

An Exciting Way to Get Involved



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 1:1, 2, 26; Exod. 18:21–25; 1 Cor. 12:12–25; Acts 16:11–15, 40; Acts 4:31; Acts 12:12.*

Memory Text: “Then He said to His disciples, ‘The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.’ ” (*Matthew 9:37, 38, NKJV*).

Someone has said, “There is strength in numbers.” In a sense, that is true. Have you ever noticed that you are far more motivated to exercise if you are doing it with a group of people than if you have to exercise alone each day? Many people join health clubs, gyms, and exercise facilities because they believe that they will exercise more and enjoy it better if they are exercising with other people. In a similar way, God has created us for fellowship. We are social beings, and as with exercise it is true with many things in life: we do better if we have a social support system. This is especially true in spiritual matters.

Throughout the Bible, small groups are highlighted as one of God's methods of strengthening our faith, increasing our knowledge of His Word, deepening our prayer life, and equipping us to witness. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit participated in a small group ministry. Jesus established His small group of disciples, and the apostle Paul traveled the Roman world with his small group of evangelistic companions.

During this week's study, we will focus on the biblical basis for small groups, and you will discover an exciting way to get involved.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 5.

Small Groups—God’s Idea First

Read Genesis 1:1, 2, 26; Hebrews 1:1, 2; and Ephesians 3:8, 9. How do these verses reveal the unity of the Godhead?

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit participated in Creation together. They each had different tasks but worked together in an indivisible union. The Father was the Master Designer, the Great Architect. He carried out His plans through Jesus, as the active agent in Creation in unison with the power of the Holy Spirit. Such a powerful supernatural act is way beyond our comprehension. What we can clearly comprehend is not only the reality of the created world and the cosmos but also that God Himself made it all (*see Rom. 1:18–20*).

Small groups were God’s idea first. Though one has to be careful when using analogies in regard to many of the mysterious aspects of God, let’s use one loosely and say that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit composed the first “small group” in salvation history. They participated together in the creation of the human race and then in its redemption after the Fall.

Compare John 10:17, 18 with Romans 8:11 and 1 Corinthians 15:15. How does the resurrection of Christ demonstrate the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the plan of salvation?

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are united in a “small group” with the express purpose of redeeming the human race. “The plan of salvation had its place in the counsels of the Infinite from all eternity.” —Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 186. There is nothing more important to God than saving as many people as possible (*1 Tim. 2:4, 2 Pet. 3:9*). Small groups may have multiple purposes that we will study in this week’s lesson, but their overriding purpose is to focus on winning lost people to Jesus. That is, by working in small groups we can help not ourselves alone but others, as well. That is, the ultimate goal of our small groups should be soul winning.

Dwell on the mystery of the unity of our God. It’s hard to grasp, isn’t it? Yet, we can still believe in, and trust, what we don’t fully understand, right? Why is this such an important principle for Christians to follow when it comes to faith?

Small Groups in Scripture

The Bible provides numerous examples of small groups praying, fellowshiping, encouraging one another, and laboring together for Christ. These groups give God's people the opportunity to share responsibilities and fully utilize their varied gifts. That is, small groups also can provide the opportunity for the Lord to use each of us more fully.

Read Exodus 18:21–25. What providential counsel did Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, provide that made a significant difference for Moses? Why was this plan so vitally important?

Every individual in the camp of Israel became part of a group of ten, led by a godly official. These small groups were a place for problem solving, but they also were much more. They were places of fellowship where problems could be prevented and spiritual life nurtured. They were places of vision, where God's plans for Israel could be shared. In groups like this, people could form tight and caring relationships that could help all involved work through whatever the issues were that they were facing. No question—then, as well as now, people struggled with things that others could help them with. Small groups provide opportunities for warm, caring fellowship, spiritual growth, and problem solving. It is fascinating that small group specialists tell us that the ideal size for group interaction is between 6 and 12 people. This is the exact size that both Moses and Jesus employed in forming their groups.

Read Luke 6:12, 13; Matthew 10:1; and Mark 3:13–15. What was Jesus' twofold purpose in calling the disciples and selecting them to be part of His small group ministry?

Jesus' purpose in calling the disciples was to prepare them both spiritually and practically for their mission to the world. In fellowship with Him, they would grow in grace. In the context of their small group meetings, they would learn how to minister more effectively. Day by day, as they observed Jesus ministering to the needs of people around Him, they would learn by observation how to use their gifts. The purpose of Jesus' small groups was both spiritual nurture and outreach.

Think about a time when you were involved with a small group of people, whatever the circumstances, who cared about each other and who were working for a common goal. What did you learn from that experience that could help you understand the value of small groups in the context of our faith?

Organized for Service

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12–25. How does the human body provide an excellent illustration of working together harmoniously in small groups?

Paul not only reveals the importance of spiritual gifts in the life of the church, but he also suggests a model of how they can be organized. He discusses spiritual gifts in the context of the body of Christ and how it can work.

A study of anatomy and physiology reveals that the organs of the body are organized into different interrelated systems. For example, the digestive, cardiovascular, respiratory, and skeletal are just a few of the body's complex organ systems. Spiritual gifts are like the different parts of the body. They function best when organized into systems or groups. In fact, in most cases they cannot function alone. Our bodies are not just a lump of separate organs freelancing away at whatever they do. Each bodily function is organized into a tightly knit system that works together toward a common goal.

All this tells us something about the environment in which we can best use our spiritual gifts. It is so easy to get discouraged when we function alone, but when we are part of a small group of people with similar interests and goals, we find that our efforts can be much better focused and greatly magnified. So, small groups provide the best environment to exercise our spiritual gifts and can become the heart of a local congregation's outreach ministry.

Ellen G. White underlines the value of small groups in these words: "The formation of small companies as a basis of Christian effort has been presented to me by One who cannot err. If there is a large number in the church, let the members be formed into small companies, to work not only for the church members, but for unbelievers. If in one place there are only two or three who know the truth, let them form themselves into a band of workers. Let them keep their bond of union unbroken, pressing together in love and unity, encouraging one another to advance, each gaining courage and strength from the assistance of the others."—*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, pp. 21, 22.

Small group ministry is ordained by God to enable each church member to grow spiritually, experience warm fellowship, and utilize his or her God-given gifts in service.

Reflect on Ellen G. White's statement above. Analyze it phrase by phrase. How can this divine counsel be implemented in your church?

New Testament Small Groups

The New Testament church exploded in growth. In a few short years it grew from a small group of believers to tens of thousands of worshippers. There were many factors that contributed to this influx of believers and this rapid growth phenomenon. Jesus' ministry sowed the seed of the gospel and prepared the multitudes to accept the preaching of the disciples. After Christ's ascension, the Holy Spirit descended mightily on the day of Pentecost on the praying, believing disciples. One of the contributing factors for the rapid growth of the New Testament church was its small group organizational structure. Small groups made a difference.

Read Acts 18:1–5 and Acts 20:1–4. **Why do you think Luke listed some of the names of those with whom Paul worked closely?**

It is fascinating that Luke mentions some of the names of those with whom Paul worked. To him each one was important. He knew them by name. They mutually supported one another in their outreach ministry. Though the number of names he mentioned was small, that helps prove the point about the importance of working closely with each other, even in small numbers.

Each one of these people surely had gifts that were different from those that others possessed. They came from different backgrounds and cultures. Their ways of looking at things were not always the same, but each one had a valuable contribution to make to the cause of Christ. Their diversities of gifts, backgrounds, and experiences contributed to the growth of the church. They each contributed to the mission of Christ from the richness of their own background and personal experience with Jesus.

Compare Acts 16:11–15, 40 and Acts 12:11, 12. **What invitation did Lydia give to Paul immediately after her conversion? Where did both Paul and Peter go after being delivered from prison?**

The New Testament believers regularly met in homes. Christian homes became centers of influence and the heart of small group ministry.

Have you thought about beginning a small group ministry in your home or joining with a friend to begin a small group ministry in that person's home? If you are already part of a small group ministry, think about what you can share with your Sabbath School class this week about its benefits.

Small Group Dynamics

Small groups are a vehicle that God uses to grow His church. They are “safe havens” for people to express their problems and discuss mutual concerns. They provide opportunities for spiritual growth in the context of caring relationships. Many non-Christians will initially feel more comfortable in participating in a small group meeting in a home than in attending a traditional church service for the first time.

Read Acts 4:31, Acts 12:12, and Acts 20:17–19, 27–32. List all of the different elements in these New Testament groups. What activities were these groups involved in?

Early Christians met together to intercede for others, pray about mutual concerns, share in warm fellowship, study the Word of God, be equipped for service, help protect each other against false teachers, and participate together in outreach activities.

Small groups make a difference. People uniting their gifts in service, focusing on the power of the Holy Spirit for outreach, are a mighty weapon in the Lord’s hands.

Read Matthew 9:37, 38. What does Jesus say about the harvest, and what is His solution to the problem?

The disciples saw only faint possibilities for the progress of the gospel, but Jesus saw great opportunities. He shared the good news with them that “ ‘the harvest truly is plentiful,’ ” and then He pointed out the problem: “ ‘the laborers are few’ ” (*Matt. 9:37, NKJV*). Christ’s solution was to pray for “ ‘the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest’ ” (*Matt. 9:38, NKJV*). Small groups are an answer to Christ’s prayer and exponentially increase the number of laborers for Christ’s harvest.

The focus of all effective small groups is witness and service. Small group ministry will soon die out if its focus is inward and not outward. If the small group becomes self-serving and little more than a discussion group, it will fail in its purpose and lose the vital reason for its existence. Small groups exist to lead people to Jesus, nurture their faith in Jesus, and equip them to witness for Jesus.

Is it possible that God is calling you to start a small group in your home? Why not begin to pray about what God may be impressing you to do? You may be on the verge of the most spiritually rewarding time of your life.

Further Thought: A number of years ago, a small European church outside of one of the continent's major cities decided that it had to do something significant for the Lord. The church was stagnant. No one had been baptized for years. If the present trend continued, the church had little future. The pastor and his church board earnestly prayed and carefully considered what they might do.

As they studied the New Testament, they decided to establish a small group ministry. Nine lay people in the congregation caught the vision. They committed themselves to pray together and study how to establish their small group ministry effectively. Soon they decided to make each of their homes an evangelistic center. The groups learned to exercise their gifts in various ways. They launched prayer and hospitality ministries. They developed friendships in the community. They reached out in acts of kindness to their family, friends, and to former Adventists. The small group leaders began Bible studies in nine homes with 40 guests in attendance. They were amazed at what the Holy Spirit was doing. Eventually 17 of the 40 were baptized. The testimony of that small, stagnant church is that small groups make an enormous difference. They are one of God's means to involve multiple church members in the mission of the church.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** In class, discuss further the essential elements in each small group as outlined in Thursday's study. In what other kinds of activities could a small group be involved? What are ways in which a small group could help those with special gifts really be able to use those gifts as never before?
- 2** Why is it so important that small groups keep an outward, mission focus? That is, however much a group can help nourish and support its members, why must it always keep central to its purpose the spreading of the gospel? Why, too, should a small group always keep connected with the local church body? Why is that so important?
- 3** Have you ever been a part of or heard of small groups that did not function effectively and eventually died out? Discuss the reasons why you think this might happen.
- 4** Think about the story above, about what happened in Europe with the small group ministry. Why do you think it worked so well? What did they do that was, in many ways, so simple and, yet, so effective? Why, too, might working from the "safer" environment of homes, as opposed to a church building, be an effective way of beginning an outreach to the neighborhood or community?

Forgiven in East Timor

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

The would-be killer of a Seventh-day Adventist store clerk won't face punishment after East Timor authorities accepted a decision by the clerk to forgive rather than seek justice in the attack. The case has shocked the East Timor town of Lospalos, where retribution is common, and even the police have expressed disbelief that store clerk Edu Wachumura chose to forgive.

The attacker, Juvinil Ananias, thrust a spear through a store door in a drunken attempt to kill Edu in 2017. The spear only nipped the tip of Edu's nose. Edu met Juvinil at a Lospalos police station in 2019 and signed a declaration to forgive him. Juvinil quietly expressed his remorse for his actions. "I am sorry," he said. "Thank you."

Juvinil offered to slaughter a pig and throw a feast in Edu's honor, but Edu declined, explaining that he doesn't eat pork. Police officers watched incredulously as Edu signed the paper in their presence. "You should at least give a gift or a cow to Edu," an officer told Juvinil.

The attack, which was featured as a Sabbath School mission story in fourth quarter 2018, occurred after Juvinil drunkenly stumbled into the store and swore at 28-year-old Edu, who was working behind the counter.

Edu, who had joined the Adventist Church after taking Bible studies from the store's owner, Zelindo João Lay, gently scolded him. Juvinil angrily threatened to kill Edu but backed off when he saw the other customers in the store. "I'm going to kill you tonight," he snarled as he headed out the door.

That night, Edu heard a knock on the double metal doors at the back of the shop. He went over to the doors, which were locked and chained together, and looked between them to see who was outside. At that moment, a spear plunged through the doors. In a split second, Edu raised an arm, diverting the course of the spear. The tip of the spear sliced the end of his nose.

Two days later, police came to the store to ask Edu whether he wanted the attacker to go to jail. Edu shook his head. "I've forgiven the man," he said. The police jailed Juvinil anyway for a week but then released him. The lengthy legal process played out until 2019, when Juvinil was officially declared forgiven by the authorities.



Zelindo hopes that the stunned local community will understand that God wants to forgive them—just as Edu forgave Juvinil. Following the attack, Edu's brother and sister were baptized, and Zelindo hopes many more people will follow their example.

"Everyone is talking about Edu's decision to forgive, and no one understands it," ZELINDO said. "It is the power of God."

Key Text: *Genesis 1:1–3*

Study Focus: *1 Corinthians 12:12–25; Acts 2:41–47; Acts 6:3–7; Acts 12:5, 12–18; Acts 16:9, 10; Acts 16:14, 15.*

Part I: Overview

In some parts of the world, small groups form the basis of spiritual nurture and outreach for the church. In other parts of the world, there are few, if any, small groups in local congregations. Small groups are described throughout Scripture in a variety of ways. Although they are outlined in Exodus as part of Moses’ organizational plan for Israel, they are a major focus of New Testament witness, both in the ministry of Jesus and the first-century church.

Small groups serve multiple functions in the Bible, and not all are organized the same way. There are a variety of types of groups. Some are primarily nurture groups that emphasize prayer and Bible study. Other groups are more witness and outreach focused, and still others provide for Christian fellowship and problem solving. The most common feature in the Scriptures is that small groups blend prayer, Bible study, fellowship, and witness. Successful small groups that are sustainable must have all four of these elements.

Small groups that fail to have a mission focus often do not survive very long. Small groups with only a mission focus and little or no prayer, Bible study, and fellowship often “burn out” their members in ceaseless activity. In this week’s lesson, we will take a brief look at Old Testament small groups, but we will spend most of our time in carefully surveying Jesus’ small group ministry and the dynamic multifaceted small groups in the book of Acts.

Part II: Commentary

The first verse in the Bible, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (*Gen. 1:1, NKJV*), uses the plural word for God in the text. It is the Hebrew noun *Elohim*. Throughout Christian history, scholars have seen in this verse the concept of the Godhead, or the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This concept is even clearer in Genesis 1:26: “Then God said, “ ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness’ ” (*NKJV*). Here the plural name for God (*Elohim*) is combined with the plural pronouns “Us” and “Our” to once again indicate the plurality of the Godhead. Genesis 1,

combined with the further revelation of Scripture, provides rock-solid evidence that the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, as three separate eternal beings, coexisted in a small group of indivisible oneness and worked together in varying roles to create this world and the cosmos. (*See Gen. 1:1, 2; Eph. 3:9; Heb. 1:1–3; and Col. 1:13–17.*)

The Bible teaches that God the Father did not exist alone. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit existed together for all eternity in intimate fellowship and abounding love for one another. The love reflected in the relationship of the members of the Godhead and Their cooperation together in Creation and Redemption are an example for all small groups today.

We see this truth modeled in the New Testament, especially in the ministry of Jesus and His disciples. Luke 6:13 records Jesus selecting the 12 disciples from among His many followers. Before His selection, He “continued all night in prayer” (*Luke 6:12, NKJV*). As the Holy Spirit impressed Him, He chose 12 disciples to become part of His small group. Within that small group, His inner circle of Peter, James, and John had the closest contact with Him. Jesus prayed with and for His disciples. He shared the Word of God with them. They often ate together, developed lasting bonds of fellowship, shared one another’s lives, and participated in Christ’s mission together.

Although they were men of varied backgrounds, different personalities, wide-ranging temperaments, and diverse understandings, Jesus was able to bring them together after the Resurrection with the single-minded focus of reaching the world for Christ. Together they were stronger than if they were apart. In unity there is strength, and in division there is weakness. When church members are organized into small groups, united in mission in which each member understands his or her role in the body of Christ, the church will have a powerful witness to the world.

Let’s consider some examples of small group ministry in the book of Acts. Acts 2 records that there were 3,000 people baptized on the Day of Pentecost. How were these early Christians nurtured following conversion? What kept the Christian church strong? The record states, “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (*Acts 2:42, NKJV*). This passage is extremely instructive. The new converts were nurtured in small groups through prayer, social fellowship, and a renewal of their faith through Bible study. Their lives were filled with “gladness” and “praise.” The community around them was moved by the testimony of their words and the witness of their lives. This witness was so powerful that “the Lord added to the church daily” (*Acts 2:47*). A united church, organized for service, is a powerful witness in the community.

In 1 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul uses the imagery of the body of Christ to describe the organizational structure of the church. Each member has a valuable contribution to make in the body. When we think of the human body, we recognize that the different members, or parts, of the

body are organized into systems. Each member of the body does not function independently. The human body is made up of 11 systems vital to the effective functioning of the entire body. A few examples are the digestive system, the circulatory system, the nervous system, and the respiratory system.

Picture the respiratory system as a small group with different members providing oxygen to the cells, including the nose, mouth, larynx, trachea, and bronchi. The respiratory system brings life through its air passages to the entire body. Can you begin to understand why the Holy Spirit impressed the apostle Paul to use the body as an illustration of the church?

He states, “Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually” (*1 Cor. 12:27, NKJV*). Members, organized into small groups, each contributing their individual gifts to the whole, create a healthy environment for members to grow spiritually and for the church to grow numerically. When you think of the human body, every member has a function. There are no idle spectators. Each member of the body has a role to play. First Corinthians 12:20–22 makes this point emphatically clear. “But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’; nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary” (*NKJV*).

Every member of the church is vitally important. Each one has been gifted for service within the body. Small groups become the vehicle that God uses to focus the witness of each member for the good of the entire body. These interrelated groups, with varying roles and responsibilities, provide the foundation of a healthy church. Involvement in a small group fosters Christian commitment, responsibility, and accountability. Christianity is not a solo act. We are Christians in community, contributing by using our gifts in and for the community.

Here are some practical examples in the book of Acts. In Acts 6, a problem arises within the church, regarding the feeding of the poor widows. There was a “murmuring” that the Greek-speaking widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. This issue potentially could become so divisive that it might have torn apart the church. How was the problem solved? A small group called deacons was established to meet, seek the good of the body, and come up with a solution. As a result of the unified giftedness of these godly men, the problem was solved. Here is another example of the effectiveness of small groups in the book of Acts. In Acts 12, Peter was imprisoned by Herod. It appeared that Peter’s doom was sealed. The church formed a small home prayer group. Members earnestly sought God. Miraculously, Peter was delivered. Small groups of committed believers, praying, make an eternal difference.

In Acts 16, the apostle Paul organized a gospel–medical missionary

team, including Luke and Paul's young protégé, Timothy, to evangelize Greece. Churches established in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth testify to the effectiveness of their work. Here are three kinds of small groups—the Acts 6 group that worked primarily within the church, the Acts 12 prayer group, and the Acts 16 evangelistic group.

One of the things that we must be extremely careful about in the organization of small groups is thinking that every group must be the same. In the New Testament, there were different groups, meeting different needs, performing different ministries for the good of the whole.

Each group was involved in prayer, fellowship, the study of the Word, and service. But the forms, structure, and ministry of the group varied, based on the gifts of the members. Some groups were predominately care groups that ministered within the body of Christ, while other groups were predominately mission groups that focused on winning lost people to Christ.

Part III: Life Application

In addition to our individual witness for Christ, small groups provide an opportunity for the blended gifts of each member to be used to their maximum capacity. Everyone is not called to do the same thing, but everyone is called to use the gifts God has given him or her. Small groups are an exciting way to get involved in church life. Here are a few of the various types of small groups to share with your class:

1. **Sabbath School Action Units:** Adult Sabbath School classes meet to pray together, fellowship, share a meal, study the Word, and plan outreach activities. In some parts of the world, these Sabbath School action units are the very foundation for the growth of the church.
2. **Ministry Groups:** Small groups of 6–12 church members with similar gifts and interests unite to accomplish a specific ministry task. An example might be a health ministry outreach of cooking schools, stress management seminars, lifestyle seminars, et cetera. Other examples might be family-life ministry, youth ministry, Bible study ministry, or literature ministry in which the Holy Spirit leads members with similar interests to form a small group to use their gifts to reach out to the community.
3. **Nurture Groups:** These are small groups of 6–12 church members whose primary purpose is to care for and strengthen the faith of existing church members. These groups often meet in homes for a three- to six-month period to share one another's joys and sorrows, struggles and triumphs as they pray, share, study the Word, and fellowship together.

Here are three practical possibilities for you to become more actively involved for Christ:

1. **Have you ever thought of starting a small nurture group in your home?**
2. **Is there a ministry group the Holy Spirit has been impressing you to become a member of?**
3. **What would you think of your Sabbath School class becoming a Sabbath School action unit that meets once a month to pray, fellowship, study the Word, and plan a Sabbath School class mission activity?**

In the New Testament Christian church, there were no spectators. So, let's get involved. We will grow in Christ, and others will be blessed as we use our gifts in service in the context of a small group.

Notes
