LEADING DIFFERENT SMALL GROUPS DIFFERENTLY IN THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

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Abstract

Mixed methods (simple exploratory and participatory action research) study explored ways congregations can draw upon the United Methodist heritage and the missional approach to foster spiritual formation using small groups that make sense to the postmodern culture and lead to behavior changes. Three crucial attributes of vital, faith-forming small groups are (1) creating authentic community (belonging—engaging one another), (2) engaging the Holy Spirit (believing—engaging God), and (3) helping participants make applications to their daily lives (behaving—engaging real life). Congregations must do the hard work of contextualizing these and combine all three for small groups to empower spiritual growth.

Research Question and Lenses

Spiritual growth is a change of heart that is evidenced in a change of behavior. This understanding draws upon the Wesleyan heritage of sanctification and John Wesley's call to inward (personal) and outward (social) holiness, or, as he often put it, "holiness of heart and life."[1] As Christians grow in their faith in Jesus, that growth is evidenced in changes in their daily behaviors.

Small groups are an important vehicle for this spiritual growth. This research found that three attributes are crucial for small groups to nurture spiritual growth: creating authentic community (belonging—engaging one another), engaging the Holy Spirit (believing—engaging God), and helping participants make applications to their daily lives

[1] For example, see "Thoughts upon Methodism" in John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley, ed. Albert Cook Outler (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1984), 9:529, or "Advice to the People Called Methodists," in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley,* 9:123–124.

(behaving—engaging real life). It is the combination of these three attributes in a group that nurtures spiritual growth. Further, leaders need to do the hard work of contextualizing these attributes for their own settings.

In this research project, I explored ways that United Methodist congregations can draw upon their United Methodist heritage and a missional church understanding to foster spiritual formation using small groups that make sense to the current culture and are usable in local ministry contexts. My research question was:

How might a participatory action research intervention, which draws on the United Methodist heritage of using small groups, framed within a missional perspective, be used to help cultivate faith formation group experiences in my local ministry context?

I drew upon four theoretical lenses to interpret my research. Perhaps the most foundational theoretical lens was social networking because it studies the relationships that connect people and can provide the framework for exploring how people relate in small groups. Particularly relevant for this research was how social network theory explores the social structures of relationships and how they affect beliefs and behaviors, linking them not to the characteristics or attributes within the individuals themselves, but to the interactions and relationships between them.[2] The group experience provides a broader

[2] The work of Nancy Katz, David Lazer, Holly Arrow, and Noshir Contractor, "The Network Perspective of Small Groups: Theory and Research," in *Theories of Small Groups: Interdisciplinary Perspectives,* ed. Marshall Scott Poole, Andrea B. Hollingshead (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2005), helps explain these relationships. In "Network Theory and Small Groups," *Small Group Research* 35(3) (2004): 307, they apply social network theory specifically with small groups, studying how people naturally structure themselves within groups (explained in terms of "ties") and how the group norms are shared and enforced. The work of Joseph Meyers, Edward T. Hall, and Peter Block helped interpret how people feel a sense of belonging and relatedness in small groups, as opposed to simple connectedness. See Joseph R. Meyers, *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Youth Specialties, 2003); Joseph R. Meyers, *Organic Community: Creating a Place Where People Naturally Connect* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2007); Edward T. Hall, *The*

context for spiritual formation that is not possible when alone and fosters changes in behavior.

One thing that can be learned from this theory is the need for small groups and their leaders to identify the similarities shared among participants who do not share obvious similarities. For example, part of the invitation to new people, or even during the relationship-building times of the small group, might be to name what that new person has in common with others in the group. This could be a passion around a certain cause, a hobby, or being fans of the same sports teams. Another idea this theory suggests is that group participants should be encouraged to invite people they know, as those people will have the benefit of knowing at least someone in the group.

A second important theoretical lens was the broader postmodern culture missional small groups seek to engage.[3] Particularly important for this research is the postmodern value of shared experiences and learning through discussions with others. As difficult as it is to understand our postmodern culture, churches have the opportunity to draw upon postmodern perspectives in order to offer small groups that make sense to and touch the deep yearnings of those in the local neighborhoods.[4] One of the most

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Hidden Dimension (New York: Anchor Books, 1990); Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008). Finally, James W. Fowler's work in faith development theory pointed to the need for relational contexts for nurture that are provided in small groups. For example, James W. Fowler, "Faith Development at 30: Naming the Challengers of Faith in a New Millennium," *Religious Education* 99(4) (2004).

[3] David Bosch provides an important lens that helped define what postmodernism is and how it offers a critique within our culture against the certitude of modernism, in David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission,* American Society of Missiology Series 16 (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991). Patrick R. Keifert's fact-value split helps explain how within our culture, the values of postmodernism are not applied consistently. See Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

[4] Miroslav Volf and David Tracy offer intriguing suggestions that can be used to do this, particularly drawing upon the value of participation of postmodern culture. See Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, Sacra Doctrina (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) and

important ways small groups can make sense to the postmodern culture might be the movement away from content learning and toward sharing from one's life.

Open systems theory helps guide how missional small groups can organize themselves so they intentionally are shaped for and by those who are in the wider community.[5] Outsiders, or new people from outside the organization, can change the group dynamic to deepen hospitality, care, and openness.[6] Missional small groups intentionally need to invite new people in from the wider community. The difficulty is for the groups to keep a healthy balance between maintaining the groups within the guidelines and organization of the local church while allowing groups and their new members the authority to craft their own group experience. It is often tempting to close the groups and only allow those who are already there to dictate how they want things done. Yet, if missional small groups take seriously the calling *to go*, they will need to go with an openness that allows new people to help craft the group experience.

Practice theory helps explain how engaging in certain practices can be powerful in bringing about lasting changes

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David Tracy, *On Naming the Present: Reflections on God, Hermeneutics, and Church*, Concilium Series (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994).

[5] Particularly important for my study was Peter Senge's and Emerald Jay D. Ilac's work on learning organizations, namely, the learning that takes place by those who make up an organization. See Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, Rev. and updated. ed. (New York: Doubleday/Currency, 2006); Emerald Jay D. Ilac, "Learning Organization—Organizational Learning: What Is the Difference?" http//www.researchgate.net/post/Learning_Organization-Organizatinal_Learning_What_is_difference (accessed November 6, 2014). Margaret J. Wheatley argues that leaders should draw upon the natural capacity of self-organization that is inherent within systems, in *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1999), 15. Landon Whitsitt adapts open-source models to suggest an open sourced church, in *Open Source Church: Making Room for the Wisdom of All* (Herndon, Va.: Alban Institute, 2011).

[6] In true hospitality, argues Patrick R. Keifert in *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 59, strangers who are new to the congregation are valued as gifts sent by God to help and impact the congregation.

in behavior.[7] Learned habits are reinforced by the cultural structures of groups.[8] Forming practices help shape a person's behavior and beliefs.[9] Small groups can be contexts of practice that reinforce desired beliefs and behaviors.

Behavior can be changed when practices are combined with learning. Small groups can be places where people join together to grow spiritually through learning about Christian discipleship and then put their new knowledge into practice through group practices and activities. Over time, those sustained practices become formative in the participants' lives, resulting in long-term changes of behavior.

I also drew upon four biblical lenses for this research project. The biblical concept of spiritual growth, particularly as developed in the New Testament epistles, describes

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[7] Pierre Bourdieu's work on *habitus* connects a person's behavior with that person's previous experiences. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

[8] Sherry B. Ortner's work with the connection between practice and structure can help small groups serve as a part of people's defined and defining structures. See Sherry B. Ortner, "Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26(1) (1984) and Sherry B. Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power and the Acting* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006). The connected work of Jean Lave, Étienne Wenger, and Seth Chaiklin on how people learn within what they coin "communities of practice" suggests how groups that share practices together can make learning a reification process that happens in the practices of everyday life. See Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Learning in Doing (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, Learning in Doing (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Seth Chaiklin and Jean Lave, *Understanding Practice: Perspectives on Activity and Context*, Learning in Doing (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[9] From a theological perspective, Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass explore how theological beliefs are lived out through practice. See Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002). Craig Van Gelder points to how theory/theology (*theoria*) and practice/practical wisdom (*phronesis*) shape personal and communal formation (*habitus*) in *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2007), 99.

growth as a process of transformation and maturity.[10] Followers of Jesus continue to grow spiritually over time. This growth is a partnership of the work of the individual and the work of the Holy Spirit within the individual. Growth means change. The desired outcome of effective groups is behavior change. The biblical understanding of spiritual growth as transformation and maturity pushes small groups to engage those characteristics that produce growth.

A second biblical lens for spiritual formation is understanding discipleship as following.[11] This pushes the understanding of small groups to actually doing life together. Spiritual formation comes from living life together, with the accountability of shared practices. Small groups that lead to behavior change focus on patterns of life that the biblical frame of discipleship calls obedience. Small groups can help disciples live more consistently in obedience because of the mutual accountability, encouraging relationships, and engagement in habit-forming practices.

The third helpful biblical lens is the healthy, holy habits that link behavior to spiritual growth.[12] Often behavioral changes are seen as the result of spiritual growth. Biblically,

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[10] Paul describes this as growing toward the desired perfection in love and as growing to become more like God (2 Cor. 3:18, Rom. 8:29, etc.). Paul and the other epistle writers use the image of physical growth to describe spiritual growth (Eph. 4:11–15, 1 Cor. 14:20, Heb. 5:11–6:1, 1 Pet. 2:2, etc.). Another New Testament image is mature plants bearing fruit (John 15:5, Col. 1:10, 2 Cor. 9:10, and 2 Pet. 1:5–8.).

[11] Jesus called his first disciples to *follow* him (Matt. 4:19, 16:24). Jesus taught the disciples from everyday life situations, helping them grow in living situations that emerged during daily life *along the way*. The Christians in the book of Acts were called "followers of the way" (Acts 9:22, 19:23, 22:4, 24:5, and 24:14). This phrase describes discipleship as a way of life, a form of daily living. Jesus' followers continued to live life together (Acts 2:42–46).

[12] Second Pet. 1:5–6 prescribes adding to faith the practices of goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, and godliness. Paul describes in Romans 5:3–5 the growth from suffering to perseverance to character to hope. Also, the early Christians in Jerusalem continued in the practices of teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42). Richard Foster helps identify and apply these spiritual disciplines, both those done individually and those done together; they are disciplines that can take place in small groups.

however, there is a witness that behavior changes can lead to spiritual growth.[13] Small groups can incorporate shared practices in order to foster spiritual growth.[14] The community of vital small groups, through covenantal commitments to each other, deep sharing, mutual accountability, focus on life behaviors, the practices within the group, and acts of service outside of it, lives out together the biblical connection of communities shaping spiritual growth evidenced in behaviors.

The fourth biblical lens is building deep relationships with outsiders. Key biblical motifs are service to others, seeing those who are usually overlooked, and building relationships with new people.[15] Spiritual formation happens when believers interact well with outsiders. This interaction, however, needs to include building deep, ongoing relationships slowly over time as life is shared. Not only does this build credibility within the wider community, it also builds the faith of those in the group. Missional small groups need to find ways of living out and about, among the wider community, sharing life together.

I also employed four theological lenses. A Wesleyan understanding of sanctification asserts that Christians continually grow in grace and holiness. For Wesley, salvation is a relationship with God, a process toward loving God completely, and a partnership between God and the individual. The Christian faith is practical divinity, and therefore faith held within the heart necessarily produces in

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[13] Early on, Jesus sends his followers out as witnesses (Luke 10:1–17). Yet this sending does not seem to be the result of spiritual formation. Spiritual growth happens as they connect with others, practice faith sharing, and live their lives among others. Actions, practices, and patterns of behavior that the early Christians did together fostered their growth in following Jesus (Acts 2:42–46, Heb. 20:24, and 1 Cor. 11:1).

[14] Richard Foster helps identify and apply these spiritual disciplines, both those done individually and those done together, which are disciplines that can take place in small groups. See Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 20th anniversary ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

[15] Strong biblical examples of this are Jesus, Paul, and the Apostles.

the life of the believer actual holiness: holiness of heart and life, or, inward and outward holiness.

Wesley's genius, however, comes in the small-group method he implemented specifically to assist the Methodists with the pursuit of holiness. He placed every Methodist in a small group, with the expressed purpose of encouraging holiness of heart and life. The members utilized ongoing mutual accountability as the context for sharing their experience of how they lived out their faith in their daily lives. The class meeting became Wesley's method for behavioral change. A key component in these small groups was mutual accountability, housed in weekly meetings, deep and personal sharing, respect and trust, and application to daily living. These are still important components for faith-shaping small groups.

The social relationship of the perichoretic Trinity, my second theological lens, informs the nature and interplay of the community and connectedness of faith formation small groups.[16] The perichoretic Trinity shows the Christian life as not just an imitation of God, but actual participation with God. That participation brings life and wholeness. When people have a healing relationship with God, it, in turn, brings healing to their relationships with other people. Conversely, when people experience healthy and wholeness-making small groups, their experiences of a loving God can be healed and restored. Small groups, then, can be contexts in which to experience the authentic relatedness for which God created people, particularly when small groups are open to new people.

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[16] Gary M. Simpson helps focus God's mission in the world as a relationship of *communio*, inviting people into communion with Godself, in "No Trinity, No Mission: The Apostolic Difference of Revisioning the Trinity," *Word and World* 15(3) (1998). Michael Welker frames this relationship in terms of people's need for intimacy with God, in *God the Spirit*, 1st English-language ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994). Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile speak of the church not as imitation of the Trinity but as participation in the Trinity. See Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation*, The Missional Network (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2011).

Hospitality as welcoming the stranger, my third theological lens, pushes missional small groups to receive God through an authentic encounter with the other.[17] I found close connections of this theological lens with the theoretical lens of open systems theory and the biblical lens of welcoming the stranger. Spiritual growth is fostered as people interact with other, new—and different—people.

Effective leaders are important in keeping groups from becoming self-focused and in creating healthy bonding when new people join groups. Leaders can point out the value of hearing diverse perspectives and how other ideas make the conversation rich and deep. Sharing must be protected in order for there to be room for everyone to share, and for all participants to feel like their perspectives are heard and valued. The leader can help the group establish ground rules of respect and inclusivity early on in the group's life that then can become part of the group's personality fabric. Leaders must help the groups resist the temptation to simply

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[17] M. Scott Boren describes the missional way of relating as ways of sharing life together, in *Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community That Makes a Difference in the World*, Allelon Missional Series (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2010). Robert D. Putnam, David E. Campbell, and Shaylyn Romney Garrett speak about this kind of connection in personal relationships that can interlock even with people with different beliefs in *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010). Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk describe the importance of deep listening; the primary approach to strangers is not to share information but to receive the other as a gift from God in *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World*, Leadership Network Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006). Christine D. Pohl and Gilbert I. Bond add that this also means to listen deeply to the Scriptures, the nature of the ministry focus, and the tacit understandings and practices of hospitality of the group. See Christine D. Pohl, "A Community's Practice of Hospitality: The Interdependence of Practices and of Communities," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, eds. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002); and Gilbert I. Bond, "Liturgy, Ministry, and the Stranger: The Practices of Encountering the Other in Two Christian Communities," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002). Finally, Whitsitt's image of "open source" helps groups to invite the other in as a forming participant with the authority to help design and shape the ongoing life of the group, in Whitsitt, *Open Source Church.*

do what group members prefer and instead keep the groups true to their missional callings.

The last theological lens that helps inform this research project is the framework of accountable discipleship for small groups developed and published by David Lowes Watson and Steven Manskar through the United Methodist General Board of Discipleship (GBOD).[18] Steven Manskar grounds small groups in the United Methodist tradition on the dual foundations of grace and holiness.[19] These two foundations bring transformation in the lives of individuals through three dynamics: believing (faith belief in God), belonging (love-relationships with others), and behaving (living in obedience).[20] These three dynamics are powerfully nurtured in covenant discipleship small groups and, when combined, lives are changed.

Methodology and Design

The methodology for my research project was a two-stage, mixed-methods concurrent approach. This allowed me to take an initial, more in-depth look at a few scenarios where small groups were being used effectively in local

[18] David Lowes Watson, in *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance* (Nashville, Tenn.: Discipleship Resources, 1985), drew upon his research of the early Methodist class meetings and proposed that accountable discipleship, a distinguishing characteristic of Wesley's class meetings, can be adapted for use in small groups among Methodists again today. Watson called this adapted form of Wesley's mutual accountability "covenant discipleship." See David Lowes Watson, *Covenant Discipleship: Christian Formation Through Mutual Accountability* (Nashville, Tenn.: Discipleship Resources, 1991).

[19] Steven Manskar continued Watson's work and offered an accountable discipleship small-group format called Covenant Discipleship Groups. See Steven W. Manskar, *Accountable Discipleship: Living in God's Household* (Nashville, Tenn.: Discipleship Resources, 2000), 16. Manskar argues that small-group experiences can be contexts that create experiences of public works of piety and mercy, and they hold participants accountable to private works of piety and mercy. See Steven W. Manskar, *Small Group Ministries: Christian Formation Through Mutual Accountability*, Guidelines (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press 2012).

[20] Manskar, *Small Group Ministries*, 10.

churches; this information was then used to inform my second stage.

The first stage was a simple exploratory project using qualitative interviews over the phone with leaders of seven different churches who oversaw their small-group ministries. These churches were selected from across the country because they were already using small groups effectively for faith formation and to engage the wider community. All the churches were United Methodist congregations. Five were very large, suburban congregations, with more than one thousand attending weekend worship. One was a suburban congregation in Minnesota, worshipping fewer than three hundred per week. One was an urban congregation in Minnesota, with a weekend worship attendance of fewer than two hundred.

The second stage was a participatory action research (PAR) mixed-methods transformative research project within my own ministry context. PAR was advantageous for the substantive part of this project because I wanted to experiment with different ideas to see what might be used in small-group settings, particularly in my own ministry context. As this required discernment, collaboration, experimentation, and reflection, PAR was a good fit. Further, because this project was about group experience, it was important to use a cooperative research group.

To begin, the same baseline quantitative questionnaire was administered to two groups, as a baseline measure for two longitudinal panels. The questionnaire surveyed how effectively people felt our small groups fostered faith formation and engaged people in the wider community. The first set was administered among a census of the thirty-six most active congregational leaders. The second group was a census of the seven members of my PAR team.

The PAR group met twice a month for ten months, ending in August 2015. Our interventions included practices that we did individually when apart, as well as activities we did together as a group when we met. The information learned from other churches in the first stage helped the

PAR group understand better how other churches were using small groups effectively.

To conclude, two end line quantitative questionnaires were administered among the same two groups that served as the end line measure of the longitudinal panels. A concluding focus group was also conducted with the participants in the PAR small group. This protocol explored the group's learnings from this project, particularly focusing on possibilities from this small-group model that might be usable in other settings.

The qualitative data were analyzed using a modified version of Kathy Charmaz's guidelines for coding qualitative data, as she describes in *Constructing Grounded Theory*.[21] The quantitative data of my research project were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The data from the questionnaires were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to perform statistical tests.

Findings: First Stage

The qualitative research of my first stage helped identify current realities and best practices among the seven churches interviewed. The churches placed high value on small groups and a high expectation for people to be in small groups. This was promoted by the senior staff and in worship settings, which created a church culture of being involved in small groups. These churches valued groups as the primary pathway of spiritual growth within their churches.

These churches also provide plenty of resources to support groups and their leaders. Most noticeable was the

[21] Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2006), 55–60. As she suggests, I conducted initial coding by identifying within the data word-by-word, line-by-line, and incident-by-incident *in vivo* codes. I then conducted what she calls focused coding by grouping first the *in vivo* codes into focused codes, and then by grouping the focused codes into axial codes. I explored various possibilities of how the axial codes could be interrelated, resulting in what Charmaz calls theoretical coding, which completed my qualitative analysis.

use of paid staff to provide oversight, support, coaching, and resources to initially develop and also to continue the small-group ministry. Even so, small groups arose somewhat organically and chaotically, and staff had to work hard to organize what was emerging. Groups were developed through a continual process of creating and re-creating, of ongoing interplay among the developing, designing, and supporting components. Training that coupled instruction with modeling was provided continually through the intentional development and support of small-group leaders. In addition, a wide variety of resources and materials were made available to leaders and participants.

The churches employed fairly consistently the components of relationship building, caring for group members, studying Scripture, making application to daily life, prayer, acts of service, and connecting with the wider community. They also worked hard to offer options and variety among small-group times, locations, topics, and formats.

Participants were not only drawn into the groups, they were also expected to affect and help re-create them. Groups tended to spend a lot of time on fellowship early on, and this helped establish trust and safety for participants to share applications to their personal lives. Serving components, although named as a priority from the beginning, might not actually be added until the group feels comfortable working together. Spiritual growth, building community, and sharing life together were the primary values for those who engage in the small-group ministry.

The interviews with the seven other United Methodist churches identified important characteristics of vital small-group ministries that have been proven helpful by tested experience in concrete contexts. These characteristics include intentional and paid staff to organize, oversee, equip, and resource the small groups and their leaders, a congregation-wide culture of valuing small groups, offering a variety of group experiences in kind and in frequency, and the need to continually form and re-form the small-group design and structure. Components shared by these

successful small groups include relationship building among the participants built on fellowship, trust and caring for each other, engaging God's Word through Scripture and open discussion of how it applies to their daily lives, praying for and with each other, and having an outward focus through service and invitation to others not in the group.

A key finding is that for these churches, small groups are the primary path of discipleship and spiritual formation. Small-group settings provide the community interaction and context for people to talk about their own spiritual journeys and to apply what they have been learning to their own lives. Connecting to God, to others, and to daily life are essential for discipleship.

Findings: Second Stage

The PAR group experience served two purposes. One was to be a small group, experimenting with different components such as sharing deeply, holding each other accountable, applying our learnings to our daily lives, and sharing life together. The other was to discern together ideas of what could be incorporated into other small-group contexts. We did this through engaging sources, trying interventions (experimental practices we agreed as a group to try), reflecting on what we were learning, and sharing feedback and insights during group time. The group tried sixteen different interventions; four of these we did during group time, and the others we did on our own between group sessions. We then held each other accountable by providing updates and asking one another for insights.

A number of the practices, we determined, could be useful in other group contexts. Taking time during the first few sessions to share a meal together fostered relationships, fellowship, and trust. It was important early on to name the expectations that we would share from our personal lives, invite new people to the group, and engage in service activities as a group together. The practice of using a guiding question at the beginning of group time helped our group move quickly to deep sharing. Two examples of the questions we used were "What makes you feel alive lately?"

and "What words of life have been spoken into/through you lately?"

Interventions that we did on our own, such as sitting in other groups at church and asking the participants what their group's purpose was, or asking people inside and outside the church what helped them continue to grow spiritually, gave rise to an idea we found could be adapted by other groups as well. One idea from a different church was a weekly cadence for participants to attend worship and engage in two other spiritual growth opportunities: an act of personal devotion and an act of service to others. This cadence we called Worship Plus Two, which we wrote out as "W+2." Our group found this to be an engaging way of communicating the United Methodist path of sanctification, which John Wesley described as "holiness of heart and life."[22]

Another transferable practice we called Ninja Blessings. This meant performing acts of service by reaching out in random acts of small, quick, and inconspicuous kindness to others. We found this really helped group members begin to see all kinds of opportunities for service and develop a habit of seeing needs and acting on them.

Qualitative Data

I divided the qualitative material from the eighteen PAR group sessions and ending focus group into reflections about our interventions and reflections about ideas that could be adapted for other small-group contexts. Of particular help to us was Manskar's description of the Wesleyan framework of spiritual growth in terms of belong (love), believe, and behave (obey).[23] This, we discerned, was a faithful expression of Wesley's concept of spiritual growth as holiness (belonging) of heart (believing) and life (behaving). Further, analysis of the qualitative data showed a clustering around these three same components.

[22] "Thoughts upon Methodism" in Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 9:529.
[23] Manskar, *Small Group Ministries*, 10.

The twelve axial codes I identified showed an emerging framework for effective small groups.[24] These codes were going deep, longing, applying/acting, relating, leading, going out, inviting, designing, growing, serving, encountering God, and changing the culture. These codes seemed to relate in three theoretical relationships: how individuals grew spiritually around the central practice of being involved in a small group, how churches could create and sustain a small-group ministry that helped people grow spiritually, and how relationships with God are formed.

These three systems interplay with each other and also have their own interplay within them. The pathway of spiritual growth for individuals seemed to have a system of relationships around fulfilling the longing of people who are seeking God as well as a system of relationships around how spiritual formation is sustained for those people. The pathway of spiritual growth created by local congregations seemed to have three systems at work: one around the importance of leadership, one around the designing of small groups, and one around the culture of the congregation for small groups. Table 1 shows these three systems and the six theoretical relationships that seemed to emerge, along with the axial codes that associate with each theoretical relationship.

[24] Kathy Charmaz, in *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2006), 55–60, describes axial coding as grouping similar focused codes into axial codes.

Table 1. Theoretical Relationships, Their Axial Codes, and the Three Interplaying Systems

Theoretical Relationships	Axial Codes
System: Relationship with God	
A. Encountering God	11. Encountering God
System: Pathway of Spiritual Growth for People Seeking God	
B. Longing for More	1. Going Deep
	2. Longing
	3. Applying/Acting
	4. Relating
	9. Growing
C. Sustained in Groups	4. Relating
	6. Going Out
	9. Growing
	10. Serving
System: Pathway of Spiritual Growth Offered by a Local Congregation	
D. Small-Group Context	5. Leading
	9. Growing
E. Designing of Groups	1. Going Deep
	2. Longing
	3. Applying/Acting
	4. Relating
	6. Going Out
	8. Designing
F. Sustaining of Groups	6. Going Out
	7. Inviting
	12. Changing the culture

Spiritual growth is an organic and living process and perhaps is more compellingly represented using organic images from nature, such as that shown in Figure 1.

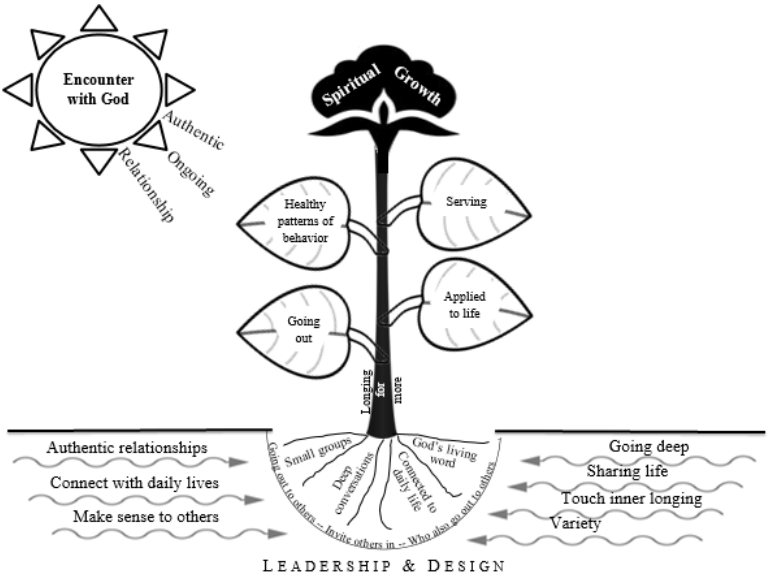

Figure 1. Organic Representation of the Three Systems and Theoretical Relationships[25]

The image of the sun represents the relationship with God. A living and personal relationship with God through Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit is the blanketing, purpose, and goal of spiritual formation. Spiritual growth is always a result of an encounter with God. People receive light and life from God, and we strive and reach to God. The human hungering for more is answered in an authentic, ongoing relationship with God.

The image of the growing plant represents the pathway for spiritual growth for people seeking God. It incorporates

[25] This diagram is original to the author.

two theoretical relationships. A person's longing for more, represented as the feeding of the roots of the growing plant, is nourished in small groups through connection to others in authentic community, connection to God and God's living word, and connection to daily life as deep conversations and accountability help participants connect God's word to daily life. The same group that helps its participants connect to their longing also helps sustain the ongoing spiritual growth. Groups do this by supporting, nurturing, and reinforcing different behaviors; going out and serving others individually; and applying what they learn to their daily lives. Spiritual growth, according to the Wesleyan model, also comes through the practice of new behaviors. Sustained in groups, therefore, is represented as the leaves of the plant, since leaves feed the plant, and define and evidence to others that it is growing.

The three theoretical relationships of the system of the pathway of spiritual growth offered by a local congregation are represented at the base of the diagram. Local churches can provide the context for effective small groups through excellent and well-trained leaders who create and sustain the right context for the groups. This small-group context created by the leadership is represented in the figure organically as the ground that supports plant growth.

Leaders can design small-group ministry to: (1) be a community that offers authentic relationships, shares life, and goes deep; (2) make sense to those the congregation is trying to engage; (3) touch their inner sense of longing and make connections to their daily lives; and (4) offer options to connect in a variety of ways over time. These characteristics feed the individuals who are growing spiritually. This theoretical relationship of the designing of groups is represented in the diagram organically as the nutrients within the soil that feed plant growth.

Further, the culture within the congregation must sustain the ongoing small-group ministry. It is a culture of expectation for people to go out and engage those who are not a part of small groups, to personally and enthusiastically invite them to join one, and for those new people, in turn,

also to go out to engage those who are not part of a small group. This sustaining of groups culture is represented organically in the figure as creating the hole in the soil in which new plants can begin to grow. It is creating the room—the capacity—for more people to join.

Ultimately, spiritual growth is a relationship. It is a relationship of individuals to God, of individuals to others in the communities in which God places them, and of individuals to themselves as they grow. Although this figure is of a single plant, it must never be imagined that, in life-giving small groups, individuals grow alone. The relationships with others are present in the soil and roots.

Quantitative Project: Two Longitudinal Panels

The qualitative research suggested how small groups *could* nurture spiritual growth that leads to behavior change. To complete the research, the baseline and end line surveys of two longitudinal panels were compared to test if vital small groups *would* nurture spiritual growth.

Descriptive statistics from the questionnaires of the leadership group revealed the following statistics pertaining to the respondents: more than sixty years old (39.3 percent), married (85.7 percent), living with a spouse at home with no minors (57.1 percent), and retired (46.4 percent). Respondents were evenly divided between males and females. Most respondents had been a Christian for more than twenty years (88.9 percent) and had been at this congregation for more than ten years (78.6 percent). Finally, respondents were balanced between being introverted and extroverted (3.57 out of 6.00).

The data also revealed that among the respondents, small groups were considered very important in helping people mature in their faith. The top six components identified as most helpful for fostering spiritual growth in groups may suggest priorities for small-group ministries in other settings. These include (1) sharing from personal struggles, (2) applying biblical teaching to daily life, (3) leaders encouraging participants to go deeper, (4) mutual confidentiality, (5) building relationships with new people,

and (6) inviting new people to the group. Variety in group styles, structures, and offerings also was identified as important. Essential group dynamics indicated were meeting people where they are, encouraging them to grow spiritually, having patience with members, supporting them over time, and discussing life issues. Respondents also reported that it was important to balance serving the needs of group participants and reaching out to new people.

SPSS was used to conduct inferential statistics on the data. The sample size was not large enough for chi-square or correlation tests to be reliable. The t-tests conducted on the responses of the group of leaders revealed four questions with a p-value of 0.05 or less. Table 2 lists the three most relevant of these questions and their t-test results.

Question 1 showed a significant change among the leadership toward a stronger belief that small groups are a crucial part of the church. This is a fairly important result for this research project, as it seems that the PAR's work had some influence on the wider leadership of the congregation to value small groups as an important part of the congregation's life and ministry.

Results from question 5 suggest that leaders were hearing more stories of how small-group experiences have impacted people's daily lives. This might suggest a cultural shift toward a greater valuing of how small groups impact daily lives.

Question 16 showed a movement of answers along a continuum from a group focus of "Help me grow spiritually" to an end line preference of "Reach out to new people." Both components are important, but this shift might suggest a movement away from a group focus on the individual to a greater focus on reaching others. It also might suggest a growing openness of using groups to reach new people.

Table 2. Questions with t-Test Results 0.05 or Less on Leaders Survey

N = 28

Question:
1. I feel that small groups are a crucial part of [our church].

Baseline Mean	End Line Mean	t	df	p
3.71	4.35	-2.588	27	**.007**

Question:
5. How often have you heard people share stories of how their small group experiences have impacted their behavior in daily life?

Baseline Mean	End Line Mean	t	df	p
2.68	3.235	-2.588	27	**.015**

Question:
16. Try to indicate along the following continuum where you think [we] ought to place primary focus: [between] "Help me grow spiritually" and "Reach out to new people."

Baseline Mean	End Line Mean	t	df	p
3.43	4.07	-3.012	27	**.006**

The small number of questionnaires and the similarity of so many of the respondents made it unsurprising that running the t-tests did not produce more indications of significant change. Even so, the direction of the changes in the responses from the baseline to the end line surveys across a number of questions seems meaningful. Among the leaders' survey, one question showed an increase in respondents ranking small groups as very important in helping people mature in faith. This question strikes to the heart of my research project. Leaders, it seems, ended by placing a higher value on small groups than before. This, coupled with the increase in the question pertaining to whether small groups are crucial to the church, seems to suggest that the leadership ended with a more favorable view of small groups and their role in spiritual formation.

Slight increases were also seen in the means to some of the questions asking respondents to rank the importance of characteristics of small groups. The means increased from 3.32 to 3.46 toward "Discuss about personal lives," from 3.75 to 3.85 toward "Asking participants into accountability," and from 3.48 to 3.64 toward "Stressing doing good to others." These are all movements, albeit slight, toward a small-group experience that encourages personal growth evidenced in behavioral changes.

Among the PAR panel, the inferential statistics failed to show any significant changes. This means that this research was not able to identify any statistically significant impact of the small-group experience on its participant's spiritual growth. This might have been influenced by the small sample size (only six participants), the group's high scoring on the baseline survey (leaving little room to show marked growth on the end line survey), and the group's predisposition in favor of small-group ministry (which might require more time to manifest larger changes in their responses). During the ending focus group, however, participants were enthusiastic about the value of the small-group experience in effecting their spiritual growth.

Three Crucial Attributes

The findings of this research project, informed by the twelve lenses, suggest three crucial attributes of small groups that foster spiritual growth in their participants. The three attributes can take a variety of forms and look very different in various settings, but all three must be present for the groups to be truly faith-forming small groups.

The first crucial attribute is authentic community. Faith-forming small groups need to be communities in which: people are able to be themselves, relationships grow and deepen among the participants, trust is built, sharing is honest and about real-life issues, and participants share life together and care for one another in ways that might even go outside of group times together. True community is an expression of the family of God. Groups are not perfect as communities, and it is difficult and hard work for participants to sustain this level of community. Yet, they consistently practice bonding, forgiveness, unity building, caring, and being with and for each other.

The second crucial attribute is that groups engage the presence of the Holy Spirit. Faith-forming small groups engage the Divine, particularly through the leading, sustaining, empowering, and transforming presence of the Holy Spirit. This can happen through engaging the Scriptures or some other media that help participants connect to the reality of God. Yet, this is not mere learning of information. It is engaging the living God as present among them, in each of them, and active in their lives. The key here is faith sharing, as group participants talk about their faith journeys, about their experiences of God, and about how God is active in their lives currently. It is also essential that group participants grow in their praying for and with each other. Engaging the presence of the Holy Spirit means that group members pursue a living and personal relationship with God.

The third crucial attribute of faith-forming small groups is the intentional and consistent application to daily life. Many small groups learn information. Faith formation that leads to behavior change, however, makes the connection

between ideas and practical living. Learning becomes about how to live differently; discussions about what is learned must connect back to the participants' daily lives. Sharing needs to be open, honest, authentic, and personal. Often groups leave the application to the participants themselves. Faith-forming small groups make it a central part of the group time together. Small groups are particularly well-suited for the reflection, honesty, support, and accountability required for life application. Further, the application to daily life also means engaging others outside the group. Reaching out in listening, witnessing, caring, and serving are vital ways that a small group engages the reality of daily life. The temptation is often for groups to turn inward and, perhaps even unintentionally, become self-absorbed. Mutual accountability also can be offered around acts that demonstrate God's love for all people.

Engaging one other, engaging God, and engaging real life: these are the three crucial attributes of small groups that can consistently lead to spiritual growth evidenced in behavior change. Small groups often do one or even two of these components well. Yet, this research suggests that it is when all three attributes are practiced together that small-group experiences better cultivate spiritual growth. When one of these attributes is missing, groups can tend to emphasize learning information, engaging in acts of service, fellowship, or mutual support. Each of these is important, but each also can become an end in itself. It is the interplay of all three, however, as represented in the diagram of the growing plant, that nurtures the spiritual growth evidenced in behavior changes in the participants.

Small-group leaders, then, have to do the hard work to interpret and design what this might look like in each different context. It might be harder, however, to maintain consistently all three attributes within groups as they continue. Often, groups atrophy over time into employing just one or two of these attributes, especially if the participants have been accustomed to groups that have focused on one or two attributes. Leaders, therefore, need to

be attentive to cultivating all three attributes together in groups as they continue and develop over time.

Conclusion

Small groups can be highly effective contexts that nurture people in spiritual growth. These faith-forming small groups help people grow spiritually, lead to behavior change, draw upon United Methodist traditions, are missional in nature, and make sense in today's contexts.

Important components and characteristics of faith-forming small-group experiences include a congregational culture of small groups; well-trained and resourced small-group staff and leaders; authentic relationships built on fellowship, trust, deep sharing, mutual accountability, and caring for each other; engaging God's Word through Scripture and open discussion of how it applies to daily life; praying for and with each other; and having an outward focus through service and invitation to others not in the group. These characteristics must be interpreted for each specific ministry context, and local congregations must do the hard work of applying them in ways that make sense in their own settings.

Perhaps the most substantial finding of this project is the importance of holding together three crucial aspects of vital small-group ministries. Small-group ministries must create authentic community (belonging: engaging one another), engage the Holy Spirit (believing: engaging God), and help participants make applications to their daily lives (behaving: engaging real life). It is the combination of all three that releases the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Leaders in local congregations also must do the hard work of contextualizing these three elements in ways that make sense in their own settings.

Leaders, then, must lead different small groups differently. Key findings of this project include the need to constantly listen to the local context, to continually form and re-form the small-group ministry within the congregation, and for the leadership to be willing to experiment and adapt their learnings. This means, then, that how leaders lead small

groups will be different in each local setting. It requires a tenacious commitment across the church leadership to the ongoing value of faith-forming small groups.

Believing, belonging, behaving …
Holiness of heart and life …
Leaders leading different small groups differently.

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