



EQUIPPER

The monthly e-zine from the U.S. Church Administration and Development (CAD) team of Grace Communion International.

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Dear pastors and ministry leaders:

Our mission in GCI is *Living and Sharing the Gospel* with a vision for *All kinds of churches for all kinds of people in all kinds of places*. Note the reciprocal dynamic at work: by faithfully living and sharing the gospel, established churches are renewed and new churches are planted, giving us increasingly fruitful means to connect with all kinds of people in all kinds of places. As that happens, we'll be engaged even more fully in what Jesus is doing through the Holy Spirit to make new disciples in a rapidly changing world.

Speaking of all kinds of people, it's interesting to note two recent Barna Group studies. A 3/15 study showed the majority of unchurched Americans are not unbelievers, but "non-practicing Christians" who profess Christianity as their faith, but haven't attended church for a long time, if ever. "Skeptics" account for 25% of this group, which means 75%, though not connected to a church, are positively inclined toward Christianity. A 10/14 Barna study showed that churchgoing in America is slowly losing its role as a normative part of life. In the 1990s, roughly 14% of unchurched adults never had experienced regular church attendance vs. 25% today. Put these studies together and we see that though many people in America are positively inclined toward Christianity, a growing number are unfamiliar with and likely put off by (even fearful of) traditional churches.

Seeing these factors, several of our pastors and CAD team members have noted that many of our smallest congregations would be well-positioned to offer Christian fellowship to non-practicing Christians by restructuring to operate using a format we refer to as a *fellowship group*.

Some of our U.S. congregations already are successfully using that format. They're learning that there are all kinds of unchurched believers and seekers who prefer Christian fellowship in a home or other "non-churchy" setting where they enjoy worship with a small group of friends in an intimate, relaxed setting. These folks tend to prefer interactive Bible discussions over formal sermons, and they tend to enjoy the informal, highly-relational setting with chairs in circles rather than in theater-style rows.

Later this year we'll be sharing more about how our very small GCI-USA congregations (those with less than 15 in average attendance) will benefit by becoming fellowship groups. In the meantime, please give prayerful consideration to what Regional Pastor Ted Johnston shares on page two of this issue. If you have questions, suggestions or concerns at this time, feel free to contact your regional pastor.

In Christ's service,

Greg Williams, Director of GCI-USA Church Administration and Development

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Fellowship Groups

Equipping all kinds of churches for all kinds of people in all kinds of places.

Advantages of becoming a fellowship group

By Ted Johnston, GCI-USA Regional Pastor and *Equipper* Editor

Here's a key question to ask when structuring a congregation: *What is Jesus doing here, and how may we participate?* This question is answered by prayerfully appraising *who we are* (as a congregation) and *who they are* (as people in the congregation and outside the walls of the congregation's place of meeting). Of course, we must be realistic in these appraisals. It can be discouraging (even debilitating) to try to be who we are not, and to try to reach people we have no ability to connect with. This is not to suggest that God cannot or will not remake who we are, and give us supernatural ability to relate to those who are not like us. But as I like to say, *Reality is our friend!* It's not a lack of faith to be realistic in our appraisals—in fact it's a sign of wisdom and maturity. And so, with prayer, we assess both who God has made us as a congregation, and how he has positioned us to reach out to a certain group of people in the community that surrounds where we gather (what we refer to as a congregation's "focus group").

In light of these factors, I think our smallest congregations will find it helpful (even liberating) to adopt a congregational model we refer to as a *fellowship group*. This structure, already successfully being used in some of our congregations, allows a small congregation to be what it is rather than struggling to be what it is not. It allows them to use what God has granted to the greatest advantage in his service. Reality says that a very small church is unable to provide the programs that some people seek when looking for a church. But as Greg notes in his letter (see p. 1), some people who are looking for more intimate, less-structured Christian community might find a fellowship group highly attractive. At the same time, a fellowship group can be an attractive alternative for current members. With these thoughts in mind, here are some of the advantages of becoming a fellowship group:

- Calling a very small congregation (less than 15 in attendance) a *fellowship group* instead of a *church* would more accurately present to the public the nature of that congregation. In America, people looking for a church typically have expectations of a fairly large size and multiple programs. Because fellowship groups do not present themselves as traditional churches, they are free to structure in alternative, more effective ways.
- Rather than being perceived by members and outsiders as a "tiny church," fellowship groups are seen by those seeking Christian fellowship (but not wanting a traditional church), as a viable, even highly attractive alternative.
- The fellowship group structure may prove to be more comfortable and realistic for existing members. Given their small size, these congregations are free to ignore some of the expectations the culture places on traditional churches and be who they are. They can meet in circles rather than rows; in homes rather than buildings. Their worship services can be discussion-based rather than focused on formal sermons. They don't need a sound system (no sermons to record) and can vary meeting formats—even meeting less than every week, if need be.
- Given this flexibility, a fellowship group is able to reach certain (often non-churched) people who traditional churches are unable to reach. In terms of reaching out, fellowship groups are more adept at "taking church to the street" (or park, or?). They can vary formats (barbeque instead of a traditional service?). You get the idea—and we'd love to hear yours. Please email them to your regional pastor.
- Last, but certainly not least, moving away from a traditional church structure to become a fellowship group gives a congregation opportunity for a fresh start, utilizing a new approach that better fits who they are. There are no guarantees, but this shift may well launch the congregation on a journey of growth leading to becoming a traditional church, or leading to starting additional fellowship groups in a movement of multiplication.