

Small Groups



One of the joys of recent years has been the arrival and integration of various new friends here at Wheelock Heath Baptist Church. We are thrilled that God is bringing to us all kinds of different people from different backgrounds and blending them into our midst, but we are aware that we need to work harder both to truly welcome these friends, and also to maintain meaningful contact and fellowship with others that have been in the church for much longer.

Paradoxically, a fuller church can actually lead to increased feelings of isolation - not only is it difficult to find familiar faces in a larger crowd, but it is a real challenge to get to know *new* names and faces.

We are committed to communicating the gospel message in the context of a gospel community, and we want people to experience the fellowship at Wheelock Heath as a network of Christ-centred relationships rather than as a meeting you attend or a building you enter. We want to be committed to caring for one another, discipling one another, investing in relationships and resolving conflict. We want all who come to have a sense of belonging. Such lofty goals highlight the fact that our imperfect attempts often fall very short! Nevertheless, we wish to continue to aim high and to make a deliberate effort to improve upon what we have. Even with refreshments after the service, a crowded hall is not the most effective place for building and maintaining relationships.

We are also conscious that our need for corporate prayer and meaningful bible study does not lessen when we see some small measure of the Lord's goodness to us. Far from it - any numerical growth must be outstripped by a passion for growing together in clear understanding of the principles we believe. We believe in prayer! We believe equally that the study of the Scriptures is essential to our personal and corporate growth.

Having sought the Lord over these matters, we are convinced that essential to the development of the spiritual life of the church is a clear focus on several key areas.

- 1 The study of God's Word and prayer;
- 2 Support of God's people pastorally;
- 3 Social interaction leading to a true 'koinonia' in our midst;
- 4 Seeking of the lost.

Such aspirations are neither original nor new to this particular church. However, we wish to deliberately deepen our commitment to each of these separate strands of gospel fundamentals. In order to help us, we have developed a Small Group ministry which we believe assists in promoting these primary goals.

In short, we have set up a network of Small Groups spread over the general geographical areas from which members and friends of the church travel for worship. These Small Groups have become, at least for part of the year, the main midweek meetings of the church dedicated to the four previously mentioned principles. Twice a month, we also meet corporately for a time around the Lord's Table in the church.

What are Small Groups?

Simply speaking, Small Groups meet in various homes for prayer, fellowship and the interactive study of God's word. They last for around an hour and a half, led in most cases by an elder or deacon (supported by their wives where possible!), all study the same biblical passages using the same format, and are intended be informal and enjoyable.

Small Group ministry is nothing new. The first Christians learned together in a structured way through teaching, admonishing and exhorting one another and through the instruction of, and interaction with, shepherds and teachers - primarily in homes.

Aside from this, the value of Small Groups in Christian history is well documented. It is a biblical and historical model that God has been pleased to bless.

Universities have seen the innate and obvious value of Small Groups for tutor group purposes and also for pastoral oversight of students for many

years. Christian Hall Groups have also been similarly used in the spiritual sphere for the nurture of Christian students and the winning of new converts. Navigators, UCCF, Evangelical Anglicanism, the 'New Churches', and many charismatic groupings have found real benefit in meeting in a Small Group context, while maintaining a strong central structure.

Reformed evangelicals have also been party to the use of Small Group ministries for many years and with real success. The concept of Small Group discussion and fellowship is well documented in Welsh and English Methodism - both Arminian and Calvinistic, with the 'Society Meeting' or the 'Association' prominent at the core of many past revivals to teach and nurture serious minded believers. Many bible centred churches across our land have enjoyed and continue to enjoy God's blessing through well run Small Group structures.

If Wheelock Heath is to develop greater fellowship bonds - and in a growing church, to simply maintain the fellowship which already exists - Small Groups are of such intrinsic value as to be almost indispensable. We are conscious that the care of God's people is to be something mutually shared, and that in our congregation it is easy to unintentionally miss people and fail to grow warm friendships. The implementation of Small Groups has allowed a regular invitation to fellowship in a Christian home to every person attending the church. The kinship bonds created there can only be conducive to greater closeness amongst those who attend, and to more effective pastoral care by those who shepherd the groups.

One of the primary blessings in implementing Small Groups is that those called to shepherd God's flock will have an increased, informal interaction with the Lord's people in a different context than church as we study together around God's Word. Our hope is that we will develop stronger Christians and future leaders as we teach and mentor each group.

Search the Scriptures...

The study of the Word of God and prayer is essential to the life and growth of every Christian, and we encourage every believer to be present for corporate worship each Lord's Day for edification and evangelism.

In addition, we are very aware that the New Testament presents us with a variety of other scenarios in which teaching took place. Sometimes it was preaching in the sense we would know it today. On other occasions the Lord Jesus taught only his disciples (Matthew 13:36) - a Small Group of 12, and even an inner circle of three. In Acts, Paul uses a whole range of venues for teaching and there is nothing in Scripture to suggest that all these were long monologues with no interaction. In Acts 18:26 Priscilla and Aquila invite Apollos to their home to teach him - again it is unlikely that this was a sermon!

We feel that there are considerable advantages to teaching in Small Groups. For example, interactive study in Small Groups allows for questions and discussion in a way that our structured church services do not. Many people do not find it easy to grasp theological concepts or to understand the implications of Biblical teaching in their lives. Small Groups enable people to ask questions, to discuss and deepen understanding. All believers have at times sat through a sermon thinking "Yes, but what about ...?" The Small Group enables them to pursue answers to those questions in a safe and encouraging environment.

The Puritan Richard Baxter, speaking after many years' conscientious ministry in Kidderminster, observed, "I am daily forced to wonder how lamentably ignorant many of our people are, who have seemed diligent hearers of me these ten or twelve years, while I spoke as plainly as I was able to speak [i.e. from the pulpit] ... whereas, in one hour's familiar instruction of them in private, they seem to understand more, and better entertain it than they did in all their lives before". (cf. 1 Thess. 2:11-12).

Preaching is wonderful and owned of God - an informal dialogue in a safe environment can press home some of those lessons in a glorious way.

We are conscious that no two individuals are identical in understanding or spiritual standing. Small Group study allows the teaching level to be adjusted to enable everyone to understand and grow accordingly. We

grow by asking questions, learning to think and reason biblically, and by observing others.

Small Group discussion Bible studies within the church provide not only a welcoming place for interested seekers, but primarily a forum for newly committed believers and maturing believers dealing with questions, doubts and struggles. They develop a Biblically literate congregation and in a growing congregation allow us to grow larger while digging deeper.

Within any church there are wise and godly individuals whose contribution to Small Group discussion can be of great value. Small Groups allow for the encouragement of gifting and the nurturing of biblical thought processes. Our desire is not pooled ignorance, but a church that grows in discernment.

More of the same

In a sense, Small Groups are only an expansion of our current ministry as a church. Many of our older young people have met for several years in a Small Group for study and fellowship each week, while Growth Groups, Baptising Classes and other fellowship groups have run on a regular basis.

We are all familiar now with the concept of Christianity Explored, a Small Group outreach run for those asking questions about the Christian faith. Our experience has been that this course offers an entirely biblical, yet culturally relevant way to reach post-Christian unbelievers. For many unbelievers 'going to church' is an alien experience - it is not so much a means to faith as a hurdle that they must overcome. This is not true of everyone - many still retain a religious sensibility, but they are the minority. Most of our society is now post-Christian. 'Home' offers a powerful dynamic for evangelism. Jesus often ate with sinners and taught his disciples in Small Groups in homes. That fellowship around meals powerfully embodied the graciousness of the Gospel.

The experiences of these Small Groups have encouraged a greater spirit of prayer, fellowship and understanding in all of those who have participated. The structure of a Small Group allows members to get to know each other more deeply as they spend time together. The support and caring that develop in Small Groups increase enthusiasm for continuing study.

Please join us as part of our Small Group structure as we move to work harder and pray harder as a church. Please come and discover the great riches of God's Word. Please come and commit to sharing close fellowship and developing stronger bonds with your fellow believers!

Our goals as we do so?

- ***Encouraging one another*** day after day (Hebrews 3:12-13;10:23-25; Galatians 4:4-7).
- ***Edifying one another*** as we study the Scriptures together and use our spiritual gifts which God freely distributes to his Body as He wills, so that we might become mature in Christ (Ephesians 4:11-16; I Corinthians 12:4-11; 14: 12,26; Hebrews 2:4).
- ***Enjoying one another in Christ*** as we interact as a covenant community, fellowshiping and worshiping in the joy, grace, and love of our Saviour (John 10:10).
- ***Evangelising others*** through the natural outreach of genuine friendships lived out in the context of the groups (John 15:8, 16).