

Mutual Involvement

A Simple New Model for Small Group Development

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MUCH LIKE THE ORIGINAL CHRISTIAN “house churches” memorialized in Acts, all truly intimate human communities tend to range in size from a mere six to an equally scant eighteen members. Congregations of greater magnitude, and few can remain viable at that minuscule size for long, are forced to get along with a lesser sense either of intimacy, or as aggregate communities made up of many smaller communities. Christ the Healer United Church of Christ (CtH), an experimental mission outreach to unchurched and antichurched younger people, was called into being with this fact in mind. At this time, virtually all people who attend CtH’s Monday night service of worship are members of at least one other CtH gathering. Some attend two or more of these smaller, more intimate groups.

The single most significant characteristic of CtH is that CtH is a constantly evolving, mutual cocreation that is shaped and flavored by the needs, wishes, and efforts of all CtH attendees. This happens with the help and encouragement, not the direction, of its co-conveners. All ongoing small groups associated with CtH have either grown out of conversations that took place during the regularly scheduled Monday night gatherings, or were meetings initiated by individuals for purposes of interaction with their non-CtH friends and/or fellow enthusiasts that are now absorbed into the CtH list of small groups.

An example that illustrates both processes at once would be that in early October 1999, CtH published an article written by Walter Wink titled “Homosexuality and the Bible” in a local alternative newspaper. Simultaneously, CtH advertised that in October they would feature a series of forty-five minute discussions on the topic of “Sexuality and Spirituality” during their Monday night meetings. Many visitors came for those conversations and a few kept coming back. Others did not.

In December 1999, one of those one-time visitors found his way to a monthly CtH potluck, where in private conversation he told Thomas that he and his roommate had found that one exchange stimulating, but inadequate. He went on to say that the two of them had called together their own gathering of friends and acquaintances to talk about the issue. That group of nine had expressed an interest in continuing their exploration of the topic, but had lacked the wherewithal to establish anything permanent. Immediately, Thomas suggested that a next meeting should be scheduled at their home, this time announced in the CtH newsletter and attended by Thomas, Gabrielle, and other CtH members, as well as the original non-CtH constituents. The man agreed, gave Thomas his phone number so that more detailed planning could be undertaken and went home smiling.

In similar ways, CtH has created a woman’s group, a monthly potluck that moves from home to home around the metropolitan area, a weekly “spiritual read-aloud with potluck meal and table-talk” group, and a six-member residential community and monthly self-direction colloquies called the Beacons (guiding lights) to oversee itself. It has also “taken over” two separate and very different hands-on healing groups, and a monthly meditation and a ritualized prayer group devoted to environmental and social issues, totaling nine successful discussion groups in all. In addition to these, a sexuality and spirituality discussion group and a monthly drummer’s group is currently in the works.

Not all groups launched have stayed afloat. This is not seen as failure since no individual’s prestige was ever on the line. In the course of life, friends come together and/or decline to come together for involvement with mutual concerns all the time. What sets CtH groups apart in the minds of participants is not that they are offshoots of a “church

organization,” since all of their friends are welcome and meetings take place in various homes, but simply that the mutual concerns and/or interests addressed therein are always of an explicit spiritual or communitarian nature, and usually both.

Being purposeful about spirit and community is the unifying theme that plays out both on Monday nights and in the individual small groups that are spread across the week. In this way, CtH achieves both the sense of intimacy and the sense of shared purpose that are aimed at by megachurches using their more directive model. Also, in this way, most of CtH’s leadership training is accomplished by “modeling.” The co-conveners must keep these training elements always in mind, but the constant production of new leaders is accomplished without diverting time and energy from all else going on, or by playing favorites.

Each CtH Monday night service of worship is in part composed of small groups. After gathering all together in one room and engaging in drumming (an exercise that encourages community by demonstrating the “Body of Christ,” unity-in-diversity principle), check-in, and a call to worship. The union prayer is chosen by an attendee, and CtH disperses into a number of breakout circles.

Every breakout circle constitutes a small group in itself. Over the three years of its existence, there have been hundreds of such groups, including Bible studies, talking about social issues, practice at sacred dance, the use of art to experience spiritual guidance, interfaith discussions, explorations of ritual, meditation, and prayer practices, discussions about such topics as “discernment,” “sacredness,” “intercessory prayer,” “faith,” “holiness,” “is Jesus getting old?” “why the modern church is so different from the church in Acts,” “why was there a Protestant Reformation?” hands-on healing prayer, and simple sharing of each person’s lifelong spiritual journeys. Some few are engaging enough to be repeated upon occasion and, once in a great while, one inspires ongoing mutual involvement and a small group existence on its own.

These breakout groups are given forty-five minutes to develop and explore their particular content and purpose before everyone is recalled to the central gathering where all are again united in prayer. CtH meetings are scheduled to last just ninety minutes, but many Monday evenings last more than two hours as conversations started in breakout circles continue into the “coffee hour.”

All CtH small groups make use of a few very simple “rules.” The first and most important rule is that all comment made during any exchange of ideas is to be based on expressions of personal experience rather than on personal opinion. CtH participants learn about and from each other. They do not attempt to control each other. This avoids arguments and builds community.

All CtH small groups starts with “check-in” where every person present says their name. It is never assumed that everyone knows everyone, or that someone new should be singled out. Each person shares some small comment appropriate to the purpose of the group. For example, at Beacons, every attendee, after introducing herself or himself, contributes one observation about something that really worked for him or her that past month. Dealing with problems that may have surfaced in that period comes later in the meeting.

All CtH small groups involve an open forum for vocal prayer. In some groups this takes place early, in the manner of a table grace. In some groups it comes at the end, while still others incorporate prayer when needed throughout the whole gathering. These prayer sessions are rarely restricted to “business at hand,” but are open intercessory petitions of all kinds. All CtH small groups are interactive, some entirely democratic in structure, some less democratic. Dispersal of authority makes some kinds of interactions more valuable and other kinds more difficult, but mutual involvement through direct interaction of participants is indispensable for building up a deep sense of community.



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To discuss the different models of new church starts and find one that works for you, contact:

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