

UNDAUNTED COURAGE

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PSC (www.parkstreet.org) is a unique historic (1809) city church with membership around 1700 and a weekly attendance of 2200. There are two morning services, very conservative, with a large population of older people. Evening services over the years previously attracted a couple hundred but has constantly decline resulting in only 30-40 in attendance in 1992. Evening contemporary service started fall of 1993 attracting hundreds of young people.

The time was right for a small group ministry which began in the fall of 1994. After 6 years the groups reached 100 involving 1200 people. Small accountability groups, college age and international ministry groups are not included in this number. The demographics of the church changed dramatically with the attendee's average age becoming 28.

PSC over the years had experienced few to many small groups for a short time and for some particular purpose, such as mission conference week. For the long run, only a handful were on-going and those had a history of being together for many years. I was hired in early 1994 to "just do it". With the luxury of doing only small groups, I began the huge undertaking with undaunted courage. I certainly couldn't let anyone know how incapable I suddenly felt. I had several years of small group management experience at a smaller church and the challenge of growing a small group ministry within a huge church where the ministerial support team had not yet bought into the small group vision was quite frankly frightening. The senior pastor at that time, fortunately, was the driving force. Totally committed to the concept, he encouraged and supported me in my initial attempts in casting a vision for caring communities through the small group venue. My experience at Leadership Network Forums in Colorado provided new nomenclature as I began painting a picture of PSC becoming a church "of" small groups where the small groups would become integral to the life of the church family.

Charging ahead with the idea that everyone could be cared for and connected through small groups and that Sunday Christian Formation classes would benefit from including the small group experience as well became my battle cry. Looking back, it took about three years for the ministerial staff to begin accepting small groups as vital venues in the life of the church and then suddenly, it seemed, everything functioned in small groups.

PSC is situated in the heart of Boston, MA. We are surrounded by 43 colleges drawing hundreds of undergraduate, graduate and post graduate students. Transition is rampant. 50% of church attendees transition in less than two years. In six years I trained over 500

leaders watching many leave for greener pastures and foreign countries. It's a mindset one must understand and expect while pouring love, encouragement and opportunities into each leader. Our Associate Pastor had done his demographics in starting a Sunday night contemporary service and the young people poured through the doors. People were looking to belong, develop relationships and find a church home for spiritual growth. The interest for small groups by the younger church family was overwhelming.

I began my position in March, 1994, by beginning to build a ministry team. Learning the history by hearing stories, what had worked, what had not, was helpful in my approach to the design. I began spending time with many potential leaders who had been recommended to me by my new team. As part of a seminary course, I began writing a training manual and promoted a six week leadership track during both morning and evening Spiritual Formation hours for the coming fall season. 76 leaders attended the first training. We paired them up and started about 30 groups. Slowly, but steadily, the groups increased, in spite of losing many good leaders to transition. The first three years we still struggled with the initial vision and resembled a church "with" small groups. By year four, with great excitement, it was evident that we were truly a church "of" small groups. As we kicked off the fifth year, we had 100 groups. Spiritual Formation classes, membership classes and most gatherings began utilizing the small group process for their time together. The ministry team had been "undaunted", determined, committed and courageous. The time was right, the vision was cast, people responded and God had blessed.

The emphasis was on creating safe communities for fellowship, spiritual growth, prayer support and mission. Most all of the small groups centered around bible study, some used guide books, some worked through scripture, a few read and discussed theological books or wrestled with scripture prior to a sermon. Many groups were "full" and few opportunities were available for constantly "open" groups. Initially the vision of multiplying was not a priority. Most nights the church was packed out with small groups as it was convenient for the many young people in school and often for those in the marketplace who enjoy meeting at the church before heading home. Many groups were age related. In three years, one group had become 30 groups for those in their 20s. A similar experience occurred for the 30-40 age where 10 groups were established. Many groups were cross-generational, older couples, younger couples and seeker driven. When I first started the ministry, it resulted in an "eclectic" model. Leaders designed groups

according to what worked! Fellowship times were important. Many of the groups studied the same material. Mission was a challenge, but numerous opportunities presented themselves purely by being a city church. A manual of suggestions and contact information was distributed to each group for mission ideas.

The vision initially was that everyone at PSC become a part of small group life. It has been my experience that most churches do well to have 50-60% involved in small groups. I'm wondering how realistic it is to expect 100%. Eventually most ministerial staff participated in some type of group which was important with modeling. The church family understood that care and connection happened through small groups. An exciting development was to offer church retreats through a small group experience several times a year. When the annual meeting rolled around and elections were in place, those nominated wrote short bios and always gave testimony to the impact of their small group upon their life. There were twelve small group leaders on my ministry team who supported, encouraged and gave sacrificially of their time.

Becoming part of the small group ministry was heavily promoted. Early September offered a ministry fair where all ministries displayed and promoted their "wares". Creative brochures, opportunities for signing up for a group and leadership training schedules were promoted. "Ministry Moments" during the service allowed verbal announcements with enthusiasm. A bulletin board, placed in a strategic viewing spot, creatively offered group opportunities and philosophy of small group life at PSC. The big push encouraged immediate sign-up with another opportunity in January. This process encouraged people to not put off the decision. Later in the fall, brief interviews during the worship service with leader/participant focused more attention on the growing ministry. Leaders were recognized and celebrated. Leadership trainings were offered each September and January with the tag line "attending does not commit you to leadership nor the team to having you lead". Being blunt on occasion is helpful.

Leadership training was required for each leader and existing co-leader. The choices offered: be part of the morning leadership track, experience the training through being part of a small group of potential leaders or attend one Saturday session. Leaders were interviewed before starting a group. And, leadership committed to four additional training sessions during the year, promising them the sessions would always be worth their extra time commitment, and they were. Most leaders honored the commitment. The year ended in June with a leadership celebration function. My favorite small group book of the year was usually given as a gift to encourage their on-going learning process.

A problem in recruiting future leaders seemed to be based on insecurity in leading, the responsibility in gathering the group and/or deciding what to study. For this situation, a different format was designed where new leaders were part of a Thursday night study where everyone studied the same material. The leaders gathered a half hour before the study, prayed and discussed a particular theological issue that might need more development.

The study began with everyone together. A speaker introduced the material and gave additional challenges. It was later switched to a

closing time. 12 new groups started under this format with the first offering and continued to grow. Most often these leaders felt more confident the following year and led groups elsewhere. It was a useful initiation into leadership.

The main weakness, and important one, for my design was the lack of shepherding of leaders. It was a daunting assignment and I tried to function as if I were undaunted! The demands for small group leaders was almost overwhelming and my philosophy developed with the feeling that I could not afford to give up any potential leader to be a coach. The ministry team served as an umbrella care team and it worked for a while. Many of the new leaders felt like they had been trained and then fed to the wolves with no on-going encouragement. This, unfortunately, was true as the groups began increasing in number. I did my best with the time I had, but it wasn't enough.

One excellent format for coaching was developed by one of my interns. We formed Pod groups where a ministerial staff or elder would lead a small group of small group leaders. Meeting every three weeks, personal support, group dynamics, theological assistance and community was built. These became significant times of encouragement and great fun to lead! However, not every leader committed to these groups. Effective coaching still is an issue at PSC.

New England is unique. We don't like change, we are very private people, we are traditional and we favor insiders. This effects how we do ministry here. For instance, favoring insiders raises the question of growth. Most traditional NE churches do not want to grow. They like to stay the way they have been for hundreds of years! With this in mind, many of the older people were threatened with the small group ministry vision. It had not been done like that before and "community" would probably be a passing fad.

Fortunately, the influx of young people in response to the evening contemporary service provided the target group for the initial stages. Enthusiasm reigned and was "caught". Older people started joining and benefiting from being together.

My recommendation to starting a small group ministry is to "hurry slowly", be patient, concentrate on the new design and young enthusiasm. Younger people in particular want to build relationships. As with my experience, the older generation eventually became involved. Do your demographics. Know your church culture and your geographical culture. Don't feel you have to adopt a particular model you might read about, do what works for your church. Care for your leaders by modeling. Train them in the initial skills and concepts that create healthy small groups. Challenge them with their spirituality and offer on-going classes for spiritual growth. Start small and develop quality. Aim to have groups ready to enfold new people as they visit or show interest in your church. Assimilation is one of the most difficult processes. Design a system that works for you and make it easy for people to get connected. It will drive you crazy, you'll need undaunted courage, but the people will experience a sense of belonging and that's the first step!