

RE-EVALUATING THE SMALL GROUP BIBLE STUDY MODEL FROM A LUTHERAN
PERSPECTIVE

BY
BENJAMIN D. REICHEL

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PROF. MARK A. PAUSTIAN, ADVISOR

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

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Abstract

Small Group Bible Studies (SGBS) have been popular among many church bodies for the last three decades. The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) was hesitant to immediately use this model, which came out of the church growth movement, for several valid reasons. Over the past 20 years or so, WELS pastors and Seminary professors have addressed these reasons and have shown them to be mere speculation. Through interviews with WELS pastors who make use of SGBS in their congregations, several books written on SGBS, and essays written by WELS pastors and professors in response to SGBS over the years, this thesis addresses a few of the major concerns felt by the WELS, including the risk of false doctrine, organization of SGBS in a congregation, and various methodologies. I will examine these concerns from a fresh perspective and offer insights into how WELS can better make use of SGBS in the future.

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Introduction

The use of SGBS has been a controversial topic in WELS circles for the past few decades. The Yoido Full Gospel Central Church first introduced the concept of a church built on SGBS in Seoul, South Korea in the late 1970s. The Fuller Institute of Church Growth then brought this SGBS model over to the United States in the early 1980s. Ever since, conservative church bodies have been skeptical about the use of small groups within their churches. However, the evangelical and church growth movements quickly grabbed a hold of the small group model and saw incredible growth in their churches.

Especially in conservative Lutheran circles, the words “church growth” automatically send up red flags and warning signs of heretical teachings. Anything that comes from heterodox churches or pastors immediately needs to be thoroughly examined in order to identify any false teachings that can quickly be dismissed. In many cases, this is certainly true. Many church growth and evangelical leaders do not preach and teach directly from God’s Word and their messages contain many false teachings.

Does this mean confessional churches should throw out everything related to the church growth movement? If they are able to bring massive amounts of people into their churches every weekend, they may just be doing something right. Does this mean that WELS, as a conservative, confessional Lutheran church body, needs to follow *everything* these church growth gurus are doing? No. However, there are certainly things WELS churches can learn from the church growth movement when it comes to utilizing SGBS in their congregations.

As this study will demonstrate, SGBS can positively impact several important areas of a congregation’s ministry. The first and perhaps most influential area is adult education. Small groups provide a safe, engaging environment for adults to discuss the new material they’ve learned from God’s Word and then apply that Word to their own unique circumstances. Adults learn differently than children, so it is important to use a different approach to adult education instead of employing the same teaching concepts used in Sunday school or catechism class. With the Bible as the focus of this learning, small group members will grow in their knowledge of God’s Word through regular Bible study.

Another area of congregational life influenced by SGBS is the formation of deep, meaningful relationships within the church. Small groups provide a way for adults to gather together around the Word of God outside of the regular public worship service or Sunday

morning Bible class at church once a week. Individual relationships are the foundation of a healthy congregation. Meeting for one or two hours at a time on Sunday morning is not enough to promote healthy relationships within the congregation. SGBS offer the opportunity to grow in faith around the Word of God, but also give adults the chance to bond with each other and create deep and lasting relationships that extend past Sunday mornings.

This study will further demonstrate that as Christians gather together around God's Word, they are able to apply it to their own lives in ways that sermons and Sunday morning Bible classes just cannot do. Members of a congregation do not have the opportunity to ask personal questions or discuss the things they've learned to any great extent as they sit in a pew or a folding chair on Sunday morning. Fellow Christians bond over common life experiences and support one another in their walks of faith because they have the greatest tool with which to find comfort and strength, God's Word. By doing so, these Christians strengthen their relationships on the basis of their shared faith. Small groups provide an environment which is less intimidating than a Sunday morning Bible class, so members feel more comfortable asking tough questions and discussing biblical truths while applying to their lives and the lives of fellow Christians.

These benefits of SGBS also lead to a better assimilation program for new members. People who are invited to SGBS shortly after becoming members in a church are more likely to stick around because of the strong relationships they have formed within the small group. The danger most new members face is becoming just another "face in the crowd" after they have finished BIC and have been confirmed into membership. Small groups do not allow for new members to become lost in the crowd. New members are able to more easily find their spiritual gifts which will enable them to serve the church, and they can find the support and encouragement they need to use their gifts from the members of their small group. Not only are opportunities for service encouraged for new members within the small group, but SGBS also train and equip new Christians for personal Bible study, which will help them through any tough situation they encounter as they grow in their faith.

The purpose of this thesis is to establish and expound on the benefits of SGBS by combining the model found in evangelical and church growth churches with the solid biblical theology found in the churches of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. The marriage of the SGBS model with the substance of scriptural theology is the perfect combination for spiritual growth within WELS congregations. After reviewing the literature on early WELS perceptions

of SGBS and the role of SGBS in adult education, I will examine several areas of congregational life that benefit from the use of SGBS.

Literature Review

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has kept an eye on SGBS since they began to become popular back in the 1980s. When the church growth movement brought SGBS to America from South Korea, the first inclination of conservative church bodies, especially in Lutheran circles, was to approach them with caution. Flashbacks to the era of Pietism and Philipp Jacob Spener's *collegia pietatis* were no doubt filling the minds of WELS pastors and professors at the mention of SGBS. Two essays written by Seminary professors summarized the concerns the synod had about SGBS early in the 1990s. Professor James P. Tiefel was commissioned to write an essay entitled "Small Group Bible Study and Adult Education in the WELS" in 1994. Professor Tiefel carefully addresses the concerns surrounding the use of SGBS within WELS, but also supports the benefits of small groups if properly supervised and organized. Former Seminary professor David P. Kuske also wrote an essay entitled "Home Bible Study Groups in the 1990s" for a series of lectures on adult education at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in 1993. Professor Kuske addressed some concerns about SGBS but offered some insightful recommendations for methodology to avoid *collegia pietatis* from springing up again and bringing back the same devastating practices from the age of Pietism.

SGBS have appeared in other essays on the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File as well, but none go into much depth on the topic. Small groups are only mentioned in passing while the author addressed other topics. For example, Mark Braun touches on the concept of SGBS as a viable option for adult education in his 1989 essay "How to Encourage Bible Study in the Parish." The focus of his essay is more on getting adults involved in Bible study in general, but he does make the observation that adults learn better in a discussion-based small group rather than lecture-style Sunday morning Bible class.

James Sherod wrote an essay entitled "Discipleship as a Means of Assimilating New Members into the Congregation" in 1988 in which he talks about one challenge that many outreach minded congregation face. A challenge for churches that focus on bringing new faces on Sundays is getting those people to stick around and become fully engaged members. He refers

to “closing the back door” so that people don’t just walk in the front door of church and keep walking through and out the back. He makes the observation that “the back door will remain open unless smaller groups within the larger body not only ‘welcome’ new people but really incorporate them into the fellowship.”¹ Pastor Charles Westra echoes the same thought in his essay “Building the Body of Christ: A Study of the Assimilation of Members into the Christian Congregation.” “The person that is actively involved in the group life of the congregation is a member that is more likely to feel a part of the congregation.”²

In that same essay, Pastor Westra also talks about the advantages SGBS have over larger, lecture-style Bible classes. Members of small groups are more likely to ask questions and discuss what that portion of Scripture is saying to them on a personal level. Kevin Lawson makes the same observation in his case study of one SGBS which has been meeting for over forty years, “A Band of Sisters: The Impact of Long-term Small Group Participation: Forty Years in a Women’s Prayer and Bible Study Group.” The purpose of this SGBS, Lawson writes, is not “to get through the material, but to take the time needed to process what they have read and studied, and to better understand its meaning and significance for their lives.”³ This is a very important aspect of adult education in general, not just to small group Bible studies. Scholars have written scores of essays and books on adult education in the recent decades, and one of the more influential writers on the topic is Jane Vella. In her book *Taking Learning to Task*, Vella describes adults as decision makers, not only in their professional lives but also in their learning. As this study will demonstrate, adults must be active learners, engaged in the material, and the subjects of their learning.

These concepts of adult education, assimilation, discipleship, and fellowship among believers are all addressed and strengthened within SGBS. Heterodox SGBS can cover all sorts of topics and can enhance knowledge in many different areas. What makes Lutheran small group Bible studies stand out from the rest is that they are properly informed by a solid means of grace

¹ James W. Sherod, “Discipleship as a Means of Assimilating New Members into the Congregation” [A paper for Professor Valleskey’s PT358A class at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, November 14, 1988]: 3, available from www.wlsessays.net/files/SherodDiscipleship.rtf; Internet; accessed August 31, 2013.

² Charles Westra, “Building the Body of Christ: A Study of the Assimilation Of Members Into The Christian Congregation.” [Prepared for the Cottonbelt Conference, October 5-7, 1998]: 8, available from www.wlsessays.net/files/WestraBody.rtf; Internet; accessed August 31, 2013.

³ Kevin E. Lawson, “A Band of Sisters: The Impact of Long-term Small Group Participation: Forty Years in a Women’s Prayer and Bible Study Group,” *Religious Education* 101, no. 2 (March 1, 2006): 180-203. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost; Internet; accessed August 28, 2013.

theology. If WELS as a synod can adopt the small group model as the main form of adult education, while filling that model with solid Lutheran doctrine, there may be “untold blessings [which can be brought] to the congregations and members of the WELS.”⁴

Having reviewed a portion of the literature on SGBS, I will now define the key terms and concepts of this study.

What Is a Small Group Bible Study (SGBS)?

SGBS have been around for over 30 years, and there are distinct characteristics and criteria that must be met in order for a Bible study to truly be considered a small group. A SGBS consists of 8-12 people at the very most. This is by no means a hard and fast rule, but most small groups function best when they are within the 8-12 member range. SGBS cannot be so small that the members feel obligated to talk all the time. When a small group only has 4-5 members, there may be some intimidation and fear because every member is forced to know all the material and have all the answers because they are going to *have* to talk at some point. This makes some people uncomfortable, and one of the goals of SGBS is to create an environment in which people feel comfortable asking questions and giving their answers at their own pace.

SGBS should also not get too large. Any small group that exceeds 12 members starts losing the closeness that is necessary to build strong, lasting relationships. The larger the SGBS gets, the greater the risk of members getting lost in the crowd. The SGBS could then become just another Sunday morning Bible class in which a few people dominate the discussions and others don't say anything. The size of a SGBS will largely depend on the size of the congregation and the comfort level of the group members. Another factor in the size of a SGBS is the specific goal of that particular small group.

Once the size of the SGBS has been established, the next step is to determine what the goals of each small group are going to be. No matter what specific goal(s) a SGBS might have, spiritual growth in a variety of areas occurs in a small group setting. Seminary professor James P. Tiefel provides a list of the benefits of SGBS that he received through a questionnaire to church members. Here is a sampling from that list:

⁴ James P. Tiefel, “Small Group Bible Study and Adult Education in the WELS” [April 14, 1994]: 4, available from <http://wlsessays.net/files/TiefelSmall.pdf>; Internet; accessed August 31, 2013.

Small group study makes it possible for more people to become involved in discussion and application of Bible truths. Small group study recognizes that not all people learn best in formal educational settings. Small group study seems to remove barriers which tend to keep people from identifying personal difficulties and problems as well as from making and sharing personal applications of a Bible truth. Small group study affords an opportunity for people to gain a more personal ownership of Bible truth because they are obligated by group dynamics to participate in the small group discussion.⁵

Another goal of SGBS could be finding service opportunities within the congregation and the greater community. Having a service project once a month or once a quarter could be one of the main focuses of a SGBS, depending on the dynamic of the group. More in-depth Bible study could also be a goal. Instead of focusing on the relational aspect of SGBS, perhaps a group of believers agrees to be more academic in their goals and learn as much doctrine as they can whenever they gather for Bible study.

Bible Study

The first and foremost area of spiritual growth within a SGBS is going to be in a person's knowledge of the Bible. Whenever believers gather together to study God's Word, their faith will be strengthened as well as their understanding of the Bible. That's the power of the means of grace. Small groups can meet together to discuss any topic, any subject. When the topic of discussion is God's Word, people grow closer to God and stronger in their faith. Depending on the dynamics and goals of a SGBS, more in-depth Bible study is certainly possible. More often than not, however, deep theological discussions are *not* the purpose of small groups.

The learning which takes place in a SGBS is more inductive and less intensive, no matter the specific content of that particular study. Small group materials and study guides usually consist of inductive questions that invite discussion, rather than "Yes" or "No" questions, or simple answers to fact questions. These inductive questions allow Christians to wrestle with tough questions in the biblical text as well as the tough questions in their own lives. They are embarking on a journey of discovery, not just a regurgitation of information.⁶ A couple fact

⁵ Tiefel, 3-4. This is merely a sampling of the complete list made up of responses from church members. Professor Tiefel also provides another list of benefits from Pastor Wayne Vogt. That list is more focused on the benefits of small group Bible studies from a pastor's perspective. That list is located on pages 2 and 3 of Professor Tiefel's essay.

⁶ The same concept applies to inductive sermons. There are certain sermon texts that lend themselves to a more deductive approach, but there are other texts and sermons that more easily follow the inductive approach. The preaching books by Eugene Lowry and Fred Craddock probably come to mind.

questions throughout the study guide might be beneficial to get people thinking and talking as they look into the Bible for answers, but most of the questions need to be open ended so that people are able to take the principles they've learned and apply those principles to their own lives and the lives of their fellow SGBS members.

Fellowship

As members of a SGBS apply scriptural principles to their own lives and the lives of others, there is going to be natural fellowship that takes place among believers. People who gather together around God's Word are strengthened in their faith and their relationships with others. Bible study also creates closeness like no other fellowship event can. Members relate their personal stories with each other; they share their feelings and concerns as well as their lives. They bond over shared experiences, both the joyful experiences of life and also the times of loss or suffering. Christians are able to apply the truths of God's Word to any and all of those situations. Getting a mix of life-long Christians and newer Christians together provides the opportunity for more mature Christians to help and counsel new Christians when life's problems arise. These Christians are able to rub shoulders and apply God's Word to any situation the group or an individual encounters.

The first benefit of a SGBS is certainly growth in the knowledge of God's Word, but growth in God's Word does not only impact the head. It also impacts the heart, and that's where a SGBS which focuses on God's Word can have a great impact on people. They may learn facts and knowledge in other forms of Bible study as well, but there's something special about Christians who gather around God's Word and make it more personal for each member of the group. A healthy faith needs to be fed in different ways, and a SGBS is one of those ways. SGBS allow Christians to speak freely and openly about Jesus and to articulate their faith in the safety of two or three who are gathered in his name (Matt 18:20). Unless this area of spiritual growth is emphasized through a particular ministry within the church, SGBS offer Christians a chance to do something they rarely get the chance to do otherwise, all in a context that is theologically sensitive to law and gospel, the authority of Scripture, the Christ-centeredness of the Bible, etc.

Another important part of the SGBS model is getting believers into each others' homes. Not only are believers getting to know each other better through their shared experiences, they are also sharing their homes with one another. Being in a friend's home, sitting on a couch in a

pair of jeans discussing the Word of God with a cup of coffee is, at the very least, more inviting than a cold folding chair in a fellowship hall with seventy other people. I am no means diminishing the importance of meeting together for worship and Bible class on Sunday mornings in a more formal, reverent setting. What SGBS do is provide an opportunity for people to get together outside of church in a more relaxed setting and bring God's Word into their homes during the week. Church isn't just about meeting together for an hour on Sunday morning and then going separate ways throughout the week until next Sunday. Church is about growing in faith and knowledge of God's Word as individual Christians while growing together as the body of Christ.

A SGBS might even be a more attractive option before a prospect comes to a worship service on Sunday morning. "Such groups form natural bridges for evangelism prospects to get to know a few people before facing the trauma of facing a whole congregation of strangers on Sunday morning."⁷ Some people are intimidated by a liturgical Sunday morning worship service because they don't know what to do, or they feel like everyone is looking at them and judging them if they don't participate. A SGBS can create solid relationships before a prospect even gets to church on Sunday morning. When that prospect does come to a worship service, they'll recognize a few familiar faces and will have connections to make them feel more comfortable in a new setting.

Assimilation

By getting people into each other's homes and lives, strong friendships are created within the church that might not otherwise be formed. Creating these friendships is a great way to assimilate new members into the congregation. When a prospect starts attending BIC and coming to worship services on Sunday, there is a lot of one-on-one time with the pastor. They feel close and connected to him as their spiritual leader and as a friend. Once those BIC lessons are over and the prospect is confirmed into fellowship, however, there is the danger of letting this brand new member become just another face in the crowd. They don't receive the personal attention of the pastor anymore because he has moved on to new prospects and new BIC classes. If these new

⁷ Sherod, 3.

members are plugged into a small group soon after joining the church, there is less of a chance that they will feel alone or alienated from the rest of the congregation.⁸

The assimilation process aims to take people from a sense of being an “outsider,” just another member of a church, to a sense of real belonging and fellowship. Pastor Westra uses the illustration of concentric circles to describe the different levels of assimilation in his essay. As a new member gets closer to the center of these circles, moving from one circle to another, the more they feel part of the congregation: “Inside that circle are the people that really feel a part of the congregation and are actively involved in the life and operation of the church. While it might be easy to enter in the first circle... it might be much more difficult for a person to find their way into the second circle.”⁹ A pastor cannot give each and every new member the personal attention and time to make the assimilation process go smoothly. That needs to be the work of the rest of the congregation. “This means each and every member of the congregation must personally shoulder part of the task of helping another find a home in the church, of overcoming the sense of ‘otherness’ that he or she inevitably feels in the presence of a group of strangers.”¹⁰ SGBS can help a person make that transition from being a new member to being a fully engaged member of the church family.

SGBS also provide a great example for personal Bible study and spiritual growth that new members can use in their personal lives outside of small group life, while providing a support system during tough times in the new Christian’s life of faith:

Christ wants to see those who are mature in Christ taking a special interest in those who are newly sprung to life so that the convert receives shade when the troubles of life threaten to wither them down to the roots (Mk 4:17); to ensure they are regularly nurtured with the pure milk of God’s Word (1 Pet 2:2); to help guard them against the forest fires of gossip (James 3:5-6) or sins by which Satan tries to burn them up (Eph 6:16).¹¹

By providing that sense of belonging and family within the SGBS, new members will have connections and relationships based on the Word of God which can help them through any situation life brings them. They will also learn how they fit into this new family of believers and find ways to serve the body of Christ with their unique set of spiritual gifts.

⁸ For a more detailed look into assimilation as an ongoing process, please read through Pastor Westra’s whole article.

⁹ Westra, 1.

¹⁰ Sherod, 1.

¹¹ Ibid, 2.

Service

As new members are brought into a congregation, they may be eager to find their spiritual gifts and figure out how to best use those gifts to serve the church. SGBS provide opportunities for service within the church and also to the community in which the church exists. Service does not need to be a requirement for every small group, but as people grow around God's Word and discover the gifts they have to offer God's church, they can accomplish more with their small group than they could on their own. SGBS encourage and support individual members to not only find their gifts and talents, but then also try and find ways for both new and veteran Christians to serve. Once again, this is *not* mandatory for every small group. Maybe churches will want to make service projects a goal for their small group ministry, but these service projects are motivated by the gospel of Jesus and what he has done for us.¹² As a confessional Lutheran church body, WELS does not use the law to motivate good works. The gospel is all the motivation any believer needs: "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Evangelism

One form of service that can be offered through SGBS is lay evangelism. When people enjoy coming to their SGBS, they will be more willing to invite their unbelieving friends and family to attend a small group meeting and eventually a worship service. This isn't regulated by an evangelism committee, there is no sign-up sheet, and there is no door-to-door canvassing involved. This is personal witness and evangelism in its simplest form. SGBS provide an opportunity for members to get involved with evangelism without being nominated or volunteering for an official committee.

The results of this lay evangelism can be exponential, as Larry Osborne says, "Once people get a taste of frontline ministry, they don't let it go easily. Once the church has been let loose, it's hard to put it back in the box."¹³ This combination of aggressive lay evangelism is also

¹² St. Andrews Lutheran Church in Middleton, Wisconsin, does not formally promote service projects for their small groups, but Pastor Randy Hunter shared with me that some small groups have taken it upon themselves to perform different service projects throughout the year. One group, for example, takes groceries to an elderly man who cannot get out of his house easily. Another group does lawn mowing and raking leaves for other members of the congregation. The teens have an open gym for kids once a month.

¹³ Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2008), 51.

combined with opportunities to grow the church within its walls, as already mentioned above, and for individual members to grow spiritually as well.

Christian Relationships

One of the greatest effects of SGBS is creating lasting relationships among Christians. St. Jerome once stated, “Joyous friendships may be rooted in a common study of the Bible.”¹⁴ As believers gather together to study and grow in God’s Word, it is only natural that they become closer to one another during the process. They listen to one another, they learn about each other’s lives, they get to know each other on such a deep level based on their common faith and knowledge of God’s saving work in Jesus. They form a close-knit support system in which they are able to carry one another’s burdens (Gal 6:2; Eph 4:2; Col 3:13) and celebrate with each other during the joys of life.

These relationships then are able to spread throughout the larger congregation, because people find that they have more in common than just spending one hour together in the same building on a Sunday morning. This sense of family, community, and belonging is an important part of a congregation’s culture because today’s society is lacking those deep relationships. One reason for this lack of deep relationships is the explosion of digitally mediated communication. Things have dramatically changed in this area with unprecedented speed. With the incredible use of social media, instant communication through the internet at cell phones, people seem to be more connected than ever, but the opposite is actually true.¹⁵ Families are moving to new towns, single people are finding new jobs across the country, and in today’s mobile culture driven by technology, it is difficult to find time to connect with peers. SGBS offer a place to disconnect from the busy world and focus on God’s Word and the lives of others.¹⁶

There are different ways of organizing a small group ministry in order to connect people with God’s Word and other Christians. No matter what system a congregation uses, it is important to make it easy for members to try different groups out before they make a commitment. There is a need for “easy-in, easy-out” trial periods so that people are able to find a SGBS with which they can easily connect, without feeling pressured into staying or guilty if they

¹⁴ Quentin Ogren. "A Bible Study Group -- How It Works." *Worship* 34, no. 10 (November 1, 1960): 613-617. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost; Internet; accessed August 28, 2013.

¹⁵ For further reading on this topic, see Sherry Turkel’s *Alone Together*.

¹⁶ Paraphrase from Westra, 1-3.

decide to leave. The goal of SGBS is to create lasting relationships around the Word of God, not force people into uncomfortable situations. Once the SGBS have been formed, solid Lutheran theology filled with the means of grace fuels these small groups. This is obviously not the only form of church, nor is it commanded by God. SGBS are adiaphora, but when organized and supervised properly, a small group ministry can bring untold blessings to any WELS congregation. The following section will explore several of these blessings in further detail.

Blessings of a Small Group Ministry

There are normally two main focuses for any church: outreach and inreach. An outreach-minded church is focused on reaching out to its community and bringing new members into the church. An inreach-minded church is concerned with spiritually feeding the members it already has and making sure their faith grows. Both areas are important for any church that wants to grow. The danger for the outreach-minded church is having a way to keep those people around and spiritually fed. The danger for an inreach-minded church is that it will soon die if it does not bring in new members. This debate has been addressed within WELS circles for the past decade or more, discussing the delicate balance between focusing on worship and/or outreach. SGBS may be one answer to the question of which approach is more important.¹⁷

Biblical Examples

Now the question may arise, “Where in the Bible does God even allow us to have SGBS?” First of all, take a look at Jesus’ own ministry. He preached to the entire nation of Israel. He spoke to thousands of people at a time on hillsides. He also sent out a smaller group of 72 to help spread his gospel. Then he had a smaller group of twelve disciples who followed him around, learned from him, and were his closest friends. Even within that small group of twelve, there were three disciples in particular who were very close to Jesus and were able to see and hear things the other twelve disciples were unable to see and hear. This is just a *description* of what Jesus’ ministry was like. It is by no means a *prescription* for how a congregation should be organized. However, it is interesting to note the different sizes of groups with which Jesus

¹⁷ Spoiler alert: They both are equally important! SGBS, as will be shown throughout the essay, emphasize both inreach and outreach within one program.

associated and how he taught them. Throughout the whole history of the church, when Christians did not have a personal copy of the Word of God, they normally shared in the communal experience of the Word. They had no reason to isolate themselves from their Christian brothers and sisters.

The early church started out in synagogues, especially in the towns where Paul preached. Soon they found it necessary to meet in one another's homes not just for worship, but also for fellowship and mutual encouragement. The early church realized the importance of building one another up around the Word and sacraments. They had no need for a big, fancy building or programs that appealed to the masses. They met together in the temple courts every day, but they also ate together in their homes and shared God's praises. "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Ac 2:47).¹⁸ The early church *was* a SGBS!

Group Dynamics

There are obviously social differences between groups of different sizes such as an intimate group of three, a larger group of twenty to thirty people, and a crowd of a couple hundred. There are certain things a teacher or leader can do with one group that he or she might not be able to do in another size group. SGBS offer certain benefits and opportunities that cannot be addressed by a larger Sunday morning Bible class or a smaller BIC. SGBS are not a replacement for either one of those teaching settings. SGBS are just one more way to get people connected with God's Word and with one another.

SGBS offer a nice middle ground between the large intimidating group setting of Sunday morning Bible class and the more intimate setting of a BIC. The size of a SGBS also offers its members a chance to offer their testimonials not only of their experience in that particular church, but also how God's Word has made a difference in their lives. Most members would feel uncomfortable giving their testimonial on a Sunday morning in front of one hundred other church members, but they might be more willing to share their experience with a new member or prospect in a small group setting. As was mentioned early in this essay, SGBS give Christians a chance to profess their own faith and articulate it in a setting that might not be offered to them in other Bible study settings.

¹⁸ Please read through Acts chapter 2 again for a refresher on the nature of the early church as a small group.

These experiences and personal stories shared between believers help strengthen the body of Christ on a congregational level. As the body of Christ, we are encouraged to “love one another” (Jn 13:34,35; 1 Jn 4:11,12), “instruct one another” (Rom 15:14; Col 3:16), “carry each other’s burdens” as mentioned earlier (Gal 6:2; Eph 4:2; Col 3:13), “encourage one another” (1 Th 4:18, 5:11; Heb 3:13, 10:25), “spur one another on toward love and good works” (Heb 10:24), “confess [our] sins to each other and pray for each other” (James 5:16), and most of all we were commanded by Jesus himself to “go and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Mt 28:18-20). These gospel imperatives could be carried out on a congregational level within SGBS.

Church Discipline

When believers watch out for one another and care about one another, they are able to exercise church discipline in ways the pastor might not be able to do by himself: “As for wise counsel, a warm hug, or a swift kick in the rear, those are rather hard to self-administer.”¹⁹ When a loving brother or sister in Christ is administering that “swift kick in the rear” to a fellow group member, it can be more readily received than if a pastor was brought into the situation. Adults are more receptive to admonition from a peer than from someone viewed as a stranger with spiritual authority (a.k.a. the pastor). As Proverbs chapter 27 says, “Wounds from a friend can be trusted.” Once those relationships have been built and strengthened, encouragement and admonition from Christian friends can be better received.

In addition, discussions around the Word of God can actually help prevent problems from getting out of hand too quickly. When something comes up during a small group discussion, brothers and sisters in Christ are able to steer an erring believer back onto the right path. The hope is that believers are built up to the point where they can care for one another instead of bringing the pastor in for every disagreement or minor problem. Church discipline can be more personal and applicable when it comes from a friend. In a SGBS, you learn to trust one another and that trust can take away the impersonal feeling of church discipline. If things cannot be settled within the small group, then yes, the pastor or council member or church elder needs to be called in to apply law and gospel as needed in church discipline.

¹⁹ Osborne, 44.

Creating this close-knit support group is also beneficial during tough times in life. “Small groups... by their nature and structure... naturally foster greater honesty and transparency. Their location, size, and makeup are much more conducive to authenticity than any sanctuary or Sunday school class can ever hope to be.”²⁰ Believers who share common interests and are in the same life situations are able to console and comfort their brothers and sisters in ways that mean more to the person suffering. Once again, the idea is that the body of Christ is strengthened so that fellow believers are able to care for one another and support one another through the Word of God.

Culture

That support group is formed on the basis of common interests or similar life situations, and the relationships, trust, and support within that SGBS grow deeper through the study of God’s Word. God’s Word is able to bind people together in ways that sports or politics or music simply cannot do. The body of Christ is a family of believers. We are all children of God and we are brothers and sisters together in Christ. In today’s mobile culture, it is difficult to find that sense of family and community. Families don’t live in the same house for multiple generations anymore. Families move to new communities and need to find somewhere to belong because they might not have any friends or relatives in the area. Church is the natural answer to that loneliness and wandering. Larry Osborne observes: “Combine rootlessness with anonymity, and we have an environment in which significant long-term relationships are hard to come by—even for Christians well-connected within their church.”²¹ He goes on later to say, “In a highly mobile culture like that of the United States, most of our relational ties are weak.”²² Christians need other Christians to watch their back and to be there for them when no one else will be.

Putting Christians in regular contact with each other around the means of grace is the only way this is accomplished. Former Seminary professor David Kuske addressed this issue of isolation and the lack of a sense of community in his essay “Home Bible Study Groups in the 1990s:”

Call it a support group, call it having a sense of community, call it friendship, call it being able to spend some time with others who care about you. In any case small groups of

²⁰ Ibid, 54.

²¹ Osborne, 119.

²² Ibid, 146.

Christians gathered for the purpose of studying God's Word together supply the fellowship for which a growing number of people hunger, living as they do in an increasingly impersonal and pagan society. This is an additional reason given by many, if not most, of the congregations in our day (non-WELS and WELS) why they are organizing home Bible study groups as a part of their adult education program.²³

People are hungry for meaningful relationships. That's the result of our highly mobile, technology-driven society. People appear to be more connected through social media and instant communication, but there is a deep need for personal, meaningful relationships that are rooted in God's Word.²⁴

That need for deep, meaningful relationships even exists among lifelong Christians who have belonged to a church most of their lives. Perhaps they've just moved into town and have already joined a church. As Pastor John Backus points out, "There's a difference between intellectually knowing that you're among believers, friends, colleagues, Christian family, and actually feeling that emotional connection."²⁵ In that same interview he told me the story of his installation at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Muskego, Wisconsin. He knew he was surrounded by brothers in the ministry and fellow WELS Lutherans, but he still felt isolated and impossibly alone just because he was in a new setting. If that's the way a WELS pastor feels at his installation service, how do you think a brand new Christian feels walking into a church of over one thousand members? Even if that person has just five friends from their SGBS, that feeling of isolation fades away and that church of one thousand starts feeling more like a church of friends.

Adult Education

The more you put Christians together with other Christians to discuss God's Word, learning will naturally take place. Adults retain information better when it is gained from peers, when it resonates with the life experiences they've had, and when the information they receive can be immediately applied to their lives. Jane Vella describes adults as active learners: "[Adult] learners must be engaged and held accountable for their learning... In such engagement, learners

²³ David P. Kuske, "Home Bible Study Groups in the 1990s" [presented in the 1993 Pastors Institute at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary as part of a series of lectures on "Issues in Adult Education"]: 2, available from www.wlssays.net/files/KuskeHome.rtf; Internet; accessed August 31, 2013.

²⁴ Refer back to footnote 15. Face-to-face contact with other believers, studying the Bible, and enjoying fellowship "in real life" holds on to something that is slowly being lost in almost every quadrant of our culture that is placing more and more reliance on technology and the virtual world.

²⁵ John Backus, interview by author. November 26, 2013.

learn not just the specific content but also the excitement and creative thrill of being decision makers in their own work, of being active learners.”²⁶ Adults can be active learners more easily in a small group setting than in adult Bible class on Sunday morning with the pastor leading a lecture-style Bible class. Mark Braun, in his essay “How to Encourage Bible Study in the Parish,” quotes Oscar Feucht when he says, “Real teaching-learning is best achieved in the small study discussion group, not in a worship assembly, not very effectively in any lecture-type presentation.”²⁷ SGBS are less intimidating, which makes it easier for members to participate and be active in the learning process.

In a large, lecture-style Bible class it is easy for members to become lost or feel like they’re being left behind. Braun also shares his experiences with this problem:

The most frequent complaint I hear about congregational Bible classes is that people don’t have much opportunity for discussion. Even when discussion is invited, not much occurs. Bible class is another “sermon.” People feel they’re being “preached at.” The teacher often comes to class armed with far more information than he can hope to cover in the allotted time, and it’s clear he wants to “get through the material.” People say, “I think pastor feels uncomfortable having me in Bible class. He doesn’t seem to want to hear my questions.”²⁸

People feel intimidated and uncomfortable in a large lecture. Certainly the pastor wants to come prepared, but as Braun says, more often than not the Bible study ends up being a second sermon rather than a class. Jane Vella combats the idea that the teacher needs to just “get through the material” and teach everything they know on the topic being learned: “A good teacher does not teach all that he knows. He teaches all that the learners need to know at the time, and all that the learners can accountably learn in the time given.”²⁹ Too often it seems as though pastors in lecture style Bible classes come over-prepared and think that they need to squeeze every ounce of knowledge into that 60 minute period so that as much information as possible can be absorbed by the people in the Bible study. As Vella points out, that’s not how adults learn best.

People don’t feel comfortable asking their questions or discussing answers during lecture-style Bible classes because they don’t feel like the pastor wants to hear them. In a SGBS

²⁶ Jane Vella. *Taking Learning to Task: Creative Strategies for Teaching Adults* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 3-4.

²⁷ Mark E. Braun, “How to Encourage Bible Study in the Parish” [Metro-North Pastoral Conference, Pioneer Inn, Oshkosh, Wisconsin, January 16, 1989]: 3, available from <http://www.wlssays.net/files/BraunEncourage.pdf>; Internet; accessed August 31, 2013.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 11.

²⁹ Vella, 11.

setting, asking questions and starting discussions is facilitated by the use of open questions and learning tasks to make learning more inductive than just deductive. Vella describes the process by saying,

[An inductive task] sets the stage for learning by sharpening the perception of the learner. It tells the learner not only what he or she has to learn by also what the person perceives he or she already knows... When learners do... a well-designed inductive task, they are connecting to their lifelong experience the new content they are learning. They can then self-motivate to the struggle that is involved in learning the new content.³⁰

Adults need a sense of critical feeling, an emotional contact to the material in order for learning to take place. They need to be able to combine that new information with the incredible wealth of life experience they have. The gospel is able to provide that critical feeling, that emotional contact, in ways other subjects and topics simply cannot do.

Learning tasks are a great way to create that critical feeling, that emotional contact with God's Word on a personal level. Learning tasks are designed "to be accomplished in a small group, moving from individual work to pairs to work in a larger group. Small group work affords opportunity for inclusion, allowing each individual to work in his or her own learning style. It allows us to celebrate the autonomy of the learner."³¹ Some adult learners learn well in a lecture-style Bible class. That's what they're used to and they're able to soak up all the information the pastor wants to give them. Most adults learn better through their own personal styles, whether that be through discussion or application or learning tasks. Well-designed SGBS enable each learner to think through the material for themselves, but also be part of a group which can further that learning through discussion.

SGBS may also provide a way to engage teenagers in regular Bible study after confirmation. Pastors emphasize that confirmation is not the *end* of biblical instruction, but only the *beginning*. So how do they show that it truly *is* the beginning of a life of study in God's Word? Do they just assume that teenagers will automatically make the transition from Sunday school or Christian day school into adult Bible study? If children are exposed to a SGBS throughout their catechism instruction, if they are invited to sit in on a SGBS with their parents, they are provided with a solid foundation to continue their study of the Bible throughout high school and college. Mark Braun touches on this topic as well:

³⁰ Vella, 39-40.

³¹ Ibid, 60.

To a great extent, we've been dealing with measurable externals. What lies behind the externals of statistics and staffing and scheduling? Let's explore our attitudes toward adult Bible study.

Here's one: *You're confirmed. You have now learned all the major teachings of the Christian faith. Now you know everything you need to know to go to heave, to go to the Lord's Supper, and to be a good Lutheran.*

Obviously, we don't say that. We may think we're saying the opposite. We may quite regularly say things like, "Don't think of your confirmation instructions as the end of your study of God's Word. Think of it as the beginning. Keep coming to teen Bible studies. Come to Bible class..."

How hard do we labor in an organized, effective way, to get post confirmation teenagers to study the Bible? A half-hearted plea? "*Please* come to young people's meetings." And how do we entice them to come? Softball? Volleyball? Swimming? Lock-ins? Retreats? The prospect of meeting someone of the opposite sex? All of the above? Bible study? Get real!...

The Lutheran Church, I'm afraid, has sold people a bill of goods that if you're fourteen, and if you've been confirmed, you're in. And, if you're in, why still study the Bible?³²

As many pastors know, it is a challenge to keep post-confirmation teenagers involved in church. Introducing catechism students to SGBS and encouraging them to continue participating in them after confirmation could be a very effective tool to keep teenagers involved not only with the church, but in their personal study of God's Word as well. This sets them up for learning as adults by getting them used to discussion-based, inductive learning rather than the common lecture-style of a Sunday morning Bible class.

SGBS also allow for accurate application of the Word that many sermon illustrations fail to do. Pastors use sermon illustrations to try and connect the Word with people's lives, but far too often these illustrations don't have the desired effects. Yes, the illustration may connect with a few people, but not everyone. SGBS provide an opportunity for people to directly apply that Word to their own lives and personal situations. They are able to bring the Word of God into their homes and lives, instead of leaving it behind in the church pew when they leave on Sunday morning. This is also part of the idea that adults are decision makers in their learning. They are able to take the principles, the new information of the sermon from the previous Sunday or materials they're studying and connect it with what they already know.

As SGBS continue to gather together and members learn more about each other, certain "generative themes" start to emerge which connect people on deeper levels. Generative themes are the ideas, issues, problems, and joys that people are often more than ready to talk about.

³² Braun, 5.

Themes such as the birth of a child, the death of a loved one, a promotion, and favorite sports teams provide a springboard for discussions and applications of scriptural truths.³³ It is important for pastors and small group leaders to tap into these themes and get to know the people in the small group. By doing so, they can bring God's Word into those themes and expand that person's knowledge of scripture as well as their knowledge of the other members of the group. This combination of growing in the Word and growing closer to one another reinforces the Word in people's lives. They may already know the principles because they've heard them before, they've learned them in different settings, but it means more to an adult learner when the Word is studied and discussed together with peers.

Leadership

As the pastor or leader gets to know the members of the SGBS, they will start to notice who is growing in their faith and who has the potential to be a future leader in the church. SGBS naturally develop leaders in the church from the inside out. The people who show the characteristics of good leadership can be the future elders and church council members, or they could just be future small group leaders. The men in SGBS can also learn how to be strong Christian leaders in their own homes. One of the callings of a pastor is "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Eph 4:12). Providing opportunities for God's people to grow in their faith and use the gifts they have for God's people includes growing leaders for the future of the church.

These leaders fill a variety of roles within the church. As the SGBS ministry grows, the current leaders are able to see which members of their SGBS have the gifts and potential to be leaders of their own small group someday. Not only can members of SGBS eventually lead their own small groups, they can step into other leadership roles in the congregation as well. Men who show leadership qualities can serve on committees and councils and as elders in the church. Leaders are able to keep an eye on other future leaders in a small group setting more easily than a pastor or church council can on their own. This can also take care of the fear of volunteering for such positions. Instead of relying on volunteers for committees, current committee members can hand-pick their successors, men who have the gifts to continue the ministry of the church in their various capacities.

³³ For more on generative themes, see Vella, pp. 65-66.

By providing future leaders within the church, SGBS can also turn the tide for struggling or declining churches. Churches which have been steadily losing members, whether by death or moving away or simply leaving the church, can stem that decline and keep members around through SGBS. Small groups provide a great system for the assimilation of new members, and the relationships that are created in SGBS are based around God's Word. Braun mentions a research article which reported:

Generally speaking, *growing* churches reflect a balanced program which includes a strong emphasis on good adult Bible study classes, along with strong programs for children and youth. Churches in *decline* spend more money, time and resources on their non-adult programs than they do on adults. In *growing* churches, he observed smaller class sizes and smaller groups in adult classes. In *declining* churches he found that the trend was toward larger, lecture-oriented classes. In the area of curriculum studies, Flavil noted a real emphasis on serious "meaty" Bible study in *growing* churches. In *declining* churches the emphasis was on rehearsing doctrine.³⁴

Braun's solution to this trend of declining churches is lay-led, small group Bible discussions. He provides a caveat as well: "As long as lay-led, small group Bible studies function within the ministry of the pastor and the congregation, they can be fine opportunities for believers to deepen their knowledge of the Word and strengthen their relationships with Christ and with other Christians."³⁵ The best way for SGBS to function as Braun sees most beneficial is through the sermon-based small group model, which will be discussed in more detail later in the essay. First, I will address how SGBS have been viewed in the WELS in the past, how they are currently being utilized, and how they can be used in the future.

SGBS in WELS

Early Skepticism about SGBS

Developing future leaders for the church and strengthening the faith of current members through the means of grace have been goals of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod for generations. When SGBS became popular in the United States about thirty years ago, WELS was skeptical, at best, to make use of the model in its churches. Remembering back to the Pietism movement in the 17th century, WELS was concerned about cliques forming within the church. The worry was that these SGBS would provide an opportunity for false doctrine to creep into the

³⁴ Braun, 12.

³⁵ Ibid, 13.

church and cause divisions. Small groups were seen to be separatistic and pharisaical. The potential, it was thought, was that these SGBS would eventually break away from the congregation and become separate churches teaching false doctrine. When Pietism took root, it was a response to the “dead orthodoxy” felt from the previous generations. Spener and his followers then shifted the focus to Christian living while minimizing justification. Early essays written by professors and pastors on SGBS reflected these concerns, while at the same time strove to be evangelical and recognize that there were certainly benefits to SGBS. Although Professor Tiefel listed many benefits to SGBS in his essay, he also voiced the concerns of several WELS pastors as they responded to his questionnaire:

More than a few are convinced that the contemporary emphasis on small group study signals a return to the conventicles of Pietism, those infamous *collegia pietatis* (gatherings of the pious) or *ecclesiola in ecclesia* (churches within the church) which brought disaster to the Lutheran churches of 18th century Germany. One respondent wrote, “You stand next to a fire and your clothes smell like it.” Another added, “If you mix the same ingredients used by the Pietists, do you really expect to come up with a different kind of cake?” A third wrote: “While I think that small group studies can work, there is an anxious part of me that sees history as a predictor of events... I would never deny that the small group program can work effectively (because our Lord works effectively where his Word is present), but a part of me will probably always be anxious about the small group program.”³⁶

In response to the concerns of these shepherds of God’s people, Professor Tiefel gives this encouragement: “A set of careful guidelines and procedures is necessary if a small group program can be truly a spiritual blessing in a congregation.”³⁷ Once again, the set of guidelines that would remove the concerns listed above would be the sermon-based small group model. Professor Kuske also provides some insights into how a congregation can avoid those dangers and pitfalls of Pietism as they implement a SGBS program:

On the other hand, if the home Bible study group is formed as a part of the congregation’s nurturing program and its goals are the same as those of the congregation, it will operate in a different manner. The group will welcome the guidance of the pastor and church council or board of education. It will welcome materials supplied by the congregation and ongoing training of the group leader or coordinator. In short, both its reason for existence and its method of operation will be in line with the words of Paul to the Ephesians.^{38,39}

³⁶ Tiefel, 4.

³⁷ Ibid, 8.

³⁸ Kuske, 3.

The passage which Professor Kuske is referencing is Ephesians 4:2,3,16: “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace... From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” As the small group ministry operates within the wider mission of the church, it functions to build each member of the body of Christ up in faith and closer to one another.

Current State of SGBS in WELS

Only within the last 5-10 years have WELS pastors begun to adopt the small group model in their congregations. Evangelical churches and churches within the church growth movement have seen success with small group ministries for decades now, and only a handful of WELS pastors have seen the potential of using that model in combination with the scriptural teachings of Lutheran doctrine. One of the principles that was born out of the Reformation was that the Spirit-filled Word will be efficacious when it is in the hands of the common people. Just because a pastor wants to make use of a model developed by people known to be heterodox does not mean he is adopting their doctrine as well. The model itself is neutral and can be safely adapted, if done with care. A WELS pastor does, however, need to thoroughly examine any materials that come from heterodox sources and weed out any bad theology before using that material in his congregation.

Of the interviews I conducted with WELS pastors who use SGBS, there is a wide variety of approaches to small group ministries. Some are very structured, with quarterly sign-up sheets and leadership training, while others are a little more informal and rely on word of mouth invitations and continuity of materials provided for discussion. With the exception of a SGBS led by the pastor or staff minister, none of the small groups in these congregations are dependent on a Bible expert. The materials these groups use, however, does need to be discussion-based and contain scriptural truths instead of personal opinions, political debates, or theological biases. Each pastor uses a different format for selecting and preparing these materials, but none of them reported that any of their SGBS have been teaching false doctrine or have even thought of breaking away from the church.

³⁹ For further reading on the organization of small groups to avoid the problems of Pietism, I strongly encourage the reader to read through the rest of Professor Kuske’s essay. While some of his guidelines are addressed in this essay, his insights into adult education are extremely beneficial.

In most of the WELS churches where SGBS are utilized, there seemed to be a need for something different when they decided to start a small group ministry. Something needed to change. As I talked with Pastor Randy Hunter from St. Andrews Lutheran Church in Middleton, Wisconsin, he mentioned that his congregation seemed to hit a plateau when it came to Sunday morning Bible classes. St. Andrews offered several options for Bible classes on Sunday morning, mostly because they didn't have the facilities to accommodate everyone in one place for one Bible study. Even though they already offered several different Bible classes on Sunday morning and started other new classes, they still weren't getting any more people into Bible classes on the whole. So about 7 years ago, the staff at St. Andrews decided to implement SGBS during the week in addition to the ones they offered on Sunday mornings. The church was growing and they wanted to keep people connected to the Word but also connected to one another.⁴⁰

One thing that makes a study of small group ministries in WELS difficult is that there is no synodical committee in charge of SGBS. The pastors who use small groups are spread throughout the synod, and everyone does as he sees fit for his congregation and his particular ministry situation. There is a temptation to focus more in the methods rather than the means in this situation, but through the training these men have received to become WELS pastors, they all believe in the power of God's Word and the sacraments to strengthen faith and relationships in their SGBS.

The Future of SGBS in WELS

In the future, it would be beneficial for congregations who already have SGBS and also for those congregations who are thinking of starting SGBS to have more study materials provided by the synod through Northwestern Publishing House or another conservative publishing company. Study guides and study materials that teach solid scriptural truths by using open questions which promote discussion are vital for WELS congregations with SGBS. Each congregation which currently has SGBS either needs a full time called worker to sift through heterodox study materials or they need to create brand new materials for their SGBS. If there

⁴⁰ Randy Hunter, interview by author. November 25, 2013. During this interview, Pastor Hunter also described St. Andrews' transition to SGBS as "whole hog," meaning that they couldn't just dabble in small groups for a while and hope for things to catch on. They needed to dive in whole heartedly and get as many members on board as possible. At the same time, he realizes that it is still a process and will take time before they start seeing the progress they hope for.

were a synodical branch or committee in charge of producing materials filled with sound Lutheran doctrine, SGBS could explode throughout WELS.

Any congregation looking to start a small group ministry will first need to shift its paradigm of adult education. It is not enough to be a church *with* SGBS. A congregation needs to be a church *of* SGBS if they want their small group ministry to be successful. This is the consensus among pastors who implement SGBS in their congregations and also among the books which have been written on SGBS. This paradigm shift, this shift in focus, takes hard work, dedication, patience, and trust in God's guidance and the power of his Word to produce the effects he desires. Introducing any kind of change takes time. This type of culture change within the congregation is no different.

Putting an emphasis on SGBS on a synodical level will also take a paradigm shift concerning adult education in the WELS. The synod produces great children's ministry materials, catechism materials for grade school and middle school, and there are dozens of Lutheran high schools where young adults can learn God's Word and study what it means for their lives. What does WELS offer for adults in the way of age-appropriate and relevant study materials? What happens when WELS members graduate from college and start families? How are they fed spiritually? Are they really being forced to attend Bible class on Sunday mornings as their only source of spiritual growth outside the worship service? Mark Braun addressed this very topic in his essay "How to Encourage Bible Study in the Parish" and he posed this question: "Do we teach children and play with adults? Few observers would question our commitment to Christian *elementary* education; it is extensive and expensive. Are we equally pleased with the kind of Christian education we offer after our children are confirmed?"⁴¹

It is my opinion that SGBS are the future of adult education in WELS. SGBS provide the best opportunities for adults to learn any subject, and with the means of grace as the topic of discussion, there is no better thing to study! SGBS are not meant to be a replacement for other valuable forms of Bible study such as personal devotions and Bible study, Sunday morning Bible class, or BIC. They simply provide another opportunity to put people in contact with God's Word and with other Christians. SGBS may also appeal to a section of congregations that might not be fed spiritually enough through these other options.

⁴¹ Braun, 1 (emphasis his).

What happens when you put people in contact with God's Word? They grow! They change! We don't need to protect the Word of God from people and we don't need to protect people from the Word of God. Some of the hesitancy in WELS that came with the introduction of SGBS decades ago was that the pastor wouldn't be able to monitor or lead all the small groups and as a result false doctrine would creep into the church. The Word of God has the power to change hearts and lives. The pastor is certainly the shepherd of the congregation and as such he is responsible for the spiritual wellbeing of all members of his flock. However, one of his responsibilities is to get people in contact with the Word of God on a regular basis and get Christians together for mutual encouragement and growth. A sermon-based small group model allows the Word of God to do its work through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, even if the pastor is not present at each of the SGBS.

SGBS also provide a great way to keep the "small church" feel as a congregation grows larger. Many congregations have experienced that feeling when they get to a certain level of membership that they start losing that sense of family they had when there were only a few people coming to church when the church first started. Pastor Ben Kuerth from Victory of the Lamb in Franklin, Wisconsin, experienced that with his congregation. Once Victory of the Lamb grew past about 150 members, Pastor Kuerth could no longer be personally invested in each and every person like he was when the church first started. The members of Victory of the Lamb also started to realize that there were more and more new faces every Sunday and they didn't know everyone anymore. People were starting to get "lost" as the church grew bigger. So Pastor Kuerth set out to "create an environment where people would connect to each other and equip one another to facilitate leading. We wanted to keep reaching beyond what we had."⁴² In order for Victory of the Lamb to continue growing but still keep that sense of connection and of being a small church, they decided to adopt the SGBS model.

The same issue was addressed by Pastor Joel Schulz in Mississauga, Ontario, Canada. As Cross of Life kept growing, it started to lose that sense of being a small group in and of itself. The fellowship events that normally included everyone in the congregation started to attract the same few families every time. That "glue" that held the congregation together seemed to be losing its grip. So Pastor Schulz began a SGBS during the week to keep that bond of fellowship and friendship in a growing congregation. Pastor Schulz said it was difficult at first to get small

⁴² Ben Kuerth, interview by author. November 26, 2013.

groups started at Cross of Life, but after trial and error for a couple years they came up with a solid sermon-based approach that is working well and is continuing to grow.⁴³

Sermon-Based SGBS

The best model for SGBS within WELS would be the sermon-based SGBS model. Larry Osborne defines the purpose of a sermon-based SGBS model this way: “The ultimate goal of a sermon-based small group is simply to velcro people to the two things they will need most when faced with a need-to-know or need-to-grow situation: the Bible and other Christians.”⁴⁴ The sermon-based SGBS model provides the pastor with an opportunity to teach the material that is going to be discussed during the week on Sunday morning during the sermon. This should put the WELS pastor’s mind at ease, knowing that he, as the spiritual leader of the congregation, is still supplying the topic for discussion and the principles that will be applied. This also guards against false teachings that might creep into the SGBS, since the pastor is unable to personally monitor each small group. The concerns against Pietism and “churches within the church” are also stemmed by using the sermon-based model. In this way, SGBS remain connected to the larger congregation and function within the church’s vision and ministry. Each group is studying the same material, following the same study guide, so it is less likely that divisions and factions will form from these SGBS. This model also reflects the synod’s reliance on the means of grace to strengthen the faith of believers. The worship service is still the main focus of these sermon-based SGBS. In order for members to get the most out of their SGBS during the week, they will want to make sure they are in church on Sunday morning. When members are in church on Sunday morning, they are being fed with the means of grace, which then motivates them to attend their SGBS during the week.

Small group leaders in the sermon-based approach do not need to be Bible experts. Instead, they are merely hosts who invite people into their home for fellowship and study of God’s Word. They are facilitators throughout the study, making sure that people feel comfortable asking questions and discussing their answers to the questions. The best materials for sermon-based SGBS are not “Yes” or “No” fact questions, but they are application and thought questions meant to encourage discussion about the principles which the pastor laid out in his sermon the

⁴³ Joel Schulz, interview by author. November 27, 2013.

⁴⁴ Osborne, 43.

Sunday before. The pastor still remains the shepherd, the Bible expert, even the teacher of the SGBS. The pastor, more than likely, will be the one who will prepare the study guides for the following week. Perhaps a staff minister or a strong Christian leader within the church could also prepare study guides based on pastor's sermon.⁴⁵ The SGBS leaders are simply the tools which help guide the discussion.

What about that group of Christians who want to dive into the depths of the wealth of God's Word? Who want to learn as much doctrine as possible? Who want to go beyond what they learn in Sunday morning Bible class and SGBS? Once again, SGBS are not meant to replace other forms of study in a church's broader adult education program. The function of SGBS is not to train the next generation of theological and doctrinal giants in our church body. If there are members in a congregation who want to learn as much as they possibly can about God's Word, there may be a need for a graduated or accelerated program for Bible study. Mark Braun advocates this approach: "Other courses which could be included in a graduated program of Bible study in the parish would be courses on church history, the Lutheran Confessions, and more in-depth courses on Old Testament books."⁴⁶ Those are just a few starting points for a "graduate level" course of study. Pastor Schulz's ideal adult education program would look something like this: BIC, Sunday morning Bible class, SGBS, and then a more in-depth study with leadership training mixed in as well. St. Andrews in Middleton is considering starting a program called the "St. Andrews Institute" which would follow the model started by their SGBS and have discussion-based courses that contain active learning strategies for adults. However, it would take the curriculum to a higher level for those members who want a class which is less relational-based and more knowledge-based. The important thing to do in that case, Pastor Hunter says, is to make sure that the intended outcomes of this program are clearly identified and communicated to the congregation.⁴⁷ As with any change in ministry, communication is key throughout the process.

⁴⁵ Pastor Schulz writes his own study guides after he has finished writing his sermon. At Victory of the Lamb, their staff minister writes a study guide based on the sermon text for the week. Pastor Backus writes all the study guides for St. Paul's Muskego, regardless if he's preaching the sermon or not. At St. Andrews in Middleton, they have a large quantity of study materials made available to SGBS leaders.

⁴⁶ Braun, 9.

⁴⁷ Hunter interview.

How to Start a Small Group Ministry

It may appear difficult to get a small group ministry going from scratch. It most certainly is! However, it is not impossible. Having a clear vision of what SGBS are and what they do is the most important place to begin. Communicating that vision to the congregation is important as well. If they are not kept up-to-date and are not on board throughout the whole process, there is no way a SGBS ministry is going to get off the ground.

Once the vision and goals of the SGBS ministry have been established, the next step is to get people organized into small groups. This is harder than it sounds. There are several ways to approach organizing the small groups, and it depends on the size of the congregation. A smaller congregation can simply start out with one or two small groups, and then start expanding from there as the church grows. That is the approach Pastor Schulz took with Cross of Life in Mississauga. When they started small groups about 10 years ago, the congregation was small enough where the church itself was the small group. As the church grew in membership, it became necessary to expand that small group ministry model from the inside out. From the original SGBS, which was made up of the leaders of the congregation, each one of those leaders started their own SGBS. They had seen how Pastor Schulz led his SGBS, they understood what was expected of them as they led their own groups, and now there are five SGBS meeting on different nights of the week.⁴⁸

If the congregation is a larger church, sign-up sheets might be the way to go. List all the options for meeting times and places and have the people sign up for whichever SGBS fits their schedule the best. This works well if the small group ministry is based on topics, so people can also sign up for whichever topic they would like to study. Sign-up sheets also work well for the sermon-based approach because the people can sign up for times that fit into their schedule so they don't feel like they have to make any special commitments that might take away from their other responsibilities.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Schulz interview.

⁴⁹ Another option for larger churches is GroupLink from North Point Community Church. According to North Point's GroupLink website, GroupLink is "a 90-minute event where you can meet people in a similar stage of life and area of town with the goal of forming a Community Group. A host and plenty of staff members and volunteers will be on hand to navigate you through the process of meeting others and forming a group." The goal of GroupLink is to get members who have the same interests or who live in the same area connected to form a small group (Community Group). Check out <http://northpoint.org/adults/groups/grouplink> for more information.

Having a schedule for when SGBS meet is another big part of organizing a small group ministry. If a SGBS were to meet every week year round, both the leaders and the members would get burned out very quickly. A common practice among the WELS pastors who have SGBS is to have a set number of weeks or months when the SGBS will meet, and then taking some time off. For instance, one congregation's SGBS meet once a week for about 3 months and then they all take one month off. Their program starts at the beginning of September, right around the beginning of school so everyone is back from summer vacations and is getting back into their normal routines and schedules. After three months of SGBS, its around Christmas time when they take a month off so no one feels the pressure of having to fit in a SGBS meeting in the midst of planning and celebrating the holidays. After the holiday season, another round of SGBS goes until Easter before they take another month-long break. One more round of SGBS before summer, and the schedule starts all over again in September.

Another key factor in starting SGBS is making sure there is an "easy in, easy out" approach to joining a small group. People should not feel pressured into finding the perfect SGBS that matches their personality and their goals right away. It may take time for a SGBS to gel as a group of believers. If a person does not feel comfortable within the first couple sessions, they should be able to leave and go to another group without feeling guilty. This trial period is vital especially in the early stages of a congregation's small group ministry. This allows people to either form their own groups or to find what group works best for them. Pastor John Backus comments, "Small groups should be like trying on pants at the store. You know your size before you get there, but you may have to try a couple different pairs on before you find the ones that fit best."⁵⁰ This may also mean that certain groups don't last very long. That's fine! That's the natural process of small group ministry. Some SGBS begin and continue growing while others slowly "die" naturally for a variety of reasons.

Perhaps the most important thing to consider when starting a small group ministry is this: Would the congregation really benefit from having SGBS? Maybe a church has reached a plateau in Bible class attendance, like St. Andrews in Middleton. Maybe a church has reached a plateau in membership, and just can't seem to keep "the back door" closed so that people stick around. Maybe the relationships within the church are merely superficial and not as deep and meaningful as the pastor or members would like them to be. Maybe the church needs more

⁵⁰ Backus interview.

fellowship among its members but doesn't have the money available to organize huge fellowship events. These are just some examples of churches that might consider using SGBS to change the culture of their congregation.

There are also examples of churches that might *not* need SGBS. Maybe the attendance in Sunday morning Bible class is excellent and even on the rise. Maybe the Bible study opportunities offered throughout the week are full and members attend faithfully. Maybe the fellowship events held by the church are always well attended and well received by the members. Maybe outreach events are able to bring in new families every year while still maintaining healthy growth through Bible classes for members. In such cases, maybe SGBS are not necessary, and God be praised! SGBS are not perfect for every congregation and every situation.

However, the benefits of SGBS far outweigh any drawbacks or perceived dangers. As long as the program is well organized and overseen so that any doubts can be calmed and obstacles overcome, SGBS can bring countless blessings to any congregation. If a WELS congregation implements the sermon-based SGBS model, the risks of introducing false doctrine and creating factions within the congregation are easily dispelled.

Conclusion

The early hesitancy from WELS pastors and congregations about the use of SGBS was founded in a concern for the true teaching of God's Word and a love for the means of grace. Cautions were issued about the use of SGBS in WELS churches, but there were also some who recognized the great benefits that could come through a proper use of SGBS. Throughout the past three decades, these fears and doubts about SGBS have slowly begun to fade. With proper organization and oversight from the pastor or perhaps staff minister, a SGBS program could be the answer to any number of problems facing WELS congregations. Although different approaches to SGBS can be implemented depending on a given WELS church's situation, the sermon-based model empowers people through the Word of God preached from Lutheran pulpits on Sunday mornings. It allows Christians to take the Word of God home with them and revisit it during the week. It allows them to discuss not only the sermon itself but more importantly the Word of God on which that sermon was based, in a structured and organized way. They are able

to apply that Word directly to their station in life, their situation and circumstances, while wrestling over life's tough questions with other Christians.

The term "small group Bible studies" no longer seems to carry quite the same stigma in WELS circles of something "new" or "dangerous." However, there still hasn't been a wide acceptance of the practice, either. The dangers often associated with SGBS can happen in any of the other ministries a congregation offers as well. There is always opportunity for false doctrine to creep into personal Bible study. Factions and divisions happen within the church on a regular basis because even WELS members are *simul justus et peccator*. These problems are not unique to SGBS, either. These same problems can arise in any program within the church if it is not properly supervised or linked to the means of grace and overall mission of the congregation.

In fact, SGBS can help curb those dangers if they are organized and run properly. That's where the sermon-based model fits well with WELS theology and practice. It provides a way for the pastor to remain the teacher, trainer, and spiritual leader while putting God's Word into the hands, lives, and hearts of Christians. Pastor Schulz gave his views on the future of SGBS in the WELS in an email response to my interview, and I whole-heartedly agree with his thoughts:

I would like to see in the WELS that small group ministry is part of every congregation in some way. People in the world are talking, connecting, communicating by texting, iMessage, Facebook, Twitter, etc... They are reading God's Word on their phones. They are listening to podcasts of all kinds of Biblical teachers. We have to help them direct and focus their study and questions by giving them casual places and opportunities to discuss God's Word with Christian friends, and to invite non-Christian friends to discuss Jesus in a non-church, non-threatening atmosphere. Small group ministry is our best way to do that. There is a big difference between that and inviting someone to pastor's Sunday morning lecture Bible study at a church.

Pastor Schulz also mentioned that it would be good for future pastors, and even teachers and staff ministers, to be educated in SGBS in college and especially at the Seminary. This is becoming a more and more useful tool when it comes to adult education, and it is important that pastors become familiar with SGBS before they enter the full time ministry. Learning about SGBS at the Seminary gives pastoral students an opportunity to become familiar with the forms and function of small groups and how to best implement them in their future congregations.⁵¹

By using the sermon-based SGBS study model, there would be less need for other programs and counseling and classes that congregations offer now that might not be seeing the results that were originally intended. Although it might appear at first glance to create more work

⁵¹ Email response to interview with Pastor Schulz. Received February 5, 2014.

for the pastor, in the long run it would eliminate many counseling sessions, church discipline visits, and the need to prepare for multiple Bible studies throughout the week. It may even improve his sermon writing and preparation if he knows that his members will actually be talking about that sermon all week!

As Professor Tiefel mentioned in his essay already back in 1993, small group Bible studies may bring “untold blessings to the congregations and members of the WELS.” From the pastors who have used SGBS in their unique settings over the past 10 years, this has certainly held true. Just imagine what countless blessings the Lord could bring to the pastors, congregations, and members of the WELS in the future, if as a synod we adopted SGBS as part of our adult education program! And not only to WELS members, but also to the countless masses who are still living in darkness!

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and *teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you*. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Mt 28:18-20).

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