

Small Groups & Pastoral Care

Possibilities, Problems, and Resources for Ministry

Small Group Pastoral Care: Opportunity and Need

Congregational ministers today often face several interlocking challenges that profoundly affect the practice of pastoral care:

- ▶ Cultural shifts in late-modern/postmodern Western society have heightened individualism and eroded the roles of tradition and institution in society. The result is a relational crisis for churches, where many congregants default to “believing without belonging.”¹
- ▶ Geographic shifts toward urban and suburban life have produced increasingly fast-paced and isolating daily schedules for congregants, who, as a result, are less rooted to a particular location in an increasingly mobile and global society.
- ▶ Congregational and societal expectations of ministers have evolved, as well. In some contexts, ministers are expected to function as church-building “moguls” while also maintaining traditional pastoral expectations and disciplines.

By equipping small groups to provide pastoral care, the church may supplement the work of the minister or ministry team and combat its crisis of relationship.

Foundations, Benefits, and Practices

The theological foundations for equipping and mobilizing lay members in the provision of pastoral care are many—from the priesthood of all believers, to the *koinonia* of the transformed Christian community, to the shared divine life of the Triune God.

Functionally, small groups may serve the pastoral needs of the church effectively in several practical ways, such as by:

- ▶ Cultivating relational intimacy with God, the church, and the group through communal and partner prayer, scripture reading, and fellowship meal practices.
- ▶ Confronting anxieties, burdens, and sin by providing safe spaces for dialogue and confession.
- ▶ Identifying physical and emotional needs that might not reach the minister’s ears, and serving as a mobilized group of “first responders” when a group member needs food, a hospital visit, etc.

- ▶ Providing a sense of belonging and purpose to less connected congregants through community and church service projects and activities.

Challenges and Considerations

Although equipping small group leaders to share in the responsibility of pastoral care offers many benefits and possibilities, several challenges persist:

- ▶ Small groups will need to cultivate deeper relational investment amongst members. Latini finds that, despite their stated aims to cultivate stronger relational bonds and accountability amongst Christians, many small group participants remain thinly linked to other group members. Lacking relational investment, small groups may struggle to turn the corner from social hub to pastoral care hub.¹
- ▶ Small group leaders will need to be trained in basic pastoral care techniques and principles, such as listening skills, conflict resolution skills, and pastoral visitation skills, to name a few. Adequately equipping group leaders presents an organizational challenge to a ministry staff, but offers benefits to those who may do so effectively.
- ▶ Small group leaders will need to be sensitive to confidentiality issues related to pastoral care and be prepared to refer group members to professional help when the need exceeds the qualifications of the leader.

Ultimately, the critical pastoral aim of small groups will be to cultivate relational intimacy through presence and attentiveness to a degree that a minister or ministry team may not be able.

Links and Resources for Ministers

For a practical theology of small group ministry, see [Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community*](#).

For a concise guide to equipping small group leaders for pastoral care, see [Stone, *The Caring Church*](#).

For a classic theological discussion of Christian community, see [Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*](#).

For a creative angle on crafting meaningful small group practices, see the [Lk10 Community](#) resources and materials (designed for North American house church plants).

For a (work-in-progress) example of how my congregation is seeking to incorporate pastoral care into the identity of our small groups, see [Community Groups Leader Guide](#).

For an annotated bibliography of sources related to small groups and pastoral care, see [Annotated Bibliography](#).

¹ Theresa F. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community: A Practical Theology of Small Group Ministry* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001).