

1-1-2011

Dissertations and Theses Notices

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Recommended Citation

McIntosh, G. L. (2011). Dissertations and Theses Notices. *Great Commission Research Journal*, 2(2), 334-342. Retrieved from <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/gcrj/vol2/iss2/20>

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Compiled by Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min., Ph.D.

Each issue of the *Great Commission Research Journal* features recent dissertations and theses of interest to our readers. Particular attention is given to publications that present research on evangelism, church growth, church planting & multiplication, missional church, emerging/emergent church, communication theory, leadership theory and other topics related to effective fulfillment of the Great Commission. Directors of doctoral programs, as well as graduating students, are encouraged to send notice of recent dissertations to Dr. Gary L. McIntosh, Dissertation Editor, at gary.mcintosh@biola.edu. Due to space limitations, and the large number of dissertations published each year, only a few dissertations are featured.

This issue of the *Great Commission Research Journal* features recent dissertations that focus on some aspect of small groups and church growth.

"Toward spiritual growth: Implementing group spiritual direction for caregivers at Trinity Baptist Church, Conyers, Georgia." Author: Joseph V. LaGuardia, D.Min. dissertation, Mercer University, 2010. 146 pages.

abstract

As America's population continues to age, an increasing number of individuals find themselves in the position of giving care to their loved ones and to the elderly. Consequently, churches are filled with caregivers, both informal and professional caregivers alike, who are seeking ways to connect with their religious and spiritual heritage in order to bring meaning, healing, and order to the caregiving role. One such way is through small group spiritual direction. In this study, the relationship between spiritual direction and caregiver spiritual formation was explored in the context of four focus groups. The investigator used a variety of quantitative and qualitative tools to measure how spiritual direction impacted caregivers, and he also provided an interpretation of the data to test the hypothesis.

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As the investigator examined whether small group spiritual direction brought caregivers into a closer relationship with God, he met the following goals: (1) To meet four times over the course of a month in a small focus group that incorporates spiritual direction with caregivers. (2) To encourage participants to raise their own awareness of God's activity in their lives and in their role as caregivers. (3) To challenge participants to have a vibrant spiritual and prayer life. (4) To provide a safe environment and ministry of presence that allows participants to discuss and reflect freely. The evidence showed that spiritual direction raised the caregivers' awareness of God but did not necessarily support the hypothesis that spiritual direction impacted positive spiritual growth; quite the contrary, spiritual direction in some cases may have actually hindered a caregiver's spiritual growth if not accomplished with great tact or sensitivity to each participant's ability to assimilate to the group dynamic.

"A study of effective lay small group leaders in Korean American churches: Fostering spiritual growth." Author: Joung Sik Park, Ph.D. dissertation, Trinity International University, 2010. 216 pages.

abstract

The primary purpose of this research was to inquire into effective small group leaders' perceptions of their roles as leaders and their effective practices for fostering spiritual growth and life transformation among group members in the Korean American church context. In addition, the study sought to find factors that contributed to the effectiveness of the leaders.

A qualitative and descriptive research design was employed. The samples were 32 effective small group leaders selected from two Korean American churches, Seoul Baptist Church of Houston (SBCH) and Sa-Rang Community Church (SRCC), which were known for their successful small group ministry. The type of small groups in SBCH was the house church, while the type of small groups in SRCC was the nurture group.

The data analysis yielded a set of findings regarding effective small group leaders' perceptions and their effective practices. The major findings are summarized in four areas: (1) leaders' perceptions of their roles, (2) contributive training and experiences for effective leadership, (3) effective practices of the leaders, and (4) lessons learned by the leaders.

First, the roles of effective leaders were mostly depicted as more nondirective, non-authoritarian, and relationship-oriented. Six major roles were identified: coaching and counseling, bridging between the church and the members, shepherding, serving, role model, and coordinating. The roles of teaching and training were not perceived as highly important.

Second, basic nurture, discipleship training, and leadership training were identified as contributive training for effective small group leadership. Pastors' sermons, learning from other leaders, and ministry experiences were also found to be helpful in leading small group ministry.

Third, seven major areas of practice on which the leaders focused in carrying out small group ministry were identified: intentional preparation, relational evangelism, leading participatory group meetings, caring for group members, nurturing and training, problem solving, and reproduction of apprentice leaders. Evaluation was found to be an area of practice that needs improvement.

Fourth, most participants reported that they had learned valuable lessons

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 2, Iss. 2 [2011], Art. 20 while leading small groups over the years. They also attested that their own leadership development occurred over the years. Three major aspects of development were identified: emotional stability, flexibility, and skillfulness.

In addition, several differences resulting from the factors of gender, age, ministry experience, and church were identified.

"The impact of the 40 Days of Purpose Spiritual Growth Campaign in twelve churches of the Alabama-West Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church." Author: James Nathan Elliott, D.Min. dissertation, Asbury Theological Seminary, 2008. 184 pages.

abstract

Currently, little information is available about the long-term impact of the 40 Days of Purpose Spiritual Growth Campaign in churches. After completing the program at Samson First United Methodist Church, Samson, Alabama, and seeing the results of the program, many questions arose. The questions caused me to consider researching the results of this program as a subject for my project dissertation.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to evaluate twelve churches of the Alabama-West Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church that have participated in the 40 Days of Purpose Spiritual Growth Campaign. The study includes lay pastoral visitation, small groups, outreach (evangelism and missions), and the size of the churches that participated in the campaign with its results.

The review of literature includes biblical, theological, and historical aspects of the nature of the church, the nature of a 40-Day period, being Christians with purpose, lay pastoral care visitation, small groups, outreach (evangelism and missions), and vision with strategic planning. The 40 Days of Purpose Spiritual Growth Campaign introduces the fact that each Christian is a minister in the local church and has ministry in his or her local church that only he or she can fulfill.

The study considered quantitative and qualitative components of the impact of the twelve studied churches. A researcher-designed questionnaire and telephone interview were the two instruments that gathered data for this study. The conclusions of these findings will be used to enhance growth strategies in the United Methodist churches.

The results of this study show that all churches noted positive changes in some way that participated in the 40 Days campaign. Small and large churches developed new lay pastoral care teams, new small groups, new outreach programs, and had professions of faith as a direct result of 40 Days. Three small churches

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(50.00 percent) reported that the purpose that had the greatest impact in their congregations was fellowship. Four of the large churches (66.67 percent) reported the purpose that had the greatest impact in their congregations was discipleship. Small and large church “yes” responses increased from before to after the 40 Days campaign in the characteristic areas of outreach (evangelism and missions) on the survey. The overall impact of the three variables, lay pastoral care visitation, small groups, and outreach (evangelism and missions), correspond to (are dependent on) the size of the church. In this study, the impact variables are slanted toward the large churches. Resistance/hindrance to having the 40 Days campaign was dependent on the size of the church. All churches recommended the 40 Days campaign.

The findings of this study showed both small and large churches benefited in some way from the campaign. Based on the evidence shown in the numbers, percentage changes, the results from the impact variables, and the telephone interviews, the larger churches received the greater impact from 40 Days. The smaller churches did receive significant impact in the three variables, because a greater need was in those churches; however, more resistance before and after the 40 Days was found in the smaller churches. The area which received the greatest impact was small groups for both small and large churches.

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“An analysis of the relationship between small groups and church growth in the Methodist Church of Mexico.” Author: Raul Garcia, D.Min. dissertation, 2005, Asbury Theological Seminary, 2008. 159 pages.

abstract

Small group strategies change the way local churches work around the world. The Methodist Church of Mexico is supporting growth in local churches that might result in significant multiplication of churches all over the country.

Transitioning from traditional structures that used to be adequate in a more rural nineteenth century context of Mexican society to new organizational structures that might function better in our current and more complicate context has been difficult for the Methodist Church. Exploration of the history and present situation of the Methodist Church of Mexico indicates this is an ideal time for implementing a new system.

The current small group movement all over the world finds its roots back in eighteen century Methodism and early Christianity. Both the primitive Christian

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church and the early Methodists received much of their strength from the way they
formed small groups to attract and disciple new converts to become mature in faith.
Leadership began and evolved through the same dynamics of small group lifestyle.

This study was a survey of the fifteen fastest growing churches of the
Methodist Church in Mexico in order to find the relationship between their growth
and small groups. The findings of the study indicate a close relationship between
the fastest growing Methodist churches in Mexico and their respective small group
strategy.

"Becoming a missional church in post-Christendom suburban America." Author: Keith
Edwin Griswold, D.Min. dissertation, Drew University, 2006. 111 pages.

abstract

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The project was designed to start a process whereby Harris Hill United Methodist Church, (HHUMC), would become a missional church within the context of its postmodern suburban culture, however doing so in a premodern way as suggested by Robert Webber in his book *Journey to Jesus*. The method chosen was that of a study group consisting of lay people from within the congregation as a preliminary "seed bed," to prepare the congregation to become more missional, in a postmodern way. The hope was that HHUMC would move towards reaching out to unchurched people under the age of forty, and be prepared to nurture them in a process of spiritual growth and development.

The study group considered how the culture has changed; becoming more secular and post-Christian, they also considered the needs and concerns of the unchurched and dechurched people in the community. To achieve this a process of small group meetings was designed to discuss the current situation of the congregation, and Christianity vis-à-vis postmodern culture; as well as having an opportunity to meet and talk with unchurched and dechurched people in a focus group and during interviews with persons within the target age range.

In an attempt to understand the attitudes within HHUMC towards evangelism and other aspects of being missional; a survey was conducted before the study group began. The survey consisted of forty-six questions; both open-ended and closed-ended questions were asked. In addition a follow-up survey was also sent out. The follow-up survey had only eight questions, dealing with the "importance of evangelism." This was an attempt to see if there were any noticeable changes in members' attitudes on evangelism as a result of the study group's influence.

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In considering this project, from a structuralist viewpoint, there are new textures being applied to old patterns at HHUMC. Those involved in the project are starting to act in new ways. They are looking at how they can be in ministry beyond the walls of the church to those who aren't part of the church community; the beginnings of a missional church can be seen.

"Small groups: A means of revitalizing the Korean Church." Author: Myung Sung Suh, Ph.D. dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2005. 225 pages.

abstract

340 There is an urgent need for a comprehensive analysis that will enable the Korean Church to regain its growth momentum in the new millennium. The purpose of this dissertation is to develop a theological, historical and practical framework for small groups to serve as a means in assuring the revitalization of the Korean church.

This dissertation in applying Browning's methodology to implicitly undergird its analysis has two parts. In Part I, I analyzed the Korean Church and discussed several theories that were presented in better understanding the religious milieu in Korea. Several contextual and ecclesiastical factors were identified as a main cause for the hindrance of church growth in Korea based on the evaluation of Korean sociology, history and culture and of statistical data. I investigated the causes behind the American Church's decline between the 1960s and 1970s and compared this downturn with the predicament of the Korean Church during the 1980s and 1990s. Parallels between these two drop-offs were identified. To deal with the American Church's decline, it is helpful to unearth possible insights and strategies that may prove valuable to the Korean Church. Most cultural and social structural factors for mainline denominations of the American Church could also be main causes for a stagnant Korean Church. Especially, the exodus of the young generation from the church is noticeable for both Churches. In Part II, I analyzed small groups based on the Bible and proposed small group strategies fit for the Korean Church. I provided a biblical basis behind the small group's strategy and reasoning, with a focus on Christian small group structure. Since evaluation of the small group ministry in the Korean Church also contributes to the small group development, the small group models currently practiced in the Korean Church were evaluated as well. The traditional kuyeok system was especially evaluated in depth. A wide range of methodologies exists for implementing small groups—such

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as a focus on small group formation, evangelism and other applications—to allow
the exploration of options to help with Korean church revitalization. There is no
one right methodology that fits every situation. It is up to the local churches to
develop its own strategy taking into consideration its specific situations, and the
biblical basis of the small group.

“Designing a ministry of church growth through small groups.” Author: Kafunyi Mwamba,
D.Min., dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, 2003. 121 pages.

abstract

The purpose of this project was to determine if the introduction of the small group
ministry as proven by the church growth movement could move the leadership and
the membership from the maintenance mentality to growth mentality, from
membership decline to membership growth, and from inactive membership to
active membership at the Ohio Family Church. The members were administered
the survey and the interview as a pre-test and post-test. Between the surveys and
the interviews, the sermons and the workshops were given as an intervention and
as a treatment. They all showed improvement. The small groups were initially
implemented, but much more work is yet to be completed.

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“The Biblical foundation of the mission-focused small group.” Ju Young Kim, Th.M. thesis,
Fuller Theological Seminary, 2002. 98 pages.

abstract

The purpose of this study is to present biblical examples of the mission-focused
small group. This study tried to relate the biblical examples of the small group to
the theology of mission, and church growth.

There are many small groups in the Korean church in South Korea. Not many
small groups have represented the missionary nature of the small group. If a
church has the missionary nature, a small group must have the same nature.

I presented primarily three biblical examples of the mission-focused small
group in the New Testament: Jesus and the twelve, Paul and his missionary bands,
and the house church. These examples showed interest for activities of mission.
This thesis suggests a new model of small group to renew stagnated small groups.

"Participation in small group Bible studies as a function of lifelong learning characteristics."

Author: Steven T. White, Ph.D. dissertation, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2001. 198 pages.

abstract

The present study investigated claims by small group Bible study advocates regarding the value of small group Bible studies for lifelong learning. Four research questions provided the framework for the study. The first two questions sought to determine factors perceived by lifelong learners as significant in their pursuit of continued learning, distinguishing between lifelong learners who participated in small group Bible studies and those who did not. The third question sought to determine whether small group participants differed in lifelong learning characteristics from non-participants. Finally, demographic variables were compared between participating and non-participating lifelong learners.

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The Oddi Continuing Learning Inventory, along with a basic demographic instrument, was distributed to the adult attenders of a large church in the mid-western United States. A total of 303 usable surveys were returned and analyzed. A convenience sample of twenty individuals was selected from among the respondents and interviewed. The interviews were based on general questions regarding the activities perceived by lifelong learners as they pursued personal learning and growth. Interview transcripts were coded and compared for common themes between and among small group participants and non-participants.

The null hypothesis was retained in each of the research questions. While there were no significant differences between small group Bible study participants and non-participants, findings have clarified potential misconceptions about the role small group Bible studies play within religious educational programming. Lifelong learners' motivation to participate was not primarily directed at content acquisition. Rather, lifelong learners participate in small groups in order to encounter new ways of thinking and perceiving, and to establish community.

Implications for religious educators include changes in leadership training for small group leaders, renewed emphasis on experiential learning and learning through community, and the need to rethink programming that tends to produce other-dependent learners. The present study was a significant step toward a better understanding of lifelong learning in general, the Oddi Continuing Learning Inventory in particular, and small group Bible studies in the context of religious education.