

Managing a Large Group

Ed O'Connor 25/10/2015

I know of Bible study groups which have about 30 people in attendance each week, 50 if everyone turned up. All the books say that is too many for a "small" group but I know these groups have worked well for many years. What is their secret? Is it a good idea to have a small group that is that big? Why haven't they split into 2 or 3 smaller groups?

Colin Marshall in Growth Groups says that 6-12 members would be ideal. "With more than twelve, it becomes too easy for members to hide or be passive, and attendance drops off because there is a sense of not being missed among the many other members." (Page 115.) Attendance has not dropped off in the large small groups mentioned above.

Karen and Rod Morris in Leading Better Bible Studies (pages 111 to 113) advise keeping the group size to between 8 and 12 with 10 as the ideal. Their reasons for advising against a larger group are that interpersonal relationships become too many and too difficult to manage, additional members increases the diversity of goals and expectations with conflicting needs and values, there is reduced participation time for each member, reduced physical space and comfort, increased gap between the fastest and slowest thinkers, and difficulties in caring for so many people.

Larry Osborne in Sticky Church (pages 76 to 77) says "A group needs to be small enough that everyone has a chance to contribute, but large enough that no one feels forced to speak up or share more than they want to. That means the ideal size for a group of introverts will tend to be larger than the ideal size for a group of think-it-and-immediately-say-it extroverts. One needs more people to break the silence. The other needs less people so that there will be some silence. . . .

The ideal size for a group of married couples is usually twelve to fourteen people. For singles, eight to twelve can be ideal. That's because a group of six couples has a radically different dynamic than one with a dozen singles. . .

We've found that whenever a couples group reaches sixteen people (or a singles group reaches fourteen), attendance becomes predictably inconsistent."

The dangers of large Bible study groups, as outlined by the three books above, are also applicable to church¹. Perhaps churches would do well to listen to the leaders of large Bible study groups to find out how they keep it going so successfully.

Let me go into more detail about the two large Bible study groups that I know of. One group began as a group of surfers and friends of surfers. By God's grace they gradually, one after another, became Christians. They went to a church, didn't understand much of what was being said but continued going out of a sense of duty or obligation. They shared a desire to learn and grow and so formed their own Bible study group. This group maintained an average attendance of 30 each week for about 5 years. What kept them together was the Holy Spirit, a combination of strong friendships, common interests and the desire to learn about God in a way they could understand which was something they weren't getting at their church. After 5 years they split into 3 smaller groups but still maintained close friendships and saw each other socially. 35 years later, married with children and grandchildren, they are still friends and go to different churches and different Bible study groups.

My wife and I joined the other group 13 years ago and stayed for 3 years. (The following opinions are my own but are not necessarily those of the leaders of the group.) We got the impression that the group had been going for many years before we came along. The group is still going today with about the same numbers as when we were there. They average about 25 people each week and split into 2 subgroups for the actual Bible study. They have 5 or 6 leaders that are willing to lead studies. After 3 years about 12 of us split off the main group to start a new group. I and another leader led the studies. This smaller group went for 5 years. Over that time people in our group slowly drifted back to the large group we originally came from, until we had 8 left in our group but averaged about 6 each week. When we stopped meeting 4 went back to the large group, 3 went to join another group and 1 person didn't join any other group.

The people in this large group all went to the same service at the same church and even sat in close proximity to each other. They were very involved in their church's activities and their children were also very involved. They also met socially e.g. movie nights, seaside walks, weekends and holidays together. This large group had very close

personal bonds with great pastoral awareness amongst the people, not just the leaders. I think the reason this group was so large and kept going for so long was because they were so close relationally and they had great pastoral awareness for each other. It was no wonder the people who split with us moved back to the large group – we didn't have the history of close relationships that the large group had, and people missed that.

Bible study and prayer was not neglected in the sea of relationships in this large group. I had some of my richest times of learning, growth and fellowship in this group. It led to trying new things with continual encouragement from this group, particularly the leaders.

Bible study groups are probably better off staying small but they can work just as well if and when they get bigger. Some books don't give enough weight to the strength of love between members in Bible study groups. If you try to break that up by forcing large groups to split then it can end in disaster or people going back to the people they love and the attempt to split has achieved nothing.

1. What I mean by church is that organisation you go to, usually on a Sunday, where you sing hymns or songs, someone reads from the Bible, someone preaches for about 30 mins, someone prays etc. – you get the idea. If “church” is a gathering of Christians (= *ekklesia*) then what we do in a Bible study group is also church but in common language it's not described that way. For the purpose of this document I will make the distinction by using “church” and “Bible study group” as completely different things.