

Quality characteristic 6: Holistic small groups

"If we were to identify any one principle as the 'most important,' then without a doubt it would be the multiplication of small groups."

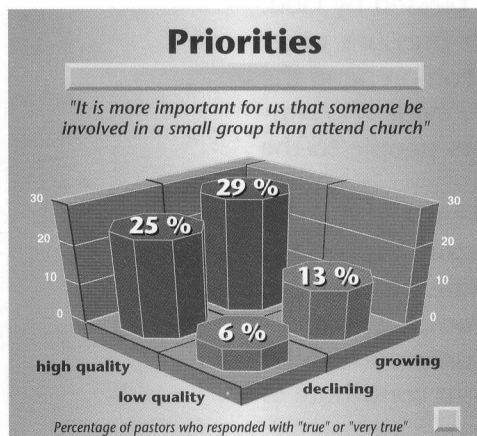
Our research in growing and declining churches all over the world has shown that continuous multiplication of small groups is a universal church growth principle. Furthermore, it has also disclosed what life in these small groups should be like if they are to have a positive effect on both quality and numerical growth within a church. They must be *holistic* groups which go beyond just discussing Bible passages to applying its message to daily life. In these groups, members are able to bring up those issues and questions that are immediate personal concerns.

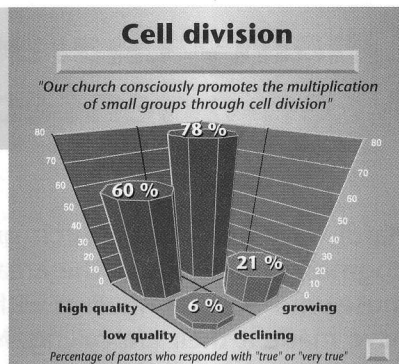
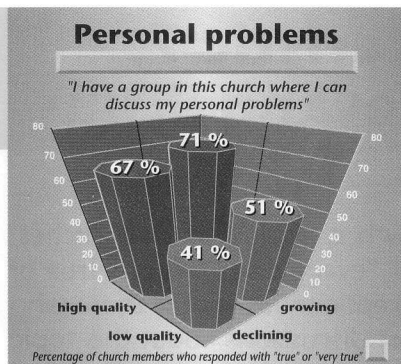
Holistic small groups are the natural place for Christians to learn to serve others—both in and outside the group—with their spiritual gifts. The planned multiplication of small groups is made possible through the continual development of leaders as a by-product of the normal group life. The meaning of the term "discipleship" becomes practical in the context of holistic small groups: the transfer of life, not rote learning of abstract concepts.

Small groups or worship service?

One result of our research is highly provocative. We presented the following statement to the pastors we surveyed: "It is more important for us that someone be involved in a small group than attend church." We asked them to indicate the response that best described the situation in their church. The diagram at the bottom left illustrates that the same answer "no" was found in both growing and declining, in qualitatively above-average and below-average congregations. We can be sure that this is *not* a church growth principle, and therefore it does not determine the quality index of a church. It is a radical, fringe position.

And yet—if we take a closer look at the results we notice that this "radical, fringe" position is much more common in churches with above-average quality than in churches with below-average quality. This means that there is a greater tendency to give small groups priority over worship service attendance (in itself a





Part 1: 8 quality characteristics

Two of the twelve questions related to small groups whose answers reveal a strong relationship to the quality and numerical growth of a church.

strange alternative) in churches with a high quality index and in churches that are growing numerically. This still does not make the priority of small groups over worship services a church growth principle, for a principle is something that a church should not neglect under any circumstances. Nonetheless, it allows us to infer the level of importance given to small groups in growing churches: they are not a supplement, like a nice but dispensable hobby. No, much of the essence of true church life is worked out in small groups. Our research confirms that the larger a church becomes, the more decisive the small group principle will be with respect to her further growth.

After we had processed all 4.2 million survey answers, we calculated which of the 170 variables had the most significant relationship to church growth. It is probably no coincidence that our computer survey selected this variable in the area of "holistic small groups": "Our church consciously promotes the multiplication of small groups through cell division" (see diagram top right). If we were to identify any *one* principle as the "most important"—even though our research shows that the *interplay of all* basic elements is important—then without a doubt it would be the multiplication of small groups.

In order to give proper weight to the strategic importance of small groups, we have conceptualized nearly all of our church growth materials so that they can be used in small group contexts. We found that there is an enormous difference, for example, between church leadership discussing "evangelism," "loving relationships," or "gift-oriented ministry" in its staff meetings and having each Christian, integrated into a small group, go through a process in which he or she experiences the meaning of these terms practically expressed in the life of the group.

The "most
important"
question

Small groups—
the pillars of
church growth