

OpenTheo

Q&A#159 Small Groups

November 22, 2019



Alastair Roberts

Today's question: "What is your take on small groups? Is it a fad? Does it come from mega-church culture? How important is it to be a part of a small group if organic friendships and involvement are already part of one's church experience? Is it healthy for churches to pressure members into joining a small group?"

If you have any questions or feedback, please send them to me on Curious Cat: <https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, what is your take on small groups? Is it a fad? Does it come from mega-church culture? How important is it to be part of a small group if organic friendships and involvement are already part of one's church experience? Is it healthy for churches to pressure members into joining a small group? Before getting into the question, I think we should take a step back and think about the context of modern society. Modern society is where there is an increasing lack of organic community.

The sort of structures of community that would have existed in the past, intergenerational communities rooted in a particular place with large extended families and the interaction between work and one's daily life and worship, those do not exist in

the same way anymore. The industrial revolution and the car have largely put paid to that sort of life. And this, more than anything else, has shaped modern ecclesiology.

If we think of ecclesiology as primarily a matter of ideas and theories, we're missing the point. Ecclesiology is in large measure a result of sociology. It's a result of the realities that surround us and shape our forms of social life.

And as a result of those forms, it's very difficult to practice certain forms of church. And there are pressures upon us to achieve certain goods that the church is supposed to represent or secure in the context of a transformed social reality. And that, I think, is one of the things that small groups are trying to achieve.

Now, in a society where you don't have the same organic grassroots community, where you no longer have extended families living in the same location for many generations, where you no longer have an extended community where people know each other, where there is a deep rootedness, where people are moving around a lot from place to place, where people have to travel for maybe half an hour to get to church in their cars, when there's a situation where you're working with one group of people, you're working outside of your home, outside of your household situation, and you're working with one group of people, you're sending your kids to school with another, you're living around another group of people, and then you're worshipping with yet another, life is complicated in ways that it was not in the past, where those things were far more likely to be interwoven or at least overlapping significantly. Now, in the modern situation, they do not. In the modern situation, many people, most people probably, have to get in their cars to get to church.

It's certainly something that I think most people in the US would have to do. Now, this is a new reality, and in that sort of context, the church is supposed to represent community, among other things. It's supposed to be a site of fellowship, it's supposed to be a site of communal interaction that sharpens us and develops us in discipleship.

And where there is not an organic structure where faithful people living alongside each other, working alongside each other, would just organically do that in their regular day-to-day interactions, you have to astroturf it, you have to bring it down from above. And many people are looking in a church for community. People talk about the church as a family, but they fail to take seriously enough the fact that the church used to be built around actual families in a far more powerful way, that these were the structure and the fabric and the fibre of the church, that it held the things together.

It represented a connection between the organic structures of life, the ways in which we live and we work and do all these sorts of things together, and the way that we share a common faith, that the interweaving of that common faith and a common life was quite natural and organic. And the structures of church leadership could also be explained in such a way, that you have the organic communal leadership of the men of the

community, and the particular men that represent the leaders of the church are part of that group of men. Now our struggles with church leadership, our struggles with church office and all these sorts of things, come in large measure from our abstraction of the organic life of a community, from the more abstract structures and systems of an institution.

And so the church has become a more abstract institution on the one hand, and on the other hand it's something that works down upon a mass of indiscriminate mass of people, and tries to form them into some sort of artificial community. Now that is a strange situation, and we need to register that that is a very strange situation that has led to peculiar problems, if we're going to actually get an understanding of what small groups represent, whether they're good or bad. The other thing to notice here is that we can talk all the time that we want about theories of the church, if we do not actually wrestle with the sociological and technological realities of society formed around the car, we are not going to have a good ecclesiology.

If your church is built around the reality of the car, you're going to struggle to form organic community, because the church has broken up organic community, and so you're going to have to wrestle to some extent against the very technologies that frame our life today. Now thinking about small groups, I've been a member of many small groups in my time, and small groups can be good or bad in my experience. A lot of it is a matter of chance of the certain people that are put together, and often there's not enough thought given to that.

People can be assembled at random, and it's not led particularly well, and it really depends upon a matter of chance in those sorts of situations. Sometimes there is a good leader, sometimes there isn't. Sometimes there's coordination, sometimes there isn't.

Sometimes there's a group of people that really gel, other times there isn't. And so the other problem that we're facing is when there are no longer lots of organic structures, when there's no longer the structures of family being really strong, when there's no longer local neighbours, people who are sharing lives alongside each other in that context, and people working together in the household and elsewhere, what you have to do is work in this decondensed setting, where all these things have been separated out, and you have to find some block into which to form this or establish this time of Christian formation. And that's always going to be a problem, because the things you'll find, there just aren't enough hours in the day.

There were enough hours in the day before, because all these things were put in together. You'll be multitasking, you'll be working with your family, and so you'd have lots of time with your family in that context. You'd be praying and interacting and teaching and that sort of context in a way that was not so pressured by time.

But now you have a few hours in the evening on a few days a week, and churches have

to fill that time to get some of the formation that they need to have in, that is no longer being provided by the fact, by people just living alongside each other and working alongside each other, being together in families. When you're having so much formation during the week in secular environments and contexts where people are very antagonistic to the faith, and you come back at the end of the day and you feel tired and you want to just watch Netflix, it's really a struggle to establish Christian formation in that sort of context. And so small groups are an attempt to astroturf people's social lives in this very time-starved situation and try and establish some artificial community where no organic community exists anymore.

And small groups can do a number of different things. Some would be emphasising fellowship, just being alongside each other, eating together, enjoying each other's company, going on outings, that sort of thing. Others emphasise Bible study, some would emphasise prayer, some would maybe have a book group, whatever it is.

Some have a combination of those. And those can really be mixed. Sometimes there'll be part of a larger community of the church where, I mean I've been part of groups where you'll meet together in your small group and then get together in the large group all together at the end, and there's a gathering together.

And that can be quite helpful on occasions. It certainly, when the small group isn't working particularly well or gelling particularly well, it actually gives you something that is a bit more positive that you can interact with this larger group and gain something from them that you may not have gained from the small group. There are other problems that you do have with small groups though.

They can establish cliques within the church that make it very difficult for people to be part of a wider community. And this is particularly an issue where you have groups that aren't intergenerational. It's the intergenerational character of our society that is particularly important.

We really, really need that. And if you're having small groups that are primarily with people your own age, then you're losing something there. You're missing a very important part of Christian formation.

Do you divide by demographic? Do you divide by area? All of these things are questions as well. Do you have more stable groups that stay together over a period of a number of years, really get to know each other and be involved in each other's lives? Or do you constantly shake things up and have maybe more shallow relationships? It's very difficult because proper healthy relationships are seldom well-formed if they're just artificially astroturfed. There's something about organic community that it just needs to happen in its own.

It needs to have a structure within which it can happen, but it needs to happen on its

own terms. And it's very difficult, I think, for small groups to fill the gap that is left by the vanishing of organic community. Now, that's not to say that there was always organic community serving people's discipleship needs in the past.

There really wasn't. But there were structures within which it was a lot easier to spread the resources and the dynamics of organic society to bring people into it from outside. So bring people into a group of a few families that meet together on a regular basis and work together.

There would be contexts of discipleship like that. And those are far more organic. Now, I've found the best small groups I have been part of have been organic.

They've been groups that I've just said, I want to do something with some other people. Let's get together and discuss these issues. Let's have a theology study group.

In the past, I've had a preaching group that I got together with a few other guys. And every week we would have Sunday evening with one of us would preach, the others would give feedback and we pray for each other. That sort of thing was really good.

It was organic and it really created a good connection between people who had common interests and concerns and wanted to develop in particular ways. The problem is with small groups with their artificiality, you often lack that. You're not going to be developing people into real strength much of the time.

There is a need to be alongside people who are different from us to challenge us in different ways and to get us to work better with others. But sometimes what we really need are people who can dig deep, who can challenge us and help us to grow into our particular strengths and capacities. And I've found that that does not usually happen in small groups in the more artificial form established by churches.

Rather, it needs a more organic structure for that to occur. You need to get people who share a common interest and really are prepared to push each other. But when you have those contexts, amazing things can happen.

I've certainly found that for my own personal growth, those have been immensely important. And so I'd recommend maybe put a little bit less emphasis upon these structured groups and think a bit more about what organic groups can you set up with other Christians in your neighbourhood and how can you form something that really is going to develop you. The other thing about small groups is often you're trying to fill in quality time with other Christians or teaching time.

There isn't much practice. Maybe a better form of small group would actually be working alongside other Christians in a practical ministry. But yet when we're so so time starved because all these things have been separated out and we're not actually doing things at the same time anymore, you're really going to struggle.

You're going to struggle to get all the teaching that people need in and then practical ministry work is just not going to happen. And there's a problem there. And I think we need to step back and think about the structure of modern life more generally and think about some of the ways we can resist that and establish structures that are a bit healthier in terms of organic connections with neighbours, with our families, with the different parts of our lives, bringing our work and our family together, bringing our work and our family and our worship together, bringing our work and our family and our worship and our neighbourhood together.

All of these things that seem to be so easily separated. Are there ways that we can actually help those things come together so we can do these things simultaneously? We can have contexts of organic community with other people as we're working with them and also speaking about our faith with other Christians. Is it possible to do that? Is it possible to have time at work where we're actually reflecting upon the things of God, to have time at work when we're praying now and worshipping? In most places, no, it's not.

But perhaps we need to think a bit more creatively in these regards, not just give in to the small groups mentality where everything has to be, where churches have to provide community, where there is no root system of community to work with. I would suggest that you can often work with those sorts of structures, but maybe it would be good to think about what structures we can develop from our own resources, from our own structures of society and community, family, etc. Try and do more in those structures and then there will be other structures that the church can provide, but not so much weight will be put upon those.

I've certainly found that when you get people together in the same sort of place, working alongside each other, interacting on a deeper level, sharing their lives, not just their quality time, important and powerful things can happen. And so I am not particularly enthused about small groups. I see why churches would emphasise them.

They're dealing with the lack of time for Christian formation and competing with all these other forms of formation that we're exposed to. And so I can understand why they're emphasising them. But if you are someone within such a church, I would recommend that without giving up on those small groups, think about other ways that you can establish a more organic form of Christian community within the existing structures of your work, your home, etc.

Thank you very much for listening. Lord willing, you've found this helpful. If you have any questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account.

If you'd like to support this and other videos and podcasts like it, please do so using my Patreon or my PayPal account. God bless and thank you for listening.