

9 Growing in Sharing Groups

Juan had always enjoyed discussing the weather and the progress of his crops with the other farmers in the area. Maria, likewise, found great pleasure in meeting with groups of ladies to share news about their children and exchange recipes and household hints. So neither was very surprised when Manuel responded to his grandfather's question by stating that the thing he enjoyed most about going to school was getting to play with the other children.

We humans are social beings and need each other. We support and help one another. We learn and grow in group settings.

Spiritual growth, also, is helped by association with other Christians. The local church meets the need for association in corporate worship, fellowship, instruction, and service. However, smaller sharing groups provide a more informal basis for associating and tend to involve believers more personally in the process of nurturing spiritual life. Both forms of association are needed, and the smaller group should always complement the ministry of the local church.

In this lesson you will study the significance of sharing groups, how they minister to people's needs, and how to organize and conduct sharing group meetings. As you relate to a sharing group, you will see that it provides opportunities for you to learn from others and to help them develop toward Christlikeness.

lesson outline

Sharing Christ's Life in Small Groups

Identifying Principles of Group Effectiveness

Leading Sharing Groups

lesson objectives

When you finish this lesson you should be able to:

1. State the purpose of Christian sharing groups.
2. Discuss four interpersonal needs that are met through participation in Christian sharing groups.
3. List specific functions of Christian sharing groups.
4. Identify principles of group effectiveness.
5. Identify common concerns facing those who organize and lead sharing groups.

learning activities

1. Study the lesson development according to the procedure recommended in Lesson 1.
2. Look up the meanings of any key words that are unfamiliar to you.
3. When you have completed the lesson development, take the self-test and check your answers.

key words

affirm	inhibited	seclusion
amenable	innovation	significant others
charismatic	nonverbal	visual gestures
dynamically	punctuation	visual punctuation
group dynamics	optimum	

lesson development

SHARING CHRIST'S LIFE IN SMALL GROUPS

The Purpose of Sharing Groups

Objective 1. *State the purpose of Christian sharing groups.*

All Christians have something in common: they have received new spiritual life, the life of Jesus. As you have studied this course, you have been made aware of the need of every Christian to nurture his or her spiritual life. This lesson introduces another element which contributes to spiritual growth. Because we Christians share in common the life of Jesus, we are related to each other. All who share this life are parts of His body (1 Corinthians 12:12, 27). This means that all Christians are vitally and dynamically related to each other. This relationship may be impersonal and meaningless, unless it is developed; it should grow and develop, for that is the nature of the body.

We are responsible not only for each other's personal growth and development, but also for the growth of our corporate body. The church becomes strong and productive through the growth and vitality of its individual parts. All of these individual parts are working together for the overall purpose of the body. The natural body functions in a healthy, productive way as each part performs its specific task. In a spiritual sense, the body of Christ functions effectively as each individual growing member contributes his share. One of the most effective ways for this development to occur is through sharing groups. We shall see what occurs when members of sharing groups bring their commitment, energy, and labor to the church. Sharing groups can promote local church functions: glorifying God, extending His kingdom, edifying, and maturing members of His body. Christians, therefore, should meet together to share the life of Christ and the fellowship of His body.

One important and meaningful way to promote spiritual growth and development is through small sharing groups. Small

sharing groups of 10–12 people are devoted to fellowship, intercessory prayer for each other, the mutual ministry of God’s Word, and the sharing of spiritual resources. They provide an important environment in which spiritual growth can occur. The relationships which develop in such groups are valuable resources for nurturing the life of Christ in each member which develops spiritual maturity. These group relationships make it possible for each member to draw strength and support from all other members and to contribute to the spiritual development of others. Members of small sharing groups can affirm each other so that each may grow spiritually, and in the process the corporate experience of the group is also enriched.

Such rich fellowship, interpersonal relationships, deep commitment, and intimate sharing of the life of Jesus are distinctive marks of the Christian church. These marks characterize the church as Jesus intended it to be. Anything less than these characteristics is less than His desire for His body. To further enhance the development and maturity of His body, the Lord gave various ministry gifts to the church through the Holy Spirit to facilitate the promotion of fellowship and nurture.

Application

1–5 Circle the letter preceding the correct answer for each of the following questions.

- 1** The primary purpose of Christian sharing groups is to
 - a)** exchange views on the Bible’s teachings.
 - b)** become a part of Christ’s body.
 - c)** share the life of Christ with others on a more personal level.
 - d)** receive the new life Jesus offers.

- 2** Christian sharing groups are characterized by the
 - a)** desire to have equal material wealth.
 - b)** commitment of each member to the spiritual welfare of other members.
 - c)** sympathy each member has for the problems of others.
 - d)** sense of facing the same problems.

- 3** Relationships within Christian sharing groups provide for the individual participants of the group by
- a)** helping them to affirm each other and so facilitate spiritual growth.
 - b)** providing a basis for comparing godly living.
 - c)** helping them avoid “worldly” contacts.
 - d)** providing a group to whom each can witness of his faith.
- 4** The distinctive marks which Jesus intended to characterize His church are
- a)** the sharing of intimate fellowship and rich interpersonal relationships.
 - b)** the giving away of all material possessions and withdrawing from non-spiritual things.
 - c)** living in seclusion from other people and performing many good works.
 - d)** the avoidance of those who are not Christians and the criticism of weaker Christians.
- 5** Jesus gave the spiritual ministry gifts to His church so that
- a)** every member might have some meaningful task.
 - b)** people might have some means to survive in a wicked world.
 - c)** Christians would be too busy to be concerned about worldly things.
 - d)** the sharing of fellowship and nurture might be facilitated.
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Sharing Groups in Historical Perspective

The idea of Christians meeting in small groups to share the life of Jesus is not new. Jesus knew the significance of intimate sharing which accompanies small group experience. From among His many followers, Jesus chose twelve intimate associates, and with them He developed an effective small group. The relationship of Jesus and the Twelve included many of the elements of group dynamics which modern social scientists have identified as necessary for meaningful group experience. In this group experience, each individual was nurtured toward spiritual maturity. Moreover, the group itself developed and grew stronger

in commitment, purpose, and knowledge as the Lord intended. Therefore, Jesus commissioned the Twelve with the ongoing task of preaching the gospel.

These first Christian leaders continued to use this small group strategy in their ministry. The book of Acts reveals the existence of various small groups during this initial period of Christian history. Acts 2:41–42 indicates that the early Christians met together to share in evangelism, teaching, fellowship, worship, and prayer. Other passages in Acts indicate that first century Christians met regularly in the homes of various Christians. These meetings gave them opportunities for intimate sharing, Bible study, and effective prayer concerning their own needs and those of other Christians. We must emphasize that apart from the times when Jerusalem Christians worshipped at the temple, Christians in general, for several centuries, had no public place of worship of their own in which to meet as a collective body. In spite of this difficulty, the various groups communicated and shared the same overall goals as they met in homes (Acts 12:12; Romans 16:5, 23; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 1–4), public auditoriums of schools (Acts 19:9), and in synagogues (Acts 14:1, 3; 17:1, 18:4), as long as they were permitted to do so. Nevertheless, the work of gospel proclamation went forward effectively and overcame all obstacles.

The pattern of small group meetings established in the apostolic period continued for quite some time. During times of official government persecution, small group meetings offered the additional advantage of security. In this setting, new converts learned the basic truths of Christian faith. Many new Christians were converts from pagan religions. They needed a new orientation to life and reality if they were to live the Christian life effectively. Through these group learning experiences, thousands received the teaching they needed to help them understand both Christian responsibilities and privileges and to further their own spiritual development.

Through the centuries of Christian history, small groups meeting together provided opportunities for Christians to

fellowship together, nurture each other, and share their common experience. Sometimes the vitality of Christian life and ministry was lost to all but a few who met together in such small sharing groups. At other times, small sharing groups have played an important part in bringing spiritual renewal to the Christian church in various places. John Wesley, for example, organized class meetings which were called societies as part of his strategy to conserve the fruits of spiritual revival that swept across Great Britain in the eighteenth century. In the early part of the twentieth century, small group meetings were held in Christian homes in widely separated places in the world. In the United States these small group meetings were known as cottage prayer meetings. Elsewhere, small groups met on Bible school campuses, in retreat centers, or wherever they could to address themselves to their spiritual needs and especially to surrender themselves more fully to the control of the Holy Spirit. These meetings helped facilitate the development and spread of the Holiness and Pentecostal movements, which brought renewed emphasis on personal holy living and on the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit in and through the lives of Christians.

In many parts of the world today, small Christian sharing groups exist. Some of these groups meet on an informal basis; other groups are structured more formally. Christians from many walks of life, social levels, doctrinal beliefs, and religious organizations meet to share in fellowship, worship, Bible study, and prayer. Sometimes these small groups meet in rooms in office buildings or factories during lunch or after working hours. Sometimes they meet in a conference room at a restaurant or hotel. Frequently, they meet in a school classroom, and very often they meet in homes. Whether structured loosely or more formally, and whether the place be a lunch room, a classroom, an office, or a warehouse, the important thing is that these groups meet, share the life of Jesus, and are edified.

Some of the largest Christian congregations organize their people into such groups, commonly called cell groups, neighborhood fellowship groups, or some other name. Leaders

of these large churches rely on small group meetings to provide intimate fellowship and personal ministry each Christian needs.

In every period of Christian history, the purpose of these small group meetings has been the same: to share the life of Christ. Rich spiritual fellowship occurs and individual Christians find their needs met. Moreover, in this context each believer has opportunities to exercise his gifts in serving others in the body of Christ as well as those who are not yet believers.

You will discover, as have Christians since the time of Jesus, that regular participation in small sharing group activity will help your spiritual growth. Your own needs will be met through such relationships, and these relationships will give you opportunities to contribute to the spiritual nurture of others.

Application

- 6** Circle the letter preceding each TRUE statement.
- a)** Small group meetings of Christians are a recent innovation.
- b)** Jesus formed the Twelve into a sharing group.
- c)** Small sharing groups were unknown to first century Christians.
- d)** The book of Acts indicates that first century Christians met regularly in home meetings.
- e)** Thousands of new Christians were oriented to the Christian life in the small group setting in the early centuries of church history.
- f)** Throughout Christian history, small groups have had little to do with the spread of spiritual renewal.
- g)** Small Christian sharing groups are common today in many parts of the world.
- h)** The largest church congregations in the world have found that small groups are unacceptable for their use.
- i)** In every period of Christian history, the purpose of small sharing groups has been to share the life of Christ together.
- j)** Participation in a small sharing group will probably produce little desirable good in your spiritual life.



Meeting Individual Needs in Sharing Groups

Objective 2. *Discuss four interpersonal needs that are met through participation in Christian sharing groups.*

Psychologists have found that people have certain basic needs: intellectual, social, physical, psychological, and spiritual. For Christians, small sharing groups help in all areas of human need, but meet spiritual and relational needs best. These two go hand-in-hand because the Christ-life is a shared life. All Christians share it together. Let us turn our attention now to an examination of four of the basic needs shared by all people.

1. Every person needs to belong. We find our identity and our sense of selfhood by belonging to a group. We develop our sense of self-worth and personal value through interaction with people who accept and love us for Christ's sake. While this kind of relationship is possible in the church, its likelihood is much greater in small groups, where we can get to know others more intimately. A child, for example, develops his personal identity by belonging to his family. In a similar way, new Christians develop their identity as children of God and members of Christ's body by belonging to a fellowship of other Christians. Everyone needs to be loved, accepted, and included. Participation in a Christian sharing group provides an opportunity for this need to be met in a meaningful way.
2. Each of us needs to relate interpersonally with other people. People in general are social beings. Throughout the world, they either find or create social groupings into which they fit themselves. Few choose to live in isolation. We build communities and cities, and we relate ourselves to other people. It is believed that the more complex a society becomes, the more interdependent the people become. We need each other and we need to relate on a more personal level with others. We develop best when we impact others lives. The mutual give and take of interpersonal relationships is necessary for healthy personality development. In like fashion, the mutual give and take of

interpersonal relationships within the body of Christ is necessary for spiritual growth and development. The help we give and receive fosters growth and development. While it may require some adaptation initially, we need to develop trust in those with whom we relate. This will produce real stability and commitment to the group and its ministry within the body of Christ.

3. Each person has a need to share. Because we recognize ourselves to be persons of innate worth, we feel a need to share our discoveries; to include others in what we know, think, and feel. Because we belong to each other, we mutually need interaction. We need to receive insights from others, and we need to share our insights with significant others who may benefit from the interchange. This need to share maybe stems from our understanding of mutuality, selfhood, and relationship. Because of the work of Jesus within our lives, we gain experience in spiritual growth which will be of value and help to others who encounter similar situations. By sharing our discoveries with others, we grow spiritually and provide them with help which can also result in their growth.
4. Every person has a need to participate. We feel a need to give, to contribute to and to take part in communal affairs. None of us can be truly content simply receiving from others. We need to take part, to be included, and to help as we can. Participating in the Christian mission, sharing Jesus with others, helping others develop toward Christlikeness—all these are opportunities for Christians to give active expression to their faith. Opportunities to do this are particularly available through participation in Christian sharing groups.

Small sharing groups, then, provide a setting in which Christians can have these needs met. They also furnish a setting in which Christians can help meet these needs for others in the group. The intimacy and mutuality that develops in such a small group setting makes it possible to extend oneself toward the other participants of the group so that each is helped by the

relationship. The purpose of these small groups is to provide the framework in which this can happen. The activities and functions of the group should be structured so that help can be extended to every participant. An atmosphere of love, trust, concern for others, openness regarding one's needs and problems, and a willingness to help in whatever way is essential in the small sharing group.

Application

7 Match each of the four interpersonal needs (right) with the manner in which it is met (left).

- | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| ... a Growth and development are fostered through interaction with other Christians in a loving, caring setting. | 1) Need to belong |
| ... b Opportunities for Christians to give expression to their faith come by means of active involvement. | 2) Need to relate interpersonally |
| ... c A sense of identity develops as one becomes part of a fellowship of other Christians. | 3) Need to share |
| ... d Experiences we have can benefit others who encounter similar situations; they are helped and we grow. | 4) Need to participate |

Sharing Group Functions

Objective 3. *List specific functions of Christian sharing groups.*

A mature Christian is one who understands his or her Christian responsibilities and knows how to utilize the resources God has provided to meet them. These responsibilities fall into three groups: 1) to God, 2) to oneself, and 3) to others. First, one's responsibilities to God

include giving God the worship, adoration, and glory due Him. God is unrivaled and wants us to recognize His worth and give glory to Him. This is done through prayer and communion with Him and by praising Him for what He has done. We also recognize His worth as we learn to depend on Him to meet all our needs and bear our burdens. Second, the responsibilities of the mature Christian include developing a healthy understanding of himself and who he is as God's child, his need for further spiritual growth, and the need to express his faith. A balanced understanding of his strengths and weaknesses is essential. He develops right values and priorities. The nurture of one's own spiritual life is essential in the development of the wholeness we discussed earlier. Third, the mature Christian has responsibilities to others, both other members of the body of Christ and those who have not yet received new Christ-life. These interpersonal responsibilities include receiving support, strength, and help from others and giving the same in return. There is interdependence between members within the body of Christ.

When properly structured, Christian sharing groups help people develop in each of these three areas of responsibility. The functions of Christian sharing groups include fellowship, Bible study, worship, prayer, and evangelism.

Fellowship is built on mutual caring; a sense of belonging to each other. Those who enjoy fellowship share together out of an awareness that they are vitally joined together by a common life in Christ. This is a major function of Christian sharing groups. They should be places where people who care for each other come together to share joys, disappointments, growth, heartaches, spiritual insights, questions, problems, love, concern, sorrows, and burdens. As these are shared openly, they are borne by the other members of the group. Fellowship involves the exercise of true Christian love and meets the deepest human need: to be surrounded by caring, loving people. Fellowship requires

being together and sharing together, and through it spiritual nurture occurs.

Bible study in sharing groups should involve primarily the sharing of Bible truth. This most often takes the form of discussion rather than lecture. Ideally, the group explores Scripture together to discover what God says, what the text meant when it was originally written, and how its truth applies to their own lives to meet their day-to-day needs. Group Bible study need not be viewed as the sharing of uninformed opinions or the sharing of ignorance. Rather, each participant should carefully study the passage under consideration in advance and come to the group meeting with well thought-out contributions and questions. Studying the Bible together with the kind of study format we suggest in Lesson 7 aids spiritual growth. As the shared insights are applied individually, each participant grows from interacting with the Word and with other group members. Moreover, he learns to accept alternate points of view that are equally valid. With this he develops sensitivity to the feelings of others. Best of all, however, group members learn the teachings of the Word of God and how they apply to life situations.

Worship involves giving honor, respect, and reverence to one who is worthy. In Christian worship, we express reverence and honor to God for who He is. This expression may be demonstrated in singing, thanksgiving, praise, prayer, and testimony. Reading appropriate Scriptures, singing carefully chosen songs, and making meaningful comments concerning God's character and activity stimulate an awareness of His holy presence and a recognition of His divine love and power. Small group meetings provide a natural setting for such spiritual activities. Often more time can be given to these activities in small group meetings than in regular church services. Worship activities should be a normal part of small group meetings.

Sharing groups provide excellent setting, for sharing burdens and needs in prayer and fulfilling the scriptural

command to “carry each other’s burdens” (Galatians 6:2). Opportunity should be given for people to relate their problems and needs so other group participants can share these burdens and bear them meaningfully to God in prayer. In prayer we commune with God and express our deepest, heartfelt needs to Him. Many different patterns of prayer may be followed in a small group setting. For example, the whole group may pray together, expressing the various needs to God, or one person may lead the group in prayer, expressing the needs and requests of the group. A period of silent prayer will permit everyone to express silently to God what is in his heart. Conversational praying also lends itself to the sharing group setting. Praying together is one of the best and most satisfying ways to carry each other’s burdens, and it is one of the essential functions of small group meetings.

Evangelism is presenting the gospel to the unconverted through the power of the Holy Spirit so that they may receive Christ as their personal Savior and follow Him as their Lord. One of the functions of Christian sharing groups is to introduce people to Christ simply, clearly, and persuasively. Someone who is experienced in leading others to Christ should have the opportunity to present the essential truths of the gospel message in small group settings. Group participants often feel free to invite their friends to attend such a meeting. Visitors are often more comfortable attending a small meeting than they would be if they were to attend a regular church service. Group participants should be encouraged to invite their unsaved friends to small group meetings with the assurance that the friends will be exposed to the clear, meaningful claims of the gospel.

Application

- 8** Circle the letter preceding each specific function of Christian sharing groups.
- a)** Sharing time together in fellowship
 - b)** Explaining how to receive Christ as Savior
 - c)** Debating a political policy
 - d)** Discussing how to apply a Bible truth to daily life
 - e)** Expressing reverence and honor to God
 - f)** Lecturing for long periods on Bible themes
 - g)** Trading recipes for preparing favorite foods
 - h)** Demonstrating Christian love in sharing others' needs
 - i)** Singing songs which express God's greatness
 - j)** Discussing a current event
 - k)** Praying for the needs of a group member
 - l)** Inviting people to receive Christ as their Savior
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IDENTIFYING PRINCIPLES OF GROUP EFFECTIVENESS

Objective 4. *Identify principles of group effectiveness.*

Dynamic forces are at work whenever two or more individuals work together to achieve a common goal. These forces include 1) the purpose and background of the group, 2) the personalities and backgrounds of the individuals who make up the group, and 3) the goals of the participants. These are the forces which determine the interaction of the group. Interpersonal relationships, communication patterns, and decision making processes are all affected by group dynamics.

Certain principles result from these dynamics which contribute to group effectiveness. Both group participants and group leaders should be aware of these principles to achieve maximum effectiveness from the group.

The first principle to observe is the principle of group participation. All members must be involved in the group

process. They must feel free to exchange ideas openly and to share in the group's conclusions and decisions. One person should not dominate the group. Those who tend to dominate group functions should be helped to understand the importance of allowing others to contribute. Those who tend to be shy, inhibited, and uninvolved should be helped to become active participants in the group's processes.

Another principle of group effectiveness is group communication. This involves what is said, how it is said, and the impact it has. Effective communication involves at least three major aspects: 1) the actual verbal message; the words that are spoken; 2) vocal punctuation; the tone in which the words are spoken; and 3) visual punctuation; the nonverbal punctuation, or visual gestures a communicator uses to convey his message. For effective communication to occur, all three of these must be in agreement. To indicate one thing in words and another in the nonverbal ways causes confusion.

In the processes of communication, one aims to convey an idea as he conceives it in his mind. The goal is for others to understand clearly the ideas as he conceived them originally. This calls for effective speaking and listening. In the group process, it is necessary to communicate clearly so that every one can understand what is intended.

Still another principle of group effectiveness is group atmosphere. This refers to the feelings participants have for each other. Group atmosphere may range from full acceptance on the one hand to defensiveness on the other. For group effectiveness, participants need to feel free to express their true personal feelings without fear of rejection. The group needs to be supportive so that no one is inhibited by the presence of others. Every member needs to develop flexibility in adjusting to the needs of others and to the different tasks of the group.

Application

9 Match each situation with the form of group effectiveness.

- | | |
|---|------------------------|
| ... a One man does all the talking. | 1) Group Participation |
| ... b James feels threatened because Pastor John is present. | 2) Group Communication |
| ... c A lady gestures with her eyes as she speaks. | 3) Group Atmosphere |
| ... d Everyone accepts Paul's insights even though he is unschooled. | |
| ... e The group leader makes sure that everyone has an opportunity to share his viewpoint. | |
| ... f The group leader encourages everyone to speak clearly and accurately. | |
| ... g Narciso hardly listens to what is being said. | |
| ... h The group leader promotes an open exchange of ideas and feelings. | |
| ... i Mrs. Gomez is too shy to share her ideas. | |



LEADING SHARING GROUPS

Objective 5. *Identify common concerns facing those who organize and lead sharing groups.*

Perhaps you have participated in small group activity, either by serving on a committee, attending a class, or perhaps in some informal way. You may have participated in a Christian group similar to what you have read about in this lesson. You may be able to recall situations which illustrate, either

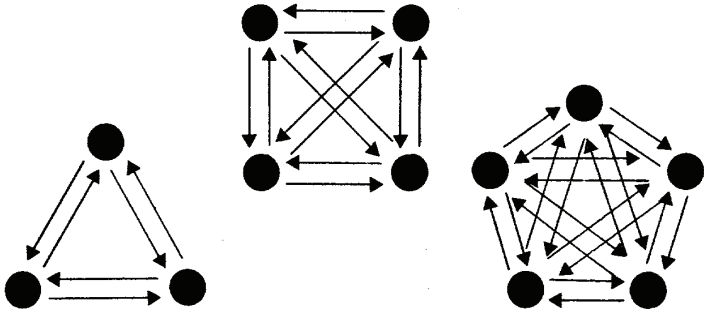
positively or negatively, many of the points discussed in this lesson. And it may be that you have been a regular participant in a Christian sharing group. If so, I am sure the experience has had a nurturing affect on your spiritual life. I hope you are developing a growing awareness that God wants you not only to mature spiritually, but also to help others grow toward Christlikeness. In helping others grow, you may find yourself organizing and leading sharing groups. The final section of this lesson is designed to answer some of the more common and practical considerations related to this task. We trust you will find the following list helpful as you address yourself to the task of organizing and leading sharing groups.

1. Where should it meet? One of the early considerations in organizing a Christian sharing group is where to meet. The only appropriate answer to this is anywhere the group can meet and carry out its purpose. I have met with such groups in restaurants or hotels, in conference rooms in office buildings, and in lunchrooms at factories. Some groups meet in school rooms; however, probably more sharing groups meet in the homes of the participants than in any other place. Generally the home meeting should be encouraged wherever possible. This setting lends an air of informality to the meeting, and participants tend to be more relaxed in this environment than in the more formal setting of an office, hotel, or factory lunch room. Some groups meet at the same home regularly; other groups meet in turn in the different participants' homes.
2. When, how often, and for what length of time should it meet? Another concern that arises is when to meet. The answer to that is whenever it is most convenient for group participants. I have met with such groups for before-breakfast meetings, at lunch time, and in the evening hours. I know of some groups that meet at midmorning or in the late afternoon. The best time for the participants is the right time to meet. The best day of the week is, again, whichever day is most convenient for all concerned. Normally these sharing groups meet about once a week for a one or two

hour meeting. However, the frequency and length of the meeting should be based on the needs and desires of the participants and their ability to come. Flexibility in planning is necessary at all times in sharing group meetings, but this is especially true in the early stages of their development.

3. Who should participate? The matter of who participates in such a group may also become a concern. Some groups begin as evangelistic outreaches in which nonbelievers make up the majority of participants. As the gospel begins to work in the lives of these people, many receive new life in Christ and the complexion of the group changes. Some groups are organized for women, while others are for men or for a mixed group of men and women. Some are organized along age lines, such as: 1) teen-age or youth, 2) young adult, 3) middle adult, and 4) senior adult groups. Many groups are formed on the basis of common interests; therefore, those who work in the same office or plant, attend the same school, or, most commonly, live in the same neighborhood or geographical area tend to meet with those who have common points of interest. Christian sharing groups can be organized anywhere among any group of people which desires Christian fellowship and is willing to commit itself to nurture individual members toward spiritual growth.
4. What size group is best for optimum results? Closely related to the goal of nurturing spiritual growth is another vital concern: the size of the group. Some people tend to say, "the more the merrier." This may be true for games and parties, but it does not work well for sharing groups. Let us see why. It is a fact that the larger a group gets, the more interpersonal relationships are required of its members. This means that there is less time for interaction with each member, and there are fewer opportunities for truly personal sharing. When sharing groups lose their personal character, they become less meaningful to participants and may be considered as just another church-related activity. Individuals tend to manage a certain number of

interpersonal relationships well. Beyond that number the relationships are no longer significant; they are only casual and may be forced. Thus, when a group increases beyond a certain size, its efforts become counterproductive. Think about this for a moment.



As you can see in the diagram above, a group of three persons involves six interpersonal relationships, a group of four persons involves twelve interpersonal relationships, and a group of five persons involves twenty interpersonal relationships. Obviously, the larger the group the greater the number of relationships each person must develop and maintain. Because of this factor, many experienced group leaders have found that the ideal small group size is about eight-twelve persons; the largest number it can have and still retain its small group character is about fifteen persons. Thus, when a group grows to about fifteen persons, it should be reorganized into two smaller groups. When these groups grow to this same size again, another regrouping should take place. Those who work regularly with small group leadership find that smaller groups tend to increase more rapidly than larger groups do. Thus, for optimum results, the small group should include about ten but not more than fifteen people.

5. Who will lead? Still another concern of those who wish to organize Christian sharing groups is the matter of leadership. There are different ways in which leaders emerge in a group. Quite frequently, pastors appoint leaders

to serve as initial group leaders. They appoint those who have demonstrated soundness in character, depth of spiritual insight, and sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. Later on, when the group has some experience, some leaders arise because of their charismatic personalities. They seemingly possess qualities which attract others, and they have the ability to inspire others toward their goals. Others come to leadership because they have developed unusual knowledge or skill in the area of the group's concern. For example, a person might be chosen to lead a group of teachers because he has more training and experience than the other teachers. Sometimes leaders are chosen by the democratic process; that is, they are voted on in group elections and chosen because they are popular with the other members of the group. However, there are occasions when strong-willed persons seek to take over the group functions through their own campaigning. If group members do not exercise sound judgment, the group can encounter spiritual difficulties. This is one of the best reasons why sharing groups should be attached to the local church.

Ideally, a good leader will be inspiring, have charisma, and possess special knowledge and skills. Because of his love for God and other people, others will want to follow him. Also, if his level of spiritual maturity and depth of spiritual insight is greater than that of others, he will be able to help them develop spiritually. Moreover, if he is popular with the group, his chances of being selected for leadership are excellent. You will do well to strive to be the kind of person who can lead others toward spiritual growth.

The leader's task in a Christian sharing group is to guide the group process and to encourage spiritual interaction with God's Word and with each other. The leader may direct the Bible study or give an evangelistic presentation. On some occasions, however, he might sit back and listen or participate in discussion while others teach or guide discussion. The leader's role is to facilitate the group's interaction and to keep its activities and processes directed toward reaching the group's

goal. In the case of Christian sharing groups, the goal is to foster the spiritual growth of each participant. The primary reason-for-being of Christian sharing groups is spiritual, rather than social. This fact must be kept in focus if the group is to achieve its goals.

As noted earlier, another important function of the leader is to harmonize the activities of the group with that of the larger body, the church of which it is part. As with the natural body, the spiritual body is strong and healthy as the members work together, each part functioning according to His design and purpose. As individual groups do the work of the corporate body of Christ, the task of evangelism is accomplished, the fruits of evangelism are conserved, and spiritual growth toward maturity is evidenced. Through sharing groups, individual members of the church have the opportunity to exercise their gifts, help others, and develop Christian maturity. In the context of the larger body, they can receive further encouragement as they recognize the results of their collective efforts, both in their own area and abroad through the foreign missions endeavor. The alert leader will make every effort to keep the activities of the group in proper focus. As a responsible servant of Christ, he will be amenable not only to the Chief Shepherd of the flock but also to the local pastor which the Lord has placed over His flock. He should also recognize any tendency to move away from the nurturing goals of the group and toward personality-centered activities. Sharing groups will play an effective role in the church as long as they are Christ-centered and Christ-exalting. Any group pursuit which aims at less than building His body will fall short of permanent results and overall success.

Application

- 10** Circle the letter preceding each TRUE statement.
- a)** Sharing groups most frequently meet in settings outside the homes of group members.
 - b)** A sharing group should meet at the most convenient time for all members and for as long as and as frequently as is practical.
 - c)** The matter of who should meet depends in part on the interest of the group.
 - d)** Concerning the size of sharing groups, a good rule is this: “the more the merrier.”
 - e)** One of the major factors in determining the optimum size of a sharing group is the number of interpersonal relationships which a person can manage.
 - f)** Leadership most generally emerges as a result of one’s ability to dominate others, to control their thinking.
 - g)** The ideal Christian leader will at times direct the activities of the group; at other times he may facilitate the group process as a participant while others lead the activities.
 - h)** The alert leader will seek to harmonize the group’s activities with those of the larger body, the church, of which it is part.
- 11** One important reason why leaders must try to harmonize the activities of their groups with those of the larger body, according to our discussion, is that
- a)** the parent body, the church, may not recognize the group if it does not observe all church rules.
 - b)** pastors of churches generally resent any activities that they cannot personally oversee and control, fearing that false doctrine will result.
 - c)** the task of the body is accomplished best as each member does his or her part.

12 All but one of the following are concerns of sharing group leaders. Which one is NOT stated in the text as a legitimate concern?

- a) A group leader should be concerned with the location of group meetings.
- b) The group leader must be aware of the most convenient time to meet, the length of each meeting, and the frequency of meetings.
- c) The group leader should consider the optimum size of the sharing group.
- d) The group leader should be aware of his position of power and use it to accomplish his own program.



self-test

- 1** Which one is NOT a stated purpose of Christian sharing groups?
- a)** Sharing groups meet to share the life of Jesus with other Christians.
 - b)** Christian sharing groups have a commitment to the growth and development of group members.
 - c)** The ministry gifts which our Lord gave were meant to facilitate fellowship and nurture.
 - d)** Sharing groups are the primary element in social action and recreation and the means by which we are to change society.
- 2** The purpose of sharing groups, viewed from the total history of the Christian church, is to
- a)** provide an alternative to large group meetings, which are less spiritual.
 - b)** enable dissident members of the body of Christ to have a place to express their anxieties and frustrations.
 - c)** share the life of Jesus with other members and stimulate one another to good works, growth, and spiritual development.
 - d)** create a place where spiritual super-saints can be developed in isolation from the rest of the less spiritual members of the body.
- 3** Sharing groups meet the interpersonal need to belong by providing
- a)** significant people who learn to know, love, and accept us for Christ's sake.
 - b)** an organization which has no membership requirements and is committed to self-help.
 - c)** a place where we can sound off against the unfairness of the system of organized religion.
 - d)** other people who share the same problems and want to hear all the common miseries restated by their fellow Christians.

4 The need to relate interpersonally with other people is met best, according to this lesson, by Christian sharing groups through the

- a)** fellowship aspect of relaxed association in which we can hide our problems from other members.
- b)** interaction provided by other Christians in a loving, caring setting, in which give and take growth and development can occur.
- c)** constant confession of all our sins and faults to others who understand our problems.
- d)** opportunities one has to meet and interact with others without making any long-term commitment to a formal organization.

5 The need to share, we have seen, is met best within the context of sharing groups

- a)** as individual members release tension by telling their problems.
- b)** by the spiritual cleansing that takes place in public confession.
- c)** because of mutuality, selfhood, and relationship: we help others and grow in maturity in the process.
- d)** because in small group settings each member has an opportunity to bare his soul before others and get a group analysis of his problems and effective cures prescribed as well.

6 People's need to participate is met especially by sharing groups because

- a)** members are forced to be a part of group activities, regardless of their feelings.
- b)** the nature of sharing groups enables individuals to be involved in both giving to and receiving from other members.
- c)** the structure of the group is such that all members must at times be leaders.
- d)** to function effectively, each member must seek a dominant role.

7 We have learned that one principle of group effectiveness, group participation, is important to the functioning of the group process because

- a)** the group can only meet individuals' needs as members exchange ideas freely and share in group conclusions and decisions.
- b)** without 100 percent participation of members on all issues no solutions can be reached.
- c)** it always produces a healthy consensus, which is good for the group.
- d)** it keeps all members happy and guarantees a successful outcome.

8 A second important principle of group effectiveness, according to this lesson, is group communication. It is important because communication

- a)** is the only major problem which prevents members from receiving help.
- b)** is thought to be central to group understanding without which the work of the group is ineffective.
- c)** involves what is said, how it is said, and the impact it has.
- d)** is the lifeline of the group in its relationship with the parent church body.

9 Group atmosphere is an important principle of group effectiveness because it determines the

- a)** degree of acceptance members have for one another.
- b)** attitude members bring to group meetings.
- c)** degree of commitment each member will have to the group.
- d)** basic attitudes that will prevail throughout the life of the group.

- 10** All but one of the following are practical aspects involved in organizing and leading Christian sharing groups. Which is NOT one of the aspects we considered in this lesson?
- a)** Where the group should meet and how it should relate to the larger body is an important consideration.
 - b)** When, how frequently, and for how long are matters of great importance to group organizers.
 - c)** Who should participate and what size of group is most effective are two important matters to group leaders.
 - d)** The kind of social entertainment and recreational activities and how they can complement the fellowship, study, and worship aspects of the group process are significant leadership issues.

answers to study questions

- 7 a** 2) Need to relate interpersonally
b 4) Need to participate
c 1) Need to belong
d 3) Need to share
- 1 c)** share the life of Christ.
- 8** You should have circled **a), b), d), e), h), i), k),** and **l).**
- 2 b)** commitment of each member...
- 9 a** 1) Group participation
b 3) Group atmosphere
c 2) Group communication
d 3) Group atmosphere
e 1) Group participation
f 2) Group communication
g 2) Group communication
h 3) Group atmosphere
i 1) Group participation
- 3 a)** helping them to affirm each other...
- 10 a)** False
b) True
c) True
d) False
e) True
f) False
g) True
h) True
- 4 a)** sharing intimate fellowship...
- 11 c)** the task of the body is accomplished...
- 5 d)** the sharing of fellowship and nurture might be facilitated.
- 12 d)** The group leader should be aware of his position of power...

6 b), d), e), g), and i) are true.