

THE VIABILITY OF MISSIONAL SMALL GROUPS IN AUSTRALIAN CHURCHES – GEOFF EGGINS

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ABSTRACT

This article and associated research discusses the legitimacy of the use of missional small groups in the Australian context. Firstly, it overviews the use of missional small groups in the New Testament. Secondly, investigates the perceptions of the church in the Australian culture. Thirdly, it offers a brief evaluation of where the missional church movement is up to in the Australian Church. Fourth, examples of the historic use of missional small groups are given in order to discern their validity and usefulness in other contexts. Fifth, a survey and associated analysis is undertaken to discern their current scope of use in the Australian context. This survey then informs the discussion with contextually relevant information. Finally, based on the above elements, a recommendation that Australian churches should pursue missional small groups is given, along with recommendations about how to help that happen.

1. INTRODUCTION

Small groups have been utilised by the church since its inception (Acts 2). How are they being utilised by the church now? This research article seeks to discover if the pursuit of *missional* small groups is something that should be the task of the Australian Church, given its current context and climate. It will draw information from the New Testament, various research works on the Australian culture, historical accounts about the use of missional small groups elsewhere, and various other works on the topic. Its major contribution though, comes from the analysis of a survey completed by ten Australian churches who are attempting missional small groups. The aforementioned contributions to this work will be synthesised and conclusions made about whether or not Australian churches should be pursuing missional small group strategies. Recommendations to Australian churches in light of the findings will also be made.

1.1 Definitions

For the purposes of this article, a broad view of the term “small group” should be assumed. For the survey, the size specified was from quite small (three people) up to large (25 people). This does not, however, limit the use of other works throughout the article that may conceive small groups to be much larger (e.g. missional community style groups up to a size of 50 people). A broad view is required.

The churches represented in the survey were evangelical in nature and much of the discussion is aimed primarily at evangelical churches in the Australian context

2. CHURCH GROWTH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Before presenting any research or recommendations, it is wise to examine the New Testament, to see if there are any disqualifying factors to pursuing missional small group strategies, or indeed if there is any evidence that would suggest small group strategies should be pursued. With this intent, the danger of course is to read into the scriptural texts rather than read out of them. With this in mind, a number of factors can be identified.

2.1 Jesus had a small group

Firstly, Jesus was involved with and significantly invested in a small group. It seems that his ministry goals involved the use of this small group. Comiskey (1996, ¶122) simply states that “Christ chose” this method. Christ could have invested in just one, or one at a time, or he could have focused on a preaching ministry to many, but instead he chose to focus on a small group. “He appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) that they might be with him and he might send

them out to preach” (Mark 3:14). The method of Christ had a single small group at its centre. Jesus “staked his whole ministry” (Coleman 1993, 31) on it.

2.2 The house and ministry

Secondly, there is very strong evidence of the utilisation of the home in the early church, perhaps limiting the size of Christian groups to “small”. Acts and the Epistles provide almost the entirety of information about the opening years of the church. Throughout these texts, the word *oikos*, house, is widely used to describe a place of gathering or residence owned by an individual or couple (Banks 1981, 45). Billings (2011, 541-569) suggests the *oikos* of the first and second century could have been something similar to the archeologically discovered *insulae*, which were apartment style residences. Though the exact size of the *oikos* is largely unknown, the closest size groups we utilize in modern western Christianity are our home-groups, life-groups or small-groups of four to sometimes over twenty-five people. There are two main ways in which the *oikos* is utilised by the early church.

2.2.1 As a place that is sent to

The church spread into the *oikos*. In Acts 10 Peter is asked to come to the *oikos* of Cornelius, who by the time of Peter’s arrival has “called together his relatives and close friends” (10:24) to join him and they are converted. In Acts 16:14-15 Lydia’s household is converted after she urges Paul to come to her *oikos*. When the apostle and a key person of the household gather people in their *oikos* there are multiple instances of conversion taking place. Evidence suggests that one of the ways the church grew was that the gospel arrives at and is spread into an existing *oikos*.

2.2.2 As a place that is sent from

The role of the *oikos* in the establishment and continuation of the early church is hard to overestimate. The household was the “basic unit in the establishment of Christianity” (Meeks 1983, 29). Not only did the household create a space from which to begin communities of faith in Jesus Christ (Haight 2004, 78), they also became “a central pivot for the Christian advance” (Green 1993, 96). The Jews in Acts 17:5 knew that attacking the *oikos* of Jason to find and disrupt Paul and Silas was a tactic that may work. They knew the house of Jason had become a base from which the message of Jesus was spreading. The house of Philip (who was also known as an evangelist) in Acts 21:8 was another unit from which the gospel was going forth. The volume of greetings in the Pauline epistles that refer to house churches (e.g. 1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:3-5; Col 4:15; Phlm 2; Phil 4:22) combined with the exhorting of Paul in those letters to spread the gospel is evidence in itself that the households were to be beacons that displayed the truth of Jesus. This is thus evidence to indicate that in the early church, the *oikos* was not just spread *into*, but that it was spread *from*.

2.3 Growth through the *oikos*

Stark (1996, 20) estimates the church to have grown at 40 percent per decade in its early stages until approximately AD 300. This may seem small at first hearing, though the social surface expansion year after year is what turned twenty-five thousand Christians into twenty million Christians in 200 years (Hirsch 2006, 18). It was these small *oikos* groups that “enabled the tiny church to grow mightily” (Brown 1992, 36). They were the “vehicle [that] facilitated the relational dynamic that allowed the church to thrive in the midst of persecution and hardship” (Breen 2013, 4). They had their own homes and they went into other people’s homes. The expansion and growth of the church was primarily through the *small*.

McGavran (1980, 217) identifies some of the factors as to why this focus on the small was able to result in this exponential style growth. He suggests, firstly, that they were not slowed by environmental concerns or costs about where to meet. Secondly, that the separation of each group in households enabled a significant enough break with Jewish connections to be able to form its identity around Christ – something that would have been much more difficult if the strategy was to turn entire synagogues to Christianity. Thirdly, as each new *oikos* developed, it exposed the church to a new segment of the population that did not know Jesus, by both physical proximity and also existing social relationships. Finally, he identifies the size limit of these groups as reason to force new leaders to be identified, developed and be given responsibilities over new congregations.

There is another further factor that should be given consideration. That is, the church was able to utilise an *existing* social construct, the *oikos*. The society was such that a person’s involvement in an *oikos* was the norm. The church did not necessarily create small groups as much as *infect* them. The church practice was not necessarily to call people out of their communities and create new ones but to *gospelize* the existing ones (Addison 2012, 209). The church may have had multiple Christians go and form a new *oikos* at times, but this is still utilizing the social spaces, the social norms and the community formation principles that were already existing in the culture. The culture knew what an *oikos* was. The church used that fact to its advantage.

The biblical evidence shows the church moving into the *oikos* and out from the *oikos*. They utilised the *oikos* as the existing social construction and by doing so gave themselves many mission fields and many mission bases. The early church utilised the *oikos*, or *small group* in a missional fashion and in doing so, expanded rapidly. There are then no biblical reasons to avoid pursuing missional endeavours in Australian evangelical churches, in fact the opposite is probably the case. In order to continue investigating the validity of such pursuits, attention will now be turned to an examination of the Australian culture. The early church knew the culture and used significant elements of it to their advantage. Similarly, the Australian Evangelical Church must be educated about its culture in order to pursue compatible growth strategies.

3. THE CHURCH AND AUSTRALIAN CULTURE

3.1 Perceptions of Church and Christianity

What does the average Australian think about the Church or Christianity? This is an important question for the Church to answer, particularly in light of the fact that an understanding of the social and cultural climate seemed to have had some influence on the strategy of the early church.

3.1.1 Census report

The Australian Census data on religion (ABS, 2012) does not at any stage attempt to differentiate between a nominal Christian and a “born again” or “practising” Christian. This limits the use of the data for a numerical measuring of “conversions”. It does, however, allow one to see the general acceptance of Christianity in the Australian culture as a religion rather than a ‘way of life’. The data does paint an ongoing picture of a country growing in disillusionment with Christianity. Those identifying themselves as Christian in 2001 were 68% of the population, and in 2011 it had fallen to 61%, showing a continuation of the declining trend from the early 1900’s, where the percentage was greater than 90% (2012, ¶24). The data also indicates that the fastest growing religious category is in fact those who report “No Religion” which has grown from 15% in 2001 to 22% in 2011 (2012, ¶26). Each year, those with a general acceptance of Christianity is decreasing and those who indicate no linking with faith of any kind is increasing.

3.1.2 Perceptions of the unchurched

McCrinkle (2013) has more recently attempted to get perceptions about Church from a segment of the population who could be considered to be “non-practicing” Christians. Out of the sample of the Australian population of greater than one thousand, 92% were found to be in this category (and therefore 8% found to be those who regularly attended church). His study revealed that those who do not attend church perceive parklands, café’s, dog parks and shopping centres, amongst other things, to be more of a community and personal need than a local church. They also ranked church services at the bottom of a list of ranked perceived community needs, underneath seniors activities, parenting seminars, employment support and counselling services. 47% of these unchurched individuals said church was “irrelevant to my life”.

3.1.3 Australian Communities Report

McCrimble (2011) has also done research using a more general sample of the Australian population in the Australian Communities report. He took a sampling of over one-thousand Australians and asked their opinion on a range of questions regarding the Church and Christianity in general.

In the “Communication & Engagement” (McCrimble 2011, 3) questions asked of these Australians, the respondents indicated that the most attractant factors to get them to engage in investigation of religion or spirituality were “Experience a personal trauma or significant life change” and “Seeing first hand people who live out a genuine faith”. Additionally, their preferred style of engagement on these topics was “Conversational & Discussion” based. The main item of note here is the closeness of life and access required to engage the community in the way they have said they engage best. Small groups, perhaps, are one of the best contexts with which to engage individuals outside the church who do not yet believe in Christ. Australians have said they will respond to “first hand” life access and conversational, discussion based engagement best.

3.1.4 NCLS research

The National Church Life Survey (NCLS) was commissioned by the Bible Society to discover perceptions of Australian church attenders above the age of fifteen on their own faith development (Bellamy, Mou and Castle, 2004). They interviewed over four thousand church attenders from Anglican and protestant churches and in a summary of their findings they state, “Church services emerge as the single most significant activity for faith development, selected by 42% of attenders as instrumental in their coming to faith” (2004, 5). Another big factor identified in the survey was the influence of parents on faith development, with 55% of people indicating their significance on their faith journey, particularly in the early stages of their lives (2004, 4).

In conjunction with NCLS, Sterland, Escott and Castle (2004) analysed data collected from four western countries (including Australia) on the attraction and integration of newcomers by the church. They found that newcomers (those with no church background) made up only 3% of the church congregations. “Put another way, of one hundred attenders in churches anywhere in these four countries, no more than 3 of them on average will have come into church life over the last five years from outside the church” (2004, 4). There are only 3% of people in our churches who have first-hand experience of being called out from the growing unchurched Australian culture into the discipleship of Christ.

These findings, when matched with the findings of the Australian Communities Report in the previous section, become somewhat concerning. Those within the Church have testimonies that are significantly different to that which is attuned to cultural expectations. Those currently attending church have primarily come to faith by church services and parents. Only a very small percentage

have any experience in coming to faith without any prior church background. The data seems to indicate that we are in an age where the majority of Australian parents are not Christians and the majority of Australians do not view church services as an attractable mode of discovering faith. In general terms, for unchurched Australians to come to faith either the church needs to break free from its own norms, or the expectations of the Australian culture need to be adjusted. The former of these is where the church needs to make adjustments. It needs to realise it is not well equipped or experienced at successfully converting a rapidly growing segment of the Australian population, and seek to be better equipped.

3.2 A disengaging Australia

In a work straddling the boundaries of sociology, theology and ecclesiology all at once, Frost (2014) identifies western nations as being in an “age of disengagement”. The Australian society, he would argue, is a culture in which people are tending to have a large number of acquaintances and a small number of deep relationships (if any). Sayers, another Australian culture observer, explains it in this way,

“contemporary life is marked by a constant wanting more, ever-present dissatisfaction, and restlessness. Our lives are marked by a constant wandering; a fluidity concerning relationships, careers, home, sexuality, identity, and belief is now the norm.” (2014a, 201)

The rise of technology, the effects of Facebook, the pace of life, the cost of living, the amount of entertainment options, amongst other things, have all been working in subtle ways to create this reality. It has created a society of people who “feel rootless, disengaged, and connected to our world only through screens rather than face to face” (Frost 2014, 15). The church will need to learn how to reach those who are disengaged not just from the church or Christianity but from everything, including themselves to some extent. Technology is changing the target group, the church needs to be aware and adapt as required.

3.3 The “state of play” for Australia

Christianity in Australia is feeling the effects of a shift to post-Christendom culture perhaps even more so than anywhere else in the West. Sayers even suggests, “we [Christians in Australia] are the post-Christendom laboratory for the rest of the West” (2012b, ¶15). Australia is encountering a culture with rapidly changing opinions about the church and Christianity in general. The majority of people in the Australian culture are, in general, disillusioned and disinterested in church. Not only that, but if willing to engage in questions of spirituality and faith at all, it seems that they are not willing to do it in the ways people have done it in the past. The research data suggests that there are congregations who have a majority of Christians who haven’t seen or experienced evangelical engagement outside the church service or family. Research suggests that the Australian culture will

look for discussion based modes to engage in faith conversations, rather than wanting to attend typical church services, which the culture is finding increasingly irrelevant.

4. STRATEGIES FOR CHURCH GROWTH

With the indicators of the Australian culture in regards to church and Christianity investigated and discussed, attention will now turn to the way in which churches are currently seeking to be the church in that environment.

4.1 The pursuit of growth in Australian Evangelical Churches

There are “stand-out” churches around the world due to their fast paced growth and size. The question “how did it happen?” for these churches, is one that looms large until it is answered. Their success gives these churches opportunity to present the principles and processes by which the growth took place, accompanied by powerful stories of these principles and processes working in their contexts. What is known as the “Church Growth” movement has been fuelled out of this process. Warren (1995), Hybels (1995) and Stanley (2012) are modern examples of this, creating books, resources and conferences about growing churches through clear sets of principles, like “seeker” sensitivity. These books and resources have come from cultures different to Australia, and yet have been widely used and applied throughout Australia. The promise of principles that can be applied in any context flavour these materials and provide hope of growth to church leaders who engage with it. To a large extent, Australian Evangelical Churches have remained heavily “flavoured” by the guidance of the “Church Growth” movement.

In an interview-based exploration of the effects of both the “Church Growth” movement and the “Emerging-Missional Church” movements in Australia over the past four decades, Roennfeldt makes this evaluation of the significant effects of the “Church Growth” movement in Australia,

“CG created upheaval for many churches. Personnel, structures, ministry programs, worship styles and facilities were scrutinized for relevance to attract growth. With community needs paramount, departments identified goals, marketing plans, key performance indicators and assessment procedures. Church buildings were remodeled, or multipurpose commercial-type buildings purchased, to meet the needs of baby-boomers. ... People expected variety and their needs to be met, and churches were categorized as traditional or contemporary, irrelevant or relevant. Family members went separate ways to attend churches they liked. Attendance rather than membership became the measure of growth. Although different, church became formulaic, a kind of ‘McDonaldization’.” (2013, 104)

The desire was for effectiveness in evangelism, however after decades of the prioritization of “Church Growth” methods and principles in reforming the church and its services around the needs and wants of the unchurched, very little actual church growth has been observable (see section 3.1.1). The “Emerging Missional Church” movement has over the last decade promoted “incarnational” models of ministry. Roennfeldt again guides the discussion well here, stating

“Their work, they declared, was mission, not church, discipleship, not growth, - through incarnation, not attraction ... critical of church forms, including recent CG models, their words and actions stung ... Relationships between CG and EMC stressed to breaking point” (2013, 106).

More recently in Australia and across the west, there has been a growing helpful conversation and unity developing between the two camps (churches established and developed by “Church Growth” methodology and “Missional Church” advocates) ,as evidenced in Hirsch and Ferguson (2011) and Frost and Hirsch (2013, 10). Roennfeldt concludes with the recommendation of a “growth-missional” (2013, 116) path, in which traditional churches and denominations, along with missional church networks, remain in conversation with one another, striving to achieve a balance for church that will see the church in Australia grow.

It is the ongoing communication and acceptance of missional church ideas, finding their way into mechanisms familiar to typical evangelical Australian evangelical churches that will pave a way forward for the “growth-missional” Australian evangelical church. Small groups are poised in the Australian evangelical church culture to be the mechanism that can carry and experiment with missional church concepts like “incarnational mission”, “discipleship”, “apostolic leadership”, “multiplication”, “contextualisation” and other missional church conceptions. Put simply, small groups are poised to play a significant role in growth and “missionality” of the church in the coming decades.

4.2 Missional small group strategies for Church growth

In recent times, there have been many examples of missional small group strategies that have grown the church rapidly. The cultural diversity of the churches that this has occurred in suggests that the use of missional small groups is able to provide benefit and growth in many and varying contexts. In order to generate both an understanding of what missional small groups have accomplished in the past and provide further reason for pursuing them in the future, a brief overview of some of their success in other contexts may provide helpful insight for Australia.

The Wesleyan small group systems of the 18th century America had significant success. Trial band meetings, band meetings and select band meetings offered a progression through varied small group stages, where commitment of the individual deepened along with the expectations on that individual as they progressed. This enabled progression from someone new to the faith through to

someone who could invest back into helping others through the stages. Comiskey (1996, ¶4) estimates that in just sixty years the movement went from one small group through to over one hundred thousand members, all organized in these small groups. The small groups were “all about creating a channel for people who had the desire and commitment to experience God and live the life of a disciple” (Albin in Stafford 2003, 44). It took those with a desire to connect with God and did not know how, and progressed them through discipleship into people who could do the same for others. Small groups provided a vehicle for rapid growth.

Far from 18th century America, is 19th century Korea, and yet small groups still provided a catalyst for fast paced church growth in the Yoido Full Gospel Church, which by 2007 had grown to over seven hundred thousand members (Easterling 2007 ,254). The leader of the church at the time, Yonggi Cho, attributes the growth of the church to his “cell-based” model, which has been replicated with similar success all over Korea. The training for cell leaders is simple and clear, the expectations for involvement are also, as is the high level of evangelistic commitment required by cell leaders (who would ride building elevators sometimes all day, just to talk to people and invite them to their cell) (Cho 199, 60). Small groups again provided the perfect vehicle for rapid, explosive growth.

Chaves (2015) also credits the growth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South America to small group strategies being used as a tool in the hands of God (2015, 1). Various unions across the country have stories of incredible growth, for example, establishing eight hundred congregations and in three years using small groups as a growth strategy (Northern Brazil Union Mission), establishing forty new congregations in one year (North Peru Union Mission) and establishing 72 congregations in two years (Santa Catarina Conference). In all these cases, small groups with missional intent have been the catalyst for this type of growth.

In Western contexts, the work of the Future Travellers group (as seen in Hirsch and Ferguson 2011, 303-329) in the United States is in the process of highlighting and encouraging ten churches in their missional endeavours, in which many are utilising missional small groups to expand their impact and mission into their locations. Soma Tacoma is a highlight in this group, having primarily utilised missional small groups they call “missional communities”. They have more than 1300 people organised into these communities in just eight years (Hirsch and Ferguson 2011, 325). There are also other missional church expressions in the west involving small group strategies that are growing in prominence. The 3DM movement has seen thousands organised into “missional communities” that go to the world in order to help the world discover Jesus without having first needing to come to church service (Breen 2013). Stott, in commentating on the book of Acts, captures part of the heart of many of these missional church expressions in the west, maintaining, “If religious people can be reached in religious buildings, secular people have to be reached in secular buildings” (1990, 312). Small groups can incarnate themselves more readily than large

congregations. They can go to where those who need Christ are, on the basis that they do not believe they will *come* on their own now that the culture has shifted.

4.3 Missional small groups in Australian Evangelical Churches

What then of the examples of missional small group effectiveness in Australia? Having seen evidence of their success in non-Australian contexts, it would make sense to be able to point to examples of the effectiveness of missional small group strategies in Australian evangelical churches. Unfortunately, examples of this are not easily found. There is work to be done in both collecting the information and using missional small groups more broadly in Australian Evangelical Churches.

4.3.1 Survey details

In the absence of information in this area, a qualitative survey was conducted in order to discover both the strategies and effectiveness of missional small groups being used in Australian evangelical churches. Ten churches completed the survey, which is attached as Appendix 1. The survey firstly aimed to collect basic information about each church, and discern which strategies were being employed for church growth, particularly strategies involving missional small groups. Secondly, the success of those strategies was then estimated by participants by outlining the growth achieved.

4.3.2 Sample selection

The ten churches chosen for the study were those that fit three main criteria. Firstly, they had a representative willing to participate in the survey and speak on behalf of the church. Secondly, they had shown numerical growth over the past three years of ministry. Thirdly, they openly communicated an intent towards missional small groups in some way. By selecting participants using these criteria, data for a qualitative study of churches who are using missional small group strategies has been generated. The qualitative data and analysis in this study may then provide insights that may then form the basis for more extensive quantitative research in the future.

4.3.3 Sample metrics

Represented in the sample of ten churches were over five denominations from four Australian states. The sample churches are representative of a total of approximately 2000 attenders and over 100 small groups collectively. The average membership size of the included churches was approximately 180.

4.3.4 Data integrity

There are a number of factors influencing the reliability of findings based upon the collected data. Firstly, the representatives were often unable to provide specific numerical information for a number of the questions, so estimation was encouraged. Data integrity in some circumstances therefore relies upon the appointed person's ability to estimate. Secondly, there were some occasions in which the response given by the survey participants did not indicate clearly whether or not they were giving a "percentage" response or a "number of persons" response. On almost all occasions, this could be determined due to other data given in the survey. Thirdly, numerical calculations during the analysis have often been calculated using mid points of ranges due to the participants only being asked to indicate which range of values their church fit into. Despite these issues, the data integrity is still of a standard that its analysis is able to provide some important insights into missional small groups in the Australian context.

5. MISSIONAL SMALL GROUP EFFECTIVENESS IN AUSTRALIAN EVANGELICAL CHURCHES

There are two main questions into which the collected data can help answer. Firstly, "What can be learnt about the success and or failure of churches that pursue missional small group strategies in general?", and secondly, "What can be learnt about the differences between the most successful churches pursuing small groups strategies and those that are less successful?" In this, insight can be provided for Australian evangelical churches as to whether or not they should pursue missional small group strategies and also which particular missional small group strategies they should employ.

5.1 Marks of Churches pursuing missional small groups

5.1.1 Growth strategy

When asked to comment about strategy for church growth, some of the most common elements mentioned were the aim to "make disciples" (mentioned by 3 churches specifically and implied in others) and the aim to do "incarnational ministry" (mentioned directly and indirectly by 7 churches). Also mentioned on multiple occasions was the desire to introduce those who were "not yet believers" and "would not normally connect with church" with the message of Jesus. These churches were going after the lost. The language of the missional church conversation (as in

Roxburgh and Borren, 2009; Frost, 2011) was identifiable in nearly all responses showing that it is achieving a level of saturation that has reached practitioners, rather than just academics (a common concern of missional church advocates. see Fetting 2011, ¶17). Also an obvious notable fact was that the majority of churches mentioned some form of missional small group in their discussion of strategy (by varied names, “community group”, “missional community”) – and those that didn’t chose broader terms that could include small groups as a part of them.

5.1.2 Effectiveness

Collectively, the churches used the lives of approximately 2000 Christians to grow the church (broad sense) by approximately 800 people. This is a growth of 40% over the three year period the survey was investigating. This is the growth rate Stark (1996) estimated the early church was growing at per decade (see section 2.3). Given the small and qualitative nature of this research, and the difference in culture between now and then, the comparison shouldn’t be made strongly, but it does excite. It certainly doesn’t indicate with any certainty that such pace of growth will continue, though it does indicate a measure of success in these churches practicing missional small group strategies. The measures of success used by missionally-minded churches though, are not necessarily in growth of attendance metrics, but growth of the number and quality of disciples (see 5.1.1), more specifically, the number of disciples who can make disciples. In this sense, there is still a measure of success associated with these churches, with churches indicating on average 26% of those who were new to their church were new-Christians or from unchurched backgrounds. Numerically, this is approximated as 300 new Christians from 2000 existing Christians (or 15% increase) over the three year period. The churches also indicated on average that approximately 50% of their new growth were showing a desire to share their faith with others.

Compared with a western church in decline, these are encouraging statistics. These churches using missional small groups seem to be running in the opposing direction of the wider trend of decline (as illustrated in Section 3).

5.1.3 Frequency

All churches in the survey said they had groups that met at least weekly (some indicated meeting even more often than that). 70% of the churches indicated they have some groups within the church meeting fortnightly, and one had some groups meeting monthly (see Figure 1). Groups like Soma, 3DM and Crowded House using missional small groups speak often of creating rhythms involving mission (Vandersdelt 2015, 169-193; Breen 2013, 19;). It seems missional churches

using small groups are keen to include meeting together for mission as part of their normal weekly rhythms of its participants.

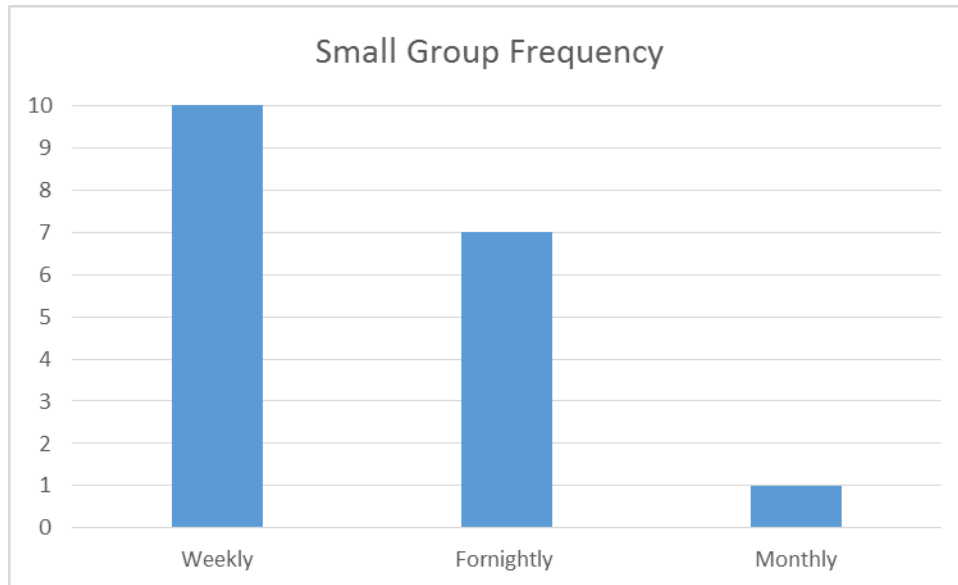


Figure 1 - Frequency of Meeting

5.1.4 Activities

Churches were also asked what they do when they meet as small groups and given ten options to select all that applied. As seen in Figure 2, all churches selected “sharing life concerns”, “praying for each other” and “reading the Bible” – all tasks that could be considered “usual” for a western church small group. Additionally to this, the churches all selected “sharing a meal” as something they do regularly. Eating together seems to be a feature of missional small groups. Other elements in most churches were “praying for the salvation of those who don’t know Jesus” (80% of churches) and “Social Justice – Good of the city activities” (70% of churches). These churches are not content for their small groups to look only inward but outward also, pursuing “missional engagement” (Boren 2010, 134) with those that don’t yet know Jesus.

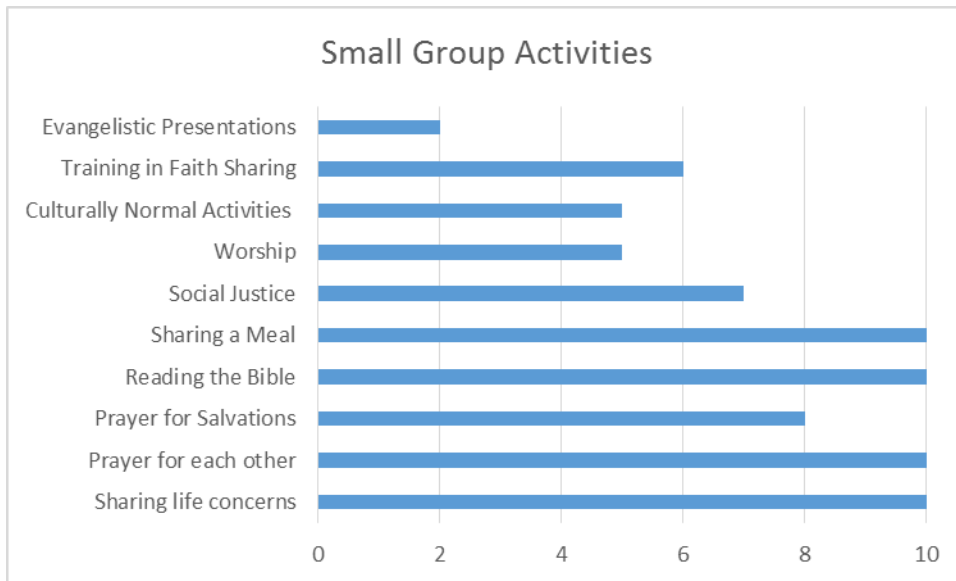


Figure 2 - Activities of small groups

5.1.5 Missionality

When churches were asked to indicate what made their groups missional, they indicated via checking or leaving unchecked five possible “missional intentions” that their group may or may not be encouraged to establish. As illustrated in Figure 3, all 10 churches identified that they covered materials together that exhorted them to life on mission. 80% indicated they encouraged their groups to be “doing mission together” and to “target a specific people group” to be missional amongst. 80% of all groups also indicated that they encouraged their small groups to be a first point of contact for a non-Christian to begin participating in church life. Their response indicates a difference from the church growth mentality shown by Stanley and Willits (2004, 101-110), whose church growth strategy is for newcomers to attend church services before small groups, and to “close” small groups to new participants for a time. Gladen (2012, 158-159), from Warren’s Saddleback Church, indicates a desire to keep “evangelism” happening and keep groups “philosophically open” but concedes there is a website that indicates a number of groups are actually “closed” to new people. His promotion of “evangelism” over “incarnation” still shows a difference in conception and strategy from the missional-movement-influenced churches of this survey.

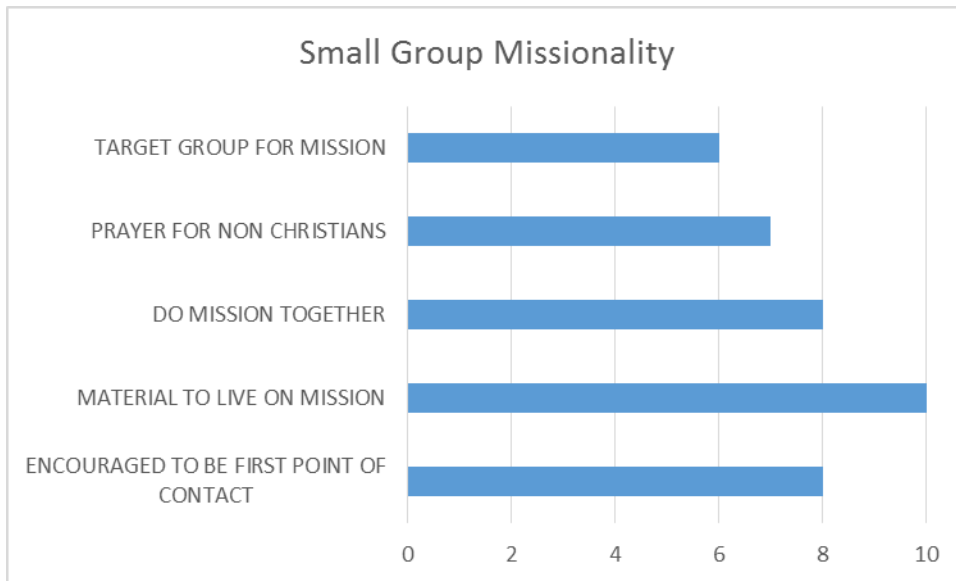


Figure 3 - What makes your small groups missional?

5.2 Marks of the most effective churches in the sample

Each church in the sample provided an estimate of its growth, both in total numerical growth and in the amount of that growth that was made up by “new Christians / unchurched persons”. This allows the identification of possible factors that set apart churches who are growing more than others in the sample and the churches who are more successful at reaching the lost. To allow for comparison between churches, growth percentages were calculated. Averages of those percentages are then used to compare between various other factors in the dataset.

5.2.1 Impact of prayer for the lost

Figure 4 shows an important reminder to churches seeking to help their small groups to be missional. The collected data indicates that churches who encourage their small groups pray for the lost to be saved are twice as effective at growth by new Christians as those who do not encourage their small groups to pray for the lost. 60% of the growth of churches whose small groups are encouraged pray for the lost were new Christians, as opposed to 30% of the growth for churches whose small groups were not encouraged to pray for the lost.

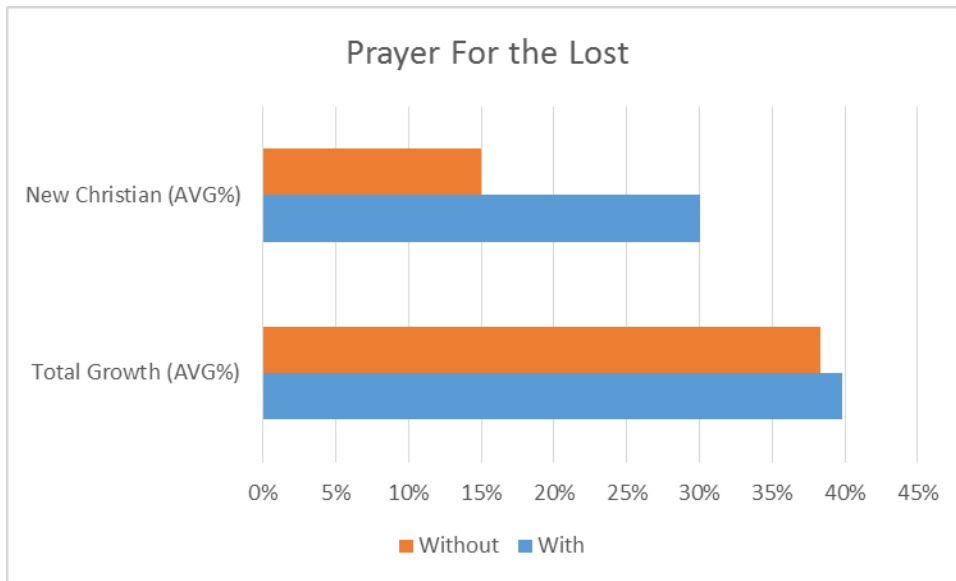


Figure 4 - Effectiveness based on whether or not small groups deliberately pray for the lost

Also of note is the apparent lack of difference that prayer for the lost seems to make in growing the church numerically (i.e. not specific about aiming for new Christian growth, but rather growing the church with already existing Christians).

These findings suggest the obvious. God responds to our requests. It also indicates the importance of prayer for the lost in order for those hoping to grow their church by new Christians. This data indicates that new Christian growth relies a lot more on prayer than growing a church by transfers (people who are already Christians).

5.2.2 Grouping mechanisms

Churches were asked to specify any categories used to develop their small groups (e.g. location, interests, gender, age) and were allowed to choose all that applied. In general, it was found that churches using “location” and “interests” (i.e. gardening, skating, fitness) showed a greater percentage of growth and also a greater portion of new-Christian growth than those who did not use location and interests to develop their small groups (Figure 5).

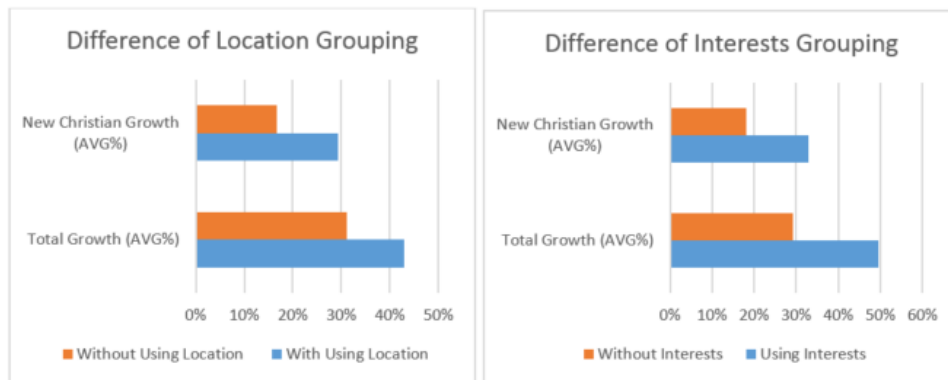


Figure 5 - Churches that Categorise Small Groups by Location / Interest

Additionally, churches that used “gender” and “age” also had greater growth than those that did not, however, the new-Christian portion of that growth was higher for the churches that did not use “gender” and “age” to categorise their groups (see Figure 6).

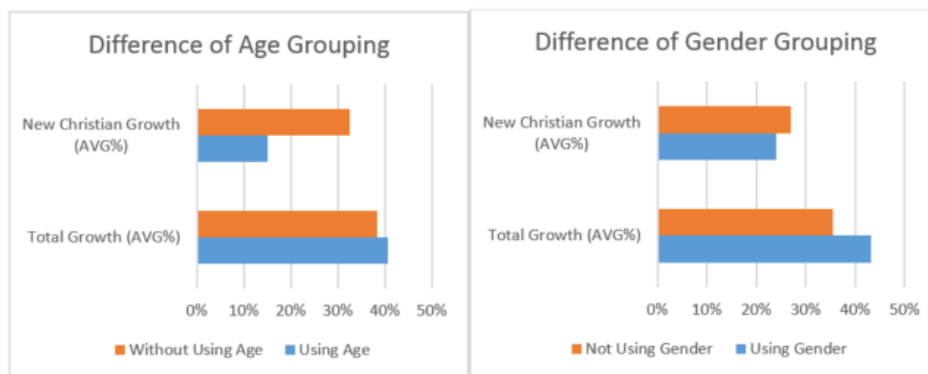


Figure 6 - Churches that categorise by Age / Gender

These findings may mean that those who are not yet Christians are more likely to connect to missional small groups where people are from the same “location” and have the same “interests”, rather than be of the same “gender” and “age”.

5.2.3 Utilising the “normal”

One of the more significant findings was the difference in growth between those churches whose small groups do “culturally normal activities” (e.g. watching football together, birthday parties, going to the beach) and those who do not. Figure 7 shows that churches whose small groups do cultural normal activities together have around twice as much total growth as those that do, and around twice as much of that growth is new-Christian growth.

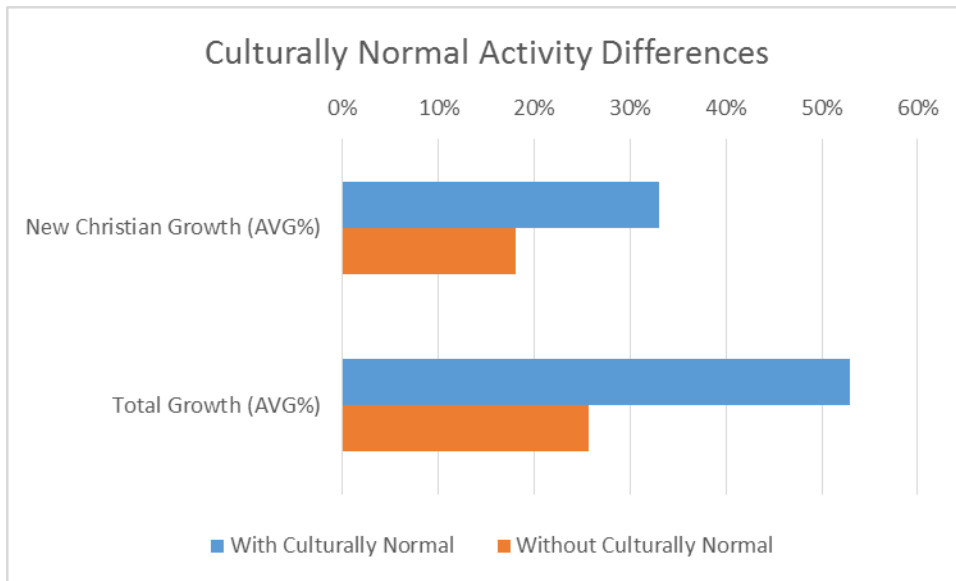


Figure 7 - The difference of cultural normal activities upon growth

This is evidence of the power of the missional concept of “incarnation”. A primary facet of the missional church movement is that the church should “go” to the people around them. Missional small groups doing “culturally normal” activities together and including outsiders is a step in that direction, one that many missional church authors and practitioners stress (Chester and Timmis 50, 65; Vanderstelt 2015, 167-228). It seems that even amongst these 10 churches with missional small group intent, there are those who have not worked out how to utilise the culturally normal activities of Australian life and culture for the benefit of church growth. Those that have are seeing amazing growth, new Christians included.

5.2.4 Small groups for the city

Churches whose small groups do social justice type “seeking the good of the city” activities (Carter 2014) in this sample also see a significant growth advantage over churches which do not partake in those activities, as seen in Figure 8.

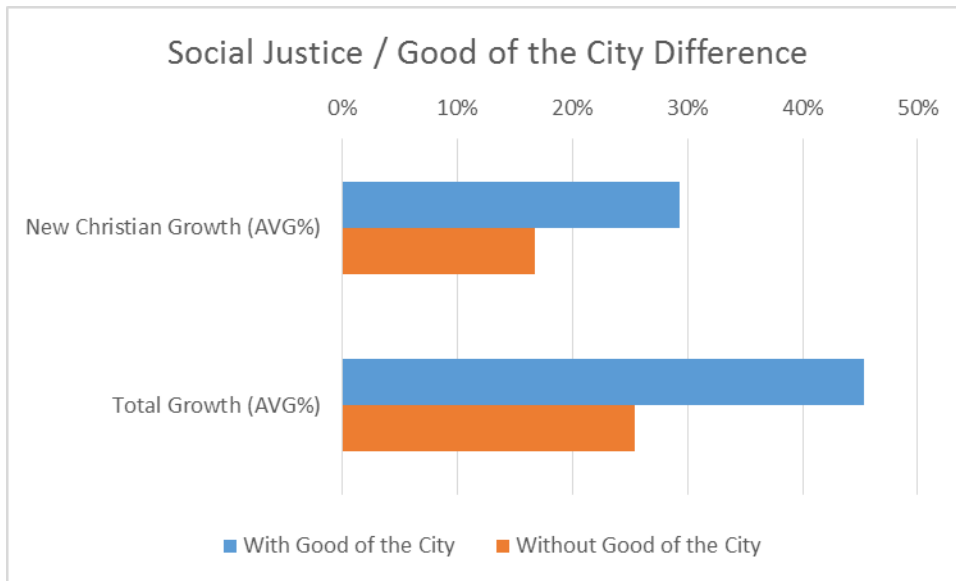


Figure 8 - Social Justice activities of small groups and church growth

The churches who do not engage in these activities see approximately half as much growth as those that do. Social justice activities generally increase the proximity of Christians to those who are not yet Christians so, it makes sense also to see the new Christian proportion of the growth significantly increased also.

5.2.5 Frequently together

The final point of comparison to make in the survey data is the difference that frequency of meeting makes. Churches whose small groups only meet weekly showed a slight disadvantage in total growth when compared with churches that also have groups meeting fortnightly. For total numerical growth, it seems that there is not a marked difference between fortnightly and weekly frequency.

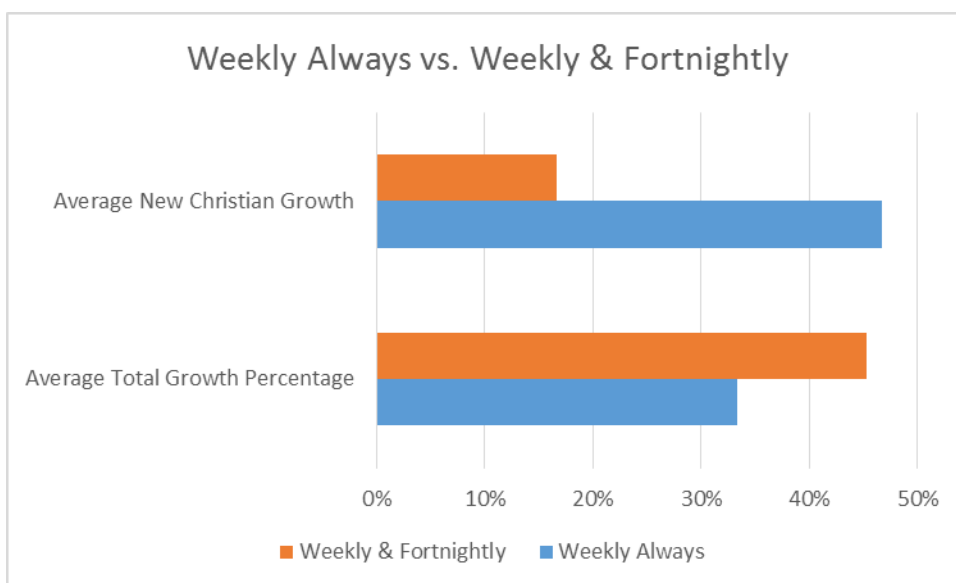


Figure 9 - Weekly small groups vs. Weekly or fortnightly small groups and church growth

Figure 9 shows the remarkable difference meeting weekly seems to make to the new Christian proportion of the growth. The new Christian growth proportion of total growth is almost three times larger for churches whose small groups meet only weekly (without any fortnightly groups or options). The data suggests that in order to save the lost, a frequency of weekly is a considerably better option.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AUSTRALIAN EVANGELICAL CHURCHES

Based on the reasoning outlined above, what follows are some recommendations for Australian Evangelical Churches regarding small groups.

6.1 Keep the right score

As discussed (in Section 4.1), the conversation between missional church advocates and existing Australian evangelical church leaders who lead churches based on and/or influenced by “Church Growth” methodology and practice is at a unique point in Australian church history. As evidenced by the ten surveyed churches in this article, the ideas of the missional church movement are gaining traction in Australia.

Missional church author McNeale (2009) reminds the church of the need to draw the scorecard for church based on what Jesus says the goals are. The missional church movement reminds Australian evangelical churches that small groups need to do more than simply retain attenders and provide pastoral care to members. The goal is to make disciples, and train and send them out to help those who are not currently disciples to be made into disciple-makers also (Matt 28:18-20).

Australian evangelical churches would do well to investigate missional church movements like 3DM, Soma and Austin Stone (see Appendix 2), who are thinking differently about small group ministry – providing examples of western churches who are strong on discipleship and big on mission. They are utilising missionally minded small groups in various ways in various places, to fulfil the mission of Jesus. Their models generally include two small group sized units, one for discipleship (Called “DNA groups” or “Huddles”) and another primarily for mission action and family life together (“missional communities”, “oikos”). Their use of these small groups is worth investigating. They are practicing the missional church values and enjoying being channels for God’s blessing as a result.

The missional church conversation has the ability to inspire Australian evangelical churches of all sizes and shapes into keeping the right scores again. Australian evangelical churches should

engage in the conversation, and follow the examples of the surveyed churches, who are using small groups to be on mission with God and seeing the lost saved as a result.

6.2 Understand the context and culture

We learn from the example of the early church that there is a wonderful advantage available to the missionaries who are aware of their surrounding culture, Paul's examples in the synagogues and public places (Acts 22, 17) showed he was a student of the cultures he was sent to. Some of the best information we have on church perceptions in Australia (as discussed in Section 3.1) indicates that the growing consensus in culture is that the church is irrelevant. Hostility towards the church is rising (McAlpine, 2015), and the number of Sunday morning service walk in salvation events is in decline. Furthermore, a growing disengagement in social life means we are in a time where people are desperate for real relationships (as discussed in 3.2). These culture shifts require a shift in strategy. Missional small groups are proving to be one of the best missionary vehicles the church has to bring those in the Australian culture into a saving faith.

6.3 Change church culture using missional small groups

For Australian evangelical church leaders, the creation of a missional culture using small groups is a workable and necessary aim. Fine (1979), in studying interactionist theory among a Little League baseball team, analysed how culture is created in small groups. He identified that potential elements of the culture need to be known, usable, functional, appropriate and triggered (1979, 733) if they are going to stay and become an embedded part of the culture. Small groups provide churches with a platform with which to enact this culture change, to teach new ideas about incarnational mission and discipleship, make them usable, embedding triggers and functions within small group practices. The extensive church-wide changes in culture outlined by missional church writers (e.g. Woodward 2012) take time, experimentation, practice and thought done best in smaller contexts first. Missional small groups are again found as strategically sensible. Australian evangelical churches in the survey are readjusting church culture by creating small groups they uphold these missional values and work them out. We have seen that they eat together, pray for their non-Christian friends together, do some social justice acts together, live life together and see lost people be saved together. This is significant culture change happening in the Australian evangelical church through small groups. Breen (2013, 126) suggests that not all existing small groups will be willing to engage in the culture change required to become a missional small group yet – some will resist. He urges churches to work with groups that desire the change first, to begin culture change small and slow at first. He wisely promotes “revolutionary change at evolutionary pace” (Breen in Bryant 2013, ¶19). Change the culture of a few at a time to change the culture of the whole.

Missional small groups have been powerfully used by the church to foster an ongoing outward focused missional culture (see section 2 and section 4.2). Ancient and modern history have shown missional small groups are up to this task. The Australian Evangelical Church should utilise what missional small groups have to offer. They have a key role to play in helping the Australian Church realise its missional potential – to set a new culture. Pursuing cultural change in small groups will take time and may prove difficult. It is, however, worth it.

6.4 Use what exists

A concept that pervades this paper and is seen multiple times, is to think carefully about what exists in order to harness it for the mission of God.

6.4.1 Inside the church

The typical western church generally has some form of small group ministry already in existence and most also have various “interest based” ministries with no more than 40 people in them (Kaldor 1997, 98) for example craft or youth groups. The effects that have given the church thus far have given the platform from which to launch into the next phase of church ministry in Australia.

Missional church advocates are beginning to realise the error of pushing for a total break with the institutionalized forms of church and have begun to investigate where missional ideas are able to fit best (Hirsch 2009, 12). When it comes to the Australian Evangelistic Church, there are opportunities to start with existing small group Bible studies, or church mens, womens, youth or craft ministries, in order to begin practicing some of these missional church strategies without having to fundamentally change the existing church or structures. Australian evangelical churches should look for opportunities in what currently exists in their structures and ministries already. The ten churches surveyed had small groups with many and varied sizes and shapes, so varied starting points and the lack of a formulaic starting place should not discourage churches from attempting ‘missionalizing’ their small groups.

One fundamental truth not yet brought to the discussion is the value and potential of the individuals that are a part of churches all over Australia at present. Hirsch in more recent years has realised the value of the “massive amount of missional potential” (Hirsch in Fetting 2010, ¶6) that is latent in every believer. God’s mission is disciple making, He has the power and the means to do it, and has chosen to do it through His disciples (Matt 28:18-20). If the missional church is God’s desire, Australian evangelical churches don’t need a new “batch” of Christians in order to become missional, they need to encourage and equip the ones they have to listen and obey God. Missional small groups again have a key role to play in this process.

6.4.2 Outside the church

The Early Church used the, *oikos*, a social construction present in their day, in order to flourish. They took the gospel into the *oikos*, and out from the *oikos*. The churches utilising missional small groups in this Australian sample were asking themselves the question “What spaces can we take the gospel into?” and seeking to be “incarnational” in their attitude towards finding these spaces. The success of those churches finding and adopting “culturally normal” practices and activities associated with “common interests” as part of their small group routines compared with those that did not is significant. Successful missional small groups are good at identifying places they can embed themselves in the existing culture, just as the early church did. They love the city enough to be able to identify and meet community needs outside the church (Keller 2012, 260) which requires eyes to see what needs exist. There is more to be done by the church in studying the Australian culture to find points where the church can best be on mission. Missional small groups provide a catalyst for repeatedly coming back to the question of “Where are there opportunities to embed ourselves?” Churches with missional small groups equip the many to be asking these questions, and by doing so, maximise their impact (more so than one church leadership team asking that question).

7. CONCLUSION

The reasons for Australian evangelical churches to pursue missional small groups are numerous. There is evidence of their Biblical use and success by Jesus and God in directing and building the Early Church. There is evidence of their use and success in the church throughout history in many differing cultures and places. The research done on the Australian culture suggests missional small groups will be a better fit to the manner in which Australians want to engage with the truth of Christianity. The wider missional church discussions are reaching a point of engagement with typical institutionalised western churches. There is evidence of them working in western contexts today. Finally, the sample data collected from ten churches who are using missional small groups suggests they are working in the Australian context.

Given the above, it is recommended that Australian evangelical church leaders pursue missional small groups for their churches. It is to be acknowledged that this pursuit will be most likely at a slow pace. The findings of this article and associated survey analysis also commend the following directions for Australian evangelical churches in their pursuit. Firstly, churches should give careful thought to what their aims are and seek to use the same scorecard that God is using. Joining in the missional church conversation will help churches in asking honest questions about whether or not disciples are actually being made and taught to disciple others. Secondly, churches should seek to know and understand the culture they are in. Thirdly, they seek to change the culture of the whole by changing the culture in small groups first. Fourthly, churches should orient themselves to

strategies that make use of what exists outside the church (e.g. community groups, community needs, interests) and inside the church (e.g. current disciples, life groups, existing ministries). As this article has shown, missional small groups are already being used with some success in Australia.

8. APPENDIXES

Appendix 1. Missional Small Groups in Australian Churches Survey

The following is a 15-minute survey about your church and the small groups / life groups / cell groups / home groups / missional communities that are a part of it. It will need to be filled out by a representative of the church that has an understanding and ability to answer questions about the small groups that run as a part of your church, and some brief numerical information about the church in general.

The survey is anonymous, however, at the end of the survey there is an opportunity for you to provide your email address if you would like to receive a copy of the report or research.

The following definitions will help to clarify some of the questions in the survey below.

Small Group: A group created by the church for ministry where the number of people is between 3 – 25 people. These could be church life/cell/home groups or other small ministry groups that are not the normal weekly gathering of the church.

Missional Group: A group that is determined to spread the good news and love of Christ beyond itself in action and/or word, whose goal is to help those who don't yet trust in Christ to trust in Christ. In short, a group focused on helping those outside the church become a part of the church.

Church Growth: For the purposes of the survey, church growth is considered numerical growth. Though the growth of a church in their relationships with each other and with Christ is important. It is not the focus of this study.

Newcomers: People who have started regularly participating in your church activities that were not previously participating. i.e. new people who have come and stayed.

Part 1 - Church & Church Strategy

What is the average regular church service attendance in unique persons?

- we have no regular service
- 0-20
- 21-50
- 51-200
- 201-500
- 500+

What is the church membership size?

If you have no formal membership then provide informal membership estimation

- 0-20
- 21-50
- 51-200
- 201-500
- 500+

What is your strategy or church growth?

Please comment briefly on first points of contact for those outside the church with church activities. If there is no developed strategy, please comment "no strategy"

Please briefly comment on the reasoning behind your current strategy for church growth.

No essay here. though if the strategy is best explained by any particular website or book please provide links as appropriate.

How many small groups does your church have running?

- 0
- 1-3
- 4-10
- 11-20
- 21+

Regarding your church small groups, please check any categories used to develop the groups.

i.e. when creating groups, are there any common characteristics of the group members required?
Do they live in the same place? Are they of similar age? etc.

- We have no categories
- Age
- Gender
- Congregation (for multi congregation churches only)
- Social Group
- Interests (e.g. gardeners, skaters, fitness buffs, etc.)
- Location

Please check all that apply to your small groups "missional" intentions

- We do not encourage our small groups to be missional
- We encourage our small groups to be a first point of contact for non-Christians
- We cover material in the small groups that exhorts the group to live missional lives
- We encourage our groups to do mission together
- We encourage our groups to pray that their non-Christian friends will become Christians
- We encourage our groups to "target" a specific "people group"

How regularly do your small groups meet?

Please check all that apply. If it varies from group to group, check all that apply

- Weekly
- Fortnightly
- Monthly
- Other:

What takes place at small group meetings?

- Sharing life concerns
- Prayer for each other
- Prayer for people to be saved
- Reading the Bible
- Worship
- Evangelistic presentations / preaching
- Training in faith sharing
- Culturally "normal" activities (watching/playing sport, watching a movie, etc)
- Sharing a meal together
- Social Justice / "good of the city" type activities
- Other:

Are your small groups encouraged to be a starting point for a non-church connected person or non-Christian to connect with your church?

- Yes
- No

Part 2 - Effectiveness of Strategy

Have you seen an increase in attendance of church ministry events / services over the past 3 years

- Yes
- No

If your answer to the previous question is yes, by how many people has it grown by?

Type "no numerical growth" into the "other" section if you answered "No" in the previous question.

- 1-5
- 6-10
- 10-20
- 21-50
- 51-100
- 101-200
- 201-500
- 501+
- Other:

Of this growth, what percentage were new-Christians / previously unchurched

Please provide an estimation if the exact figure is unknown. If there has been no growth, please type "No Growth"

Of the newcomers to your church over the past 3 years, how many have had involvement in small groups?

Please estimate if an exact figure unknown.

Of the newcomers to your church over the past 3 years, how many had their FIRST involvement with the church through a small groups?

Please estimate if an exact figure unknown.

Of the newcomers to your church over the past 3 years, how many have shown a desire to share their own faith with others?

Please estimate if an exact figure unknown.

What role do you see small groups have played in your church's "new Christian" numerical growth over the past 3 years?

Please comment on any other role your small groups have played in your church over the past 3 years.

Appendix 2 – Web Addresses for Missional Church Movements

List of websites for recommended Missional Church movements using missional small groups / missional communities.

3DM - <http://3dmovements.com/>

Soma - <http://wearesoma.com/> and <http://www.somatacoma.org/>

Austin Stone - <http://austinstone.org/>

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