

## The Childcare Conundrum

There are many ways to include children within your community.

For churches wanting to include younger families in small groups, childcare will always be one of the larger obstacles. But there is hope. Several options do exist for successfully accommodating children within a small-group setting.

### Here are some common options when children participate with adults in the group:

- ⇒ Children remain present with adults for the entire meeting.
- ⇒ Children remain present with adults for part of the meeting, and then break into a separate group in a separate room. Children can develop their own small group, participate in an activity (such as a Veggie Tales video), or enjoy a supervised time of free play.
- ⇒ Children join the adults every other meeting, or once a month. Children and adults meet separately during the other weeks.
- ⇒ Children and adults meet separately for the entire meeting.

### Here are some common options when a babysitter is involved:

- ⇒ Adults work together to arrange a babysitter for all of the children in the group. Payment is split between the entire group, or between only those bringing children.
- ⇒ A babysitter cares for most of the children during the group meeting, but nursing infants remain with adults.
- ⇒ Outside of the small group, each parent arranges for the care of their own children through a relative or sitter.
- ⇒ Young adults or teenagers from the church's youth ministry care for the children of your small group as an act of voluntary service, or a paid task.

### Here are some common options when childcare is arranged within the small group:

- ⇒ Each small-group member cares for the children on a weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly rotation.
- ⇒ Only those participants who have children in the group provide childcare on a weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly rotation.
- ⇒ Participants of other small groups at your church (ones that meet during a different time of the week) rotate to provide childcare for your small group, which returns the service.



## Godshapedlife

Viv Coleman

DISCIPLESHIP COACH

Email: [vivcolemanhowick@gmail.com](mailto:vivcolemanhowick@gmail.com)

[www.godshapedlife.com](http://www.godshapedlife.com)

Read my blog at [www.godshapedlife.blogspot.com](http://www.godshapedlife.blogspot.com)

## the godshaped life

### Spiritual Practice Nine



*"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer...(they) worshiped together ...met in homes ...and shared their meals with great joy and generosity" Acts 2: 42—46*

"Practice" means the repeated performance of a task or action regularly over time. A spiritual practice is exactly what the word suggests, a way to be deliberate about matters of the soul. This month's booklet introduces a concept where practice will need to be worked out in your life as an individual, for it reminds us that God has made us with wonderful variety.

*"A godshaped life is a flourishing tree" Proverbs 11: 28*

Spiritual Practices 2017

## Better Together

*"Community is the place of belonging .... of acceptance  
.....of caring. It is a place of growth in love.....  
Community leads to openness and acceptance of others.  
Without community people's hearts close up....."*  
Jean Vanier 'Community and Growth' (1989)

The Spiritual Disciplines Handbook notes that "Jesus was never a Lone Ranger. He has always been part of a divine community with the Father and the Holy Spirit. And when he came to earth, he continued to live his life in small groups. He began his ministry by choosing 12 disciples to be with him (Luke 6:13). Day after day he taught them about God and themselves, and modelled spiritual practices for them. He introduced them to new ways of worship, prayer, witness and service. In other words he gave them the gift of his presence.

Spiritual transformation today is not a solo event. God works in us through others. We all need a friend or a circle of others to encourage, support and speak truth to us. Authentic voices and unconditional love help us to grow.

Many of us recognize that small groups are a good idea. But the pace and busyness of life overwhelms us. Still, the discipline of doing the spiritual journey in the company of others remains Jesus' model for discipleship. Small groups are a simple means of connecting people and offering them a place for self-disclosure and meaningful interaction. Within that context each group must decide for themselves their number, duration and purpose. Small groups often exist for Bible study and prayer, but they may also revolve round meals, hobbies, tasks, justice issues or service projects.

### **"There is no one right way to do small groups."**



-Paraphrased from Spiritual  
Disciplines Handbook  
(Chapter on Small Groups)  
by Adele Calhoun

## Couple Time

The benefits of a very small group.  
ANGELA DION© 2002. used by permission.



After 12 years of marriage and a decade of Christian service, my husband and I decided to begin a new small group in our home—a very small group. In fact, our group consisted of just the two of us. Raising our family, work schedules, and church obligations allowed us to minister to many people. But we touched so many other people's lives that we never saw each other.

Perhaps the church as a whole needs to remember God's guideline from Deuteronomy 24:5: "For one year he [a recently married man] is to be free to stay at home and bring happiness to the wife he has married." And the Lord's command to Adam and Eve in Genesis 2:24: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and they will become one flesh." The marriage union is important to God, and nurturing it may be our most important ministry; so why not study the Bible as a couple?

Here are some advantages to having a small group for just the two of you:

- **You can begin as early or as late as you want.** We began our study at 9:30 p.m., soon after our son went to bed. Our study did not interfere with our time with our child, and did not alter his bedtime. We ended at 11 p.m., which is much too late for most small groups where members need to drive home. But it was perfect timing for us.
- **Rescheduling is easy, though often unnecessary.** We were able to continue our group even while on holiday and when our son was sick. When my husband had to work late, we met on a different night.
- **You can stay home and study in your pyjamas.** Yes, we often did this. I also didn't have to worry about having the house cleaned and snacks prepared. This was the most comfortable I have been hosting a Bible study!
- **It will build up your marriage.** The marriage relationship is second in importance only to our relationship with God. My husband and I were able to study, pray, and communicate on a regular basis. Our bond to each other strengthened during this time.

So, if you need some quality time with your spouse, do what we did. Begin by praying together. Then set a time, even if it requires leaving another small group or ministry for a season. The small group we left understood our decision. Your study doesn't have to be family related—we studied Joseph's life. Just do it! This will deepen your relationship with each other and the Lord beyond what you can imagine.

## Accountability Partner

Goal—to give a regular and honest account of my choices priorities and temptations to a godly spiritual companion who points me to Christ. I disclose my struggles, failures and temptations to someone who is willing to ask the hard questions, and will encourage and pray for me . If the process is reciprocal, we are accountability partners. If the disclosure is one way, with a person who has more of an advisory role, then **mentoring** is a more appropriate tag.

### Training:

[www.godshapedmentoring.blogspot.com](http://www.godshapedmentoring.blogspot.com) has resources for mentor training.

## Spiritual Direction

Goal—to offer quality listening and assistance in hearing God's voice, reflecting on the journey and facing into the movements of grace in our lives.

Here are some further definitions of spiritual direction

...

“.....help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of this relationship”  
- Barry & Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, p8

... a “prayer process in which a person seeking help in cultivating a deeper personal relationship with God meets another for prayer and conversation that is focused on increasing awareness of God in the midst of life experiences and facilitating surrender to God’s will”.  
- David Benner, *Sacred Companions* p94

"Holy Listening" - Margaret Guenther

Find a spiritual director at <http://www.acsd.org.nz/director.html>

## Discerning the Season

The spiritual practice booklet (Seasons of the Spirit), published just before this one, acknowledges that people are at very different places on the road with Christ. I noted that traditional Bible study groups are appropriate for some stages or seasons, but not so much for others. This booklet introduces some different ways of doing community.

- One on one, with a spiritual director or mentor - see page 10
- As a married couple in your home and at a time of your choice—p 11
- As a group focused on a particular hobby - see p 8—9
- As a neighbourhood group linking people who live near each other
- With others who share a social justice concern
- As those engaged in a particular church/community service activity
- With others in a local church ministry
- As a group concerned to pray for a particular need. Eg missionary support, physical healing, spiritual conflict
- With others wanting to read, study and apply the Bible

For those in this last category, I will offer some different ways of doing this in another Spiritual Practice, resource focused on the Bible:

- ◆ Essential Jesus (100 short readings)
- ◆ Transformational Bible Study (using the right brain)
- ◆ Lectio Divina (spiritual reading)
- ◆ Ignatian (Imaginative) Prayer

Whichever model you choose to practice, Dr Bruce Tuckman’s model of group development helps explain what happens when people form small groups. The leadership dynamics change over time as the needs change:

1. Forming - build rapport and set expectations, ground rules etc
2. Storming - personalities and quirks emerge, so do conflicts and power plays. Without a commitment to journey together despite this diversity, there is a danger of the group breaking up.
3. Norming -- the group settles into the gifts and struggles of the journey
4. Performing—the group accomplishes its goals and in the process each member becomes more of the person God wants them to be.





# Learning to Love

Pachomius is hardly a household name, but for Christians endeavouring to live in community, this obscure fourth century Egyptian offers unexpected encouragement. As a military conscript, Pachomius was won to Christ by the kindness of Christians in Luxor and was baptized in 315 AD. He took his new faith seriously and tried to learn the spiritual practices popular in that era—self-denial and solitude. Religious hermits were very influential in early Christianity. Their model of devotion was to resist corruption by wandering the desert, fasting, praying, and having visions. Many went to extremes: eating nothing but grass, living in trees, or refusing to wash. They often attracted large crowds; the most famous is probably St Simeon Stylites, who lived on top of a pillar for thirty-six years, fed by disciples who lifted baskets of food up to him. Thousands came to hear the preaching of this elevated man of God.



But Pachomius found this early spiritual training inadequate. He began to question the methods and lifestyle of his mentors.



- How can you learn to love if no one else is around?
- How can you learn humility living alone?
- How can you learn kindness or gentleness or goodness in isolation?
- How can you learn patience unless someone puts yours to the test?

In short, he concluded, developing Christian virtues demands other people - ordinary, 'ornery' people. "To save souls," he said, "you must bring them together." So Pachomius began a faith community where holiness was developed, not in isolation, but in community. Instead of

each person seeking God in his own way, with the dangers of idleness and eccentricity, Pachomius established a common life based on worship, work, and discipline. This was the beginning of genuine monastic life.

In community with flawed, sometimes disagreeable people, followers of Pachomius learned to take hurt rather than give it. They discovered that disagreements and opposition provide the opportunity to redeem life situations and experience God's grace. 'Love is best learned,' he said, "where we can't be selective about our associates." Perhaps this is why the two institutions established by God—the family and the church—are not joined by invitation. We have no choice about who our biological or spiritual brothers or sisters will be; yet we must love them. Pachomius has been largely forgotten in church history but his insights are essential for community life today.

- Weight Training
- Church History
- Crown Financial
- Knitting

From other churches:

"One of our groups joined a local bowling league. They partner up with others in the league, build relationships by bowling together every week. Eventually, they invited their new friends to a small group that meets in someone's home. The process takes time, but reaches people not reached easily by other methods."

*"we started a "mean-women" small group for women who had been hurt or wounded and were more angry than they wanted to be..."*

*"..guys who regularly go rock climbing together and practice intentional discipleship. Their fellowship has been very forming for each of them. And none of them belong to the same church, not even the same denomination! Christian community and relational discipleship can be just as effective outside congregational models – perhaps even more effective due to the variety of ideas and experiences in an interdenominational group."*

*"..a cross-denominational youth worship team, where kids have fun learning instruments and songs, my (adult) friend has an opportunity to disciple them, and all find an outlet to worship God. They hold special worship services on a regular basis in their community."*

*"some are evangelistic groups in which only the leaders are Christian at the start... Cooking, Golf, Knitting, Outdoor Grilling, Scrapbooking, Drama and Paintball! ...These groups are attractive to non-believers, and the leaders can use them as an opportunity to love and serve, to provide a model of Christ's love, and to infuse their teaching and discussion with God's truth – perhaps without ever mentioning God! Explicit evangelism may then happen in the context of genuine, trusting relationships – where it is most powerful."*

*"we decided to hold each round for a period of 10 weeks, with each group required to meet at least 5 times within the round. The leader decides the date, time and the location of their group. Each group begins the meeting with either prayer, testimony, worship or a devotional. The meetings last about two hours. Our church has had good participation ...Friendships have been built along with learning."*

*"We discovered two significant factors keeping people out of groups as well as out of leadership—an unclear purpose and the indefinite future of the groups."*

**"Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another."**

(Hebrews 10:25)

# Free Market Small Groups

*Main thoughts adapted from a post by Heather Zemplar, Discipleship Pastor of NCC, an interdenominational congregation in Washington DC*

Oswald Chambers said, "Let God be as original with others as he was with you." So why do churches force people into little clusters that all look alike, slap the label "small group" on them, and then promise that they will grow exponentially in their faith as a result?

Some churches require that all members attend a weekly small group, with study material supplied by the pastors, and others opt for the voluntary approach where people chooses a group that is convenient for them or with people they already know. There are lots of advantages to both, but over the recent years some congregations have found that broadening the concept of small group to include task teams, hobby clubs and sports leagues has enabled many more people to participate, both as followers of Jesus and as enquirers.

**A free-market small group system allows for a high degree of relational connection and creativity by allowing leaders to turn their existing relationships, gifts, interests, passions, and hobbies into disciple-making small groups.**

The free market notion comes from the reality that discipleship happens best within the context of shared interests, and flows naturally out of passion and vision. Many churches establish a vision and a model for small groups and then ask leaders to come and serve that vision and model. But what happens when leaders are supported to find their own vision for discipling others, in whatever relational context they find themselves? Protocols may need to be specific enough to give direction and focus, but should be broad enough to give latitude for leaders to discover where their passion meets a need.

Small groups here (at NCC) have only two requirements. small groups. One, there must be opportunity for connection and relationships (**relational**). And two, discipleship should be the longterm purpose (**missional**). But we want to encourage innovation and creativity. We believe that God has designed each person uniquely, and he can use that uniqueness as a catalyst for disciple-making. Some groups that have come out of our free market system include:

- Spiritual warfare
- Sign language
- Inductive Bible Study
- Acting
- Evangelism
- Running
- C.S. Lewis' Writings
- Women in Leadership
- Fantasy baseball



# Four Reasons why Small Groups are a Big Deal

1. Innate Desire for Community - all around the world, people long to feel loved, supported, needed and to have a true sense of belonging. It's part of the way God created us, and it's the way modeled by Jesus in his life on earth and in the church he founded.
2. Venue for Transformation—life change happens best in small groups. Rick Warren says small groups provide a place for people to fulfill all five purposes of the church: to grow 1) warmer through fellowship, 2) deeper through discipleship, 3) stronger through worship, 4) broader through ministry, 5) and larger through evangelism.
3. Training New Leaders—the best way to learn to lead is to "just do it." That's why rotating the leadership in groups can prepare people to emerge into this role better than if they were to participate in a training course. But remember that not every leader is a 'teacher,' and that there are other ways to help the group engage with a topic than verbal explanation.
4. Growing the Church— in the early church, people didn't meet in temple courts, they met in homes, The growth was phenomenal. Now we have facilities, but bricks and mortar can only cater for so many. The beauty of off-site groups is the potential for unlimited growth. Besides, building relationship is the most non-threatening way to connect authentically with an unchurched person. And the welcoming atmosphere of a home is one of the most effective places for them to hear the most important message in eternity. (Brett Eastman, Saddleback)

**Love — and the unity it attests to — is the mark Christ gave Christians to wear before the world. Only with this mark may the world know that Christians are indeed Christians and that Jesus was sent by the Father.** (Francis Schaeffer) The Apostle Paul took Jesus' command to "love one another" and expanded on it. Like a prism that expands white light by showing the intrinsic colours of the spectrum, Paul uses the Greek word "allelon" ("one another") to spell out 40 times how love is a conscious choice to act in certain ways:

- honour one another
- accept one another
- forgive one another
- encourage one another
- bear with one another, *and many more.....*



## Group Wisdom

*“People are longing to rediscover true community. We have had enough of loneliness, independence, and competition....Community is the place of belonging .... of acceptance.....of caring.*

*It is a place of growth in love..... Community leads to openness and acceptance of others. Without community people's hearts close up.....”*

**Jean Vanier**



*“We are good at forming clubs and gathering crowds. But clubs and crowds, even when they are religious clubs and crowds, are not communities. The formation of community is the intricate, patient, painful work of the Holy Spirit.*

*We cannot buy or make community; we can only offer ourselves to become community.”*

**Eugene Peterson**

*The church is a community of people on a journey to God. Wherever there is supernatural togetherness and Spirit– directed movement, there is the church – a spiritual community. Why is spiritual community so rare? I suspect it has to do with the requirement of brokenness. We’d much rather be impressively intact than broken. But only broken people share authentic spiritual community.”* **Larry Crabb**

*“Paradoxically, a group of humans becomes healing and converting only after its members have learned to stop trying to heal and convert. Community is a safe place precisely because no one is attempting to heal or convert you, to fix you, to change you. Instead, the members accept you as you are. You are free to be you.*

*And being so free, you are free to discard defences, mask, disguises; free to seek your own psychological and spiritual health; free to become your whole and holy self.”* **Scott Peck**

*“When we hear the phrase spiritual formation, we usually think about individual lives. That’s not a bad thing; Paul says he labors and struggles “to present everyone mature in Christ.” However, Paul wasn’t writing to an individual at the time. Most of the New Testament books are letters to congregations; to corporate bodies; to groups, not individuals. If I’m a member of a gym, it may not matter much to me what kind of shape other people are in. I’m interested in my fitness. I don’t have a strong investment in the fitness of other people. In fact, I don’t mind a little flab in the bodies working out around me. It makes me feel better by comparison. I use the fitness center to get my body in shape. The fitness center is a tool for individuals.*

*But the church is not a spiritual fitness center. The church is not a tool. The church is a body. It is Christ’s body....All the parts matter.”*

**John Ortberg**

*Community is not easy. Somebody once said, Community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives. Within the discipline of community are the disciplines of forgiveness and celebration. Forgiveness and celebration make community, whether a marriage, a friendship, or any other form of community.*

*What is forgiveness?*

*Forgiveness is to allow the other person not to be God.*

*This is where celebration, the second discipline of community, comes in. If you can forgive that another person cannot give you what only God can give, then you can celebrate that person’s gift.*

**Henry Nouwen**