



Introducing small groups

Summary

This is the proposal of the small group committee to session concerning the introduction of small groups into the congregation of Gosnells. In this abstract we summarize all points that are discussed in the remaining of this paper. Please consider this abstract as proposal to session.

1. Session decides to introduce the small group model into the congregation of Gosnells, creating a congregation of small groups.
2. The model of a congregation of small groups is based on the span of care: how many people can one person be responsible for.
3. The small group will be the place where a major part of the congregational life will take place; besides that, it will be the place where the congregation can welcome new members and new Christians.
4. Session recognizes the responsibility of the congregation with respect to pastoral care and will encourage the congregation to play a more active role in pastoral care.
5. Small groups influence the work of session: with the partial transition of the responsibility for pastoral care into the small groups the session can concern itself more on its other major tasks: leadership, teaching and oversight.

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1 What are Small Groups?

In order to present a proposal for the introduction of small groups in the Gosnells congregation, we first have to define what we exactly mean with the term 'small group'. Are we just presenting another label for the Area Fellowship Groups? Or do we want to leave the idea of the big congregation behind us and are we proposing a return to so called house congregations?

This first chapter tries to give an overview what we see as a small group, which characteristics are important when we are talking about a small group. What does it mean when we try to organize small groups and what is actually the goal of a small group?

1.1 Span of Care

Just stop for a second and think about the term: small group. A *small* group!

What does it mean when we are telling that it is a *small* group that we are talking about? Is it just a matter of cosiness to start a small group? 'We all have some friends and it is easy to organize ourselves in a group with those friends only. We know each other, little chance of disagreement amongst each other. Do not make the group too big!' Or is there something else?

The concept of small groups is related to what is called the 'span of care': how many people can you be responsible for: you as public official in society, you as manager in a company, you as an office bearer in the church? The Bible presents us a striking example of this concept. In Exodus 18 it tells us about Moses who is busy, too busy, with organizing and leading the people of Israel. It says in verse 13 that Moses was busy 'from morning till evening'. Jethro, his father-in-law, asks Moses, verse 14:

'What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening'

Jethro is pointing out two things:

1. Moses, you cannot do this on your own. This will break you if you keep going like this!
2. But also: Moses, since you are doing this all on your own, people have to wait for you from morning till evening! Is that the best care that you can give to these people?

For the best of Moses but also for the best of the people, Jethro points out that Moses has to come up with a different organisation model; verse 21:

'But select capable men from all the people (...) and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens.'

Basically, the span of Moses' care cannot cover all the people of Israel. It is better to make one person responsible for a group of ten, make one person responsible for 5 of these leaders etc. A person his span of care can reach 10 people, but not the complete people of Israel without causing problems for himself or for the people he is taking care of!

How well are we organized in the churches, in our congregation? Do we make a limited number of people responsible for a big group of people? Do we make an elder responsible for 25 families (= 75 people on average)? Does that have a negative impact on the elder and *also* on the people he is providing pastoral care for?

A small group tries to mimic the organisation model as proposed by Jethro and implemented by Moses. The congregation members are organized within small groups and per group we have one leader that is responsible. And per an X number of leaders we have another leader that is

responsible for these X leaders. We want to make sure that nobody has to care for more people than his span of care enables him/her: for the well being of the people and for the well being of the leader.

1.2 In Gods church nobody should feel left out!

A paragraph heading we all can agree with: nobody should feel left out in Gods church. Yes, we know that we all are one congregation but we cannot be in contact with all other members. We have our own group of people that we are in contact with; friends, family ... But what if you are a member and you don't have other family in the congregation? What if you lack the social skills to easily make new friends? Are we sure that nobody feels left out here in Gosnells? We just refer to the letter that session received last year, 2006. An anonymous member crying out for help: left alone in this big congregation in Gosnells, basically on his/her own!

God's church is a place where nobody should feel left out! God makes us one body, we are not just a group of individuals, but we all need each other (1 Cor. 12:12-31, Eph. 4:1-16)

The concept of small groups helps us to organize the congregation in such a way that nobody feels left out. It will not be possible to be anonymous in a big congregation, each of us is member of a smaller unit: a unit where it will be noticed if we stand alone. A unit where we cannot disappear in the big group, a unit where we actually know more from each other than only the name; but also a unit where we all are needed. Being needed is an important pre-requisite for feeling accepted; in a small group we all are needed, we simply cannot hide behind the back of other people around us.

1.3 In Gods church we are all responsible for one another!

Nobody should feel left out is one side, but, as important, on the other side God makes us *all* responsible for one another! It is not only about the things we can receive; God wants us to give as well, 1 Cor.12:15:

'If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body.'

We are all responsible for each other since we all belong to that one body. We have the responsibility to pray for each other, to help each other materially, to help when there is sickness, to encourage one another etc. Is that easy when we are all part of a big congregation as Gosnells is? Do we know from all members the particular needs they have?

Small groups help us to enable congregation members to feel responsible for one another. No, not for all 300 members in Gosnells, that is not feasible (Again, think of your personal 'span of care'). But we are all able to look after +- 10 people, especially when we do not have to do that on our own: there are nine other people looking after these same 10 people!

1.4 Transformation-focussed groups

In this section we will focus on the ultimate goal of a small group: being more and more transformed in our lives. This is not so much a special character of small groups, it can be the goal of any group in the church. Yes, it is even a major goal for the whole church itself; being more and more transformed to live the life that God wants us to live!

In some literature about small groups we see a listing of three different styles of groups:

- truth-focussed groups
- life-focussed groups

- transformation-focussed groups (Rom. 12:2, 2 Cor. 3:18)

We will provide an overview of these three different types of groups and point out that it will be important to organize our small groups in such a way that they are really transformation focussed!

Bear with us, the descriptions may seem a little bit too black-white. But it just helps us to get clear what we are trying to achieve!

1.4.1 Truth-focussed groups

The first type of group we distinguish is the 'truth-focussed' group. It focuses on answering questions with answers from the Bible. The group comes together and every member has prepared the study of a certain passage of the Bible. All group members have a list with questions, possibly printed in the material we use in our preparations, and during the evening we all try to find the 'correct' answer on these questions. The main focus point for a truth-focussed group is learning; which new thing did we learn this evening?

Truth-focussed groups help us to get a thorough knowledge of the Bible: we know about the main points of Christianity, we know the stories in the Bible; we know where we can find verses that deal with a certain topic. Knowing the truth is an important thing in our lives!

1.4.2 Life-focussed groups

A second type of groups we can distinguish are the 'life-focussed' groups: groups that enable members to share what they are experiencing. Life is hard sometimes and sharing it can help us. Just being able to tell our story brings relief!

Life-focussed groups help us to feel accepted: people are willing to listen to my story, my problems are important as well. I can tell about my hardships but also about my joy, about problems but also about the good times.

1.4.3 Transformation-focussed groups

There is a third type of group we want to describe: so called 'transformation-focussed' groups. What does the knowledge bring us, if it does not bring us to Christ? What does it help me eventually if I can share my troubles but I do not learn to bring them to God?

In transformation-focussed groups we try to live as close to God as possible and we help others doing that. It is not enough to know what the Bible tells us about e.g. alcoholism! It is not pastoral to only listen to another member who feels secure enough in a group to share that (s)he has problems with alcohol!

In the group we all share the zeal to be more and more transformed. We share our knowledge with one another, we listen to the burdens of the other and we pray for each other, we point each other to our mighty Father in heaven who can transform! We do all what it takes to learn to live closer to God, expecting His Spirit to work in us and expecting His blessing!

1.4.4 Small Groups in Gosnells

While introducing small groups in the Gosnells congregation, we want to focus on transformation-focussed groups. Does it make a difference with this policy plan? Yes, it does, further on when we are talking about training and pastoral care in the small groups. Let it now suffice that we propose to organize small groups that are 'transformation-focussed': what each group is doing is less

important than the ultimate goal of each group: to live closer to God. Whether that is done on a Wednesday evening with praying and Bible study as main focus or as Cadet group with a shorter Bible study and more time for crafts, is not important. As long as it all helps us to reach the goal, it will fit in the proposed small group model.

1.5 Small Groups are not something from the last years

'Small groups: something new coming from evangelical churches in the USA? Why would we consider it?'

No, the concept of small groups is not something new. Think about the small house churches that Paul is mentioning in many of his letters. Small groups were also implemented in the congregation of John Wesley; Earlier, Martin Luther thought and talked about about the implementation of small groups etc.

The concept of small groups is not something new; 'small groups' is a concept that helps us to organize the church in a biblical and more optimal way (see next chapters for more argumentation). We are not changing for the sake of changing: we propose to implement the concept of small groups in order to improve, to come closer to that ideal as described in Ephesians 4.

2 Why do we have Small Groups?

In this chapter we want to focus more on the why of small groups. We first want to focus more on what the Bible teaches us with respect to community, interdependence, being one. Following that, we talk about the responsibility that we all as congregation members have. We talk about the small groups in the context of nurturing new Christians, new members into Gods kingdom. And we focus on the needs of existing members, the reason why the concept of small groups is important for them as well.

2.1 What does the Bible tell us?

Did you ever hear a sermon about the dogma of 'community and interdependence'? May be (with other synonyms), may be not. However, right in the beginning of the Bible God reveals something very important to us, Gen. 1:26:

'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness'

God is not an individual; God is three Persons in One, as we confess as church. But then, we are created in His image, in His likeness! It is not by accident that we people need other people around us, that we need to communicate, that we cannot exist on our own. By being created in Gods image, we are created with an internal desire to communicate, we are created with the need of having other people around us. Because we bear His image! We are not a collection of individuals without the need for one another; we are created with a need to communicate and a need to be one, to feel a unity! We do not exist on our own!

Jesus talks about this unity as well: John 17:11:

"I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of Your name - the name you gave me - so that they may be one as We are One".

Jesus prays for us being one as God is one!¹

2.1.1 God wants to relate with us

That God wants to have a relationship with us: Acts 17:24 -27:

*"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made a nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. **God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him**, though he is not far from each one of us."*

God wants relationship with us, even when we are not looking for God. God does not need it, but He wants it! God wants it so much that He even shows his emotions to people: Exodus 32:9-10, Ephesians 4:30, Zephaniah 3:17. God even counts the hairs of our head (Math. 10:30), He counts our tears (Ps 56:8)

God created us for interdependence with him!

¹ We are not saying that the Trinity and our oneness are at the same level; we only point out the comparison as far as it made by Jesus himself.

2.1.2 God wants us to relate

God wants relationships between His children; He created us also for interdependence with others:
Gen. 2:18:

"The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'"

Gen. 4:9

Cain: *"Am I my brother's keeper?"*

But also Eph. 5:29-30: Just as God is Three in One and marriage partners are two in one, so also in the church separate individuals can become inseparable parts of Christ's body (See also Romans 12:4-5)

Another verse: Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 and 12:

"Two are better than one ... if one falls down, his friend can help him up."

"Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."

We can help each other to carry the load we have to carry.

And yet another example, we need each other to grow: Proverb 27:17:

"As iron sharpens iron, a friend sharpens a friend."

Mark 3:31-34:

Jesus said "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

Living as Gods children brings us in a family relationship to each other, as a brother and a sister, as parents. In Gods kingdom we are no longer individuals, even if we want to be; we are family!

2.2 Return the responsibility

Why are we introducing small groups in our congregation? Is there more than the limited span of care that all of us have? Yes, there is more than that.

In this paragraph we will show that the Bible teaches us that the care for our fellow congregation member is not the responsibility of the session only; it is the responsibility of all of us. And for that reason we cannot leave the responsibility of pastoral care for the congregation members on the shoulders of just a few only; we all, as a congregation, have to take our responsibility. Small groups enable us to do that!

2.2.1 What does the Bible tell us?

First, it is important to learn from the Bible that we *must* think about the best organisation form for the church: thinking about the most optimal organisation form is important because it enables us to care for the people in the best possible way.

Besides the example of Jethro and Moses in Exodus 18, there is another example that tells us that organisation is important in the eyes of our Lord.

In Jeremiah 23:2 Jeremiah says to king Jehoiachin

"Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done", declares the Lord"

Basically, Jeremiah tells Jehoiachin that the Lord will punish him because he has not cared for His people, he even has scattered them. The care for God's people is something very important; we have to come up with the best way to do this. God is requiring that from us!

Having read that organisation is important, we can search for the best organisation structure. In order to find the best structure, we can look in the Bible how the congregation is described. There are two passages in the Bible describing the congregation as a unity, as one body; a body where all members have to take their responsibility. The first passage is 1 Cor. 12:12-31: we are all members of that one body and each part of the body must do its work.

1 Cor. 12:12-13:

'The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body ...'

Paul then continues in the verses 14 to 27 to show how absurd it is when Christians view themselves as individuals related only to Christ, not to each other. We all need each other; we are all responsible for one another.

The second passage is from Ephesians 4:1-16. It talks again about the congregation as a body. It calls upon all of us to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (verse 3). We are all responsible for that. The passage continues to tell that God gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers (verse 11)

'to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up'
(verse 12)

God gives certain talents to people to build up the congregation for works of service. Translating that for today: God gives pastors and elders and deacons to enable the congregation to execute works of service! Notice that it is not the session that is called to execute, it is God's people who are to be enabled to execute. Providing leadership and teaching are two very important tasks for pastors and other session members, so that the whole congregation is prepared for works of service. It is the responsibility of the congregation to do the pastoral care as well!

2.2.2 What about the ordination forms?

What does the ordination form for office bearers tell us about the task for session members? There is much to say about this, but we will focus on two verses mentioned in this form.

One of the central verses mentioned in the form is Matthew 18:16-18:

"But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector."

Another verse mentioned 1 Thessalonians 5:14:

"And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone."

Although these verses are mentioned as proof verses for the tasks of elders, it is good to notice that both verses first of all address the congregation members. They have the task to admonish, to warn, to encourage, to help and to be patient. Some time in history we started to see this as primarily the task for session members, thus shifting away the task from all believers to session.

As a conclusion we would like to state that of the tasks for elders as mentioned in the form, leadership and teaching, pastoral care and visitation, the last two are really tasks for all congregation members as well; session should really focus on the first two tasks. *Your task with respect to pastoral care is not primarily to execute, but to enable the congregation to execute as well.*

2.3 How do we nurture new Christians into God's kingdom?

Returning to the original question for this chapter: 'why are we introducing small groups?'. We have seen the biblical foundation of sharing responsibility between session and the congregation; we have seen that proof verses mentioned in the ordination form basically point to the congregation members as responsible for the day to day pastoral care. Small groups will help us to organize this. But there are more reasons and one of them is nurturing new Christians into God's kingdom.

One of the strong points of the Gosnells congregation is 'talking to visitors'. Whenever we have visitors, it is virtually impossible for that person to leave the church without at least one member approaching him/her; inviting that person for coffee after the service, inviting him/her for another service next week. But what are we offering to visitors besides the coffee and besides a next worship service?

Another example, John de Jongh is regularly teaching the 'introducing God' course, an important help for people to get to know God. But what happens to these people when the course is finished? Are we expecting that these people become members straight away? Don't, since it will, humanly speaking, never happen. People do not become church members straight away; it is a process that gradually brings them into God's kingdom.

If we are serious about guiding all these people into God's kingdom, we need to provide a structure in which these people can grow more and more toward the congregation. Small groups offer such a structure: it is a safe place where we get to know a small number of people and where we feel secure enough to share our questions etc. Secure enough, also for a seeker on the road to God's kingdom!

2.4 People ask for more than one home visitation each year

How often have we heard the remark that people are not willing to open up to an elder visiting them once a year? People nowadays expect more from an elder, if he is visiting just once a year it is not enough. We are not answering the question whether this expectation of people is reasonable or not; we just point out that people are looking for something else than is offered in the congregation. Whether we agree or not, like it or not, but quite often the structure of the church does not match the needs of members.

So what can we do to make sure that we can match the expectation? Are we asking even more from session members: 'visiting people once a year is not enough; you have to visit them at least four

times a year.' Impossible, even if we would want to do it. Are we going to search for more session members? If we double the number of elders everybody could be visited twice a year while the workload remains unchanged. No need to say that this is impossible as well. The current model seems to be not sustainable in these years, in our society. We have to think whether the current model fits well in our times!

We already discussed sharing the responsibility of pastoral care between session and the congregation. In a small group we (= the congregation itself) can offer the pastoral care people are looking for. We can divide home visits among the members of the small group: besides meeting each other in the small group, regular face to face visits can be organized between the members of a group. It can be 'an official home visit', it can be in the format of having other people over for dinner in order to really speak with each other during the meal. Whatever the format we use, because of the small number of people involved it is more viable to look after one another more often than possible for a session member. We can try to match the requirements of church members in these years and in this society, small groups will help us with that.

Additionally, it is good to talk about church members who are no longer able to attend worship services or attend the current fellowship groups. These people need regular visits, for them it may be the only link they have with the congregation. Are we expecting our elders and deacons to visit them regularly? Are we asking our pastors to do this? Are we asking one congregation member to do this work? Or are we implementing a model where we 'divide' those members amongst the small groups, may be one or two per group, and ask the groups to make sure that these members will receive a regular visit? It is the work of the congregation to make sure that nobody is left alone!

2.5 But we already have groups?

When we introduce small groups in Gosnells we do not have to start from scratch. There are already several groups active in the congregation: one or two fellowship groups are still functioning, there are several Cadet/Gems groups, a youth group, a junior youth group.

No, we do not have to start from the beginning; we are not discarding what we already have. However, we have to expand these structures. Are all groups organized along the line of 'transformation-focussed'? And may be even more important, are we making sure that these groups are responsible for pastoral care amongst its members? And who is giving care to the leaders of these groups? Are we giving training to the leaders and possible leaders of these groups?

Yes, we already have several groups in the Gosnells congregation. It provides us with a good starting point for a further implementation of the concept of small groups!

3 Who is involved?

Introducing small groups in Gosnells involves more than only thinking about the bible study groups that can meet during the week. We already saw that it influences the work done by congregation members, it influences the tasks of session members, it helps us to introduce new members into the congregation, it has something to say about the training we provide to congregation members etc.

This chapter switches from the more theoretical side of the story as described in the first two chapters to the more practical side. How are we going to introduce this in Gosnells (chapter 4) but first, who is involved when we introduce small groups? We will focus respectively on small group members, small group leaders, session members and also the minister.

3.1 Small Group members

'Small group members', that is about you and me, it is about all congregation members. A congregation consisting of small groups, not a congregation with small groups, will aim for a situation where all members are belonging to a small group. We all will have a responsibility within the small group, we are all called to be responsible for the other: pastoral care is an important part of our small group life. We have the responsibility to look after new members that become part of our small group; we have the responsibility to look after congregation members that are in need, we have the responsibility to visit the members that feel left out, alone. In conclusion, we as congregation members should do a lot of work that we now expect the session to do.

But this also implies that we as congregation members do not expect everything from session. We may expect to be visited, but not necessarily by a session member or one of the ministers. If we are in practical need, we may expect to receive help but not necessarily from or organized by a deacon. If we are missing a congregation member for a longer period in the worship services we do not ask a session member: first of all, within the small group, we are responsible for one another.

We also have the opportunity to make sure that new members and/or new Christians will find their way within the congregation, to make sure that they have people around them that help them to feel at home.

As said, we aim for the situation that every congregation member is member of a small group. This will not happen a month from now, most probably we will never reach the 100%. We have to be realistic and know that we have to grow in this: it is good to set certain goals for a year from now and two years from now. But additionally, there will be always members that do not want to become a small group member or that cannot become a member because of e.g. age. The first group shall be called again and again to become members, the second group can be divided over the existing small groups and we can make those groups 'responsible' for the pastoral care of these elderly members.

3.2 Small Group leaders

A new position in the congregation, leader of a small group². A very practical position: a small group leader makes sure that the small group can function; he or she creates the rosters and can lead the meetings. Besides that, the small group leader makes sure that every member of the group receives the pastoral care (can delegate to other group members) and finally (s)he is the link to the session: (s)he will receive information concerning new congregation members that can be invited

2 A small group leader is not an office bearer.

into the small group. Additionally, the small group leader will regularly meet with the responsible session member to discuss which members need special pastoral care besides the overall progress within the group.

The small group leader is important in the process of providing pastoral care to all members but will also receive pastoral care him/herself, provided by the responsible session member. Small group leaders are not only expected to give, but they will also receive!

Finally, leaders will receive training before they start with their task. Practical training like conversation techniques, how can I lead a meeting, how can I look after members, how do I recognize signals people are giving about their personal situation etc. But also training to know about that one goal that we are aiming for so that all people will be aware of that goal and aim for one and the same.

3.3 Session

The third group of people involved in this process is you, session members. Session will have its own set of tasks in order to come to a successful introduction of small groups in Gosnells.

First of all, it is important to recognize the position of communication in this process. Why would we be able to have a successful introduction, why should we expect that we have a chance of activating people that may have been inactive for a long time? First of all, we are dependent on Gods blessing in this process. Without prayer and without God's blessing we are certain we will fail. But God calls us to do our part of the job as well and an important part of that job is communication. We have to communicate with the congregation over and over again what our goal is.

- Communication via articles in the church bulletin, not just 1 or 2 lines; explain the background of small groups; explain the transition of responsibility from session to congregation etc.
- Besides the bulletin, the session members can communicate during the home visitations (do not expect that home visitations can be stopped as soon as we start this process; it is our goal but we may/will never reach it for the full 100%)
- Session can communicate with the congregation during one or more special meetings. Present the plans to the congregation and, even more important, ask for feedback, ideas etc. Try to make this plan not a plan of the session only, it should become a process that we all feel comfortable with, we all, the whole congregation, should recognize it as ours. This can only happen if we communicate over and over again and also are willing to adapt to input given by the congregation.

Besides the communication, session should prepare itself to the transition of responsibility. In stead of being a session that executes, we should become a session that enables the congregation to execute. We should return to the core tasks for session, that is leadership and training/coaching. This may influence the elders training as well: what is the task that we expect to be performed by session members. It will change in this model and it is good as session to prepare for that changed situation.

While we grow to this new situation of having small groups, session will be more and more responsible for leadership and training/coaching within the congregation. Leadership with respect to issues concerning the whole congregation and training/coaching of the small group leaders that each

session member will be responsible for. Session will be responsible for the dividing of new congregation members over existing small groups if these members have not already joined a group. Session will be responsible to make sure that all people that simply cannot attend a small group because of age are 'adopted' by a small group and will receive the pastoral care via that group. Session will remain responsible for encouraging members to become a small group member. Session will have a coordinating role over the various small groups: make sure that we all aim for one and the same goal, may be have a central theme that all small groups deal with for two or three evenings, session can organize/can have organized an evening at the start of a new season to introduce this theme etc. etc.

3.4 Pastor

Finally, the pastors also have their own task in this process. Starting with communication again: preach about this, mention it in prayer, use the church bulletin to communicate! Humanly speaking, our only chance to be successful lies in abundant communication. Hearing about this once from one side is not enough, this has to be repeated over and over again by different people within the church; Ministers play an important role in this.

We already spoke about the training of small group leaders: it may be that this task is given to the ministers. It will involve the search for good training material and presenting the actual training itself.

The pastor can be the one that introduces seekers after the introduction course into a small group.

4 How do we introduce Small Groups?

How are we going to introduce the concept of small groups into the Gosnells congregation? The pages before have already touched on quite a number of changes, attention points etc. that will introduce a lot of work. Are we expecting this to be up and running within two, three months? In this chapter we will present a very rough outline of a plan to introduce this concept, which steps do we need to make, who is doing what and when. A rough outline, after acceptance of this proposal it will be good if session appoints one or two members that will be responsible for the introduction of small groups; their first task may be to make a detailed planning (the what, when and who) that will be more accurate and complete than this chapter.

But above all, we want to make clear that the introduction of small groups will not be a two months process. Because it is such an overall plan, we expect this to be gradually introduced during the coming years; it won't be a 'one time introduction'.

But the start of the introduction can be right now ...

4.1 'With' or 'of' small groups?

As a starting point, session needs to decide whether we aim for a congregation with small groups or a congregation of small groups. Is that a big difference? Yes, all of the things written before have been written in the context of 'Gosnells as a congregation *of* small groups': transition of responsibility, introducing new members into the congregation, pastoral care to the elderly who are not able to attend, pastoral care to all congregation members etc.³

'Gosnells as a congregation *with* small groups' would basically reflect the current situation, a certain number of people who are spending time on a week day to come together and if needed helping one another. But it is not a structural situation, only a (very) limited number of people are active in this way.

Session needs to decide between these two models. The proposal is to introduce the concept of a 'congregation *of* small groups' for Gosnells.

1. The remaining of this chapter assumes that session will agree with this proposal.

2. Notice that all of the phases described in the remaining of this chapter do not need to take much time and that some of them can be done concurrently. They are only described as distinct phases in order to make sure that we will cover all steps needed for a successful introduction of small groups.

4.2 Training

Training will be a central part of introducing small groups and for this reason we need to make sure that we can provide good training to small group members. Session need to make sure that we will have good training material, most probably by delegating this task.

The training material must include our mission/vision diagram, our goal for transformation-

3 It is good to note that small groups are not replacing the families as God given units within a congregation. It is good to think more how families can be integrated within a small group in the overall process of implementing small groups in Gosnells.

focussed groups but also day to day conversation techniques: how can I lead a discussion, how can I involve people, how can I recognize signals people are giving etc.

This training needs to be presented to (potential) small group leaders, probably by one of the ministers or, if available, by a professional trainer in our congregation.

4.3 Preparation

After the initial phase of looking for training material we will have a period of preparation:

- What will be the exact structure that we are targeting? What influence will it have on the existing structures?
- Come up with a plan to get enough small group leaders; a period to introduce this to the congregation and at the same time search for enough leaders; take notice that with this model the number of session members may decrease leaving more people for the positions of small group leader.
- Come up with a complete description of existing 'small groups' already functioning within our congregation; this will enable us to build upon existing structures instead of starting from scratch.
- Start to think about the transition of session as an executing body to a body that enables the congregation to execute; what impact will it have on the number of session members needed, what impact will it have on training for (new) session members, what impact will it have on the work of existing session members.
- Appoint one member within session that will be responsible during the overall process, to make sure that there is one point of contact but also one person that keeps the overview and knows what should happen when.

4.4 Planning

After the preparation phase, the responsible person will have to define a planning phase (what follows is not exhaustive):

- When are we going to introduce the plan to the congregation; who is going to communicate? When?
- When will the training material be available
- When will we be able to start training future small group leaders
- Can we initially start a small group consisting of potential small group leaders; can we make them all start their own group after one(?) year
- When can we go public with the small group structure and open it to the whole congregation
- When can we slowly start to shift the responsibility of pastoral care from session into the small groups?
- What are the milestones for the overall project; when do we expect to reach the various goals we have in mind.
- How do we continue after an initial introduction

4.5 Communication

A separate section about communication; most of this has already been said before, however, we think that communication is that important that we like to repeat it in this section.

We think that, humanly speaking, communication is an essential condition for a successful introduction of small groups in Gosnells. Why would we be successful this time? We have tried so many things and look at the result; only a small percentage of the congregation members is member of an area fellowship group. We think that communication is essential: communicate in order to make people think, to make them enthusiastic and hopefully make them act!

First of all, the communication about small groups needs to be repeated again and again. It will not be enough to mention it once or twice, we need to repeat it. Things that you hear once or twice are easily forgotten, people learn by repetition!

Secondly, this needs to be communicated by various people via different channels. Communication coming from one person gets easily ignored, repeated communication coming from different people has more chance of having a lasting impact. So it is good to come up with a communication plan: who (pastor, session, small group committee, future small group leaders) is going to communicate when about what via which channel (sermon, prayer, church bulletin, information evening, information leaflet for new members etc.)

It will be good to include a yearly 'season opening evening' in the overall planning: it is an opportunity to communicate again, an opportunity for new members to get to know the small groups, an opportunity for existing members to start a new season etc.

Finally, as committee we think that communication is a very important aspect of the introduction of small groups into the Gosnells congregation. Without repeated communication it will be very hard to make people enthusiastic for this. Humanly speaking, it is the essential part of the plan.

5 What are Small Groups (2)?

At the end of this document, we would like to close where we started: what are small groups? Within the context of the last chapters we would like to describe a couple of more practical points that have not been answered yet, in order to come to a complete picture.

5.1 What is the optimal size?

First of all, what is an optimal size for a small group? Practical experience teaches that an optimal size is about 10 – 12 members, while a group approaching the 15 members mark should seriously consider to split into two groups.

Ten to twelve members ensures the viability of the group; if one or two members can not attend an evening or event, still enough members will be available to have a fruitful evening. Becoming too large may introduce problems with the ability to be open to the fellow group members and so splitting a group into two groups may be appropriate when approaching the ‘15 members’ size.

5.2 What is the life span of a Small Group

Is a small group supposed to exist into eternity? Some people may like to see the same people year after year, however that can have a negative influence on the ability to build up one another. Other people may like to get to know new people every other month, however that can have a negative influence on the level of trust within a small group: 'why would I open my heart for people that I see only for a short time?'

Overall, there is no answer how long an existing group should exist without changes in its membership base. But a group should be open to change.

Small groups will definitely change when they grow: by splitting they can start new small groups.

Finally, each small group should be open to new members: we should not close a small group to outsiders; it must always be possible to join an existing group. We must (try to) prevent the creation of small groups consisting of only friends or family members that are not open for others.

5.3 What types of Small Groups?

What types of small groups can exist? First, groups based on area, but also groups based on shared interest. It does not matter that much what the common ground is, what the time or format is, as long as people get connected with each other and as long as the goal of each group is the same: helping each other to live closer to God!

5.4 Small Groups are transformation focussed

‘Being transformation focussed’, does that have any practical consequence? Yes, in as far that the format of each group can differ. What people are doing in a small group is important as far as it helps them to live closer to God. How, when and where exactly this is done is less important and can differ between the various groups.

5.5 Trust

We conclude with an aspect that must be taught to each and every group member: if we really want to live together in a small group then we must be able to trust each other. What somebody tells, remains within the small group. Without trust there will be no living small group.