

SMALL GROUP MINISTRIES AND SUPPORT GROUPS

About the Author

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INTRODUCTION

Before He left, Jesus gave his disciples a task we sometimes refer to as the "Great Commission." Matthew 28:19 says, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." If you were to break this important assignment down into two main parts, you would have "go" and "make disciples." The "go" part means we can't expect people to just walk into our church and ask to be baptized—we need to go get them and introduce them to our friend Jesus. Baptism and teaching are a part of making them disciples; helping them to become more like this Jesus they have decided to follow.

I am so excited to share with you today what has proven to be one of the most effective tools known to the church for connecting people to Jesus and growing them in discipleship: the small group. You see, to fulfill the Great Commission, we need to be not only "fishers of men" and women, but keepers of the aquarium! Spirit-filled small groups can help a church be successful at both.

Our world is crying out for authentic, loving, God-honoring community. Without Christian community we are lonely and not as effective in serving God. When people are not in authentic relationship with God and others they often try to fill that need to belong unwisely; turning to bars, gangs, and other substitutes to find acceptance and purpose. It is through relationships with God and each other that we find fulfillment and growth. It is through authentic relationship that we reach out to others most effectively. **(OH-1)** Small groups are an effective tool for healthy spiritual and community relationships.

BIBLICAL BASES FOR SMALL GROUPS (OH-2)

The Small Group is not a new idea. God has been employing this wonderful tool for millennia.

A. The New Testament Model of Group-Based Discipleship

Discipleship is often thought to take place primarily in one-on-one Bible studies. But in the New Testament, making disciples was a group event. As Phil Donahue notes in his book, *Leading Life-Changing Small Groups (LLSG)*: "The scriptures rarely record our Lord meeting with fewer than three of the twelve disciples. . . ." He goes on to note that "As we look at one-on-one encounters between Jesus and Peter, Paul and Timothy, and Paul and Silas, it is clear these are leadership development relationships, not basic discipleship."

Donahue points out that "discipling in the context of group life . . . allows disciples to grow in Christ by experiencing the teaching, mentoring, love, encouragement, and giftedness of many brothers and sisters in Christ. . . . Ministry in and through groups and teams more accurately reflects the New Testament model (Mark 3:14; Matt. 10:5-42; Acts 13:2; Acts 16:1-5)" (*LLSG*, 145). This also keeps a new disciple from becoming a clone of any one member and encourages an atmosphere of mutual support, ministry, accountability, and training.

B. The Example of the Early Christians

One of the best descriptions of this kind of group can be found in Acts 2:42-47:

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

This is a description of the apostolic church. They were involved in accomplishing all the purposes that a church today should be involved in accomplishing: Worship, Community, Continual Spiritual Growth (or "Discipleship"), Service, and Outreach (or "Evangelism"). And church didn't just happen one day a week for a couple of hours; they met together during the week, too!

Let's look more closely at the group life of the early Christian church, because here we find all the elements of a successful small group as well as the five purposes of a small group. As we read over Acts 2:42-47 again, see if you can guess which of the five purposes (worship, community, continual spiritual growth, service, or outreach) it helps to fulfill. **(OH-3)**

1. *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching"*
Element: Bible study (or the study of material that is solidly Biblical)
Purpose: continual spiritual growth, (also known as "discipleship")
2. *"and to the fellowship"*
Element: sharing each other's lives
Purpose: community
3. *"to the breaking of bread"*
Element: food: eating together
Purpose: community
4. *"and to prayer."*
Element: prayer
Purpose: continual spiritual growth
5. *"Everyone was filled with awe,"*
Element: God shows up! God's presence is a fulfillment of the promise of Jesus in Matthew 18:20, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I with them."
Purpose: worship, outreach (OH-4)
6. *". . . and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles."*
Element: miracles (life change is the greatest miracle!)
Purpose: outreach, service
7. *"All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need."*
Element: in-reach ministry or "keeping the aquarium"—taking care of those within the body of Christ
Purpose: service, community, also outreach because "They'll know we are Christians by our love."
8. *"Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts."*
Element: meeting together at church—the larger gathering
Purpose: worship, community (OH-5)
9. *"They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God"*
Element: small home groups
Purpose: community, worship, continual spiritual growth

10. *"and enjoying the favor of all the people."*

Element: Purposeful presence in the community. This means they were interacting with their community, and the people in the community were favorably impressed.

Purpose: outreach—the "go" part of the Great Commission

11. *"And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."*

Element: Life transformation is the fruit of "Go-ing"— people saved!

Purpose: outreach

THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL SMALL GROUP (OH-6)

We can break the elements of the Acts group into even more simple categories and we will have the essentials elements for a successful small group:

1. *People*—A small group of people (no more than 12 is best) who meet regularly (once a week is often best) and sincerely invite God's presence into their midst. (He will come!)
2. *Food*—Even if it's as simple as popcorn and water, there is something about eating together that breaks down the barriers between people. It also gives seekers who might be embarrassed an excuse to come.
3. *Bible study and life application*—or a relevant study based on sound biblical principles. The key to this element is the emphasis is on life application, not just head knowledge (or in the language of Jesus, we must be "doers" not just "hearers" of the Word.)
4. *Sharing each other's lives*—This is a critical piece! Don't leave it out or let it dominate. Authentic sharing about what is going on in people's lives will allow group members to:
 - hold each other accountable to the changes God is calling them to make in their lives
 - encourage and pray for each other as needs arise
 - celebrate each other's victories and praise God for His goodness

Let people talk about what is going on in their lives and how what the group is studying is making a difference in their work and relationships. As member's needs come up, let the Holy Spirit guide you in empowering group members to address those needs outside the group as well, if needed.

5. *Prayer*—Sincere prayer is the key to the success of any group. Pray as you're planning whom to invite, as you prepare, and during the week for each member. Make sure to leave time for this element during your small group time. Encourage people to pray for what is really on their hearts—not just for the health of distant relatives. Let this be a time to praise, thank, petition, and confess to God.

6. *Purposeful presence in the community*—If we are to be the salt of the earth we need to get out of the salt shaker and into the world! The presence of Holy Spirit-filled Christians in the world is redemptive. Pray with your group members about how you can serve the people in your community and invest in relationship with them. Eventually the time will come when the Holy Spirit impresses you to invite some of these contacts to your small group. You may never see the kingdom result in the lives of many of the people you serve. But God will use the memory of pleasant, loving Christians to soften their heart to the gospel and someone else may reap what you have sown.

This is evangelism as Jesus did it. In *The Desire of Ages*, p. 151, Ellen White tells us that before Jesus started his preaching ministry, He had gained the confidence of the people because He spent time “among them, as one who desired their good.” Besides group activities, encourage your group to spend time with individuals as well. Remind them of the importance of positive interaction with unbelievers, telling stories of how God has blessed when you have tried it personally. Each week ask how they are doing on this aspect and/or assigning outreach accountability partners.

There are different kinds of small groups within a church. We will look at some that meet specific needs, such as recovering from grief, later in this seminar. But a basic small group made up of these six elements: 12 or less people who meet and invite God's presence, food, Bible study and life application (or study based on biblical principles), life sharing, prayer, and purposeful presence in the community, is the most basic kind of small group.

The members of a life-changing small group will experience to some extent each of the five life purposes of a Christian—worship, community, continual spiritual growth, service, and outreach—in their group life.

From the first century to the 21st century, in all different parts of the world, the small group has been successful in bringing people into transforming relationship with Jesus Christ and providing a place for continual spiritual growth to occur.

The small group is a valuable tool in the church's effort to fulfill the Great Commission.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTINUAL SPIRITUAL GROWTH (DISCIPLESHIP)

Continual spiritual growth is the goal of the Christian; Jesus promised that those who abide in (remain/stay connected to) Him will grow! They will produce fruit (John 15:5). They will be changed to be more like Jesus. And small groups are where this life transformation takes place most effectively—even more than a church setting alone.

WHAT MAKES SMALL GROUPS SO EFFECTIVE FOR LIFE TRANSFORMATION? (OH-7)

A. The Small Group compared to the Church Service

Why are small groups so effective at being a catalyst for life transformation? While worshiping together with a larger group of believers and listening to a sermon is very important to the growth of a believer, it is possible to go to church year after year and remain unchanged in the pew. The church service can be a largely passive experience. You go. You listen to the pastor. You leave. It is easy to mentally agree with the sermon and yet go back out into the world and remain unchanged; to hold the principles preached in one's head but practice quite a different lifestyle at home, in our relationships, or in our job.

A small group gives people a chance to discuss what they have heard and studied. An effective small group will always lead people to consider how what they have learned impacts their lives. Group members have the encouragement of other group members, and often an accountability partner. It was extremely important to Jesus that people were not only "hearers" but *doers* of the Word. He is recorded as addressing this point in many different ways throughout the gospels.

Paul also addresses this concern in Romans 2:23, 29: "You are so proud of knowing God's laws, but you dishonor Him by breaking them. . . for God is not looking for [religious knowledge], but He is looking for those with changed hearts and minds" (The Living Bible). "*How will I be different today because of what I have learned?*" is a question that an effective small group leader will encourage her members to consider at the end of every study.

B. Intrinsic Human Needs

The human need for authentic relationship with God and each other is another aspect of human nature that makes the small group model work so well for the

church. We need to know and be known, love and be loved, serve and be served (or care for and be taken care of), celebrate and be celebrated.

Even God exists in relationship, the tri-unity: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The creation of our race started with the longing of God to be in relationship with us; salvation history records the lengths to which He would go to maintain that connection.

"The formation of small companies as a basis of Christian effort is a plan that has been presented before 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 also" *Evangelism*, p.115.

Small groups are where front-line ministry happens. They provide member care so people already in the church don't slip away, as well as a safe place to bring people who are searching.

I hope that by now you are excited about employing the ministry of small groups in your church. So, how do you start?

SMALL GROUP MINISTRY; HOW DO I GET STARTED? (OH-8)

1. Start with prayer!

This is such an effective ministry that the devil will try to derail it from the start. Drench your efforts with prayer.

- Is God calling *you*? Petition God until you feel confident that God is calling you to be part of getting a small group(s) going at your church.
- What part is He asking you to play? Also spend time in prayer to get a sense of *what* it is He is asking you to do: Get people excited about small groups? Start a small group? Talk to a friend with the gift of leadership? Don't move until you know what part in this ministry God wants you to play.
- Is this God's timing? Ask God for wisdom to know if this is the best time to start a small group(s) in your church. Should you wait until after summer is over, or until the current evangelistic series has ended? Wait for God to give you affirmation that this is the time for you to start building up a small group ministry.
- Ask God to bring to your mind people to work with. If you are considering starting up several small groups, you will need to prayerfully approach leaders in your church. Most importantly, look for women who are actively engaged in a growing relationship with Jesus and seek to continue growing. Consider:

- Spirit-led women who exhibit a humble, teachable spirit.
- Women with whom you are already serving in women's ministries or whom you suspect you would work well with.
- Women who have influence in your church. If you can win them over, you also win all the people that respect their opinion.
- Women who show leadership potential and whom you believe might be good small group leaders or hostesses.

2. Model and Mentor

The best way to convince someone of the power of small groups is to let them experience it for themselves! If you are planning on starting a small group ministry, you might first want to lead a small group made up of women whom you think might make good leaders of small groups.

- Speak individually with the women you hope to have in your pilot small group. Help them understand the power of small groups and ask them to pray about their possible involvement.
- Gather the women for an initial meeting and discuss what small groups could do for the women in your church and community. Choose a time, topic, and the duration of the pilot small group.
- After several small group meetings together, start giving each of the group members a chance to lead. Meet with them before to pray and support them and afterward to debrief and assess how it went.

HOW DO I FIND SMALL GROUP LEADERS? (OH-9)

1. Look for group members who take the group seriously.
2. Consider those people who challenge your leadership. These may be potential leaders who are frustrated.
3. Look for gifted people whom you can recognize and affirm.
4. Pray regularly for guidance. **(OH-10)**
5. Look for people who embrace the small group vision.
6. Try to look for people who exhibit the following spiritual, emotional, and social qualifications:

Spiritual

- Do they see God working in their life?
- Are they self-feeders? (Do they consistently spend time nurturing their own spiritual growth through time in God's word and in prayer?)
- Are they eager to learn? (Do they actively participate in spiritual discussions?)
- Do they share the vision of small groups?
- Do they have a humble, teachable spirit?

Emotional

- Are they secure enough to be vulnerable and open with the group?
- Are they emotionally stable? (Are they aware enough of their own strengths and weaknesses; not subject to mood swings that affect the group dynamic?)
- How do they respond to confrontation and character development? Defensively? Responsively?

Social

- Do they openly participate without dominating? (If this is an issue, how did they respond to confrontation on the issue?)
 - Are they able to listen to others in a caring way?
 - Are they able to facilitate discussion?
7. At the end of the duration of your pilot group, talk with potential leaders and hostesses from your group to assess their interest in leading the discussion or hosting a group.

HOW DO I OVERCOME THE OBJECTIONS OF POTENTIAL LEADERS? (OH-11)

Typical objections to becoming a group leader include:

1. *"I just don't have the time."* Remember, people make time for those things they believe are important. Share the importance of small group leadership in the body of Christ. Emphasize the life change that can occur as they rise to the occasion and accept the challenge of leading a group.
2. *"I don't have the gift of leadership."* Encourage people by reminding them that leadership is mostly character. It takes time to develop character and competency (skills). If you believe someone has the basic character qualities of a potential leader, let them know you are willing to make sure they get appropriate training to ensure they will be effective.
3. *"I'm not the leadership type."* At this point you need to simply explore what the person means by "leadership type." Perhaps they have a definition of leadership that is not biblical. Perhaps they view a leader as someone who is in charge and in control, as opposed to someone who can facilitate life change by caring for, shepherding, discipling, and loving others.

The next step is to set up a time to train your leaders.

TRAINING YOUR SMALL GROUP LEADERS

"Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock." (1 Peter 5:2-3). **(OH-12)**

A. What qualities should a small group leader have?

1. A growing relationship with Jesus
2. A sense that God is calling her to lead a small group
 - A passion for nurturing others in the Lord (John 21:15-17, 1 Peter 5:1-4)
 - Joy in relating to others in a way that brings them together in group life (Heb. 10:24-25)
 - A sense that her genuine walk with God will be an example to others (1 Thess. 2:10-13)
3. Character and skill
 - Love (John 13:34-35)
 - Integrity (1 Timothy 3:1-7)
 - Fruit-bearing (Gal. 5:22-23)
 - Servanthood (Mark 10:35-45)
 - Able to teach and manage responsibilities (1 Timothy 3:1-7)
 - Able to stand up for sound doctrine (Titus 1:9)
 - Lead with diligence (Romans 12:8)
 - Shepherd with eagerness (1 Peter 5:1-4)

While no one would argue that this list of character traits and skills are important for a leader, reading this list of character traits with one's self in mind can be a little intimidating! You may want to assure your small group leader (and yourself!) that she is not expected to be fully developed in all these traits and skills when she becomes a group leader; however, she should make it her aim to develop them as she matures in Christ. **(OH-13)**

B. What are the basic responsibilities of a small group leader?

1. Find a hostess for your small group (a place to meet and a person to be responsible for the meeting place.) Work with your hostess to plan your meeting schedule and any other important details such as refreshments and child care if necessary. Remember to update your meeting schedule regularly with your hostess.
2. Conduct Life-Changing Group Meetings. As the small group leader, your responsibility includes assembling the group and leading the time in a way

that facilitates self-disclosure, understanding and application of the Word, and mutual care and support.

3. Prepare for your small group. Identify who will be in your group and challenge them to make a commitment for a period of time. A group can grow to about eight to twelve people and still experience discussion and vulnerable sharing. Use the natural connections or relationships that you already have to find your group. This might include people in your ministry, neighborhood, place of work, or acquaintances. Remember, the body of Christ is diverse, so your group may include various kinds of people as well. Set your meeting time, place, and frequency. It is good to meet at least twice a month, but weekly is better.
4. Use the resources that seem to best fit the needs of the group. The material should be biblically-based, application-oriented and good for discussion. (Note: Your Adventist Book Center (www.AdventistBookCenter.com) is a good resource for small group materials, as is the Center for Creative Ministries (www.creativeministry.org). The General Conference Department of Women's Ministries also has some small group materials available. Another excellent and reasonable resource is Christian Book Distributors at www.christianbook.com.)
5. Share the responsibilities of teaching, leading discussions, social time, prayer, and ministry involvement with gifted members of your group. Don't feel as though you have to do everything for the group.
6. Choose a person to mentor as you lead your group. Be prayerful and deliberate about training up a small group leader from your group. This potential group leader is sometimes called an "apprentice." Choose someone who has the desire to demonstrate the characteristics of a small group leader and who desires to help others grow spiritually. Include your apprentice in as many of your leadership activities as you can. Spend time with this person to disciple her. (Matt. 4:18-22; Mark 3:13-15; 2 Tim. 3:10).
7. Shepherd the Members of Your Group. It is your responsibility to care for and nurture your small group members so they can become committed Christians and participating members of the church. (This process takes time, don't become discouraged and don't rush them. Allow the Holy Spirit to lead.)
 - Pray for your meeting time and for each member of the group. (Phil. 1:3-11; Col. 1:9-12).
 - Exercise oversight of your members (1 Peter 5:1-3). Another word for oversight is *care* or *shepherd*. It means to be concerned about the welfare of each member of your group just as you are concerned about your own welfare (Phil. 2:4, 20-21).

- Model Christlikeness to your group. Serve them as Christ served His disciples with acts of kindness (John 13:1-5). Help them grow in Christ. Encourage one another to live each moment as Jesus would.
 - Create a safe place for others to share their feelings, hurts, pains, and concerns. People will only be as vulnerable as you are. Admit your weaknesses to the group in a way that encourages others to see themselves as they really are. (2 Cor. 4:7; 12:10).
 - Call group members if they miss a group time, not to make them feel guilty, but just to let them know they were sincerely missed.
 - Ask God to give you His love for each woman in your group.
8. Expand the Ministry. As the Lord grows the group, it will be necessary to consider birthing a new group in order to provide the appropriate amount of care for each person and to allow other women in the church to experience life change through small groups. This should only be done when you feel the group is ready to birth and when your apprentice is ready to take on a new group.
- Keep an empty chair in the circle as a reminder to invite people to your group. There are many people who are in relationship with your group members that are unconnected to your church. (Due to the sensitive nature of the topics of some groups and the need to build trust and safety within the group, some groups may want to have an open chair only for the first two weeks and then bring it out again at the end of the study to remind the group to invite people to the next study.)
 - Invite prospective new members to a social event with your group.
 - Get a feel from the group on whether these prospective new members would be a good fit. It may be that the women in your group have experienced authentic acceptance and love for the first time in your group. They may feel threatened by the prospect of new women in the group or fearful of losing the community they have found if the group was to multiply into two groups. You might need to explain how growth is healthy and normal for a good group.
 - Develop your apprentice by providing her with leadership responsibilities and certain women to shepherd. It is likely that those women will join the apprentice to form the nucleus of a new group.
9. Encourage each group member to maintain a healthy relationship with the church. Members should aspire to follow Jesus wherever He leads and to participate actively in the local church. This is best done by modeling it yourself.

A TYPICAL SMALL GROUP MEETING (OH-14)

A typical small group meeting might look something like this:

1. Gather the Group

- Each woman is warmly greeted as she comes in the door.
- Refreshments are available.
- Pray and invite the presence of the Holy Spirit
- Begin with an icebreaker question that gets people sharing.

2. Study the Bible

- Read the Bible passage you will be studying out loud.
- Allow a moment after the reading for people to pray and meditate on the passage silently.
- Establish the basics of what you have read by asking who, what, and where questions.
- Dig a little deeper. Ask a few questions that generate thought and discussion.
- Ask questions that encourage women to share how they will be different because of what they just read. Such as: "Did the Lord speak to you during this time? Is there something you need to change? What is it? When will you begin?" (Sharing is encouraged, but voluntary.)

3. Pray Together

- Go around the group and ask if there are any prayer requests or praises.
- Keep a journal of the group's prayer requests. It's exciting and faith-building for the group to look back and see how God has intervened in their lives.
- If the sharing time starts to get too long, encourage people to pray their requests right to God (instead of saying them to the group first) and go right into prayer.
- Vary the kind of prayer you have. You might try sentence prayers, break into smaller groups or just twos to pray, if it comes up in group that someone is in crisis, stop and pray for them right there, etc.

SMALL GROUPS THAT ADDRESS SPECIFIC NEEDS (OH-15)

The small group just described is extremely successful at building community, introducing people to Jesus, and deepening their relationship and walk with Jesus. This small group can also be adapted to meet specific needs of the women of your church and community. This type of small group can be incredibly effective in caring for your members and reaching out to the unchurched.

But small groups that meet special needs are only effective if they address the needs that the women in your area are actually feeling! As a women's ministry leader, how do you assess the needs in your church and community?

1. How do you find out what types of small group and support ministries are needed in your church?

- Pray that God will help you hear their hearts of the women in your congregation.
 - As you are in conversations, listen for recurring themes in the needs and concerns that are expressed.
 - Use a diagnostic tool such as a questionnaire or needs survey. Pass the questionnaire out at church or at your next women's ministry meeting.
- (OH-16)**

2. How do you find out what types of small group support ministries are needed in your community? Don't assume you know the needs of the women in your community. Spend time in prayer before God asking Him to give you an understanding of what concerns and needs the women in your area have. Then be intentional about determining what those needs are.

- Listen, listen, listen: to your friends, to people you meet, to the conversations of people in the stores. **(OH-17)**
- Note issues featured by the local media, in newspapers, and TV or radio news.
- Ask. Survey people you know in the community or people on the street. What's on your heart? What is occupying your mind? What do you find yourself thinking or worrying about?

The needs women feel can differ widely from region to region. The time spent trying to understand the particular needs of your area is time well-spent!

There are certain needs that are commonly felt. As diverse as women are, there are many commonalities as well. All over the world mothers are concerned for their children; women everywhere feel pain and grief when a loved one dies.

The women in these groups will have special needs that should be addressed in a small group meeting to support them. Following is a list of these 5 special need groups and some objectives for the groups that are formed to meet these needs.

THE GRIEF RECOVERY GROUP (OH-18)

While death is an inevitable part of life, many people fear death and not everyone is able to comfortably listen and talk with someone who is in the midst of dealing with the pain that the death of a loved one causes. Consequently, one of the most healing elements in the grief recovery group is found in providing a safe place where people can talk about their pain and have it heard by sympathetic, understanding people.

A good grief recovery group will offer Christ-centered and Biblically-supported encouragement and comfort by:

1. Helping group members understand the stages and tasks of grief and its impact on every part of their life
2. Facilitating the sharing of stories of God's healing presence throughout the process
3. Suggesting exercises to provide deeper understanding of what is being experienced
4. Providing strategies for coping with the symptoms of grief (such as bursting out in tears in public places) **(OH-19)**
5. Suggesting resources for finding support systems for the holes that are left in one's life by the death of a loved one
6. Providing information on how to help family members deal with the impact of the death
7. Helping members understand the impact of secondary losses (i.e. for a widow those losses might include: income, residence, change in lifestyle, social circle, loss of a role, friends, etc.)
8. Giving practical examples of how to draw on a relationship with Jesus for strength, comfort, and guidance during this difficult time.

One woman, who joined a grief recovery group after the death of her husband, described her experience in this way:

"[Being in the group highlighted] the incredible sense of God being with you. That it's OK to grieve—that God is grieving with you—but also the hope that knowing God and eternity gives. As I listened to the stories of others in the group, there were so many illustrations of how during tough times God lifted their spirits with little things—illustrations of God walking through the painful times *with* you... walking through each day and anniversary date...

"There is such strength in hearing from the experience of different people...the beautiful 'patchwork quilt of faith.' We each had different holes—where one person would have a question, another would have their feet solidly on the ground. And everyone's faith was strengthened as a result of the sharing."

There is an excellent resource for a weekly seminar and support group called GriefShare which can be found on the internet at www.griefrecovery.com. It is designed to be led by lay people modeling the concept described in 2 Corinthians 1: 3-6—that we comfort others with the comfort we ourselves have received from our Father, God of all compassion and comfort. (For a list of the weekly objectives see Appendix A.)

As noted on the GriefShare website, a Grief Recovery small group is an excellent outreach tool since “When a person is hurting deeply because of grief and loss, they are often more open to spiritual solutions for their life. . . point them to Christ as the only lasting source of healing.” (www.griefrecovery.com/pages/strtwks.html)

THE DIVORCE RECOVERY GROUP (OH-20)

As divorce rates continue to rise, the church has a unique opportunity to minister to those who are experiencing its devastating effects. A divorce recovery small group is a special place of encouragement, information, and sharing to support those dealing with the issues surrounding separation or divorce.

The purpose of a divorce recovery small group is to provide a safe, supportive environment where through prayer, discussion, and personal reflection (journaling) divorcees can:

1. Express their grief and hurt
2. Identify the reasons the marriage fell apart and determine which they were responsible for and which their partner was responsible for
3. Work through their feelings of hurt and anger towards their ex-spouse and come to a place of forgiveness **(OH-21)**
4. Apply biblical truths to the separation/divorce circumstances
5. Admit and confess the things they should have done differently
6. Learn how to help stabilize their children and help them in their healing process
7. Determine how they can strengthen their character and walk with God, and heal from wounds of the past so that if God calls them into marriage again they are coming from a position of strength. (i.e. The ability to choose a partner for healthy reasons instead of falling into a similar relationship/making similar mistakes.)

An excellent resource for divorce recovery can be found on the internet at www.divorcecare.com. (The outline of their 13-week program can be found in Appendix B.)

THE SMALL GROUP FOR WOMEN WHOSE HUSBANDS ARE UNCHURCHED (OH-22)

Women who find themselves married to an unbeliever are in need of a support system. One woman in this situation who has led this kind of small group ministry said, "At church we find ourselves in 'no-man's land' quite literally. We are not divorced, we are not single, and yet we are not part of a couple that can go to a couple's ministry. It's an odd situation to find oneself in and it can be very lonely. In addition, it's easy to think it's my job to convert my husband and that there's no use for me anywhere if I can't even convert my own husband.

"A small group of this kind is *not* a gripe session or a place to gossip about one's husband, but a place where women can find encouragement and help to change the mindset of self-pity and guilt."

A small group for women whose husbands are unchurched is a safe place where women who are spiritually single can support and encourage each other to:

1. Find true value and worth in Jesus
2. Recognize Jesus as their true husband
3. Express emotions and discuss crucial issues
4. Rest in God's peace whatever the outcome. Recognize that they are not their husband's personal Holy Spirit; that it is not their job to save him

(OH-23)

5. Ask for forgiveness (if needed), and relinquish the guilt of getting into the relationship because that will only keep the relationship from moving forward.
6. Recognize that their husband is the father of their children and respect his role as the father.
7. Find joy even when their husbands continually reject invitations to come to church.
8. Decide to love their husbands through everything
9. Be an encourager rather than a discourager

"I Married a Possibility" is the name of the small groups resource prepared by the Women's Ministry Department of the General Conference. Another good resource is the book *When He Doesn't Believe: Help and Encouragement for Women Who Feel Alone in Their Faith* by Nancy Kennedy.

MOTHERS' SMALL GROUPS (OH-24)

Mothers of young children often experience loneliness and discouragement. Meeting the needs of children is constantly demanding and yet it's easy for mothers to feel that what they are doing isn't important.

The purpose of a mothers' small group is to provide a safe, nurturing, fun place where mothers can find help, understanding, and encouragement and be reminded of how important their mothering is. A mothers' small group might consist of elements such as these:

1. A presentation or group discussion on some aspect of mothering (spiritual guidance, discipline, caring for physical needs, teaching, etc. The women might also be reading the same book on mothering together and come together to discuss it.)
2. A time for moms to ask questions and share personal experiences.
3. A time to pray for their children by name. Possibly some quiet time for mothers to write private prayers in a journal.
4. A time to make a craft together or have a light refreshment.

It is essential to provide childcare during this small group. A babysitter can be brought in, or the moms can take turns being in charge of the children.

What Every Mom Needs by Elisa Morgan and Carol Kuykendall is another excellent resource for a mothers' support group as is MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) International 1311 S. Clarkson St. Denver, CO USA 80201, phone: (303) 733-5353.

SINGLES' SMALL GROUPS (OH-25)

Being a single woman in the church has its own unique challenges. A small group can help can help singles overcome feelings of isolation and encourage them in their walk as single Christians.

A small group for singles would provide a safe, nurturing place where singles can come together to support and enrich each other's lives. A small group of this kind would provide unmarried women with the opportunity to:

1. Share an understanding of the experience of being single. Not just the difficulties, but also the benefits, such as time, flexibility, love not concentrated on one person but spread throughout many relationships with different people and generations.
2. Study what God expects from them and that He can be counted on.
3. Exploration of the topic of having a life partner in marriage: Do I want to? Should I? What is God's will for me? To help people clarify their goals and

then provide support for living a productive life as a single, or moving toward finding a partner. **(OH-26)**

4. Find and provide help with practical life skills such as what to do when your car breaks down.
5. Build up their understanding of their identity in Christ—that they have value and can have a productive and fulfilled life without a mate.
6. Help hold each other accountable to stay celibate—maybe have an accountability partner.
7. Pray for each other.
8. Take part in activities with other women as well as in mixed-gender activities.

SMALL GROUPS FOR MOTHERS WHOSE CHILDREN ARE NOT CURRENTLY IN THE CHURCH (OH-27)

There is nothing more painful for a mother than knowing that her child's heart is currently far from God. Women who find themselves in this situation have found comfort and strength in small groups designed to support them in this experience.

A small group of this type might:

1. Share stories, sorrow, and answers to prayer concerning children not in the church. Give support to those who are hurting, rejoice with those whose children are taking steps toward God again.
2. Brainstorm together. Think of ways to reach out: hold special invitational Sabbaths; send relevant church magazines to them; think of fun events to invite the unchurched children to that are not church-related, but can get them interacting with friends and comfortable around "church people," etc.
3. Pray for children by name. Keep a prayer journal. Make a prayer blanket that has the children's names on it or a picture board to collectively pray for them.
4. If the children have left the church, try to understand what it was about their church experience that they are reacting negatively against.
5. Look for ways that God *is* moving in their children's lives so they can thank and partner with God to minister to their children.
6. Concentrate on thanking God for making that child and remembering what a blessing they are and release them back to God.

The Women's Ministry Department of the General Conference has materials for a group like this called "Prayer and Love Saves" or PALS.

These are some examples of small groups that meet special needs. The key to making the most kingdom impact with special interest small groups is determining the felt needs of the women to whom you will be ministering.

The small group is a strong tool for evangelism, discipling, member care, community building, and worship. The potential small groups have for extending the kingdom of God is great. May God bless and guide you as you determine how you will use this effective ministry in your church.

APPENDIX A

Weekly Topics covered in GriefShare

SESSION 1- When Your Dreams Fall Apart

An overview of the GriefShare program; the first steps to understanding your grief and the losses which accompany it; sharing your hurt with others.

SESSION 2- Seasons Of Grief

What to expect during your "season" of grief; how grief can "ambush" you; how men and women respond differently to grief issues.

SESSION 3- Emotions of Grief (1)

Facing the flood of emotions which accompany grief; examining shock, anger, denial, blame and regret; feeling out of control and helpless; avoiding self-destructive solutions to easing the pain.

SESSION 4- Emotions of Grief (2)

Avoiding emotional ruts; avoiding traps of self-pity, fear of the future and bitterness; discovering the freedom of forgiveness.

SESSION 5- When Your Spouse Dies

Why the death of a spouse is unique and an especially deep loss; how to respond when you feel like you've "lost your identity;" how to deal with feelings that you will "never feel normal again;" discovering how the Lord can fill the gap left by your mate's death.

SESSION 6- Your Family and Grief

Coping with the loss of a child or parent; the stresses such a death can bring to a family; coping with suicide; how to help children grieve.

SESSION 7- Where Is God?

Why did God allow this death to happen? What do I do with unanswerable questions confronting me? How to trust God and grow closer to Him even when you don't have all the answers.

SESSION 8- Your Greatest Resource

How to draw upon your relationship with Christ for strength as you face grief; how to find Christ if you've never known Him; how He can guide and comfort you through this difficult time in a way nobody else can.

SESSION 9- Stuck In Grief or Moving On

Understanding false guilt; identifying hidden grief; confronting actions and attitudes which cause you to become "stuck;" steps you can take to move forward through the grieving process.

SESSION 10- Growing Through Grief

Becoming "bitter or better" through your grief experience; experiencing unparalleled spiritual growth; reaching out to others to help them in their time of grief.

SESSION 11- Grief Recovery Toolkit

Claiming God's joy and hope for the future in your life; using practical tools such as a journal, conversations with friends, helping others, prayer, Bible study and praise to assist you in recovering from your grief.

SESSION 12- God's Spiritual Hospital

This important session shows how the church can serve as "extended family" and assist you in the healing process. You will also see how to use your own experiences in ministry to others.

SESSION 13- Longing for Heaven

Can a person really recover from the hurt and pain that comes during the grieving process? Will there ever be a time when all sorrow and pain are gone forever? This final session is filled with good news as you see how one day the Lord will wipe away every tear and there will be no more sorrow or pain.

APPENDIX B

Weekly topics covered in DivorceCare

SESSION 1- What's Happening to Me?

An examination of the typical emotional, physical and spiritual reactions felt by someone experiencing separation or divorce.

SESSION 2- The Road to Healing/Finding Help

Productive steps you can take to begin the healing process.

SESSION 3- Facing Your Anger

Insights to identify anger and develop appropriate responses.

SESSION 4- Facing Your Depression

Depression is a nearly universal response to divorce. This session will help you identify effective ways to deal with it.

SESSION 5- Facing Your Loneliness

Constructive ways to reduce feelings of loneliness and ways to avoid inappropriate responses.

SESSION 6- What Does the Owner's Manual Say?

Encouragement to apply scriptural truths to separation or divorce circumstances.

SESSION 7- New Relationships

How to know when you are emotionally ready to enter a new relationship and how to develop a healthy relationship when the time is right.

SESSION 8- Financial Survival

Practical advice for budgeting, work and other key financial issues affecting you during divorce.

SESSION 9- KidCare 1

How to help your kids stabilize during the most intense period of separation and the early days of divorce.

SESSION 10- KidCare 2

How to be a successful single parent and practical suggestions for bringing up your kids in this environment.

SESSION 11- Forgiveness

How to overcome obstacles to forgiveness and develop a forgiving lifestyle.

SESSION 12- Reconciliation

Practical counsel for those interested in exploring reconciliation. You'll learn that reconciliation can take many forms that may or may not include full restoration of the marriage and gain an understanding of how reconciliation (to the degree possible) can aid in your healing.

SESSION 13- Moving On, Growing Closer to God

How God can use bad experiences (such as divorce) to help us grow closer to him and discover his will.