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

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

Reviewed by Gwendolyn Jackson

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

The book, *Small Groups & Established Churches: Challenge and Hope for the Future*, focuses on developing healthy, successful small group ministries in established, traditional churches. Ellas reviews the nature, purposes, functions, and structures of the church; explains the impact of group dynamics, culture, and values; points out the importance of understanding group typology and church models; outlines goal setting, components of spiritual formation, and strategies for evangelism; and leadership.

While Ellas has impressive formal credentials and professional accomplishments, his experience as congregational consultant and workshop trainer at Center for Church Growth strengthens his credibility as an authority on the aspect of small groups in established ministries. As such, he has influenced hundreds of church leaders, particularly in his own church tradition.

American churches, commonly influenced by the Sunday School movement, have a skeptical view of small groups. One reason is previous failed attempts at home-based ministry. The Jesus, Shepherding and Discipling movements all incurred negative notoriety because of abuses interpreted as cultic psychological manipulation. However, the phenomenal growth of Yoido Church in South Korea challenged American researchers and church leaders to view small groups more positively. Reliable studies indicate that a breakdown in community and the need for spirituality in America is what fuels its growing acceptance of the small group movement.

Leaders must evaluate their ministries in light of the biblical understanding of the nature, purposes and functions of the church. Community, one of five biblical functions, was prevalent during the first two centuries when believers worshipped in house churches. Some think the nature and function of the church changed when Constantine built the first church in the third century. It resulted in the degeneration of strong social re-

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relationships and gave rise to a dichotomy between clergy and laity. Rather than reflecting the priesthood of believers, church became ritualistic, hierarchical, and traditional. A condition, which Ellas calls "edifice complex" (43), reveals the conflict between ensuing human traditions and God's design for the church.

Ellas defines the characteristics and dynamics of large-, middle-, and small-size groups, and he notes the differences between American and biblical values. Large-size (tertiary) groups work best for low-relational events. Middle-size (secondary) groups promote surface relationships and work well for teaching, service, or task-oriented events. Small-size (primary) groups allow for face-to-face interaction that can lead to spiritual fellowship. Realizing how the radical individualism and religious privatism of Western society differs from the group orientation of the New Testament world helps leaders understand resistance to practicing community in small group interaction.

There are two major types of groups. One accomplishes tasks and the other builds relationships. While group goals determine the type of group, appropriate agenda activities accomplish intended goals. Congregations are either a traditional church "with" small groups or a non-traditional church "of" small groups. Hope, Willow Creek and Saddleback community churches are examples of congregations "of" small groups. All three mega churches use the meta-church principle of small groups and large corporate worship meetings.

Ellas asserts "the two basic but foundational tracks for making progress toward ministry goals are (1) core values and (2) detailed plans" (92). He defines them in detail. He addresses two deficiencies that severely stunt growth: compartmentalized leadership and self-directed attitudes. He states that organized leadership, adequate training, and shared vocabulary promote shared vision, ownership, and participation in ministry.

The author's purpose is to orient the reader to the general landscape of small groups and to encourage intentional, proactive leadership. Ellas accomplishes this purpose by offering an informative, critical picture of the status quo along with practical solutions. He discusses the origin of small groups in Asia and how the movement has evolved in America to become the most viable means for experiencing community both in the church and in secular society.

Although Ellas' knowledge stems primarily from the experience he has garnered in his own Church of Christ tradition, his conclusions do not appear skewed by any particular theological, philosophical, or denominational biases. He briefly mentions the

national scope of the small group movement, which gives some cultural perspective. And while he presents a view broad enough to encompass the movement on a church-wide scale, he targets established churches and focuses his attention on how the dynamics of small groups affect them.

In his presentation Ellas calls the church back to its God-given purpose outlined in the New Testament. Without attempting to give an overly technical definition of the nature of the church, he gives a powerful shortlist of biblical imagery to help us comprehend it. He reminds us how the early church conducted herself when the mandate to continue the ministry of Christ was more pure. He informs us just when and how we veered off the track and clarifies an unfortunate consequence by quoting Churchill's observation: "We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us" (43). Ellas convinces us that the small group movement can be instrumental in restoring our lost community. He goes on to give practical ways to build and nurture small groups in the hostile environment of traditional church buildings and social structures.

Ellas gives leaders functional tools for managing their unique ministry infrastructures. His explanation of group dynamics helps leaders understand the purpose of each group and what it contributes to the church function. This understanding enables leaders to intelligently plan activities that achieve stated goals efficiently. His discussion on group typology encourages leaders to distinguish between relational and task-oriented groups and highlights the importance of connectivity between group types, goals, and meeting agenda activities. Conducting group meetings in a pell-mell manner produces activities that serve no purpose, leads to group dysfunction, and ultimately undermines the group's potential for long-term success. Ellas lists six church models that indicate the relationship between churches and small group ministry. Studying these models help leaders to effectively cast vision and determine church readiness. Ellas includes diagrams and charts that help leaders visualize the concepts he introduces.

Ellas defines core values as deep-seated passions of a church that are distinct from aspirational values, which are mere mental and verbal assents that lack the passion and commitment needed to provoke action (93). He notes two major ministry goals: spiritual formation and evangelism. He outlines the need for vision, intention, and means (VIM) as required conditions for reaching goals. Drawing the VIM acronym from Dallas Willard's book, *Renovation of the Heart* (97), Ellas states, "Vision and intention form the core value track. And *means* is equivalent to the de-

tailed plan track." (103). He further asserts that a congregation must possess evangelistic core values before it will evangelize (107).

I became slightly lost in Ellas' discussion in chapter five. After referring to his introduction, I was still unclear on exactly what his argument was. He states that spiritual growth and local evangelism are the two most desired goals of small group ministry (4), but seems to imply that participants must have been previously engaged in Bible study and primary-level fellowship before these goals can be actualized. The information in the chapter is useful, but seems to flow differently than other chapters.

Ellas urges his readers to examine the numerous existing small group resources with an admonition that they recognize each writer's point of view before selecting and adapting material (86). Ellas includes the viewpoints of others, but none that really compete with his arguments. He includes a quote by Thom Rainer suggesting that Sunday School is an "on-campus" small group (12). Using the literary tool of comparison, Ellas allows the previous quote by Lawrence Richards to refute that of Rainer. Ellas acknowledged the errors in the Church of Christ Discipling movement, but defended the movement by mentioning a book outlining possible corrective measures. One wonders whether a similar grace might have been afforded the Jesus and Shepherding movements for their failings.

The book is very relevant to contemporary culture. I was unaware of the movements of the 1960's that so negatively influenced small groups. I also did not know that house churches were recognized as bonafide, autonomous church congregations. I gleaned valuable information and practical techniques to employ in ministry including tools for conducting an evaluation of existing church ministry, particularly those related to infrastructure dynamics, groups types, church models, leadership, and troubleshooting; the ten small group activities suggested by Galloway (115-116); the use of group agreements and evaluations, as well as the topics needing clarification (140-141); addressing the six consistent group leader deficiencies (123); and the sage counsel of Ellas not to attempt developing a small group ministry without both the permission and support of front-line leadership.

I would highly recommend this book to pastors and other senior leaders because of their visibility and platform for communication. Additionally, they might not be cognizant of their leadership deficiencies, which are presented in a non-threatening manner. The book is full of practical information for seminary

students, small group leaders, and interested laypersons.

Reviewer

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