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ABSTRACT

THE CREATION OF VIRTUAL ONLINE SMALL GROUPS
TO INCREASE MEMBER PARTICIPATION AND
BUILD COMMUNITY AT THE REDDING
SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

by

Robert Fisher

Adviser: Del Dunavant

ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Project Document

Andrews University

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: THE CREATION OF VIRTUAL ONLINE SMALL GROUPS TO INCREASE MEMBER PARTICIPATION AND BUILD COMMUNITY AT THE REDDING SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

Name of researcher: Robert Fisher

Name and degree of faculty adviser: Del Dunavant, DMin

Date completed: March 2023

Problem

Many churches have struggled to continue to accomplish mission in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic while complying with the mandated restrictions. The Redding Seventh-day Adventist Church already struggled with no small group ministry prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the “stay at home” requirements for churches only increased feelings of isolation in the Redding Church members. These feelings of isolation created a hindrance to mission and resulted in a severe lack of biblical community.

Method

The research method employed in the design of this project was a qualitative one. It explored the question under examination by using NCD surveys to assess the eight characteristics of church health. The initiative started by having the church complete a Natural Church Development (NCD) survey to assess the eight characteristics of church health. The initial survey provided baseline NCD scores in all eight categories, and specifically in Holistic Small Groups (HSGs). I provided the Northern California Conference a list of all email addresses on file with the Redding Church office. The total number of addresses in the email list was around 80. The email list was forwarded to NCD, and each email address was sent a digital NCD survey to complete. The survey closed upon completion of the first 30 responses. The church then launched a small group ministry which started with VSGs. After nine months, a second NCD survey was conducted. This second survey measured the impact small groups had on NCD in the areas involving HSGs.

Results

The NCD results showed improvement in almost all areas. The most dramatic increase in the eight categories of health was in the category of HSGs. All but one specific question relating to HSGs improved dramatically, indicating that the addition of HSGs to the Redding Church did make significant improvements in the area of biblical community and to the overall health of the church and its members.

Conclusion

The study has revealed that in the absence of HSGs, church members often suffered a wide range of consequences because of the lack of biblical community. It is evident from this study that it would be beneficial for the church to refocus and realize that small groups are not an end in themselves, but rather, a vehicle to foster healthy biblical community. Therefore, there is a need to encourage the denomination as a whole to increase the emphasis on HSG ministries.

Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

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TO INCREASE MEMBER PARTICIPATION AND
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SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

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

by
Robert Fisher
March 2023

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APPROVAL BY THE COMMITTEE:

Adviser,
Del Dunavant

Director of DMin Program
Hyveth Williams

Jim Lorenz

Dean, SDA Theological Seminary
Jiří Moskala

Nilson Ferreira

Date approved

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

HSGs	Holistic Small Groups
NCD	Natural Church Development
Redding Church	Redding Seventh-day Adventist Church
VSG	Virtual Small Group

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

There appears to be a shift that is taking place in church growth. This shift is away from the primary focus on growth and, instead, focuses on church health. “The key issues for churches in the twenty-first century will be church health, not church growth. When congregations are healthy, they advance the way that God intends” (Kidder, 2011, p. 22). If a church is unhealthy, simply growing a bigger church may result in bigger problems. One significant challenge for churches today is how a church shifts its primary focus to health, rather than just church growth. In addition, how does a church’s focus on health translate into healthy and sustainable growth? “Research has discovered that there are, indeed, eight characteristics of church health and that it is when these eight characteristics are functioning optimally in churches that the churches grow all by themselves” (Burrill & Evans, 2014, p. 14). In essence, if a church is holistically healthy, it will naturally experience growth, thus, resulting in healthy growth. This project will measure the eight categories of church health of the Redding Seventh-day Adventist Church (Redding Church) using the Natural Church Development (NCD) survey at the beginning of the project and after a nine-month intervention. The Redding Church historically has measured low in all eight categories but scored the lowest in Holistic Small Groups (HSGs). Holistic Small Groups will be the primary NCD category of interest of this project. The intervention will specifically focus on this category and

measure any adjustment in the NCD score as a result of this intervention. Due to the restrictions of Covid-19, this project will “work around” the mandated lockdowns and implement a virtual small group ministry to comply with governmental mandates and still attempt to improve the Holistic Small Group category of NCD.

Description of Ministry Context

At the time of doing this project, I am the pastor of the Redding Church. I started pastoring the Redding Church in August 2019 and have been in full-time pastoral ministry since 2007. I have pastored a total of 13 churches including the Redding Church. The Redding Church has had plateaued growth for many years. There is an ethnic church company currently meeting in the city of Redding. However, the Redding Church is the only Seventh-day Adventist Church with “church status” within the city limits of Redding, California. However, there are other Seventh-day Adventist Churches in the surrounding communities. According to Areavibes (2022), the City of Redding had a population of 91,320 at the time of this project (para. 1). The only small groups in the Redding Church prior to this project were prayer meetings on Wednesday evenings and Sabbath School classes on Sabbath mornings. These groups have not historically functioned as HSGs. Church attendance has historically remained between 80 and 100 people each week. As of August 2019, when I arrived in Redding, church attendance averaged around 100–120 each week. Almost a year prior to this project, in November of 2019, the church took the Natural Church Development Survey, which revealed that the Minimum Factor was HSGs. However, it would not be long before everything would change. In March 2020, Redding Church’s attendance had increased significantly from August 2019. For multiple weeks, the attendance doubled from where it had been six

months before. Then Covid-19 hit the United States and the State of California, which resulted in government mandates to “Stay at Home.” The result was that Redding Church, already struggling with biblical community and small groups, was struck and forced to close its doors for several months. The Redding Church went online with Facebook Live and YouTube to help meet the congregation’s needs. However, this closure greatly impacted the Redding Church, killing the growth momentum and exacerbating the lack of biblical community and feelings of loneliness and isolation. The Redding Church has many elderly members and people with high-risk health conditions, and these people became even more isolated at home. The year 2020 and Covid-19 had an unprecedented impact on individuals’ well-being. According to the American Psychological Association (APA):

We are facing a national mental health crisis that could yield serious health and social consequences for years to come. There is no question: The COVID-19 pandemic has had a substantial impact on the lives of all Americans, and it will continue to do so. It has disrupted work, education, health care, the economy and relationships, with some groups more negatively impacted than others. (APA, 2020, paras. 3–4)

The APA report goes on to say that “nearly 8 in 10 adults (78%) say the coronavirus pandemic is a significant source of stress in their life” (APA, 2020, Multiple Sources of Stress section, para. 1).” This impact of Covid-19 is one of the major driving forces behind the lack of community and the feelings of isolation.

Statement of the Problem

The Redding Church is a medium-sized church that historically has not offered HSGs. As a result, the NCD scores are low, specifically in the area of HSGs. According to the concept of NCD, the lack of HSGs seriously hinders overall church health. In the year 2020, it became impractical, if not impossible, to implement traditional small groups

because of the “Stay at Home” or “Lockdown” orders related to Covid-19. People felt lonely and isolated, specifically, the older and “at risk” population that did not leave their homes for employment purposes. With Covid-19 restrictions including orders to “stay at home,” the problem was how could the church facilitate building biblical community without HSGs.

Statement of the Task

The task of this project was to establish a better biblical community by implementing “virtual small groups” (VSGs) in the Redding Church. This task would start by casting a vision through a series of sermons focusing on small groups and their unique ability to help foster biblical community. I started casting a vision from the pulpit during sermons about 2–3 months before launching the small groups. This entailed recruiting and training small group leaders, in addition to training in online formats, if necessary, and implementing small groups virtually in online formats like “Zoom” or “Google Meet.” The goal was to launch with 10 small groups. Because these small groups were a ministry of the Redding Church, the Redding Church Board and I approved all small groups and small group leaders. This small-group-leader approval requirement assisted in helping ensure that no groups would be teaching anything contrary to Seventh-day Adventist beliefs or values in their small group. The congregation received an NCD survey before launching any small groups. The survey provided a starting reference point. The survey also provided an accurate assessment of the church’s overall health and, specifically, the holistic small group score. As Rainer (2018) observed, “Many church leaders and members think their churches are healthier than they really are” (2018). This task aimed at improving the sense of bible community

and measuring the impact on holistic small group NCD scores of the Redding Church, thereby increasing overall church health. The NCD survey was conducted before and after the intervention to substantiate the effectiveness of the intervention.

Delimitations of the Project

The Redding Church in Redding, California was the location of this project. The project included small group leaders, active members, and guests attending the Redding Church small groups during the intervention. The small group leaders were limited to members of the Redding Church, whom the Church Board and I had approved. One significant challenge foreseen was that this virtual option for Small Groups was challenging for many who needed it the most. The elderly may not have had computers or smartphones or may not have been technically knowledgeable on how to use online platforms. This population may already have felt isolated and have been the least impacted by this project. Small-group-leader training was limited to members of the Redding Church who had volunteered to lead a small group. The project research time was from December 2020 to September 2021.

Description of the Project Process

The project process included building a theological foundation, reviewing relevant literature, developing an intervention, evaluating the results, and reporting the findings according to research methodologies and protocols.

Theological Reflection

The theological reflection studied six areas that form the biblical foundation for a small group ministry in the local church. These areas include (a) church health, which

studied the Parable of the Sower (Matt 13:3–23; Mark 4:1–20; Luke 8:4–15) and the Parable of Growing Good Seed (Mark 4:26–29); (b) fostering biblical community, by looking into the biblical characteristics of assembly; (c) planning for small groups, by reviewing the biblical principles for planning successful small group implementation; (d) developing small group leaders, by examining Acts 6:1–7; (e) increasing member involvement, by investigating the story of Moses and Jethro in Exod 18:13–26; and (f) church growth, by studying Eph 4:11–12. Evaluation of these six areas forms the biblical foundation for implementing small groups in the Redding Church.

Review of Literature

Building on the base of the theological foundation and relevant literature will help structure the intervention. This literature review expanded on the theological foundation and analyzed eight areas relating to small groups. These areas include (a) increasing church health; (b) small groups, a key ingredient in church health; (c) fostering biblical community; (d) importance of biblical community; (e) planning for successful small group implementation; (e) developing small group leaders; (f) increasing member involvement, and finally; (g) growth and retention through small groups. The literature review supported the need for the intervention to add a small group ministry in the Redding Church and help shape the intervention.

Development of Intervention

Building on the theological foundation, the literature review, Covid-19 lockdowns, and NCD scores that were critically low in HSGs, the intervention looked for alternative ways to form small groups during the Covid-19 pandemic. With prohibitions

existing against meeting in person for much of 2020, and restrictions including items like small groups, I developed a “work around” to help connect people during this period. This work around included VSGs with online platforms like Zoom and Google Meet. This intervention assisted in closing the void during this unusual time until people were allowed to meet in person again. This intervention addressed a two-fold issue: historically low Holistic Small Group presence in the Redding Church and, second, no traditional way to implement HSGs because of Covid-19 lockdown requirements.

Structure of Intervention

This project included seven steps:

1. I conducted a Natural Church Development (NCD) Survey to determine the baseline scores to be used after the intervention in order to compare any measurable differences.
2. Next, I sought buy-in from the church board by discussing historically low NCD small groups scores, lack of in-person connections, and reading the book *Creating Healthy Churches Through Natural Church Development* by Russell Burrill and Tom Evans.
3. The next step was to start sermons and devotionals focused on the vision of a small group ministry, which would include VSGs as long as necessary, based on the need for a healthier biblical community. This vision casting period provided the opportunity to begin recruiting interested small group leaders.
4. Implementation of the leader training began in December 2020. This training was offered monthly for group leaders in several key areas. These included but were not limited to how to become a “holistic” small group, building biblical community, small

group multiplication, and virtual formats like Zoom and Google Meet.

5. Simultaneously, 10 small groups launched virtually in December 2020.

6. After nine months of small groups implementation and training were completed, the NCD survey was given again to measure any improvement in HSGs by comparing the new NCD scores with those before the implementation.

7. The NCD scores determined whether the small groups had been effective in increasing the NCD scores overall, specifically in HSGs. The small group leader training coincided with the holistic small group nine-month implementation period. The project period ended in September 2021 upon completion of the second NCD survey.

Methodology and Protocol

The Natural Church Development Survey was the method of evaluation. The main reason for this selection is NCD's established record and ability to measure overall church health, specifically HSGs. All attending church members' email addresses were gathered and forwarded to the Northern California Conference Evangelism Department which administers NCD for its territory. Approximately 80 recipients received the survey. The email addresses were sent a digital survey via the NCD portal and were completed anonymously by anyone who chose to complete them. After approximately 30 responses, the survey window was closed, and the results were tallied. Each time the NCD Survey was conducted, a minimum of 30 respondents were required to ensure statistically significant results. The beginning NCD survey was completed in early December 2020 before any small groups were launched and again in September 2021 after approximately nine months of implementation.

Definition of Terms

Many terms used in this paper may have a broad spectrum of definitions. Therefore, to help ensure clarity for this project, the following terms are defined.

65 hypothesis: As described by Schwarz (2000), “there is one rule, however, for which we did not find a single exception among the 1,000 churches surveyed. Every church in which a quality index of 65 or more was reached of the eight quality characteristics is a growing church” (p. 39). He continued, “The ‘65 hypothesis’ simply states that whenever all eight values climb to 65, the statistical probability that the church is growing is 99.4 percent” (p. 40).

Biblical Community: This is a holistic community of faith where people grow together according to biblical principles. The dictionary definition of “community” includes “people with common interests living in a particular area, or a group “of people with a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society” (Community, n.d.). For this paper, “biblical community” refers to those living life in a community of faith, where people grow together to provide nurturing support and share common interests and characteristics.

Covid-19: According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), “COVID-19 is a respiratory disease caused by SARS-CoV-2, a coronavirus discovered in 2019. The virus spreads mainly from person to person through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks” (CDC, 2022, para. 1).

Google Meet: This is an online meeting platform that allows multiple individuals from different locations to meet together online for various purposes like meetings.

Holistic Small Groups: These are more than just small groups.

A holistic small group is one that deals with the whole person: the mind as well as the emotions. It is a safe place where people can be themselves and not feel condemned. It is a place to grow in Christ in an atmosphere of love and acceptance. It is a place to be trained for reproductive ministry, ...a holistic small group is also a place where people can be held accountable for their life in Christ” (Burrill & Evans, 2014, p. 66).

Lockdown/Stay at Home: On November 19, 2020, Erica S. Pan, MD, MPH, State of California Acting State Public Health Officer, issued the following order:

Upon assessment of the recent, unprecedented rate of rise in increase in COVID-19 cases across California, the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) is taking immediate actions to prevent the spread of the virus. These immediate actions will help reduce community spread, protect individuals at higher risk of severe illness or death from COVID-19, and prevent the state's health care delivery system from becoming overwhelmed. Reducing movement and mixing of individual Californians is critical to decreasing transmission, hospitalizations, and deaths.

Therefore, as the State Public Health Officer, I am issuing a Limited Stay at Home order, effective in counties under Tier One (Purple) of California's Blueprint for a Safer Economy, requiring that all gatherings with members of other households and all activities conducted outside the residence, lodging, or temporary accommodation with members of other households cease between 10:00pm PST and 5:00am PST, except for those activities associated with the operation, maintenance, or usage of critical infrastructure or required by law. (California Department of Public Health, 2021, paras. 1–2)

Natural Church Development: According to the NCD International website, NCD is described in this way:

Natural Church Development (NCD) is a principle-oriented way of approaching the Christian life that strives to integrate biblical standards and empirical learnings. The growth principles identified by international research and communicated in the NCD books can be applied both by individuals (church members, active believers, nominal Christians, non-Christians) and at a corporate level (local churches, small groups, denominations, para-church organizations, etc.).

NCD has developed an extensive toolbox targeted at helping people relate the principles to their specific contexts and needs. All tools of Natural Church Development are focused on increasing the quality of the Christian life. NCD research indicates that this investment in quality, i.e. increasing health in individuals, is key to activating quantitative growth, i.e. increase of churches and Christianity as a whole (Schwarz, 2006, paras. 1—2)

Minimum Factor: This is the lowest-scoring quality characteristic of the eight measured in the NCD survey, indicating the weakest area of the organization’s health.

Small Group: This is a small group of people ranging anywhere from 3 up to 20 people meeting together on a routine basis.

Virtual Small Group: This is a small group conducted online instead of in-person. Virtual small groups typically use a format like Zoom or Google Meet.

Zoom: This is an online meeting platform that allows multiple individuals from different locations to meet online for various purposes like meetings.

Summary

This introduction provides a picture of the challenges the Redding Church faced with the global pandemic related to Covid-19. This introduction lays out a problem with a poor biblical community relating to a lack of HSGs and exacerbated by sporadic church closings related to Covid-19 “stay at home” orders. The proposed solution of implementing HSGs was not possible in a traditional sense, so in order to overcome this obstacle, the proposal was to launch HSGs virtually until they could be conducted in person. This project assisted with overcoming some of these obstacles. While this intervention was not ideal, it did provide some valuable information regarding the use of technology and its ability to help in some of the challenges facing today’s churches. I want this information to be helpful to churches facing similar issues.

CHAPTER 2

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

Introduction

This theological reflection will examine six areas related to the biblical foundation for launching a small group ministry within a local church. These six areas are (a) church health, which will examine the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of Growing Good Seed; (b) fostering biblical community by evaluating the biblical characteristics of assembly; (c) planning for small groups by reviewing the biblical mandates for successful small group implementation; (d) developing small group leaders by examining Acts 6:1–7; (e) increasing member involvement by reviewing the story of Moses and Jethro in Exod 18:13–26; and (f) growth by studying Eph 4:11–12. Evaluation of these six areas will build the biblical foundation for forming small groups in the Redding Church.

Church Health

The Great Commission, as found in Matt 28:19–20, clarifies the Church’s ultimate purpose: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age” (NKJV). Thus, the goal of the church and of the individual Christian is kingdom

growth. However, growth does not just happen. How a church grows is critical to sustainability. The Parable of the Sower, found in the synoptic gospels (Matt 13:3–23; Mark 4:1–20; Luke 8:4–15) teaches us the importance of the relationship between health and growth. In Matthew’s gospel, the Parable of the Sower begins with these words: “Then He spoke many things to them in parables, saying: ‘Behold, a sower went out to sow’” (Matt 13:3, NKJV). Morris (1992) stated, “Clearly Matthew wants the reader to see that it is Jesus who is the sower” (p. 335). Matthew continued,

And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” (Matt 13:4–9, NKJV)

Notice that “the skill of the sower and the quality of the seed are the same in relation to each of the four kinds of soil” (Nichol, 1980a, p. 403). With no difference in the sower or seed, the only difference was in the health of the soil. The first three soils yielded no long-term fruit, whereas the good soil produced up to a hundredfold more fruit. Therefore, a primary concept found in this passage is that healthy soil produces a more plentiful crop. In the Gospel of Mark, the Parable of the Growing Seed follows and expands on the Parable of the Sower:

He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come. (Mark 4:26–29, NIV)

In this parable, Mark recorded Jesus using an illustration similar to the Parable of the Sower. The New International Version states that the seed grows “all by itself,”

which further explains the Parable of the Sower. However, Jesus took a slightly different approach in this parable. In this case, “the sower plays a minimal role. Furthermore, the seed grows without his effort (or lack of effort) and in a way that is a mystery” (Brooks, 1991, p. 85). This mystery is not that God is not involved; instead, it is more about God’s involvement and less about human ability. Nichol (1980a) explained it this way:

In this parable Christ says that if the seed of the kingdom is but given a chance in the life, it will produce its harvest of good. Men may not be able to explain how the process of Christian growth and character transformation takes place, but it goes forward nevertheless. (p. 600; Mark 4:26)

Looking at these two parables, the health of the soil is what makes a difference of up to a hundredfold. This healthy soil can also apply to how churches grow. When a church is healthy, it will grow naturally. The process may not always be explainable, but it will grow like the seed planted in good soil. It will grow “all by itself.” This natural growth, based on health, is the concept behind NCD. As stated earlier, if a church is healthy, it will grow all by itself (Burrill & Evan, 2014, p. 14).

Small Groups Foster Biblical Community

One important benefit of small groups is the opportunity to create biblical community. What is biblical community and why is it important? First, something happens when God’s people come together. Jesus stated in Matt 18:20: “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (NKJV). Jesus promised His followers that He would be present with His people when they gathered together in groups.

Biblical community is multi-faceted. It consists of several different aspects of the

Christian life. One might say it consists in walking in the Christian life in the presence of God and other people.

The first aspect of small groups that helps to foster biblical community begins with Bible study. We read in Acts 5:42: “And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” (NKJV). Small groups are an excellent place to study God’s Word. This verse lists two places they taught and learned: in the temple and in every house. As Stanley and Willits (2004) observed,

sustained spiritual growth is not well nurtured by an environment where people simply sit in rows, listening to messages in complete anonymity. Sustained growth takes place where people are personally challenged and encouraged in their relationship with God and others. (pp. 94–95)

Here, the biblical practice of the Early Church provides a precise picture of how the study of the Scriptures took place, both in the church and in people’s homes. As James (2005) noticed, “true community is deeper than a group of people coming together once a week to be taught a Scripture lesson or to listen to a minister preach” (p. 49). Small groups provide a fantastic place for many to learn and study God’s Word.

The second aspect is found in 1 Cor 12. Paul wrote that the church is like a body signifying the closeness and unity that should exist within biblical community. “For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ” (1 Cor 12:12, NKJV). This illustration is an example of working together in unity and functioning for the benefit of the whole. This example of Christ’s church illustrates the unity that should exist in the church today. Paul continued “that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer

with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it” (1 Cor 12:25, NKJV).

Biblical community goes beyond just Bible study and unity. The third aspect is nurturing, where members of a biblical community should encourage and support each other spiritually. In 1 Thess 5:11, Paul wrote, “Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing” (NKJV). Paul wrote a similar thought in Gal 6:2: “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (NKJV). Nurturing happens best when all the group members nurture each other, instead of just one person ministering to the whole group.

Acts 2:42 records a picture of the Early Church, and healthy growth happens when these aspects are in place. “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (NKJV). This picture of the early Church records several different aspects of church life, such as doctrine, fellowship, and eating and praying together. This type of holistic approach to ministry was very effective. The passage continues:

Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. (Acts 2:43–45, NKJV)

This text provides a great look at community and its benefits to the group. We can see that every soul was involved and affected, there were many signs and wonders, and they cared for their mutual needs. Luke continued,

So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the Church daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:46–47, NKJV)

What a fantastic description of the Early Church: a sense of community and a unity of purpose. The result of having a healthy biblical community described here in Acts is that the “Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).

The leaders of the New Testament Church saw the need for gathering together in biblical community. Hebrews also points out that it may be more critical now, living in our day, than in the time of the Early Church:

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb 10:24–25, NIV).

“All the more”—in other words, it is more important the closer we get to the Second Coming of Jesus.

Small groups foster all the essential aspects of biblical community. They include doctrine, Bible study, prayer, spiritual growth, fellowship, involvement, nurture, and edification. While corporate meetings in the church have their place and are significant, many of these aspects of community are easier in small groups.

Planning

Small groups just do not happen automatically, and they require planning and organization that must be intentional. As Paul warned us, “let all things be done decently and in order” (1 Cor 14:40, NKJV). Several other verses in Scripture also support the importance of planning. “The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty” (Prov 21:5, NIV). This verse suggests that in order to have a successful or profitable small group implementation in a church, planning is vital. Without it, the implementation of small groups will be challenging. Jesus even spoke about the

importance of planning to achieve success.

Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish. (Luke 14:28–30, NIV)

Jesus’ words of warning are significant. Small groups are challenging to implement, especially in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, where HSGs are our lowest-ranking quality characteristic in NCD (Burrill & Evans, 2014, p. 68). Perhaps one reason is that many churches launch small groups, but then they never really get off the ground because of a lack of planning and thus, they do not succeed.

Ellen White (1946) wrote about the importance of planning: “Diligent work is now called for. In this crisis, no halfhearted efforts will prove successful. . . . Wise plans are to be laid, in order that such work may be done to the best possible advantage” (p. 59).

The involvement of local congregational influencers and local church leaders should not be overlooked. It is also advisable to include experts in the field of small groups. The Bible says, “plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed” (Prov 15:22, NIV). Tied directly into the importance of planning is the training and development of small group leaders.

Developing Leaders

Small groups also provide the next critical component, the development of new leaders in the church. Ellen White (2022) observed that training new converts was significant in the Early Church: “This careful training of new converts was an important factor in the remarkable success that attended Paul and Barnabas as they preached the gospel in heathen lands” (pp. 186–187). After all, the work of the church is too great for

any one individual. Therefore, it is essential to organize systems and delegate responsibilities if the Church is to grow.

Developing leaders is tied directly to increasing the involvement of others in the work of ministry. The story of Moses and Jethro found in Exod 18:13–26 demonstrates why it is essential to develop leaders and involve others to share the work of ministry. One of these ingredients is protecting pastors and leaders from burnout. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, noticed some troubling practices and counseled Moses to make changes:

When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, "What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening? (Exod 18:14, NIV)

Jethro recognized that it was more than Moses could handle. "Jethro saw that the situation was unsustainable. ... Moses himself would become burned out if he continued with his existing practice" (Mackay, 2001, p. 317). It would not be suitable for Moses to be burned out, and eventually, it would not be suitable for the people, either.

Moses' father-in-law replied, "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him." (Exod 18:17–19, NIV)

Jethro observed Moses' load and declared, "you cannot handle it alone." It was just too much for Moses to handle by himself. "You are not able to perform it alone" is literally, "You [singular] are not able to make it by yourself" (Osborn & Hatton, 1999, p. 440). The requirements in many churches today are too much for any one person alone. Jethro observed that this was the case for Moses. Therefore, Jethro advised "that Moses should divide his burden by delegating certain duties of leadership to others qualified to bear them" (Nichol, 1978, p. 590). Likewise, taking on more than one person

can handle is a significant challenge for many pastors, just as it was for Moses. In addition, in Moses' situation, "there was nothing to be gained by carrying on until he broke down under the strain when there were others who could help him" (Mackay, 2001, p. 318). This lesson still applies to pastors who work in churches where the challenges are more than the pastors can handle by themselves. Hughes (2008) noticed the limitations on any one pastor trying to move a district into a cell church model without help. He stated, "The demands upon the pastor to lead, train and model biblical community is simply too demanding for one person to bear" (p. 89). Church leaders must train others to share the burden of the work. Jethro shared the benefits of following his advice: it would "make your load lighter, because they will share it with you" (Exod 18:22, NIV).

White (1999b) also encouraged delegation of duties: "The minister should not feel that it is his duty to do all the talking and all the laboring and all the praying; he should educate helpers in every church" (p. 197). White (1999a) took it one step further: "The greatest help that can be given our people is to teach them to work for God, and to depend on Him, not on the ministers" (p. 58). White saw this as a problem in the early Adventist Church and it has only become a larger problem today. "When an effort is made to present our faith to unbelievers, the members of the church too often stand back, as if they were not an interested party, and let all the burden rest upon the minister" (1999b, p. 196). Perhaps they feel the burden for souls and want someone with more experience to handle it so they do not hinder someone's advancement to the kingdom. However, the result is just the opposite. White (1882) also said, "For this reason the labor of our most able ministers has been at times productive of little good" (p. 121).

White (1946) observed that the solution was to get the laity to work in ministry and stop depending on the clergy to do all the ministry work:

If the proper instruction were given, if the proper methods were followed, every church member would do his work as a member of the body But the churches are dying, and they want a minister to preach to them. (p. 381)

The solution that Jethro envisioned was training and developing new leaders and organizing them into smaller groups to assist with the heavy workload. This plan would enable Moses to get others involved. Jethro advised Moses to do so by “teach[ing] them . . . and show[ing] them.” “Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform” (Exod 18:20, NIV).

Jethro advised Moses to teach the new leaders the information they needed to learn and use practical instruction by having Moses “show them” the things they would need to learn. This “teach them, show them” model would be most helpful in a local church if implemented in small groups. Jesus used this same model in training His disciples, just as Jethro counseled Moses to develop. Jesus started with instruction and included “show them” or by modeling the instruction as He ministered alongside His disciples. “After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee” Matt 11:1, NIV). The Jewish education style was different from what is typical in our culture now. “The disciple learned by literally following his rabbi in everyday life: traveling with him, living with him, and imitating him” (Oluikpe, 2018, p. 21). Jesus included instruction and practical hands-on training in the functions of His daily ministry. Dunavant (2006) wrote, “The most effective training methods include hands-on training (modeling). The least effective method is an expert lecturing on how to minister” (p. 94).

Ellen White (1999a) agreed and suggested that the Church would benefit from this hands-on or practical instruction. “There should not only be teaching but actual work under experienced instructors. Let the teachers lead the way in working among the people, and others, uniting with them, will learn from their example” (p. 59). This statement confirms that hands-on learning is highly effective in training members in the work of ministry. White further explained its value: “One example is worth more than many precepts” (p. 59). This hands-on approach could be applied directly by a church by training small group leaders in a small group of their own. This will provide a great place for small group leaders to be developed.

In addition to teaching and developing new leaders, Jethro also counseled Moses to be wise about whom he chose to develop and train as those new leaders. As the text goes on with Jethro’s advice to Moses, it was to “select capable men”: “But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens” (Exod 18:21, NIV).

There is an essential difference between getting everyone involved in ministry and everyone involved in leadership. Jethro was speaking in this passage about selecting capable people as leaders. Osborne (2010) noted, “It’s hard to have a winning team with losing players” (p. 47). A church may have difficulty because it cannot just swap out leaders. Osborne continued, “Which is why guarding the gate is one of the most important tasks of leadership” (p. 47). This process is not a small task. “Jethro not only counseled Moses to choose ‘able men’ but listed the qualifications these men should have—piety, moral integrity, and fairness” (Nichol, 1978, p. 591). The selection of

leaders is just as important today as it was then. Jethro understood that leadership matters. In fact, “the health and long-term effectiveness of any ministry begins with the health and unity of its primary leadership teams” (Osborne, 2010, p. 19). A small group consisting of small group leaders in the local church would be a tremendous asset in this type of training and development of new leaders in the local church.

Developing new leaders in the local church can be a sizable challenge in many churches, especially smaller churches, where personnel options are often limited. With limited personnel, it is even more challenging to be selective and careful in putting people with good development potential in office. Sometimes there is not a large enough selection of good potential leaders. Osborne (2010) believed selecting “good enough probably isn’t” (p. 57). He said, “One of the most common mistakes that pastors and boards make is to fill the position with the best person available. ... Fearing a long term vacancy more than choosing the wrong person” (p. 57). Churches often face the dilemma of choosing between a less-than-ideal candidate or not filling the position. This dilemma becomes even more complicated as a church tries to encourage all local church members to be active and involved, while at the same time, a church may have many open positions. However, as Paul counseled in 2 Tim 2:2, “Commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also (NKJV). Paul advised that it is not enough to find capable people, but rather, to find leaders who can teach and reproduce more leaders.

Jethro continued in Exod 18, advising Moses of the benefits of following his advice: “That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied” (Exod 18:22b–23, NIV).

Jethro was concerned for Moses and his heavy load. Encouraging Moses to share the burden of the work with qualified people was essential in maintaining sustainability. Thus, developing leaders who are leader-makers is an essential ingredient in any successful long-term ministry plan.

Increasing Involvement

Tied directly into developing leaders is increasing involvement. This is only to share leadership responsibilities, but also to perform works of ministry. In Acts 6:1–7, there is a similar example of Moses and Jethro. We observe in this passage the twelve struggling with ever-increasing responsibilities. “Here only in Acts the apostles are called the Twelve” (Peterson, 2009, p. 232). The twelve encountered a problem as the church began to grow: “Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution” (Acts 6:1, NKJV).

We see the numbers of the Church growing in Acts. The challenge came when the twelve were overcome with too much work, resulting in the neglect of some Greek-speaking Jewish Christian widows or Hellenists. “The particular difficulty involved a complaint from the Greek-speaking Christians against the native Aramaic-speaking Christians that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food (literally, ‘the daily ministry’)” (Polhill, 1992, p. 178). There were likely large numbers of widows in the Church, and the Church provided these widows with daily food. The size of the task was immense. “The Hellenist widows were being overlooked—certainly not deliberately neglected but inadvertently left out” (Polhill, 1992, p. 179). White (2002) recorded, “The Church was continually enlarging, and this growth in membership

brought increasingly heavy burdens upon those in charge” (pp. 88–89). Today, like the apostles, as the work grows, the leadership of the Church wrestles with ever-increasing responsibilities because the burden of the work is so enormous.

White (2002) continued, “No one man, or even one set of men, could continue to bear these burdens alone, without imperiling the future prosperity of the church” (pp. 88–89). It is a fact of ministry today. The burden is too significant in many churches for one person to handle alone. Systems must be in place to train additional people to help in ministry work. White observed, “There was necessity for a further distribution of the responsibilities which had been borne so faithfully by a few during the earlier days of the Church” (pp. 88–89). Although the apostles stepped in at this time, growth quickly caught them needing to delegate responsibility to others, which could help carry the load. “The apostles must now take an important step in the perfecting of gospel order in the church by laying upon others some of the burdens thus far borne by themselves” (pp. 88–89). The twelve gathered the body of disciples together to organize better and ensure that they were not overwhelmed.

“Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, ‘It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables’” (Acts 6:2, NKJV). The twelve realized they could not minister in the Word while being overwhelmed by the responsibility of the practical matters of the church such as food distribution.

Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word. (Acts 6:3–4, NKJV)

As the twelve apostles discussed the matter, they realized the solution to their problem was to develop workers and leaders and then appoint them over the practical

work of the Church. This solution would allow the twelve to spend time in prayer and ministry of the Word. It also clearly shows a distinction of tasks in the Early Church to maximize efficiencies. Acts 6 teaches us that those who labored in the Word in the church should not be overly weighed down by performing all the practical matters of church life. It might be helpful if ministers today followed this advice and took measures to protect a portion of their time for prayer and ministry in the Word. This balance of tasks may add to the challenge for ministers of churches where ministers can feel pressure to perform tasks instead of training others to perform those tasks.

Polhill (1992) said, “To oversee the distribution to the Hellenist widows would distract them from their primary responsibility of witness. The phrase “it would not be right” really means “not pleasing in God’s eyes” (p. 180). The apostles’ primary focus was ministry in the Word, not the various other practical matters involved in ministry, although they were important. “Modern ministers sometimes misuse this statement as a biblical warrant for refusal to do the mundane administrative tasks in the church” (Polhill, 1992, p. 180). Polhill’s statement raises the obvious question about how much and what the minister’s duties are and what duties the minister is not to perform? White (1995) addressed this concern: “God’s cause has not advanced as it should have done, for the very reason that ministers and leading men have felt that they must do everything themselves” (p. 257). White continued: “They have tugged and toiled to keep the wheel rolling, and are weighted down with responsibilities and burdens in the various departments of church-work, in the Sabbath-school, and in every other branch of the cause” (p. 257). White certainly disagreed with pastors taking on more than they should: “They think they must do all this or it will not be done; and truly it would not be done,

because they have failed to take others into their counsel and to train them to work” (p. 257). Pastors must find a balance between spending time in the Word and prayer and doing too much practical work of ministry. Small groups are an opportunity for pastors to train members in many of the practical duties of church life.

Interestingly, some key phrases in Acts 6:2 are translated differently in the NIV than in the NKJV. The New King James Version states, “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.” The phrases in the NKJV is “not desirable” and “leaving the word.” These phrases in the NKJV can give the impression that it isn’t optimal. However, in the New International Version, it is a little more definitive: “So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, ‘It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.’” In the NIV, the wording that comes through is that it would “not be right for us to neglect.” The NIV gives a sharpened translation in that it would “not be right,” instead of “not desirable.” Regardless of which translation is more accurate, both translations are certain; those who minister in the Word should avoid neglecting or leaving the Word to take on too many tasks that others can perform. The issue continues to be one of sustainability and developing others to take on new roles. In order to find the correct balance between how much “practical work” ministers should “take on,” it would be helpful to look into the word “neglect” in Acts 6:2. The Greek Word is καταλείψαντας, which means to “leave behind, abandon” (Swanson, 1997). The idea here is that pastors must not “abandon” the work of ministry “in the Word” to engage in practical work that others can perform. Small groups can assist with a delegation of duty, a crucial ingredient in the model of the New Testament church; as the Church grows, it must

organize and delegate ministry functions.

The Twelve thus realized it would not be “right” to neglect their primary responsibility, which was “ministry of the word,” to perform tasks that others could perform. They needed to train and equip others to take on the responsibility of performing the ministry duties of food distribution and thus, not interfere with their primary duties.

In this passage, delegation into small groups was essential for future success. Much of a church’s future success depends on developing leaders, involving members, and organizing for mission.

With the task size before the church, it is not enough to have just a few doing ministry while the masses observe. The church must strive for greater member involvement in ministry. Although a church needs to be careful in selecting small group leaders, all members are to function as workers. It is evident in the Great Commission that everyone has some role to play in the work of God.

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (Matt 28:19–20, NKJV)

The expectation is that all followers of Jesus are to be disciple makers. “The main command of Christ’s commission is “make disciples” (Blomberg, 1992, p. 431). The primary question arises: “What is a disciple, and how does one make disciples?” The word *disciple* (μαθητεύσατε) has a connection to learning. “*Mathēteúō* means not only to learn, but to become attached to one’s teacher and to become his follower in doctrine and conduct of life” (Zodhiates, 1992, “Mathēteúō”). This model demonstrates that part of the Great Commission is to attach people to Jesus who are willing to be taught by Him as

their main teacher. However, Jesus is not the only One who teaches. Jesus uses His people in the work of teaching. In v. 20, it states, “Teaching them,” which demonstrates Jesus wants His people also to have an active role in teaching others about Him. “To ‘make disciples of all nations’ does require many people to leave their homelands, but Jesus’ main focus remains on the task of all believers to duplicate themselves wherever they may be” (Blomberg, 1992, p. 431). Small groups help followers of Christ to be workers for Him where they are. They do not have to go to some foreign land but are to witness for Jesus where they live. Once people are believers, they must understand that as believers, they are to be workers for Christ. “The verb ‘make disciples’ also commands a kind of evangelism that does not stop after someone makes a profession of faith” (Blomberg, 1992, p. 431). Bloomberg continued: “The truly subordinate participles in v. 19 explain what making disciples involves: ‘baptizing’ them and ‘teaching’ them obedience to all of Jesus’ commandments” (p. 431). A disciple of Christ is a believer who can reproduce and develop more believers. Here again, this is the commission of the gospel to reproduce believers in the church. Few would argue that the Great Commission was given to all believers of Jesus to help fulfill the mission of Christ.

One function of the church is to equip and train members to use their spiritual gifts to participate in church life. The instruction in 1 Pet 4:10 is that “each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms” (NIV). Everyone is to use his/her gift or talent for God for the mission of the Church.

It is essential to include all members in some form of the work by assisting them in developing their talents and helping in directing their specific gifts to the work. A

network of small groups in the local church would greatly assist this endeavor.

One must ask what would happen if we do not train and equip others to assist in the work of ministry? The answer would be a slowly withering church. Therefore, small groups are a part of a healthy church that operates in a way that involves all people in the work of the Church. Everyone must have a part in the Commission of Jesus.

Growth

We need to start with correct theology in order to help ensure correct practice (Burrill, 1993, p. 31). Therefore, in building this foundation, it is important to clarify further the ministry functions between clergy and laity and who performs which functions in a healthy church. A healthy church model will aim to ensure that every member is functioning optimally so the church can be built up. It also assists in developing new leaders, organizing for maximum member involvement, and reducing pastoral dependence. White (1958) shared the type of growth that is possible: “When divine power is combined with human effort, the work will spread like fire in the stubble” (p. 118). This type of growth is possible with the model that Scripture lays out.

Paul wrote in Eph 4:11–12: “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (NKJV).

Looking into this text in Greek, it is notable that the offices of pastor and teacher here in Eph 4:11 are listed with the same article. “There has been some question as to the significance of the fact that in Greek the words *pastors* and *teachers* are joined by a single article rather than individualized with each having its own article.” The significance of this article has implications for the meaning of this passage. “This device

usually indicates that the words so joined stand in a close relationship; in some cases their meanings are identical” (Liefeld, 1997, p. 104). Although their meaning may not be identical, they do at least stand in close relationship with each other. This relationship shows that teaching is a significant aspect in pastoral ministry.

There are also some possible challenges in interpreting this passage in Ephesians. Depending on how you read this passage, it can determine how a church is to perform ministry. There are three phrases in verse 12, and how they fit together affects the meaning of the text. “A major exegetical issue affects the interpretation of the successive phrases ‘for equipping,’ ‘for ministry,’ ‘for building up’: are they (1) in parallel (that is, coordinate), (2) in sequence or (3) mixed?” (Liefeld, 1997, p. 106).

If we view these phrases as parallel, “the leaders do all three of the following: equip the people, do the works of service and build up the body” (Liefeld, 1997, p. 106). In essence, if the clergy or leaders receive the gifts mentioned in v. 11 and perform all the functions in v. 12, this model would be overwhelming for leaders who are already overworked. However, if they are in sequence, the phrases then describe that “the gifted leaders equip the people, who in turn do the works of service, which in turn result in the building up of the body of Christ” (Liefeld, 1997, p. 106). While both options are grammatically possible, the context of surrounding texts helps determine the meaning here in Ephesians. “So there are two major alternatives: either the leaders do all three tasks (the phrases in parallel), or they prepare God’s people and thus achieve the goals of service and building through the people themselves” (Liefeld, 1997, p. 106).

Depending on which option Paul intended, the interpretation results are vastly different ministry methods. “While the grammar could support the idea that in this

particular place Paul is focusing only on the ministry of the leaders” (Liefeld, 1997, p. 106). The context of surrounding verses helps to bring out Paul’s intention. Liefeld continued, “We know from verse 7 that every believer is gifted and contributes to the building up of the body. That is the most likely meaning here in verse 12” (p. 106).

This passage in Ephesians indicates a model contrary to how many churches function today which is why so many pastors are overwhelmed. “In most churches today, the clergy perform most of the ministry while the laity watch” (Burrill, 1993, p. 30). This pastor-dependent model does not fit the context of this passage.

Instead, “the New Testament views clergy, not as performers of ministry, but as trainers of people for their ministries. This is the primary function of the New Testament pastor” (Burrill, 1993, p. 48). In this biblical model of the church, the pastor serves as a trainer and equipper, which is one reason why the office of the pastor has a close relationship with teaching and a reason this passage ties into small groups.

Looking deeper at the last part of Eph 4:12—“for the edifying of the body of Christ”—Paul spoke directly to how the church grows. Consider this phrase: “Edifying the body.” The word “edifying” and its usage could lead to a misunderstanding. According to the Concise Oxford English Dictionary (Edifying, 2005), *edifying* is an adjective that means “serving or likely to provide moral or intellectual instruction or improvement.” The Greek word used by Paul, which the NKJV translated as “edifying” is οἰκοδομή. It means “a building up. The act of building, building as a process, also that which is built, the building” (Zodhiates, 1992, “οἰκοδομή”). Therefore, it appears that οἰκοδομή, in this instance, means more than just intellectual instruction or improvement and more of “building up” the church.

Various other translations follow this line of understanding and translate it accordingly:

- NIV: “to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.”
- NRSV: “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”
- NASB: “or the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.”

Each of these other versions translates “edifying the body” differently by using some form of the phrase “building up.”

The similar phrase, “edifying of the body of Christ,” is also found in 1 Cor 14:12: “Even so you, since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel” (NKJV). Other translations such as the New Revised Standard Version and the New International Version, in this case, translate οἰκοδομή again as “building up.” In both 1 Cor 14:12 and Eph 4:12, spiritual gifts are to edify or build up the church. There is a wide range of understanding in various commentaries with these verses. However, a few items are clear. First, the spiritual gifts are for the ultimate purpose of building up the church, not just for the edification of an individual. *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* correctly comments on the usage in Eph 4:12: “‘Edifying.’ Or, ‘building up.’ The church is to be built up in both character and numbers” (Nichol, 1980b, p. 1024). Thus, the purpose of the spiritual gifts in Eph 4:11 is to equip the saints to perform the work of ministry, which in turn grows or builds up the Church.

An additional item of clarification is how the KJV reads in this passage. What the KJV translates as “perfecting” (καταρτισμός) could cause one to believe mistakenly that the desired outcome was to achieve moral perfection. However, καταρτισμός is better translated as “equipping or training” (Gingrich & Danker, 1983). This understanding could be problematic since it focuses on the moral character development of the saints, not on building up the body of Christ. It would indicate that the saints must be perfect in order to perform works of ministry.

The text, therefore, indicates that the equipping and training of the members to become workers is the role of the New Testament pastor. Thus, these member-workers are the ones who work in ministries to build the church. If all the members are to assist in building the church, many modern churches could have a major problem. This problem, as Floyd Bartel stated (as cited in Malphurs, 2013, p. 191), is that “95% of Christians in North America will never win someone to Christ in their lifetime.” It is not a giant leap to see why the Church in North America is dying. If the ministry work is to be performed by the members, and 95% of them have never led someone to Christ, it is understandable why churches are withering up. Again, this is why HSGs add such a critical dimension since small groups allow individual members to be involved naturally in leading others to Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

This theological reflection has reviewed the biblical foundations in six areas from the Old and New Testaments related to small group implementation in a church. I have argued that small groups are not an end in themselves, but rather, a method to achieve holistic biblical community, which will increase church health. I have suggested that

implementing healthy small groups in a church will result in many positive benefits, including leader development and sustainability, increased member involvement, and, ultimately, more significant and healthier growth.

Because of the limited parameters of this project, it might be helpful to investigate the process of transferring leadership from one leader to the next. How is that process best handled? I have asserted that leadership is key to holistic small group success, and in addition, so is the creation of the next generation of leaders, but how does that happen in the Adventist Church context?

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter will analyze the literature about creating healthy churches by implementing small groups. It will analyze literature in eight primary areas relating to small groups: (a) increasing church health, (b) small groups a key ingredient in church health, (c) fostering biblical community through small groups, (d) the importance of biblical community (e) planning for successful small group implementation, (e) developing small group leaders (g) increasing member involvement, and finally, (h) growth and retention through small groups.

Increasing Church Health

As stated earlier, there appears to be a shift in focus to creating healthy churches instead of just growing a church. What might a healthy church look like versus an unhealthy church? Kidder (2011) offered a perspective on the makeup of a healthy church”

A healthy church seeks to obey the Great Commission and Great Commandments in its setting by being biblically based, spiritually alive, mission-focused, functionally balanced, effective in its organization, servant-led, characterized by excellence in all that it does, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. (p. 22)

Kidder listed several church characteristics that make up a healthy church, but one question arises. How does a church achieve the end goal of becoming healthy?

An unhealthy condition is a sobering reality for many churches in North America. Malphurs and Penfold (2014) wrote, “The Church in America faces great challenges. Most churches are plateaued or declining in worship attendance. The percentage of people attending church is shrinking, and young people eighteen to twenty-nine are abandoning the faith” (p. 26). The idea of church growth and church health is at the forefront of implementing small groups in the local church. However, the purpose of implementing small groups is not to focus exclusively on growth, but rather, to focus on church health. “Church growth of any kind occurs best when the church is healthy and functioning well under the guidance of the Holy Spirit,” said Kidder (2011, p. 22). Several authors agree that church health should be the primary focus, instead of simply aiming at church growth. “In church circles today, many writers and bloggers on the church have moved away from the church growth terminology in favor of church health” (Henard, 2015, p. 8). Kidder (2011) agreed and drew a similar conclusion as stated earlier: “The key issues for churches in the twenty-first century will be church health, not church growth. When congregations are healthy, they advance the way that God intends” (p. 22).

Schwartz (2000) listed eight characteristics of church health that make up a healthy church. His premise was that if a church is healthy in all eight characteristics, then that church will grow naturally. Burrill and Evens (2014) affirmed Schwartz’s premise: “Research has discovered that there are, indeed, eight characteristics of church health and that it is when these eight characteristics are functioning optimally in churches that the churches grow all by themselves” (p. 14).

Kidder (2011) offered seven instead of eight characteristics of church health.

The Bible indicates seven signs of a healthy church. It (1) glorifies God; (2) produces disciples who seriously strive to obey the commandments of God; (3) has members that participate in ministry based on their spiritual gifts; (4) is incarnational- in the world and in the community, influencing them; (5) is active in evangelism; (6) assimilates new people into the life and leadership of the congregation [and] (7) trusts God and obeys Him in all things. (p. 22)

Both Kidder and Schwartz offered similar characteristics of healthy churches. While they are not precisely the same, they have many philosophical similarities (see Table 1).

Table 1

Comparison of Schwarz and Kidder

Schwartz – 8 Quality Characteristics	Kidder – 7 Signs of Church Health
Empowering Leadership	Trusts God and obeys Him in all things
Gift-oriented ministry	Has members that participate in ministry based on their spiritual gifts
Passionate spirituality	Produces disciples who seriously strive to obey the commandments of God
Functional structures	
Inspiring worship services	Glorifies God
Holistic small groups	Assimilates new people into the life and leadership of the congregation
Need-oriented evangelism	Active in Evangelism
Loving relationship	Is incarnational—in the world and in the community, influencing them;

The question mentioned earlier is whether a church should focus on growth or on health. Historically, the focus has often been on growth. Many churches struggle with accomplishing growth and what the best way is to accomplish that end. Thus, the question is not so much whether church growth is positive or negative, but ultimately, what the best way is to grow God’s church and accomplish its mission. Grys and Schallor (2001) wrote, “The most compelling characteristic for healthy church growth lies in the area of HSGs. Many church leaders will find this claim simplistic or too

challenging. The reality is that many churches sustain no small group life” (p. 15). Seventh-day Adventist churches struggle with HSGs, as they are Adventism’s weakest category of NCD (Burrill, 2009, p. 104). “Yet small groups are the principal way to empower nurture, fellowship, spiritual gift discovery, evangelism, and leadership development” (Grys & Schallor, 2001, p. 15). Others agree with this view. For example, Macchia (1999) listed ten characteristics of a healthy church which he divided into three levels. He visited 100 healthy churches and observed:

The variety of small groups in these churches was genuinely staggering: couples’ groups, midweek family groups, men’s and women’s groups, singles Bible studies, missions prayer groups, and more traditional Bible studies. Bottom line—come together on a regular basis for authentic, transparent relationship-building. (p. 23)

Burrill (2009) stated, “NCD operates on the premise that if a church is healthy, it will grow automatically. Therefore, rather than work on growth, the church seeks to bring itself to better health” (pp. 57–58), so, instead of just growing a church and potentially growing an unhealthy one, NCD helps a church by providing assessments and tools to focus on health and allow growth to occur automatically as a result of being healthy. Not only does NCD help to grow a healthier church, but it also assists in a church’s efforts being much more effective. Burrill (2009) continued, “Churches that are healthy simply grow faster in attendance than those that are not as healthy” (p. 63). “The premise of the NCD research is that a church should begin working on its weakest area, realizing that the weakest link is hindering the church from growth” (Burrill, 2004, p. 60). Schwartz (2000) identified this weakest area or the least developed quality characteristic as the “minimum factor.” Minimum factors are a church’s lowest-scoring characteristic of the eight. Thus, each church would have a characteristic that scores lower than the others. Schwartz (2000) continued that “‘minimum factors’ are those least developed

quality characteristics which at present seriously hinder development” (p. 108). Thus, by working on the weakest areas or minimum factor of church health, the church would naturally become healthier in that area, and overall health in the church would go up.

As it works on that characteristic, the church will see a reverberating effect on all the other characteristics, and the church’s health will improve in each area. If the church is low in any characteristic, it will be unable to accomplish its vision or dream fully until that area has improved, so dealing with the minimum factor is of vital importance in helping a church move off the plateau and into mission accomplishment. (Burrill, 2004, p. 62)

After reviewing 2,500 Adventist churches that had completed the NCD survey, Schwarz (2015) observed:

Conversely, those Adventist churches that did focus on their minimum factor, indicated by an above average increase in that area (again, in most cases ‘holistic small groups’); increase their growth rate from initially 2.0% to 7.1%—in other words, a 3.5-fold increase of the growth rate! (p. 7)

Others agree with Schwarz. Cauley (2016) stated,

Holistic or discipleship groups are the most basic building blocks of the church. The impact, consequently, on improving in the Holistic Small Groups quality characteristic will have the greatest positive impact on the other seven quality characteristics, thereby, growing overall church health. (p. 67)

Natural Church Development is not a program but a tool to help a church evaluate and implement strategies that will help a church strive for optimum health. “When churches work seriously on their minimum factor they experience significant change in their health status” (Burrill, 2004, p. 64). However, not everyone agrees with investing time and resources in a church’s weakest area. Osborne (2010) appeared to take a different approach: “Successful ministries ignore their weaknesses and focus on their strengths” (p. 74). He suggested pouring resources into the strengths and not pouring time and resources into the weaknesses. However, according to the minimum factor concept of NCD, which has a proven track record, as discussed earlier, if an area of the

church is unhealthy and thus weak, it becomes a hindrance and must be addressed.

Many churches struggle with growth and struggle to accomplish “The Great Commission” and yet fail to see the reason for their failure in mission. This is often connected to unhealthy conditions within their church. “Amazingly, in all the analysis of why evangelism works in one venue, and not another, no one ever questions the health of the church” (Burrill & Evans, 2014, p. 11). The church’s health is essential for growth, spiritual impact, and long-term sustainability. Church health is one of the most critical factors in a church’s having success: “Success in evangelism depends on the health of the church. When churches are healthy, they will grow all by themselves, regardless of what method of evangelism is used” (Burrill & Evans, 2014, p. 11).

Small Groups—A Key Ingredient in Church Health

Why are Small Group tied so closely to church health? Comiskey (2003) wrote,

Cell groups or small groups have become the focus of many churches around the world. Cell groups are exciting because they provide a place where people can share their lives with one another, people can reach nonbelievers without using high-pressure evangelism tactics, and ordinary people can become new leaders. (pp. 11–12)

Similarly, Schwarz (2012a) asked, “Why do we need small groups.” He insightfully answered, “Because human beings were created for community. However, in order for them to fulfill that purpose, they must become holistic—loving the Lord with their heads, hands, and hearts” (p. 10). Cox (1998) observed, “Small Groups are nothing new in the Seventh-day Adventist Church” (p. 15). Some 24 years have passed since he said that, but for some reason, we have yet to integrate influential small groups denomination-wide. Burrill (2004) evaluated Seventh-day Adventist churches and their NCD quality characteristics when researching the characteristics of a healthy church. He noticed that

“three areas of concern are the characteristics for holistic small groups, gift-based ministry and inspiring worship services. . . . it appears that if churches are healthy in these areas, they are also healthy in most other areas” (p. 67). Being healthy in these three does not dismiss the other five characteristics; he merely noticed that within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the churches that are healthy in these three are often healthy in the other five. Burrill (2004) stated, “This means that if a church can concentrate on improving the worship service, gift-based ministry, and small groups, its overall health will be upgraded” (p. 70). Others looked at changes in the Christian church in the last 10 years and discovered that small groups have become more vitally important now than they were 10 years before. For example, Rainer (2017) said, “Healthy churches today make groups (community groups, home groups, Sunday school, life groups, etc.) a high priority” (para. 11). Small group utilization becomes a little concerning when we look at Seventh-day Adventist churches and their holistic small group NCD scores. Burrill (2004) singled out Adventist NCD HSGs scores: “Holistic small groups is an area of weakness for the Adventist Church” (p. 70). Despite Burrill’s recognizing this weak area of small groups in 2004, he wrote again five years later that “yet holistic small groups remains the worst developed characteristic in Adventist churches that utilize the Natural Church Development system of church health” (2009, p. 104).

Suppose Rainer (2017) was correct, and small groups are more critical today than in the past, and since this is one of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s traditional areas of weakness overall, the presence of small groups could be a tremendous help or hindrance to Seventh-day Adventist churches.

It is no surprise that Schwarz (2000) also noticed the vital importance of small groups on church health: “If we were to identify any one principle as the ‘most important,’—even though our research shows that the interplay of all basic elements is important—then without a doubt it would be the multiplication of small groups” (p. 33). Schwarz and Činčala (2019) emphasized this importance: “Christian small groups are not merely a nice, yet dispensable ‘pastime.’ No, they are the very essence of the true life of the church of Jesus Christ” (p. 25).

Why are small groups, as Schwarz and Činčala (2019) stated, “the very essences of the true life of the church”? The answer lies in their function. Stetzer and Dodson (2007) said that “George Gallup found that 70 percent of Americans have said that the church is not meeting their needs” (p. 180). If that statistic is even close today, we must ask, “what are the needs that are not being met?” Furthermore, “how can the church do better?” Here are the needs listed by Gallup:

1. To believe life is meaningful and has purpose.
2. To have a sense of community and deeper relationships.
3. To be appreciated and respected.
4. To be listened to and heard.
5. To grow in faith.
6. To receive practical help in developing a mature faith. (Stetzer & Dodson, 2007, p. 180)

Notice that most of these needs revolve around biblical community and growing in the faith in a safe and meaningful place. The things not in the list are music style, beautiful buildings, and great sermons. Stetzer and Dodson (2007) concluded that in these six areas, “these needs can be met in a variety of ways but are best met in a nurturing small group” (p. 180). Winseman (2006) agreed by stating,

It’s also easy to see how belonging to a small group increases one's engagement. Among other things, small groups offer opportunity for members to form deep and

lasting friendships, have their spiritual needs met, learn and grow, be encouraged in their spiritual development, feel cared about, and see spiritual growth in others. (p. 138)

Winseman identified the relationship between small groups and church engagement as crucial elements in a healthy church. He continued, “What is important is there’s a significant relationship between the two. Capitalize on this relationship-no matter which leads to which-and your congregation will become much healthier” (p. 138).

Fostering Biblical Community

The purpose behind bringing small groups into a church is not the end in itself. Rather, the purpose of small groups is to help foster biblical community. Having small groups, just to have small groups, really serves no purpose. Cox (2003) observed, “Jesus-followers do not grow well in isolation. God has designed that we grow together. When we are baptized into Christ, we are also baptized into His body, His community, the church” (p. 16).

Boren (2007) noticed that the New Testament does not give instructions on the structure of small groups or cell groups. However, he concluded, “The small group house church was the paradigm that shaped how they thought about church, but structural direction itself is strikingly absent from the inspired cannon” (p. 25). Instead of instructions on structure, Boren suggested that “what is not lacking in the New Testament are the overt commands concerning how members of the church should relate to one another: love one another, serve one another, edify one another, and consider others more important than self” (p. 25). Therefore, structure was not the goal, but rather, what the structure provided. Boren continued, “The relationality of people in the groups is what provides the base of life from which ministry occurs. Groups are only a means to the end

of a relational life” (p. 25). Small groups are to serve as a tool to foster biblical community.

Today the church has departed from the New Testament norm. Our institutional churches fail to provide community, and we spurn the house church as a relic of days gone by. ...The principle we gather from the early church is that the church of Jesus is to be a church that exists in community, not buildings, programs, and large group meetings. (Burrill, 1997, p. 64)

Community is a vital perception when adding small groups into a church. “The small group does not exist for the sake of the small group. It is merely the vehicle for the establishment of community. Jesus recognized that the small group is the best means for the accomplishment of that purpose” (Burrill, 1997, p. 51). Burrill continued: “The purpose of our evangelism is to bring people into community. If all we do is to bring people to a knowledge of salvation and truth but fail to bring them into community, we have failed in our Christian mission” (p. 82).

Kidder (2015) studied “insights” from “fast-growing churches” and had some recommendations for an effective model of evangelism. The first recommendation was to “focus on discipleship,” and the second was to “emphasize relational evangelism” (p. 30). Kidder explained: “Evangelism isn’t a program; it’s a way of life” (p. 30).

Evangelism as a way of life confirms the need for HSGs. Kidder (2015) explained in more detail:

The greatest evangelistic asset for any church is members who love Jesus and are excited about their church. Relational evangelism means believers witness for Christ in everyday life by getting their friends and relatives into Bible studies, church fellowship groups, sports teams, and service projects. Relational evangelism is effective because it is natural and it is biblical. (Kidder, 2015, p. 30)

Holistic small groups provide that relational dynamic that facilitates building biblical community based on loving, Christian relationships. Dixon (2001) recommended that

“more emphasis should be placed on building friendships within the church” (p. 179).

Hartwig, Davis, and Sniff (2020) stated, “When asked how their small group added value to their life, 65 percent of the small group members we talked to mentioned some element of community” (p. 9). The chart below shows some of the elements mentioned (Table 2).

Table 2

How Small Groups Add Value

Fellowship and friendship
Care, support, encouragement from the group
Connectedness to the local church and broader church
Similarities shared among group members
Sharing of stories and of the faith

(Hartwig et al., 2020, p. 9)

Importance of Community

Holistic small groups are a tool that helps foster a critical ingredient in church health: biblical community. Schwarz (2012a) reflected on HSGs: “[It is] the most essential content imaginable—the essence of Christian community” (p. 9). Surratt (2019) agreed: “We all need community. In fact, we were designed by God to be in community” (p. 117). Cloud & Townsend (2003) expanded on this very concept:

God the Creator designed us to live life not only with him, but also with each other. True life lies in relationship: “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen 2:18, KJV). Research has illustrated what the Bible teaches about the necessity of connectedness. (p. 5)

The benefits are significant. Cloud and Townsend continued that “people who are deeply

attached to others tend to live longer, better, and more healthily” (p. 58). Expounding on the impact of community, Hawkins said that “nothing in all creation exists apart from community. At the most basic physical level, all forms of matter seek relationship, connection, and communion” (p. 6).

People need to belong to something bigger than themselves. Even outside the church, this is significant. Sinek (2014) stated that

when we feel like we belong to the group and trust the people with whom we work, we naturally cooperate to face outside challenges and threats. When we do not have a sense of belonging, however, then we are forced to invest time and energy to protect ourselves from each other. (p. 41)

On the contrary, trust is an essential ingredient in biblical community. Sinek continued, “When we feel safe among the people with whom we work, the more likely we are to survive and thrive” (p. 41). Trust among small groups that foster biblical community becomes very interconnected and essential. “The small relational group provides a place where people can grow in their spiritual life with the support of fellow travelers on life’s spiritual journey” (Burrill, 2009, p. 104). Hawkins (2004) added, “Christian community creates a safe space where all feel welcomed and included” (p. 15).

It is not easy to overstate the importance of fostering biblical community. Willis and Clements (2017) stated, “Our homes get us away from others (or at least the vast majority of others). Garages, privacy fences, building security guards, and key codes—all of those reinforce our desire for isolation” (p. 30). Isolation is the antithesis of community. Willis and Clements clarified their perspective by stating, “There is nothing wrong with appropriate isolation and wanting your own defined space. When taken to the extreme, however, a desire for isolation is at odds with the biblical values of community, hospitality and neighborliness” (p. 30). Burrill (1997) stated, “The primary

objective of small groups is to create a community that cares, as it reaches out to share Christ with those who do not know Him” (p. 18). Burrill continued emphatically, “There can be no church if community is not created” (p. 27). Small groups serve the purpose of creating community. Stanley and Willits (2004) observed, “When we aren’t in meaningful relationships, we suffer natural consequences whether we realize it or not” (p. 31). Relationships with those around us are the very core of our makeup as human beings. Cloud and Townsend (2001) stated, “People’s most basic need in life is relationship. People connected to other people thrive and grow, and those not connected wither and die” (p. 122). Stanley and Willits (2004) shared this observation:

When we live in isolation, we can easily lose perspective on life. . . . Our lows tend to be lower, and our highs tend to be higher. Our point of view becomes clouded and things tend to seem worse (or better) than they really are. (p. 31)

Cloud and Townsend (2001) took it one step further: “At an emotional level, connection is the sustaining factor for the psyche, the heart, and the spirit. Virtually every emotional and psychological problem, from addictions to depression, has alienation or emotional isolation at its core or close to it” (p. 122).

As stated earlier, community is part of our makeup as human beings. According to Burrill (1997), “human beings are basically communal. We were not made to live alone but to live in community with others. This need to live in community is God-created, inherent in our very being” (p. 19). Interestingly, Hawkins (2004) agreed with this concept but took it one step further: “Our lives are constituted and sustained by relationships in community. Without these relationships, we cease to be human” (p. 7).

Living in isolation inhibits our growth and limits our ability to become what God desires.

Thus we are limited in our ability to live alone, apart from God. The same limitation applies to our relationship with each other. We are limited in our ability to provide what we need for ourselves without another person to relate to. (Cloud & Townsend, 2001, p. 31)

Living life with others is a gift from God. If we grow in a Christian Community, it assists us in growing and maturing to become what God intends us to be. Cloud and Townsend continued:

So self-sufficiency from God is not the only relational limit we have. We also need other people and cannot live independently from them either. The results of trying to live apart from our need for others is disastrous and never works. (Cloud & Townsend, 2001, p. 31)

Relating this to the church, we can say that a church that does not provide a caring community can be disastrous. When we are in isolation, we cease to grow and can starve spiritually. Hawkins (2004) stated what happens when we are starved spiritually due to a lack of community: “The effects of this spiritual starvation are everywhere; anger, violence, escapist behavior, substance abuse, control, and manipulation. The constant expression of anger—from road rage to rudeness in the shopping line—is a sign of our relational emptiness” (p. 14). This relational emptiness that Hawkins spoke about leads to significant problems. Hawkins continued: “Escapist behaviors and addictions momentarily fill this emptiness. They give people a false illusion of communion. Some people try to overcome these feelings by controlling others, manipulating them into the recognition and acknowledgment they so desperately seek” (p. 14). Isolation can get worse than these false illusions. Hawkins also said, “Having forgotten how it feels to live in genuine communion with God and others, we seek out pseudo-communities” (p. 14). What kind of “pseudo-communities”? “Some pseudo-communities are built upon rage

and anger. They are filled with people united only by their hate and suspicion" (Hawkins, 2004, p. 14).

Just as the adverse effects of not belonging to a biblical community can be so devastating, the benefits of having small groups and creating biblical community can be equally as positive.

The need is for the church to become a truly loving, caring community. The small group is the best vehicle to accomplish this. . . . We must help people enter into community. Therefore Adventist churches today need to create small groups that are truly community and enable people to find fellowship in these groups. (Burrill, 1997, p. 84)

Burrill also suggested that these small groups are needed and that people would search them out: "Non-Christians seeing people living in a restored community, truly care for each other, will flock to be a part of it. . . . People will beat a pathway to the door of churches that live in New Testament community" (p. 85). Connection to other Christians in community is the key. "Groups connect. That is, they bring people together on a personal and heart-based level. Connection is the basis of any good work in a group" (Cloud & Townsend, 2003, p. 71). The connection, then, becomes a focus in the group to foster community.

"Each group takes the responsibility of being a place where connection can be created and flourish" (Cloud & Townsend, 2003, p. 71). The benefits of connecting in biblical community are inspiring.

Small groups provide benefits beyond the scope of their context, topic, or materials. While what people learn is very important, the group experience itself changes members' hearts in subtle ways. The beneficial connections created through the small group experience produce other fundamental benefits that have to do with what the Bible calls sanctification, being set apart and cleansed for God's service. (Cloud & Townsend, 2003, p. 57)

Through connection with other believers, biblical community helps group members grow

spiritually and become the persons God desires them to be. What are the benefits of sanctification in small groups? “These benefits are honesty, integration of character, and normalizing struggle. Thus small groups help heal, grow, mature, and repair people so they are fit and ready to be used by and for God. Small Groups are that important” (Cloud & Townsend, 2003, p. 57). Transformation and life change occur when we are in Biblical community. “True, deep, long-lasting changes occur through experiences with God and others that transform us from the inside out. Experiences cannot be shortchanged” (Cloud & Townsend, 2003, p. 52). The life changes and transformation that occur with a relationship with God and others is also known as discipleship. Winseman (2006/2012) agreed: “Discipleship happens in small groups” (p. 138). Surratt (2015) affirmed this idea that discipleship takes place best in community: “I am convinced that it’s possible to achieve community without discipleship, but it’s impossible to achieve discipleship without community” (p. 43). Spiritual growth, like discipleship, happens best in strong biblical community. Hartwig et al. stated that “thriving small groups are healthy communities that contribute to individuals’ spiritual growth” (p. 11). Nesbit (2022) observed that small groups had a powerful impact on community through

...the integration of sharing personal challenges and testimony, reflection, and prayer. Observation revealed that the more that participants were allowed to share and reflect, the more they experienced acceptance, validation, and empathy. As a result, they followed the same path and naturally began to empathize, pray for and help other participants. These behaviors helped generate an experience of biblical community, which became a powerful context for their journey toward wholeness. (p. 112)

Planning for Successful Small Group Implementation

Any church looking to start a successful small group ministry must start with

coordination and planning. “Great small group pastors have a plan that is coordinated with the church's vision and mission” (Gladden, 2018, p. 24). As Gladden stated, the plan must coincide with the overall vision and mission of the church.

Coordination with the church's overall vision is not something to overlook. It starts with motivation, a critical factor in successful small group implementation. Sinek (2009) stated, “Very few people or companies can clearly articulate WHY they do WHAT they do” (p. 39). In a business or a church, this can be critical. Sinek continued, “By WHY I mean what is your purpose, cause or belief” (p. 39). A church’s understanding of small groups and their purpose is essential for successful planning and implementation. Malphurs (2013) stated, “You will never do ministry that matters until you define what matters” (p. 107). Donahue and Robinson (2012) agreed with Sinek and Malphurs. They wrote: “You need more than just clarity concerning where your church is headed. You have to start answering the essential question; Why groups? Why is community life so central?” (p. 24). Schwarz (2012b) agreed and explained further:

People must fully understand what they are doing and why they are doing it; they must be able to adequately interpret what is going on around them; they must recognize core biblical principles, how they relate to each other, and in what way they can affect their personal lives and the life of their church. (Schwarz, 2012b, p. 83)

If people do not understand the purpose, plans may stall. Schwarz continued, “Until people grasp the why behind what they or others are doing—perhaps because their leaders have focused on the how—they won’t mature” (p. 83).

Intentionality is another key factor in successful small group implementation. Boren (2002) stated, “Instead of launching groups recklessly, churches that succeed launch them intentionally” (p. 32). Understanding the purpose or the “WHY” of small groups then helps to focus the development of the implementation. “Disciples are made

intentionally, just as children don't grow up without personal care, or learn mathematics on their own, so discipleship will not occur without faithful Christians being intentional about meeting together" (Arnold, 2004, p. 23). What happens if we do not build biblical community by implementing small groups? "If we do not focus on returning to our biblical roots by building intentional community, we will miss the greatest lessons that our faith offers" (Arnold, 2004, p. 23).

Many churches have attempted small groups, many have been successful, and many have failed. Planning becomes even more critical if churches launch small groups for the first time. Launching any new ministry into uncharted territory in a church requires significant guidance and planning. Unfortunately, many churches look to their history as a guide. It seems that many look to what they know and have done before, which is not always the best plan. Malphurs (2013) stated:

Leaders need a map to find the way for the church. If you are trying to drive to a particular location in your town or city and you do not know the way, you need an up-to-date map or you may get hopelessly lost. Lots of leaders in our churches are navigating their terrain with outdated maps (those drawn up in the 1940s and 1950s), and they are totally lost. (p. 27)

It also appears that many churches look to their golden days when their church was growing and successful and want to duplicate whatever they did "back then" and do it all over again. This line of thinking rarely works. Malphurs (2013) observed that people who are following the wrong map and working harder and with greater effort simply "get lost faster" (p. 56).

Therefore, identifying "why" small groups matter when planning small group implementation is essential for success. The "why" identifies the largest reason for establishing small groups—fostering biblical community. Living and growing in biblical

community is the best tool to countering isolation on multiple levels. In aiming for biblical community, a church must be careful about how groups operate. Cloud and Townsend (2001) noticed a potential pitfall in attempting to create biblical community. They stated, “Ironically, one problem we often see in the Christian community is that people get more into religion and less into the connectedness the Bible prescribes, with the results that they get sicker” (p. 122). Burrill (1997) suggested, “New Testament groups will grow in both Bible knowledge and in relationship with one another” (p. 54).

As discussed earlier, one area of weakness in the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s scores in NCD is in the area of HSGs (Burrill & Evans, 2014, p. 68). Burrill (2009) even stated, “These small groups cannot be cognitive only, they must also be relational. Knowledge must be placed into action, or it is worthless” (p. 104). Perhaps one reason that Adventist churches struggle in the area of small groups is the tendency to form groups that focus on knowledge and study and not focus equally on connectedness. It is interesting just how important fellowship is in a small group. Bain (2014) noted when he surveyed small group members that “when asked which aspect was most memorable the following was stated: fellowship 62%, study 24%, caring 6%, and service 8%...” (p. 101). To avoid this pitfall, successful small groups must emphasize connectedness and community building just as much as study and spiritual knowledge. Howerton (2012) asked, “What if the ultimate goal isn’t knowledge? . . . Our ultimate goal is to make disciples, not biblical scholars. And discipleship is more relational than informational” (p. 73). This is not intended to lessen the importance of biblical knowledge or learning. However, it focuses instead on understanding how discipleship happens and that discipleship happens best in relationships. Burrill (2009) agreed: “It is not enough to

know about love, one must also be able to demonstrate that love. This is why involvement in a small group is so essential as part of the discipleship process” (p. 104).

Howerton (2012) also said,

Disciples are made when a less mature believer is in relationship with a more mature believer, watching how he responds to difficult life situations, listening to him when he points out a biblical truth or talks with someone far from Christ, learning from him as he speaks wisdom from God's Word, and as he journeys alongside the growing believer- being aware that the disciple is further along in his journey than the disciple is. (p. 73)

Howerton correctly stated that this does not lessen the importance of biblical knowledge, but rather, emphasized the best way of learning the practical application of biblical knowledge. He continued,

Learning God's Word is vital to anyone's journey with Christ, and attending classes where the Bible is taught is important. But mature disciples are not made in a classroom, they are made as people walk alongside one another and as the disciple does what he or she has seen done. (p. 73)

Biblical community that takes place in small groups can provide the relationships that foster discipleship. Groups that focus solely on knowledge can often miss the mark; thus, growth and discipleship often stall. Cloud and Townsend (2001) observed that

this is also why we see very sincere, spiritual people often struggle for years with problems they are trying to overcome by Bible study and prayer. While those are necessary, they are not all that the Bible tells us to bring to the situation. It tells us to bring the rest of the Body with all of its healing agents. (p. 133)

For a church to become the healing body that Christ called it to be, it must integrate broken people into a healthy and loving biblical community. However, Burrill (1997) warned us to be careful of another pitfall: we can become focused inward. Thus, he said, “Adventist small groups have had a tendency to focus primarily on nurture. This is not healthy for the group. New Testament groups not only nurtured, but also reached out into the community and won people to Jesus Christ” (p. 87).

As stated earlier, successful small group implementation and creating biblical community does not just happen without significant planning. Malphurs (2013) was correct when he said, “Regardless of the reason, the old adage is right on target – failing to plan is planning to fail!” (p. 92). Gladden (2018) agreed with the concept of being intentional and stated it this way: “Whole-church coordination doesn’t happen by accident. It takes intentionality. As Christians, it is possible to get caught in the passive ‘If God wants it to happen, it will happen’ trap and this can lead to...absolutely nothing” (p. 23). Gladden was not stating that God is not involved, but that God uses humans to accomplish things on earth. Gladden continued,

While it’s true that the Lord can and does make things happen, he has also equipped us to be his hand and feet. Therefore, the best kingdom outcomes require that we become intentional in our planning while depending continually on the Lord for wisdom. (p. 23)

Developing Small Group Leaders

Along with the focus on “why,” another critical factor in small group success in a church is “who.” Who is going to lead? Finding and developing leaders for small groups is paramount to successful small groups in a church. George (1994) wrote, “Security is not found in your personal performance, however excellent, but in producing other performers and leaders” (p. 156). Just as leadership is important, the people developed by leaders are equally as important. A quote by Bill Smith (as cited in Addison (2015) emphasizes the importance of people:

Some practitioners spend too much effort trying to get the strategy and methodology right rather than looking for the right person to invest in. If someone says to me, give me the method or give me the curriculum, I know they have not understood that this is accomplished through persons rather than through methods. (p. 19)

Building on this concept of developing people, Maxwell (1995) observed that “the

leaders you've developed must carry on the tradition of development and produce a third generation of leaders. If you don't, the building process stops with them" (p. 188).

Maxwell keenly observed that the process is not sustainable without leaders to develop more leaders. Thus, he continued, "True success comes only when every generation continues to develop the next generation, teaching them the value and the method of developing the next group of leaders" (p. 188).

When launching a small group ministry, leadership and development are vital.

Malphurs and Mancini (2004) correctly stated the following:

The quality of the leadership affects the quality of the ministry. One leader correctly observes that everything rises or falls on leadership. As the ministry's leadership goes, so goes the organization, and the quality of any ministry is in direct proportion to the quality of its leadership. (p. 25)

Aguilera (2006) shared this same perspective: "Ultimately success hinges on the ability of the leader or leaders to develop a team that will work together to accomplish the mission of the organization" (p. 40). Kidder (2011) also agreed that "everything in the church depends on leadership. It would therefore be wise to invest more in leadership training and development" (p. 27). Kidder was not alone in this perspective. Johnson (2011) wrote, "The greatest success principle I have learned over 35 years of being involved in small groups is this: Just like every area of church life, a local church's small group success will be no better than its success in developing leaders" (p. 129).

Leadership is so serious that if we look at small groups that succeed and small groups that fail, leadership is often at the center. "Thus leadership is the key element of ministry, a vital ingredient for success. If a ministry isn't doing well, then much of the time the problem can be traced back to leadership or its lack" (Malphurs & Mancini, 2004, p. 25).

Not everyone agrees that leadership is critical. Hartwig et al. stated, "This belief

is a problem because sometimes leaders don't matter as much as people think" (p. 18). They clarified their statement in this way: "However, the merging of all team or organizational members' contributions and how the entire group works cooperatively makes a much greater difference" (p. 18). It may be that Hartwig et al. agreed that leaders matter, but sometimes great leaders have poor followers and, thus, are hindered from advancing successfully.

As stated earlier, Osborne (2010) stated, "It's hard to have a winning team with losing players" (p. 47). It is more complicated than just having losing players versus winning players, as Osborne portrayed. However, success can sometimes be tricky depending on a church's options for small groups, specifically small group leaders. It is interesting that Comiskey (2002) observed this from his research: "The survey of 700 cell leaders in eight countries revealed absolutely no connection between the cell leader's spiritual giftedness and success in cell multiplication" (p. 29). It is noticeable that Comiskey found no connection between one's spiritual giftedness and success in cell multiplication. No connection with giftedness suggests that a church can train and develop leaders to be successful regardless of giftedness. Chand (2011) added to this idea by stating that "God will use flawed people in often messy processes to accomplish his divine purposes" (p. 107). Therefore, even if there are limited options for potential leaders of small groups, God can still work with what is available to a church. Rainer and Geiger (2011) wrote, "Sometimes the best players are not the right players" (p. 169). Ministry alignment is more critical than just giftedness. Cox (1998) also stated,

Leadership is one example of an ability/gift which can be more fully developed and utilised [sic] through small groups. When Moses looked for leaders for the vast small group network described in Exodus 18, he found them among the multitude of former slaves who followed him. (p. 44)

Cox suggested that perhaps these leaders had experience as leaders of groups of enslaved people while in Egypt. One could argue that Moses did not have much to work with, yet Moses developed a strong, organized group of leaders made up of formerly enslaved people from Egypt. Maxwell (2022) used a similar illustration as Osborne (2008) about sports: “Leadership is the issue. It starts with a team’s owner and continues with the coaches and some key players” (p. 8). In Maxwell’s illustration, the sports team owner would be the ultimate leader in that scenario. Maxwell continued, “When the leaders at every level are good, the team has a good chance to win a championship. When the leadership is poor at any level, the team rarely succeeds” (p. 8). Thus, while Osborne’s statement has merit, it is difficult to win with losing players. Nevertheless, the literature suggests that good leadership can transform poor-performing players into better-performing players.

Therefore, in order to implement successful small groups, it would be helpful to identify and develop strong leaders who reproduce additional strong leaders. It simply does not happen by chance and it does not happen without intentionality. “We’ll never have truly healthy cultures, however, if we don’t identify and develop a host of strong, creative, passionate leaders” (Chand, 2011, p. 50). Chand’s perspective was that creating strong leaders requires involvement in people, not just training. Training is vital, but training may limit learning to isolated information exchange. Chand suggested that “developing people is far more essential in creating a healthy culture than training people in specific skills” (p. 49). Developing and training are not mutually exclusive, but often go hand-in-hand. Cox (1998) suggested that “the best form of initial training for small group leadership teams is gained in a small group of their own, once they have gained a

basic understanding of small group ministry” (p. 78). This type of hands-on training would provide experience and assist in developing leaders more broadly than simply reading through a book or completing a small group training program.

Arnold (2004) agreed with Cox and stated, “The best training for small group leaders is to be in a small group” (Arnold, 2004, p. 27). Dunavant (2006) added to this idea: “Volunteers, deserve to receive training, resources, and ongoing support, which are the three imperative steps to building better volunteers” (p. 91). A small group is where people can find a place to develop in the local church. It will help their effectiveness, as well as their sustainability. Dunavant added, “If people are ineffective in their ministry, they usually know it. And if they are not given opportunities to improve, they often become frustrated and quit” (p. 91). Building an effective ministry team would be tough if members and leaders are getting frustrated and quitting regularly. A small group of group leaders provides the optimal way for ongoing development, necessary support, and any additional training and edification as needed.

Developing and training strong small group leaders also requires intentionality by the church. Kidder (2011), in researching successful Adventist churches, discovered the following: “In the research we did on the fastest growing Seventh-day Adventist congregations, it became quite clear to us that such churches spend a great deal of time, resources, and money in training, and equipping their members” (p. 54). In order to invest time and resources in training and equipping members, a church has to be intentional about doing this. It does not happen without intentionality. Intentionality is confirmed in Kidder’s research:

Moreover, the leaders of the growing SDA churches are also highly intentional in educating others to do their specific ministries. Those congregations have leaders

who are focused on training, and members who are eager to learn to do ministry and evangelism. (Kidder, 2011, p. 54)

Malphurs and Mancini (2004) shared this perspective: “The job of the leader isn’t just to enlist more followers but to recruit and equip more and better leaders. It’s the leaders’ responsibility to develop other leaders” (p. 25). They continued that it is

God’s job to build the church, . . . however, it’s our job to build leaders—competent, godly leaders. In 2 Timothy 2:2, Paul commands Timothy to train leaders. This is the principle of leadership multiplication: leaders training leaders who, in turn, train other leaders through the ministry. (p. 27)

Building leaders helps to ensure the viability of any ministry. It helps protect against burnout, increases effectiveness, and helps ensure the ministry's future. “Since the job of the leader is to make more leaders, every leader in a ministry must be a leader-maker” (Malphurs & Mancini, 2004, p. 27). Therefore, we do not just want strong leaders, but strong leaders who are strong leader-makers. Malphurs and Mancini continued: “The mark of good leaders is that they continually develop leaders at every level of the ministry who will take the organization well into the future” (p. 27).

Flexibility is another component of developing and training small group leaders. Because small groups and small group training have been a church focus for years, many churches likely have individuals and potential leaders who have some training in small groups. It is also highly likely that many churches will have a wide range of experience in small groups. Thus, offering a “one size fits all” type of small-group-leader training would not be very beneficial. According to Surratt (2015), “the best approach to building a lasting groups system is to plan for flexibility. An open mindset will allow group leaders to follow where God is moving in the church, and not just in the circles and lines on our whiteboards” (pp. 13–14). Surratt made a valid point. Allowing flexibility,

allowing God to move, and even allowing prior training to guide current or future training would help leader-training be much more impactful. Perhaps ongoing training or incorporating potential leaders into a group of their own would greatly benefit them. Arnold (2004), like Cox (1998), believed that “the best training for small group leaders is to be in a small group” (p. 27). Learning in a small group allows training to be catered more specifically to the individual needs or experience. Surratt (2015) suggested that “offering more in-depth training tells a leader that you believe in them and they are capable of bigger things. This could be through one-on-one mentoring” (p. 85). This ongoing mentoring and involvement provide an antidote for failure. Boren (2002) observed, “When you put cell groups on autopilot, they crash” (p. 33). Therefore, ongoing leadership support, flexible training, and development are essential.

Aguilera (2006) summed up the importance of leadership quite well in stating the following:

In other words, the people you surround yourself with determine the success of the organization. Having the right people involved in leadership development and leadership positions will affect the direction of the organization and ability to create a culture of growth and development. (p. 42)

It is not giftedness alone, but developing leaders you can depend on and trust that will have a great impact on future success. Beckham (2000) suggested that “empowering leadership is a biblical root for worldwide revival in the twenty-first century” (p. 105).

Increasing Involvement through Small Groups

Another beneficial aspect of small groups is that they facilitate member participation in church life. They provide a tool for people to get involved in the church’s mission. The ideal goal of the church is to have every member involved in the

church's ministry. Geiger and Peck (2016) stated, "Pastors, and churches, with a biblical approach to ministry possess a deep-seated conviction that all believers are gifted for ministry, not just the 'professionals'" (p. 40). Nevertheless, while realizing that total involvement in their church is optimal, many churches struggle to reach such a reality. "Perhaps every Christian would agree that every Christian should serve and that the ideal church functions like a body, with every part working for the common good" (Arnold, 2004, p. 31). The ideal healthy church would then have all members of the body functioning effectively. Arnold asked this question: "So how does the church create specific opportunities for the body of Christ to achieve the kind of maturity spoken of in Ephesians, while engaging in the activities that build the church?" (p. 31). He provided the answer: "Small Groups" (p. 31).

This idea is not new; it has been written about extensively. Many churches have goals, but if a church has a similar goal, how does it accomplish getting each member into a position where they can witness for Jesus? Malphurs (2013) explained, "The idea is to challenge every person in the church to set a goal of reaching one person for Christ per year" (p. 191). How is this accomplished? Kidder (2011) stated, "A healthy church is one in which every member grows, serves, witnesses, and builds up others" (p. 22). Burrill (1997) answered the question of how we involve everyone in ministry. He suggested, "If we are biblical Christians, we will follow the Master's plan and labor in groups, just as Jesus taught us" (p. 49). This concept of everyone ministering through groups provides two desirable results. First, each person can minister in some capacity by ministering in groups. The other result is that the group takes on a biblical community function that results in the members caring for and supporting each other in times of

spiritual need. More members involved in nurturing each other will result in less demand for the role of the pastor. Burrill (1997) observed that “lasting ministry is formed only through empowering people through small group ministry” (p. 46). If a church empowers its members through small groups, as Burrill suggested, its ministries become more resilient. “The ideal group engages each member in discipleship while encouraging each individual to make a positive contribution for the growth of others” (Arnold, 2004, p. 28).

Growth and Retention through Small Groups

With the understanding that healthy churches grow all by themselves, church growth is not a primary objective of small groups, but rather, a reality of small groups implemented correctly. There are a few primary reasons why growth occurs in healthy small groups. Finley (2017) asserted that small groups have multiple benefits: “Small groups are the basis of nurturing new converts, strengthening church members, planting churches, teaching the Word, and evangelizing new converts. They also provide an excellent means of preparing for evangelistic meetings” (p. 24). Small groups involve more individuals in active ministry. If a group of ten people is involved in personal evangelistic activities versus a pastor-dependent model, the group has the opportunity to reach many more people.

Cox (1998) observed that the larger the church, the more pastoral care is needed. Cox also stated that small groups are a way to provide that much-needed pastoral care effectively and that there are two specific benefits as a result of small groups. The first is member retention. “Fewer people will leave the church . . . if they find the support they need they will stay” (p. 46). The other benefit Cox noticed was that “pastors will be able

to specialise [sic]. The biblical role of the pastor is that of teacher/trainer, ‘(preparing) God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up...’ (Ephesians 4:11, 12)” (p. 46). Allowing a pastor to function as a trainer/equippier would allow a more efficient ministry. Cox (1998) continued:

Pastors of small-group churches will naturally continue to be involved in a certain amount of pastoral care, but they will be able to give priority to developing the gifts and skills which the Holy Spirit has given to the members of the church. The result will be congregations functioning just as Scripture says they should- as a body with every part doing what it is supposed to do. (p. 46)

Burrill (1997) noticed that the pastor-dependent model of the church is problematic: “Modern Adventist Churches have become so pastor dependent that without the pastor, no real ministry is possible in most churches. As a result, we have burned-out frustrated clergy, from whose ranks many excellent pastors are exiting year by year” (p. 17). Burrill noticed this trend, realized the impact of small groups on a church, and wrote seven years later, “It is impossible to grow a healthy, vibrant Adventist church today without small groups as a vital part of its ministry” (Burrill, 2004, p. 71).

Growth and Retention

Member retention is another benefit of HSGs related to church growth. In reflecting on the success of small groups at the Saddleback Church, Gladden (2011) related, “Our number one strategy for helping new believers is to get them into a small group. Once they are part of a spiritual family, we know that they will get the guidance they need for their spiritual walk” (p. 72). Member retention is a factor in growth because it does not matter how many people come through the front door if they walk right back out the back door. Osborne (2008) observed that “whatever you do to reach people you have to continue to do to keep them” (p. 31). Therefore, if an individual

enters the front door of a church via a small group, the small group remains a constant for that individual. Whereas, if an individual enters a church via a special program, which is limited in time, then that individual will no longer have a connection to that church as soon as that special program is over. Therefore, not only do small groups offer the advantage of bringing people in the proverbial front door, but it also has benefits in keeping them from walking out the back door. “Small groups are the key to retention. Rarely, if ever, does the church lose a person who becomes involved in a small group” (Burrill, 2009, p. 81).

Growth through Group Multiplication

One final area in successful HSGs is their ability to foster growth by multiplication. Wilson (2014) wrote, “In both addition and multiplication, output results increase with each incremental input effort. The difference is in the rate of increase” (p. 31). In addition, Rainer (2005) stated, “It is a sin to be good if God has called us to be great” (p. 15). Similarly, Ferguson and Bird (2018) suggested, “Hero makers know that if we focus only on addition, we never get to multiplication” (p. 37). Others agreed: “Instead of addition, the Spirit of God is calling forth multiplication” (Trousdale & Sunshine, 2018, p. 27). Related to member involvement in small groups comes the next level of benefit of HSGs in a church. Small groups, if healthy, naturally grow and reproduce themselves.

A small group or church, therefore, that is not reproducing itself by establishing new relational communities is an unhealthy church. Just having small groups in a church does not create community. These communities must multiply if they are healthy at the core. (Burrill, 1997, p. 53)

Hartwig et al. (2020) agreed with Burrill:

Not only does multiplication spur more groups where-in people can grow, but it also strengthens the groups that prepare for and engage multiplication. Our data was beautifully clear here: groups that multiplied were healthier than groups that had not yet multiplied. (p. 202)

Groups that multiply are healthier than those that do not and lead to a healthier, growing church.

Hartwig et al. (2020) listed four implications of multiplication:

1. Multiplication is one sign of a spiritually healthy group.
2. Spiritual Health precedes multiplication, not the other way around.
3. The most effective groups in our study were newer groups.
4. Groups that have multiplied tend to contribute to individuals' spiritual health more than groups that haven't multiplied (p. 202)

Multiplication is a sign of a healthy group. Thus groups must maintain their purpose for existence by creating a balance between spiritual growth within a group and living the Great Commission by reaching outward and being evangelistic. Healthy groups follow the same pattern as a healthy church. If healthy soil exists within the group, then growth naturally occurs within that group, similar to a healthy church.

Conclusion

Burrill (2009) likely said it best: "Small groups involvement is not optional; it is mandatory for any church that is concerned about keeping new members" (p. 81). The review of this literature of eight areas of small groups demonstrates that small groups are essential for churches to create healthy biblical communities in which people grow. It also demonstrates that developing competent leaders and group multiplication is vital to the success of small groups. Because of the limitations of this review, I would recommend further investigation into pastor leadership transition/succession in churches

that have successful holistic small group ministry. For example, when a pastor and church build a successful small group ministry, and the pastor then moves on to a new assignment, how does the small group ministry survive? I have also asserted in this review that when small groups go on autopilot, they die. What happens when another pastor comes into that existing church with perhaps a different vision and set of values? Ng'andu (2018) wrote, "For church growth and development to take place to any meaningful extent, every church needs to have a system for the development of leaders as well as a succession plan based on sound principles" (p. 21). Small group sustainability connected to pastoral transition or succession could provide helpful insights for the Seventh-day Adventist Church which struggles with maintaining HSGs. Ng'andu continued concerning pastoral succession: "The Adventist Church has often overlooked this important factor, and as a result, matching pastors with the right leadership skills for various church appointments has been a critical problem" (p. 21). Developing succession-plan options for pastoral succession to help ensure the continuity of HSGs would likely provide many benefits.

Finally, the literature reviewed demonstrates that small groups increase members' involvement in the church's ministry. Therefore, healthy and growing churches will make HSGs central to their ministry.

CHAPTER 4

DESCRIPTION OF THE INITIATIVE

The title of this intervention is “The Creation of Virtual Online Small Groups to Increase Member Participation in Small Groups and Build Community at the Redding Seventh-Day Adventist Church.” With the unexpected pandemic from Covid-19, the State of California and local county guidelines prohibited meeting in person for any official church functions for much of 2020. The task of this intervention was to establish virtual small groups (VSG) in response to these guidelines in the Redding Church. This chapter will discuss the development of the intervention in Phases One through Three. Then it will cover the description of the intervention in Phases Four through Nine. The objective was to build and improve the sense of community and combat isolation amid Covid-19 lockdowns and measure the impact on NCD scores in the area of HSGs. There were nine phases in this intervention:

Phase One: Achieving Buy-in from the Redding Church

Phase Two: The Survey and Identification of the Minimum Factor

Phase Three: Strategy

Phase Four: Recruitment of Virtual Small Group Leaders

Phase Five: Training Virtual Small Group Leaders

Phase Six: Launching Virtual Small Groups

Phase Seven: Multiplication of Small Groups

Phase Eight: Re-Evaluation and Assessment

Phase Nine: Refocus

Development of the Intervention

Church growth and how a local church helps to accomplish the Great Commission given by Jesus in Matthew 28:18–20 is a constant area of study. A good definition of church growth is this: “Church growth is that discipline which investigates the nature, expansion, planting, multiplication, function, and health of Christian churches as they relate to the effective implementation of God’s commission to ‘make disciples of all people’ (Matt 28:18–20)” (Rainer, 1993, p. 20). As part of this church growth process, I looked at how best to implement the Great Commission in the Redding Church. This process started by evaluating the “function and health” of the Redding Church to determine what areas need improvement in order to maximize the fulfillment of the Great Commission in their context.

The Redding Church has not had any formal small group ministry in several years. Therefore, it struggles with maintaining an atmosphere of community. In general, Seventh-day Adventist churches score lowest in the areas of HSGs (Burrill & Evans, 2014, p. 68). Historically, the Redding Church has followed the same SDA trend. Before Covid-19, the Redding Church faced the challenge of integrating people into the church to feel included. I received feedback from various members of the Redding Church that they did not feel part of the church community. Because the church was in “lockdown” for several months during 2020, the feelings of isolation grew worse. “Modern life does not undermine the possibility of community; the absence of community creates the frantic distractions and relentless pace of modern life. We live in

a culture that values individualism while dismissing the importance of relationships” (Hawkins, 2004, p. 13).

Before the Covid-19 lockdown, there were only a handful of church events where the Redding Church could build community. Sabbath potlucks, Sabbath afternoon hikes, and Wednesday night prayer meetings were the only opportunities where people could gather outside of church services on Sabbath mornings.

In December 2020, after almost a year of lockdowns because of Covid -19, the NCD survey was conducted in the Redding Church to measure the church’s health. The specific category of interest was HSGs. The results and impact of the survey will be discussed in more detail later in the next chapter.

Phase One: Achieving Buy-in

This intervention started with seeking buy-in for launching virtual small groups in the Redding Church and using NCD as an assessment tool of the church before and after the intervention. Malphurs (2013) stated,

There is power in every organization, including the church, and that is neither good or bad. The question here is, “Are the people with the power supportive of embracing the strategic planning process?” These empowered people are the church’s governing board, pastor, staff and any matriarch or patriarch. (p. 55)

Like any major strategic change in a church’s ministry, getting the local church’s leadership behind the strategy was essential. Malphurs continued, “Ultimately, they must support the process if it is to succeed” (p. 55).

Buy-in was first sought by approaching various key leaders and influencers one on one. I sought to dialogue and determine whether any hesitation existed. I shared the philosophy of NCD and biblical support for the addition of a Small Group Ministry.

After I was satisfied that I had no further barriers from my key leaders and influencers, I then approached the remaining church leaders, the board of elders, the church board, and then other influencers, and finally the church-at-large. Involving the leadership at the very onset of this process was essential because “they are the leaders whose presence will generate congregational buy-in or trust in the process. If the congregation does not trust the process, it will not be realized in the life of the church” (Malphurs, 2013, p. 59).

I explained to church leadership and then the church as a whole the rationale for selecting NCD as the tool to measure the church’s health. The buy-in of the leadership team was sought by explaining the concept behind NCD as described by Schwartz (2000). Schwartz developed a survey to measure these eight qualities of church health. The process was presented and explained to the Redding Church, and they were given the opportunity to take the survey to determine how it ranked in the eight categories of church health. For the Redding Church leadership team, the best explanation came from Burrill and Evans (2014):

Schwartz identifies eight quality characteristics that exist in healthy, growing churches. When one closely examines these quality characteristics, it is apparent that these same quality characteristics are mentioned throughout the Bible and the writings of Ellen White. Schwartz declares that when these eight quality characteristics are functioning optimally in churches, they grow all by themselves. (p. 15)

Like in many Adventist Churches, the support from the Bible and Ellen White was very helpful in achieving buy-in.

The eight quality characteristics measured by Schwartz in NC D are as follows:

1. Empowering leadership
2. Gift-oriented ministry
3. Passionate spirituality

4. Functional structures
5. Inspiring worship service
6. Holistic small groups
7. Need-oriented evangelism
8. Loving relationship

The leadership team was briefly trained on NCD. At the same time, the remainder of the church was given a simple explanation: “NCD operates on the premise that if a church is healthy, it will grow automatically. Therefore, rather than work on growth, the church seeks to bring itself to better health. When this happens, the church grows all by itself” (Burrill, 2009, pp.57–58).

In addition, I preached a sermon on the “Parable of the Sower” (Matt 13:1–23; Mark 4:1–20; Luke 8:4–15). I recapped this sermon with the Church Board and the elders. The key concept in this parable is that healthy soil produces a healthy harvest. The NCD survey is like a farmer who takes a soil sample to determine whether a nutrient is missing. I was equating the church to the soil and saying that the healthier the soil, the better the seeds grow. Therefore, the task was to measure and create the best soil possible in Redding Church.

The idea of creating a healthier church is not new. White (1886) wrote in response to what she felt was being neglected in the Adventist church in her time:

The time and labor of our ministers have not been spent in the manner best calculated to keep the churches in a healthy, growing condition. If less time had been spent in sermonizing, and far more in educating the people to work intelligently, there would now be many more to enter the broad field as missionaries, and much more talent to be put to use in the various branches of the work. (para. 7)

This concept is coming back to contemporary thinking. As noted earlier, Kidder (2011) stated, “The key issues for churches in the twenty-first century will be church health, not church growth. When congregations are healthy, they advance the way that God intends” (p. 22).

I selected the NCD survey as the tool to assess the Redding Church’s health for many reasons. The primary factor in choosing NCD was its history of an established record and proven effectiveness. This established record would help ensure dependable results. According to NCD (2006),

by July 2016, the NCD Church Survey has been used by more than 70,000 churches, covering 84 countries and 112 denominations. NCD tools are available in 40 languages. In 65 countries, there are NCD Partners who offer support for churches and individuals who want to increase their health and see numerical growth. (para. 13)

Phase Two: Identification of Minimum Factor

This phase is much simpler than Phase One. The category in the NCD survey with the lowest score is known as the “Minimum Factor.” The strategy that focuses on addressing this minimum factor is known as the minimum strategy. “The minimum strategy assumes that the growth of the church is blocked by the quality characteristics that are least developed. If a church focuses its energy on these minimum factors, this alone can lead to further growth” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 50).

I formed this plan before the December 2020 NCD survey was completed. Thus the intervention was not dependent on a particular church health category’s being the minimum factor. Burrill (2004) stated, “Some might be wondering if their church should take the NCD survey before creating the dream. This approach could work in some churches, but I believe it would be better to create the dream first” (p. 60). In this case,

the formation of this intervention was not dependent on any particular characteristic's being the minimum factor. However, the specific category of focus was HSGs and the questions surrounding this category. However, Burrill also stated that "some churches instinctively know their weaknesses" (p. 59). I considered this perspective and formulated the intervention based on the observation that a weakness in the Redding Church was HSGs.

The Redding Church took the NCD survey with a requirement of a minimum of 30 respondents. After receiving the completed NCD survey results, I focused on the overall category of HSGs and the various questions comprising the category of HSGs. The Holistic Small Group Questions on the NCD Survey are questions 11, 27, 34, 49, 54, 55, 65, 76, 78, and 90 (see Table 3).

Table 3

NCD Questions Related to Holistic Small Groups

11. "My small group helps me with the challenges of my life."
27. "In my small group we spend time on things which are irrelevant to me."
34. "My small group helps me to grow in my spiritual life."
49. "I am a member of a group in our church where it is possible to talk about personal problems."
54. "In the groups I belong to it is easy for newcomers to be integrated."
55. "I am a member of a small group in our church where others will pray with me if I need it."
65. "I am a member of a small group in which I feel at home."
76. "The leaders of our small group are trained for their task."
78. "Our small groups actively seek to multiply themselves."
90. "In my small group we trust each other."

Phase Three: Strategy

The overall premise behind this intervention was that healthy churches have healthy growth. Thus, the strategy focused on a plan working towards becoming a healthier church. When the results of the NCD survey were received, the overall score in HSGs and the individual questions that make up that category were recorded.

Once the results were tallied, they were emailed to me. After reviewing them, I shared the results with the leadership team at the Redding Church. This team reviewed the NCD scores in detail. The strategy that had been developed prior to the completion of the survey was confirmed. The minimum factor on the December 2020 survey was indeed HSGs. Thus, the Redding Church would implement the minimum strategy.

The minimum strategy is simply a tool to help set timely priorities. Since we cannot work on all eight areas with the same amount of energy and concentration, we need to find areas which will yield the greatest long-range return on our investments. (Schwartz, 2000, p. 51)

This focus on the minimum strategy launched the plans to improve the NCD category of HSGs in the Redding Church.

If your church is low in this area, it is encouraging to note that improvement in small groups may also improve your score in many other areas as well. Holistic small groups is the quality characteristic that has the greatest positive impact on the other characteristics. (Burrill & Evans, 2014, p. 68)

At the beginning of the intervention, the Redding Church was still in mandated lockdown due to Covid-19 and had been for much of 2020. Thus, by necessity, this project was done by adding and implementing virtual (online) small groups as opposed to traditional HSGs. After about eight months, the NCD survey was repeated, and the results were compared to the NCD scores from before the implementation of VSGs. Virtual Small groups were launched in January 2021 and continued through August 2021.

This time frame allowed enough time to measure any impact small groups may have had on NCD scores and church health.

This intervention was created for primarily two reasons: to improve the church's health and to assist the Redding Church members feel more connected. Essentially, this intervention was a "work around" to the restrictions of Covid-19 in launching small groups in the Redding Church. These VSGs took on much of the same format as traditional small groups but were conducted via Zoom or Google Meet. I anticipated some technology challenges with some of the senior members. Therefore, a technology expert was available to help train and troubleshoot any technical issues.

Description of the Intervention

Phase Four: Recruitment of Virtual Small Group Leaders

One of the most important aspects of any ministry is leadership. This intervention is no different. So much of the success depends on the VSG leaders. Chand (2011) stated, "We'll never have truly healthy culture, however, if we don't identify and develop a host of strong, creative, passionate leaders" (p. 50).

As stated previously, leadership is vital. Sinek (2017) stated, "As gatekeepers, leaders establish the standards of entry—who should be allowed into the circle and who should be kept out, who belongs and who doesn't" (p. 28). Therefore, small group leaders were reviewed by the Redding Church Board and by me to help ensure value alignment. The leaders were asked to sign a statement that they would not teach anything contrary to the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. After some initial training, the VSG leaders were allowed to advertise their group to the church as a whole to attract people to join their group voluntarily. The church advertised the virtual

small group ministry and leadership opportunities by various methods: During most of this intervention, the worship service was only streamed via Facebook Live because the church was not allowed to meet in person. Small group leaders were recruited virtually during church announcements, newsletters, emails, board meetings, posters, sermons, and personal invitations. Participation in these virtual small groups was entirely voluntary.

Phase Five: Training Virtual Small Group Leaders

This phase involved training and development of small group leaders. The philosophy of this phase was not only training but also, more important, developing new leaders. “Developing people is far more essential in creating a healthy culture than training people in specific skills” (Chand, 2011, p. 49). Training and coaching the initial VSG leaders were intentionally fashioned to develop new leaders. “The leaders of the growing SDA churches are also highly intentional in educating others to do their specific ministries” (Kidder, 2011, p. 54). In addition, it seems that small groups have a very high rate of burnout and failure in the Adventist context. It was essential to seek out and develop new group leaders continually in order to keep groups alive and multiplying. It has been my experience that most small groups have a short life cycle. Thus, in order to achieve any long-term success, new leaders and new groups must be formed consistently. Johnson (2011) wrote,

The greatest success principle I have learned in over 35 years of being involved with small groups is this: just like every area of church life, a local church’s small-group success will be no better than its success in developing leaders. (p. 129)

I conducted the training for the leaders in the group aspect and arranged for a technology expert to be available for those who need assistance using the online platform Zoom or Google Meet. All the training was offered and conducted in person and via

Zoom. The first training included a review of small groups' purpose, function, and nature and the necessity of going virtual in the midst of Covid -19 lockdowns. The second training covered the idea behind NCD and the results of the first NCD survey conducted and reviewed the specific questions making up HSGs to help leaders understand the dynamic the Redding Church was facing. In addition to small group leaders, Sabbath School leaders were also invited to participate in the leader training. The objective was to provide an opportunity to assist Sabbath School leaders in seeing how Sabbath School classes could become more holistic in their approach. The March leader-training reviewed the material presented in the first two meetings, focused on developing new group leaders, and included a question-and-answer session.

Phase Six: Launching Virtual Small Groups

The launch of VSGs began in January 2021 after the first NCD survey was completed and tallied. My goal was to launch six to ten groups to start, then to add additional VSGs as the church could over the length of the intervention. For this intervention, the Redding Church and I decided to focus on a wide range of group styles. In other words, we did not limit the type of small group to a particular group style. Johnson (2011) stated, "My approach to small groups has broadened and adapted as society has changed" (p. 8). Understanding what changing culture might mean, this intervention left open the option for different types of groups with the understanding that the Church Board and I would screen the groups. Thus there could be Bible study groups, prayer groups, outdoor groups, or youth-gearred groups.

As groups launched, we trained leaders to develop new leaders constantly. If the

intervention was going to be successful long-term, the small groups had to multiply.

Burrill (2004) said it correctly:

It is not enough to have small groups actively operating in your church; these groups must also be multiplying. There is no stronger correlation to church growth than the multiplying of the group structure in the church. It is impossible to grow a healthy, vibrant Adventist church today without small groups as a vital part of its ministry. (p. 71)

Therefore, it is an essential component for developing new leaders consistently, leaders who will, in turn, lead new small groups.

Phase Seven: Multiplication of Groups

The focus of Phase Seven was to develop new leaders intentionally. This tied into the purpose of the intervention of creating a healthy church. Burrill (1997) stated,

A small group or church, therefore, that is not reproducing itself by establishing new relational communities is an unhealthy church. Just having small groups in a church does not create community. These communities must multiply if they are healthy at the core. (p. 53)

The main idea was to “think leader multiplication, not group multiplication” (Searcy & Thomas, 2008, p. 72). This concept promotes developing leaders to start more small groups, contrary to “splitting” existing groups to gain more small groups.

The challenge was how best to train any new leaders who had missed the initial launch training. Dunavant (2006) stated, “The most effective training methods includes hands-on training (modeling). The least effective method is an expert lecturing on how to minister” (p. 94). This concept worked best and was used by developing new leaders already involved in a small group.

For new group leaders, the process would follow the recommendation of the literature and develop and train in a small group. “The best form of initial training for

small group leadership teams is gained in a small group of their own, once they have gained a basic understanding of small group ministry” (Cox, 1998, p. 78). By being a part of a group and watching and learning from their leader, new group leaders became interested in leading groups. These additional small group leaders did not go through the initial training but received independent training and ongoing coaching throughout the intervention.

Phase Eight: Re-Evaluation and Assessment

Phase Eight was about evaluating and assessing progress. Malphurs (2013) stated that in order to “keep your implementation process on track, closely monitor team performance” (p. 296). I monitored the VSG implementation during the entire course of the intervention period. Malphurs (2013) suggested, “If you want to know how you’re doing, and you do, then you need to evaluate what you are doing. This involves evaluating both the people involved and the process” (p. 296). I also monitored the VSG leaders and followed up with the leaders monthly to monitor their success and answer any questions. The VSGs were also monitored to ensure they were equipped with any resources that I could help provide.

Cox (1998) stated that “no church is going to get everything right the first time” (p. 79). This realization allowed some flexibility in this process. Nevertheless, Cox stated: “As small groups increase in number, evaluate their overall effectiveness in achieving the objectives and goals of the church. Evaluation, like training, should be ongoing” (p. 79).

A significant component in Phase Eight was the NCD survey retaken at the end of the intervention. The strategy was to implement VSGs for 6-8 months and then re-

evaluate using NCD a second time to determine whether VSGs impacted the NCD scores in the area of HSGs. The NCD scores of HSGs, specifically those questions in Table 3, were compared to those of the December 2020 survey to evaluate the effectiveness of this intervention.

This NCD process for the second survey mimicked the process for the first survey as much as possible. The survey was again emailed to Redding Church members with email addresses on file with the church office. The process was to email these email addresses to the Northern California Conference Ministerial Department who forwarded them to NCD. Then a survey to be voluntarily completed was sent to each email address.

Phase Nine: Refocus, Adjustments, and Recommendations

This was the final phase of the intervention. Phase Eight was the “now what?” stage. It was the tail end of the intervention. The intervention period was over, and the NCD survey was conducted a second time. Once I received these results, I shared them with the leadership team of the Redding Church, who then began to refocus. They reviewed the results and started to ask questions such as the following: Where do we go from here? How are the groups going? How many groups are there? How many members are involved? How many of our congregation are involved in a group versus those who are not? What is their impact? Are the groups being successful in creating a sense of biblical community?

Any significant long-term change takes time. Kotter (2012) stated, “Because changing anything of significance in highly interdependent systems often means changing nearly everything, business transformation can become a huge exercise that plays itself out over years, not months” (p. 150). The church is no different. Change

takes time, and significant change takes significant time.

Conclusion

In summary, I executed this nine-phase intervention by assessing the health of the Redding Church, developing the strategy of launching VSGs in the Redding Church, and then assessing their impact on church health. This intervention was executed by starting with NCD to assess the Redding Church in December 2020, launching VSGs in January 2021, and then completing this intervention by using NCD to re-assess the church in September 2021.

CHAPTER 5

NARRATIVE OF THE INITIATIVE IMPLEMENTATION

Introduction

This chapter is the narrative of the intervention of launching VSGs into the Redding Church and measuring their impact on church health. This narrative will cover all nine phases of this intervention, starting with the buy-in process in Phase One that began in the fall of 2020 to the refocusing process in September 2021 described in Phase Nine.

Phase One: Achieving Buy-in from the Redding Church

Buy-in started by vision-casting for the biblical precedent of small groups in sermons in the Redding Church starting in November of 2020. Shasta County had reduced Covid-19 cases in late October 2020 and, as of October 31, the Redding Church was once again allowed to meet in-person with certain restrictions. Thus, the buy-in sermons were preached in-person. The sermons on small groups focused on the Bible texts supporting small groups by using the following verses from the English Standard Version:

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Matt 18:20).

“Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing” (1 Thess 5:11).

“And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46).

“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42).

“Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Eph 4:15–16).

“And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” (Acts 5:42).

“Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).

“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb 10:24–25).

In addition to these passages from scripture, the following paragraph from Ellen White (1902) was shared with the church:

The formation of small companies as a basis of Christian effort has been presented to me by One who cannot err. If there is a large number in the church, let the members be formed into small companies, to work not only for the church members, but for unbelievers. (p. 21)

In a sermon that referenced the quotation above, I attempted to cast a vision for a healthy, small-group ministry in the Redding Church where members could minister within their potential groups. Thus, I challenged members to pray about the possibility of becoming a small group leader.

By early December 2020, a small group leader application form was developed (see Appendix A). The application process was simple; the applicants were to agree with a statement stating they would not teach anything contrary to the fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and do their best to attend the monthly leader-training. Then, they would sign the application form, fill in details of the proposed group, and turn

the form in to me. Once all the small group leaders' applications were turned in, the elders and the Church Board reviewed them for final approval. All the group leader applicants who signed the application form and turned it in were regular attendees and were in good standing; therefore, all the applications submitted were approved.

At the December 2020 Church Board meeting, the buy-in process was accelerated to seek buy-in for launching small groups and using the NCD survey. The NCD process was explained in detail, including the eight quality characteristics measured by the survey. The Board members were informed that the surveys would arrive within a few days at their email addresses. In addition, it was explained that I would focus on the survey category HSGs. Two Sabbaths after the Board meeting in December 2020, the NCD survey was announced to the church-at-large during announcement time at the beginning of the worship service and the members were informed that the survey would be sent to their email addresses. In addition, an email was sent to the entire church from the church office explaining that a survey was being sent out on behalf of church leadership.

On January 2, 2021, I preached a sermon on church health, focusing on the Parable of the Sower, based on Matt 13:3–9.

Then He spoke many things to them in parables, saying: "Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!

This sermon drew on the idea that healthy soil produces a healthy harvest. Thus, the Redding Church would use the NCD survey as a soil test. The survey would help the

leadership team focus on improving the church's health. The concept appeared to be widely accepted.

In addition, buy-in was sought continually throughout the intervention through sermons, devotionals, and board meetings. In early February, additional sermons were preached on member involvement in ministry, and in early March, on biblical community and the importance of relationships, followed at the end of March by developing the next generation of leaders. By May 2021, more people started moving into groups and inviting people to attend their groups. Therefore, starting in May and throughout the summer, sermons focused on divine appointments, reminding members that God was working through His providence to assist them in reaching lost people.

Phase Two: The Survey and Identification of the Minimum Factor

The NCD survey was sent to over eighty Redding Church members in December 2020. These eighty members represented all the email addresses of the entire church. The survey closed when the first 30 surveys were received, which is standard for NCD. The results were then tallied and forwarded to me. When the results came back, they showed that the Redding Church had scored below the average score of "50" in all of the eight categories that NCD measures. The minimum factor was HSGs, with a score of "1." There was a 36-point variance in the next lowest score, Effective Structures (see Appendix B). The 2020 Covid-19 lockdowns likely contributed to the critically low score in HSGs. The Redding Church invested substantial resources in equipment to livestream the church services on Facebook and, eventually, on YouTube at the beginning of 2020. However, this was only helpful to those who had Facebook and

YouTube and did not connect people in person.

The make-up of those who took the survey was closely aligned with the make-up of the church and was 43% male and 57% female. The most significant percentage of those who completed the survey were those 70 years of age and older. Figure 1 below shows that the disproportionate number that completed the NCD Survey in December 2020 was over 70. In addition, 60% of those who completed

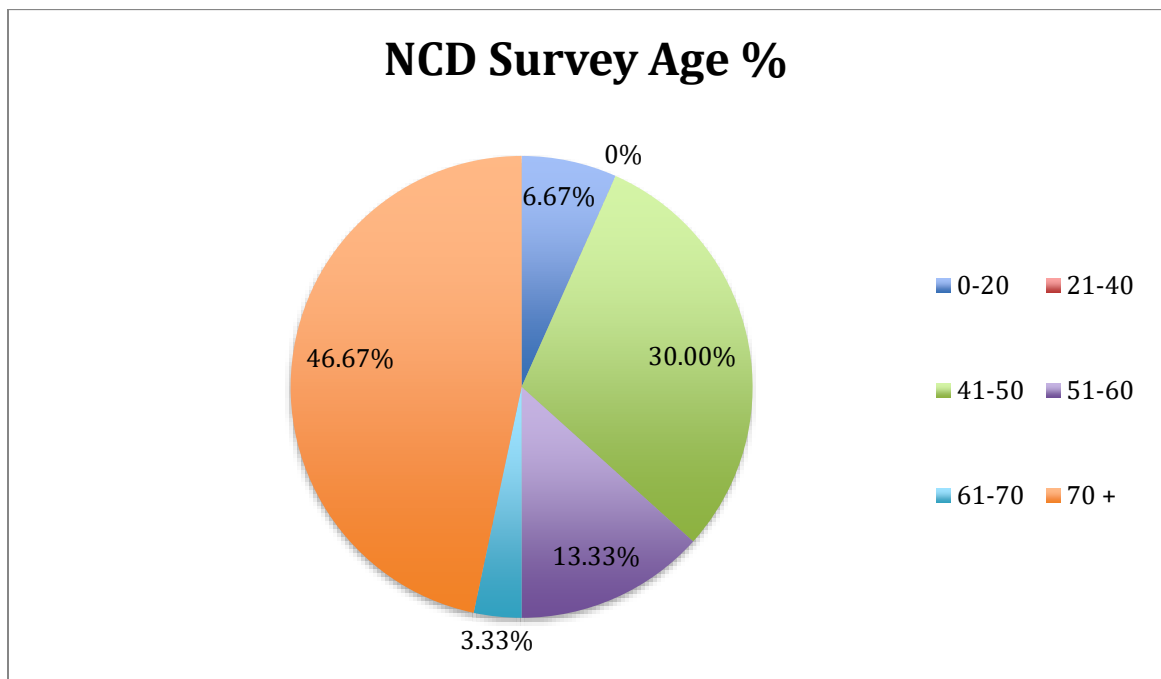


Figure 1. Age percentage of members who completed the December 2020 NCD survey.

the survey were female, and 40% were male.

Although this intervention focused on HSGs, participants took the entire survey to determine the minimum factor and whether this intervention resulted in any unintended adjustments in any of the eight categories of church health.

The eight categories of church health measured in December 2020 received the following scores (see Table 4). The questions involving HSGs were the primary interest of this intervention and scored as follows in December 2020 (see Table 5).

Table 4

NCD December 2020 Scores

NCD Category	Survey Score
1. Empowering Leadership	42
2. Gift-oriented ministry	39
3. Passionate spirituality	43
4. Functional structures	37
5. Inspiring worship services	44
6. Holistic small groups	1
7. Need-oriented evangelism	46
8. Loving relationship	40
Average	36

As can be noticed in Table 5, the church received a score of “1” in the category of HSGs in the December 2020 NCD survey. A score that low is problematic because a score of “1” show an extremely unhealthy status. Even more worrisome was Question #90 (see Table 5): “In my small group we trust each other.” This question scored the lowest of any of the questions on the survey (-14). According to Schwartz (2000),

in each of the countries we surveyed, the values we obtained were normed to a median of 50, i.e., the “average church” for each country had a quality index of 50 for each of the eight characteristics. The result of the study was that growing churches clearly scored above the qualitative median in each of the eight categories, and declining churches were similarly below the median. (p. 38)

A score of “1” hinders the mission and growth of the Redding Church.

Table 5

NCD Holistic Small Group Questions Scores, December 2020

Question	Score
11. "My small group helps me with the challenges of my life."	9
27. "In my small group we spend time on things which are irrelevant to me."	76
34. "My small group helps me to grow in my spiritual life."	-4
49. "I am a member of a group in our church where it is possible to talk about personal problems."	16
54. "In the groups I belong to it is easy for newcomers to be integrated."	27
55. "I am a member of a small group in our church where others will pray with me if I need it."	-1
65. "I am a member of a small group in which I feel at home."	-4
76. "The leaders of our small group are trained for their task."	15
78. "Our small groups actively seek to multiply themselves."	6
90. "In my small group we trust each other."	-14
Total Average Score	1

Schwartz (2000) continued,

Our research tells us that there is no one single factor which leads to growth in churches; it is the interplay of all eight elements. No church wanting to grow qualitatively and quantitatively can afford to overlook any one of these quality characteristics. (p. 38).

Therefore, according to Schwartz, the Redding Church had to look at ways to improve HSGs if it wanted to become healthier.

Phase Three: Strategy

The NCD survey was completed after the December 2020 Church Board meeting when the intervention strategy for implementing HSGs was discussed and approved.

The challenge facing the Redding Church was not just how to launch small groups within the church, but also how to launch small groups during a time of restrictions mandated by the state and local government due to the Covid-19 pandemic. After watching state guidelines fluctuate for much of 2020, I realized the impossibility of launching “in-person” small groups and attempted to find a solution or a “work around.” The solution was “Virtual Small Groups (VSGs).” Realizing VSGs is a less than perfect solution because an important part of HSGs involves building relationships and community, which poses a challenge when small groups are held online versus in-person.

Phase Four: Recruitment of Virtual Small Group Leaders

Leaders were recruited in a variety of ways. It started with vision-casting in November 2020 by preaching the sermon calling for Small Group Leaders. Each week from November to January after the “vision-casting” sermon, I gave a reminder from the pulpit during announcement time requesting people to consider becoming a small group leader. The challenge in recruiting leaders was that the church was still in lockdown, so these announcements were only on Facebook Live and YouTube. In addition, I, the researcher, solicited VSG leaders during Zoom Board Meetings, Zoom Business Meetings, Church News Letters, emails, and individual conversations with prospective leaders. Finally, I reached out to a few key individuals who appeared to be natural leaders to see if they could lead a small group. However, all ten of the new group leaders who were ready to launch in January were individuals who came forward on a voluntary basis.

Phase Five: Training Virtual Small Group Leaders

The initial agreement the VSG leaders signed was that they would do their best to attend the group leader training. A vast majority of them honored that commitment. However, an unexpected dynamic soon surfaced. Of the ten new group leaders, several were mature, educated, experienced in small groups, and did not need much small group-leader training because they had been through that process already. However, a few of the group leaders started with no experience. This varied experience made a one-size-fits-all training impractical. Therefore, I decided to share the concepts behind small groups, building community, the importance of forming relationships, and, ultimately, building trust within the groups. I also offered to be available to younger leaders specifically to help coach them through any issues that could arise. In addition, I covered the NCD survey results in detail in the February meeting. I also shared with the leaders the questions on the survey relating to HSGs and the church's scores (see Table 5). Finally, I drew the leaders' attention to the four specific questions on the survey that scored the lowest.

Question 34. "My small group helps me to grow in my spiritual life."

Question 55. "I am a member of a small group in our church where others will pray with me if I need it."

Question 65. "I am a member of a small group in which I feel at home."

Question 90. "In my small group we trust each other."

I realized that these four lowest-scoring questions on the December 2020 survey dealt with the trust and comfortable feeling with others in the church. Thus, not only was the Redding Church facing a small group challenge, but also a trust issue. Therefore, I

felt it necessary to share this realization with the leaders because they needed to be aware of the scores. This awareness would help the leaders intentionally create a group in which people could trust each other and feel more comfortable attending.

Because the groups were starting on Zoom or Google Meet, I attempted to verify that the group leaders could use the technology of Zoom or Google Meet. Of those who attended the training, about 50 % attended in person and 50% on Zoom. This March meeting covered the importance of looking for and developing new leaders within their small groups.

Phase Six: Launching Virtual Small Groups

The initial launch of VSGs started with ten groups in January 2021. The challenge quickly arose that one group in particular needed help understanding the technology. I reached out to the Information Technology individual at Redding Adventist Academy, a Zoom and Google Meet expert. Over a few weeks, he attempted to help train this group leader on the technology. Unfortunately, this leader never did get the technology to work and finally transitioned the group to another leader. This is Group #1 in Table 6, listed below.

Most of the small groups started virtually, except for an outdoor men's group that centered around disk golf and Group #2 that was both virtual and included outdoor activities. The other eight began virtually via Zoom and Google Meet. The make-up of the Groups was as follows.

Table 6

Virtual Small Group Demographic at Launch

Group Number	Group Theme	Number in Group
Group #1	Walk through Romans	8
Group #2	Youth Group 1	18
Group #3	Youth Group 2	18
Group#4	Ladies Group Crafting	8
Group #5	Ladies Prayer Group	12
Group #6	Biblical Languages	7
Group #7	Men’s Outdoor Group	13
Group #8	Prayer Group	12
Group #9	Study Group	13
Group #10	Pre-Teen Group	9

Phase Seven: Multiplication of Small Groups

I trained the group leaders and intentionally focused on developing new leaders. This intentionality paid off. Throughout the intervention, eight new leaders stepped up to lead seven additional groups. These groups are listed in Table 7.

We lost two groups from the initial launch date within the first two months. The first was Group #1, as stated earlier. The group just could not get the technology to work. The leader transitioned the technology to another person who ran the Zoom, and the leader covered the lesson. Nevertheless, it still did not work. They folded their group in February. In Group #6, the leader expressed his displeasure with the church for not opening up against State guidelines. Several neighboring churches were open, and he

Table 7

Small Groups Added During Intervention

Group Number	Theme	Attendance
Group # 11	Bible Marking	12
Group #12	Bible Study Outdoors	9
Group #13	Mom’s Watercolor	9
Group #14	Ladies Running	6
Group #16	Ladies Lunch	15
Group #17	Experiencing God	20
	Total in all groups	189

felt strongly about meeting in person and decided to transfer to a different church. His group also folded in early February.

By the middle of February, several of the groups were struggling. The outdoor men's group and Youth Group #1 were doing well. Both were in-person and abided by the guidelines through social distancing and being outdoors. However, Youth Group #2 was not doing as well. The leader, who was a young person, asked for additional assistance. Their attendance was down to about three people. Then, in early February 2021, the State of California lifted the church Covid-19 restrictions, thus allowing churches to open up again.

This change in status prompted the Youth Group #2 leader to ask permission to transition from the virtual platform to in-person. Thus, by March, Youth Group #2 transitioned to in-person meetings and saw an immediate spike in attendance to double digits. They eventually had up to eighteen young people attending. A few months later,

the leader of Youth Group #2 told her group that she was leaving to go to a boarding academy out of the area and asked if anyone would like to step into her role. To her astonishment, her younger sister who had helped her with all the prior meetings, said, “I will do it.” Her younger sister took over as leader and continued leading this group throughout the intervention period. At the close of the intervention period, this Group was running strong. As spring 2021 approached, several other groups also started transitioning to in-person meetings.

All the seven new groups that started over the intervention met in person. In addition, seven out of the first ten had transitioned out of the virtual platform and into in-person meetings by the intervention’s close.

Phase Eight: Re-Evaluation and Assessment

Phase Eight was to retake the NCD survey at the end of the intervention. The strategy was to implement VSGs for 6–8 months and then re-evaluate using NCD a second time to determine whether VSGs impacted the NCD scores in the area of HSGs.

On September 1, 2021, I initiated NCD a second time to measure the impact on HSGs in the Redding Church. The September 2021 NCD survey was sent again via email, this time to about 62 Redding Church members to request that they take the NCD survey. This time, the survey was sent to 45% males and 55% females. The age breakdown for this second survey turned out to be more widespread for those who completed the second survey.

The second survey was sent to about 20 people fewer than the first NCD survey. This was attributed to email addresses that were filtered out as not valid in the first survey. The first survey was sent to almost the entire email list that the Redding Church

had on file. However, a number of those email addresses were not valid. Thus, those inaccurate email addresses were removed. Although not equal among all age groups, there was a more balanced age range for this second survey. Those 70 years of age and older and those 41–50 years of age participated equally in completing this second survey (see Figure 2).

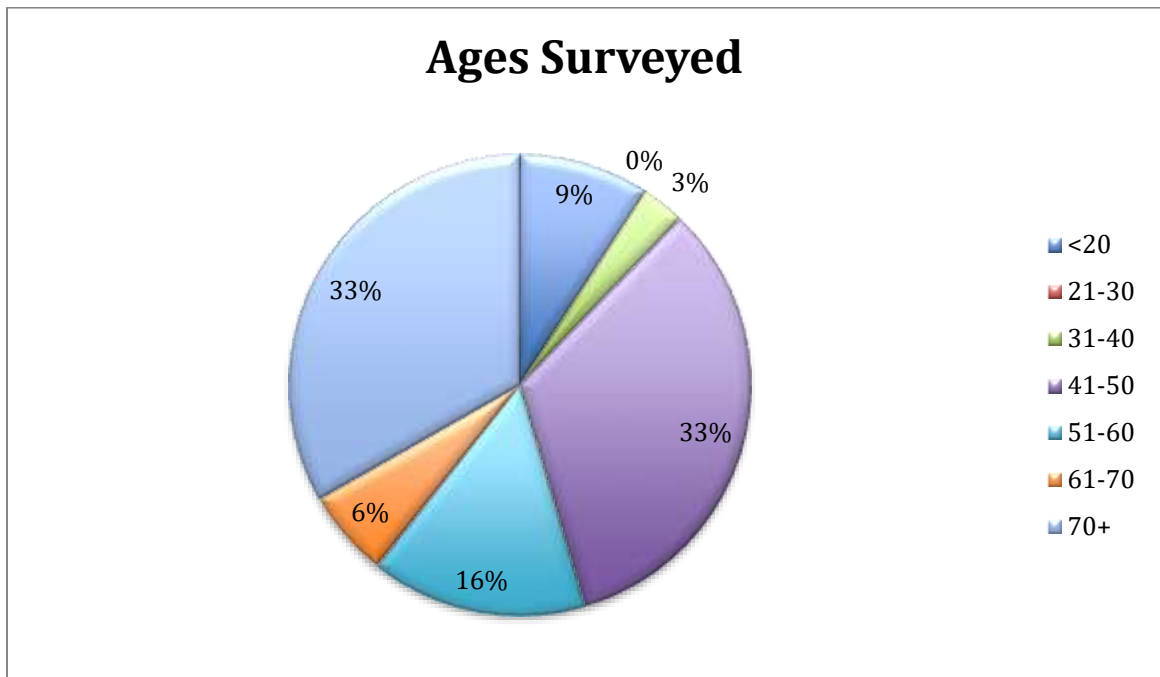


Figure 2. Age percentage of members who completed the September 2021 NCD survey.

Phase Nine: Refocus

This phase was originally intended to take place after the completion of the intervention, with the second NCD survey. I then determined the impact and effectiveness of the intervention and developed a path forward in the Redding Church that either refocused the strategy moving beyond the intervention or shifted to a different category of NCD based on the results of the second NCD survey in September 2021.

However, after a month into the intervention, I had to refocus and allow natural adjustments to the intervention plan because of the adjustments to Covid-19 guidelines that specifically targeted churches. The headline from *USA Today* on February 6, 2021 read, “Supreme Court blocks enforcement of some California COVID-19 rules for churches” (Fritze, 2021). This ruling by the US Supreme court essentially impacted the intervention. After lockdowns for much of the previous year, people were tired of the restrictions and wanted to get back to meeting in person. Not all groups transitioned to in-person because many of the members did not yet feel comfortable meeting in-person. However, another phenomenon surfaced. People began to experience something referred to as “Zoom Fatigue.” The *Harvard Business Review* stated the following:

“Zoom fatigue” stems from how we process information over video. On a video call the only way to show we're paying attention is to look at the camera. But, in real life, how often do you stand within three feet of a colleague and stare at their face? Probably never. This is because having to engage in a "constant gaze" makes us uncomfortable and tired. (Fosslien & Duffy, 2020, para. 5)

Much of the feedback coming to me from the Redding members was that people were tired of all the Zoom meetings, and it started to impact the groups.

After the US Supreme Court ruling, the members of the Redding Church started pushing to transition to in-person events, including worship services and small groups. A majority of the Redding members I spoke with were suffering from Zoom fatigue. Many adults would go to work and have Zoom calls for much of their day. Many of the young people were in school and used Google Meet or Zoom for classes for school and were spending several hours a day on computers and phones. In February, Youth Group #2's leader (Melody) was so concerned that she approached me, stating that she could not get people to join the meetings: “Nobody wants to get on one more Zoom call” (personal

communication, February 2021). Upon learning of this US Supreme Court ruling, she asked permission to transition to in-person meetings. Around the beginning of March, Youth Group #2 transitioned to meeting in person.

Because various guidelines were still in place, the church was cautious in having groups transition. At the end of this intervention, one group remained virtual and plans on remaining virtual for the foreseeable future. There were two primary reasons that one group remained virtual. One, Covid-19, has not gone away and several are still concerned for their safety. The second reason is convenience. Some members live quite a distance from others in their Group, and they find it much more convenient to meet online than in person.

The Redding Church did retake the NCD in early September 2021. The results will be discussed in the next chapter.

Conclusion

In conclusion, much of this intervention was completed as planned, except for small groups transitioning out of virtual platforms into in-person meetings. The NCD measured church health by using the survey both at the beginning and the end of the intervention period as planned. I expected low NCD scores at the beginning of the survey in the area of HSGs; however, the beginning NCD scores came in significantly lower in the first survey than I had expected. Thus, this intervention was both a success and a failure. The groups were established and functioning, but yet some struggled with the virtual dynamic.

CHAPTER 6

PROJECT EVALUATIONS AND LEARNINGS

Summary

This project ultimately sought to create a healthier church environment in the Redding Church by increasing a better sense of biblical community by launching virtual HSGs. An NCD survey was conducted in the Redding Church in December 2020, thus identifying the minimum factor as HSGs with a score of “1.”

Due to the restrictions related to Covid-19 and the stay-at-home orders issued by the State of California, this project launched HSGs virtually in late December 2020. Monthly small-group-leader training via Zoom also started in December 2020. As lockdowns began to lift in the spring of 2021 and the ability to assemble in person became available, many Small Groups transitioned back to in-person groups starting in the spring of 2021.

Description of Methods

Natural Church Development was the evaluation tool for this project. The Redding Church’s email addresses were edited to ensure the accuracy of the results. The NCD survey was sent to all current attending members’ email addresses to ensure confidentiality. After a benchmark of 30 responses was received, the Northern California Conference closed the survey, had the results tallied, and forwarded them to me. Of the

eight quality characteristics in NCD, this project was specifically interested in the questions and category relating to HSGs. The questions on the NCD Survey that were specifically relevant and related to HSGs can be seen in Table 3 in Chapter 4. Table 8 gives the results of the two NCD surveys. The data clearly shows a remarkable difference in the HSGs scores overall.

Table 8

NCD Score Comparison December 2020 to September 2021

First Holistic Small Group Score (December 2020)	Second Holistic Small Group Score (September 2021)	Difference
1	51	+50

The score comparisons for each of the Holistic Small Group questions before and after the intervention are given below in Table 9.

In reviewing all the questions relating to HSGs, only one question had a score go down. Question 27, “In my small group we spend time on things which are irrelevant to me.” Perhaps, prior to implementation, when no small groups were held, they were not spending time on “irrelevant things” because they were not spending time on anything at all. However, after implementation, they spent time in a small group, and while the score did go down, it was still a high score at 71.

Table 9

NCD Holistic Small Group Questions Score Comparison

NCD Holistic Small Group Questions	First	Second
11. "My small group helps me with the challenges of my life."	9	47
27. "In my small group we spend time on things which are irrelevant to me."	76	71
34. "My small group helps me to grow in my spiritual life."	-4	51
49. "I am a member of a group in our church where it is possible to talk about personal problems."	16	45
54. "In the groups I belong to it is easy for newcomers to be integrated."	27	53
55. "I am a member of a small group in our church where others will pray with me if I need it."	-1	44
65. "I am a member of a small group in which I feel at home."	-4	53
76. "The leaders of our small group are trained for their task."	15	47
78. "Our small groups activity seek to multiply themselves."	6	50
90. "In my small group we trust each other."	-14	54

The NCD question with the most significant improvement was question #90, "In my small group we trust each other." Before implementation, this was the lowest score on the survey (-14). After implementation, the score improved to +54. This improvement has several positive aspects. It demonstrates the building of trust among those who took the survey and is a strong indicator of an increased sense of biblical community. Another improvement was witnessed in question #11, "My small group helps me with the challenges of my life." The previous score of "9" improved to "47"; while not a great score, it improved significantly. This question also affirms the premise in the literature

review that people grow better in groups. This idea that people grow better in groups is confirmed by question #34, where the score for spiritual growth went up significantly, and in question #65, that showed people feel “at home” in their group. The scores showed significant improvement and reflected positively on the overall improvement in feelings of biblical community.

Outcomes

The outcomes of this project are unique. Some are easily measured, and some are not. The overall scores relating to HSGs increased significantly by 50 points. While showing great strides in the right direction, the Redding Church still has plenty of work to do since none of the categories reached the NCD “65 hypotheses” benchmark (Schwarz, 1996, pp. 39–40). Even in the category of HSGs, the score of “51” falls short of the 65-benchmark score. The outcomes that are not as easily measured are the results of the virtual dynamic of the project. Approximately two months into the project, the VSGs’ attendance could have improved. One group folded because the leader did not understand technology, and several others struggled with attendance. As the lockdown lifted in the spring of 2021, groups began to request being able to meet in person. As a result, attendance in the groups increased significantly. When I spoke to many group leaders and attendees, it seemed that one major contributor to the lack of attendance in the virtual groups was attributed to “Zoom fatigue,” as discussed in the previous chapter.

Ultimately, HSGs scores increased tremendously; however, how much of that increase can be credited to online versus in-person? It is challenging to measure. Judging by attendance in the groups, in-person group attendance was significantly higher. Interestingly, after the project, one group is still meeting weekly via Zoom. An

observation of all the members of this group is that none of them use Zoom for any other purpose—not for employment—and they live considerable distances apart. This was unlike others, many of whom used Zoom and Google Meet for work or school during the day and were much more likely to experience Zoom fatigue.

Summary of Conclusions

Theological Conclusions of Chapter 2

This project focused on implementing virtual small groups in the Redding Church. While there is no biblical mandate on the virtual aspect of this project, HSGs are a vital tool to establish biblical community among believers. Biblical community is the optimal environment where spiritual growth and discipleship take place. It has been shown that healthy churches grow and produce more fruit than unhealthy churches. Small groups are a critical component of healthy churches that provide many added benefits, including increased biblical community, greater member involvement, broader growth opportunity, and reduced pastoral dependence.

Theoretical Conclusions of Chapter 3

The literature reviewed indicated that healthy churches, like healthy soil, produce a greater harvest than unhealthy churches. It is challenging to measure church growth in attendance numbers because of Covid-19 lockdowns. Many churches have experienced reduced attendance upon reopening and returning to in-person services. Each church is unique, but this lack of attendance can largely be attributed to some people not yet ready to return to church or some who may not ever return because of the risk factors of Covid-19 related to health or age. The literature indicated, and this project confirmed, the

premise that people grow better in groups. The literature reviewed in this project stated that when people are in biblical community, they are more likely to experience an increase in spiritual growth. The NCD scores indicate that this is accurate. They clearly show that the Redding Church's small groups were fostering their spiritual growth (see the results of question #34 in Table 9).

Methodological Conclusions of Chapter 4

This project also confirms that several of the methods that were implemented in this project had positive outcomes in the NCD scores. The first was casting vision. Second, the training that was conducted for small group leaders in this project came through in the NCD scores (see question #76, Table 9). I struggled with training because of the challenges with Zoom attendance, but the data results show an improvement in this area. Along those same lines, the literature strongly recommended creating HSGs that multiply. This intervention placed a strong emphasis on developing new leaders in the training of small group leaders. The NCD results also indicate an improvement in this category (see results for question #78, Table 9).

Interpretation and Conclusion of Data of Chapter 5

In the narrative of the intervention, several observations are noteworthy. In Phase One of the intervention, casting the vision for becoming a healthier church via small groups resulted in many advantages. Vision-casting assisted greatly in the church's being aware of what the intervention was aiming to accomplish and why the church was undertaking this intervention.

In Phase Two, "The Survey and Identification of the Minimum Factor," the initial

survey results were quite disturbing. HSGs were not only identified as the minimum factor, but its score was quite concerning at a score of “1,” a clear hindrance to church health and, thus, growth.

The destination point was clear in developing the intervention Strategy in Phase Three. The destination goal was a healthier church, achieved by increasing the Holistic Small Group score to within the healthy range. The challenge with Phase Three was not “why,” but “how.” Covid-19 had shut down in-person gatherings, and the very thing the church needed to do was to gather in small groups. Thus, the strategy was formed to work around the restrictions of Covid-19 and meet and gather online in small groups. The church had already gone online via Facebook Live for worship services, but this was a more concentrated effort. The church formed Small Groups that met online via Zoom or Google Meet. One unforeseen challenge this strategy should have considered was Internet and technology usage. This strategy proved very difficult for the elderly population of the church. In addition, several members of the Redding Church were limited in computers and technology. Many lived in rural communities and had challenges with stable Internet coverage that was adequate for Internet meetings.

Phase Four, Recruitment of Virtual Small Group Leaders, went remarkably well. I attribute this to the success of Phase One; when the vision was successfully cast, many in the church came forward to lead groups. The church launched ten groups at the beginning of the intervention, with more to follow in ensuing months.

Phase Five experienced many challenges, and several conclusions have been observed. Online small group training is challenging. It is almost impossible to train a person who does not understand the technology and then teach him/her to use the same

technology he/she does not understand. Phase Five started training via Zoom, and a few leaders could not understand the training; one group eventually dissolved because of technology issues. This phase confirmed the research expressed earlier in this project by Dunavant (2006): “The most effective training methods includes hands-on training (modeling). The least effective method is an expert lecturing on how to minister” (p. 94). Some leaders already had experience in leading small groups in the past and did quite well. If this was the first time for others to lead a group, they needed continued follow-up and one-on-one coaching from time to time.

In Phase Six, ten leaders emerged to lead groups at the beginning of the intervention. The goal was ten groups to start, and ten groups were achieved. The goal was achieved, likely due to the success of Phase One; the congregation embraced and accepted the vision.

Phase Seven was closely related to Phase Six, which involved adding additional leaders who had participated in other groups and then ended up starting groups of their own. These additional leaders help to confirm another observation about group multiplication. The small-group-Leader training included developing leaders within their groups; this element proved a great success since the church launched ten groups initially and then added seven more groups with new leaders within the intervention period. The concept of growth by group multiplication proved a great asset.

In Phase Eight, the NCD survey came back at the close of the intervention period. The results showed significant improvement in HSGs. These are some of the critical observations. First, before launching VSGs, the Redding Church members had been in lockdown and mostly shut up in their home except for essential outings. Many were

engaged in online formats like Zoom, Google Meet, or Facebook Live for church services, school, and employment. While the NCD scores showed significant improvement from December 2020 to September 2021, the scores do not reflect the feelings and attitudes towards the online formats (Zoom, Google Meet, Facebook Live). Redding members started giving critical feedback to me about Zoom Fatigue. This was evident as people began shifting to in-person small groups as soon as it was legal to do so. At the end of the intervention, all but one small group had transitioned into in-person meetings. The group members who did not use the online formats for work or school were those who made up the single group that remained online.

Phase Nine observed the need to re-evaluate Small Groups by understanding that the church is much healthier now than it had been in December 2020. The church has decided to strive to keep HSGs going and continue to focus on becoming a healthier church by using them as a tool to achieve a better biblical community. The major refocus is Holistic Small Group in-person versus online.

Over-reaching Conclusions

While the second NCD survey showed significant improvement in the category of HSGs, one significant limitation is evident; it does not measure or distinguish the virtual small group impact versus in-person small group scores. One critical element that I observed is that all the small groups, except Group #5 (see Table 6), that were virtual at their launch in January 2021 transitioned to in-person or closed within a few months. After communicating with group leaders and members as stated earlier, I attribute this to Zoom Fatigue. Several groups noticed a significant increase in participation when they transitioned to meeting in person. I asked Petr Činčala, Executive Director for NCD

America about the significance of virtual small groups transitioning to in-person small groups and their impact on NCD scores. He responded, “What the questions measure is more connected to the inner dynamics, not primarily to the environment. If there was a low community even before the COVID, then Covid (and virtual meetings) did not help” (Personal Communication, January 12, 2023). This means that NCD’s measurement of HSGs transcends the “virtual versus in-person” dynamic, and is, as he stated, “tied directly to the questions themselves.”

Personal Transformation as a Ministry Professional

In reviewing the completion of this project and the class time surrounding this program, some significant benefits have impacted my personal life and my skill set in ministry. One goal that I had when I entered the Doctor of Ministry program was to improve my skill set and improve my competencies in ministry. Acknowledging that there is always room for growth, I can recognize several positive skill sets that have improved as a result of this program. Before starting this program, I had not successfully led a single church through the NCD process. Thus, the first skill set that has impacted me is in the area of NCD. In March of 2021, I completed the NCD Coaches Training, and I am now on the Northern California Conference (NCC) list to assist by coaching other churches through the NCD process. The second skill set that has improved is in the area of coaching. I am currently part of the Coaching Collective in NCC, in which we are being trained to become better in coaching. Third, is an increase in Conference area responsibility. Before this program, I held no official responsibilities outside of typical pastoral responsibilities within my local Conference. I currently sit on the Pastoral Advisory Committee, I am the leader of the Area Pastors’ Group, I am part of the

Coaching Collective, and I am also part of the Evangelism Mastermind Committee.

I look forward to learning and developing these existing skill sets and any additional opportunities as the Lord leads.

Recommendations

Church Health is the goal that is consistently strived for but never fully achieved. Perhaps as Paul stated, “I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Eph 3:14, NIV). The NCD’s ability to help clarify a church’s health status and thus clarify the direction and goals a church should work toward is well established. The improvement in NCD scores during this intervention relating to HSGs is evidence that biblical community through HSGs is vitally important to church health. I recommend that churches engage in significant efforts to achieve a Holistic Small Group ministry. There are often hindrances to attaining this goal. As the Redding Church experienced in striving for VSGs, although the virtual aspect did not accomplish our desired goal of VSGs, God still worked through small groups to create a healthier church. I recommend doing whatever it takes to achieve what God is calling your church to do. The research indicated that people grow better in groups. The data reflected that truth. I recommend HSGs to help facilitate spiritual growth, and this happens best in biblical community, which HSGs promote.

Final Word

The Church is always looking at the latest methods to assist in the mission of the church. Online platforms provide many helpful ways to connect when other options are unavailable. However, they did not prove to be a replacement for in-person connections.

Perhaps there is wisdom in Heb 10:25: “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (NIV).

APPENDIX A

REDDING SMALL GROUP APPLICATION FORM

Leader Name(s):
Group purpose, plan, or idea:
Location: (Zoom, Google Meet, a house, etc.)
Group size: (ideally @8-12)

*To ensure integrity within our church it is my intent and I hereby promise not to teach anything that contradicts the commonly accepted beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

In-addition, I agree to do my best to attend group leader training sessions that will occur once per month (via Zoom or also available in-person if Covid restrictions are lifted)

Leader Signature: _____
Date: _____

Co-Leaders Signature: _____
Date: _____

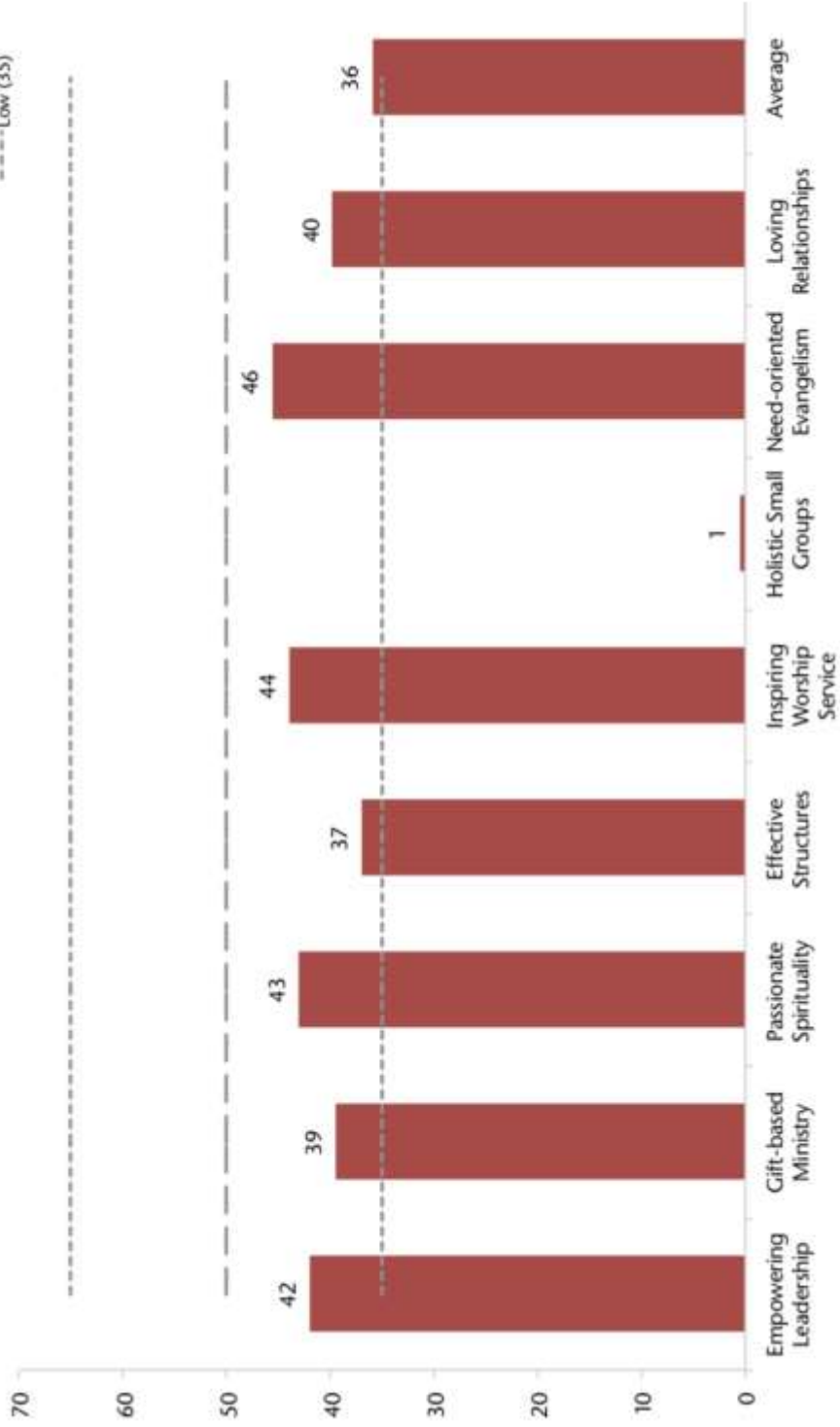
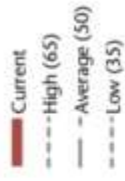
Co-Leaders Signature: _____
Date: _____

APPENDIX B

NATURAL CHURCH DEVELOPMENT PRE-
INITIATIVE SURVEY RESULTS
(Dec. 2020)



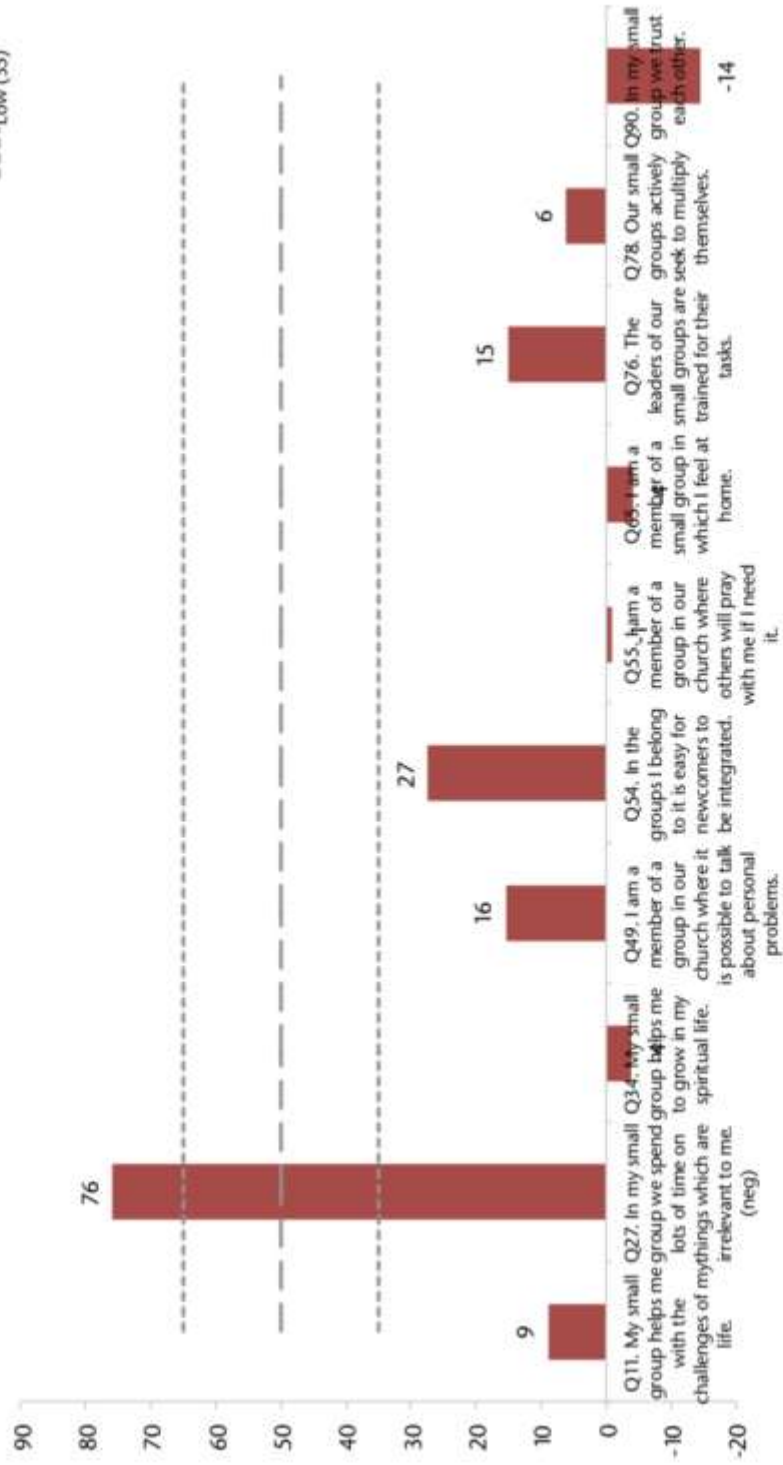
Quality Characteristic Current Profile





Holistic Small Groups Current Profile

■ Current
--- High (65)
--- Average (50)
--- Low (35)

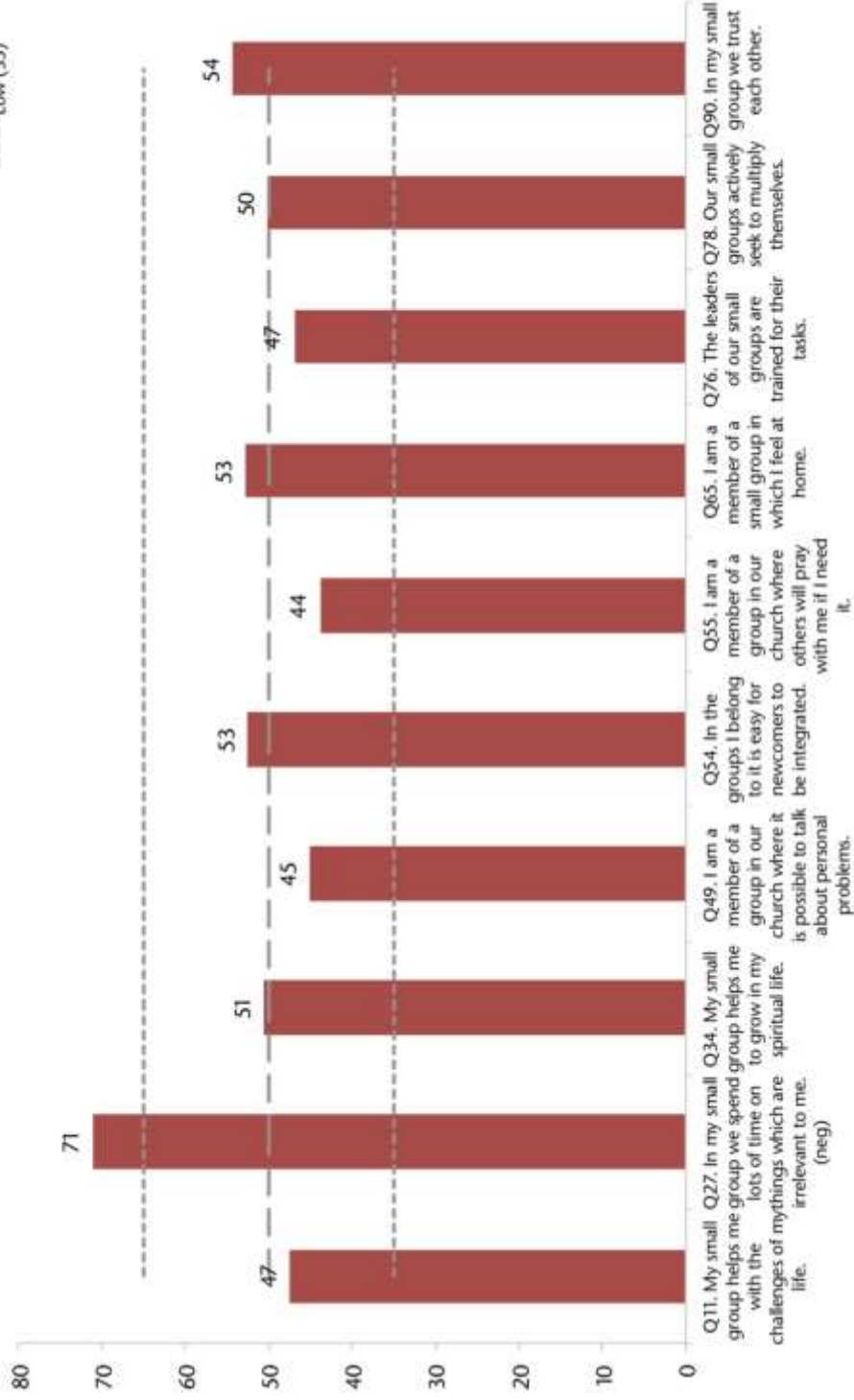
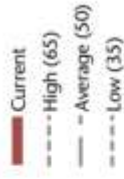


APPENDIX C

NATURAL CHURCH DEVELOPMENT POST-
INITIATIVE SURVEY RESULTS
(Sept. 2021)

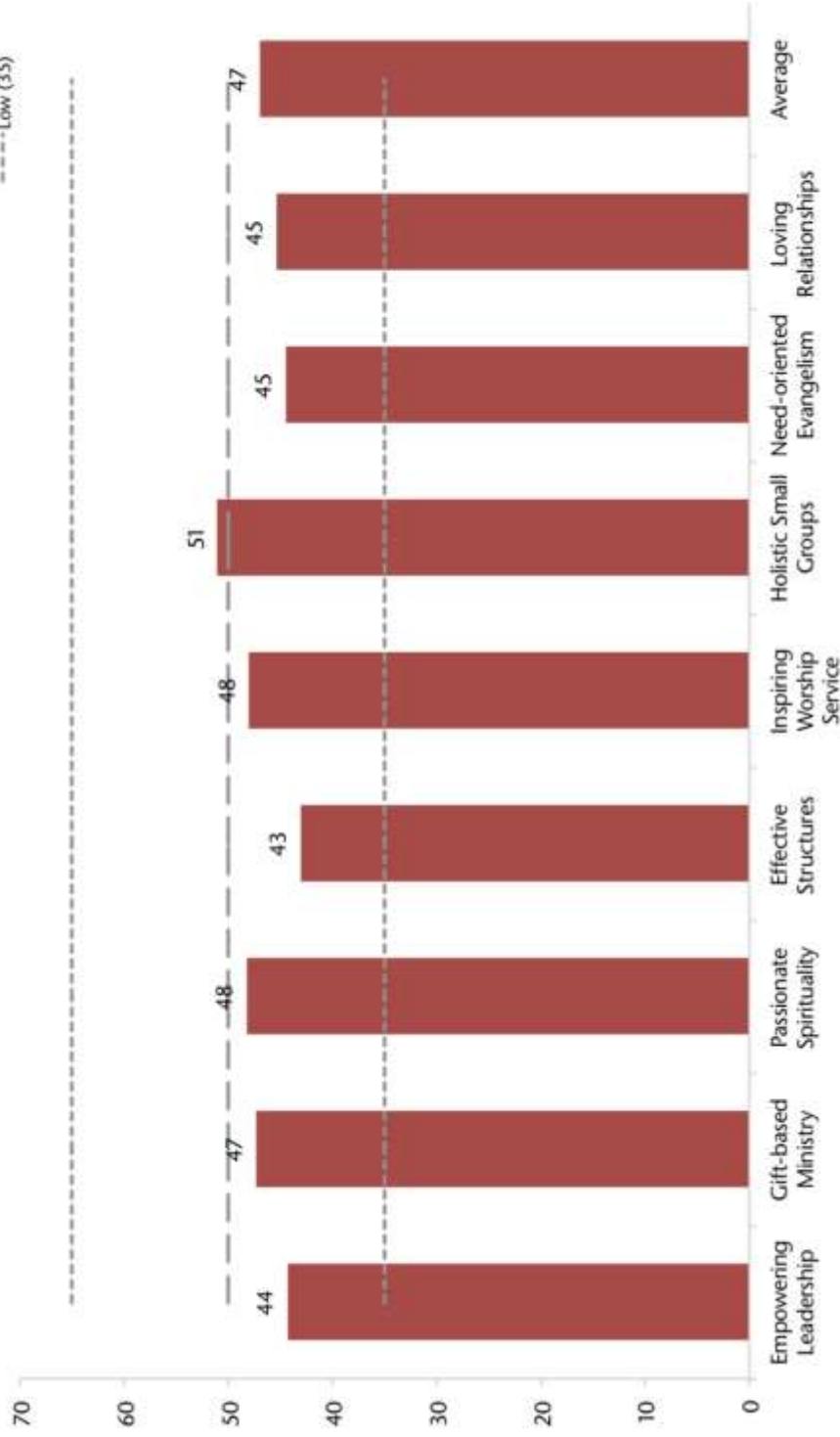
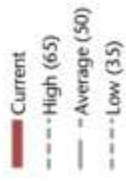


Holistic Small Groups Current Profile





Quality Characteristic Current Profile



REFERENCE LIST

REFERENCE LIST

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CURRICULUM VITA

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Name: Robert Fisher

Birthdate: May 9, 1972

Family: wife: Lenea; children: Melody, Hannah, and Timothy

Education:

2017-2023 Doctor of Ministry (Emphasis: Leading for Growth and Church Multiplication), Andrews University Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

2004-2007 Master of Divinity, Andrews University Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

1998 BA in Business Administration – HealthCare Management, Concordia University, Portland, OR

Ordained:

2010 Ordained by Pennsylvania Conference

Experience:

2019-Current Pastor of the Redding Seventh-day Adventist Church, Redding, California

2014-2019 District Pastor of the Brownsville, Dobbins, and Gridley Seventh-day Adventist Churches (Northern California Conference)

2011-2014 District Pastor of the Beaumont, Drums, Slocum, and Wyoming Valley Seventh-day Adventist Churches (Pennsylvania Conference)

2007-2011 District Pastor of the Distant, Indiana, Johnstown, Laurel Lake, and Washington Heights Seventh-day Adventist Churches (Pennsylvania Conference)