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ABSTRACT

BUILDING AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY THROUGH  
SMALL GROUP MINISTRY AMONG YOUNG  
ADULTS OF SELECT CHURCHES WITHIN  
THE GREATER NEW YORK  
CONFERENCE

by

Ricardo V. Bain

Adviser: Steve Case

## ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Project Document

Andrews University

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: BUILDING AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY THROUGH SMALL GROUP MINISTRY  
AMONG YOUNG ADULTS OF SELECT CHURCHES WITHIN THE GREATER  
NEWYORK CONFERENCE

Name of researcher: Ricardo V. Bain

Name and degree of faculty adviser: Steve Case, PhD

Date completed: September 2014

### Problem

The Greater New York Conference has several churches that have begun and sustained many programs for building interpersonal relationships between young adults within their membership. These programs have produced lukewarm results. In some cases these efforts failed. Many of the young adults have either left the church because they do not feel connected to others of their peer group, or they are present with little or no intentional ministry that relates to building their relational needs.

In an interview with the immediate past and present youth directors of the conference, both admitted that there is tremendous need for a ministry that pulls young people from the fringes of the church into the center of the action. They both cited the need for genuine spiritual

relationships between young adults as the greatest need of youth ministries in our territory. They conceded that a connection with God and others of similar age group is imperative for the survival of the church going forward.

New Yorkers are usually very busy people. Young adults who live and work in New York are likewise very busy. Connecting them with others who can aid their spiritual and interpersonal development is of critical importance to their faith development.

### Methodology

A seminar series was implemented to outline the issues regarding the need for genuine community among young adults within these select churches here in Greater New York and produce an intervention strategy to assist in correcting these issues. The objective was to aid in the spiritual, personal, and interpersonal growth of the group members.

Leaders were handpicked upon completion of the seminar training to begin the intervention plan that included selecting an assistant leader and a curriculum. The assistant leader's role was to mentor and help in the organizing and execution of the meeting and ministry objectives. The curriculum we used was the *I Am Second* young adult curriculum. This study focused on young grown-ups from three churches within the Greater New York Conference. After meeting for 10 weeks we conducted exit interviews to collect and report the data from this study. It was a very well-organized and productive study concerning these young adults. They were conscious and deliberate in their responses to this experience.

### Results

A total of 37 persons within the three churches participated in this small group approach to ministry. The data showed that 95% of the participants shared that the experience significantly increased their connectivity with God. It was interesting to see that 100% of the

respondents communicated that they got to build more meaningful relationships with fellow young adults (new and old) because of their in-depth communion over the 10-week period. And 88% of those who participated conveyed their relationship to the church was tremendously impacted, and they felt more connected. The main concern of all interviewed was that the time together was too short.

### Conclusions

This analysis indicates that small group ministry among young adults is very effective in building genuine community. Genuine community with God, fellow young adults, and the church was enhanced tremendously. This study also suggests that if it were utilized on a wider scale it would produce similar results. I also concluded that this study could provide administrators, senior pastors, youth pastors, and mentors with materials to aid ministry to and with young adults.

Andrews University  
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

BUILDING AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY THROUGH  
SMALL GROUP MINISTRY AMONG YOUNG  
ADULTS OF SELECT CHURCHES WITHIN  
WITHIN THE GREATER NEW YORK  
CONFERENCE

A Project Document  
Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Ministry

by  
Ricardo V. Bain  
September 2014

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BUILDING AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY THROUGH  
SMALL GROUP MINISTRY AMONG YOUNG  
ADULTS OF SELECT CHURCHES WITHIN  
THE GREATER NEW YORK  
CONFERENCE

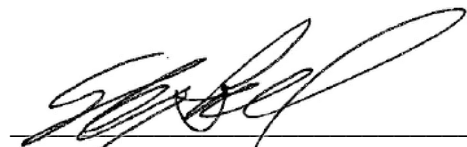
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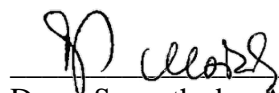
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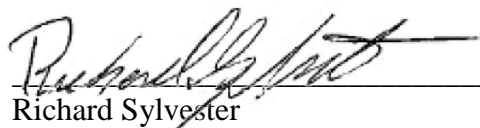
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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I walked into the office of a fellow pastor in my conference (Greater New York), I saw a picture that made me pause in wonder. It was the picture of a turtle sitting on a fence. I asked a question that I thought was logical. How did the turtle get on the fence? The pastor then told me that was the exact reason why he kept the portrait on the wall; he kept it up on the wall in front of his desk to remind him that he did not attain his accomplishments on his own. He had to acknowledge the assistance of others to make his dreams come through.

In similar fashion I would like to acknowledge the assistance of others who have helped me to sit on top of this “wall.” I would like to acknowledge God for taking me from a ghetto neighborhood, and calling me to be a minister for Him. It is because of Him that I am in this ministry to, and with youth and young adults.

I would also like to recognize my wife, Tameka, and kids, Ricardo II and Zoë-Madisson Bain. They were very kind, and patient with me during this process. There were times we were separated by distance during the production of this project. Even though not physically together, we were connected through technological means. This helped to close the physical gap, thus giving me added impetus for the journey. I love you all!

In the same breath I would like to thank my mother. She participated in bringing me into this world, and has never turned away from me. Her steadiness, and stellar financial support to me in the midst of this project was amazing to note. There were times I thought the formidable circumstances I faced would prevent my completion. Mom always gave a kind word, and resources to keep me going.

I would like to say a special thanks to my professor, and adviser Dr. Steve Case! I was motivated, cajoled, rebuked, and instructed by his profound wisdom, and practical advice. He has an uncanny way of making everything seem so simple to do. He was a Godsend genius in the midst of my entire Doctor of Ministry journey. I appreciate you in ways you will never know Dr. Case!

My second reader Dr. Mike Stephenson was a helpful set of eyes making sure I had everything in its proper place; while giving wise advice and depth of meaning to my project. Thanks a million!

I had a third set of eyes in the person of Mrs. Dericka Missick. She used her audit like skills to make sure that I was able to line up my project properly. Thanks a whole lot!

Special thanks to Mrs. Era Gibson my mentor for her words of wisdom and support during this process. Such wisdom will always remain with me.

I believe I had the best work-study group. Milton, one who was very consistent and organized, and kept us on task. He did much to shape this project. Sonia, very analytical, ever ready to help, and give her welcomed candid perspective to my project.

I too say thanks to all the young adults who joined me in the practical implementation of this project. You were many times the wind beneath my wings. I love you all, and appreciate your putting up with me. Some of you I got to know as a result of this project, and now we are connected for life.

Finally, I would like to say thanks to all the professors, and administrators within the Doctor of Ministry Program. I am richer for your input into my life. I am transformed as a result of your deposits of grace into my life. Thanks much, and God bless you all!

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

As a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ, I believe it is not only prudent, but also obligatory of me to seek out ways to develop, and enhance my ministry to and with young adults. I am apt to believe that small groups among young adults are a worthy goal to pursue. As I took a mental survey of my ministry over the years; I believe it is important for me to do this because of the growing concerns about commitment to God and others, building authentic relationships, and selfless service to others, that seem to be lacking among many of the young adults, that I have been privileged to work with over the years. Embarking on a project of this magnitude surely has its assumptions, unknowns, and definite concerns. However, I am persuaded that an exploration into this type of ministry can produce substantial results.

#### **Statement of Problem**

The Greater New York Conference has several churches that have begun and sustained many programs for building interpersonal relationships between young adults within their membership. These programs have produced lukewarm results. In some cases these efforts failed. Many of the young adults have either left the church because they do not feel connected to others of their peer group; or they are present with little or no intentional ministry that relates to building their relational needs.

In deep conversations with the present (A. Peralta, Personal Communication, September 30, 2012), and past (J. Cortez Jr., Personal Communication, September 30, 2012) youth directors of the conference, both admitted that there is tremendous need for a ministry that pulls young people from the fringes of the church into the center of the action. They both talked about the need for genuine spiritual relationships between young adults as the greatest need of youth ministries in our territory. They conceded, a connection with God, and others of similar age group is imperative for the survival of the church going forward.

New Yorkers are usually very busy people. Young adults who live in New York are likewise very busy. Connecting them with others who can aid their spiritual and interpersonal development is of critical importance to their faith development.

### **Statement of Task**

This project's task was to provide a model for small group ministry among young adult members within select churches in the Greater New York Conference. This model was employed to evaluate its effectiveness in creating and aiding Christian, interpersonal relationships between young people in our churches. This document was modeled to assist and train youth leaders to lead a small group, and nurture relational youth ministry. These results that have been garnered will be shared with denominational leaders to evaluate their usefulness in building solid, authentic Christian relationships among young adults.

### **Justification for the Project**

Many churches in Greater New York have for years embarked on ministry plans for connectivity between members of the general church population. However there were

little intentional plans focused on connecting young adults utilizing a curriculum specifically designed for them.

The focus of the youth department of Greater New York has focused much on the “large events.” Even though these many times offer inspiration; they are suspect in proffering transformation. This small group approach will give attention to transformational activities.

Youth need peer-support and guidance to help with relating to the issues that confront them. A model for small group ministry that concentrates on accountable relationships and bonding young people should help give sustenance to their faith, life, and serving others.

Most churches in our conference have young people who have shallow relationships with God and their equals. Many young adults blame their busy lifestyles. Small group ministry will lead them to interface with God and each other in deep meaningful ways.

### **Description of the Process**

Developing a theological basis for small group ministry is crucial to this process. This theological reflection and basis will be primarily from an exploration of Acts 2: 42-47; Gal 3:26-29, 1 Cor 12:18-26.

A literature review will focus on books and journal articles written on small group ministry in general, and among youth and young adults in particular, within the last 10 years.

To accomplish this study I will focus on implementing a seminar series to sensitize the churches involved in this pilot study to the existing concerns. I will also

handpick leaders to assist me in facilitating this young adult small group trial study. These leaders will select assistant leaders to mentor and help with the execution of the ministry objectives. Together, we will also utilize the *I Am Second* young adult curriculum to aid the participants' spiritual and interpersonal growth with God and each other. The leaders and participants will meet in these interactive groups for a total of 10 weeks.

To evaluate this process I will conduct interviews and surveys with young adults from the various groups. This will provide data that will enable me to report my findings, coming directly from the persons involved in the ministry.

Once this information is put together, copies (electronic or hard) will be given to youth who participated in the process, their leaders, local conference, and union personnel. This project should begin in September of 2010 and be completed by May 2014.

### **Project Expectations**

I have five major expectations of this project. It will, first of all, create a model for a small groups-based Christian relational ministry among youth within the Greater New York Conference. Secondly, this study will provide tools to help young adults connect with God and others with purposeful communion. Thirdly, It will help produce relational accord among young adults of our conference. "Fourthly, Research like this offers pastors tools and strategies for implementing effective small group ministry among young adults. Therefore, this project will help me as a pastor better understand youth of different churches, and the dynamics of their local contexts. Lastly, this project will make

me a resource person for small group ministry throughout the Atlantic Union Conference and beyond.

### **Delimitations**

This study was solely to make connections with young adults in various churches within the Greater New York Conference. This was by no means an invasive look into their personal lives. This project looked at principles, and parameters for young adult small group ministry to exist in a positive manner. Each person was encouraged to share only what they wanted to share in an environment that was protected. This study is in no way an affront to the leadership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Greater New York, neither the leadership, nor local church from which they came. The names of the churches were only mentioned in this work for the purpose of structure within the project. These groups were all for personal growth, not to reference any local issues within their personal, and spiritual environments.

### **Limitations**

This study was limited to young adults who worship in 3 churches associated with the Greater New York Conference. These churches are a) Queens Faith Temple, b) Cross Roads, and c) Bedford Park. There were 37 participants from all the churches combined. This is a small sample size.

This study was done in one 10-week cycle, which may not be exhaustive to include issues, and challenges that may be present in other places, cultures, and ministry settings outside this local area.

## Definition of Terms

There are several terms that will be used throughout the project. They are listed here with the intention of giving the reader a better understanding of the topic discussed in the following pages.

*Small Group* — A group of persons numbering between 10 and 14 persons coming together to share experiences of bonding, and spiritual activities to aid in deepening interpersonal and spiritual connections.

*Genuine Community* — The communal characterization of group members, sharing their lives with each other in a transparent yet respectful manner. This takes place in a solid Christian atmosphere, in which Jesus permeates the environment.

*Access Partners* — Within the small group experience model that is advocated in this study; each person has a partner of their choosing for a period of two weeks. After this time each person agrees to choose another one. This happens until the 10 weeks of the meetings are done. These access partners agree to meet together in person, or via different media to share blessings, or burdens that they may desire to share. They are only encouraged to share what they wish to share. Following the sharing they agree to pray for and with each other. This happens at least twice per week in between group meetings. These partners also foster bonding as group members have another reason for spiritual and interpersonal togetherness.

*Youth Small Group Contract* — This is a document that gives in summary credibility, and focus to the group's time together. It is the document that group members agree to accept as the guide for group activities (permissions and limitations), confidentiality, and sustenance of group life and culture.

*Small Group Model* — This refers to the structure, and preferred arrangement of the activities of the group. The style and type of the group's events are also taken into account when the term small group model is used.

## CHAPTER 2

### A THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

#### **Introduction**

I believe small group ministry is as essential to the life of the church as God's presence. The truth is God is a small group. Any theology concerning small groups, and their effect on humankind would do well to use this premise, as a foundation for its position. As Icenogle (1994) observed, "Small groups are microcosms of God's creation community. Wherever two or more persons come together, they become an actual reflection of the image and likeness of God" (p. 5). For God created human beings in His image, and God expressed Himself to us in a community of three, in a small group. Therefore, human beings are to imbibe and digest the thought that God communicated His essence to the universe when He created us as a community. Undoubtedly, He is sharing with all that He desires us to reflect the same.

Malone shares these words, "We do need each other. God intended it that way. He made us to be in relationship with him and with each other. Much of our growth is dependent on the quality of such relationships. These can often be best built within the context of small groups of committed Christians" (Baker, 1997, p. 13). From the very beginning God designed small groups to be the basic unit of earth's family. His intention was to have the small group He created (Adam and Eve) to populate the earth with many more small groups. This is evident in the command given to our first parents by our

creator God, “So God created man in His *own* image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen 1:27-28, NKJV).

Small groups are to create in-depth relationships that are just like a family. A small group of Christians gathering to share life together, and commune on the word of God, is a great way to achieve His intentions for us. After all, we are created with a need to be in community. We are designed by God to be interconnected and interrelated as a people. Just as God shares, communes, live, work, creates, as a plurality of three persons operating as one; we ought to do the same in small groups to accomplish His purpose for the human race.

In this chapter we will begin by looking at a basic overview of a few small group concepts at work in the Old Testament. We will transition to a brief look into New Testament biblical and historical perspectives on small groups, and what impacts them. Next, we will explore some contemporary Christian theological viewpoints on small groups. Then I will put forth my personal, practical, theological points, based on these perspectives. I will conclude with a critical look at some key thoughts on small group ministry.

The interaction with past and present studies, and my personal reflection should give me added tools to impact youth and young adults, through the powerful medium of small group ministry. I intend to use it all for personal enrichment, and in-depth sharing of this material. This theological study should help to bolster small groups among the

youth of the Greater New York Conference. Should this happen, I envision a cohesiveness that pervades the entire conference population of youth and young adults.

## **Old Testament Roots for Small Groups**

### **God as Small Group**

Small groups as a concept for community and togetherness is not a new phenomenon. Small groups can be traced back to the Old Testament, and more distinctly before the existence of the world. Warren posts words that are compelling in this context.

The basis of today's small group ministries can be traced back to the Old Testament. The small group begins with the very nature of God. Genesis 1:1 launches the biblical record with a simple yet profound statement that God (Elohim) is the Creator of all that exists. The word Elohim is plural, designating or incorporating more than one person. Our own needs for and use of groups is a logical extension of the fact that God exists within the divine form of a small group. Of course the term small group is not used in Scripture, but neither is the word Trinity. From the entire nation down to the smallest family unit, a large and small group mentality permeated the Jewish existence. (2010, para. 1-2)

This thought of God expressing himself as a triune being is foundational to genuine community. Genuine community in fact mimics what God is. Three beings distinctly different in being, yet in will and function and purpose they are one. There is singularity in plurality and plurality in singularity. He is the only being that can experience that. Small groups when healthy and sharing genuine community will reflect this kind of oneness.

Comiskey also shares his support for these thoughts, "Community and communion can first be seen in the Trinity. The first small group was between the Godhead. The relationship that existed from the beginning between the three in One is the perfect model of unity and harmony." This is to be seen as Comiskey's hovering

thought as he sets forth his foundational belief concerning small groups. He adds, “From a historically classic Trinitarian view of God, the divine group existed as three persons in conversation and mission” (Comiskey, 2008b, para. 3). Icenogle adds a solid thought that gives further validity to this section.

It may be overly dramatic to say that God lives as a *small group*, but the church has historically described God as Trinity, three persons in one. In any case, the creation account presents both divinity and humanity as *communities* of being and action. God is described as existing in divine community, in dialogue with other members of the God-self, an *intracommunicating* group who also created humanity to exist in group intra-communication. God created and addressed humanity as community with community, as group with group. The divine community has existed in *intercommunity* with human community from the beginning. Three areas of dialogue and community are established from the beginning: within (intra) God’s group self, within (intra) the human group and between (inter) God’s group and the human group. (1994, p. 21)

God existing in community is not only for communion and internal sharing of plans, purpose, and mission. It is also for connection with the human realm and communion with us earthlings. For the reason of community God created us. He wants to enjoy community with us and for that togetherness to be reflected in our communion with each other as humans.

### Earth’s First Small Group

God determined that He would express Himself and His image in the creation of human beings. He was apt to give of Himself in the creative process and that produced our foreparents Adam and Eve. God along with this couple was to form earth’s first small group. The leadership group was the triune God, and the fellowship group was God and the first couple. Together they would share intimate connections within the realm of communion.

After Adam was created, God declared, “It is not good for the man to be alone”

(Genesis 2:18). Have you ever wondered if God had made a mistake in creation? When he created Adam did he forget to create something in Adam that would make him feel secure and not alone? The answer is an emphatic *no*. From the very beginning of time God had planned to create all humans to need both God and other humans. He created all of humankind to live in community, a small group community. We see this small group community in creation consisting of God, Adam and Eve. The relationship among the three of them was a prototype of how God wanted to relate to his people and how he wanted them to relate to each other. (Long, Beyerlein, Keiper, Pell, Theil, & Whallon, 1995, p. 33)

God exists with a constant desire for deep intimate communion with His creation, in particular human beings. His need to express communion is resident in his reason for creating us, God wants to be with us. He knows that we also need a similar connection with each other. We cannot exist in isolation for an extended period of time and be sane. We are created to express and receive community.

Icenogle captures germane information to add depth to this conversation. He shares,

The Bible begins with the word *bet*. The first letter of the Hebrew Bible is the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet. When prefixed to the beginning of a word, *bet* is a simple preposition usually meaning “in” as in “In the Beginning.” But *bet* not only means “in.” It also represents the plural, the conjunctive, the number “two”—the human species starts as two.... One is nothing. Two is everything. One is not even a number. Two is the beginning of all numbers.... Plurals are basic to all that God creates.... Unitariness was the first thing God didn’t like. (1994, p. 20)

Once again we see that God expresses Himself in plurality. It is His very nature to be beside us as we experience community. We must accept the fact that God created us with a natural attachment to Himself. This means that God gave us direct access to his being enjoying deep community that can only be shared with Him and no other. He wants us to express that in the basic building block of a community, a family. This is key to understanding what was God’s intention from the beginning. Family is to be linked to God and each other as His being was connected to Adam and Eve in Eden.

## Broken Communion and the Results

Our first parents were enjoying their relationship with God in intimacy. However, they succumbed to the influences of the archenemy of community and oneness. There has been brokenness in the family ever since.

Eventually, Adam and Eve became discontented. Instead of being willing to be in communion with God and proper community with each other, they sought independence. The result of their sin and rebellion was alienation from God and each other. They now felt shame around each other and thus tried to create barriers between themselves. (Long et al., 1995, p. 51)

The Bible explicitly outlines the effects of this broken community. The couple that experienced this deep relationship with God in a small group was now moving away from Him rather than anticipating their time with him. They realized immediately that there was a change in their communion with their creator and friend.

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. They were ashamed and afraid of God, so they tried to hide: Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid." (Gen 3:7–10, NKJV)

This is important for us to connect with because it represents the beginning of a time of separation and alienation that created issues between God, and humankind and resulted in mankind nurturing the same issues with each other.

In Eden the small group community was shattered. Instead of contentment there was contention. Instead of harmony there was hatred. Instead of sharedness there was shame. The rest of human history became a struggle between humanity's continued rebellion from a small group community on the one hand and its desperate search for that community on the other hand.

During the period of the Judges in the Old Testament, the anarchy of

individualism was pronounced. It was a time when everyone was apt to carry on his or her life with little to no communion with God. Judges 21:25 says, “In those days there was no king in Israel every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” This highlights what happens when community is sacrificed on the altar of individualism. God created us to be in communion with Him and each other. When there is a threat to any aspect of this togetherness and unity, the results are menacing. Throughout the Old Testament there seems to be a formula for communal success. Stay with God and enjoy the beauty of community, or move away from Him and experience the brokenness derived therefrom.

#### The Nation of Israel’s Roots as Related to Small Groups

We can see God choosing Israel as a nation as a part of the small group roots in the Old Testament.

The Israelites were a chosen people; God set them apart from all other peoples on the face of the earth (Deuteronomy 7:6). They were chosen not because they were large in number, but because they were few in number and God loved them (Deuteronomy 7:7-8). They formed a great family called “the house of Israel” (Exodus 40:38). This family identity served as the model around which the nation was internally organized. (Warren, 2010, para. 3)

As He called Abraham, and chose to work through him and his family to solidify a nation unto Himself, He did it through a small family. It was calling out a small group of people to be the establishment through which He would permeate the world with His presence. The seed of Abraham has been spread throughout the world. According to the scriptures (Gen 17:1–8) God said in summary that He was going to bless Abraham and his seed, and through his family all nations of the earth will be blessed. The Nation of Israel came about as a result of a small group. It would seem reasonable to conclude that small groups for genuine communal life together are resident in the being of God. God

gave the example of family to show that the nation he chose was not to exist only as a large group, rather small family groups that come together to make up the large group.

God gave us small groups (families) to show forth his goodness in the earth. However they do not always meet God's intention for them. Affected by sin, the human race has become degenerate in its reflecting and modeling God's purpose in the world. From ancient Israel to present day humanity there has always been a struggle to live what God has intended versus what humankind has construed as constructs of their own thoughts and ideologies. Icenogle, a veteran in the arena of small groups, sees this thought as a tension between God's will and the human's will manifested from Old Testament times.

Small groups are the basic arena for either imaging the redeeming presence of God or projecting destructive human systems. Every small or large gathering of humanity exists in this tension of manifesting an inhuman structure or embodying divinely redemptive relationships. The biblical record calls every small group to consider their source and purpose. This biblical recollection is a calling to remembrance of God's image for human community as it makes an impact on the being and service of small groups. The Old Testament has no specific theology of small group community. However, there is much reflection on tribal community, marital community, familial community, and friendship. (Icenogle, 1994, p. 21)

As we live life in this world, it is incumbent upon us to live out the purpose of God for our lives in our families. Caught in the tension of doing good or evil, each small group or family setting should seek to take on this attitude; every decision made in life is for good or evil. That said, Christian small groups extend the former.

### Tribes in the Old Testament and Small Groups

As one surveys the Old Testament there is a significant emphasis on the tribes in Israel. These have solid connections to small groups. These were divided to ensure that none was left out and all persons were accounted for when daily provisions were given.

This tribal concept created a familial atmosphere within Israel. Even though relatively large there was a defined small group concept engrained in their system of governance.

Let us look at this point by Warren.

The house of Israel, by virtue of its descent from the twelve sons of Jacob, was divided into twelve subgroups or tribes (Genesis 49). Tribes provided the leaders with a method to administer and guide the people. These tribal sub groupings were established clearly by the time the land of Canaan was divided among the Israelites according to their tribes and families. (Joshua 13-22) (2010, para. 4).

Warren's contribution is vital because these tribes even though there were significant infighting among them; they were closely connected. As a closely knitted bunch the people of God in the Old Testament times enjoyed great fellowship even though they were tainted with sin, and struggled through many life concerns.

Undoubtedly, God's promise to bless Abraham's seed was on this fledgling nation divided up into smaller tribes, and families for the purpose of communion and in depth bonding. Kaiser offers support for this thought.

This promise of a universal blessing to the "peoples" or "families" on earth is repeated in Genesis 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; and 28:14. In Genesis 12:3 and 28:14, the Hebrew phrase used for "all the peoples/families" is *kôl mišpəḥôt*, a phrase that is rendered in the Greek translation of the Old Testament as *pasai hai phulai*, meaning "all the tribes" in most contexts, but it could also stand for households as in Joshua 7:14 Therefore the blessing of God given to Abraham was intended to reach smaller people groups as well as the larger political groupings of nations. (2000, p. 10)

Fittingly, I concluded small groups affected Israel. It would also be reasonable to conclude from Kaiser's offering that the writer of Genesis and Joshua were hinting at a small group familial setting when God was communicating His covenant blessings to His people. These tribes relished living in the abundance of God's goodness, while oftentimes fostering a communal spirit.

## Household as Small Group in Old Testament

Household in Hebrew thinking literally means “house.” The various clans were divided down into family subgroups or relatives living in the same dwelling, including servants and dependents. Households typically incorporated several generations of relatives and servants (Warren, 2010, para. 6).

A specific man, including his wife and children, was the smallest group within the Jewish identity. A single-family unit could exist as part of a larger household or as a separate entity. Individual family units were the heart of Hebrew society—the primary small groups (Warren, 2010, para. 7).

The concept of households as small group family units is further developed by an explanation from the *Holman Bible Dictionary*.

The Old Testament family represents a larger body that the English word suggests. There are two Hebrew words, which are used to refer to the family. One word (*mishpachah*) was used to describe the larger patriarchal clan which included those persons related by blood, marriage, slaveship, and even animals (as found in the fourth commandment, Exodus 20:10 ). Occasionally even strangers or sojourners could be included in the larger household. The second word (*bayith* ) was used to suggest the place of residence or household. It had multiple meanings. It represented a clan of descendants (Genesis 18:19), or property and persons of a particular place or residence on which and on whom one depended. (Job 8:15) (Butler, 2013, para. 4–5)

As I analyzed this quotation it seems plausible to believe that there was strong community and togetherness within Israel. Based on the aforementioned, there was pervasive inclusion in the households of Israel. Inclusion is primary to small groups engendering deep bonds within them. For mention to be made concerning strangers in the context of a household was significant because small groups seeks to bond strangers together as family.

The *Holman Bible Dictionary* continues,

The Old Testament family was close-knit, and family loyalty was very strong. The family was held together around the central dominant figure of the father. Family honor and respect was high. The covenant was central to understanding Old Testament family relationships as well as relationships with God. A covenant had both an interior bonding and an exterior binding quality. Steadfast love (heed) was the basis of the covenant which created a sense of loyalty, justice, and high regard. Covenants were personal and caring and were greater than contracts for directing the family (Butler, 2013, para. 12).

This dictionary's classification of the family unit projects a typical small group setting. There is closeness, and loyalty. A leader is distinct, although I would shy away from the word "dominant." Honor and respect are both hallmarks of small group ministry. Covenants are also involved in small group life and ministry. Love, and genuine concern for members of the small group, mirrors that of the Old Testament family. Looking at Deuteronomy 6:1-9 God clearly enters into a covenant relationship with His children. He gives them commands and instruction for a great covenant community. He told the people that, "The Lord our God is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might (vv. 4, 5). He continues with covenant community language, "You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." (vv. 6, 7). This is what community looks like in small groups. In essence Christian small group communal life seeks to rivet in all a genuine love for God with one's entire being, and sharing with all involved the benefits of authentic community with humankind. Succinctly put, one can take this definition from the Holman Bible Dictionary, and the biblical text of Deuteronomy 6: 1-9, and swap it for a definition and explanation of small groups. As it was in the Old Testament, modern day households are also close knitted groups. Each family could be seen as a small group that fosters life building as life is lived together. Genuine

community is the number one goal in any era of small groups joining up to do life together.

### **A Historical and Cultural Setting of Small Groups Based on an Explanation of Acts 2:42–47**

At Pentecost the manifestation of the Holy Spirit was so powerful that about 3,000 souls came to Christianity. Subsequent to this outpouring of spiritual power on the church was the need for the conservation of the church's new membership. For any group of persons to come into a setting and survive long term there must be a plan for keeping them. I submit small group ministry is a great plan that can be used to create an environment for the church to live together in harmony and love. Thus, making membership conservation effective. The immediacy with which the post Pentecost church implemented it conveyed its power for good, the development, and transformation of the people affected by its ministry.

A cursory look at Acts 2:42–47 seem to suggest that Luke's thoughts were somewhat disjointed; quickly putting words together to report on what was happening. It is hardly the case when we consider the text closely. One can observe a careful survey of the text and come to the conclusion that there was intentionality in Luke's summary of the aftermath of Pentecost. As I dug into the text I found some pivotal points that provide a solid foundation for an explanation of the life of the church in Acts 2:42–47.

#### **They Were a Knowledge-Based Church**

These disciples were eager to learn in the post Pentecost experience. Consider these thoughts about their determination to learn: "These people attended constantly upon the apostles' doctrine—'teaching'; giving themselves up to the instructions which, in

their raw state, would be indispensable to the consolidation of the immense multitude suddenly admitted to visible discipleship” (Jamieson, Fausset, & Brown, 1997, 2:42).

There was a massive conversion experience that took place during the Pentecost encounter. It was important for everyone to be on the same page with the doctrines and position of the new church. The apostles gave them their marching orders from the word of God and they were excited for it. One could easily see their elation for the word that came from God via these advocates of truth.

The translation of the Greek term *proskarterountes* used in the text announces (*they spent their time in the doctrine*). In some languages one may use “they gave themselves to,” “they were eager for,” or “they were very desirous of;” the *learning from the apostles*. (Newman & Nadia, 1993, p. 63)

It seems not to matter what language is used; there was an insatiable desire for knowledge of the word of God. Barclay comments, “These people continued to connect with the apostles’ doctrine. They were eager to know more and to dig into what the scriptures shared based on the explanations from the apostles” (1976, p. 45). Any way we look at this, it appears as though the point continues to surface; that the new believers were excited about their opportunity to know more about their new found faith and belief in Jesus Christ.

### They Were a Church That Valued Fellowship

According to (Acts 2:42) Fellowship was an important part of what the church deemed essential to their genuine togetherness. It was a church that apparently took communing together very seriously. These believers in Christ and His word were experiencing depth of fellowship that was certainly uncommon. The context seems to share that they were so united that there was not even a trace of animosity or strife among them (Barclay, 1976).

The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, shares the following perspective: The Greek word for fellowship in Acts 2:42 is *koinōnia*; although this word is translated most often as “fellowship” (1 Cor 1:9; Phil 1:5; 3:10; John 1:3,6,7, etc.), in 1 Cor 10:16; 2 Cor 13:14 it is rendered “communion.” It seems clear that in the present instance the word refers to the brotherhood that developed between the apostles and their converts.” (Nichol, 2002, p. 148) *Fellowship* (a word which occurs only here in Acts) may refer either to the common spirit which the believers shared with the apostles, or, more likely, to the communal spirit which they shared with the total group (Newman & Nida, 1993, p. 63).

Commonality is basic to healthy church life, and should be protected to keep the integrity of the togetherness of the church’s experience. A church that has no small depth of fellowship is a church that bonds together with ease and shares in Christian love together without frivolous inhibitions. Based on an examination of the scriptures it is safe to purport that this church had a deep and genuine fellowship.

This time of fellowship also included eating together as (Acts 2:42) clearly indicates. Fellowship that leads to a shared meal is a fellowship often remembered and cherished. And it does much to build a robust community. These words in the following quote aptly throw light on this aspect of communion.

*Sharing in the fellowship meals* (in Greek literally “in the breaking of bread”) represents a Greek phrase which occurs only here and in Luke 24:35. It is generally agreed that these *fellowship meals* were common meals shared in by the early Christian community, and followed by the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The implication of this expression is that “they ate together as believers.” Obviously, there is more than merely having one’s meals with one another. This eating together was an aspect of their common loyalty to Jesus Christ. (Newman & Nida, 1993, p. 63)

It is noteworthy that the church was together enjoying oneness that comes as a

result of constant fellowship and sharing in meals. The church was connected like the assembly of a symphonic piece played without a discordant note. This is what the power of fellowship can do for the church.

#### Prayer was a key Component of the Church's Communion

It was a church that prayed together.

The early Christians knew that they could not meet life in their own strength and that they did not need to. They always went in to God before they went out to the world; they were able to meet the problems of life because they had first met him. (Barclay, 1976, p. 45)

There was sensitivity to the presence of God in the prayer experience. In Acts 2:43 the word used for fear contextually denote reverence. The Holy Spirit's work was so prevalent among them that their hearts were in awe of the presence of God. Experiencing Pentecost was an eye-opener for these new converts and they translated the lingering effect of that experience during the following days with awe-filled hearts as they beheld the glory of God among them.

Consider these words from Ogilvie and Ogilvie (1983) in *The Preacher's Commentary* on the power of prayer in the life of the church.

In order for people to be galvanized into oneness in Christ, it takes time to be together to listen to each other, care, and be *for* each other. Prayer together becomes the time of communication with the Lord in which His Spirit replenishes us in order to continue unselfish and non-manipulative concern and caring for each other. (p. 73)

These words seem to be otherworldly; in that they provide a heavenly thought that gives us an idea of what the power of prayer can do to unite the church around a common fellowship and mission.

When we pray we should do so expectantly as they did. We should be looking to see something happen. Signs and wonders were there (verse 43). These converts to

Christianity believed God for great things to happen among them. Their pristine faith moved the heart and hands of Almighty God. Thus their experience testified of His miraculous works among them.

The apostles were not hands off concerning the prayer life of the believers. They prayed together in the communion of the church (verse 42). They prayed corporately, and this manifested itself by God responding with signs and wonders among the apostles and believers (verses 42, 43).

The new believers were to be trained in the discipline of prayer. Corporate prayers were viewed as an essential part of the spiritual growth of the church. Wonders and signs apparently were given by the Lord to the apostles to validate their divinely ordained position and to verify the truthfulness of their witness in the establishment of the early church. (Heb 2:3, 4), (Radmacher, Allen, & House, 1999, Acts 2:40–43)

Prayer was a key component in the life of the early church. The members seemed to be on point with their desires and expressions to God. God did not disappoint that nascent group of believers. He attended their awe, togetherness, communion, and petitions with a close ear to listen and an intimate hand to help.

#### These Believers had an “Others First” Mentality

Acts 2:44–46 describes the results of communal living in the context of a church. The church is called to be a place where oneness is highly esteemed. The community of believers should lay hold of the power of God among them in such a manner that it leads to togetherness, having all things in common, a willingness to count personal possessions as nothing when it comes to meeting the needs of fellow members, eating fellowship meals together in our homes, with joyfulness and singleness of purpose.

When this type of fellowship, manifested in this way, appears in churches the world will know that we are serious about spreading abroad the love of Jesus Christ.

They will know that we are living worthy of the name we bear: Christian!

Acts 2 verses 44 and 45 provide the crux of these early Christians intense feeling of responsibility for each other. Spiritual and physical needs were met in an intimate setting of sharing and caring for one another. No need was expressed and was not addressed. The very culture of church life seemed to espouse sharing of life together, along with possessions. They understood clearly that a Christian could not bear to have too much when others have too little (Barclay, 1976).

The disposal and distribution of possessions in the early church was directed among all, as anyone had need. When a physical or spiritual need became known in the church, action was taken to address it (1 John 3:17). The New Testament believers demonstrated their love for one another by giving self-sacrificially (Radmacher et al., 1999; Acts 2:44-45). This love was not prompted by self-aggrandizement rather a deep concern for the needs of others. Their motivation was simply to satisfy whatever pain, discomfort, hurt, or dismay; which existed in the church. They saw these as threats to their community and sought to address them promptly. *The Pulpit Commentary* (2004) corroborates this thought,

*Others* were more thought of than *self*. There was a general desire to imitate Christ by *giving up for others*. This seems the idea in their “having all things common. Under the strong and general feeling of Christian charity, which sprang out of Christian unity, [people] gave as freely as if what they had were not really their own, but only held by them in trust for others. Practically, what was any [person’s] came to be [everybody’s]; no [one] asserted his or her private proprietorship, or said that aught of the things that he or she possessed was his own. (p. 91–92)

This view posited by the *Pulpit Commentary* shows us genuine community. Love in action is the theme of this comment. There was a strong sense of solidarity that captured each heart of the early believers. Each person was properly cared for without

exception. This is practical Christianity! Devoid of much theory, these supporters of the Christian faith were moved to act. They did so with a common purpose to alleviate suffering in the body of Christ, thus enjoying in-depth fellowship.

### They Combined the Temple and House Ministries

The early believers corporate and house worship gatherings spoke of their willingness to present to all the entire essence of the gospel as taught by Jesus Christ himself. They mimicked His example and what I call His mission statement for ministry found in Luke 4:16-19. It was a dual purpose that combined a corporate witness with His individual expressions of healing and deliverance. These disciples of Christ attended worship in the temple and had a personalized ministry of fellowship that was from house to house. *The New American Commentary* agrees in substance with this position.

The Christian presence in the temple testifies not only to their remaining faithful to their Jewish heritage but also evidences their zeal for witness. In Jerusalem the temple was the primary place where crowds would be found, and there the Christians went to bear their witness (3:11–12; 5:21, 42). If the temple was the place of witness, homes were the place for fellowship. In the intimacy of the home setting, a common meal was shared together, probably including the Lord's Supper as well. It was a time marked by rejoicing in their fellowship with one another and with the Spirit and by their own openness and sincerity. (Polhill, 2001, pp. 121–122)

This church was a worshipping church (verse 46); they never forgot to visit God's house. Things can happen when we come together. God's Spirit moves upon his worshipping people. They did so in the temple and they continued with breaking bread from house to house. These people combined corporate worship with house-to-house communion. This is what made their fellowship so powerful and meaningful. It was not just centered on the temple worship. It too focused on worship beyond the temple walls. It was a church that met in houses. This combination of corporate worship in the temple,

and meeting in homes for communal exchange defines for me a church that was involved in small group ministry. They had the balance of the large group and small groups. And God inhabited their worship indeed.

### The Church Encountered Glee and Growth

This new church enamored with the events of the Holy Spirit's presence among them imbibed the joy of the Lord and, (verse 46) gladness was there. The Greek word gives us a pointed explanation of the kind of joyful church they were. The word is "*agalliasis*, 'exultation,' 'extreme joy.' They rejoiced at the privilege of being Christians" (Nichol, 2002, p. 150). A gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms. They experienced the joy of the Lord. This was evident in their worship and interaction with each other.

This joyful spirit embedded in the common spirit of unity that existed among this incipient group of believers led to exponential growth. For Christianity is a lovely thing. In the early Church there was winsomeness in God's people. They were perfuming their environment with the love of God. This resulted in people desiring to be a part of their fellowship and experience. Their love for God and each other provided an unparalleled and unavoidable witness that aided the growth of the church. (Barclay, 1976) Luke comments in Acts 2:47 "And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." This explosiveness in growth sprung out of the joyous spirit of unanimity that described their fellowship, worship, and willing discipleship.

All of the scholars I researched agree with the core of this treatment of the early church's experience. This delineation of primitive godliness, oneness, genuineness, and faith that were all evident among them are the warp and woof of the church's concerns today. Their attention to corporate worship, and communal living, and sharing in houses

present the essence of real solid small group life; an uncanny togetherness that should be emulated in churches today. In this way there would be no one from any walk of life, country, ethnicity, social class, or religious persuasion left out in the church's worship and experience.

### **A Historical and Cultural Setting of Small Groups Based on an Explanation of Galatians 3:28**

Small group ministry should provide a deep oneness that supersedes culture, gender, class, or race. By this I mean there ought to be no form of discrimination in the group's life and togetherness. Obviously, any trend toward a discriminative culture in small groups is a sure way to kill the group's progress in bonding. These kinds of problems existing in groups would do more to sever the groups' impact on their own members and the community than they would for good.

The Apostle Paul in his admonition to the people of Galatia sought to stomp out this discriminatory fervor that was being fed by the Jews vs. Gentiles, Slave vs. Free, and Male vs. Female, by sharing that we are all one in Christ Jesus. It is our connection to Him by belief and practice that makes us one.

It is important for us to note,

In the Church there was no difference between any of the members; they had all become sons of God. In verse 28 Paul says that the distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free man, male and female is wiped out. There is something of very great interest here. In the Jewish Morning Prayer, which Paul must all his pre-Christian life have used, the Jew thanks God that "Thou hast not made me a Gentile, a slave or a woman." Paul takes that prayer and reverses it. The old distinctions were gone; all were one in Christ. (Barclay, 1976; Gal 3:28)

The only real equator for human distinctiveness and claims to such is the fact that we are all debtors to the grace of Christ Jesus. When this comes into full view one cannot see the shallow things that tend to divide us.

Please let us understand Paul clearly. He is not saying that we are not different in personality, gender, nationality, class, and status. These are all realities of life. However, we need to come to grips with this position that,

It is not that the distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free men, male and female no longer exist, as a literal rendering might suggest, but that in union with Christ Jesus, those who are baptized are *all one*, and that *there is no difference* between them because of their nationality, their social standing, or even their sex. In other words, the distinctions, which exist, are no longer important and present no impediment to any of these persons becoming children of God. (Arichea & Nida, 1993, pp. 84–85)

Henry (1996) rightly recognizes that the oneness that ought to be shared in the community of Christ's followers is to be experienced by each person. He states:

This privilege of being the children of God, and of being...devoted to Christ, is now enjoyed in common by all real Christians. The law indeed made a difference between Jew and Greek, giving the Jews on many accounts the pre-eminence: that also made a difference between *bond and free*, master and servant, and between *male and female*, the males being circumcised. But it is not so now; they all stand on the same level, *and are all one in Christ Jesus*; as the one is not accepted on the account of any national or personal advantages he may enjoy above the other, so neither is the other rejected for the want of them; but all who sincerely believe on Christ, of what nation, or sex, or condition, soever they be, are accepted of him, and become the children of God through faith in him (1996; Gal 3:19–29).

Once membership in the body (church) is understood in this light there should be no issues with cliques, classism, cultural differences, gender, and so forth. With this view in mind garnering support for the mission of the church is also a non-issue. The community would be a genuine one, a loving one, with all persons executing their responsibilities to God's honor and glory. Authentic community is usually one of the goals of every church and small group. Creating a climate in which these issues that Paul outlines for us in Gal 3:28 are openly addressed, and practically countered in the church or group is essential to vibrancy of the ministry.

## **A Historical and Cultural Setting of Small Groups Based on an Explanation of 1 Corinthians 12:18–26**

Pauline writings share significant and salient pointers on creating an atmosphere for genuine community in a church or group setting to thrive. To the church that worshipped in Corinth he presented a pitch for oneness, genuine concern for others, and the use of giftedness for the wellbeing of the church.

It is important to discuss here Paul's point in verse 18. He connects the members who come into the church with God's providence. He says that God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased Him. Inferring it is through God's divine hands that people come into the church. Once they are connected to the church's experience there ought to be oneness among the believers as the creator Himself assembled a literal human body. It ought to be a seamless synergy that creates collectiveness that celebrates all the gifts within the body with a blatant blindness to who possesses the gifts. After all God is the one who assembles the literal human body, the church body, and He disperse the gifts that give them abilities to function.

It seems as though the apostle Paul was making as much a plea for genuine community that unity brings, as he was teaching about spiritual gifts. I think Matthew Henry got it right in his concise remarks on 1 Cor 12:18–26.

All the members of the body are useful and necessary to each other. Nor is there a member of the body of Christ, but many and ought to be useful to fellow-members. As in the natural body of man, the strongest bonds of love should closely unite the members; the good of the whole should be the object of all. All Christians are dependent one upon another; each is to expect and receive help from the rest. Let us then have more of the spirit of union in our religion. (Henry & Scott, 1997; 1 Cor 12:12–27)

This unity in love ought to be expressed in our dealings with one another. We ought to never have it said about us as Christians that we do not have a genuinely deep

concern for the well-being of the others in the church and wider community. Embedded in Christ, the members of the body are intertwined with bonds of love that are of supernatural strength. This becomes evident in the way we relate to each other.

In verses 20–24 Paul gives a passionate plea here for genuine concern for the membership regardless of the perceived importance of the gifts that exist in the church. As the body has a specific function and design for all its parts created by God; so does all the members have a specific function. One should not be seen, as over or against the next rather, there should be a greater focus on the one who is perceived to have a “lesser gift” (v. 24) for their encouragement in the faith.

The Bible Knowledge Commentary supports this point by sharing that a person with a seemingly greater gift should not imagine that he could function alone since a bodily member cut off from the natural body would cease to exist. More importantly, one thought to possess a lesser gift should in fact be accorded greater attention by the other members of the body. (Walvoord, Zuck, & Dallas Theological Seminary, 1983, 1 Cor 12:21–26)

In short, Paul is saying that in a church or group setting there ought to be such a commonality that no one is seen in isolation. Every person has a role to play however insignificant it may appear to be. In fact the more insignificant it appears to be Paul feels the more it should be preferred. The end result should be that God gets the glory and adds to His community.

In 1 Cor 12:25, 26, the scripture presents the ideal situation for a community of believers in Jesus Christ. The author’s main concern in these verses centers on divisions in the church body and what genuineness conveyed by fellow members can do to allay these concerns. Paul clinches the message by sharing that differences should not get in the way of our care for each other. I believe God wants us to look beyond our differences while we celebrate our differentness in the body of Christ.

There were apparent rivalries in the church at Corinth and Paul makes it clear, “There should be no schism in the body” (vs. 25). He shares this point that the church would be aware that Christ’s presence cancels these types of issues in our midst.

Let us ponder this compelling thought on verse 25 and 26 that expresses in a nutshell Paul’s desire for the church:

That rivalry would cease (so that there should be no division in the body; 1:10; 11:18) and genuine unity would exist (12:26). The unifying member in the spiritual body is Christ. As the Head (Eph. 1:22; cf. 1 Cor. 11:3) He possesses the body and sovereignly expresses His will. His command is that love should prevail among the members (John 15:12). This was the force, which would maintain unity within the diversity. (Walvoord et al., 1983; 1 Cor 12:21–27).

In spite of the differences and differentness we share we ought to have a care for each other that is a result of mutual Christ like love (vs. 26). This love drives our passion for unity and peace that ought to be shared liberally within the church. Within its environs all should experience everyone caring for each other in ways that transcend our issues and challenges; while aiding the church and fostering its unity and growth. “By each one functioning according to God’s will and helping the other members to function; if one member suffers, it affects every member. If one member is healthy, it helps the others to be strong” (Wiersbe, 1996; 1 Cor 12:14).

The writer of 1 Corinthians makes it clear that God desires a church joined by a common love, shared in the bonds of peace. He is big on the church celebrating all the gifts, in an environment where unity exists. Paul substantiates the point that there should be no differences among us that divide the church. It is his view that we all care for one another and genuinely suffer when a member of the body is hurting and when members are proffered any praise for good we rejoice with them. In so doing we would be living in genuine Christian community.

## **My Practical Theology Based on the Aforementioned Texts**

As I perused the information and instructions within the texts above my heart was smitten with the tremendous love of God for humankind. I was compelled to pause and ponder on the power and potency that emanate from the words of these texts of scripture.

This reflection has led me to draw out five practical principles for life and the development of genuine Christian community in small groups. The delineation of these points also gathers thoughts on the impact these texts have had on my own life and ministry.

### **Genuine Community Life Starts With God**

God was the first mover in the early church. They tarried in earnestness for His presence and He breathed upon the apostles. They were so affected by His communion with them, which resulted in the Pentecost experience. The outgrowth of their connection with God was massive growth and deep communion with those new members. It all began with a God encounter. This encounter led to others knowing God by the apostles' genuine oneness modeled in the community of believers.

I truly believe that daily communion with God is the key to living in Christian community. Spending time alone with Him reflecting on His word and chatting with Him, has transformed my own experience. In this regular undisturbed experience with God, hushed from the busyness of life I have found, power, direction, joy, peace, and a sense of fulfillment. I could not find these in any of the other moments of my life. As a pastor life could get very busy. However, I always look forward to the time alone with Him to recalibrate and continue on.

As a result of my personal experience, I felt enabled to share this with small group leaders, who have begun a similar journey and are garnering results. They have relayed the simple yet profound method for connecting with God, and have reported their group members are enjoying God in a way devoid of the many distractions of life. I have gotten testimonies of miracles: finance, healing, mending relationships, and so forth among these believers who are seeking God; just like those in Acts 2:43.

This was similar to the experience of the early church. These people met God and they continued without wavering in the doctrine of the apostles (Acts 2:42). They were in love with God first. They shared their experiences with each other (Acts 2:42). Besotted with His awe and power among them they were led to a more in-depth communion with each other. Small group ministry has to share in, and lead people into this kind of God first encounter for it to fully benefit from the potency of sharing life together.

#### Genuine Community Life Promotes Commonality

The early church had people who were experiencing a level of fellowship and togetherness that was rare. It seems like the god-likeness in their church was at an all-time high. The Post-Pentecost church was a church had fellowship to the point that “all who believed were together and had all things in common” (Acts 2:44, NKJV). This meant that the people were promoting a communal style of living that was not coerced. It simply emanated out of hearts driven by a deep love for God and genuine concern for each other.

The practical nature of genuine commonality in church life indicates that once a person connects with God that person will share loving concern for persons around them. This means that if someone is hungry we offer him or her food. If one is in need of

clothing we find clothes. If someone needs healing we ensure that they get the best possible health care. If there is a person there without transportation we ensure they are transported where they need to go. We ought to live life in such a way that the possessions we have are not hoarded, rather dispersed. This can only happen consistently when hearts of love promote the common life.

I believe there are only three uses for the Christian's possessions: a) God's cause, b) family, and c) community. If a Christian's possessions cannot fit into these three areas of life I do not think it is proper stewardship to expense them.

I have yet to see a church community that lives like the members of the Post-Pentecost church. Seeing a need and addressing it without regard for their personal assets. In fact they sold their own stuff to meet the needs of the church members (Acts 2:45). This is truly promoting commonality among the believers. In a "me" crazed society that envelops many, it behooves us to learn from the practical, free-giving spirit of the members of the early church.

Small groups seem to work best when commonality is present within the life of the groups. When one cannot bear to see the others with needs and hold possessions that are at a level to help. Sharing is the most practical way we can spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. For His gospel is a social gospel as well as a spiritual one. Jesus himself met the needs of those around Him with freeness unmatched (Luke 4:17–21). Patterning this freeness exhibited by Him and the persons in Acts 2 who were obviously communing with Him, would help us spread His love among us, and abroad.

## Genuine Community Life Joins the Temple and House Communion

The togetherness that was shared in the church described in Acts 2:46 was balanced. Temple worship, which the members never neglected, was a part of the routine of the church community. There was also a house-to-house fellowship that extended their time together. This balance of the large group and the small group is very vital to sharing life together. The large group gives validity to sharing corporate worship discipline, and order in the courts of God. And the small group presents a bona fide connectivity that cements people in real relationships advancing love and fellowship.

Both groups are necessary to help members experience the presence of God. Both groups ought to be dependent on each other to function properly to provide a balance between worship and fellowship. These are necessary to aid authentic relationships in the church, with God, and fellow human beings. In an environment like this growth is inevitable. And as each group grows the church grows for God's glory.

## Genuine Community Life Sees no Discrimination

Community is by nature a word that dispels prejudice. It refers to a group of people living in one place, having particular characteristics in common. This is my definition of community and I think it fits the description of the kind of lifestyle that should exist in churches affected by the power of God.

If community is going to be experienced we cannot be hung up on those characteristics that divide us rather, we focus on those that unite us. We can focus on the common love, faith, peace, joy, life, challenges, and commitments rather than on gender, ethnicity, color, social status, or class that tend to be divisive. As mentioned before there will always be differentness among us. We are not all alike, we are from different parts

of the world, we have different sexes, we enjoy varying levels of affluence in society; these are facts of life. However we cannot allow these to derail our opportunities to be in community. Once we are children of God His spirit unites us. He is our Father!

### Genuine Community Life Celebrates Oneness

In the body of Christ there should be nothing that disturbs the cohesion of its organization. Disjointedness and true community is a contradiction in terms. There ought to be oneness that exists in our relationship with God and each other. Paul writing to the Corinthians (1 Cor 12:12–17) uses the analogy of the literal human body. Each organ within the body plays its part in the health of the whole. The same it is with God's church. Each person is important and as this feeling permeates the church unity would be the result.

Even though the primary context infers spiritual gifts and their usage in the church, one could also deduce that Paul was harping at unity for the church. Even though the church is a diverse body, it is still one body. Just as there are many gifts that are at work in the church it is still one Holy Spirit that gives them.

This is practical stuff! There ought to be nothing tolerated among us that threatens our oneness. No thought, no conversation, no action, no implication that would bring about a tinge of divisiveness within the church or small group should be embraced. Every fiber of our beings as children of God should be to up build the kingdom of God.

In fact Paul makes it clear "There should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another" (1 Cor 12:25, NKJV). He is promoting oneness for the people of the church at Corinth, and by extension to those who abide in today's world. There ought to be an uncommon togetherness among God's

children. So much so, that even if one is at a point of loss or less; that one should be given utmost attention to alleviate the need, and return all to oneness (1 Cor 12:26). Based on Paul's explanation here there is no celebration in the body until all can celebrate. This is the extent to which we are called to take life together. We are to be intentional about creating an atmosphere of love and abundant living.

### **A Brief Exploration of Some Historic Christian Viewpoints on Small Group Ministry**

Too many are the voices that professed Christianity and expressed their lives of service in small group ministry to do a thorough treatment of them here. Too many are the circumstances that small group ministry overcame during the years to reach the point of enjoyment where it is today to fit into these pages. However, at this point I take a succinct look at some of the history surrounding small group ministry in the Christian Church.

#### **Small Groups and the Early Christian Movement**

This period of time prior to the reformation was a very challenging time for small groups to flourish with vitality. The church and state were merging with in-depth magnetism while within Christianity there were distinctions between clergy and laity that created a stiff divide. The recognition of Christianity was a blow to the efficacy of small group ministry. These were stringent times for small groups to connect. Comiskey explains,

There were at least two historical developments that hindered small group activity before the reformation. First, a growing distinction between clergy and laity hindered lay participation and second, the legalization of Christianity took away the need for home meetings. (2008a, p.35)

After the legalization of Christianity many members of the church felt like there was too much of the world in the church. This gave rise to small groups of monastic believers who were trying to find pure religion again. This was at first scorned by the authorities in the state church but later became a staple part of the Roman Catholic Church life.

These small groups within the Roman Catholic Church were for clergy only which became known as monasticism within their ecclesiastical ranks. This order among them filled the need for education and communion among the clerics, but denied the laity (Comiskey, 2008a p. 153).

This created a powerful clergy, but a rather inept laity. Small groups of people began to rise up and cry out for change to have all people proffered the same connectivity as the clergy.

Comiskey continues his commentary on this valuable history by offering;

The Protestant Reformation was not an isolated event. There were many underlying factors that helped lay the foundation for reform. Before the Protestant Reformation, an underlying yearning for change began to spread among small groups such as the Lollards (followers of Wycliffe), the Hussites (followers of John Huss), the Waldensians (followers of Peter Waldo), the Friendship Band, various women's' groups, and the Brethren of the Common Life. Although in varying degrees, these small groups expressed longing to return to the priesthood of all believers, the authority of Scripture, and holy living. (2008a, p. 35)

It was important for the life of the church to experience a resurgence of power felt during Pentecost. The distinction of functional differences between the brethren at that time was non-existent and there was tremendous unity. For this to come to the fore again all be it in a type of coercive fashion was necessary for the church to find its passion for the spread of Christianity once again.

### Some of the Reformers' Positions on Small Groups

There were great men who led the reformation church movement through a very tumultuous period of perdition and persecution. Many of them believed in small group ministry as a means of sustaining and maintaining the faith during those difficult periods. Some of them though were still connected to state churches, but utilized small groups as a method of pressing the Protestant message. Consider this point by Comiskey,

In the seventeenth century, Pietists on the European continent and Dissenters in Britain revived the "house church" ideal in contrast to state churches (Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican) that they considered spiritually dead. John Wesley, who had contact with Pietists and Dissenters, encouraged all Methodists to meet in groups outside of their local church, even though such meetings could lead to persecution. But Wesley also expected Methodists to keep attending Anglican churches, as he did. He's perhaps the first to think of small group participation as an addition to regular church attendance, not a replacement for it (Comiskey's study, as cited by Coffman, 2008, p. 51).

Wesley continued his push for small groups during the post-reformation period to the point that he is known as one of the leaders of small group life among the reformers. "Wesley believed that small groups were God's instrument to implement change. He realized that long-term change required an effective organizational structure, and thus he worked hard to build an extensive small group network" (as cited by Coffman, 2008, para. 1).

During and immediately following the reformation period various small groups continued the push that the reformers in principle began to emphasize. These groups began a powerful awakening within the laity that continued with exceptional consistency. The church has benefited much from their emphases to broaden the scope of church life and experience. Their work laid the foundation for contemporary small group ministry in the church. Bear this summary point in mind,

The early Reformers (especially Martin Bucer an ardent follower of Martin Luther) teach us how small group structures can be used to call the church back to vital Christianity. The small group structure among the Anabaptists helps us to learn more about the nature of the true church--the gathered community. In Pietism, we catch a glimpse of how small groups were used in a complimentary role within the state church. From the Moravian and Methodist small group structures we observe how small groups contribute to church growth by emphasizing both evangelism and discipleship. (Coffman, 2008, para. 3)

It is clear that these men and their followers provided a course that led the church back to its primitive beliefs in the priesthood of all believers. Each of these post-reformation groups provided a fitting emphasis on small groups that aided the church and its mission to take the gospel of Jesus Christ to all people.

### **What Have we Learned?**

Today we have many forms of small group ministry that operate in various sized churches. This is in direct contrast to what took place during the early years of Christianity.

Coffman offers further insight on small group ministry and its development in the Christian church from those early years.

Small groups of Christians met regularly (weekly or perhaps monthly) for worship, encouragement, and instruction as early as the first decades of Christianity, but it's not quite accurate to call them "small groups" in the contemporary sense. These groups didn't think of themselves as the more personal, relational aspect of a larger church, as many small groups do now—they were the only church that members knew. (2008, para. 1)

I think Coffman is on point with her comment. We could learn from this that there ought to be a kind of togetherness that comes to the fore of small groups. The result of which is that each group is seen as a church in itself. I though, feel that it is necessary to have a small group connected to a larger body of believers. This gives the members of the

small group a broader yet safer expression of beliefs and ideas, while sharing a greater context for faith, life, togetherness, and organization.

We also learned that small groups evolved in the early years of Christianity in the midst of volatility. We can also appreciate the process that small group ministry went through, from divisiveness (clergy only) to inclusiveness (all believers communing together).

We too have absorbed the fact that we are indebted to the small groups of believers that whipped up a stir concerning the priesthood of all believers. This constant outcry eventually outlasted the state church's hold on the believers. We have also gathered that we owe them a debt of gratitude for their implementation and sustainability of small group ministry in the face of daring odds.

We can also be grateful for the fact that we enjoy small groups expression as a result of the energy of these great men of the reformation period who gave their all, and in some cases their lives for the Christian cause that we believe in today.

Finally, we glean that small groups have an innate force for togetherness that is very difficult to match on earth. This type of familial activity in the context of a church is a power for good that can prove to be so potent. Small groups of Christians can obliterate forces that are not in keeping with its success, and turn out to be indestructible in comparison to large church organizations. I totally agree with Comiskey's (2008b, p. 27) point here,

The strongest organizational unit in the world's history would appear to be that which we call a cell because it is a remorseless self-multiplier; is exceptionally difficult to destroy; can preserve its intensity of local life while vast organizations quickly wither when they are weakened at the center; can defy the power of governments; is the appropriate lever of prying open any status quo. This seems

the appointed way by which a mere handful of people may open up a new chapter in the history of civilization.

We ought to consider these words as poignant while we consider the power of small groups. We have seen the power of this type of ministry heretofore. I think this kind of ministry is needed today. Young people as well as seniors seem to be affected by its power like no other. From history to the present denotes small groups strength for change and transformation of church ecclesiastic leaders, and laity.

### **Key Thoughts and Analysis of God's Activity in and Through Small Group Ministry**

Key to any Christian view of small group ministry is the point of relationships. These find fulfillment in fusing God and humankind with astounding profundity. Vertical relationships (with God) ought to be intentionally nurtured in small groups. Likewise horizontal relationships (with humankind) should be procured and encouraged.

There are many voices in Christendom that share salient points on small group ministry. What follows in this section are some of these voices and their views on small groups from the standpoint of relationships between God the creator and his created beings.

Icenogle (1994), is one of the leading Christian voices who produced a prominent work on Christian small group ministry entitled, *Biblical foundations for small group ministry: An integrative approach*; postulates a well-founded point that adds depth to this discussion. He says:

Scripture begins and ends with God calling humanity into relationship with the divine community and with one another. A survey of salvation history reveals the struggle of God and humanity to be in intimate relationship with one another. This is warfare for human persons who can be redeemed only as God intercedes in human relationships and activity. God beckons us into the presence of divine and human persons and relationships. (p. 8)

It is impossible to be Christian and not be in a solid relationship with God, and have in-depth connectivity with fellow humans. Small groups pose excellent opportunities for these to align themselves in relational bliss. God desires for us to be in a joyful alliance with Him and share the same with others. This comes with awesome responsibility. It is our specific task to have a level of care for each other that is beyond the shallow thoughts expressed with surface acquaintances. It goes into real life together for the sake of helping ourselves and others see the efficacy of the gospel of God in Jesus Christ. Steve Barker renders further counsel to us on the matter.

Christian community is not merely a subjective feeling of belonging. It's different from membership in a bowling league, tennis club or civic group. Christian community is more akin to the commitment of love and obligation we have toward members of our own families. It is devotion to one another based on the experience we share of God at work saving us from the "corrupt generation" around us (Acts 2:40 NIV) and knitting us into effective teams of change agents in the world. The outcome of life in community is that we are knit together in love and built up as whole people. (Eph 4:12–16) (Baker, 1997, pp. 24–25)

The purpose of this type of ministry is two-fold. To be positively impacted by small groups, and help others be affected by the same.

As I read through this I wondered to myself; why church people are not full of the Pentecostal spirit, vitality, and authenticity as a result of communing with each other in small groups? As I sought answers I found a convincing response from Stark and Wieland's Book, *Growing people through small groups*. They bluntly share that; God develops people in His own time and in His own way. Though wonderful concepts for growing people in small groups seem precise and tidy, people are not always that way. Small groups can be quite a mess. These groups are only tools. God works with people as they are and calls them to be better than they are.

“People are organisms and not organizations: they’re fluid and highly flexible” (Stark & Wieland, 2004, p. 83). I think these authors got it right when they observed, “Life isn’t linear or logical, and neither is the development of our faith” (2004, p. 83). We can accept Christ and make an enormous leap forward and then have a broken commitment and make a few steps back. No one, or group changes quite like the other the seasons of life and the seasons of faith will all be different. Each has its own timing and lifecycle (2004).

In many churches people struggle relationally with God and fellow members. Regardless, God still calls us to community with Him and others. Yes, people may be a mess before God cleans them up. Even so, God still has the earnest prayer that we all be one. John 17:11 tells us that. This plea has no decision attached to whom, or which segment of His church will be one. It is His prayer that we all be one. Disheveled, dejected, destitute, discouraged, we all through His enabling strength and repairing grace can be one.

Through community in small groups we can see the power of God shaping and developing people into his likeness. This is what Christian togetherness and oneness is all about. It is not just oneness with our fellowmen it is also oneness with God. John 17:21 utters Jesus’ words in prayer for us, “That they all may be one, as You, Father, *are* in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me” (John 17:21, NKJV). It appears reasonable to believe that this can only happen through the medium of the Holy Spirit working through us. This oneness with God can only happen through His prompting and leading. As humans we are unable to promote, let alone sustain this type of communion with God.

Relational community in small groups is highly dependent on members loving each other in an uncommon way. This tends to happen best when there is trust and openness in the group's time together. As Gladden (2012) puts it, "When group members experience genuine community and unconditional love, they become more willing to be honest and vulnerable with one another" (p. 59). This is a solid point that underlines what relationship is all about. Sharing heart to heart is the crux of the matter. This ought to happen with God first, and flow naturally to all others.

The small group is the ideal microcosm in which to explore the simplicity and delicacy of the full God-human community in action. God is at the center of human community or there is no *human* community. Without God it is not a community of human beings being called into deeper fellowship with the *Theos* of the universe. The human small group can be an arena for nurturing healthy relationships in the presence of God" (Icenogle, 1994, p. 18).

God desires relationship with his creation. He wants to be intimate with human beings and a reflection of this intimacy is seen in Christian community with each other. The togetherness we share ought to be real and deeply interwoven in the cohesiveness of our constant connection with God. We know God is at work in our small groups as we authentically share the love that flows from Him through us, to impact others. This is how we experience genuine community.

### **Summary Thoughts**

#### **Summary Thoughts Related to Old Testament Roots**

Small groups originate with God. He (plural) is a small group! In being, purpose, mission, creation, and action God expressed Himself as small group. His desire to commune with His created beings is overwhelming. He cannot exist outside of community. Hence His insatiable desire to restore the communion lost by our fore parents.

He wants us to mimic this small group concept that exists in Him among each other. His entire plan was to show the nations of the world what it is like to enjoy genuine community. He desired to use families as small groups to accomplish this purpose. This is still His expectation within the human family.

According to Icenogle (1994, p. 23) the small group is the *base community* in which men and women can meet God and one another to be, to plan, and to act for the careful nurturing of relationships with created things. This small group is not only a *being* group for the nurture of persons but an *acting* group for the benefit of creation.

The Old Testament was not explicit with its categorization and designation of small groups, or even house groups. However, there was much gleaned as the family structures in Old Testament times were examined. There were many parallels made with modern day small groups. As the positive outcomes of small groups were immersed in the life and culture of the Old Testament there were undeniable similarities that were mentioned above. The effects of maladjustment experienced in Old Testament families, were also revealed, including earth's first couple.

In this section I sought to provide a basic outline of some of the small group impressions that I garnered related to Old Testament life and culture. It was challenging yet rewarding to uncover these nuggets related to small groups in Old Testament.

Living in God's blessings and possessing this spirit of communion in our lives, families, and significant life groups really describes the essence of a godly life. It is a worthy goal to pursue this lifestyle everyday with His presence and power.

## Summary Thoughts Concerning New Testament Passages

Writing a theological basis for small group ministry must begin and end with God's activity in and through us. He is the One that created us and desires us to be in communion with Him. He also wants us to celebrate a deep-rooted community in Him and with each other.

God reveals to us numerous times in His word His yearning for genuine community with us, and fellow human beings. As I surveyed Acts 2:42–47; Gal 3:28; and 1 Cor 12:18–26; I found this to be particularly true. God wants a defined oneness that characterizes unmitigated love and concern for our brothers and sisters. This is a love that reaches beyond regard for material possessions. This is one way to indicate our love for Him. The relational symmetry in our small groups and churches should deem baseless any issues regarding fellowship, culture, gender, class, or status. We all belong to Jesus and these things ought not to divide us. Our oneness should supersede these petty issues that tend to divide us.

My personal journey with small group ministry continues, and I am glad for the fact that I am growing in Jesus through this style of ministry. I believe God is leading me to extend myself to others by becoming more genuine as I minister. Small groups present a marvelous opportunity for me to do so.

Like me, some of the great men of Christian history journeyed through small groups. Even though they surmounted formidable circumstances to implement and sustain small groups. God used their odysseys to show forth the force of small group ministry.

There is little doubt that the power of small groups is resident in a sound relationship with God, and our fellow humans. Once solidly connected to Him, a genuine love and deep concern for humankind is the result. I have felt God's power through small groups at work in my own life. I only want this to grow and blossom, as I humbly surrender to His leading every day.

## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE SUPPORTING AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS IN SMALL GROUP MINISTRY AMONG YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS

#### **Introduction**

To belong is fundamental to building genuine relationships. As humans we tend to connect with groups best when there is a sense of belonging attached. Myers (2003) shares his thoughts on belonging and relationship building, “Belonging happens when you identify with another entity-a person or organization, or perhaps a culture, or ethnic group” (p. 25). Once a bond like this develops there is usually a degree of ownership of the group or entity that the person identifies with.

Theoretical relationships are not the result of one’s identification. People want to feel like they interconnect naturally with those involved. “As people search for community, they are listening with their eyes, ears, and emotions. They are keenly aware of how we tell them they belong or don’t belong” (Myers, 2003, p. 26).

This review of literature brings together viewpoints from a number of authors on some models for developing authentic community in small group ministry; youth models for solidarity within a small communal context; the real force of small groups; and leadership’s contribution to building genuine community.

## **The Building Blocks of Genuine Relationships in a Small Group Context**

“The lack of access to community means that isolation rules.” It is important “to help people discover a rich sense of community” (Frazee, 2001, p. 30). Finding new structures and helping people make life more simplistic while adding meaning, depth, purpose, and community is crucial to the survival of the Christian (2001).

Let us now explore several models that aid in building genuine relationships in a small group setting:

Icenogle (1994) outlines his views of how building relationships in a small group context should develop. There are five levels that are a part of this model.

1. Cliché Conversation-This mode of conversation involves very little self-disclosure with no intentional communication happening. Expect conversation that avoids engagement. There is no meaningful depth of thought exchanged at this level.
2. Reporting the Facts. This involves minimal sharing of ourselves. Raw data is expressed. At this level only a surface revelation of one’s self is submitted. Only a meandering of truthful words with no heartfelt expressions is expressed.
3. Sharing my Ideas and Opinions. This is when more personal expressions of one’s thoughts are communicated. More risk taking is done at this communication level. For when ideas and opinions are shared, they can be opposed. A person would have to have a sense of connectivity to that group to ensure that they can recover from such opposition.
4. Sharing my Feelings, Values, and Emotions. These words represent more of the individual’s personal self. They are trying to see if it is safe to talk to this group of

people. It is when you would get a real glimpse of who the person is on the inside. The real essence of the person's value system, attitude, and emotions are starting to show at this point. There is obviously a level of comfort to begin such expressions.

5. Confessional Sharing. This is the apex of communication that comes from a person. The feelings and thoughts shared here may never be shared with others. Conversation shared at this level happens only in safe a relationship. People typically open themselves at this point when there is a person listening that is compassionate, understanding, and forgiving.

Icenogle (1994) makes it clear that most communication does not happen at the level of Confessional Sharing. Level 4 is the place people normally get to in a small group and no further, unless within the group there is a friendship that has the depth of meaning that is not typical.

Eastman (2004, sec. 2) posits his model on building relationships within a small group context. His perspective is presented with 5 Cs: connect, cultivate, champion, coach, and celebrate.

1. Connect the Group with One Another - This starts out with relational identity. As the group comes together there is a strong focus on activities to build and atmosphere that encourages friendship within the group.
2. Cultivate the group's spiritual journey - Getting the group into God's Word is very important, because this is how it grows deeper. A group seriously into bible study ordinarily encourages others in their journeys. All study material should be

prayerfully and carefully chosen to build in-depth relationships with God and the group.

3. Champion the Group's Gifts - Helping people discover their unique God-given gifts would normally assist in the building of solid relationships. Celebrating and cheering on each other gives the feeling that their gifts are welcomed and appreciated.
4. Coach Each Other to Shepherd One Another - Not all of us are called to be leaders and teachers. Just about all of us can look out for each other. Participating in caring for group members and sharing with them is a way to support building relationships. Activities that allow for accountability in caring for each other ought to be pursued.
5. Celebrate the Lives of the Group Together - The big idea here is to gather people, and celebrate life. Do not miss birthdays, anniversaries, or life-changing events. In celebrating life together it adds a communal aspect to the life of the group. Even though it seems trivial and simplistic, people feel appreciated and cared for when the special events in their lives are remembered and celebrated.

Both of these authors bring into view some positive points for building relationships in a small group environment. It is easy to gather that they differ on the way to deepen the relational experience. Icenogle is very methodical with his progression through the stages of building relationships. It seems as if his thoughts are well thought out in a step-by-step format. He gives the impression that one level leads logically to the other. Eastman on the other hand seems to be more earthy and emotional in his approach

to building relationships in a small group. He sets out his arguments well, with personal growth, and celebration of life being his theme for establishing relationships.

Comiskey (2007, para. 4) presents us with another relationship forming model to take a look at he hopes these would make the point about developing solid group relationships and work, he focuses on:

1. Regularity. If the group only meets occasionally, it's very difficult for bonding to take place and sincere relationships to develop within the group. It's very hard for life change to take place with irregularity. Weekly meetings are the norm in holistic small groups (although natural breaks, for example, holidays, sickness, are normal as well).
2. Smallness. If the group is too large, members usually find it difficult to share deep needs and struggles. Somewhere between three to fifteen adults is the best size for holistic small groups. At that size, everyone can share and participate.
3. Penetration. The early church was a home-based movement. The theme of penetration is to take the church to the people outside of the building into homes. While the home is the best place, some groups meet on college campuses, restaurants or elsewhere in the marketplace.
4. Essential components of holistic groups. The key components of evangelism, community, discipleship and multiplication should be present in all holistic small groups. That is, these components should be the objective or goal for the group. If the group only focuses on evangelism, community will suffer. If the group focuses solely on community, the members will not have the chance to exercise their outreach muscles. If the group never multiplies, it's robbing someone the

growth opportunity of facilitation. The group cannot multiply unless members are disciplined and prepared to be future leaders.

Comiskey argues for a balance to the group life if there is going to be any significant growth. This balance he insists must be between community and evangelism. Obviously he is advocating small groups from the standpoint of relationship building and evangelism.

Frazee (2001) is a ways away from Comiskey in actual principle, but their gist is somewhat similar; with their main focus being to combine relationship building and evangelism as a framework for small group ministry. He advances the following:

1. Authority - Community with a common purpose has a clear understanding of and respect for authority. The commonality of the group's reason for being is the thing that holds it together. Members are held accountable for their behavior positive or negative. This involves disclosure of one's self to the point that a willingness exist to put out to the group personal struggles and have the group challenge choices, and hold them accountable to an objective standard.
2. Common Creed – This represents a shared understanding of beliefs and practices that guide a community. Some traditions need to be reevaluated and done away with. However all groups that have true community have them as a part of building life together. Building new traditions that impart the group's purpose, values, and thinking are tools that can be used to develop group life.
3. Standards - As the name suggests it touches on the guidelines that define what is expected of the people of the group or community. They outline what is

considered normal behavior for the group. Every group that is properly organized has a code of conduct that they follow within the group.

4. Common Mission - Any true community will have a clearly interpreted mission that brings the individuals of the group together. This is what knits them together as a cohesive family. It is a mission that could be to involve others in the group, a mission that calls others to be a part of the group's life and accept its code of ethics.

Looking at Comiskey and Frazee there is a stark difference in the words they use, but there is a common focus on evangelism that exists in their principles. This is perhaps the only point that they line up on directly. Both men believe mission is crucial to the group bonding. As the group does mission it will grow larger.

Hall (2005, para. 1) also believes both evangelism and community could coexist. He writes, "The purpose of a group is to carry out the Great Commission by building relationships with people who do not know Christ and inviting them into relationship with God and the Christian community."

Comiskey is clearer than Frazee, on how the group should redistribute personnel into a new group. Comiskey would strike one as being a little more balanced than Frazee in his approach to building relationships within small groups.

Miller, Peppers, and Myers (2008) joins this study by granting us a view of their model. They present five stages to relational group life:

1. Gathering - This is the stage where the purpose of the group is being defined. People are still checking things out. Those present at this stage are determining whether they want to be apart of the group. The major task of

the gathering stage is to build a level of trust. If this does not happen relationships are bound to remain surface and the group will eventually fizzle out.

2. Negotiating - At this stage in the group's life there is a question being asked; So who's in charge? And how do I fit in? Conflict usually arises at this time even quarreling happens. Those present are just testing each other. It is not always negative at this point. People commonly try to align themselves with the rest of the group as they try to figure out what is acceptable behavior and what is not. The major task of this stage is risk. People need to know that their opinions are validated and respected if not agreed with.
3. Momentum - This is the stage that everyone in the group wants to be at. Everyone understands the purpose, and objectives of the group. Friendships have evolved and are maturing. Members of the group do not have to worry about trying to impress others with thoughts, words, dress, and such the like. Roles are understood, goals are clearly defined, and a clear path is mapped out. The group is operating very well! The major task of this stage is belonging. Once the group members bond and have a sense of belonging genuine community is highly likely to be the result.
4. Serving - This aspect of group life includes making a difference. Having a mission to accomplish outside of the group is important to building relationships. It shows a selfless aspect to the group's experience and maturity. The major task of this stage is contributing. With the group

members giving their service to others it would far outstrip their numbers in their effect.

5. Closure - This signals that it is time to move on. Some refer to this stage as transformation. This may for some signal goodbyes, and for others it is seen as a new beginning. There are others who could start new groups, those affected by the group could move into new areas of ministry. This is not the death of a group; rather it represents the fruit of the group. The major task of this stage is celebrating. Getting feedback and encouraging dialogue is important. The absence of this could lead to awkwardness in the way the group is dissolved. Encouraging closure to celebrate the transformation of lives is apt to give a positive feeling to all.

Tuckman and Jensen (1977) open up their thoughts for us on setting up solid relationships in a small group locale. They proffer five points for consideration:

1. Orientation - Forming - Is normally characterized by fears, anxieties, and fairly strong positive expectations. Guardedness and curiosity fittingly describes the general mood of the group at this stage.
2. Catharsis - Storming - Initial resistance will take place between members of the group. The honeymoon is over. The members of the group know enough about each other now to find something they dislike. This might be termed as growing pains. Every small group at some time experience this. How it is handled usually determines how well your group bonds afterwards.
3. Focus, Action, Testing - Norming - This stage is characterized by a respect for others despite differences of opinion. When the group has normed natural

tendencies of members of the group are overlooked and even humored.

Conflict no longer can dissuade group members, or worse yet break the group apart. This is like a stage of maturity that the group enjoys coming out of conflict.

4. Purposive - Performing - The group life moves from great to incredible. At this juncture it is about extending God's love to others who do not know it yet. It gives the group a sense of purpose beyond themselves. The group is at its peak experience. There is a level of comfort within the group. The friendships are far deeper than before, and genuine community has happened in the group's life.
5. Closure - Adjourning - This refers to the stage that signals the dissolution of the group. Strong interpersonal feelings and friendships have developed during the time together. It takes skill to conclude a group and still have pleasant thoughts about what took place over the weeks and months that the group was together. It is important that this happens and present opportunities for members of the group to offer a response to the time spent together.

Miller, Peppers, and Myers, along with Tuckman and Jensen seem to use similar language to explain just about all of their points. The main difference is choice of words to define each stage. These writers agree that genuine relationships in small groups come about by a mixture of smooth and rocky situations; handled properly to bring about cohesion. All of their stages wrap into one, the group coming together, enduring challenges together, growing together, working together, and agreeing together to leave transformed.

Surveying all these viewpoints makes it plain that relationship building in a small group circle takes effort. To build genuine community is key to the survival of the groups. It takes spending quality time together to establish relationships. Christian community is indeed powerful, but to experience the “Christ among us” and the Christ who dwells within, others, we must spend time together as true friends (Neighbor, 2004)!

As I looked these models that have been presented they seem to have common ground. They all purport relationship building, accountability, spiritual disciplines, and communion with God. I feel these models offer some patterns for small group development that if followed can bring about transformation in the lives of young people. The commonness young people share is celebrated in small groups. Many of them have said from time to time in my experience that they came to the group meetings for community. They were bold enough to say that they came for the gathering of their friends more than for bible study. Young people love getting together. If not in a small group, they will still find ways to come together. I think it is better to follow some of these models, and have them gather around positive Christian activities.

Many of the aforementioned authors have different approaches. They all present their information with varying levels of intensity. The views indicated above look as though they come from people who are passionate about building deep steadfast relationships through small groups. Trent, Cox, and Tooker observe,

One of the best places to experience intimacy is in a small group. Intimate means belonging to or characterizing one’s deepest nature. While it is not practical to believe you will have a deep intimate relationship with everyone in your small group, intimacy with others in your group should be a goal. Make closer relationships in your small group a matter of prayer, and find ways to connect relationally to others in the group. This helps the group develop a network of meaningful relationships that transforms the group into a loving exciting fellowship of believers. (2005, p. 10)

It is this kind of relational attachment that we need to make small groups be all that they could be under God's power. Relationships that grow and begin maturation within a small group could move beyond the specified time, and have a lifetime impression on those involved. If this is to happen "the group experience has to be relevant and sufficiently beneficial so that it's worth an ongoing investment" (Boren, Keefer, & Wilger, 2006, p. 88).

Done the right way small group ministry makes effectual Christian relationships that are profound. As a group grows it should naturally address the more weighty matters of the members' lives. A group that is developing sound Christian ties address issues like, fears, personality concerns, feelings, and troublesome sin areas. Any small group not doing this is only scratching the surface of real human interaction (Arnold, 1998).

Establishing relationships in small groups presents significant challenges, but no small amount of joy wells up in the hearts of the members when they overcome. When the group is fused together, and Christ-like relational intimacy between members of the group happens; an exhilarating feeling of joy customarily results.

### **A Brief Exploration of Community Building in Youth Small Groups**

Young people in this generation are longing for deep relationships. They want to know God. This goes beyond the depth of knowledge gained from listening to a sermon. They desire practical, relational, connections that would lead them to a growing relationship with Christ. Walshe (2009, p. 182) openly shares about youth needs, "They want to know God at a deep level. They are open to spirituality; many of them are theistic. At an undiscovered level they sense that, bidden or unbidden, God is present, and they want to become aware of Him."

How true, I submit based on my time working with young people, and older ones, young people are more inclined to give their hearts to Jesus. They are still very impressionable, and often times can be shaped. There is something of a draw to them wanting to commit to Christ. The problem often is that there is not much to aid them in keeping connected. I believe small groups well organized, and well placed can bring about a significant challenge to this problem.

Along with searching for Jesus, young people want to connect with existing friends, and develop new ones. Cowdell, (2004) seem to think that this urge many young persons have is a rediscovering of the values of friendship that have been lost in time. They want to have authentic relationships generally seen by them as a valued commodity (Jones, 2000). Syzmack agrees by stating,

One of the most important things for a student is their desire to belong. They don't just want to be another face in the crowd; they can do that just by walking down hallways of their high school each day. Students want to be known and cared for. (2010, para. 2)

Long (1993) however scolds those who scant the relational dimension of small group ministry for youth giving way to a heady bible study. This kind of action emphasizes mind over heart. If youth are going to be deeply influenced in a Christian community, both head and heart need to be ministered to.

I like Cowdell, Jones, and Long's comments. They strike at the heart of real solid small group ministry. I liken proper small group ministry to a healthy bird. There must be two wings properly positioned, and intact to fly. The same is true for small groups. There must be first the connection with God that all Christian small groups champion, then there has to be an interpersonal dimension that has to have equal import.

The truth is, the more spiritually mature you grow, the more you will find your heart drawn to people. You want to reach out to people, especially those neglected

by society or far from God. Many [young] people lack great friends for the simple reason that they have never made pursuing community a high priority. (Ortberg, 2006, para. 5)

With this emphasis, I feel youth should be fully appended to those in their group. When the group is bonded together there is usually an uncommon commonality that exists. I think there is a growing interpersonal disconnection that is taking place with the onset of technology, for example: social media. Lots of young people are connected to these, and person-to-person contact is often minimized. I am not advocating that these media of connection ought not to have their roles in the connectivity of young people. I do believe that if this relation is tilted too far in the technological world, we will continue to have challenges bringing bodies together for the purpose of Christian bonding. That is why I believe that in every group members ought to feel and live like family. When this happens, Frazee (2004) states, people in your group would know each other and interact in frequent and meaningful ways.

Dean, (2004, p. 186) views differ from all thus far. She appears to outright belittle the impact of small groups on the lives of youth. She said,

Small groups are relatively impotent in the practice of passion. Instead of providing a context where young people wrestle with faith and with one another, small groups like youth groups and churches as a whole tend to operate under a veneer niceness that makes the kind of honesty to which Christians are called decidedly unwelcome.

Grassel (2002, p. 92) counters this conviction by Dean.

Discipleship works best when an intimate group of students can share, explore, and process their faith. It has to be a 'safe place' where the leader and kids experience real Christian community. The value of these kinds of experiences cannot be overemphasized. The real power of the Christian faith is the experience of truth in the midst of authentic relationships lived out incarnationally.

The evidence presented in this work heavily supports Grassel. Considering what

is presented within this project, small group ministry executed the proper way is not at all impotent and dishonest. Perhaps, Dean had some personal experience that did not go well for her, or she may be in a church environment that has some issues with young adult small groups, hence her comments.

I strongly argue contrary to Dean. This is based upon my own experience with young adult small groups. I see at each meeting a genuine communal living within these groups. Young adults come with a passion for togetherness. Real Christian loving relationships full of support for one another, and compassion have been the results I took away from these group meetings. Youth small group ministry has the making of an intimate experience where young people can share openly and honestly about their personal feelings, in a guarded place.

I side with Grassel. All that I have researched, and experienced has led me to do no other. He has made solid points concerning faith development within real community building activities, and mutual bonding between leader and group members. I literally lived this in the small groups that I have been fortunate to connect with. Undoubtedly, I endorse the coming together of like minds that have similar goals for bonding with God and each other.

Youth are exposed to much of their lives under the influence of their friends. The effects of these alliances are not always negative. For “Christianity can be offered through friends and relationships” (“General Conference,” 2005, p. 92). Friends in a small group can offer this. These groups encourage “relationships with adults and peers who call them into more eagerness and faithfulness” (DeVries, 2004, p. 92) as they follow Jesus Christ.

## **Models for Building Genuine Friendships and Community in Youth Small Groups**

Neighbor (1990) asserts interpersonal commitments are the essence of community building. Sharing life together produces such community. There are many different models to assist in the progress toward community. Let us take a look at some of these patterns for forming authentic community among youth.

Walshe (2009, p. 183) calls his model the God Connection Small Group Model. There are four points to review:

1. The group meets for 10 weeks.
2. The group is closed to (a) build trust (b) aid rapid spiritual and interpersonal growth, (c) allow for authentic relationships and community, and (d) bolster the transformation of hearts.
3. The group uses a covenant-building contract to build trust, authenticity, community and spirituality.

With a model like this it is likely to have the level of trust that youths would gravitate towards. Accountability comes into play with the involvement contract. This also suggests that the group is legitimate and authentic.

Frazee (2004) furnishes us with his youth model for small group ministry. His is a seven-step process for building community:

1. Create a one-another community. This is not just for a large church meeting, where people try to create smaller communities within a mass group. This also needs to happen in exclusive settings, like small groups. When someone voices a response, affirm him or her, it's like a Ping-Pong game: Just get it started and keep the ball in play.

2. Open your heart. Being authentic lets your group know no one in the group have it all together. When we communicate openness that makes it safer for everybody else to be open as well.
3. Naturally group members together for deeper discussion. It's important that every meeting permits discussion time. When the group gets larger than 7, it's more difficult for everyone to share. So discussion should be in groups of 3-4 people. The more airtime an individual has leads to greater life application; and that's when you'll see lives transformed.
4. Challenges, questions, or even conflict are welcomed. The group that does not have sparks actually does not have as much life. Healthy groups have conflict.
5. Encourage shared ownership. When this happens, the group moves from being the leader's group to "their" group. Facilitation of the group changes at least by the 2nd or 3rd week. The group calendar records where the group will meet, who will host, who will lead worship, and who will bring refreshments. This will develop ownership on a variety of levels.
6. Cultivate a group of friends. This model ensured members would always connect with one another, even if they missed a meeting at the temple. Getting pizza night going, games nights, and socials, are all examples of cultivating a group of friends.
7. Take time to do life together. Do not miss anniversaries, parties, baby showers, job promotions, and even house closings. Celebrate one another's lives.

This model provides the framework for community, and depth of relationship to exist. It looks to be just as functional as Walshe's model. One would probably argue for more openness from Walshe. The two of these models offer useful tools to build bona fide relationships in youth small groups.

Comiskey puts his youth model forward for us to take a look at it. He confidently writes,

The postmodern generation (or whatever other label you want to give it is over-loaded with information. They long for relationships. Youth cells provide environment for youth to be transformed, to grow in a secure family environment, to develop real relationships. (2007, para. 2)

Comiskey's structure for supporting genuine togetherness youth small groups is interesting. It includes:

1. Get together activities - This is that time when the group come together specifically for group building activities. Bonding through play is the objective of this segment. People more commonly bond through play than through bible study. "The webs of relationship embodied in the small group family offer exciting opportunities for cell-based ministry" (Comiskey, 1997, p. 91).
2. Personal Sharing - Reflection is positive for youth. There must be time for them to look at their lives, and share with each other the journey they are on with God.
3. Vision Sharing - This ensures that communication flows throughout the group. Ideas may come from the youth or given by leadership. Vision sharing keeps the group life fresh, always evolving.
4. Worship - The essence of what happens in a small group is worship. Every aspect of the group's life is worship. God is the object of our praises. All ought to keep this focus at group meetings.

5. Discussion - This relates to the aspect of group life where expressions concerning biblical data are made. Practical life application questions related to the biblical story are necessary for youth to keep sorting through their issues.
6. Prayer Time - Quality time is to be spent in prayer. Variation though, is crucial to youth enjoying their corporate prayer life. Prayer for and with the group typically gives a sense of authenticity in the group life. When prayer is offered people generally develop a sense of calmness.

Teens are absorbed with their problems, which they experience as dramatic and vast. Simply engaging God and seeking God's guidance can have a spiritually ordering effect, and it can also give them confidence that God walks with them through their issues. (Feldmeier, 2007, p. 121)

Alger (2010, para. 1) commends to us his model for genuine small group community. He submits:

1. A time of worship - According to Alger, the spiritual focus for the group is important in order for it to grow relationships. Genuine worship ascribed to God and "real" fellowship with fellow members should cause a depth of community.
2. Testimony at the Meeting - Whether it is at the beginning, end, or during the meeting special opportunities for young people to express what is going on in their lives is crucial.
3. Organize Around Common Interests - Young people who connect in a small group around stuff they all like (games, traveling, etc.) will more than likely bond.
4. Keep the Group Fun and Interesting - Young people want to have fun. This must be a staple of the life of the small group. Planning fun activities is a way to get them together and keep them together.

Bunch (2004) advances her approach to youth groups with the following:

1. Life: Start-up - Everybody is fresh and considering all of the possibilities of the group's life together
2. Shake-up - This touches on the presence of conflict and challenges and commitment in and to the group.
3. Live-it-up - This points out the action stage once the group has gelled. Activities happen and plans are executed with structured regularity.
4. Wrap-up - The group comes to a point of dissolution and closure is gained.

Comiskey and Alger are almost identical in their approach; while bunch is slightly different. The former two see fun activities, prayer, personal expression, and worship as being foundational to their model for engendering community among youth. Bunch uses cute wording, however, she seems more traditional in her approach to doing youth small groups. Examining all these thoughts one could conclude that they are insightful. And add quality depth to the field of knowledge in small group ministry.

I delved into small group ministry; influenced by reading, reflection, and observation, I have put together my personal model of small group ministry to add to those cited here.

1. Befriending (1-2 weeks) This happens at the initial stages of the group life. The group members are searching for people that they could get to know as friends. Small talk would happen here. The conversation will usually be very general, and few extended conversations will happen. The young adults are just trying to see who they can really connect with, and who would befriend them.
2. Blending (3-4 weeks) Young people start to warm up to each other. There is a connection deeper than the weather, what is your favorite television show? There

is an inclination to open up a little more and share in the group. Members of the group start to refer to the group as “my” or “our” group. They begin to blend in and show ownership.

3. Bending (5-7 weeks) Discipleship and shaping begins to happen here. You may notice that the principles that you share in the group meetings, the values you encourage, the lessons shared, start to be communicated and lived in a more defined way. You are seeing the effects of molding of the mind and lifestyle in the bending stage.
4. Bonding (6-9 weeks) By this time the group is usually solidly connected. Sharing life together is happening. Open communication happens and everyone is comfortable with the personalities present. There is an understanding of the roles and functions of all group members. Open communication happens between all in the group and there is a great deal of transparency that results. The group members usually have a trust for each other that go beyond the norm, and confidentiality is at a premium (even when something wrong is done it is confidential). Notice this could happen right alongside the bending stage; or it is possible for it to overlap with it.
5. Bleeding (7-9 weeks) Usually together with the bonding the bleeding happens. These weeks could overlap. With some groups this happens faster than others. By bleeding I am referring to the conflict that will arise in the small group life. Conflict is inevitable in life. It is going to happen, and when you have young people feeling comfortable around each other sharing their feelings openly; some issues will surface and some bleeding will take place (sometimes literally). This

obviously must be handled properly. The leader needs to be versed in conflict resolution skills, and exhibit patience when dealing with interpersonal conflict.

6. Mending (9-10 weeks) After the challenging experience of dealing with bleeding then comes the mending. This is when the cuts begin to heal. This is usually a process. Sometimes shorter for some groups and longer for others. With youth and young adult groups you will know when the mending is complete. There will be a peace in the group that resembles the bonding stage. The leader must handle this with care to avoid a relapse of the bleeding. Stay close to those directly involved and guide them through the process.
7. Sending (9-10 weeks) This is a process by which the group ends the cycle. It usually takes a couple of weeks to wind things up and transition the group into a new phase---leaving. After going through so much there normally is some difficulty attached to these moments. This is a time when there is usually a mixture of emotions, sadness, fulfillment, joy, contentment, etc. The sending is necessary to ensure that young people have an opportunity to exhibit the growth gained without the direct aid of an entire group.

I observed these seven points as I examined the youth small group that I attended during the 10-week process. My observations were rolled into these stages to add to this conversation about young people's small group models. This model squarely sums up the way I noticed the group come together during our time of involvement. I think these stages presented here may offer striking similarities to what some other groups may experience during their meetings.

### **Community: The Power of Small Group Life**

Youth small groups should connect. These groups should be a cohesive force for personal growth. The good groups customarily “bring people together on a personal and heart-based level. Connection is the basis of any good work in a group. For a few minutes every week or so, members receive the experience of being attached, loved, and in a relationship with like minded people.” (Cloud & Townsend, 2003, p. 71) Another goal for small group discipleship is to foster a passion in students to learn more about God and his Word. It is important to nurture transformational growth in their spiritual journeys (Polich & Scandlyn, 2005). One ought to seek spiritual guidance everyday, and each meeting as a group. “Don’t depend on past experience. God wants you to seek him” (Todd & Boren, 2005, p. 65) afresh at each meeting encounter.

Lucado (2009) corroborates what many of the sources in this writing have divulged. He shares that the group should have as its chief purpose to grow community and intimacy with one another. Kirk agrees with Lucado and comments:

A Christian Community is a community because it is unified by or common life in Christ....Small groups on college campuses, and in churches are meeting in dorms, or homes and becoming small palaces for the king of the universe as they are united by a common call to follow Christ. (2009, p. 40)

This type of community depth as was mentioned earlier, is not easy to come by; one has to be committed to the opening of self to Christ and to those in the group. Community will demand of all members to engender trust, confidentiality, honesty, care, risk, and commitment to meetings. (Fields & Eastman, 2006) Accomplishing all of these goals is good, but commitment to making disciples for God is also critical. (Donahue, & Willow Creek Community Church, 2009) Community ought to lead us past information

to transformation. Community life in small groups should lead us to living a life differently (Lucado, 2006).

Most relationships really never get past the surface. A small group communal environment could be the answer to turning surface relationships into genuine friendships (Fields & Eastman, 2003). Burns (2010) supports this view by recording, “Students have a need to feel a sense of belonging more than they have a need to be identified in a large youth group. I believe the best youth ministries all have a solid small group strategy.” These are powerful words to engender the spirit of community.

Sharing life with the group makes it more interesting and fulfilling. Sometimes the best relational momentum one can get is the momentum of life together. (Eastman, 2004) We need each other for this powerful ministry to survive. The longevity of this kind of communal existence “will restructure the relationships between people and help them experience and interact with each other in a fundamentally new way (Hirsch, 2008).

Focus must be on relational characteristics for group bonding to be achieved. (Lentz, 2005) He says in another place, “Relationships plus vision plus equipping can transform existing relationships into disciple-making communities” (2009, p. 1). It seems as if this is a natural part of connecting lives. “Community or fellowship is an essential part of any cell group. God uses community to shape followers of Jesus” (Comiskey, 2009, para. 1).

Jesus himself used communal living to make the strongest argument for small group ministry. Comiskey’s (2009, para. 2) offering makes this explicit, His disciples, “lived, walked, and ate with Jesus for three full years. Jesus taught them through parables and real-life object lessons—not primarily in the large group setting.” Jesus’ relationship

with them was transparent. “Open sharing and transparency work well to cement relationships” (2000, para. 23) .

The more transparent your relationships are in the group the stronger the group should be. Popenoe (2010, para. 3) reports, “In creative interchange, we engage our whole selves with expressing mind-and-heart-pictures that expose our vulnerabilities and aspirations while gaining insights from the same sort of visionary imaginings of others.”

### **Small Group Leadership’s Influence on Community**

Zigarelli (2006, p. 74) gives us his views on leading and influencing genuine community. He explains:

Some are more gifted at leadership than others, for sure, but we worship a God who calls every one of us to influence the people around us—to lead them to a fuller understanding of who God is, of what He’s done for us, and how He wants us to live our lives.

We must come to the realization that small group ministry leadership is not about the leader it is about operating in God’s strength to facilitate the group. “It is recognizing, acknowledging, and appreciating the value God has placed in them and giving them an opportunity to let that value blossom” (Zempel, 2010, p. 1).

Operating in joy and encouraging accountability in-group life is important to building cohesion in the groups as well. The leader is to ensure that he or she is prepared for each meeting; while modeling what is expected from the group.

It is important that care is given by the leader to create a safe environment for sharing. Listening is more expedient for the person in charge than speaking, and when speaking, sticking to the point helps the group stay focused (Zigarelli, 2006). “The cell-group model has built-in intimacy because the kids there are already acquainted with each other and care about each other. It’s student-led, which commands greater

commitment among members” (Stump, 2010, para. 9). The leader need to have a direct hand in providing, “a place where people connect to one another as fellow Christians, and develop a sense of community and family” (Boren, 2006, para. 5).

Eqli, lets us in on what he calls the leader’s most important job. He submits,

The leaders who have a strong relationship with God have groups that were healthier and faster growing. These groups experience a deeper level of care between members, have a clearer sense of mission beyond their group, and produce more leaders and new groups. (2010, p. 1)

Highly spiritual small group leaders tend to “rub off” on their group. There is an expectation of something positive happening at every meeting. These types of leaders always “expect God to lead them to whomever he wants you to encourage or challenge in a special way” (Life Together, 2003, p. 1).

The leader should be responsible for ensuring that small groups have an atmosphere where bonding can take place unhindered. A ministry called Life Together makes this point:

It's the leader's job to establish the biblical purpose of "fellowship" within the first few weeks of your group's existence. As the small group leader, you need to pray for and "love on" each member of the group. That means making sure people feel connected with other members in the group. (2003, p. 1)

Neighbor (2004, p. 1) concurs with this view he says, “Holistic small groups can only work when relationships between group members are considered number one.”

Mawdesley (2004, p. 1) makes a poignant observation that is in harmony with Neighbor.

He says,

We emphasize the importance of community and relationships, yet many of us are strung relationally thin and would have to say, "Do as I say, not as I do." The problem with this is that leaders are models; we show, through our actions, what true community is. Our everyday lives show the picture of what we believe to be truly important. If we're not doing it, the majority won't do it either.

It seems logical to believe that the leader has a significant role to play in leading small groups. These authors in this section have given much to consider as it relates to the role of the small group leader. Undoubtedly, this is an awesome experience to undertake. For “intentional discipleship through small group ministry is one way to aid believers and nonbelievers to experience God in their lives and support them in their journey of becoming the disciples of Christ” (Pak, 2009, summary, para. 1).

### **Conclusion/Summary**

Pondering the information presented in this writing, small group ministry is one that is essential for building community between members of the group and church. “A church grows up when small groups are active and function appropriately; small groups are the foundational units and the starting points to the essence of the church, the gathering of God's people” (Kim, 2007, summary, para. 1). This statement provides a certain depth for our minds. Small groups are foundational to church life. Whether organized or not we have them in every church, because the church is made up of families, and these are small groups.

Small groups have a way of pulling people together to offer genuine relationship, love, and care. Young people thrive in this environment. According to Earley (2008, para. 3) on relationships, “They don't go far without emotional fuel. However, when the tanks are full, relationships go well, and advice and instruction are easily received. When the tanks are low, relationships and development efforts sputter.” How fitting to describe relational depth in a small group surroundings. Youth thrive for relationships. A great way to give it to them is through small groups. As they join in fellowship, worship,

personal expression, games, travel, eating, Bible study, and prayer, community is pretty close to being unavoidable.

Leadership is key to genuine community being developed. As leaders model the essence of community in practical terms the group often follows. Spiritual leaders usually give care, unconditional love, money, Godly advice, practical biblical lessons, a model to follow after, and encouragement. In short the leader must be prepared to share life together with the group transparently. Considering all discussed in this script genuine community is a worthy goal for all small groups to go after. “After all, it is the Spirit of God who is the true teacher—the one who truly brings about transformation in the lives of your group” (May, 2008, p. 1). For real community cannot exist without Him!

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODOLOGY AND IMPLEMENTATION NARRATIVE FOR YOUNG ADULT SMALL GROUPS IN THE GREATER NEW YORK CONFERENCE

#### **Introduction**

Small group ministry is one that has been a part of my life from the earliest time I can remember. I was a part of a Sabbath school class (small group); all the levels of Pathfinders (small group); and these have impacted my life in powerful ways. I am so passionate about small groups because I have seen the way they helped me with growth and accountability in my relationship with God and fostering a genuine concern for those in my group, and people in general.

The discovery of small groups and the power they bring was like a breath of fresh air to me. This serendipity led me on a journey that connected me with small groups as a fundamental part of my life and ministry.

#### **My Fascination With Small Groups**

It was not until I was doing my graduate work in an institution of learning that I came into contact with small groups in any concentrated way. When the professor began sharing about small groups and their power I was really enthralled. I soaked it all up and got every bit of information that I could find about the subject. I read and read and the more I read the more excited I became.

I then returned and the conference that I work for launched small group ministry conference wide. I was concerned though that there was no mention about small group ministry for youth. Then Dr. Case asked us to look at areas of concentration for our projects that came out of a ministry challenge. One of the suggested topics was small group ministry for youth. I jumped on this one immediately. Knowing what I went through as a young person I thought I had to do something about this. As I sat in class during our first intensive session, Dr. Walshe gave a presentation, and the focus of it was small group ministry for young adults. I was positively impacted by this presentation, and it helped me hone my topic. As a result my interest in small groups for young people only grew stronger. As youth director for my conference I decided to do what I can to implement small group ministry. I met some challenges, but I am still determined to ensure that I set up small groups wherever I am.

The Greater New York Conference youth program was in dire need of youth small groups that would assist in creating genuine community among its youth. Therefore this methodology and descriptive section of the project is dedicated to focusing on the steps already taken, concerning the creation of a suitable small group model. The use of this framework is intended to affect a deeper sense of togetherness among the youth within the conference.

This chapter focuses on the methods and implementation strategies used to bring about the aforementioned desired results. This will be done by describing the process I utilized in putting the groups in motion, monitoring, and maintaining these youth small groups. Perspectives on the relational factors that made this action plan successful will also be presented.

**A Model for Authentic Small Group Ministry  
Among Youth of the Greater New York  
Conference Seminar Series  
to be Implemented**

In order to bring about a deeper awareness of the need for youth small group ministry within our context a seven part series was implemented to show the state of our conference's youth and the lack of cohesiveness within the territory among youth. It also focused on youth small groups as the intervention strategy that helped quell this concern. This series showed the benefits of in-depth, genuine community, as youth lived life together in a close knitted group. Most importantly these seminars showed that the main aim of these youth small groups were to bond young people together, and connect them with God in meaningful, powerful, and lasting ways.

**Leadership Selection and Training**

Following the seminars that sensitized the membership of these three churches to this serious challenge, there was solid intentionality in selecting leaders for these groups. The leaders were handpicked based on my interaction with the young people, and the interest shown from the seminar exit surveys. There were six leaders selected from the participants in the seminars. These were trained to lead the three groups. The groups came from each participating church in this study (one group per church). The leaders were placed in a small group that met simulating the experiences that their groups eventually enjoyed. It was a 6-week cycle in this pilot group that covered the following areas (two sessions each):

1. Understanding Life Changing Youth Small Groups
2. The Power and Benefits of Youth Small Groups

3. Community Building in Youth Small Groups
4. The Model Explained, Implemented, and Practiced
5. God, Community, and Youth Small Groups
6. Small Group Leadership's Influence on Building Community
7. How to Lead a Youth Small Group?
8. Creating the Right Youth Group Environment
9. Evaluating the Group's Life
10. Sustaining Small Group Life
11. Building Small Group Networks
12. When it is all done? What's Next? How to End the Cycle?

During these meetings their training was done experientially and actively. An exit session with each leader was conducted to gather information on the process, and present points of interest for improvement. This process was completed when they emerged as new leaders. A special graduation was held for them that punctuated their training. These leaders, in pairs then led each of these three groups. They all completed a 10-week cycle in their groups with their peers.

### **Preparation for the Meeting**

The meetings were conducted successfully; there was proper prep work done to see to it that the meetings went as smoothly as possible. Below is an explanation of what went into the preparation for these successful meetings.

### The Small Group Meeting

The small group meeting was designed to be youth friendly. The environment was relaxed and informal; yet there was some planning and structure in place to guide the flow of each meeting.

### The Place

The preparation of each meeting place was taken seriously. This was a very important part of the process. These meetings were held in homes of members of the churches. A properly lit, ventilated, and commodious environment met each participant at every meeting. A large meeting room that comfortably accommodated eight to ten persons was achieved. The room was arranged to accommodate the meeting plan for each night.

### The Leader

The leader was the person that facilitated the flow of every meeting. This individual ensured that there is intentionality to the meetings. They all did solid preparation. They knew the materials needed to make the meeting a success and furnished them. The leader was expected to have a focus, yet still be flexible to adapt to what was happening in the meeting. This person job was also to ensure that there is no threat to the environment of the meeting. The meetings were to always have an atmosphere where there was respect, openness, confidentiality, trust, and bonding. The leaders made sure to protect these aspects of the meeting. These leaders possessed a distinct savvy to ensure participation of all in the group without coercion. These general expectations of each of these leaders of the youth small group were satisfactorily met.

### The Host/Hostess

This person was responsible for the place where the meeting was held. There was an expectation that this person in conjunction with the leader of the group ensured that all necessary things regarding the physical set up of the meeting place was in place. The food, its arrangement and or preparation was cared for by the host/hostess. In short all the issues regarding the physical atmosphere of the meeting was the responsibility of the one making accommodations for the meeting.

### The Members

The members too had a responsibility to the group. Once they agreed to the contract they all assumed a deliberate connection to the group and its activities. They came to meetings in a timely manner according to their contract; participated in-group discussions openly and honestly; shared in service mission projects; and took part in social events, fellowship, and bonding activities.

### The Visitor

We had a few of these persons that came to the meetings on occasion and did not have the same level of connectivity to the group. After three weeks we did not allow visitors to come in. This was to protect the groups' bonding and confidentiality. A few visitors came in as guest presenters, and members also invited others that came and participated in our fellowship meetings. All the visitors that came offered the same level of respect for the group, its leaders, and functions.

### **A Description of the Program Model**

Group dynamics usually develop through interesting Bible study, worship, prayer, fellowship, sharing and opportunities to fulfill the mission given to the church. In this model ninety minutes was the time allotted for the meetings. These efficient group leaders were paying close attention to the environment of their meetings, and worked to ensure that there was a good deal of togetherness, and camaraderie in the groups. These manifested themselves through the following aspects displayed:

#### **Welcome**

The group leader gave the welcome to each member and guest that attended the meeting. He or She then invited God's presence by either praying or asking a member of the group to pray. (23 minutes)

#### **Transition Activities**

This was usually a series of games for members of the group to get to know new persons, or fellow members, this created a very informal and light atmosphere for all the meetings. These also promoted bonding and group cohesion as deep communion formed within the groups. This happened up front every meeting. (20–30 minutes)

#### **Review of Covenant and Goals**

Individuals that joined the groups by agreed to the covenant. This was kept in the member's notebook and the group leaders reviewed this every week. To vary the format from time to time the leaders assigned other members to explain the different points of the covenant. (2–3 minutes)

### Praise, Sharing, and Testimonies

The groups were like a family that met once every week, and every member was interested in the welfare of the family. Members, therefore, took time out to share joys, victories, sorrows and concerns. These were group related or personal concerns. (10-12 minutes)

### Prayer of Thanksgiving

After testimonies were given, the groups took time out to praise God for His blessings. Prayer was done either individually or in a conversational style. Whatever approach was taken care was exercised to include basic elements of confession, adoration, thanksgiving, intercession, petitions, and submission to God's will. (5-7 minutes)

### Study of the Bible

No individual or group of Christians can experience growth without the Holy Spirit and the solid study of the Bible. Regardless of the time of the other activities the time for Bible study was never sacrificed. An inductive, interactive, meditative, study of the Bible laden with participation sharing of the thoughts and ideas the Holy Spirit revealed to each one was done. All the points of each meeting lead to this MAIN POINT! (30-35 minutes)

### Closing Exercises

Closing remarks, prayer for two to three minutes, and refreshments made up the closing exercises. Refreshments were at every meeting and were fundamental to the meeting. It was not included in the 90 minutes because these were available from the time

group members arrive. Anyone was to feel free to take what he or she needed to until the time group members left. The snack bar was open to all until there was no more. There was no specific time suggested for fellowship. However, the leaders ensured that the entire program, for the most part fit into the ninety-minute slot.

### **Description of the Youth Small Group Cycle**

For some young people small group ministry serves as the only family they know. During this process I noticed a natural progression. The methods documented below, have some nuggets worth biting into. Some referred to these as the bonding process of the groups. Some chose to see it as the group cycle. Others said it was the step-by-step process in the groups' lives.

This process of bonding, to me, advanced in seven stages. These stages I describe here as unfolding over a 10-week period, which I consider to be the natural life cycle of a youth small group. These groups all moved along these on a different time schedule. There was no official timeline on the recognition of these stages in these small groups; even though I added in this description some suggested timelines. There is also no official length of time that a group should meet. This is at the discretion of the leadership. One of the groups mentioned in this study is still meeting weekly. However, I recommended to the groups at the beginning of this study a 10-week window. There are to be defined breaks in the group's experience. These stages of bonding I recognized in these youth small groups are: (a) befriending, (b) blending (c) bending, (d) bonding, (e), bleeding, (f) mending and (g) sending.

### Befriending (weeks 1-2)

This happened at the initial stages of the group life. The group members were searching for people that they could get to know as friends. Small talk happened here. The conversation was usually very general and few extended conversations happened. Youth were just trying to see whom they can be friends with and who would befriend them.

### Blending (weeks 3-4)

Young people started to warm up to each other. There was a connection deeper than a discussion about the weather, what is your favorite subject. There was an inclination to open up a little more and share in the group. They started referring to the group as “my” or “our” group. They began to blend in and show ownership.

### Bending (weeks 5-7)

Discipleship and shaping began to happen here. I noticed that the principles shared in the group meetings, the values encouraged, the lessons shared, was communicated and lived in a more defined way. I saw the effects of molding of the mind, and lifestyle in the bending stage.

### Bonding (weeks 6-9)

By this time the groups were solidly connected. Sharing life together was happening. Open communication happened and everyone was comfortable with the personalities present. There was an understanding of the roles and functions of all group members. Open communication happened between all in the groups and there was a great deal of transparency that resulted. The group members had a trust for each other that

went beyond the norm, and confidentiality was at a premium (even when something wrong was done it was CONFIDENTIAL). (Notice this could happen right alongside the bonding stage; or it is possible for it to overlap with it.)

#### Bleeding (weeks 7-9)

As youngsters became more comfortable with each other during the bonding stage, the bleeding stage occurred. The weeks for bleeding in some instances overlapped with the bonding. With some of the groups this happened faster than others. By bleeding I am referring to the conflict that arose in these small groups. Conflict is inevitable in life. It is going to happen, and with these young people who felt comfortable around each other, and shared their feelings so openly; some issues surfaced, and some bleeding literally took place (WOW!). This obviously was handled properly. The leaders were versed in conflict resolution skills, and exhibited patience when dealing with interpersonal conflict.

#### Mending (weeks 7-9)

After the challenging experience of dealing with bleeding then came the mending. This was when the cuts began to heal. This was usually a process. Sometimes it was shorter for some groups and longer for others. With these youth and young adult groups it was quite evident when the mending was complete. There was a peace in the groups that resembled the bonding stage. The leaders handled these with care to avoid a relapse of the bleeding. They stayed close to those directly involved and guided them through the process.

### Sending (weeks 9-10)

This was the process by which the group ended the cycle. It took a couple of weeks to wind things down and transition the groups into a new phase---leaving. After going through so much there was some difficulty attached to these moments. It was quite clear in all the groups that a mixture of emotions was happening, sadness, fulfillment, joy, contentment, etc. The sending was to ensure that young people have an opportunity to exhibit the growth gained without the direct aid of an entire group.

### **Monitoring of the Youth Small Group**

It was the leader's responsibility to ensure that the groups that are meeting had all the necessary tools to function. If there was a lack the leader saw to it that it was supplied. To properly monitor the group the leaders ensured that during the 10-week cycle they paid attention to the group members during, and after each meeting. There was periodic usage of surveys (formal and informal) during the meetings to gauge the successes of the groups according to their goals for development of genuine community.

Leadership's informal one-to-one interaction with the group members during the cycle concerning the development of group bonding assisted in monitoring the community building process. Formal interviews conducted with the group members at the end of the cycle to ascertain their in-depth thoughts and feelings about their experiences were very important. These were great in determining whether or not genuine community was established and maintained. Judging relational factors of real community can be challenging without the voices of the persons involved. These interviews were used to make this possible.

### **Youth Small Group Network**

The groups that launched their activities simultaneously formed a matrix of groups that shared thoughts, activities, ideas, and occasionally engaged with other groups on service projects. These networking groups assisted in building even greater camaraderie among these youth, while cultivating in them a sense of relational oneness. Even though the networking process did not allow for frequent cross-fertilization, it still delivered the opportunity for the groups to see that there were others that shared the same passion for genuine community.

Once these groups completed these activities together over the 10-week period of time surveys and interviews were conducted to determine how effective the larger group settings were in the overall process of building genuine community. These results were captured and reported as a part of this study.

### **Conclusion**

As I described the methods and implementation strategies to determine the effects and benefits of genuine community among the young of the Greater New York Conference, I was truly blessed. I believe this plan of action, and my observations as a result of putting into effect these ideas yielded great results. I desire nothing more from this study than to report its effectiveness in the lives of young people not just for the immediate future; rather the distant future.

## CHAPTER 5

### RESULTS FROM IMPLEMENTING YOUTH SMALL GROUPS IN SELECT CHURCHES THE GREATER NEW YORK CONFERENCE

#### **Introduction**

This research project was designed to aid young adults in gaining a transformative experience with God, while bonding with peers. This was carried out in three churches within the Greater New York Conference. These results were garnered through observing each group in action over ten weeks of small group meetings. Their time together included, spiritual growth experiences (using the *I Am Second* curriculum), open interpersonal interaction, a community service project, and genuine bonding exercises.

#### **Overview of Chapter**

This chapter contains the results of an exit survey that was given to all participants at the completion of the 10 weeks of togetherness. There were also exit interview questions that each participant responded to. From these answers I produced qualitative analyses that are reported here.

#### **Theological Reflection**

As I engaged in reflection on my study theologically, I focused on three passages in the New Testament. (Acts 2:42-47; Gal 3:26-29; and 1 Cor 12:18-26.). I concentrated on small group ministry historically and culturally while looking at these texts; developed

a practical theology based on my understanding of these verses; and set my personal suppositional viewpoints on small group ministry. I also briefly look at some of the historic Christian viewpoints on small group ministry. I reflected on my own ministry and summed it all up with some thoughts on God's activity in our world through small group ministry.

### **Literature Review**

This part of my study focused on current literature in the area of small group ministry in general, and those that have specific perspectives on youth and young adults. I zeroed in on three major areas: a) building blocks of genuine community in a small group context, b) exploring community buildings in a small group context, and c) considering models and lessons for building authentic relationships in a small group setting. These gave me a fresh understanding for this project, and viewpoints concerning proper young adult small group development.

### **Methodology/Implementation Strategy**

To implement this small group approach to building deep relationships I began with a seminar series within the churches involved. These sessions keyed in on the issues facing our relationally distant young adults. Leaders were selected from those who attended the seminars and trained (experientially) to implement this approach to ministry with their young adults. Once trained, each leader facilitated their group's meeting for a 10-week period. Following the *I Am Second* young adult curriculum that focuses on personal, and faith issues while granting assistance in overcoming them. As a result of the interaction with the program the groups' experienced solid connectivity.

Interviews and surveys were conducted to capture the data from each group. I analyzed the facts and figures and they are reported here.

### **Churches Involved in the Sample Groups**

The churches participating in this study were a) Bedford Park, b) Queens Faith Temple, and c) Cross Roads Seventh-day Adventist Churches. There were a total of 37 participants in these young adult small groups. Bedford Park had 12 people involved; Queens Faith Temple had 15 young people, while Cross Roads had 10 people participating (See Table 1). All these persons consented to be interviewed, and took exit surveys following their experience.

Table 1

#### *Churches Involved in the Small Group Study*

| Church              | Persons Involved |
|---------------------|------------------|
| Bedford Park        | 12               |
| Queens Faith Temple | 15               |
| Cross Road          | 10               |
| Total               | 37               |

### **Research Questions and Hypothesis**

The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. How can we get young adults building genuine community with God and fellow young adults?

2. Does small group ministry create an atmosphere of bonding in a young adult ministry?
3. Does small group ministry help in aiding spiritual disciplines within young adults?
4. Can a small group ministry model give young people a deeper sense of connectivity to the overall church program?
5. Can this small group ministry model be used on a wider scale in other settings?

The hypotheses is that small group ministry that is fitted for young adult interface and bonding, through a bible based curriculum, open sharing, confidentiality, embracing sound spiritual disciplines, and service activities will be more efficient than the generic programs employed by many churches today.

### **Organizing for Relational Community With God and Others**

It was a significant challenge to put together a study like this to hash out a plan for a solid small group ministry for and with young adults. The young people involved in this study were very responsive, and considered the process very meaningful to their personal, interpersonal, and spiritual lives.

These emerging adults were interviewed following the 10-week process about their experience of going through the *I Am Second* young adult curriculum in a small group setting. The interviews were voice recorded and transliterated. The intent of the interviews was to determine what impact their time in the group had on their communion with God, and their connectivity to others in their group. The interview questions can be found in Appendix B.

### **The Participants and the Seventh-day Adventist Church**

When I checked the data from all the individuals who participated, I discovered 51% has been associated with the Seventh-day Adventist Church for more than 10 years, 27% for 5 years, and 22% for less than 6 months that are considered New Converts (See Table 2). The mixture was good to see, and helped to add variety to the viewpoints in the group.

Table 2  
*Years of Association with the S.D.A. Church*

| Churches            | More than 10 Years | 5 Years | Under 6 Months |
|---------------------|--------------------|---------|----------------|
| Bedford Park        | 8                  | 2       | 2              |
| Queens Faith Temple | 7                  | 5       | 3              |
| Cross Roads         | 4                  | 3       | 3              |

*Note.* Response to interview Question 1. How long have you been associated with the S.D.A. Church?

Table 3  
*Initial Thought of Being A Part of Small Groups*

| Churches            | Uncertain | Had an Idea |
|---------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Bedford Park        | 9         | 3           |
| Queens Faith Temple | 11        | 4           |
| Cross Roads         | 10        | 0           |

*Note. Response to interview Question 2. What were your initial thoughts as you agreed to be a part of this small group?*

Small Group Ministries is still an unfamiliar form of ministry to many in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This type of ministry though is a growing concept in the Seventh-day Adventist Organization. However it still has some ground to cover in Greater New York Youth Ministries. This became evident to me as I looked at the fact that 81% of the individuals interviewed were uncertain of what Small Group Ministries entailed and only 19% had an idea. (See Table 3) However at the exit interviews 76% of the individuals stated that their involvement in the group exceeded their expectation, 19% stated that the group was what they expected and only 5% stated it was not what they expected (See Table 4).

Table 4

*How Thoughts Differ After Being A Part of Small Groups*

|                          | Bedford Park | Queens Faith Temple | Cross |
|--------------------------|--------------|---------------------|-------|
| Roads                    |              |                     |       |
| Exceeded expectation     | 9            | 9                   | 10    |
| What was expected        | 1            | 6                   | 0     |
| Wasn't what was expected | 2            | 0                   | 0     |

*Note. Response to Interview Question 3. How are those thoughts different today?*

### Bonding Within the Small Group Process

Small Group Ministries by nature has a tendency to bond people together. As I attended the group meetings and watched the movements of these young adults, I was really astounded by the level of genuine Christian connectivity they shared. The report reflects that, 84% of the respondents gained a deeper communion with each other and 16% was able to maintain the same communion with others in the group they had prior to our commencement (See Table 5).

Table 5

#### *Depth of Communion Felt With Group During Shared Life Together*

| Churches            | Deeper Communion | About the Same |
|---------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Bedford Park        | 12               | 0              |
| Queens Faith Temple | 11               | 4              |
| Cross Roads         | 8                | 2              |

*Note.* Response to interview Question 4. *Explain the depth of communion that you felt with your group as you shared life together?*

I feel this is very significant because one of the research questions was directly related to this type of behavior. It is easy to conclude from the information that the experience of small groups creates a deep relational atmosphere. As I observed the groups in their meetings I sensed that they were very open in their responses. I believe they were dialed into each meeting in a meaningful way. The responses above show that the intent and purpose of group bonding was mostly achieved.

### Communion With God Through Spiritual Disciplines

Spiritual growth was one of the factors that I was anxious to report. It was almost as if one could touch the personal growth these youngsters enjoyed. I was very encouraged to see what emanated from this study. Each group had spiritual relationships that positioned these emerging adults to be accountable for themselves and each other. As a result, 92% of the persons stated that their relationship with God was impacted in a positive way. This was due to the small group meeting process. Only 8% stated that there was no change in their relationship with God (See Table 7). When asked how did the, *I Am Second* Curriculum challenge them in facing life's issues and toward practical Christian living? It was good to see that 78% of the persons felt challenged and only 22% felt as though they were not challenged. (See Table 6) Their peers aided these young folks as they prayed for and with each other, shared personal testimonies, studied scriptures, and served others. All these impacted the outcomes cited here.

Table 6

*Ways in Which I Am Second Lessons Challenged Life Issues and Practical Christian Living*

| Churches            | Deeper Communion | About the Same |
|---------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Bedford Park        | 10               | 2              |
| Queens Faith Temple | 11               | 4              |
| Cross Roads         | 8                | 2              |

*Note.* Response to interview Question 5. *In what ways did the I Am Second lessons challenge you in facing life's issues and practical Christian living?*

Table 7

*Impact of Relationship With God During Small Group Meeting*

| Churches            | Positively | Negatively | Remain the Same |
|---------------------|------------|------------|-----------------|
| Bedford Park        | 12         | 0          | 0               |
| Queens Faith Temple | 13         | 0          | 2               |
| Cross Roads         | 9          | 0          | 1               |

*Note.* Response to interview Question 6. *How has your relationship with God been impacted as you attended the small group meetings?*

### **The Importance of Service in the Groups**

During their time of sharing these groups engaged in community service projects. Some of these were done jointly, while the individual groups did others. This aspect of the groups made for even more bonding. Further, the group members were able to see the gospel of Jesus Christ in a more real sense. The conclusion of this saw 84% of the persons stating that it was meaningful for them to participate in these projects, and only 16% decided it was status quo for them to be involved (See Table 8). One could extract from these percentages that service to others was very impacting on the young adults that participated in these groups.

Table 8

*Impression of Community Service Projects Together*

| Churches            | Status Quo | Meaningful | Not |
|---------------------|------------|------------|-----|
| Meaningful          |            |            |     |
| Bedford Park        | 2          | 10         | 0   |
| Queens Faith Temple | 1          | 14         | 0   |
| Cross Roads         | 3          | 7          | 0   |

*Note.* Response to interview Question 7. *There were community service projects during your time together; what impressions did they have on you?*

### **The Overall Objectives Achieved**

Immersing these young adults in small groups to share life together was a great experience. The goals were defined and based on the results narrated here were largely achieved. Building genuine community with each other and God was of paramount concern. And the effects of small groups in this study show that these young adults felt this sense of authenticity as they interacted with each other.

I proffer that by building a deeper communion with others and a positive relationship with God genuine Christian community will result. When asked if this was achieved of which 70% of these young beings believe this was achieved and 30% does not believe it was achieved (See Table 10). Those who did not offered responses like, “I knew most of these people before.” Which leads me to believe that they leaned more to

the humanistic side of the question when responding. In all I think they were very positive in their responses to the small group challenge.

Table 9

*Most Memorable Moment*

|                 | Bedford Park | Queens Faith Temple | Cross |
|-----------------|--------------|---------------------|-------|
| Roads           |              |                     |       |
| Fellowship time | 7            | 9                   | 7     |
| Study time      | 4            | 4                   | 1     |
| Caring          | 0            | 1                   | 1     |
| Service         | 1            | 1                   | 1     |

*Note.* Answer to Question 8 of the Interview: *Would you share your favorite experience or most memorable moment during your experience?*

There were four aspects of the small group meetings: fellowship time, study time, caring and service. When asked which aspect was most memorable the following was stated: fellowship 62%, study 24%, caring 6%, and service 8% (See Table 9). This was very revealing. Fellowship was very high on the agenda for many of these young souls who participated in this process. Extracting this as the chief reason for them wanting to come together, and using it, as a time to also connect them to Jesus was a noble idea. Study came up as the second most important reason for them wanting to get together, which is also noteworthy. It seems to me that this form of ministry is a powerful way to merge fellowship and worship seamlessly.

Table 10

*Thoughts on Achievement of Genuine Community*

| Churches            | Achieved | Not Achieved |
|---------------------|----------|--------------|
| Bedford Park        | 8        | 4            |
| Queens Faith Temple | 11       | 4            |
| Cross Roads         | 7        | 3            |

*Note.* Response to interview Question 9. *Do you believe that genuine community (a real family atmosphere) was achieved in your group? Explain?*

At the end of the meeting period, although there were various experiences through the groups, everyone stated that they would recommend the same small group experience to others. Every response was in essence that the groups were very beneficial to their overall experience. This was very powerful and transformative for me, because I did not expect all of them to generate such similar responses concerning their recommending the small group approach to others (See Table 11).

Table 11

*Recommendations of Small Group Experience*

| Churches            | Yes | No |
|---------------------|-----|----|
| Bedford Park        | 12  | 0  |
| Queens Faith Temple | 15  | 0  |
| Cross Roads         | 10  | 0  |

*Note.* Response to interview Question 10. *Would you recommend the small group experience to someone else? If yes, why? If no, why not?*

## **Personal Reflections**

As I scrutinized the groups and their journey toward cohesiveness, I noted the level of openness these groups expressed. Most of the participants were willing to share their personal testimonies. Although there were persons in the groups that I did not know prior to the groups forming, after the first three meetings I felt connected to everyone.

Those who joined as group leaders were committed to the task at hand. They carried out their responsibilities with finesse. I was particularly pleased with the level of organization and effort that each of them put into the process. The persons who were trained were so passionate about leading small groups that three of them decided that they would start their own groups. I was definitely overjoyed with this result. They were changed by the process, and wanted to see others affected by this great ministry. Even to this day they point to the intervention of small group ministry as the most exciting spiritual experience they have experienced.

I enjoyed seeing the maturity of the responses that came from members of the various groups as they interacted with the *I Am Second* curriculum. I sensed that they were growing deeper in their communion with God. The partners formed within each of the groups were to aid their intercessory prayer experience and deepen their interpersonal involvement. That worked very well, as many shared weekly that their partners encouraged them to pray more. Some people also were thankful for their partners being a listening ear as they spoke about issues facing them.

The use of Facebook enhanced our Access Partners system. A private page was set up on this social network for each group. It was the hub of the groups' activities between meetings. It was a way for them to experience another means of getting together. They shared testimonies, pictures, spiritual thoughts, poems, songs, bible texts,

etc. The thing that they looked forward to each week was the challenge placed on their pages by their leaders. Each person had to complete the challenge (usually related to a spiritual discipline) and talk about the experience during the next meeting. The use of social media added an invaluable dimension to our doing life together as groups.

In all this was enriching for me. I was stimulated by the interface with these young people. These experiences will not be forgotten anytime soon.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

#### **Introduction**

After conducting a brief investigation into young adult small groups, I feel like there is so much more that I need to know and understand. There is so much more room for me to grow as a minister relating to the field of emerging adult small group ministry. Nevertheless, I have made some conclusions. As I pull the loose ends of this report together, I will give my conclusions about this work, and my view of its accomplishments. I will also make some recommendations for areas of additional study and probing, as it relates to small groups among those in their incipient years of adulthood.

#### **Conclusions**

What follows is a listing with explanations relative to my conclusions drawn from this work:

1. This exercise was done to examine the process of small group ministry for, and with young adults in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Greater New York. I found out by way of this study that small group ministry is a very effective model of ministry that young adults embrace. As I interacted with them it became very clear to me that they welcomed the informal setting. They were excited about the

sense of oneness that this form of ministry promoted. This was evident from about the third week we got together until the end of the process. I believe this was when group members began to feel comfortable within the setting of the group. I have concluded that this cursory look into young adult small groups have yielded positive, deep, and lasting relationships. They still frequent the social media pages we created for each group and lament the fact that the time of togetherness has come to an end. All of the groups have begun plans to begin such a process again. This depth, and enthusiasm did not exist before we got together to do this study.

2. The process of implementation and the gathering of these results gave much insight to the great potential that this form of ministry can generate. The context of these groups and the connectivity of these young adults to God, and the church were very encouraging. They got into the bible, at each session. Some of them never read their bibles with any level of consistency. The access partners encouraged them to engage in spiritual disciplines with beautiful outcomes. They testified to the encouragement being a force for good in their spiritual lives. I determined from my interaction with them that they have grown.
3. I believe that this project met its objectives based on the responses given in the tables of chapter 5. It is also plausible for me to posit this view based on the results reported, the individuals who participated gave sufficient information to address the research questions that are a part of this study.
4. Most importantly, the young adults involved in this study have grown as a result of their experience, and would recommend it to others. This was the salient point

in the exercise that gave me great confidence that this study hit its target. It was good to see that these young people would be willing to recommend this form of ministry to their peers. For people (especially young adults) usually do not recommend what they have no solid appreciation for.

5. I would testify that the greatest conclusion I made happened in my own experience. I was stretched by the process, and transformed by the Holy Spirit. I have as a result of this time with these youngsters altered, and added quite a bit of personal, and ministry adjustments. For example, I have decided that I will always in some way be involved with small groups for the rest of my ministry, and life. My ministry will never be the same again as a result of a journey as emphatic as this one. I cannot say that I will always be a young adult, but I can say that I would be involved in ministry to and with them as long as I should live. As I took this journey I got much closer to God. The planning, execution, and implementation of this project truly transfigured my walk with God. I learned to lean on Him for wisdom, strength, and guidance. I thank Him for allowing me to be involved in such a transformative experience.

These are the major conclusions that I have made as a result of doing this work. I think doing life together with young adults in small groups, has a power so great that all the conclusions would never be made here on earth. The ultimate conclusions would be wrought when Jesus comes again!

### **Recommendations and Further Study**

This study was very instructive. I perused the information herein, and I believe there are some possible proposals, that could make for great additions to this existing

project. I also believe this rudimentary study sets up the table for additional studies in the future. Some of these recommendations for greater study are as follows:

1. It would be good to study the groups for a more protracted period to see the effects if any that it would have on the group experience. There were significant expressions of depth in the relationships formed; and it would be noteworthy to see if these would fade or deepen.
2. I am persuaded that it would be a superb undertaking to do a study on a much larger sampling of groups. Three groups were included in this study. It would be positive to see if the samples were opened up whether or not we would garner similar results.
3. I would sanction such a study like this to be done either church by church in my conference (Greater New York) or as a conference youth department. This can inform and enhance our planning and ministry focus. There is presently a lopsided view toward the large events, and very little effort or concern related to small groups.
4. These small groups were highly relational and it would be a worthy goal to test the effect of this form of ministry would have in a conference setting as multicultural as Greater New York. It would be good to do this for the major ethnic groups. There may also be significant information that could be gotten from young adult groups that are made up of multiple cultures.
5. I would vouch for an analysis to be done to see the effects of small groups on the retention and discipleship young adults in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Many young adults if exposed to this model of ministry may gain a deeper

appreciation for the church, and their presence within it. The young adults that were exposed to the model in this study were very thankful for its influence for good in their lives. I would like to see a study done to see what are the consequences of small group ministries on long-term commitment to God, and our church.

6. I would also recommend the *I Am Second* Small Group Curriculum be studied as a model for curriculum development for Young Adults in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. As I researched this area concerning young adult small groups, I was very troubled that I found very little to work with within our denominational framework. I thought to myself, if significant resources can be placed into developing a power packed program like this, it would aid young adult ministries in our church, and beyond.
7. I believe if we can take a look at youth leadership development through the eyes of small groups we would have more effective youth ministry leadership training for our local churches. We would have more cohesive youth and young adult leadership teams that engender a familial spirit in planning, executing, and leading young people's ministries. By mentioning this point, I proffer that we model small groups for Adventist Youth Leadership Training. I would even push for a component of the training program specifically focus on small groups, how they work, how they aid in creating genuine community, how they promote teamwork, and loyalty to the cause of Christ.
8. I would also recommend the study of the use of technology in relation to young adult small group life and culture. As I related to all the groups during this

project, I was very excited about their involvement in various technological activities. All of the group members were tech-savvy, and loved the idea of having a source of communication outside of meeting times. We piloted a “Text a Text” program among ourselves within the various groups. This was very encouraging to many of them as they got to read a text every day coupled with a word to encourage fellow members each day. We also developed a Facebook page that was the hub of our announcement reminders throughout the week. I would also put up there a thought provoking blog for them to respond to each week. This was done for each group. It was a very good way for us to stay in touch with each other throughout the week. I think we just scratched the surface with this awesome medium for further connectivity, and doing life together.

9. Service activities would be another area to study relative to their impact on small group life. This was an area that was skimmed over as these groups met for their activities. We had one major service project for each of the groups. Each one of the groups along with the people that they served experienced no small amount of joy. I watched young people who had very little connection to the scriptures show a depth of appreciation for the gospel clothed in service. Service mission activities are compelling for young people, and usually produce in them selflessness, as they reach out to others. This aspect of service had a vivifying effect on every group that was a part of this study. I believe further study could be given to the effects of young adult service mission (within a small group context) on the young adults themselves, and the people they connect with. I sure would like to read the results from such a study.

10. As I peered into young adult small group ministry, I felt something else was missing. After looking at all these results, and the conversation that they profusely engage in with little effort, I was lacking a cap for this project. These young people often times have to coexist with those who have been in the church for so many years ahead of them. The generation gap typically causes issues of understanding, tolerance, and forbearance. I believe if there can be a hybrid small group ministry that can bring together the young adults with those who have been around for a longer time it may quell some of these issues. A group like this being studied can produce lots of resourceful data that would truly inform the generational issues that face our church. We can at least get a discussion going on, our likeness, our differences, and what we can do to bring, and keep these two usually distant groups together in love for the growth of the church. I think this would have great appeal for further research.

I truly am blessed for this opportunity to engross my mind in a life changing process as this. I know that my life has been forever blessed. Accordingly, I am determined to unleash small group ministry wherever I am privileged to serve. I am particularly interested in, (but not limited to) building these small groups among young adults within my churches, my city, and around the world. I firmly believe this is my divine calling! I have signed up to be a lifer in this great ministry expressed through small groups.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1

#### A Look at Your Group

Examine the quality of your group structure, and rate the following dynamics in terms of being fulfilled within your group: The related content can be found in chapter 3.

#### Exhibit 1

#### *Group Fulfillment Rating*

Total

Evaluation

Continuum \_\_\_\_\_

|  | 0              | 10               | 20            | 30            | 40 |
|--|----------------|------------------|---------------|---------------|----|
| 50   |                |                  |               |               |    |
| <u>ELEMENTS</u>  | <u>USUALLY</u> | <u>SOMETIMES</u> | <u>SELDOM</u> | <u>RARELY</u> |    |
| Teaching...Learning And<br>applying God's word.                            | 5              | 3                | 1             | 0             |    |
| Fellowship...Building<br>Supportive, mutually<br>accountable relationships | 5              | 3                | 1             | 0             |    |
| Worship...Praising God for<br>who He is, what He has done<br>and is doing  | 5              | 3                | 1             | 0             |    |

| <u>ELEMENTS</u>   | <u>USUALLY</u> | <u>SOMETIMES</u> | <u>SELDOM</u> | <u>RARELY</u> |
|---|----------------|------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Prayer...Listening to and sharing intimately with God, and interceding with God for one another | 5              | 3                | 1             | 0             |
| Power...Experiencing the filling and outpouring of the Holy Spirit                              | 5              | 3                | 1             | 0             |
| Caring...Group becomes the primary agency for meeting one another needs                         | 5              | 3                | 1             | 0             |
| Sharing ...Group allows time for members to share what God is doing in their lives              | 5              | 3                | 1             | 0             |
| Ministry...Utilizing spiritual gifts to bless the members of the group.                         | 5              | 3                | 1             | 0             |
| Evangelism...Sharing the good news of salvation   | 5              | 3                | 1             | 0             |

Key: 0-25-----DANGEROUS ZONE

25-35----- NEEDS MUCH IMPROVEMENT

35-40----- NEEDS SOME IMPROVEMENT

40-45----- KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK

## APPENDIX 2

This is the model I am presenting for the meeting: The related content can be found in Chapter 4.

### Youth Small Group Contract

#### **Purpose**

To experience a journey of deepening relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ, and with each other through mutual accountability and sharing, in an atmosphere of love, caring, personal trust, and support.

#### **Group Specific Goals**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Study Materials**

We intend to study the Bible

#### **Group Covenant**

We have covenanted to meet together for the next \_\_\_\_ Weeks, covering the months of \_\_\_\_\_ through \_\_\_\_\_ 2012 - 2013. We will meet each week on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_ p.m. at \_\_\_\_\_ location.

## **Group Agenda**

Nightly program will include:

1. Songs of praise
2. Announcements
3. Recognition of special guests (ICE BREAKER)
4. Members' accountability (Missing Members)
5. Sharing time (Testimonies)
6. Prayer time (Conversational & Intercessory type).
7. Study time
8. Fellowship Experiences
9. Other item deem necessary by the leader

## **Group Leader**

1. Coordinate and facilitate all group Bible studies.
2. Create the climate for group Bible study and other discussions.
3. Be sensitive to non-involved members of the group and involve them in all group activities.
4. Plan with leadership team the monthly program for the group (socials, outreach plan, community projects, etc.)
5. Attend weekly leader's meeting and give reports relative to the progress of the group
6. Keep focus of the group away from controversial or doctrinal topics during Bible discussion time.
7. KEEP MEETING WITHIN GIVEN TIME LIMIT!

After two absents of a member organize a visit with other members of the group. Your absent members should be called either after the meeting or on the following day. Pray regularly for your group members

### **Assistant Group Leader**

1. Lead out in the absence of the group leader.
2. Lead out in the group preliminaries e.g. songs of praise etc.
3. Work closely with the group leader and other members
4. Attend weekly leaders meeting
5. Assume leadership of his/her own group when the group divides
6. Keep updated record of prayer requests.

### **Host/Hostess**

1. Prepare your home for Small Group meeting place
2. Be genuine in warmth, love and acceptance
3. Refreshment (Discuss with Leader and Assistant Leader)
4. Physical setting for group study
5. All distractions must be handled by the host/hostess

### **Group Philosophy**

1. Spirituality: Continual Christian growth and a deeper fellowship with God and our fellow men through Bible study, prayer, and sharing.
2. Sociologically: Creation of opportunities for greater interaction, deeper level of sharing, fulfilling basic needs and achieving common goals.

## Prayer Scroll

|  |  |
|--|--|
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |

## My Covenant as a Group Member

Depending on God as my guide and stay, I make a covenant with the members of my group to exercise the following disciplines:

1. Give priority to attending my group meetings, unless something inevitable occurs.
2. Participate freely in the Bible study and all activities of my group
3. Cooperate with the social and spiritual activities of my group to keep me spiritually awake and growing.
4. Commit at least two hours weekly to the needs of my group:
  - a. Study my lesson for group discussion
  - b. Pray with my prayer partner
  - c. Pray for my group members by name and their needs
5. Be actively involved in the Prayer Ministry of the group
6. Watch over and care for the member for whom I am a spiritual partner
7. To incorporate at least one non-Christian into the fellowship of our group, thus helping him/her to have a clear knowledge of the goodness and love of God.

I WILL TRY WITH GOD HELPING ME TO BE A REGULAR, CARING AND FAITHFUL MEMBER OF THIS GROUP.

---

Signature

---

Date

### **Group Covenant**

As members of this group, for the next \_\_\_\_\_ weeks, we agree to the following disciplines:

**Attendance.** Priority given to group meetings. Every member will faithfully attend all group meetings unless prevented by illness or other significant reasons.

**Participation.** To be actively involved in all activities of the group thus creating a community of caring and concern individuals.

**Accountability.** If a member is missing, leadership will immediately implement absentee strategy so as to demonstrate love and concern for the missing. First time missing...Phone call by leader of member. Second time missing...Visit by leader and another member. Additional strategies will be implemented as needed.

**Confidentiality.** Keep whatever is shared in the group very confidential. Broken confidentiality is the route to destroy a group unity, its relationship and its ministry.

**Prayer Ministry.** Directly involve in the prayer ministry of our group on a daily basis both for our individual group and the other groups in our church.

**Bible Study.** We will familiarize ourselves with the study materials before coming to meetings.

**Affirmation.** We will endeavor to see the good in others at all times and positively speak of them.

**Accessibility.** As group members we give each other the right to call upon one another for spiritual help in times of temptation and need---even in the middle of the night.

**Evangelization.** Both absentees and the unsaved will be of primary concern to our group.

## APPENDIX 3

### Organizing for Relational Community with God and Others

Below is the list of the questions young adult participants were asked. Chapter 5 refers to the related content. The interview questions focused primarily on their personal experience.

1. How long have you been associated with the S.D.A. Church?
2. What were your initial thoughts as you agreed to be a part of this small group?
3. How are those thoughts different today?
4. Explain the depth of communion that you felt with your group as you shared life together?
5. In what ways did the *I Am Second* lessons challenge you in facing life's issues and practical Christian living?
6. How has your relationship with God been positively impacted as you attended the small group meetings?
7. There were community service projects during your time together; what impressions did they have on you?
8. Would you share your favorite experience, or most memorable moment during your experience?
9. Do you believe that genuine community (a real family atmosphere) was achieved in your group? Explain?

10. Would you recommend the small group experience to someone else? If yes, why? If no, why not?

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# RICARDO VERNON BAIN

*“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry.”*

## PERSONAL STATEMENT

Ministry is my life’s passion, and there is nothing else I would rather pursue. I have experienced different facets of ministry; however, youth and young adult ministry is my niche.

## PERSONAL INFORMATION

Date of Birth: December 2, 1975

Nationality: Bahamian

Civil Status: Married (Tameka Monique Bain) ; two children (Ricardo Vernon, II and Zoe Madisson)

## PUBLICATIONS

*Think Small! A Practical Guide to Building A Solid Youth Small Group!* (2012)

*Inter-Generational Youth Ministry: Youth and Adults Growing Together.* Recalibrate: Models of Successful Youth & Young Adult Ministry. AdventSource. Lincoln, NE. (2011)

## EDUCATION

Doctoral Student, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University 2010– Present

Masters, Pastoral Theology (Suma Cum Laude) *Northern Caribbean University* 2002 – 2005

Bachelors of Arts Religion, Pastoral Ministry (Honors) *Northern Caribbean University* 1994 – 1997

## EMPLOYMENT AND ORDINATION

### Church Pastor

Queens Faith Temple S.D.A Church, Queens NY USA 2012 – Present

**Adventist Youth Ministries / Personal Ministries Director/** 2003 – 2012

### Church Pastor/ Camp Director /School Chaplain

North Bahamas Conference of Seventh-day Adventist  
and Grand Bahama Academy of Seventh-day Adventist

**District Pastor** 2006 – 2008

North Bahamas Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

### Ministerial Credential

West Indies Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2003

## RECOGNITIONS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

### Centurion Awards

North Bahamas Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 1999 – 2012

*Recognition for being the leading evangelist in the conference territory*

**Bahamas Government Youth Leadership Awards** 2005, 2006

*A citation for exemplary youth leadership in the Pathfinders Organization  
being the largest and most disciplined youth group in the country*

