

# **A Vision for Small Groups at Holy Trinity Claygate**

## **Report to the PCC of the SG Vision Working Group. November 2007**

### *Working group members*

Pippa Cramer	Mike Harle	Stuart Sadler
Steve Cramer	Linda Morgan (chair)	John Smith
Tom Darwent	Sarah Slater	

## **1. Background**

The working group arose out of the vision process as set out in *'The Next Chapter'* in June 2007. Under the second aim, to see *'Deeper followers of Jesus'*, we see small groups as vital to the long-term health of HTC. A working group was set up to explore ways of building on the existing Homegroup (HG) structure and embracing new patterns of Small Groups, as they are more generally named. The Working Group met five times between July and October 2007 in order to develop and propose a vision for SGs at HTC, and to consider options for their future shape. The team drew on: (i) feedback from the PCC/Leaders Awayday, and from existing SGs and their leaders, (ii) the organisation of SGs in other churches, (iii) some 'market research' amongst HTC members not currently members of SGs and (iv) their own personal experiences of SGs at HTC and elsewhere.

## **2. Small groups at HTC – the present situation**

We have much to thank God for in our present situation. We currently have 22 homegroups (7 daytime, 15 evening groups), comprising approximately 230 members (~44% total adult church membership). Groups are valued as places in which deeper fellowship is enjoyed with one another and Christian growth is stimulated and encouraged. Fellowship, prayer, and open, honest sharing were things that members consistently value and are thankful for, based on recent feedback; additionally, Bible study/application, learning from more mature Christians and gaining confidence in prayer came out strongly as helping individuals' growth as Christians.

However, the numbers belonging to homegroups have been broadly static since 2003, and groups have been relatively uniform in study materials and approaches. Further, the overall age-profile of group members is also older than that of our main 10am Sunday service, with the parents of young (primary school or younger) children being particularly underrepresented in SGs. At the Awayday (May 2007) our leaders concluded that the present structure had probably reached saturation point in terms of potential membership.

### 3. Small group fundamentals at HTC

The Working Group sees the purposes of HTC SGs as follows (as distinct from SGs in the secular world, for instance):

- **Relationship** (with God, with others)
- **Christian Discipleship and Identity** (groups being secure under God of their own identity)
- **Growth** (personal, spiritual and numerical)

These purposes relate to the three overlapping strands of our overall vision – *more followers* (drawing in the fringe, nurture of new Christians), *deeper followers* (fundamental for those already in groups), both facilitated by being *closer followers* in community with one another, where each group has its own identity. How will we recognise a small group at Holy Trinity? We anticipate that in the future Holy Trinity will have a greater variety and diversity of SGs than our current situation (explored later in this report). However we would expect certain core activities at the heart of all our small groups,

- Fellowship
- Bible Study
- Prayer
- Service

although these individual activities might well be given a different emphasis and weight in different groups

### 4. A broad vision for the future – The church of Small Groups

How might SGs look in five year's time, given the above purpose?

#### 4.1 Movement from a church 'with' to a church 'of' small groups

There are three major models of the shape of SGs within a church

*The church **with** Small Groups* – This model sees SGs as optional groups that a church member can attend if desired. The Sunday service is the main focus of church life.

*The church **of** Small Groups* – Here, all members are committed to a Small Group and the focus of the church is split between Sunday services and the SGs.

*The church **is** Small Groups* – In this instance church happens in the Small Group and this becomes the focus rather than the larger Sunday services

At present, SGs at HTC most closely resembles the first model. The working group envisioned moving from the model of a church *with* SGs to a church *of* SGs. In this preferred new model, SGs would be truly central to the whole church's perception of what it is to be a member of the Church family. SG activities would be seen as "what church is about", just as much as our Sunday services. If SGs are to play a more central role in the life of HTC, with a much greater proportion of the congregation being involved in them than is currently the situation, then it would be both desirable and necessary for groups to have the following distinct characteristics.

#### 4.2 Vision Element 1: Accessible and Attractive Groups

The enablers above are likely to prove effective only if there is also an adequate provision of SGs that are both accessible (in timing, location and welcome) and attractive for people to join. The success of Toddler's Praise has shown the attraction of an appropriately accessible small group. Changing the time to make it more accessible had a positive impact on both numbers and variety of people attending. Its appeal has extended beyond those who attend Sunday services (or indeed those who are Christians at all).

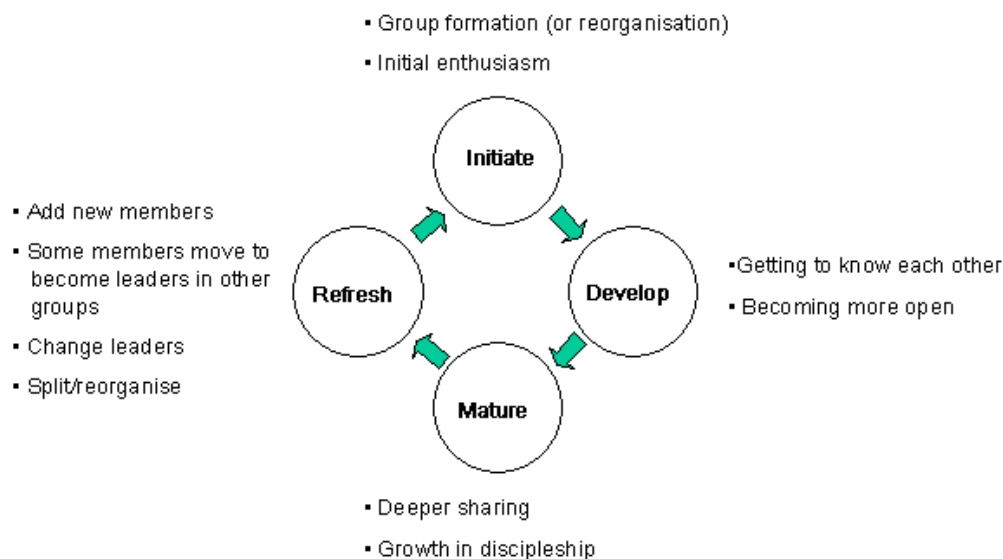
Building accessibility and appeal would involve new actions, including:

- Encouraging SGs to be flexible in the way in which they cater for couples with small children (e.g. in being willing to rotate venues to allow couples to attend together when a group meets at their house). Church members without children living at home could offer baby-sitting to allow parents with young children to attend SGs, at least on a semi-regular basis.
- Growing the culture of 'inclusive' and accessible SGs. It is often difficult for new Christians (or especially those who are still effectively enquirers) to settle into existing home groups. The continued provision of post-Alpha groups is therefore essential, but the development of SGs that are consciously and intentionally accessible for new or not-yet believers would also widen access for new Christians.
- Building SGs around groups of 'common interest'. Most of the working group had had at least one positive experience of a group concentrated around a particular age or stage of life. However, we were also aware that groups can be successfully built upon homogeneity in other ways; for example groups that are particular focussed on new Christians, on those interested in a particular aspect of ministry or spirituality, or on those sharing a particular evangelistic focus. All of these 'things in common' were felt to be an effective basis for developing successful groups, in addition to developing groups based primarily on convenience factors.

#### 4.3 Vision Element 2: Dynamic, Outward-looking Groups

Many current non-attenders of SGs would only try out a group if someone had personally invited them. Yet, at present, only about 25% of new group members are recruited in this way. So, increasing membership of SGs will require more of SG leaders and groups than a reliance on others to recruit members for them.

- SGs who are actively seeking to grow in numbers and who look out for potential invitees at Sunday services and amongst neighbours and friends can become a huge resource for numerical growth. The conviction that every group should be looking to grow in numbers was strongly held within the working group.
- Groups have a natural journey (or life-cycle), which can be presented as below. Recognition of such a cycle and support for group leaders at *every* stage (not just the initial stage of group formation) can increase the sense of group dynamism and flexibility, as well as both numerical and personal growth.



#### 4.4 Vision Element 3: Disciple-forming, Purposeful Groups

SGs at HTC are already one of the primary places in which Christian discipleship is encouraged and nurtured, as evidenced by the feedback from existing homegroup members. We envision SGs as places in which people engage in the practicalities of Christian discipleship, whatever the stage of their faith journey. This could be enabled in the following ways

- By each SG developing its own sense of its distinctive character and calling. Historically, homegroups at HTC have tended to be fairly uniform in character, and controlled quite tightly from the centre. Yet the concept of individual group calling, in which each group feels called to a particular strategy within the wider vision of the church is one that was prominent in the working group's thinking. Working Group members have witnessed friends or colleagues respond to a calling from God to begin or develop SGs with a particular focus or objective. When these have been faithfully implemented they have borne tremendous fruit.
- By offering support and advice, on an ongoing basis, for leaders seeking to develop and implement strategies and callings for their own SG. Fundamental to all of this is the priority of prayer and seeking the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit
- Calling has its origins in an ambition or desire, in both leaders and groups, to follow Jesus. We envision challenging ourselves and other SG leaders (and our groups), across the board; be it in growth of numbers, maturity, love, knowledge or spirituality – and not becoming satisfied with simply maintaining the status quo.

## **5. Achieving the vision**

To achieve the above vision for growth and diversification in our SGs, several fundamentals need to be in place. Such a shift in our general thinking will not be either easy or quick to

achieve, but a number of enablers would help us to successfully make the transition from a church *with*, to a church *of*, small groups

### 5.1 Short-term Enablers for SG development

- Strong, personal and visible backing of the church leadership for SGs and their programmes; as key, dominant messages running through Sunday services on a regular and long-term basis. The reasons for such an emphasis would also be regularly communicated, including as responses to such questions as “*what do I need to do to grow effectively in my relationship with Christ*” and “*what do we collectively need to do to most effectively fulfil God’s calling to us as a church?*”
- Social trends, which often conflict with the demands of discipleship in SGs, would be recognised and addressed within Sunday service teaching. Examples of these would be ‘privatisation’, individualism, time-starvation and materialism.
- SGs to be visible in Sunday services, so that the benefits of membership (fellowship, support etc.) are more tangible to those who have not experienced them. This new visibility could, for example, be achieved by having SGs take part in services (such as welcoming, stewarding, doing prayers or readings, serving coffee or giving testimonies).
- Information about small groups to be clearly visible in the foyer, and in publications. The recent ‘Map of Claygate’ display showing the location of different groups in the parish is an example of this. More detailed information could be displayed in the future.

### Medium-term enablers for SG development

#### *5.2.1. Skilled Leaders*

This is fundamental to all aspects of SG development and has wide implications in terms of both initial training and a ‘rolling programme’ of training. SG leaders’ training in the past has been patchy. A systematic programme of leader identification and training needs to be put into place, with the following components:

- If we are to expand our SGs we are going to need more leaders. An increase in participation to 60% of our adult members would lead to a further 8 groups being needed. If this were combined with an increase in actual Church membership (of say 20%), then this number could rise by a further 6 groups (36 groups compared to the current 22). Yet today, we struggle to find leaders for existing groups, and so we need to focus strongly on identifying and encouraging potential leaders, training them, and offering appropriate support.
- Important first steps can be to:
  - (a) Identify an additional leader/potential leader from each existing group, with the understanding that (s)he would eventually either take on their own group or take leadership of another group. There are huge benefits of having two leaders for every group, in terms of mutual accountability and idea generation, and complementary gifting. We want to stress the desirability of having co- (as opposed to lone) leadership
  - (b) Identify potential SG leaders from the current Growing Leaders course.

- High quality training for all leaders. Some of SG vision components described above may be relatively new to existing leaders and a comprehensive training programme for existing and potential leaders is needed. This would encompass both group leadership skills as well as the specifics of developing discipleship in others. SG leaders may seek training and idea-sharing on an ongoing basis, and this can be provided by staff or experienced members of the church.

### *5.2.2. Supported Leaders and Groups*

We recognise the related importance of external oversight and accountability (to help review group strategy and progress), of prayer and support from other group leaders, and of moving to a pastoral structure in which SGs are part of larger collective bodies (such as the pastorate system at Holy Trinity Brompton). In this way, at the very least, leaders can have the opportunity to meet together. Our past attempts at implementing such structures have so far met with mixed success; however, the working group suggests that different structures can emerge from the relationships and support groups formed during a proposed training programme for leaders in the New Year. There is also potential for setting up ‘pastorates’ or ‘clusters’ where groups actually meet together regularly. An example of this would be a ‘cluster’ coming out of the large current Alpha course (together perhaps with one or two other groups with a similar focus on discipling new Christians). The benefits of such gatherings would include the opportunity for members to quickly get to know a broader cross-section of the HTC family, thus accelerating the process by which they feel part of the wider church and feel ready to commit to serving in its various ministries.

### *5.2.3. Well-resourced Groups*

The growth of SGs must occur in the climate of expectation that leaders are trained and the groups supported and resourced. This has implications both for the provision of both study materials and dedicated staffing with responsibility for the overall oversight of SGs

- The availability of a range of high quality study material that has good application/challenge to people’s lives is essential. There was a general consensus in the working group that a range of suggested material should be issued from a central source, generally tying in with sermon series, with options to suit groups over a wide range of Christian maturity, but that groups should have more freedom to opt into alternatives than at present. It will almost certainly mean that more ‘in house’ study material will need to be produced
- Finally, we note that many churches larger or equal in size to HTC have redirected greater staff resources into SG training and oversight than we have done hitherto. A similar approach could bring significant benefits to HTC. If SGs grow in number and variety, as envisioned in this paper, a dedicated member of staff, either part or full-time, would be needed. Depending on participation and growth rate developments, this could be optimal in two years time, with a purpose of taking overall oversight and responsibility for SGs at HTC.

## 6. Provisional Milestones

Some progress has been made over the Autumn to progress the vision described above. We have started to raise awareness of SGs, with a map describing and locating SGs in the church foyer. A new group with a more relaxed format, for parents with young families, has started in September 2007. The Autumn Study Series supports the sermon schedule whilst offering SGs greater flexibility and variety of format than in the past. The following developments are envisaged for the future

- Training for leaders (Jan 2008). A 6-part monthly training evening for leaders and potential leaders has been planned for Jan-June.
- Enlarged co-ordinators group to implement/oversee individual parts of the vision (Jan 2008).
- New groups formed – Mums/carers (Easter 2008). Mens group (autumn 2008).
- Every group to have 2 leaders (Summer 2008).
- ‘Catching the vision’: SG series designed to deepen discipleship and group focus (potentially Autumn 2008, depending on other elements of the Vision Process).
- Primary oversight of SGs as dedicated task, possibly by additional f/t or p/t staff member (2009).

## 7. Conclusions

The working group is very aware that our vision for SGs is very much a ‘Work in Progress’. We need first and foremost to acknowledge our dependency on God for all aspects of the task. A lot of prayer and thought still needs to be applied. We have not come to you with all the answers.

Nonetheless, supporting the vision, even as it is outlined in this paper, should be viewed by the PCC as an important change in priorities, and as an important investment in the Kingdom’s future in Claygate. A continuation of the status quo would see HTC rather sub-optimising this area of its ministry.

We are also aware that patience is needed and the right pace of change is critical if we are to develop and deepen our existing SGs as well as broaden and enlarge SG membership. We want to encourage people to catch a new vision for SGs for themselves, not coerce them down a particular path. Any model that we use is also bound to have messy edges – people (thankfully!) do not fit into neat categories

SGs provide a forum whereby people can learn together, share their faith and their doubts, encourage one another with experiences of God working in their lives, and reach out to others. They are a huge resource for building God’s kingdom in Claygate and in the wider world.