

Small Group Bible Study and Adult Education in the WELS

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Although I was honored to receive this assignment and am pleased to present it, I was surprised that I was chosen to prepare this essay on small group Bible study. I did not inaugurate this method of adult education in the congregation I served and have not participated in any small groups of this variety since I began teaching at the seminary. I have attended several small group workshops, have done some reading on the issue, and have a good sampling of small group materials in my personal library. I am by no means, therefore, an expert on this subject; as I said, I was surprised to be asked to prepare this essay. I do distribute a set of notes on small group Bible study to the seniors who attend my required seminary course, "Methods in Adult Education" and usually spend about two class periods on the subject. In the notes I mention some cautions, and several advocates of small group study, noticing these cautions, have opined that to caution at the seminary is to condemn. While I do not think that criticism is valid, it is part of the reason I was surprised by your invitation.

Soon after I received the assignment I began researching the topic. Obviously, a study of church history needed to be a part of the work, especially as it concerns German Pietism. Since most of the classic works on Pietism are in German, I leaned heavily on secondary sources. There are a number of articles in WLQ on this subject and several essays of more recent origin. I reread a number of small books, e.g., Roberta Hestenes' *Using the Bible In Groups* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983) which explain the small group concept as well as Carl George's new book on the Meta-church phenomenon, *Prepare Your Church for Future* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1992). I had copies of materials prepared by pastors in the WELS: Wayne Vogt's *Affinity Groups*, Martin Sprigg's *Koinonia Groups*, and some things by Jon Buchholz. As I prepared for this assignment, I looked at these more carefully than I had before. As word spread that I was working on this essay, I received a number of unsolicited letters and clippings from WELS pastors. I was pleased to be able to study statistics and comments gathered by the Commission on Adult Discipleship (CAD) in a very recent synod-wide questionnaire on the subject of adult education. While I could have perused dozens of articles on small groups which are appearing regularly in denominational periodicals, I looked most carefully at several important articles which were published in the February 7 issue of *Christianity Today*.

In an effort to solicit specific information and pastoral opinions from a group of pastors in whom I place strong trust, I prepared a rather detailed questionnaire and sent copies to 25 WELS pastors. A copy is appended. I did not send the questionnaire to men I knew to be either strongly in favor of small group study or strongly opposed to it. Were I to give you a list of these men, I think you would be impressed that they are among the most respected pastors in our fellowship. Some are involved with small groups, others are not. Finally, I sent the questionnaire to most of the administrators and chairmen of the commissions which make up the Division of Parish Services. The response to these questionnaires was excellent.

A Definition of Small Group Bible Study

In the questionnaire I felt it was necessary to define small group Bible study before I asked any questions, and it is probably necessary to do the same at the beginning of this essay.

We can begin to speak about objectives and guidelines only when we agree on the kind of group we are discussing.

The small group phenomenon is a fascinating occurrence in 1990s America. According to a recent three year Gallup study, 40 out of every 100 Americans are involved in some sort of small group. Obviously not all are involved in the same kind of group. The poll identified all of the following as “small groups”: Sunday School classes, Bible study groups, political/current-events groups, self-help groups, sports/hobby-events groups. Surely not all occur in the same way or with the same objectives.

It seems necessary to understand that a small group Bible study is not the same as a pastor conducting a class with only a few participants. The small group concept is anchored in the idea of lay leadership and participation. The respondents to the questionnaire were generally satisfied that I had defined small group study as that which is led by a lay person.

The questionnaire, however, indicated no interest in or excitement about small groups which begin apart from the impetus of the congregation and its called pastor. Nor was there any feeling that detailed training of the leaders was not a necessary presupposition to a small group program. The rationale for these points of view will be brought later in the essay.

With the above comments in mind, I submit the following definition for small group Bible study:

- A small group Bible study is a Bible study carried out by a group of between 6 and 12 Christians meeting at a member’s home or at another location.
- A small group Bible study is a Bible study at which the congregation’s pastor is not regularly present.
- A small group Bible study is part of a Bible study program which has been activated and is overseen by the congregation’s Board of Education (or Elders).
- A small group Bible study has members and a leader chosen with significant input by the congregation’s pastor and Board of Education.
- A small group Bible study has a leader who regularly attends training sessions with the pastor.

Advantages Of Small Group Bible Study

It stands to reason that a church body which is as Bible-loving as the WELS but which sees less than 11% of its adult members involved in regular Bible study would be intrigued by the small group concept. One is obligated to ask, “What do small groups offer that cannot be found in the pastor’s Bible classes?”

One needs not look far or long for a glowing list of advantages which can accrue to the church through small groups. Martin Spriggs has written, “Small groups provide an almost unparalleled setting for many relational mandates given to us by God” (*K-Groups: A Leadership Guide to Small Groups*, p. 5). He also maintains that “Small groups are a necessity in the local church, not an option” (p. 5).

The following is a list of benefits mentioned by Pastor Wayne Vogt:

- More people grow in faith through regular study of God’s Word.
- Stronger faith leads to improved Christian living.
- People become closer to others within the congregation.
- More unchurched people hear God’s plan of salvation.

- Unchurched people who have attended an Affinity Group (Vogt's name for his small groups) and then attend worship are welcomed by friends they have met in their group.
- Newcomers to the congregation are more quickly assimilated.
- People receive personal spiritual care from a leader whom they know as a friend.
- People who are having problems are counseled by Christians.
- Leaders are given meaningful ways of serving the Lord and other people.
- Leadership skills of more laypeople are developed.
- Those suffering from sickness, grief, or loss receive Christian support.
- Fewer people "fall through the cracks."
- Some who have begun to backslide can be reclaimed.
- The spiritual needs of many more people can be served.
- The pastor no longer feels the frustration of "playing solo."

It should be quickly obvious, of course, that the case Pastor Vogt makes for small group study could be made for a variety of other churchly programs as well. For example, church members who are involved in a congregational care committee are also given "meaningful ways of serving the Lord and other people." An expanded evangelism effort will also result in "more unchurched people hear[ing] God's plan of salvation."

Perhaps those most committed to the small group concept are less able to articulate the benefits of the method than those who stand farther away. The following is a listing of advantages gleaned from the questionnaires:

- Small group study makes it possible for more people to become involved in discussion and application of Bible truths.
- Small group study recognizes that not all people learn best in formal educational settings.
- Small group study seems to remove barriers which tend to keep people from identifying personal difficulties and problems as well as from making and sharing personal applications of a Bible truth
- Small group study affords an opportunity for people to gain a more personal ownership of Bible truth because they are obligated by group dynamics to participate in the small group discussion.
- Small group study allows for targeting Bible study to more specific groups in the congregation (young marrieds, singles, etc.)
- Small group study gives people an opportunity to develop the gift of teaching and sharing the Word.
- Small group study allows lay people to see that the victories of the gospel do not depend on the presence of the pastor but on the presence of the Word.
- Small group study encourages participants to view the life of faith as a whole life matter, rather than a "church-life" or "Sunday-life" issue.
- Small group study provides the context in which to develop a caring, interactive community of believers who work at growing in their ability to give personal support and encouragement.
- Especially in larger congregations, small groups may offer fellowship with other like-minded couples or individuals. It is often difficult in large congregations to identify those with whom there may be an affinity.

- Some small groups might offer opportunities for service which other congregational organizations do not highlight (e.g., child care).
- Small group study provides another side-door entry into the congregation, thus becoming an evangelism tool.
- In a congregation with limited facilities, small group study makes it possible for more classes to meet simultaneously.
- Small group study frees the pastor to be able to focus on other aspects of ministry.
- Small group Bible study can supplement and complement the pastor's Bible classes.

The list of advantages almost takes one's breath away! Wouldn't it be wonderful if these advantages could actually be realized in our congregations? What a blessing this would be for the WELS!

Summary 1: Small Group Bible Study may bring untold blessings to the congregations and members of the WELS.

Concerns About Small Group Bible Study

Despite these advantages, however, not all respondents to my questionnaire were positive in their reaction to small group Bible study. The same is true of the survey conducted by the CAD. The men who wrote negatively about small group study are likely representative of other pastors in the WELS who are not only reluctant to attempt such a program, but actually consider a small group program in a congregation to be a dangerous signal. More than a few are convinced that the contemporary emphasis on small group study signals a return to the conventicles of Pietism, those infamous *collegia pietatis* (gatherings of the pious) or *ecclesiola in ecclesia* (churches within the church) which brought disaster to the Lutheran churches of 18th century Germany. One respondent wrote, "You stand next to a fire and your clothes smell like it." Another added, "If you mix the same ingredients used by the Pietists, do you really expect to come up with a different kind of cake?" A third wrote:

While I think that small group studies can work, there is an anxious part of me that sees history as a predictor of events ...I would never deny that the small group program can work effectively (because our Lord works effectively where his Word is present), but a part of me will probably always be anxious about the small group program.

Are these concerns legitimate? In order to answer that very important question we will make a short review of the small group ministry fostered by Pietism.

The classic case study is found in the ministry of Philipp Jacob Spener (1635-1705). Spener was raised in an orthodox Lutheran home and was encouraged in his Christian upbringing by pious parents and grandparents. Regular family reading included Johann Arndt's *True Christianity* and devotional readings by English Separatists. He began his university training in Strasbourg and eventually developed a deep interest in the Biblical languages and the writings of Luther. He seems to have intended to pursue a career as a theological professor. At the age of 31 Spener was called to be senior pastor in Frankfort. From the start he preached against formalism and all unspiritual reliance upon orthodox standards. He cautioned his members against Phariseism which he felt could be observed in any feeling that holding right doctrine, participating in the divine service and the sacraments, and avoiding scandalous sins were tantamount to genuine Christian faith. In 1675 he published *Pia Desideria* in which he set down

his hopes and dreams for the true Lutheran Church. Among the changes he suggested were the following:

1. Thought should be given to more extensive use of the Word of God.
2. Attention should be given to the establishment and diligent exercise of the universal priesthood of all believers.
3. Christian faith must be put into action, for it is by no means enough to have knowledge of the Christian faith, for Christianity consists rather of practice.
4. More gentleness and love should be practiced among denominations in polemics.
5. In the schools and universities attention must be given to the moral development and moral training of future pastors. Ministerial students should be taught to preach sermons aimed at the heart and directed toward the life of their hearers.

Spener's suggestions were favorably received by many Lutherans in Germany. When viewed in their historical context, it becomes easy to understand why Spener suggested what he did. His emphases were surely a necessary tempering of orthodox excesses in Lutheran Germany.

Five years before Spener published *Pia Desideria*, he began to gather like-minded laypeople in his home for Bible study and prayer. These were the so-called conventicles or *collegia pietatis*. The concept was not original with Spener. Martin Bucer had suggested the small group format in Strasbourg a century before. But Spener was determined to make the idea work. He hoped that these small gatherings of Christians who were committed to his efforts to revitalize Lutheranism could help the cause by becoming a wholesome influence on the rest of the congregation.

Unfortunately, the idea did not work. Almost from the start the conventicles were separatistic, Pharisaical, and opposed to the ministry of the parish pastor. Although Spener tried to reclaim control of the small groups, he eventually was forced to break with them and even speak against them. By the time he ended his ministry in Frankfort (1686) "he was seriously questioning the value of introducing such meetings and consequently established no more conventicles in his own ministry in either Dresden or Berlin." (Dale Brown in *Understanding Pietism*, p. 31)

The misguided theological emphases which Spener advanced in Frankfort and which blossomed in his small groups eventually gave birth to a whole series of false teachings. The Lutheran emphasis on the objective truths of the Scriptures was lost, personal experience took its place, and the Means of Grace were downplayed. Eventually Pietism removed all vestiges of orthodox Lutheranism: the sacraments, the Confessions, the liturgy, and the Christ-centered hymnody. All this paved the way for Rationalism. In another essay I wrote: "Rationalism is what finally killed the Lutheran Church in Germany, but Pietism is what inflicted the stab wound to the Lutheran heart."

The story of Lutheran Pietism and its conventicles is well-known in WELS circles. There are, however, a few contemporary disasters which are also well-known, and these disasters took place in the WELS. One congregation in Minnesota and another in Michigan struggled with problems in the 1970s which occurred as a direct result of small groups. 17 families were suspended from the Minnesota congregation after they began to embrace and then promulgate false teaching. Their small groups were using materials prepared by Campus Crusade for Christ. Half a dozen members, including several teachers from the local Lutheran high school, left the Michigan parish. The Michigan case led one of our pastors to compose a stern article for *The*

Lutheran Educator denouncing the small group concept. (Mark Braun, “Bible Cells?” February 1980).

In his article Pastor Braun made it very clear that he was not concerned about the small group format *per se*, but with small groups that were formed apart from the impetus of the congregation and without the guidance of the congregation. That line of thinking was often advanced in my questionnaire as well. When I asked whether the problems of Pietism could be avoided, many respondents answered that the problems could be avoided if the small groups were established and guided in the right way. Concerns about small groups held by many of our pastors seem able to be moderated, therefore, if we can find procedures which will help us avoid the errors which crept into the small groups connected with Pietism.

Pitfalls Of The Pietistic Small Groups

I see four problems in the Pietistic Bible cells and, although I do not know as much about the small groups in the Minnesota and Michigan congregations, these same problems seem to have existed in those cases, too.

1. Many conventicles were begun in Germany because of dissatisfaction with the local orthodox pastor. Many pastors were thought to be too wooden, both in doctrine and in communication, and too autocratic. While there was some justification for the complaints, much opposition came about because overly pious church members failed to understand the relationship of faith and the Means of Grace. Since the conventicles were begun in opposition to the pastor, it is obvious that the pastor was not welcomed to exercise theological oversight and control in the small group.
2. In general, Lutheran Pietists were dissatisfied with church life, and especially with the orderliness of the public ministry. Again, there were some good reasons for their dissatisfaction. The territorial churches of the 17th century operated under the strict control of the consistory (i.e., the prince’s sometimes-religious, often political church administrator). The lay people had little part in the decisions concerning their pastors. Frankly, some pastors were simply not good pastors despite their divine calls. The orderliness of the divine call was maligned, therefore, and many lay people, with nothing more than an “inner call,” took up positions of leadership in the conventicles.
3. Spener and his followers took note of the sad state of affairs in Lutheran Germany after the Thirty Years War. Religious education had been almost non-existent in many provinces, and unendurable large congregations made pastoral discipline almost impossible. It seemed a farce to Spener that notably impious church members could be regularly absolved and communed. These observations led him to a theological emphasis which asserted that the forgiveness of sins offered in the gospel became effective only when it was accepted by a Christian who made an honest and obvious change in his life style. His emphasis turned away from the objectivity of God’s free declaration of forgiveness toward the necessity of a subjective response on the part of the Christian.
4. In the Lutheran Church the Pietists directed the alarmed sinner not to the Word and the Sacraments, but to his own prayers and wrestlings with God in order that he might win his way into a state of grace. They also instructed the believer to base his assurance of grace not on the objective promise of the gospel, but on the right quality of his contrition and faith and on his feeling of grace. (John T. Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, pp. 455-546)

This theological subjectivism blossomed in the conventicles. Despite Spener's stated devotion to a study of the Bible, the conventicles were more often "proving grounds" for conversion and rebirth. This religious empiricism fostered a dangerous emotionalism. Prayer in the conventicles became a means by which one gained faith rather than a fruit of faith.

It must be noted that Spener's primary objective in forming the conventicles was to encourage sanctification both within the cell itself and then, through the cell, in the congregation. Whatever possibilities existed for the accomplishment of this objective were destroyed when the focus of the cells moved away from that which prompts sanctification, i.e., the Means of Grace. Without the Means of Grace the conventicles became little more than cells of self-righteous individuals who spent as much time deprecating the unrighteous in the local congregation as they did rejoicing in their own righteousness.

Summary 2: While in many ways beneficial, small groups have brought disaster to churches when they have not been properly organized and controlled.

Necessary Emphases in WELS Small Group Bible Study

In my questionnaire I asked:

Do you feel that the small group concept can avoid the abuses of the notorious Bible cells associated with German Pietism?

If so, how?

A decided majority of respondents felt that the abuses could be avoided by a careful structuring of the small groups. They noted that my definition of small group Bible study seemed to eliminate or at least minimize the possibility of problems. The three points which were in the minds of most were:

1. A small group Bible study needs to be part of a Bible study program which has been activated and is overseen by the congregation's Board of Education (or Elders). In other words, the impetus for the small group program comes from the body of believers through its appointed leaders. The small group dare not be born out of a reaction against an ineffective or unpopular pastor. The small group cannot have as its focus a disagreement with the public doctrine of the congregation and its synod.
2. A small group Bible study needs to have members and a leader who are chosen with significant input by the congregation's pastor and Board of Education. The small group program must exist within the context of the public ministry of the congregation. Leaders must be representative ministers, i.e., individuals who meet certain qualifications and are called (appointed) to serve as leaders.
3. A small group Bible study must have a leader who regularly attends training sessions with the pastor. The small group needs to exist as an extension of the pastor's teaching office. The pastor, therefore, retains oversight of the ministry. Leaders seek to fine-tune their leadership qualities and understanding of the doctrines of the Scriptures under the direction of the called pastor.

I add several additional points:

4. In all effort to avoid the problems of cliquishness and Phariseism, it is probably wise that the membership of individual small groups change from time to time.

5. It is imperative that the materials which are studied by the small group be on the one hand easy to understand and use, and on the other hand free of non-Lutheran teachings and/or emphases. While a side effect of the small group might be growth in the Christian life or the development of friendships, the primary objective ought to be study of the objective truths of the Bible. This was a recurring emphasis in the questionnaire. Pastor Jon Buchholz sent me several forms which he uses to train lay leaders for small group studies. The forms make it clear that Pastor Buchholz is trying to help lay people focus their study on the Scriptures and at the same time help them use good teaching methods.
6. The pastor must be a regular and obvious part of the small group program in the same way he is a regular and obvious part of the congregation's Sunday School program. There must be no thought that a program begun successfully will remain successful without the continuing oversight of the pastor.

There was general consensus in the questionnaires that small groups could serve best in a congregation if they operated under the guidelines I have listed. Prof. Arnold Koelpin offered a precise summary when he wrote:

The German "pietists" were a reaction to a sterile state church environment and to a message that had become excessively defensive and ossified because of the political and territorial imperatives. Hence the strong tendency of many German "pietists" was to be anti-clerical. If the clergy today, as called servants, not merely sponsor small group study, but guide them with the understanding of the level at which they operate and the way in which the program integrates into the total program of the congregation, the safeguards will be there—to the extent that we can safeguard against the devil's wiles in any operation. The congregation's supervision should be able to avoid creating an *ecclesiola in ecclesia* by its orderliness. In such a case the anti-clericalism of the "pietists" is not likely, or less likely, to surface.

Although I should not have expected anything different, I was pleased to find in the questionnaires an almost unanimous agreement that a successful small group program demanded careful guidelines and procedures.

Summary 3: A set of careful guidelines and procedures is necessary ('a small group program can be truly a spiritual blessing in a congregation.

Will the WELS Be Able to Carry Out these Guidelines?

We seem to have reached the end of the discussion. Yes, there are great benefits which can be derived from small group Bible study. Despite the abuses which have occasionally accrued to small groups in history, we seemingly can find ways to avoid a repetition of those abuses. We will work to develop good materials and careful procedures for the formation and maintenance of the small group concept. Just this week the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* arrived in the mail and contained an article by my colleague David Kuske on the subject of small group Bible study. In the article Prof. Kuske offered good reasons for establishing such a program and offered a set of guidelines to help keep the program on track. His advice was very similar to what I have offered in this essay.

However, listen to a few voices which wonder if our procedures and guidelines are really viable and practical:

I wouldn't go so far as some who overstate their case and say that small group studies are the brain child of Reformed theologians and anyone who would use them has been brought into their thinking. Honestly, I see the whole concept as something that looks good on paper and can be good, but in reality is too unwieldy a monster to control.

I think your definition is optimistic; the kind of oversight it envisions is exactly the kind of oversight that the most ardent supporters of such groups want to avoid. If the kind of oversight your definition envisions could be achieved, it would be difficult to maintain. The pastor would need a special level of commitment to the success of the process and be willing to invest the time and patience necessary for it to be done properly.

The system you envision is an organization nightmare!

What I hear in those words is a deep concern that the safeguards which all have agreed are vital for a sound and spiritually successful small group program are going to be difficult if not impossible to achieve.

Again I ask: Are these concerns valid?

Concerning the Selection of Leaders

In his leaders guide Pastor Martin Spriggs lists the following as qualifications for the leader of the small group:

Character

1. A movement toward the qualities in 1 Timothy 3:1-7
2. Spiritual maturity
3. Not afraid to confront others
4. Can discern God's will and solve problems
5. Have the attitude of a servant
6. Places the kingdom of God as life's priority
7. Motivated for leadership to:
 - a. glorify God
 - b. please God
 - c. love and serve God
 - d. advance the kingdom
 - e. love and serve others

Behavior

1. Teachable, not defensive
2. Walk in forgiveness and integrity in personal relationships
3. Enthusiastic
4. Consistent in prayer and devotional life
5. They exhibit the fruits of the Spirit

Commitment

1. to God
2. to marriage and family (if they have one)
3. to ministry (and the specific plan of this church)

Commitment to God

1. Pursuing a vital relationship to God
2. Not a new convert
3. They have a growing relationship with Jesus Christ
4. Zealous to serve the Lord and give him glory

Commitment to Marriage and Family

1. Pursuing a time of ministry and prayer with the family
2. Respected by their spouse
3. Manage the family well
4. Children under control

Commitment to Ministry

1. Willing to lead a small group
2. Willing to share the church's vision with the group
3. Committed to and have a desire to help others grow in their Christian faith
4. Willing to pray regularly for their group
5. Committed to the purpose and agenda of the small group ministry

Pastor Wayne Vogt has several different qualifications:

- Don't feel that you have to know all the answers... you're there to learn, too.
- Be regular in your Sunday worship and Bible Class attendance so you'll continue to grow spiritually.
- Consider attending your pastor's adult instruction class.
- Regularly pray for God's guidance for yourself as a leader.
- Regularly pray for each individual in your group, by name
- Faithfully and thoroughly prepare your materials before each session.
- Being well-prepared for a meeting will take several hours. (If you aren't ready to make a major commitment to this, you're not ready to be a leader.)
- Visit your group members when they are celebrating, hospitalized, etc.
- Study this Leaders Handbook regularly ...in its entirety every time you begin a new series with your group.
- Look for people in your group who have leadership potential and train them to lead.
- Delegate whatever you can.
- Be ready to "open up." Leaders need to be transparent enough to demonstrate that they are human also, with the same fears, temptations, and weaknesses as everyone else in the group.
- Don't be afraid to "let your guard down."
- Confidential matters should not be discussed with anyone outside the group, not even spouses.

- Be understanding [of the people in your group and] quickly learn to “read between the lines.”
- Refuse to be drawn into something that is beyond the scope of your group.
- Learn to care for people as you would expect your pastor to.

Although Pastors Spriggs and Vogt have done more study in the area of small group Bible study than perhaps anyone else in our synod, let us suppose for a moment that their lists of qualifications are a little ambitious. Even if we removed 50 % of their required qualifications, however, where are we going to find such lay people in our congregations? The CAD survey mentioned earlier contains dozens of comments similar to these:

Gifted lay people who are doctrinally sound, spiritually mature, and willingly available are not abundantly found.

I don't have lay people here who are interested in conducting Bible studies for other adults.

Lay-lead Bible study is fine, but it's not always easy to find lay people who are both capable and willing to expend the time and effort needed to do it effectively.

We are in a rock-and-a-hard-place situation here. In order to find lay leaders, we must reduce the list of qualifications. In order to retain confessional and scriptural stability we must increase qualifications. Another respondent in the CAD survey wrote:

In today's doctrinal hodge-podge of Lutheran-Reformed ideas, we need lay leaders who not only have a talent for teaching, but also have a very solid doctrinal background. It is not easy to recruit such in every congregation. With 1000 communicants we see only 2 or 3 candidates, and these are very busy in several other areas of congregational life.

I, too, wonder how realistic it is to think that most pastors will be able to find an adequate supply of qualified lay leaders to maintain a confessional small group program on a synodical level. When I hear reports from the editors of Parish Leadership and the Northwestern Lutheran that our lay people want these periodicals to be simpler and easier to read, I cannot help but ask if we are realistic in supposing that we have the number of lay folks we need for a synodical small group Bible study emphasis.

Concerning Pastoral Supervision

Will pastors who begin a program of small group studies actually be able to continue the kind of oversight which is necessary for the program to be spiritually valuable? Spener discovered quickly that he was not able to sustain oversight. One respondent to my questionnaire wrote:

I know of a certain pastor who got such a program going pretty much according to definition, but without his “sitting on it,” it kept wandering in the wrong direction. There were all kinds of problems. One of the problems was that the leader wasn't able to keep at it but the group still wanted to meet. The pastor gave them the materials, but no one

was assigned to be leader. One lady had a management position in her job and “picked up the ball.” One day a member of the study group invited a friend who happened to be a member at another church. The visitor reported back to his pastor what happened and suddenly it appeared in Christian News that this church had a female Bible Class leader. Finally the associate pastor had to step in and take the heat from the other pastor and the members and insist that the class be stopped until it could be done better.

The pastor’s schedule is impossible already. Pastors are finding it difficult to keep their language skills alive, their sermons crafted well, their catechism lessons planned to include student participation, their marriage counseling sessions followed up on, their Bible classes prepared, their evangelism calls made, their Sunday School teachers taught, etc. I can envision a pastor beginning a small group program with a great deal of enthusiasm and commitment. I can also envision a scenario in which the pastor, having set up the program, given the leaders initial training, chosen materials, and selected the groups, will be beset by the other unending tasks of the ministry and will soon leave the small group program in the hands of the lay leaders. This—and I think we have historical documentation for it—is a prelude to disaster. I have watched ten classes come and go during my years at the Seminary, and I must say—and this is, of course, a generalization—that those men least inclined to promote small groups would be most inclined to exercise great care in oversight. In my judgment, those men most inclined to promote small groups would be least inclined to practice oversight.

Concerning Theological Subjectivism

Can small group Bible study in the WELS avoid the subjectivism which destroyed the value of 17th century conventicles and which brought eventual disaster to the Lutheran Church in Germany? I mentioned previously that the key here is to retain a study focus on the objective truths of Scripture. I also mentioned that this was a recurring theme in the questionnaire. Pastor John Vieths wrote:

We need to be careful that sanctification doesn’t overshadow justification. The studies should be Christ-centered, not, however, with their focus on Christ as example but on Christ as God’s loving sacrifice. I have nothing against Christians developing strong friendships with one another and displaying their love for one another, but this is not the primary objective of Bible study. The overriding purpose and objective of the class should be to focus on our relationship with God, not on our relationships with each other.

Pastor Stephen Degner added some thoughts about what would likely lead to a subjective emphasis:

1. Goals of bonding the group with the use of group dynamics
2. Emphasis on talking about self and sharing feelings
3. Emphasis on rating your level of sanctification on a certain issue
4. “Practicing the Presence of the Lord”
5. Covenanting with one another

Degner also felt that the use the People’s Bible and similar materials by Northwestern Publishing House work well to maintain the objective emphasis of the small group.

The solution seems simple. Keep the focus of small group study on the objective facts of Scripture. With a primary emphasis on the divine-human relationship, individual sanctification will increase, just as God promises. A primary emphasis on building relationships and increasing the level of love takes the attention away from the source of these fruits of faith. Theological subjectivity and a reversal of the justification - sanctification progression bring nothing but harm to the Church.

It is precisely at this point, however, that *Christianity Today* finds problem with the small group concept. In the February 7, 1994 issue, Warren Bird commented on the amazing growth of the small group phenomenon. He admits that “the small group movement has been effecting a quiet revolution in American society” (“How Small Groups Are Transforming Our Lives,” p. 21). But he adds that the subjectivity of almost all small groups may well become their theological downfall.

Small groups are not drawing people back to the God of their fathers and mothers. They are dramatically changing the way God is understood. God is now less of an external authority and more of an internal presence. The sacred becomes more personal, but in the process, also becomes more manageable, more serviceable in meeting individual needs, and more a feature of the group process itself. (p. 22)

To be sure [small groups] encourage people to pray and to think about spiritual truths. Nevertheless, they do little to increase the biblical knowledge of their members. Most of them do not assert the value of denominational traditions. Indeed, many of the groups encourage faith to be subjective and pragmatic. A person may feel that his or her faith has been deepened, but in what way is largely in the eyes of the beholder. Biblical truths may become more meaningful, but the reason is that they calm anxiety and help one make it through the day. (p. 23)

In a 1992 *Christianity Today* article, Walt Russell insisted that such subjectivism must come to an end:

We must establish the original historical and literary context of biblical passages. Once this work is done, then we can move to determining the needs a passage addresses. But the text, not our concerns, initially determines the focus. To ignore the necessity of this task is to risk sliding into relativism. We find few contextual safeguards in this land of “what-it-means-to-me” and probably very little of God’s voice. (October 26, 1992, p. 32)

Again and again pastors observe how society’s attitudes affect the members of their congregations. Our women are troubled by society’s concepts of women’s liberation. Our teens are troubled by society’s quest for instant gratification. Is it unrealistic to suppose that our small groups may well be troubled by the subjectivism which pervades the immense network of small groups in our country? Is it an absurd scenario to suppose a pious, Bible-loving WELS member comparing small group notes with his pious Bible-loving Assemblies of God neighbor and concluding that the Assemblies of God small group procedures are far more interesting and relevant than the Lutheran small group methods? When even *Christianity Today*, the mouthpiece of American experiential theology, expresses concerns about religious relativism and spiritual subjectivism and calls them part and parcel of the small group phenomenon, ought not the WELS

think twice before jumping into the small group pool with both feet? When the entire small group world seems to be moving toward a “what-does-God-mean-to-me?” approach to Scripture, is it realistic to suppose that WELS small groups can maintain a “Christ-has-done-this-for-me” emphasis?

Neither our people nor our pastors are immune to these influences. In fact, some in our synod are concerned that the influence has made inroads already. Prof. Paul Eickmann seems to be one of those who has this concern. In an essay prepared for the celebration of the Seminary’s 125th anniversary, he wrote:

In an effort to be down-to-earth and practical, it seems to me that some of our newer Seminary graduates preach the law very clearly, but with sanctification of the church in view ...They may feel that the preaching they themselves have heard from my generation did not do full justice to the important place of sanctification. (*WLQ*, “Sola Fide,” Summer 1989, pp. 187-188)

One hesitates to bring examples which cause these concerns, lest one becomes guilty of sinning against the 8th Commandment or of violating the principles outlined in Matthew 18. One cannot ignore, however, the instances of overstatement and/or unclarity. Consider, for example, this “Health Check-up” (i.e., How can I know if a small group is functioning properly?) presented at a WELS workshop on small group study:

- Is there group discussion?
- Is the leader a friend to all?
- Does the leader encourage non-superficial responses?
- Is the study heavy on application?
- Does the leader know his group?
- Are prayers really coming from the depth of the participants’ souls? (This last gauge was listed as the “best gauge”)

A pastor who feels strongly about the use of small groups for evangelism wrote: “The Christian doesn’t study the Bible to learn it. The Christian studies the Bible to present it!” At its best that is an overstatement made for some sort of effect; at its worst, it puts sanctification before justification.

Among some, there seems to be an almost a flippant lack of concern in this area. In an essay on Pietism, Prof. Paul Prange commented in a footnote:

A WELS pastor, explaining his use of Serendipity materials, began his presentation to other WELS pastors: “Don’t worry about me. I’m a Word and Sacrament kind of guy.” He proceeded to teach from Serendipity that true *koinonia* can only come when there is gut-level communication in a small group. When questioned as to where the Means of Grace play in, the pastor responded, “Oh, yes, and it’s all based on the Word of God. There, are we orthodox now?”

The list could go on, but my point is this: I believe that a degree of dangerous subjectivism has already entered the WELS and seems to be found, as often as anywhere else, among those who are the staunchest advocates of small group Bible study.

The question I raised at the beginning of this section—Can small group Bible study in the WELS avoid the subjectivism which destroyed the value of 17th century conventicles and which brought eventual disaster to the Lutheran Church in Germany?—cannot really be answered at this time and place. But I must admit to you that I have some doubts.

Concerning the Pastor's Role as Teacher in the Congregation

There are additional concerns which could be raised: Will an emphasis on small group Bible study allow our church body to retain the Reformation emphasis on the role of the pastor as teacher? My questionnaire asked:

As you consider an entire program of Christian education for adults in your congregation, where does a small group program fit as to priority compared to:

- the pastor's weekly Bible class(es)?
- pastoral visitation of members?
- an effective system of Bible class in which teaching assistance is afforded by using laymen or staff ministers and/or LES

The respondents indicated almost unanimously that the pastor's Bible class was the most important element of a congregation's program of adult education. Prof. Mark Braun wrote:

Small groups should not be promoted as a replacement for a strong teaching, preaching and serving ministry of the pastor in the congregation. If we fail to do our job in the congregation as a whole, pietism will develop whether we initiate small groups or not.

The question about retaining an emphasis on the pastoral teaching office is another which cannot be answered now. Again, one has concerns. A WELS small group manual insists: "Everyone, through personal experience and unique biblical insights, can teach everyone else." "The gifts of leadership, teaching, shepherding, and administration are not limited to the called staff of our churches."

Finally, it is not illegitimate to ask this question about a small group program: "If we have them, will they come?" Many respondents to the CAD survey and a few who answered my questionnaire doubt there will be much congregation interest in small group Bible study. In the opinion of more than one, those who do attend will be the ones who are already enrolled in the pastor's classes and who already are growing in faith and love.

Summary 4: There are some serious questions which wonder if it will be possible for the WELS to establish and maintain the guidelines which a small group ministry requires.

False Claims for Small Group Bible Study

In my judgment small group Bible study holds as many disadvantages as benefits, as many liabilities as assets. I realize this view will not be popular with everyone around this table nor in the studies of all the pastors in our synod. One almost senses a reluctance in some quarters to see anything wrong with the concept. A number of men who responded to my questionnaire seemed surprised that I would even have asked about the dangers of Pietism. There seems to be a growing interest in small groups and an increasing perception that such a methodology may be long overdue in our synod. I alluded earlier to a claim made for small groups: "Small groups provide an almost unparalleled setting for many relational mandates given to us by God."

I wonder if some of the determination for and commitment to small group methodology is not born in claims which are made about small group study. For instance:

There is a long history of small group home Bible studies in the Christian Church, beginning with Jesus himself.

That model was continued by the disciples.

Of all the potential ministry formats available to the local church, small groups have the greatest biblical support.

The fact that believers met together every day suggests that small groups can produce great commitment.

No where else in the Bible does God tell us of a time when the Church grew more rapidly than when they were meeting in small groups.

Growth will be a natural event in an active and fulfilling group. Each member of the original K-group will spread the word by modeling a renewed spirit and also by simply sharing with others the potential spiritual power these groups possess.

The setting tends to promote true Christian sharing and fellowship.

I contend there are a number of errors in those claims.

1. To accept the contemporary definition of a small group, i.e., a group of Christians meeting under the leadership of a lay person, and then to call the apostles the first small group and Jesus the first small group leader, is ridiculous. If he was anything, Jesus was a seminary professor; the twelve disciples were seminary students. To say that those 13 who traveled the hills and valleys of Palestine were nothing more than a small group Bible study is like saying the filet mignon is nothing more than pre-ground hamburger.
2. It is just as difficult exegetically to associate the New Testament "house" references with today's small group Bible studies. The following passages are usually listed when the contention is made that small group gatherings were the pattern of the early church:

Acts 2:46 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. Both Lenski and the Concordia Study Bible maintain that the gatherings in homes to which Luke refers are Christian families rejoicing as they eat their meals together and not groups of church members partaking of the sacrament.

Acts 5:42 Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ. These were either evangelism visits or pastoral calls. Nothing indicates that groups of Christians were meeting in these homes for study under the leadership of a lay person.

Acts 12:12 When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. This was a one-time gathering occasioned by Peter's imprisonment, and not a regular meeting of Christians for study.

Acts 20:20 You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. Paul believed in the old adage, "A house going pastor makes for a church going people." No small groups here.

Colossians 4:15 Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. Without church buildings, Christians gathered for worship and study in the home of the congregation's most prominent member. Those in Nympha's house were not meeting separately from the rest of the congregation; they were the congregation. They met without an apostle because there was none nearby.

Philemon 1:1-2 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home. Again, this was the congregation meeting at a private home.

Romans 16:3-5 Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ JesusGreet also the church that meets at their house. Same situation.

It should be obvious that there is no pattern for today's small group Bible study on the pages of the New Testament. Even if such a pattern could be established, these references are considered by Lutherans to be descriptive and not prescriptive for the New Testament church. It is the Reformed, with their prescriptive understanding of Biblical patterns and customs, which make much of these kinds of passages.

I see again and again in the small group literature a confusion of methods and means. Too often the small group method is given credit for what only the Means of Grace can effect. It must also be said that literally every Christian life objective desired as a by-product of small group methodology can be and often is prompted by the Holy Spirit working through the Means of Grace in various ministry formats. Claims for the superior efficacy of one or another method come straight out of anti-Means of Grace theology of the Reformed. Charles Finney insisted, for example, that "conversion has nothing to do with a miracle but with the proper use of methods at the proper time." It is true, of course, that the small group format allows for some group dynamics which a large group class cannot match. Small group advocates need to be careful not to confuse fruits of faith which only the gospel can prompt and psychological objectives which occur by means of group dynamics.

Summary 5: Too often advocates of small group Bible study methods overlook and ignore legitimate warnings because they have been misled by claims made about and for small group study which in reality are false.

Small Groups and Evangelism

I asked one question about small groups and evangelism in my questionnaire. Generally, the respondents were cool to the idea of using small groups for evangelism, although one writer expressed the opinion that evangelism is the primary objective of the small group. In his article on small groups, Prof. Kuske offers a list of cautions and qualifications.

It is well known, of course, that many Christian groups have heavily invested in small groups with evangelism in mind. I understand that some of our synod's mission counselors strongly encourage mission pastors to use the method. I suggest that the Board for Home Missions and the Commission on Evangelism work together to study this issue. In any case, the commissions of our division and those in the mission area should speak with a united voice.

Final Summary and Suggestions for Division Ministry

1. It is obvious that many blessings can accrue to our church body as the Word of God is proclaimed and studied in small group Bible studies.
2. It is possible to plan the organization and oversight of a small group program in such a careful way that the errors which entered the church through the conventicles of Pietism (and through similar Bible cells) can appear to be avoided.
3. It seems to me that the carrying out of that organization and oversight will not be as easy as it seems. I wonder if there are not already indications of confusion and misapplication in our own synod on the issues involved with small groups.
4. It cannot be proved that all of the benefits promised for small groups cannot be gained in other formats of ministry. I am concerned that we are, by a promotion of the small group concept, risking a great deal to gain what might be gained in other ways.
5. In my opinion the commissions which are part of the Division of Parish Services should stop promoting and encouraging small group methodology at this time. I make this suggestion for several reasons:
 - a. In many ways we are spinning our wheels and trying to accomplish too many things at once. The result of this is that we do much poorly and very little well.
 - b. Our commissions need to distance themselves from those who are making overstatements and even false statements about small group Bible study. We and they should not be perceived to be lying in the same bed.
 - c. The majority of our pastors are honestly (not superficially) concerned about the small group concept. I do not believe I am overstating if I contend that the encouragement toward small group Bible study by leaders in our synod is one of the things which is causing some WELS pastors to lose confidence in the leaders of our synod.
 - d. It must be recognized that there are some pastors in our church body who have the gifts and maturity to oversee a small group Bible study program in their congregations and that they serve congregations where lay leaders are available. We should give no impression that we disapprove of their ministries. We must also recognize, however, that not every pastor has the necessary wisdom, caution, and ability to oversee a small group ministry at this time in the history of the Church. We should take great care when we promote something as the *sine qua non* of adult education when many are

unable to carry out such a program in their congregations with confessional and pastoral safeguards.

- e. Since some pastors and congregations likely begin or continue a small group ministry without our encouragement, we ought to produce a small booklet containing the history of the small group phenomenon, a set of possible and/or wise objectives for the program, and a set of guidelines and procedures for overseeing the program in the congregation.
6. I suggest that the CAD take great care in choosing those who represent it on the district level. It is not always the most enthusiastic who serve best. It seems that our circuit pastors and district presidents would be wise to carefully advise some in our midst concerning the danger which accrues to the Kingdom because of a lack of thorough research and off-handed overstatement in the area of small group methodology. straight.
7. I believe we should not talk out of both sides of our mouth. If we are going to suggest small group methodology, we should produce small group materials. If we are not going to produce small group materials, we should not be encouraging small group studies. The CAD and NPH have to come. to a meeting of the minds and quickly.
8. I believe we ought to focus our attention on helping pastors become the best teachers possible. Many need help in setting up a curriculum. Many need help in writing lesson plans and study guides. Many need help gaining or improving teaching skills. Many need help promoting Bible classes. Many need help evaluating their teaching skills and/or adult education program. Many need encouragement to keep plugging away despite discouragement. We have plenty of work to do to prepare large group materials, promotion materials, teacher training materials, family materials, etc. Getting into small group methodology besides these other things will compromise our efforts to do other tasks well.
9. The CAD survey indicated that many pastors are looking for better Bible Class materials. I suggest that the CAD work to identify precisely what the pastors feel they need and that NPH then sets its hand at producing those materials.
10. I believe we should continue to promote family Bible study methods and materials. I agree with those who maintain that the family is the small group at which we ought to be aiming our best efforts.
11. It seems to me that we should continue to produce quality materials for private and individual home study.
12. We hear much complaining these days about the lowly 11% of our members who attend Bible classes. From one point of view, the statistic is, of course, abominable. Those 11%, however, are still a blessing from God. In view of the problems we find in our society today, we ought to consider it a miracle of God's grace that even 11% are regularly studying the Scriptures. We should be realistic about the situations our pastors are facing in today's world and take care lest we place a heavy load of guilt on our pastors by means of this statistic. My suggestion is that we work to help pastors become the best teachers possible and at the same time encourage them to be content with the blessings the Holy Spirit provides.

We are not talking about biblical rights and wrongs when we speak about whether or not to promote or employ small group Bible study. This is a matter of wisdom, not of law. I become

mighty uncomfortable when I hear WELS pastors mightily lambasting the small group concept. A commentator whose opinion I respect wrote:

This laxity [in the small groups] afforded Spener's opponents a ground of attack, but their unskillful, superficial, and impassioned onslaughts not only lightened Spener's task of defense and substantiation, but also, unfortunately, helped to obscure his perception of the real consequences of his position. (Paul Gruenberg in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. IX, p. 56)

I become just as uncomfortable, however, when I hear voices insisting that congregations cannot get along without small group study.

The decisions made by the commissions of the Division of Parish Services need to be made carefully, lovingly, and surely without acrimony. They also need to be made without naivete and shortsightedness. The goal of more Christians studying the Scriptures is a noble goal, but it is not a more important goal than holding to the Scriptures. May it never be said that we achieved the former at the expense of the latter. May God give you wisdom.

Addendum

After the presentation of the essay several men asked why I had not included methodology as part of the definition of small group study. I could not understand how methodology had anything to do with the definition, since I supposed that a variety of teaching methods could be used in small groups just as a variety of teaching methods can be used in any adult Bible study class. Some concerns were voiced about using the "sage on a stage" method of teaching in the small group. I answered that an exclusive use of the telling method was ill-advised in any adult education forum and that this was especially true in the case of small groups.

Eventually it became apparent that the questions about methodology had to do specifically with the type of methods used in many small groups which have as their primary objective to encourage and enable growth in interpersonal relationships. These are questions which ask the participant to divulge personal feelings and judgments about one or another situation. Such methods allow the individual to "open up" so that sharing with one another and caring for one another may occur.

Two examples (in a study of the wedding at Cana) are:

John says that through this wedding miracle Jesus "revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him." How does this miracle move you to put your faith in Jesus more?

- I see Jesus as more caring about me and my everyday concerns than before.
- Jesus' power is obviously great enough to see me through any problem.
- This miracle proves that Jesus is who he claimed to be: the Messiah.
- Nothing in Jesus' ministry happened by chance, "dumb luck." He planned and controlled it all, just like he plans and controls my life according to his love.
- I was reminded that my God provides for me beyond my needs.
- This miracle shows me that God is able to respond to situations in my life and make them positive even if I messed up with poor planning.

- This miracle hasn't led me to trust Jesus more.
- Other

Where, in my life, do I need Jesus to turn the water of “what is” into the wine of his mercy and blessing?

- My attitude toward work, life, etc.
- Problems that could become opportunities.
- Relationships in my family that need God's loving touch.
- Friendships that could become a witness opportunity.
- Hurts that can become growth.
- Other

I answered that questions of this nature had a place in any Bible study for adults and that they were perhaps more natural in small group Bible studies. I still could not understand, however, why the use of this sort of methodology had anything to do with definition.

It was not until after the presentation session that I figured out why questions about methodology were asked in relation to the small group's definition. Many of the promoters of small group Bible study—many outside of Lutheranism, some inside—insist that the essential presupposition of the small group concept is that it must encourage and enable interpersonal caring and sharing, that it must provide a forum for building relationships with fellow Christians and that it must offer a support system for people. If this is to be the essential nature of the small group, the methods used in the small group must foster the relation-building phenomenon and must include, therefore, the kind of questions exemplified above. In fact, the small group Bible study from which the above questions were drawn consisted entirely of this variety of question. With the presupposition that the essential nature of the small group concept is to foster relationships and provide support and since a certain variety of methodology encourages that essential nature, it becomes obvious why questions concerning methodology were attached to definition. A desired part of the definition would be:

A small group Bible study uses methodology which encourages and enables interpersonal skills, the improving of personal relationships, and emotional and spiritual support.

The matter of methodology, however, has to do with the objective of small group Bible study, not with its definition. I dealt with objectives of small groups apart from their definition. I wrote on p. 8:

It is imperative that the materials which are studied by the small group be on the one hand easy to understand and use, and on the other hand free of non-Lutheran teachings and/or emphases. While a side effect of the small group might be growth in the Christian life or the development of friendships, the primary objective ought to be study of the objective truths of the Bible. (emphasis added here)

Again:

Can small group Bible study in the WELS avoid the subjectivism which destroyed the value of 17th century conventicles and which brought eventual disaster to the Lutheran Church in

Germany? I mentioned previously that the key here is to retain a study focus on the objective truths of Scripture. I also mentioned that this was a recurring theme in the questionnaire. Pastor John Vieths wrote:

We need to be careful that sanctification doesn't overshadow justification. The studies should be Christ-centered, not, however, with their focus on Christ as example but on Christ as God's loving sacrifice. *I have nothing against Christians developing strong friendships with one another and displaying their love for one another, but this is not the primary objective of Bible study. The overriding purpose and objective of the class should be to focus on our relationship with God, not on our relationships with each other.* (emphasis added)

Pastor Stephen Degner added some thoughts about what would likely lead to a subjective emphasis:

1. *Goals of bonding the group with the use of group dynamics*
2. *Emphasis on talking about self and sharing feelings*
3. Emphasis on rating your level of sanctification on a certain issue
4. "Practicing the Presence of the Lord"
5. Covenanting with one other (emphasis added)

Degner also felt that the use of the People's Bible and similar materials by Northwestern Publishing House work well to maintain the objective emphasis of the small group. The solution seems simple. *Keep the focus of small group study on the objective facts of Scripture. With a primary emphasis on the divine-human relationship, individual sanctification will increase, just as God promises.* A primary emphasis on building relationships and increasing the level of love takes the attention away from the source of these fruits of faith. Theological subjectivity and a reversal of the justification - sanctification progression bring nothing but harm to the Church. (emphasis added)

The fact is that the vast majority of small group promoters outside of our Lutheran Church do reverse the order of justification and sanctification. The entire theological system of neo-Evangelicalism supports the contention that the church can grow and be strengthened by human effort: "Love one another, support one another, befriend one another" are consistent refrains.

The careful observer sees what is happening here: On the one hand fruits of faith precede the source of faith. Of course Jesus said, "Love one another." But before he said that, he said "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remain in me and I in him, he brings forth much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15). The second confusion is that human effort replaces divine effort to strengthen faith. The Means of Grace are de-emphasized and human means are promoted.

One who makes this switch in the area of evangelism is the LCMS pastor, David Luecke, who teaches at the School of Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary. In his 1988 book *Evangelical Style and Lutheran Substance* Luecke contends that the emphasis on building relationships and offering support is the best way to build the church in the present era. He sees love and joy between human beings almost as new sacraments:

A sacrament is God's use of human senses to reestablish contact. The touch-point with the Evangelicals is acceptance of the principle that God can use human experience to convey the Word of his offer of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvationWhen his Word is added to the element, to that which can be touched and felt, there God's presence is to be experienced. (p.85)

This [relational] style can show how sacramental thinking might be extended, that is that God's presence can also be recognized through other forms of combining the Word of his promises with what believers can touch, feel, and experience. (p.85)

Luecke contends that Lutheranism can retain its substance even though it adopts Evangelical style. Commenting on Luecke's book, Prof. David Valleskey wrote, "It does not appear to be rash to claim that if the Lutheran Church were to extend its sacramental thinking along the lines Luecke suggests ...in the interest of cultivating a new contact-oriented style, more than a little of Lutheran substance will also be affected" (*Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 87, Spring 1990, pp. 139-140).

If the objective of small group Bible study is to come into contact with sin and grace, law and gospel, Christ and his love, then a variety of methods may be used without harm. If the objective changes and moves primarily to the fostering of interpersonal skills and the encouraging of support, then no methods are without danger.