

Our Vision for Small Groups

Acts 2:42–47

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Many of you will have experienced what it is like to move to a new town or a new country. When everything is unfamiliar – the streets, the people, the culture, and the way things are done – it can be quite daunting. You may wonder: Where do I belong? Where are my people? Where can I find friendship and community.

And yet, one of the remarkable things I have experienced in moving to different places and countries is how quickly the church can become a spiritual home. That has certainly been my experience. I have lived in quite a few different places, and again and again I have discovered that, even in a completely unfamiliar environment, God has provided a Christian community where I could belong, make friends, grow in faith and serve alongside others.

My recent experience of coming to South Australia and to St Augustine's has been an example of that. This place was completely new for me, and yet God has given me and my family a spiritual home here among you.

I was reminded also of the year 2014 when Guan and I moved from South Korea, where we were living at that time, to Dunedin in New Zealand. We moved to Dunedin because I was beginning my doctoral studies at the University of Otago.

Dunedin was completely unfamiliar to us. We were in a new country and a new community. But God was already at work. Within a week of arriving in Dunedin, I was invited to a small group that met in the home of a Christian family. I went along, and I remember how warmly they welcomed me. I was a stranger, but they welcomed me as a friend and as a brother in Christ.

That small group became one of the ways God provided a spiritual home for me. The following Sunday I went along to their church, and that church became my church home during the years I was doing my doctoral research. When Guan joined me in Dunedin several months later, she too found a spiritual home there and became part of a ladies' group.

That experience has taught me that the church is not simply a gathering in a Sunday morning. The church is a community in which Christians share life together.

We need one another

We live in a time when community is desperately needed. Many people today are experiencing loneliness. We can live in cities, surrounded by many people, and yet feel alone. We can have hundreds of people in our contacts and friends on social media and yet have very few people with whom we can genuinely share our lives.

It is not only the people outside the church who are confronted by this problem. Christians can experience it, too. And this matters for us as believers because God did not create us to live the Christian life alone. From the very beginning of Scripture, God says that it is not good for human beings to be alone. And when Jesus calls people to follow him, he does not simply call isolated individuals; he creates a people. He calls us into a community of faith. That is why the New Testament repeatedly speaks about how Christians are to relate to one another.

Jesus says, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34). Paul says in Romans 15:7, “Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you.” In Colossians 3:16, he says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom.” In 1 Thessalonians 5:11, he instructs us to “encourage one another and build one another up.” Hebrews 10:24–25 tells us to “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works” and not to neglect meeting together. Colossians 3:13 calls us to “bear with one another” and forgive one another. And James 5:16 encourages us to “confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”

Think about what those passages are telling us. We are not simply being told to “attend church.” We are being called to know one another, love one another, encourage one another, pray for one another, forgive one another, serve one another and bear one another’s burdens. And it is difficult to live that kind of Christian life if our experience of church consists primarily of sitting among other people for an hour on Sunday morning.

Sunday worship is absolutely central. We gather as the whole people of God to hear his Word, to pray, to sing his praises, and to celebrate Holy Communion together. But we also need places where Christian relationships can become deeper and more personal. And that is one of the great opportunities presented by small groups.

The example of the early church

Our reading from Acts gives us a beautiful picture of this. Luke tells us: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” And then he says: “All the believers were together and had everything in common.” They met together in the temple courts, but they also “broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.”

There is something very important here. The early Christians gathered both as a large community and in smaller communities. They gathered in the temple, but they also gathered in homes. They

worshipped together, but they also shared meals together. They received teaching, but they also prayed together. They cared for one another, shared their possessions and responded to people's needs.

And notice what happened as they lived this kind of life together: "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." In other words, their community was not inward-looking. Their shared life together became part of God's mission. People saw something different among these Christians. They saw a people who loved one another, cared for one another, worshipped God together, shared what they had, welcomed others and proclaimed Jesus. And God used that community to bring people to faith. That is the biblical vision behind what we are beginning to explore here at St Augustine's.

Our vision for St Augustine's

So today I want to cast a vision for our small-groups ministry. I want to share with you something of my prayer and my hope for our church. I see St Augustine's as a church where many people belong to small groups that meet throughout the week. I see people gathering in homes and other appropriate places to pray together, open God's Word together, encourage one another, share life together and serve together. I see small groups becoming places where people who are already Christians grow deeper in their faith, but also places where people who are exploring Christianity can come, ask questions, build friendships and encounter Jesus.

I hope that, over time, belonging to a small group will become a normal and valued part of life at St Augustine's. And this is not about creating another programme to add to our church calendar. Our vision for small groups is that they would become a vital part of who we are as a church.

You may be wondering about the practical questions. Who will lead the small groups? Where will they meet? How often will they meet? What will they study? How will we organise them? Those are important questions, and we will work through them in due course. But today, I want us to think about what kind of small groups we want to establish and develop at St Augustine's. What should be the character – the DNA – of a St Augustine's small group? Let me briefly describe eight characteristics.

Eight characteristics of our small groups

1) Christ-centred and Spirit-empowered

First, our small groups will be Christ-centred and Spirit-empowered. Jesus will not be an optional extra. He is our Saviour and Lord, and he is the reason we gather. And we will depend upon the Holy Spirit to work among us – to help us understand God's Word, transform us, equip us, and lead us in mission. We want our groups to be places where we grow together in Christ through the work of his Spirit.

2) Biblically grounded

Second, our groups will be biblically grounded. God's Word shapes what we believe and how we live. Scripture has a central place in our life together. We want to listen to God, understand his Word and ask what difference it makes to our lives. We don't simply want to know more about the Bible. We want the Bible to shape us as followers of Jesus.

3) Prayerful

Third, our groups will be prayerful. Prayer is not something we squeeze into the final two minutes of a meeting. Prayer is an expression of our life together. We pray for one another – for our joys, struggles, families and needs. We pray for our church. We pray for our community. And we pray for people who do not yet know Christ. A healthy small group is a group that knows that it needs God.

4) Relational

Fourth, our groups will be relational. One of the great gifts of a small group is that people can be known more personally than is usually possible in a congregation of this size. We can share our joys and struggles. We can encourage one another. We can notice when someone is struggling. We can bear one another's burdens. And we can celebrate together. This is important because Christian fellowship is more than simply being in the same room. It is sharing life together in Christ.

5) Discipling

Fifth, our groups will be discipling communities. The goal is not simply that people enjoy themselves or make friends. The goal is to help people to grow in faith, character, knowledge, prayer, obedience and service. We want people to discover the gifts God has given them and become increasingly equipped to use those gifts for the sake of Christ and his Church.

6) Outward-looking

Sixth, our groups will be outward-looking. This is important. Our small groups are not closed Christian friendship circles where we simply enjoy one another and forget about everyone else. Instead, we want our groups to notice what is happening beyond the group. Who are our neighbours? Who are the people around us who are lonely? Who needs practical help? Who might we invite to share a meal? Where might we be able to bless someone?

7) Missional

Seventh, our groups will be missional. We want to pray for people who do not yet know Jesus. We want to practise hospitality. We want to be willing to talk about our faith. We want to look for opportunities to share the good news of Jesus. And we want our small groups to participate in the mission of our whole church.

8) Serving

And finally, our groups will be serving communities. Our groups look for practical ways to serve – within our church, in our local community and beyond.

So these are the eight characteristics of the small-group communities I envision for St Augustine's, and which I commend to you as a vision for us to pray about, discern and embrace together:

- 1) Christ-centred and Spirit-led
- 2) Biblically grounded
- 3) Prayerful
- 4) Relational
- 5) Discipling
- 6) Outward-looking
- 7) Missional
- 8) Serving

That is the kind of small-groups ministry I would love to see develop at St Augustine's.

What might God do through this?

And if, by God's grace, we begin to develop this kind of small-groups ministry, what might happen?

First, we will experience something of what God intends for his Church: Christian community. People will have places where they belong. People will be known and cared for. People will have others praying for them. People will grow in their knowledge and love of Christ. And I believe we may also see new people coming to faith. Perhaps someone comes to a small group because a friend invites them. Perhaps they are not yet Christians, but they feel safe enough to ask questions. Perhaps they encounter Christians who genuinely love one another and begin to wonder what makes that possible. Perhaps a young family finds a community where they feel they belong. Perhaps someone who has been on the margins of church life discovers a place where they can contribute and serve.

And as people grow, new leaders will emerge. People will discover gifts they did not realise they had. People will become equipped to serve in different ways. And, as the church grows spiritually and numerically, we will have greater capacity to participate in God's mission – to care for people in need, to reach our community, to support evangelism and mission, and to steward the resources God gives us for his kingdom.

But there is one benefit I want to emphasise above all the others – joy. There is something deeply joyful about seeing people flourish in Christ. There is joy when someone grows in faith. There is joy when someone discovers that God has given them gifts to serve. There is joy when a person

who did not know Jesus begins to follow him. There is joy when we see our church becoming healthier, stronger and more fruitful. And ultimately, there is joy because we know that we are participating in what God is doing.

What is our response?

So, what do I want you to do today? The first thing is very simple – pray. Pray for this vision. Pray that God will guide us. Pray that he will give us wisdom about how to develop our small-groups ministry. Pray for unity among us. Pray that God will raise up leaders. Pray that he will bring the right people into the right groups. And pray that through these groups people will come to know Jesus.

But prayer is not the only response. The second response is to discern what God may be calling you to do. Some of you may be thinking, “I would love to help lead a group.” Wonderful. Some may think, “I don’t know whether I could lead one, but perhaps I could explore that possibility.” Wonderful. Some may think, “I don’t want to lead, but I would value being part of a group.” Wonderful. And some may think, “I can’t lead or attend at the moment, but I would like to help us develop this ministry.” Wonderful.

There is a Response Form available to you today. It is very brief. I encourage you to take a minute to fill it in. You are not signing a contract. You are not committing yourself to something you don’t yet understand. You are simply helping us to discern what God may be doing among us. So please indicate how you might be interested in participating.

And I want to say this particularly to those who may be thinking, “I’m not the sort of person who could lead a small group.” Don’t decide that too quickly. You may not feel particularly gifted or experienced. But perhaps God is calling you to take a step of faith. And if that is the case, we will not simply ask you to lead a group and leave you on your own. We will work towards providing training, resources and support. Because this is not my project. It is not Parish Council’s project. It is part of our shared calling to be the Church of Jesus Christ. Our Mission Action Plan has identified the development of small groups as one of our priorities. Today we are taking one of the first steps towards turning that priority into reality.

And so I want to invite you to join me. Pray for this vision. Discern your part in it. And be willing to take the next step. Because my prayer is that, in the years ahead, when people come to St Augustine’s – whether they have been Christians for many years, whether they are new to the faith, or whether they are simply searching – they will find not only a church where they can worship on Sunday, but a Christian community where they can truly belong. A community where people know one another, love one another, pray for one another, encourage one another, grow together, serve together and join together in God’s mission.

And may God, by his Spirit and for the glory of Christ, make that vision a reality among us.

Amen.