

## **REAL CHURCHES NEED SMALL GROUPS**

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Too many churches are pervaded by a sense of unreality. My mind goes to the announcement often made in an English church: 'After the service we will have a time of fellowship over a cup of tea and biscuits'. I feel like shouting out: "Rubbish! That's not true'. For I have never experienced true fellowship over a church cup of tea and biscuits. I may have experienced a certain superficial friendliness - but real fellowship, never.

We Baptists are good at being friendly people - at offering cups of tea and maybe a chocolate biscuit too. Most of our churches, thank God, are not like that apocryphal church which was 'Gothic in architecture, arctic in temperature, and where the deacons walked up and down the aisles like polar bears!'. No, our churches are generally characterised by a certain degree of warmth, which in itself can be very winsome. But fellowship is more than warmth, fellowship is more than being friendly. Fellowship is something which goes much deeper. Fellowship is about operating at levels two and one, rather than levels five, four and three.

Let me explain. Some years ago the American Jesuit, John Powell in his book, *Why Am I Afraid To Tell You who I Am?* helpfully described five levels of conversation:

- Level 5: Clichés - "Terrible weather we're having these days!"
- Level 4: Facts about others - "Did you hear about Mrs So-and-So?"
- Level 3: My ideas & judgements - "Workers these days are only out for what they can get!"
- Level 2: My feelings - "I'm so relieved! I never realised that you felt that way about it"
- Level 1: Peak communication (absolute openness/honesty) - "Our relationship hasn't been easy, but I want to tell you that I really value you as my friend".

Most people can operate at levels 5,4,and 3 without too much difficulty. For example, level 5 is the kind of conversation we have with a stranger at a bus stop – or in a church pew. Level 4 is the kind of conversation we can have with an acquaintance ('gossip'), whether within or without the church. While level 3 is the kind of conversation which often goes on at the church meeting (save its normally not about workers, but about young people: 'Young people these days are not what they were!' or 'Young people never leave the kitchen tidy'). But how often do ordinary members in the church really get down to levels 1 and 2 - the levels of feeling and of peak communication? Rarely. Yet these levels are what real fellowship is all about.

Sadly, unless a church is prepared to structure its life around small groups, true fellowship will never really be possible. Honest conversations, meaningful relationships, will be the exception rather than the rule. It is only within the privacy of a small group, where people have begun to trust one another, that we can make ourselves vulnerable and so become real with one another. Small groups should not be optional extras any church – they are an essential to being church.

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