven churches I interviewed. As the congregations learned what seemed to work, they adapted those learnings into their small group plans. As interest grew in the groups, the congregations added more options and variety, not only to accommodate the needs of those joining, but also to accommodate what the congregation was able to do well. Small group ministries are always organic, cyclical, and continually developing!

The interviews with the seven other United Methodist churches identified important components and characteristics of vital small groups that have been proven helpful by tested experience in concrete contexts. These characteristics include intentional and paid staff to organize, oversee, equip, and resource the small groups and their leaders, a congregation-wide culture of valuing small groups, offering variety of group experiences in kind and in frequency, and the need to continually form and re-form the small group design and structure. Components shared by the small groups of these other churches suggest a core list of key components. These include relationship building among the participants built on fellowship, trust and caring for each other, engaging God's Word through Scripture and open discussion of how it applies to their daily lives, praying for and with each other, and having an outward focus through service and invitation to others not in the group. A key learning is that for these churches, small groups are the primary path of discipleship and spiritual formation.

Findings: Second Stage

The PAR group experience was designed to serve two purposes. The first purpose was to be a small group together, experimenting with different components such as sharing deeply, holding each other accountable, applying our learnings to our daily lives, and sharing life together. The second purpose was to discern together ideas and learnings that could be incorporated into small group experiences and ministries in other contexts. We did this through engaging sources, trying interventions (which we called experiments), reflecting on what we were learning, and sharing feedback and insights during group time together. The group tried sixteen different interventions, four of which we did together as a group and rest that we did on our own between group sessions. One intervention, for example, was that each of us as individual group members would either start a new small group or apply some learning in another group setting. Then, we held one another accountable to this when we met together by giving updates and asking for insights.

As we reflected on our experiments, we discerned that a number of the practices could be recommended for other small group contexts. We discovered that taking extra time during the first few sessions to share a meal together really created a context of building relationships, fellowship, and trust. We also needed to name early on the expectation that we would share from our personal lives, invite new people into the group, and engage in service activities as a group together. One practice that really helped our group to move quickly into sharing deeply was to use a guiding question at the beginning of group time that called us to reflect directly on our lives and share personally. Two examples of the questions we used were, “What makes you feel alive lately?” and “What words of life have been spoken into/through you lately?”

We also engaged in some experiments on our own outside of group time. One was to sit in other groups at church and ask the participants what their self-understanding of the group’s purpose was. Another was to ask people both inside and outside the church what helped them continue to grow spiritually. These conversations gave rise to another idea for groups to try.

A person had learned at a previous church the weekly cadence of attending worship and engaging in two other opportunities for spiritual growth, one act of personal devotion and one act of service to others. This cadence of worship plus two other spiritual growth activities we called Worship Plus Two, which we wrote out as “W+2.” Our group used this practice individually for many weeks, and then we reflected on our experiences together during group time. Our group found this to be an engaging way of communicating the United Methodist path of sanctification, which John Wesley had described as “holiness of heart and life.”³³

The Worship Plus Two gave rise to yet another transferable practice, which we called Ninja Blessings. In our desire to perform acts of service, we developed a plan to reach out in random acts of small, quick, and inconspicuous kindness to others. The idea is to see a need, to move in quickly to meet it, and then to move on quickly so not to draw attention to oneself. Again, we engaged in doing this each on our own, and then we gathered together to reflect on how it went. This practice really helped group members begin to see all kinds of opportunities for service and develop a habit of seeing needs and acting on them. Again, this idea could be implemented by other groups.

Qualitative Data

There was substantial qualitative material from the eighteen PAR group sessions and ending focus group, which I divided into reflections around our interventions and reflections around ideas and learnings that could be adapted to inform other small group contexts. Of particular help to us was the work that Steven Manskar has done exploring the United Methodist tradition of faith formation using small groups.³⁴ He described the Wesleyan framework of spiritual growth in terms of belong (love), believe and behave (obey).³⁵ This, we discerned, faithfully described a three-fold Wesleyan way of growing spiritually, expressed in Wesley’s language of holiness (belonging) of heart (believing) and life (behaving). Further, analysis of the qualitative data showed a clustering around these three same components.

The twelve axial codes I identified showed an emerging framework for effective small groups. These codes were going deep, longing, applying/acting, relating, leading, going out, inviting, designing, growing, serving, encountering God, and changing the culture. These codes seemed to relate in three theoretical relationships: how individuals grew spiritually around the central practice

³³ “Thoughts upon Methodism” in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 9:529.

³⁴ Manskar, *Accountable Discipleship*. Also, Steven W. Manskar, *Disciples Making Disciples: A Guide for Covenant Discipleship Groups* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016).

³⁵ Manskar, *Small Group Ministries*, 10.

of being involved in a small group, how churches could create and sustain a small group ministry that helped people grow spiritually, and how relationships with God are formed.

These three systems interplay with each other. In addition, these three systems each seem to have their own interplay within them. The pathway of spiritual growth for individuals seems to have a system of relationships around fulfilling the longing of God’s children as well as a system of relationships around how spiritual formation is sustained for those people. The pathway of spiritual growth created by local congregations seems to have three systems at work: one around the importance of leadership, one around the designing of small groups, and one around the culture of the congregation for small groups. The following table shows these three systems and the six theoretical relationships that seem to emerge, along with the axial codes that associate with each theoretical relationship.

Table 1. Theoretical Relationships, Their Axial Codes, and the Three Interplaying Systems

Theoretical Relationships:	Axial Codes:	
<i>System: Relationship with God</i>		
A. Encountering God	11. Encountering God	
<i>System: Pathway of Spiritual Growth for Children of God</i>		
B. Longing for More	1. Going Deep	2. Longing
	3. Applying/Acting	4. Relating
	9. Growing	
C. Sustained in Groups	4. Relating	6. Going Out
	9. Growing	10. Serving
<i>System: Pathway of Spiritual Growth Offered by a Local Congregation</i>		
D. Small Group Context	5. Leading	9. Growing
E. Designing of Groups	1. Going Deep	2. Longing
	3. Applying/Acting	4. Relating
	6. Going Out	8. Designing
F. Sustaining of Groups	6. Going Out	7. Inviting
	12. Changing the culture	

Spiritual growth is an organic and living process and perhaps is more compellingly represented using organic images from nature suggesting growth. I offer the following figure in attempt to represent spiritual growth in small groups organically.

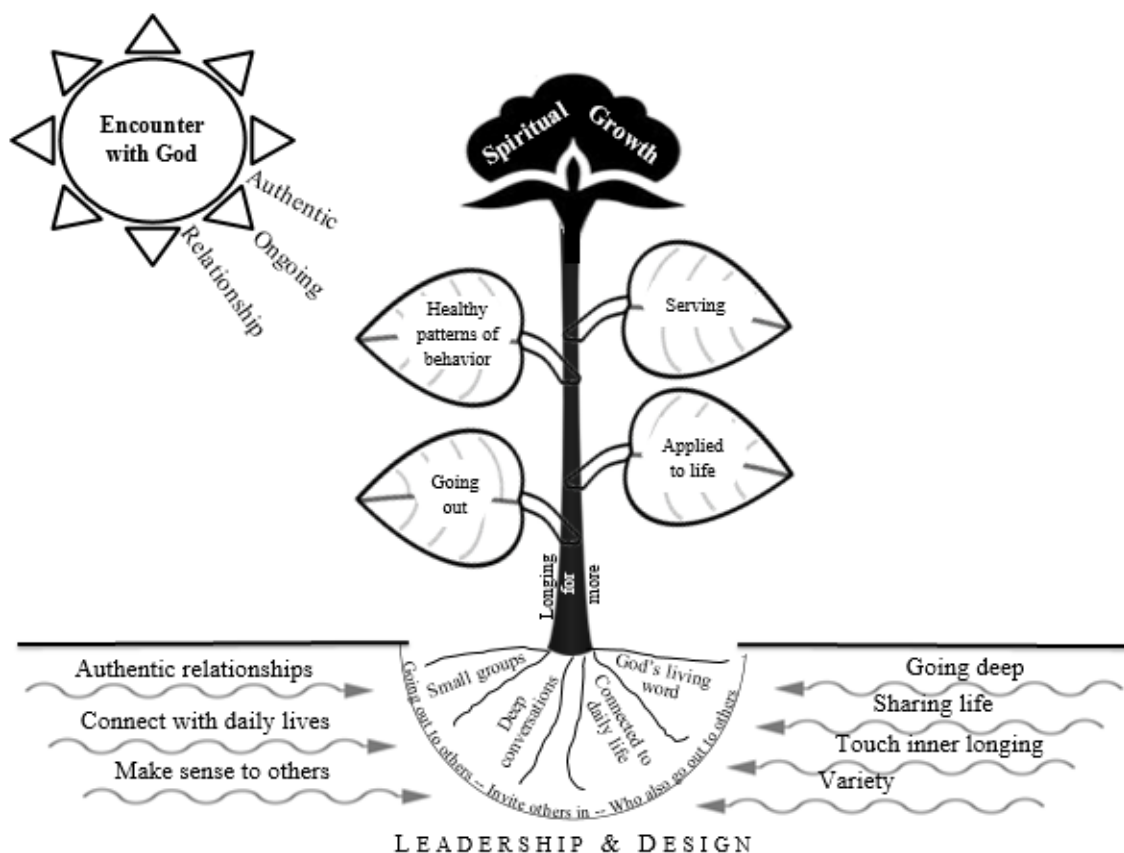


Figure 1. Organic Representation of the Three Systems and Theoretical Relationships

The image of the sun represents the Relationship with God. A living and personal relationship with God through Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit is the blanketing, purpose, and goal of spiritual formation. Spiritual Growth is always an encounter, and a result of that encounter, with God. People receive light and life from God, and we strive and reach to God. The human hungering for more is answered in an authentic, ongoing relationship with God.

The image of the growing plant represents the pathway for Spiritual Growth for the Children of God. It incorporates two theoretical relationships. A person's Longing for More, represented as the feeding of the roots of the growing plant, is nourished in small groups through connection to others in authentic community, connection to God and God's living word, and connection to daily life as deep conversations and accountability help participants connect God's word to daily life. The same group that helps its participants connect to his or her longing also sustains the ongoing spiritual growth. Groups do this by supporting, nurturing, and reinforcing different behaviors by the participants going out and serving others and applying what they learn to their daily-lived lives. Spiritual growth, according to the Wesleyan model, also comes through practice of new behaviors. Sustained in Groups, therefore, is represented as the leaves of the plant, since leaves both feed the plant and define and evidence its growth to others.

The three theoretical relationships of the system of the Pathway of Spiritual Growth Offered by a Local Congregation are represented at the base of the diagram. Local churches can provide the context for effective small groups through excellent and well-trained leaders who create and sustain

the right context for the groups. This Small Group Context created by the leadership is represented in the figure organically as the ground that supports plant growth.

Leaders can design small group ministry to: (1) be a community that offers authentic relationships, shares life, and goes deep; (2) make sense to those the congregation is trying to engage; (3) touch their inner sense of longing and make connections to their daily lives; and (4) offer options to connect in a variety of ways over time. These characteristics feed the individuals who are growing spiritually. This theoretical relationship of the Designing of Groups is represented in the diagram organically as the nutrients within the soil that feed plant growth.

Further, there needs to be a culture (perhaps even a culture change) within the congregation that sustains the ongoing small group ministry. It is a culture of expectation for people to go out and engage those who are not a part of small groups, to personally and enthusiastically invite them to join one, and for those new people, in turn, also to go out to engage those who are not a part of small groups. This Sustaining of Groups culture is represented organically in the figure as creating the hole in the soil in which new plants can begin to grow. It is creating the room, the space, the capacity for more people to grow.

Ultimately, spiritual growth is a relationship. It is a relationship of individuals to God, of individuals to others in the communities in which God places them, and of individuals to themselves as they grow. This figure of a single plant may give the impression of a lone individual. The relationships with others are present, however, in the soil and roots. In life-giving small groups, it must never be imagined that individuals grow alone.

Quantitative Project: Two Longitudinal Panels

The qualitative research suggested how small groups could nurture spiritual growth that leads to behavior change. I finished my research by comparing the baseline and end line surveys of two longitudinal panels to test if vital small groups would nurture spiritual growth.

Descriptive statistics from the questionnaires of the leadership group revealed that the typical respondent was over sixty years old (39.3%), either male (50.0%) or female (50.0%), married (85.7%), living with a spouse at home with no minors (57.1%), and retired (46.4%). The typical respondent had been a Christian for over 20 years (88.9%), and had been at this congregation for over 10 years (78.6%). Finally, this respondent was described as balanced between being introverted and extroverted (3.57).

The data also revealed that among the respondents, small groups were considered very important in helping people mature in their faith. The top six key components identified as most helpful for fostering spiritual growth in groups may suggest priorities for small group ministries in other settings. These include, (1) sharing from personal struggles, (2) applying biblical teaching to daily life, (3) leaders encouraging participants to go deeper, (4) mutual confidentiality, (5) building relationships with new people, and (6) inviting new people to the group. Variety in group styles, structures, and offerings also was identified as important for people to be able to take advantage of small group experiences. Essential group dynamics indicated were meeting people where they are, encouraging them to grow spiritually, having patience with members, supporting them over time, and discussing life issues. Respondents also reported that it was important to balance serving the needs of group participants and reaching out to new people.

I used SPSS to conduct inferential statistics on the data. The sample size was not large enough for chi-square or correlation tests to be reliable. The t-tests conducted on the responses of the group of leaders revealed four questions with a p-value of 0.05 or less. The following table lists the three most important of these questions and their t-test results.

Table 2. Questions with t-Test Results 0.05 or Less on Leaders Survey

N = 28

Question:	Baseline	End Line	t	df	p
	Mean	Mean			
1. I feel that small groups are a crucial part of [our church]	3.71	4.35	-2.588	27	.007
5. How often have you heard people share stories of how their small group experiences have impacted their behavior in daily life?	2.68	3.235	-2.588	27	.015
16. Try to indicate along the following continuum where you think [we] ought to place primary focus: [between] “Help me grow spiritually” and “Reach out to new people.”	3.43	4.07	-3.012	27	.006

Question one showed a significant change among the leadership toward a stronger belief that small groups are a crucial part of the church. This is a fairly important result for this research project, as it seems that the PAR’s work has had some influence on the wider leadership of the congregation to value small groups as an important part of the congregation’s life and ministry.

Question five may suggest a cultural shift taking place among the leadership. People may be sharing more about their small groups and the direct impact their groups are having on their own daily lives. People also may be more attentive to hearing the stories being shared. In either case, this may suggest a cultural shift toward a greater valuing of the sharing about people’s small groups and how they are impacting their daily lives.

Question sixteen showed a movement of answers along a continuum from a group focus of “Help me grow spiritually” to an end line preference of “Reach out to new people.” This may suggest an important shift among the leaders toward valuing the need to reach out to new people. Both components are important, but this shift may suggest a movement away from the more traditional small groups as studies that have so dominated the church’s small group offerings. At least it suggests a valuing of using groups to reach new people.

The small number of questionnaires and the similarity of so many of the respondents make it unsurprising that running the t-tests did not produce more indications of significant change. Even so, the direction of the changes in the responses from the baseline to the end line surveys across a number of questions seems meaningful. Among the leaders survey, one questions that showed this kind of change in the actual responses showed an increase in respondents ranking their agreement that small groups are very important in helping people mature in faith. This question strikes to the heart of my research project. The direction of increase toward more strongly agreeing suggests that leaders had a higher value of small groups than before. This, coupled with the increase in question one discussed above that small groups are crucial to the church, seems to suggest that the leadership has a more favorable view of small groups and their role in spiritual formation.

There were also slight increases in the means to some of the questions asking respondents to rank the importance of characteristics of small groups. The means increased from 3.32 to 3.46 toward “Discuss about personal lives,” from 3.75 to 3.85 toward “Asking participants into accountability,” and from 3.48 to 3.64 toward “Stressing doing good to others.” Each of these I

would consider are movements, albeit slight, toward a small group experience that encourages personal growth evidenced in behavioral changes.

Among the PAR panel, there were also a number of changes between the means of the two surveys. One question worth noting asked how often people had heard others share about how their small group experiences have impacted their daily lives. The mean increased from 3.00 to 3.57. Again, this may suggest a changing culture in which small groups are talked about and valued.

Otherwise, among the PAR group, the inferential statistics failed to show any significant changes. This means that this research was not able to identify that the small group experience had any impact on its participant's spiritual growth that was statistically significant. This may have been influenced by the small sample size (only six participants), the group's high scoring on the baseline survey (leaving little room to show marked growth on the end line survey), and the group's predisposition in favor of small group ministry (which may require more time to manifest larger changes in their responses). During the ending focus group, however, responses were enthusiastically in favor of the value of the small group experience in effecting participants' spiritual growth.

Three Crucial Attributes

The findings of this research project, informed by the twelve lenses, seem to suggest three crucial attributes of small groups that foster spiritual growth in their participants. The three attributes can take a variety of forms and look very different in various settings, but the key, I believe, is that all three must be present for the groups to be truly faith-forming small groups.

The first crucial attribute is authentic community. Faith-forming small groups need to be communities in which people are able to be themselves, relationships grow and deepen among the participants, trust is built, sharing is honest and about real life issues, and participants share life together and care for one another in ways that may even go outside of group times together. True community is an expression of the family of God; it is what belonging to the Church of Christ is supposed to be like. Groups are not perfect as communities. It is difficult and hard work for participants to sustain this level of community. Yet, they consistently practice bonding, forgiveness, unity building, caring, and being with and for each other.

The second crucial attribute is that groups engage the presence of the Holy Spirit. Faith-forming small groups engage the Divine, particularly through the leading, sustaining, empowering, and transforming presence of the Holy Spirit. This can happen through connecting with the Scriptures or some other text/media that helps participants connect to the reality of God in their midst and in their lives. Yet, this is not mere learning of information. It is engaging the living God as present among them, in each of them, and active in their lives. The key here is faith sharing, as group participants talk about their faith journeys, about their experiences of God, and about how God is active in their lives currently. It means reflecting together on the Scriptures, other texts and media, and experiences in their own lives to discern what the Holy Spirit is saying in and through them. It means discussing together how what they learn applies to their daily activities and life situations. It is also essential that group participants grow in their praying for and with each other. Engaging the presence of the Holy Spirit means that group members pursue a living and personal relationship with God.

The third crucial attribute of faith-forming small groups is the intentional and consistent application to daily life. It is easier to share and discuss ideas and concepts and to keep the discussion about the ideas themselves. Many small groups learn information. Faith formation that leads to behavior change, however, makes the connection between ideas and practical living. Learning becomes about how to live differently; discussions about what is learned must connect back to the participants' daily lives. Sharing needs to be open, honest, authentic, and personal. Often

groups leave the application to the participants themselves. Faith-forming small groups make it a central part of the group time together. Small groups are particularly well-suited for the reflection, honesty, support, and accountability required for life application. Further, the application to daily life also means engaging the real life of the wider environment and the lives of others outside the group. Reaching out in listening, witness, caring, and serving are vital ways that a small group also must engage the reality of daily life. The temptation is often for groups to turn inward and, perhaps even unintentionally, become self-absorbed. Mutual accountability also can be accountability for the group and its participants continually to engage in acts that demonstrate God's love for all people.

Engaging one other, engaging God, and engaging real life: these are the three crucial attributes of small groups that can consistently lead to spiritual growth evidenced in behavior change. Most small groups do one or even two of these components well. Yet, I have come to believe, it is the combination of all three, held together, that releases the transforming power of the Holy Spirit within the groups.

Leaders, then, need to design and lead small groups to hold all three of these together. Leaders have to do the hard work to interpret what this may look like in each context, as this probably will look different in each. It may be harder, however, to maintain consistently all three attributes within groups as they continue. Often, groups atrophy over time into employing just one or two of these attributes. It is far easier to do so, especially if people have been used to other, more traditional, groups. Leaders also need to be attentive to keeping all three attributes together in groups as they continue and develop over time.

Conclusion

This research project found that there is a hunger within local churches for small groups to help people grow spiritually. The United Methodist tradition helps frame spiritual growth in terms of growing in holiness and changes in behavior in daily life. Yet spiritual growth is not only expressed in changes in behavior, changing behaviors also can help people to grow spiritually. People both believe their way into behavior as well as behave their way into belief.

Small groups can be recoverable and highly effective contexts that nurture people in spiritual growth. I have come to call such groups faith forming small groups. Faith forming small groups help people grow spiritually, lead to behavior change, draw upon United Methodist traditions, are missional in nature, and make sense in today's contexts.

Interviews with other churches using small groups effectively, as well as the PAR project, have revealed some important components and characteristics of faith forming small group experiences. These include a congregational culture of small groups that uses paid staff to lead the small group ministry; authentic relationships built on fellowship, trust, deep sharing, mutual accountability, and caring for each other; engaging God's Word through Scripture and open discussion of how it applies to daily life; praying for and with each other; and having an outward focus through service and invitation to others not in the group. The twelve lenses helped explain that these characteristics must be interpreted for each specific ministry setting and that local congregations must do the hard work of applying them in ways that make sense in their own settings. Further, the work of the PAR has identified some practices that could be very effective in other small group settings. Three of these are using a guiding question, participants committing to Worship Plus Two, and participants engaging in acts of Ninja Blessings.

Perhaps the most substantial finding of this project is the importance of holding together three crucial aspects of vital small group ministries. Small group ministries, no matter what the ministry setting, must create authentic community, engage the Holy Spirit, and help participants make applications to their daily lives. Drawing upon Manskar's description of the Wesleyan three-fold approach to spiritual growth, engaging one other (belonging), engaging God (believing), and

engaging real life (behaving) are the three crucial attributes of effective faith-forming small groups. It is the combination of all three, held together, that seems to release the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

If this is true, then leaders must lead different small groups differently. Leaders in local congregations must strive to keep all three attributes balanced in their small groups, but they must also do the hard work of contextualizing these three in ways that make sense in their own settings. Key findings of this project include the need to constantly listen to the local context, to continually form and re-form the small group ministry within the congregation's life, and for the leadership to be willing to experiment and adapt their learnings. This means, then, that how leaders lead small groups will be different in each local setting. It requires a tenacious commitment across the church leadership to the ongoing value of faith-forming small groups.

The organic figure presented above attempted to draw upon the image of a growing plant to help describe how spiritual growth can happen organically in small groups. People and communities of faith, as part of the Body of Christ, are created to grow. The plant, in order to grow, must be grounded in an environment that empowers its growth. Local churches and their leaders need to tend to the ground, to cultivate an environment in which vital small groups encourage true spiritual growth. Yet, it is the encounter with the Divine (the sun/Son) that calls up the transformation and growth.

Upward, inward, outward ...
Believing, belonging, behaving ...
Holiness of heart and life ...
Leaders leading different small groups differently.

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