

PHILIPPINE BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

**THE RELEVANCE OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH GROUP DYNAMICS
IN SPIRITUAL FORMATION OF GROWING BELIEVERS**

A RESEARCH PAPER SUBMITTED

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INTRODUCTION

Definition of Terms

Small Group

“A small group within the church is a voluntary, intentional gathering of three to twelve people regularly meeting together with the shared goal of mutual Christian edification and fellowship.”¹

Spiritual Growth Group

“A small group of people who are seeking to attain growth in their understanding of religion and in religious experiences which should also result in growth in personal awareness and self-fulfillment.”²

Spiritual Formation

“A process concerned with the holistic growth and development of the individual and its ultimate result is an authentic maturity in Christ- the true goal of the Christian faith.”³

Importance of Study

Small groups are diverse in the way they are done. As a result of this research, the researcher determined that spiritual growth group dynamics is well matched with developing and challenging growing believers for genuine spiritual formation and transformation, leading to Christ- likeness. The researcher also believes that effective use of spiritual growth group dynamics will be a useful aid in developing mature believers who can effectively interact within the larger Christian community. Considering the problem that the church has had with spiritual formation of adults, this study should be viewed as critical in developing believers that can be an example, and a light to the world.

¹Neal F. McBride, *How to Lead Small Groups* (Colorado Spring, CO: NavPress, 1990), 23.

²Charles F. Kemp, *Prayer-Based Growth Groups* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1974), 17.

³Nick Taylor, “Spiritual Formation: Nurturing Spiritual Vitality” in *Introducing Christian Education: Foundations for the Twenty-First Century*. Ed. Michael J. Anthony (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 91.

CHAPTER I

SPIRITUAL GROWTH GROUP DYNAMICS

Relationships, intimacy needs, sense of belonging are descriptive words associated with growth group.⁴ Its dynamics and processes indicate stages and change. The very nature of growth group lends to its usefulness in faith development from spiritual formation to transformation. “Personal faith cannot be built with impersonal methods. Spiritual growth is built not by involving people in programs, but rather by encouraging relationships that will support them in their faith.”⁵ Consequently, God has made mankind to have fellowship with Him and with others.

Characteristics of Spiritual Growth Groups

Believers need each other to grow in their faith. A small group committed to spiritual growth can function as a microcosm of the universal Church to help new believers adopt into the family of God. Michael Griffiths is quoted by Willoughby as saying, “It is not enough to use the phrase ‘born again’ and then behave as though we have been born as orphans in the wilderness. We must recognize that if God has begotten us again, then we have been born into the new family, the new household of God.”⁶

All small groups have particular characteristics. The group members can determine the primary reason for their group’s existence. Emphases are placed on these group traits that are necessary to meet the needs and attain to the purpose of individual groups. Neil McBride noted these characteristics of a group. These are background, participation pattern, communication, cohesion (unity), atmosphere, norms, sociometric pattern, structure and organization, procedures and goals.⁷ Growth groups are dynamic forms of small groups because they can supply members with a sense of belonging through trust, acceptance even when conflicts arise, and security from danger since they are a recapitulation of properly functioning family groups.⁸

⁴Donaldson R. Forsyth, *Group Dynamics*. 2nd ed. (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing, 1990), 482.

⁵Michael C. Mack, *The Synergy Church: A Strategy for Integrating Small Groups and Sunday School* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 23.

⁶R. Willoughby, ed., *The Quiet Time Companion* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 23.

⁷McBride, 53.

⁸Forsyth, 482.

Stages of the Spiritual Growth Group Dynamics

“Good groups do not happen automatically, they take time, commitment, understanding and the power of the Holy Spirit.”⁹ Small groups’ lifecycle is likened to life’s developmental stages. The first phase forming as in birth to infancy demands care and nurture.¹⁰ The next step is norming like the childhood stage there is a lot to learn about acceptable behaviors and boundaries.¹¹ The third phase is conforming akin to the teenage stage of questioning, challenging and adjustments for the next level.¹² The fourth step is maturity or performing. This phase of the group is teeming with activity and the product of the group work tests unity and adherence to their covenant.¹³ The final stage is old age and death (reforming or adjourning). This is a time for reminiscing and rejoicing in spite of the difficulties, there is a sense of accomplishment all shared by each group member.¹⁴ Donald Forsyth identified the storming stage in group dynamics that normally occur after forming stage shortly before the norming stage. Conflict occurs during this stage of group life, a painful but absolutely necessary step to endure for growth to be realized.¹⁵

Growth Group Dynamics as Depicted in Biblical Accounts

One of the attributes of God is His Trinity. In the Genesis account (Genesis 2:18) God said that it was not good for man to be alone and He gave man a suitable helper in the woman.¹⁶ According to Micah 2:15, God’s plan for them was to have godly offspring. A family is a unity of love whose purpose in God’s design is to give glory to Him. But mankind had fallen short of God’s and even his own personal expectation because of broken relationships with God and with others. Jesus Christ the ‘Immanuel’ is the only one who can reconcile these relationships. Once men and women are restored to a right relationship with God they also long for fellowship with other believers. The apostle John wrote in I John 1:7, “But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one other, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from sin.”

⁹Steve Barker, Judy Johnson, & others, *Good Things Come in Small Groups: The Dynamics of Good Group Life*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 16.

¹⁰McBride, 40.

¹¹Ibid., 45.

¹²Ibid., 48.

¹³Ibid., 52.

¹⁴Ibid., 51.

¹⁵Forsyth, 79.

¹⁶All Biblical quotations are taken from the New International Version unless otherwise stated.

Biblical love, genuine fellowship, building the body of believers, and nurture of spiritual gifts are dynamic Biblical goals. These can be successfully realized in group process.¹⁷

Leadership Style that Enhances Spiritual Growth Within the Group

Jesus called His disciples together and said; “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave- just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:25-28)

The servant leader according to Doug Whallon is “the Biblical model of leadership that is built on twin concepts: (1) a servant serves by leading and (2) a leader leads by serving.”¹⁸ A leader who follows the example of Jesus is one who enables the members to be what God wants them to be. This empowering relationship between leader and each group member facilitates encouragement and influence toward love and good deeds.¹⁹ A servant leader plays a very important role in strengthening others to be themselves and are emboldened to freely give and receive love. As the servant-leader and members of the group abide by the guiding of the Holy Spirit, the group grows spiritually. Thanksgiving to God overflows beyond the boundaries of the group.

¹⁷McBride, 26-27.

¹⁸McBride, 37.

¹⁹Julie Gorman, “Small Groups in the Local Church,” in *Introducing Christian Education: Foundations for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Michael J. Anthony (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 181.

CHAPTER II

SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Nature of Spiritual Formation

“Spiritual formation is more than the transfer of knowledge from a teacher to a learner. It is a process concerned with the holistic growth and development of the individual. Whereas the goal of education is learning, the goal of spiritual formation is maturity.”²⁰ Growing and developing in spiritual maturity is a process that is described in Scripture as “being transformed into the image and likeness of Jesus” thus the first order of learning is with actualization or being.²¹ “Spiritual formation begins with the change of heart, where being begins. These changes primarily bring about relational depth with God and others.”²² According to Dallas Willard “there is nothing just between me and God. For all that that is between me and God affects who I am; and that, in turn modifies my relationships with everyone around me and deeply affects my relationship with God. Hence those relationships must be transformed if I am to be transformed.”²³ The apostle Paul acknowledges the dyad path of being and doing of spiritual formation when he wrote Romans 12:2. The Christian life is a process and dynamic in nature. Therefore there is not a standardized gauge to measure progress from spiritual formation, transformation to full maturity. But it is understood that the final goal is Christ-likeness. It is commanded in Colossians 1:28, “We proclaim Him admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.”²⁴

Spiritual Formation Through the Life Stages

Jesus, during his abode here on earth involved the children in His teachings. He was indignant with his disciples for preventing the children to go near Him. He did not disregard any age group when He taught.²⁵ “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (Mark 10:14). He then proceeded to tell everyone that each of them should have faith like a child in order to enter the kingdom of God. Spiritual formation begins at childhood.

²⁰Taylor, 91.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid., 92.

²³Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 151.

²⁴Taylor, 92.

²⁵Ibid., 93.

Spiritual Formation in Children

Robert Clark defines spiritual formation in children as a “step by step and stage by stage process through which a child is guided, encouraged, nurtured, admonished and disciplined to embrace Christ as Savior and be disciplined to develop as a Christian through the work and power of the Holy Spirit’.”²⁶ Child developmental theorists do not agree as to how children develop behaviorally, “whether children are passive or active in their development.” However they have a consensus that for children to develop in these area, human relationships is integral component in human characteristics development.²⁷

Spiritual Formation in Adolescents

Preteens’ and Teens’ spiritual formation must be handled with grace and truth. The reality of Christian truths must also be reflected in the lives of those that claim to know them.²⁸ According to James Bryant Smith selfhood in adolescence proceeds by imitation and integration. He defines the two:

Imitation is the process of adapting to one’s surroundings by patching together the beliefs and behaviors of others. Adolescents try to develop a sense of who they are by attempting to look, act, think, and sound like someone else. On the other hand, integration is the process of testing, separating, and discriminating between several types of beliefs and behaviors until one discovers, that which is genuine and real. It involves interaction with others, personal reflection, and freedom to explore.²⁹

Imitation starts with relationships they can trust in the home. This is followed by personal observation in having an intimate relationship with God. They can understand Scripture when it captivates the mind and heart. “They need models of adults who will give them both grace and truth, people who will love them unconditionally while showing them the reality about themselves.”³⁰

²⁶Robert Clark, “Spritual Foormation in Children,” in *The Christian Educator’s Handbook on Spiritual Formation*, ed. Kenneth O. Gangel and James C. Wilhoit (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 234.

²⁷Taylor, 92.

²⁸Ibid, 94

²⁹James Bryan Smith, “Spiritual Formation in Adolescents,” in *The Christian Educator’s Handbook on Spiritual Formation*, ed. Kenneth O. Gangel and James C. Wilhoit (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), p. 234.

³⁰Taylor, 94.

Enabling them to articulate Christian principles in their day-to-day experience facilitates spiritual formation for adolescents. Delegating responsibilities enhances this enabling process. But it must give leeway for failure without condemnation. This is an ideal safe haven for spiritual formation.

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Spiritual Formation in Adults

Spiritual formation is still an ongoing process even in adulthood. Creative learning through developmental guidance, intentional relationships, and pressing on toward spiritual goals are necessary for spiritual maturity. The apostle Paul wrote towards the end of his life, “Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13-14).

Malcolm Knowles identified four critical postulates indispensable in the maturity process:

1. The adult’s self-concept moves from dependence toward self-direction. Adults prefer to be involved in the direction of their growth and learning. Don’t expect them to take a passive role; create ways for them to be active in their formation. Offer choices, assess individual discipleship needs, and delegate responsibilities to the learner whenever possible.
2. The adult accumulates a growing reservoir of experiences that become an increasing resource for learning. Utilize real-life experiences in the formation process. Celebrate personal history, draw out life lessons from past trials, and crises, acknowledge former lessons learned, and move on to new ground.
3. The adult’s readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his or her social role. Adults are most concerned with the everyday roles they find themselves in---employee, parent, boss, sibling, spouse. The areas of discipleship that will provoke the most passion for them will involve these roles.
4. The adult’s time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly his or her orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem-centeredness.³²

³¹Ibid.

³²Malcolm Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education* (New York: Association press, 1970), 43-44.

Christ-likeness is the Ultimate Goal of Spiritual Formation

The apostle Paul in his letter to the members of the church in Colosse about the Gospel of Christ, “I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness- the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:25-27). And again he wrote to the Church in Ephesus to apply the diverse spiritual gifts given them, “to prepare God’s people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature attaining to the measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12-13). Spiritual formation is made visible in a growing believer as his/her life is transformed in the image and likeness of Jesus. This transformation in the lives of many believers is vital so that they might reveal God’s righteousness and sovereignty.³³ Dallas Willard proposed a general pattern of effective personal transformation and this like spiritual formation can only transpire as God advocates and guides each growing believer. Willard wrote that vision, intention and means or V-I-M for short effects authentic inward transformation into Christlikeness. “The vision of Christ-likeness and the solid intention of obeying Christ will naturally lead to seeking out and applying means for achieving those ends.”³⁴

³³Willard, 58.

³⁴Ibid., 59-61.

CHAPTER III

WAYS GROWTH GROUP DYNAMICS CAN ENHANCE SPIRITUAL FORMATION

In the field of psychology and in church ministries there is an overwhelming demand for small group encounter. History has proven their efficacy and this present high tech and high touch society yearns for authentic relationships.

Growth Group Builds Relationships Necessary For Spiritual Growth and Transformation

Four decades ago psychologist Kurt Lewin proposed that transformation is attained proficiently in group interaction rather than the individualized setting. He further observed that group processes are especially effective in evoking and maintaining change.³⁵ “Piaget has generated important studies on the factors that promote development. Two important factors are ‘*social interaction*’ and the process of ‘*exploring tensions*’ or ‘*disequilibrium*’. People tend to grow and develop as they struggle with problems in groups.”³⁶ The Plueddemanns quote J. I. Packer as saying, “We should not think of our fellowship with other Christians as a spiritual luxury... We should recognize rather that such fellowship is a spiritual necessity; for God has made us in such a way that our fellowship with Himself is fed by our fellowship with fellow Christians...”³⁷ Rick Warren concurs that Christian spiritual maturity thrives in fellowship but spiritual growth is stunted in solitude.³⁸ The question that needs to be asked is how can wholesome process of growth group advance spiritual growth and transformation? “The key is a Biblically based philosophy that asks questions about our ultimate purpose in life, about the nature of persons and about aims and methodologies.”³⁹ Jim and Carol Plueddeman suggest that growth groups and enabling groups must have the purpose of growing in Christ as the fellowship’s unifying factor.⁴⁰

³⁵Forsyth, 482.

³⁶Jim Plueddemann and Carol Plueddemann, *Pilgrims in Progress: Growing in Groups* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1990), 33.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 127.

³⁸Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Manila: OMF Literature, 1995), 389.

³⁹Plueddemann, 12.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

A good group process connects the here and now life instances of the members with Biblical truths. This group process must observe what the Bible is saying for proper '*interpretation*' then struggle with '*personal implications*' to encourage obedience and application to day by day situation of what was gleaned from this experience.⁴¹

Growth Group Encourages Thinking, Being, and Doing Applicable for Spiritual Growth and Transformation

Regarding groups, Marianne and Gerald Corey have come to this conclusion:

Groups provide a dynamic and stimulating way to learn about yourself and your relationships. Often we are dissatisfied and unaware of our own self-defeating behaviors. In the privileged environment of a group, others can be counted on for spontaneous and truthful reactions and feedback that can help you see yourself more clearly. The group allows you to discover how you relate to others, how others are affected by you and how you make it easy or difficult for others to be close to you. Your strengths and growth areas will be highlighted as you challenge yourself to take risks in the group setting.⁴²

In this, the Coreys had taken into account the conceptual framework of the cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions of human experience. Forsyth noted that Irvin Yalom's '*curative-factors model*' provides a comprehensive view on how change and growth are facilitated in groups. He described the general group conditions and listed a number of the mechanisms that can advance change in members of the group. "His list includes the installing of hope, universality, the imparting of information, altruism, the corrective recapitulation of primary family group, the development of socializing techniques, imitative behavior, interpersonal learning, group cohesiveness, catharsis, and existential factors."⁴³

Growing believers develop in understanding and obedience to Christ as they share various life experiences with other learners. Accountability to one another encourages growth because there is love and affirmation and they are a part of a unit that permits and warrants growth.⁴⁴

⁴¹Ibid., 56-59.

⁴²Marianne Schneider Corey and Gerald Corey, *Groups: Process and Practice*, 4th ed. (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/ Cole Publishing Company, 2000), 385.

⁴³Forsyth, 477.

⁴⁴Mack, 83.

Growth Group Enhances Nurture, Worship, Community and Mission for Well-balanced Spiritual Growth

The elements of nurture, worship, community, and mission were customs that unified the first century Church. This was recorded in Acts 2:42-47.⁴⁵

They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Everyday they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Information, experience, reflection and community are four elements present in small group needed for the process of spiritual growth to occur. However in and of themselves, they are incapable of changing the lives of growing believers. This is the sole work of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁶ The early Church practiced these four factors. The members devoted themselves to the promulgation of the apostles' teachings. This was information. They practiced being and doing by praying together, eating together, and fellowshiping together. They corporately experienced the miraculous signs and wonders done by the apostles and they reflected on these as they went to their homes giving praise and thanks to God. They enjoyed the favor of the people and the Lord added to their number daily. They became a community with a mission to reach those who have not yet received Jesus as Savior and Lord.

The cycle of interpersonal learning in clinical psychology of learning groups follow a similar pattern observed in early Church groups in Acts. The experiencing/describing/processing/applying cycle of interpersonal learning is this: First, the group members perform an experiential exercise that requires self-assessment or active interaction within the group. Second, they describe their experiences within the group by discussing their personal feelings, thoughts and reactions. Third, the consultant helps the group members conceptualize their experiences by processing the exercise. Lastly, the interpersonal learning is completed when the group members identify ways in which they can apply their newfound knowledge in their own work, family, and other interpersonal settings.⁴⁷

⁴⁵Barker, 23.

⁴⁶Taylor, 97.

⁴⁷Forsyth, 469.

CONCLUSION

This paper addressed the problem: What is the relevance of spiritual growth group dynamics in the spiritual formation of growing believers? To accomplish this spiritual growth group dynamics was described and shown to have certain characteristics, stages, and an associated leadership style that is Biblical and useful in spiritual formation. Next, spiritual formation was shown to be a process leading to spiritual transformation through the life stages with Christ-likeness as the ultimate goal. Finally, spiritual growth group dynamics was shown to aid spiritual formation through building relationships with God and other believers, and encouraging thinking, being, and doing.

“It is out of our relationship with God that selfhood develops, but it is out of our relationship with others that our self is given shape. As we respond and react with other people, we discover our potential as creative and loving persons. The most basic forms of interaction help us to know who we are and what we might become.”⁴⁸ Growth group can facilitate genuine fellowship with God and other believers resulting in authentic spiritual growth and transformation in growing believers. “Growth groups help the believer move closer to Christ and live like and for Him.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸Robert H. Boyte and Kelly Boyte Peters, *Spiritual Growth in the Congregation* (St. Louis, MO: CBP Press, 1988), 36.

⁴⁹Mack, 151.

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