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Book Review: Small Groups and Established Churches: Challenge and Hope for the Future

Katie Dudgeon

Biola University, kd@efcaim.org

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Book Reviews

Small Groups and Established Churches: Challenge and Hope for the Future

Reviewed by Katie Dudgeon

Ellas, John W. Small Groups and Established Churches: Challenge and Hope for the Future. Houston: Center for Church Growth, 2005. 157 pp.

John Ellas works for the Center for Church Growth in Houston, Texas. He has been observing and studying small groups for years, after his initial experience with an evangelistic small group in the Church of Christ (21). Having significant exposure to small groups while studying at Fuller Theological Seminary, as well as pastoral experience beginning a small group ministry, Ellas was asked to become a congregational consultant and workshop trainer with the Center for Church Growth (21-22). He began teaching courses and leading workshops on small groups, and has continued to see the impact of small group ministries in American churches. He has also helped develop and write materials on small groups for churches (146, 157).

It is evident that Ellas writes *Small Groups and Established Churches* out of his experience working with established, or traditional, churches in the context of small group ministries. He prolifically uses statistics from the Gallup Organization and other research groups as it relates to the operational nature of local churches and society, but many of the examples he gives are from specific local churches (50, 113, 134, 143) and personal experience (22, 113). He tries to relate the more academic insights on small groups from research to current church realities.

Ellas attempts to fill a void in the plethora of small group resources and materials. Rather than suggest a model and method that fit only one context, or purport to fit every context, Ellas wants to take readers to “the *core issues* affecting established

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congregations with small group ministries" (1, emphasis mine). His goal is to increase awareness of the often-overlooked, larger core issues surrounding small groups and church ministry paradigms. Ellas has seen that "Established churches often discover that small groups are not a hand-in-glove fit with the existing ministry design" (1), and he believes the this disconnect with established churches can change with a better understanding of the ministry landscape. His purpose is "not to produce another 'how-to book' but to seek a balance between 'how-to' and 'why'" (1); he wants to provide readers and leaders with a "clear orientation" in the development of effective small group ministries in established churches (149).

Ellas is not shy with the potential or significance he sees in small groups in traditional churches. In the introduction he states that "small groups can serve as an effective ministry for making and maturing disciples for Christ" and desires that the insights in his book "help churches prepare to carry out the Great Commission" (5). Although he is reticent to wholly align himself with the criticism of the traditional church and its inefficacy (86), he certainly sees the potential and cruciality of America's traditional churches to fulfill their purposes (87).

There are six chapters in Ellas' book, and each highlights a specific insight or core issue in the small group landscape. He begins by exploring the traditional church Sunday School paradigm along with the origins of the more recent small group movement. In the second chapter, he describes the early church example of biblical community, and touches on the role small groups can play in creating modern biblical community. In the third chapter, Ellas describes the challenges and opportunities for small groups in light of the spiritual climate in current U.S. culture. He continues in chapter four by dissecting the varieties of small groups, the ministry infrastructures that host small groups, and the resulting church models. In chapter five, Ellas explores the importance of core values and detailed plans in order to establish the *vision*, *intention*, and the *means*, of a small group ministry, and continues the emphasis on leadership through chapter six. In the last chapter he focuses on important characteristics of both leaders and "followers" in effective small group ministries.

Small Groups in Established Churches is helpful in that it provides a unique introduction to many of the issues and challenges that are specific to small group ministries in traditional churches. Ellas' understanding of the dynamics of developing small group ministries in established churches provides valuable insight into the potentially overwhelming topic. Ellas does an excellent job of

integrating recent history, research and theory into the discussion of small groups in chapters one, three and four. The information on the context and origins of the small group movement is insightful, the discussion of the spiritual needs that exist today is convincing, and the typology of groups and church models is practical. Although at times the point or argument could benefit from further discussion and expansion, Ellas sufficiently covered these three topics.

Ellas' first chapter on the history of the Sunday School movement in the United States provides excellent background information and context for the newer small group movement. As Ellas says, "This perception of congregational life, strongly forged out of the Sunday School movement, sets the important backdrop for understanding small groups in traditional churches" (11). He highlights three of the most influential and prominent churches in the small group movement (New Hope Community Church, 14-16, Willow Creek Community Church, 16-17, Saddleback Community Church, 17-18), as well as their relationship to the Korean origins of the small group movement (7, 8, 14). Knowing the origin of both movements helps to understand each movement's purposes and the potential pitfalls when transitioning between the two.

The description Ellas gives of the "cultural soil" and the spiritual opportunities that exist in the United States are both challenging and convincing. Ellas points out that even the secular world recognizes the need for more community and that the church is poised to help meet that need. Ellas quotes George Gallup, Jr., saying "small groups are the future of the church" (61) and mentions several authors, like Robert Putnam and Robert N. Bellah, who have similar conclusions (61). He summarizes well as he says, "Researchers acknowledge that faith-based organizations play a vital societal role in providing strong social networks, but they unanimously agree that not enough is getting done" (61). The societal and individual need for community, as Ellas describes it, is exciting in light of the small group movement.

The angle in which Ellas approaches group types and church models could be the single most important contribution of Ellas' book. Because he is not advocating a single model or group type, he is able to provide a framework for churches to discover what model they operate on and what methods or materials best fit their model. As Ellas says, "many never clearly identify their church model point of view" when they read materials on small groups, but "the ability to recognize each writer's model point of view allows readers to select and adapt materials useful to their

own setting" (86). Ellas' description of group types through lists and diagrams are thoroughly helpful, but further expansion of these tools and additional assessment tools or questions could aid the reader's application.

Although Ellas contributes several unique and convincing points to the discussion and materials on small groups, there are several weak points in his book. In many ways, *Small Groups and Established Churches* does not provide what an established church might need to improve or begin a small group ministry. In chapters two, five, and six, Ellas simply tries to cover too much information and incorporate too much peripheral detail. This results in a lack of depth and clarity at two pivotal points: his definition of biblical community and the development of leadership principles.

He does not provide a clear definition or vision of biblical community or explain why the traditional church is not attaining that community. In chapter two, it seems that Ellas overemphasizes the reasoning for the Bible as the primary source for instruction (28), yet later warns readers to "not idealize the early [New Testament] communities but rather see them as instructive examples" (29). It is unclear why Ellas spends much of chapter two discussing the varying historical forms of church and church community among the New Testament Christians, yet does not arrive at any overarching definition or common aspects of biblical community. On page 30, 32 and 40, he lists aspects of biblical community, but does not integrate these or incorporate them into a larger definition. Chapter two concludes with a discussion of the disservice of traditions in the life of a church (42-44). It seems that Ellas is subtly attempting to attack the "edifice complex" (44) or other unbiblical traditions churches may hold to, and defend himself in light of any criticism that his methods are not biblically based. The subtle focus on these secondary issues prevents Ellas from developing an explicit definition of biblical community that would refute unhealthy traditions and provide a better platform to directly address the non-biblical tendencies of established churches.

Ellas' discussion of leadership issues, specifically in chapters five and six, is also lacking depth and application; the reader is not given enough information to significantly move forward without other resources. Ellas mentions several concepts related to goals and leadership such as aspirational values versus core values (93, 124), detailed plans (93), *vision, intention, means* (98), equipping and training leaders (144-145), compartmentalized leadership and communication (132), unhealthy mindsets (132-134), vision casting (144) and church leadership support versus

church leadership permission (143). These concepts are important, as Ellas mentions, yet they are not easily internalized or applied. Ellas gives little opportunities for reflection, self-evaluation, or assessment for leaders or churches in these areas, even though he recognizes the need for internationalization and the role active learning plays in transformation (104). In addition, he throws in peripheral ideas on small groups, like the role of hospitality in evangelism (111-114) or group agreements (145), into the midst of discussions on leadership principles and accomplishing goals. Instead of the specific goals of spiritual formation (95) or local evangelism (108) serving as illustrations or applications of goal-setting, it distracts from his main purpose of preparing leadership to reach their goals by becoming familiar with the core issues.

It seems that Ellas attempts to provide an orientation to the issues of small group ministries, but sacrifices the depth that would strengthen his perspective and the application that would increase his influence. I do not think this book would have convinced me of small groups if I had been skeptical of them, nor do I think this book would have given me enough tools to begin implementing a small group ministry if I was convinced of the need already. It seems that this book would be most useful for an individual or an established church that is toying with the idea of transitioning to a church of small groups and needs some material to guide their considerations.

Throughout much of the book, I found myself agreeing with Ellas and finding relevance on many of his points. However, I often wanted him to develop a point further or more fully, and to provide more opportunity for assessment and application.

Reviewer

Dudgeon, Katie. Address: kd@efcaim.org. Katie has served with the Evangelical Free Church of America International Mission, first in Mexico and then in Minneapolis. She is currently pursuing a Masters of Divinity at Talbot School of Theology in La Mirada, CA and is part of a church planting team in Long Beach, CA.