

Home Bible Study Groups in the 1990s

David P. Kuske

[This article was presented in the 1993 Pastors Institute at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary as part of a series of lectures on "Issues in Adult Education."]

Home Bible study groups are on the increase in our day again. They are not something entirely new. One can go back in the history of the church and find that this method of Bible study has appeared and disappeared a number of times. But seldom has this idea been as popular as it is today, nor has it appeared in as many different churches as it has today—including some WELS churches. Let's take a closer look at why and how home Bible study groups are being formed in the 1990s.

A Change in the Reason for Home Bible Study Groups

One can point to the reason why such groups have been formed in the past history of the church and find cause for concern. We probably think first of such groups coming into being in the late 1600s in connection with Pietism. Spener promoted them as a vehicle by which pious laypeople could be a leaven for good in reforming the "dead orthodoxy" of a congregation and its pastor. More recently, in the 1960s and 70s, such parachurch groups as InterVarsity, Campus Crusade, and Navigators promoted small group Bible study outside the congregational setting—often in reaction to the "institutional church structure."

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, the small group approach took a decided turn when men such as Lyman Coleman conducted workshops across the United States and produced materials (e.g. *Serendipity New Testament for Groups*) to promote small group Bible study. His goal was to make home study groups an integral part of a congregation's educational program instead of something outside of and perhaps even as a rival to that program.

Another purpose of small groups in the 1980s was to have them serve as a means of lay evangelism—Christians conducting Bible study in their homes to which they invite unchurched friends and neighbors. In an article on the small group movement, J. A. Gorman notes that "both the Church Growth Institute of Fuller Seminary and the American Institute of Church Growth became centers for influencing the use of this means for evangelizing."¹

Whether or not nurture and outreach are wise and proper uses of small group Bible study will be dealt with later. The point being made here is that the reason for having home Bible study in small groups seems to have shifted from the Pietists' or parachurch groups' goal of creating cells of people who will reform the church to having small groups as an integral part of a congregation's work.

An Additional Reason for Contemporary Home Bible Study Groups

Why have small group meetings in the home become so popular in our day? Lyman Coleman has continued for more than ten years to conduct well-attended workshops all over the United States. Why have some WELS congregations begun to make home Bible study groups a part of their nurture program? Is it only the "if you can't beat `em, join `em" reaction, something like the Pioneers organization which began in part as a

¹*Christian Education Foundations for the Future*, ed. by R.E. Clark, L. Johnson, A.K. Sloat (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), pp 509,510.

way of countering the strong attraction that scouting had in the 1950s and 1960s? Or is there something more than that involved?

This writer's acquaintance with this current phenomenon is threefold: 1) he has attended one of the workshops held by Lyman Coleman; 2) he has read about a dozen books in the last ten years coming from evangelical sources that deal with small groups either wholly or in part; 3) he has also inquired about why a number of WELS congregations have begun to conduct small group Bible study and how they have structured these groups. There is one common thread that seems to run through all contemporary home Bible study groups. These groups are started for fellowship purposes as well as for spiritual nurture.

Today's society often isolates families and individuals. Young people, middle aged people, and retired people, either as individuals or families, leave the community where their children, parents, siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles live and move to places far from "home." The sense of community that came from living close to relatives is not as common as it once was.

Many people work at jobs that are very impersonal. They go to work for eight hours, have little more to do with fellow employees than exchange a few pleasantries during a break, and then go home. The average person changes jobs every five to ten years, which often means moving to a new place to live and learning to know a whole new group of people at the work place. The sense of community that existed when people worked together over long periods of time for the same company is not as prevalent today as in the past.

As a result of people changing jobs and moving, many neighborhoods have a constant turnover of people. The sense of community that came from having the same neighbors for decades is not that common anymore. A concern for security often makes people living in the same building total strangers to each other. When people have enough income to buy a good home, they prefer something in the suburbs, preferably not too close to anyone else, where they can have some privacy.

In city and suburban churches, relatively few people stop after church to chat with one another. When some group in the congregation attempts to organize a social gathering, it is not uncommon that only a handful of people show up—usually people who already know each other fairly well since they have been members for a time. Even in rural congregations where the social activities of the people once centered in church fellowship activities (mission festival and annual meeting dinners, ladies' and men's group meetings, youth group ice cream socials), the sense of community is not what it was. Members who lose a spouse by death or by divorce are especially lonely and insecure if they have no close friends or relatives nearby.

Call it a support group, call it having a sense of community, call it friendship, call it being able to spend some time with others who care about you. In any case small groups of Christians gathered for the purpose of studying God's Word together supply the fellowship for which a growing number of people hunger, living as they do in an increasingly impersonal and pagan society. This is an additional reason given by many, if not most, of the congregations in our day (non-WELS and WELS) why they are organizing home Bible study groups as a part of their adult education program.

The Reason Why Home Bible Study Groups Are Formed Influences How They Operate

Why a home Bible study group is formed will also greatly influence how it operates. If the group is formed for some reactionary reason (its members don't like the pastor, don't like the people in Bible class, don't think the WELS fellowship practice is right, don't think women are being given enough influence in the church, don't think our church is active enough, don't think our members are really living their faith, etc.), then the small group most likely will not want to have any guidance from the pastor or the elected lay leaders

of the church. The group will want to set its own agenda, choose its own materials, and operate as a special church within the church.

This clearly does not follow Paul's admonition and encouragement given in Ephesians 4:2,3,16, "Be humble and gentle in every way, and be patient—putting up with each other in a loving manner. Do your best, through the peace that ties you together, to maintain the unity that the Spirit gives....He makes the whole body fit together and unites it through the support of every joint. As each and every part does its job, He makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love" (NET).

On the other hand, if the home Bible study group is formed as a part of the congregation's nurturing program and its goals are the same as those of the congregation, it will operate in a different manner. The group will welcome the guidance of the pastor and church council or board of education. It will welcome materials supplied by the congregation and ongoing training of the group leader or coordinator. In short, both its reason for existence and its method of operation will be in line with the words of Paul to the Ephesians.

How Are Home Bible Study Groups Organized to Avoid Potential Problems?

A number of concerns have been voiced about having such groups in a congregation. Though groups may have been started originally for fellowship and Bible study, how do you avoid having the group become a clique which begins to find fault with things in the congregation and adopts its own agenda for "changing things"? The literature this writer has seen suggests a number of ways this problem can be headed off: 1) the members of the church council serve as the leaders of those groups that are organized; 2) the church council chooses the leader of each new group and indicates that one of his responsibilities is to keep the group's meetings focused on Bible study rather than becoming fault-finding sessions; 3) the groups meet for one year and then a certain number of people from each group rotate to the next group; 4) the pastor and the elders of the congregation visit the groups regularly on a rotating basis, and as part of each meeting where a pastor or elder is present some facet of the congregation's or the synod's work forms part of the agenda for that meeting.

How do you keep the group from going off the deep end theologically if the pastor or another theologically trained person is not there? The suggestions that are given to avoid this problem all speak about the materials the group has and how the group uses these materials. One of the best approaches would be to use printed material that presents biblical truth already developed in a fairly comprehensive form. Following the study of this material, the group uses a study guide to talk about some questions and discussion starters that apply this truth to their lives.

This latter approach can be accomplished in any number of ways: 1) the study material to be used by the group is provided by the pastor, the pastor meets with the leaders and prepares them to use the material, and any questions that the group raises which go beyond that material are discussed with the pastor at the next leaders' meeting; 2) the study material is chosen by the group from courses produced by Northwestern Publishing House that have a teacher's manual for the leader to use in guiding the class as it works through a lesson; 3) the Bible study consists in working through one of the volumes of the People's Bible (using the study guide if one has been produced for that volume); 4) the pastor gives the group the sermon text for the next Sunday, some guide questions, and some parallel passages to discuss at their meeting; then they hear the pastor's sermon on that Bible text the following Sunday; 5) the groups are formed as monthly breakout groups from the pastor's weekly Bible class and the material to be studied in the small group is something they do in preparation for the next weekly Bible class.

What if some people in the congregation prefer not to be part of a small group? The answer usually given is that this should be only one part of the congregation's nurture program for adults, not the whole

program. Then members should feel no more "pressure" to attend a small home group than they do to attend the pastor's weekly Bible class, the women's or men's organizations, a family vacation Bible school, etc. People in each home Bible study group will naturally extend friendly invitations to others to join them (especially if the groups are organized on an area basis or if new members join the congregation, etc.). But they need to be warned not to use any pressure in the form of guilt or put downs to get someone to accept the invitation.

What if a group wants to invite someone who is not a member of the congregation to join the group? A number of things would have to be true in order for this not to become a problem: 1) the group should be one that is quite well established in its pattern of study of good material so that the non-member does not divert them to some less desirable pattern or material; 2) the non-member would have to be one who is not a member of another church so that this group is not viewed either by that person or by a member of the group as an interdenominational study group²; 3) the group needs to have at least a few Christians who are mature in their knowledge of Scripture and basic Christian doctrine so that a clear law/gospel witness can be given this person at all times. If these three conditions are present, this can be just as effective a way of witnessing to this person as when an individual Christian discusses his/her faith with a non-Christian on a one-to-one basis.

Conclusion

These are some of the most common concerns raised about small groups. Taking into consideration everything said so far, should every congregation feel duty bound to have home Bible study groups as part of its educational program? No, not at all. Each congregation needs to assess its own program of education and plan accordingly. Home Bible study groups might be a negative in the adult education program for some congregations.

Are there some situations that might lead a congregation to consider home Bible study groups? Yes, if any one or more of these conditions are present: 1) there is a group of people in the congregation who have asked that this approach to adult education might be considered; 2) the "why" and the "how" concerns discussed earlier are dealt with in a way that supports rather than undermines congregational unity and growth in spiritual maturity; 3) members of the congregation are being drawn into interdenominational small groups and one way to counter this problem is to start congregational home Bible study groups³; 4) there are enough leaders to guide the small groups in a responsible way; 5) this is one way to multiply the number of people in the congregation engaged in regular Bible study; 6) there is a real need for a growing number of isolated or lonely members in the congregation to have an opportunity for fellowship and spiritual growth in the company of a small group of fellow Christians.

As is the case with any other congregational program, home Bible study groups should be organized only after the whole congregation has studied carefully its dual God-given mission of nurture and outreach. Home Bible study groups can and will be a blessing for all concerned only when the reason why they are formed truly supports this mission of the congregation and the way they are organized is planned and carried out by the congregation's leaders.

²If a non-member wanted to attend a group Bible study meeting as a visitor to get to know more about the Lutheran church, an exception might be made. But it would have to be clear to everyone that this person was there as a visitor and inquirer, not as a teacher.

³Obviously, this should never be the sole reason for starting home Bible study groups. These groups should be something the congregation feels will contribute to its overall nurture program as well as keep members from getting involved in interdenominational groups. The situation would be analogous to congregations a few decades ago that started Pioneer groups for the benefit of their children as well as to avoid having those children entangled in Boy and Girl Scout troops.