

Evaluate the extent to which the statement ‘the small group is more important in the life of a church than the Sunday congregation meeting’ is true. Suggest how a local church could maintain an appropriate balance between the two.

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Introduction.

This research papers commits to presenting a definitive argument reflecting and analysing the claim that small groups play a more important part of Church life than the regular Sunday meetings. Personal and scholarly views will be explored and examined; along with possible processes a local Church can institute to ensure balance is maintained between these two Church groupings.

The paper is structured along the following outline, comprising all the relevant elements:

- Introduction.
- Small Groups.
- Sunday Congregation Meetings.
- Local Church maintaining the balance.
- Conclusion.

In commencing this paper, it is helpful to define some of the words within the title of question. From personal experience, occasionally references will be made to ‘cell’ groups instead of ‘small’ groups. The focus, purpose and outline are extremely agnate but not wholly identical. This is due to available resources and scholars using different wording.

The same is unequivocally true for small groups and regular Sunday congregational gatherings. They possess correlative features and purposes but are disseminated along distinctive tangents and expressions.

Small Groups

At entry level, the overarching purpose of small groups is to minister to and facilitate the spiritual life and growth of the members. Beckham highlights “it (cell groups) carries the mitochondria DNA of the church that met together in the houses of the early Christians.”¹ It provides a safe and secure environment for members to step up and respond to the call of God on their lives. Benner believes “the potential of small groups as a vehicle for spiritual accompaniment is enormous.”²

Genuine, healthy and deep relationships can be forged and nurtured in small groups. This plays a key role in ensuring the groups remain purposeful and channel the growth of the spiritual lives of all members.

This can only be achieved relationally where a strong culture is developed and adhered to. Storti presents a working definition stating “culture is the shared assumption, values, and beliefs of a group of people which result in characteristic behaviours.”³ Then trust, a strong sense of belonging and community demonstrated, as they “give us an opportunity to develop really deep and lasting relationships that are not shallow but have real substance.”⁴

¹ William A. Beckham, *The Second Reformation: Stage 2*, (CCS Publishing: Moreno Valley, California, 2014), 251.

² David Benner, *Sacred Companions: the Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction*, (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois, 2002), 166.

³ Craig Storti, *Figuring Foreigners Out: A Practical Guide*, (Intercultural Press: Boston, Massachusetts, 1999), 5.

⁴ Colin Dye, *The Friendship Factor*, (Dovewell Publications: London, England, 2006), 34.

The structure small groups offer helps shape the organisation of the church. It is paramount the small groups play a central role in helping fulfil the mission of the church. They are the nucleus and Dye helpfully highlights cell groups “are the fundamental means by which ‘church’ happens.”⁵

The defining hope and belief is that if the small groups are strong, united and flourishing spiritually, they will become the ambassadors and change agents in their daily lives where they have influence in their homes and work places. It is here that calling, ministry gifts and motivation for “good works which God has prepared for us to do”⁶ is cultivated and developed. Yong-Gi Cho advances this assertion, believing “words that contain love and blessings really do change people, and they make the environment more blessed.”⁷ For this to be most effective and compelling, Coleman correctly observes it is vital “to keep the group small enough to be able to work effectively with them.”⁸

This is crucial distinction and focus on the cell groups. It is the training ground for doing life with one another. In today’s western world, people crave genuine care and attention. “Sunday Christianity doesn’t work and is a travesty of the New Testament example.”⁹ Bold and courageous assertions from Dye, and they are not without merit. Edwards believes “community is the soil in which believers most readily mature.”¹⁰

One of the challenges with placing too much emphasis on the small groups is that cliques can form. Subsequently, the wider picture and overall mission of the church can then be marginalised or even disdained in preference for the small groups.

Fortunately Coleman provides a remarkable remedy for this potential concern. He considers it of paramount importance that the group members are given regular opportunities to nurture, articulate and demonstrate things they have learned. He then offers the key insight, “unless opportunity is provided for this outreach, the group can stagnate in self-contentment, and eventually fossilize into nothing more than a mutual admiration society.”¹¹ 1 Corinthians 12:12 onwards describes how the Church best functions; all parts working together in unity and tandem - fulfilling their respective roles.

An inherent risk presented by small groups is Donahue’s astute observation that “groups can get pretty animated about what they believe.”¹² Never is this more true or dangerous than in a small group where differing theological ideologies begin to be introduced to the group and if weak leadership is demonstrated, the risk to spiritual harm to the members is substantial.

Sunday Congregation Meetings.

Evidently regular Sunday congregational meetings remain the staple diet for most Christians. Their affinity in their faith is strengthened and built up at these meetings. Sunday has long been associated as “the day” Christians gather corporately in various communities and formats to celebrate Christ. Dye reminds us that “we come together to renew our sense of belonging and to affirm our corporate identity.”¹³

⁵ Colin Dye, *People with a Passion: Building Cell Church Today*, (Dovewell Publications: London, England, 2011), 90.

⁶ Colin Dye, *A Willing Heart*, (Dovewell Publications: London, England, 2006), 78.

⁷ David Yong-Gi Cho, *4th Dimensional Living in a 3 Dimensional World*, (Bridge-Logos: Alachua, Florida, 2006), 134.

⁸ Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, (Baker Publishing Group: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2010), 24.

⁹ Colin Dye, *The Friendship Factor*, 34.

¹⁰ Dwight Edwards, *Revolution Within*, (WaterBrook Press: Colorado Springs, Colorado, 2001), 175.

¹¹ Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 104.

¹² Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Walking the Small Group Tightrope: Meeting the Challenges Every Group Faces*, (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2003), 24.

¹³ Colin Dye, *Building a City Church*, (Dovewell Publications: London, England, 1993), 86.

These meetings invariably involve larger more corporate expressions of worship and encouragement. Their significance, role and impact cannot be underestimated. It could be strongly argued that the regular Sunday congregation meetings are the nucleus of the Church as a whole.

Believers sense and appreciate they are a part of something bigger than themselves and we “gain a sense of spiritual solidarity.”¹⁴ McPherson enquires that “we all need a weekly reminder of our moral compass according to God’s Word.”¹⁵ It is predominantly in these meetings that that compass is re-orientated.

Interestingly, Sunday congregation meetings are also acknowledged by non-Christians. Generally speaking, they associate Sunday as “Church” for their Bible believing friends, and Dye observes “the testimony of so many Christians getting excited about Jesus is enough for many non-Christians to be attracted to the meetings.”¹⁶

That said, McNeal’s belief “that building a great Church was our contribution to God’s Kingdom”¹⁷ remains an Achilles heel for many Christian leaders today; all inward looking, consumer based formats of Christianity, or as McNeal subsequently describes “all tethered to the Church’s facilities.”¹⁸

What is clear is this current generation deeply desires a sense of belonging within Church life. They are no longer satisfied with being one person in a vast crowd of believers, where their presence is rarely acknowledged, their contribution in service unappreciated and having vast numbers of acquaintances but very few genuine, soul friendships.

This current climate can be reversed and dismantled if Churches adopt the vision Jesus had with intimate gatherings. This is guaranteed Sbanotto’s belief “they’re joining communities that are standing for something”¹⁹ comes to complete fruition. Donahue’s vision eloquently affirms all the main ingredients needed to achieve this, stating, “do life, go deep, and draw in. Practice doing life together, connecting regularly between meetings, build depth in relationships and foster discipleship; and draw other into the net.”²⁰

Progress has been made in developing the life and purpose of the local Church. Frost correctly assesses “a culturally diverse missional community was the best way forward for the Church.”²¹ Significant numbers of local Churches now possess this vision and cultural mix.

Local Church maintaining the balance.

The local Church is not powerless in its ability to strike a healthy balance between small groups and regular Sunday gatherings. That said, Greenwood’s astute observation rings definitively true... “changing the culture and habits of being Church is proving challenging and – for some – overwhelming.”²²

¹⁴ Colin Dye, *Building a City Church*, 88.

¹⁵ Miles McPherson, *Church Is Not a Show: Finding the True Purpose of Sunday Service*, (unknown published date), <https://www.christianpost.com/news/church-is-not-a-show-finding-the-true-purpose-of-sunday-service-106408/>

¹⁶ Colin Dye, *Building a City Church*, 88.

¹⁷ Reggie McNeal, *Kingdom Come*, (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois, 2015), 5.

¹⁸ Reggie McNeal, *Kingdom Come*, 6.

¹⁹ Elisabeth Nesbit Sbanotto, *Here’s What’s Bringing Millennials Back to Churches*, (unknown published date), (accessed Wednesday 22nd November 2018), <https://www.denverpost.com/2015/11/28/heres-whats-bringing-millennials-back-to-churches/>

²⁰ Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Walking the Small Group Tightrope: Meeting the Challenges Every Group Faces*, 168.

²¹ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church*, (Hendrickson Publishing: Peabody, Massachusetts, 2013), 10.

²² Robin Greenwood, *Sharing God’s Blessing: How to renew the local church*, (SPCK: London, England, 2016), 3.

Meier notes “new ideas are controversial”²³, which although hardly ground-breaking, is an excellent starting point for local Churches. Often the local pastor will devote more time to one area of the ministry than another. Introducing small groups as a way of shaping organisationally the Church may well be met with resistance. But over the time the benefits will be identified and embraced.

Warrington notes “the local church provides opportunities to facilitate individuals to develop their own abilities and gifts.”²⁴ It is here that immeasurable progress will be achieved – when the wider congregation acknowledge that Church bleeds over into all spheres of life every day of the week, and not exclusively focused to repetitive Sunday activities. Then the Church comes alive and all members can embrace their calling corporately expressing their gifts to strengthen the body of Christ.

Examples to cultivating the right spiritual environment and overall success is the lead pastor delegating some responsibility for some Sunday activities to congregation members. This releases the lead pastor to envision, equip and impart to the congregation.

It is vital to identify that small groups and Sunday gatherings are not in competition or conflict with one another. They both have value and purpose and fulfil their respective functions – namely the gathering of God’s people for fellowship, community, worship and the Word.

Conclusion.

One can’t help but agree with Dye who believes a “radical change of thinking”²⁵ is needed for the body of Christ to fully function and do the work of Christ today. He continues, believing “Churches must learn the power of cell life in the body of Christ.”²⁶ This is undoubtedly true and furthermore, the rise and fall of the Church will be orientated on the regular gathering and encouragement of believers.

This leads to the vision of the Church being achieved through the cell groups. Dye recognises cell groups are effectively “the breeding ground of ministry formed at the cutting edge of mission.”²⁷ Dye further asserts cell groups “provide a bridge between the Sunday services so that people don’t lose touch with each other during the week.”²⁸

Sunday gatherings are wider expressions of the body of Christ gathering for corporate worship and Biblical understanding. But perhaps indicative is the ‘real’ work of the Church is done in the small groups where individuals views are encouraged, developed and appreciated. This is near impossible to achieve in the larger context of Sunday meetings.

As Dye concludes, “the key is to understand that Jesus spent most of his time with a small group of chosen disciples.....if this is what Jesus did....surely the Lord’s example is something we should follow.”²⁹

Benner furthers this claim, stating “a significant part of my hope for the church lies in the small group movement that has already had a significant impact around the world.”³⁰

Beckham’s viewpoint is clear and highly persuasive, stating “I am convinced the Church may grow on Sunday through large group ministries and programs but will only expand during the week through relationships and small groups.”³¹

²³ Paul Meier and Todd Clements, *What I’ve Learned Since I Knew It All: 12 Secrets to Living a Satisfied Life*, (Tyndale House Publishers: Carol Stream, Illinois, 2008), 5.

²⁴ Keith Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology: a Theology of Encounter*, (T&T Clark Publishers: London, England, 2008), 133.

²⁵ Colin Dye, *Introducing the Cell Vision*, (Dovewell Publications: London, England, 2005), 28.

²⁶ Colin Dye, *Introducing the Cell Vision*, 15.

²⁷ Colin Dye, *Equipping the Saints: the Fivefold Ministry*, 9.

²⁸ Colin Dye, *The Friendship Factor*, 34.

²⁹ Colin Dye, *People with a Passion: Building Cell Church Today*, 125.

³⁰ David Benner, *Sacred Companions: the Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction*, 165.

³¹ William A. Beckham, *70: Jesus’ Expansion Strategy*, (CCS Publishing: Moreno Valley, California, 2015), 28.

This is a blatant reality birthed from decades of statistics and testimonies. Rather than resist or even dismiss these assertions, they must be believed, embraced and actioned. Only then will the Church come fully alive and fulfil its true function and calling

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