

The Networking of Groups

by Neil Cole

The created world has natural boundaries held in place by gravity. The oceans are held in place by the shores. The atmosphere is contained by the weight of earth's gravity. Gravity keeps the solar system contained in orbit around the sun. In a similar way people have natural boundaries in the way that we function best. We are pulled into social groupings of certain sizes by a spiritual gravity inherent with the function of the group.

Jesus, too, consciously stayed in the boundaries of social gravity. Jesus invested most in an inner circle made up of Peter, James, and John, while he lived with a spiritual family of the 12 disciples. He personally trained and deployed the 70. When he ascended into heaven, he left behind 120 disciples. While these groupings were the main focus of his life and ministry in order of priority, he also healed, taught, and fed the multitudes, while appearing to more than 500 followers at the same time after his resurrection.

Starting Small

Jesus also describes the kingdom of God with the parable of the mustard seed, which starts small and then eventually grows very large. He said: *“How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, yet when it is sown, grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; so that the birds of the air can nest under its shade.”*(1) The growth of the kingdom of God must start at the smallest of social groupings. Jesus is instructing us that the kingdom of God must start small and grow via multiplication to have great and expansive influence.

If we cannot multiply house churches, we will never see a movement. If we cannot multiply leaders we will never multiply house churches. If we cannot multiply disciples, we will never multiply leaders. The way to see a true house church multiplication movement is to multiply healthy disciples, then leaders, then churches, and finally movements—in that order.(2) Trying to multiply large, highly complex “macro” organisms without first multiplying and networking on the “micro” level is impossible.

Therefore, we would suggest that there are five natural sizes for social groupings that should be multiplied and networked together into today's house church movements.

The Inner Circle: 2 or 3 People

The beginning of every family starts here at this size. The Bible often elevates a group of two or three to significance. Both the Old and New Testaments mention the phrase "two or three." It is interesting that at least 10 times “two or three” is suggested as an ideal size at which to conduct ministry. The Bible does not say “two or more” or “three or less” but always “two or three.” Perhaps it is good to have some flexibility without too many options. There are several reasons why this may be the ideal size for effective fellowship and ministry that will penetrate the rest of the church and ultimately the kingdom of God:

- Community is stronger with two or three (Ecclesiastes 4:9–12).
- Accountability is stronger with two or three (1 Timothy 5:19).
- Confidentiality is stronger with two or three (Matthew 18:15–17).

- Flexibility is stronger with two or three (Matthew 18:20).
- Communication is stronger with two or three (1 Corinthians 14:26–33).
- Direction is stronger with two or three (2 Corinthians 13:1).
- Leadership is stronger with two or three (1 Corinthians 14:29).

The Family: 12 to 15 People

This is the natural size in which an extended family operates. It is small enough that all parts can intimately know one another, yet large enough to have significant diversity and group dynamics. Across the world, this represents the size of house churches everywhere. It is a natural sized grouping to operate naturally as a family.

The Team: 70 to 75 People

When it comes to training and deploying leaders as part of a team, this grouping represents the most efficient size to get across pertinent information, skills, and relationship, while still maintaining quality. When it comes to training leaders in a region through, say, monthly leadership meetings, this is the size of group that is best.

The Network: 120 to 150 People

Malcolm Gladwell, in his book [The Tipping Point](#), writes almost spiritually about the significance of the number 150 in the development of movements throughout history.⁽³⁾ We, too, have found by experience that a house church network will very rarely grow beyond 15 house churches (or 150 people). This boundary is natural. The kingdom does not stop at this boundary. What is necessary beyond this boundary is to reproduce more *networks*, rather than trying to add more house churches to an existing network. Of course, we should always look for opportunities to start new churches, but we will also find that other churches stop meeting and a network of approximately 15 churches will usually remain constant. The key to multiplying networks is to raise up leaders from within who can start and lead new emerging churches in an entirely new network.

The Masses

Beyond the above numbers are the masses. This is a more relative grouping, but in reality, it is a gathering together of the other smaller groups for the purposes of annual conferences, occasional “worship and teaching” celebrations, saturation of cities with the gospel, broader impact on a culture, etc.

Notes:

(1) Mark 4:30–32 (NASB)

(2) Neil Cole (2007), [Search and Rescue](#), Regal Publications. This soon to be published book expands on principles necessary to multiply disciples and presents Life Transformation Groups, a simple reproducible system that is working all over the world.

(3) Gladwell refers to it as the “magic number 150”, [The Tipping Point](#), pp. 169-192.