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**ACTS 2:42 IN 2006:  
EXAMINING SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION  
IN AN AMERICAN MEGA-CHURCH**

by

SHERI GUSEMAN

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education  
University of San Diego

May 2006

Dissertation Committee

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## **Abstract**

During the last century, Americans have become increasingly isolated from one another, resulting in feelings of loneliness and creating a void of community (Frazee, 2001). However, as attendance at mainline churches continues to decline (Stafford, 1998), attendance and participation in mega-churches, defined as those serving more than 2,500 individuals and offering a multiplicity of services, continues to increase (<http://www.hirr.hartsem.edu/org>). One popular explanation for this phenomenon is that mega-churches are often characterized by an organized small group ministry - something absent in more traditional churches. Although this trend has clearly swept the nation (Gladwell, 2005), related research on the efficacy of the small group structure has not.

To test the power of participation in Christian small group discussions, this dissertation examined the extent to which biblical knowledge retention was influenced by participation in small groups at a Southern California mega-church. Using the biblical definition of small groups, which is described as "people gathered together to study the Bible, pray, and socialize," (Acts 2:42) this quasi-experimental design used multiple regression analysis to compare biblical knowledge retention from the previous week's sermon among two groups of participants: those who discussed the sermon in small groups and those who did not. In addition to group discussion, measures of individual and group demographics such as gender, race/ethnicity, and educational background were also used to explain variation in the weekly quiz scores.

Results suggest that the two most significant effects on sermon retention were the ages of the various group members and whether or not individuals had attended the previous group meeting. Specifically, people who participated in mixed-age groups

scored an average of 8% higher on weekly quizzes than those from similar age groups ( $p=.00$ ). Furthermore, if an individual attended the group meeting the prior week, regardless of what the group discussed, the average quiz score was 6% higher than those who did not attend ( $p=.01$ ). Finally, the open-ended data strongly indicated that people attend small groups desiring biblical study. The results of this study may aid church leaders and perhaps educators who utilize discussion as a pedagogical tool.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to my parents, Anne & Brian Wall.

Regardless of what I do or achieve, they are selflessly sacrificial, loving, and proud.



## **Acknowledgments**

Without God there is nothing and I cannot imagine living in a world void of hope, joy, and Truth - to Him I owe everything - primarily, the inspiration and ability to complete this paper as well as the long list of people who interceded along the way to bring this project to fruition. What follows is an abbreviated list of the people on whose shoulders I am standing.

The first person God put in my path, to light a fire under me and keep it stoked was my friend J-Clint. Our friendship has blessed every element of my Life, especially my walk with our Lord. Thanks, J. for leading me, protecting my heart, keeping me accountable, making me laugh a lot and demonstrating with integrity that not all men leave when faced with adversity....

The second person who impacted the completion of this paper is Fred Galloway. Until I got to the actual proposal phase of this project, I never understood why people would thank their committees?!? Now, not only do I understand, I whole-heartedly believe that I would never have finished had it not been for Fred's dedication and candor along the way. His dedication to students is inspiring. Later, the enthusiasm and discerning thoughts of Dr. Lori Low added insight and made this a project about which I could be proud. I must also acknowledge Dr. Taylor Mc Kenzie who by signing here etched his name into the posterity of the Grossmont College Communication Department. As Taylor retires this year, I will miss his faith and perspective, ever present at department meetings and ever radiant each morning as I arrive on campus.

I would like to acknowledge the following collection of people who supported me at various times when I needed it most. All four of my parents and my four brothers &

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Always ready to give good advice on a hot date or over a cup of the bucks, I thank Uncle Johnny for his friendship and generosity. Thanks for being there when I was born and continuing to be a great uncle.

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J., EB, Smiley, Deb, Karen, Julie, D'Arbra, Holly, Cousin Mary, Kurt Brauer, my small groups, and countless others - thank you for your constant and faithful prayers (Eph 6:10); never doubt their power. I pray that this is God's work and it will have worldwide impact through the small groups of Koinonia House with Dan and Chuck. Thanks, guys for your respect; I can only hope to be the good and faithful servant you expect me to be.

And the best for last... Jesus saved all of us once, and me in this process many times. For Christ's sake, I am finished! Thanks God for getting me through!

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

While listening to a Sunday sermon, one may feel inspired, inundated, overwhelmed, bored, or a myriad of other reactions. The sermon's message, however, is just the beginning of what a pastor hopes to instill within the congregation. The sermon could be the beginning of behavioral, attitudinal, and possibly eternal life changes. However, during the time a pastor spends in front of the congregation, he (or sometimes she) does not normally interact, question, or engage the congregants in dialogue. There is no way for the pastor to grasp whether the message was clear, understandable, inspiring, life changing, or even heard by those attending. How then can a pastor measure or ensure his or her effectiveness? There are many ways pastors may ascertain effectiveness (e.g., sermon quizzes, Wednesday night reviews, informal meetings), but one prevalent way is through sermon-based small groups and small group discussions.

A small group discussion, framed within a specific church and following New Testament guidelines, enables a pastor to reinforce the sermon, as well as serve various other functions. Informal Christian small group meetings were popularized in the first century AD (O' Halloran, 1984) and since then people have been meeting together to study the Bible, pray, and socialize. Families convened as part of a church body to raise children and meet other community needs. Church leaders regularly utilized small groups to perform various needs throughout a society. Despite the fact that small Christian groups have been meeting since the first century, little research has quantified their effectiveness in terms of biblical knowledge (Price, Terry, and Johnston, 1980). For that

reason, this paper specifically examined the relationship between a formal group discussion and retention of the pastor's message.

In an attempt to measure small group effectiveness, this dissertation partially replicated Price, Terry, and Johnston's study (1980) wherein Christian small group effectiveness was measured by a variety of variables, including retention. Specifically, this study examined individual's retention of a Sunday sermon by analyzing data from two sets of groups: one that discussed the sermon and another that did not. In addition to analyzing retention data, this study also examined participants' expectations and reflections of learning in the church-based small group environment. These points are made more clear in the following explanation of the background and purpose of the study.

### ***Background of the Study***

Throughout time, people have formed and belonged to small groups for a variety of reasons, ranging from basic survival to social activities, rehabilitation, work projects, school studies, community endeavors, and religious growth. Until the last decade, people regularly lived in groups as a way of life (Frazee, 2001) and there is evidence of communal living in the earliest known records of humanity. There is also instruction for small groups within the earliest documents of the biblical New Testament.

For example, in the book of Acts while reporting Peter's first sermon, also known as the first Christian sermon (<http://www.khouse.org/articles/2001/359/>), Luke writes that believers were to devote themselves to small groups for the purposes of prayer, fellowship and learning (Acts 2:42). That premise has been the foundation of Christianity since the time of Christ and can be seen repeatedly in church history (as is detailed in the

next chapter). Although not always used to advance a benevolent agenda (e.g., the crusades), Luccock (1951) asserts “all the great movements in Christianity have been based on the training of small groups” (p. 786).

In the last 50 years small groups have gained popularity and usefulness within U.S. churches as a place to build community and spiritual renewal (Turner, 2000; Wuthnow, 1994). More importantly, in the last decade, there has been an increase in the number of churches that believe that an organized small group ministry is integral to their purpose ([www.willowcreek.com](http://www.willowcreek.com); Wuthnow, 1994); consequently, there has been an increase in the number of people participating in church-based small groups. In 2001 Gallup estimated that 40% of Americans are in a faith-related small group (as cited in Frazee, 2001). To accommodate this population, there has been much published on “how to” run a church-based small group ministry (over 1,600 books on [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)) but little research on the effectiveness of small groups within churches.

**Replication** As mentioned earlier, this study replicated a portion of Price, Terry, and Johnston (1980) in which behavior, knowledge, semantic differential, evaluation of self as worshipper, and evaluation of pastor were examined by surveying 82 people in a Baptist church in Virginia. In Price, Terry, and Johnston’s (1980) study, half of the participants heard the Sunday sermon and engaged in small group discussions later in the week, while the other half attended unrelated workshops at church. The effects of preaching, preaching with group dialogue (small group discussion), semantic differential, and behavior were compared.

The only significant behavioral change was reported in “semantic differential” (Price, Terry, & Johnston, 1980, p. 186), which is defined as the participant’s

understanding of various biblical topics and habits of perceived religious people. The only significant knowledge effect was reported between the groups who discussed the sermon. In other words, participation in the small group promoted knowledge of the sermon and behavioral changes within small group members. The study proved useful but limited because the authors tested five different scales with ten different groups and found only two areas of significance.

Over 25 years ago when completing their study, Price, Terry, and Johnston (1980) lamented the paucity of available research on small groups, and little has been done since. As they suggested, this type of study “raises many questions” (p. 196) that are often not answered by quantitative analysis, thus leaving a void in this body of knowledge. The current study begins to address this lack of knowledge by replicating a portion of Price, Terry, and Johnston’s (1980) study by answering the question: Do small group discussions increase each participant’s knowledge of a Sunday message?

### ***Problem Statement***

“The biggest challenge for the church at the opening of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to develop a solution to the discontinuity and fragmentation of the American lifestyle” (Schaller, as cited in Frazee, 2001, p. 37). As has been made clear, small groups are becoming an ever-important means of developing community within churches in the United States (Wuthnow, 1990). As more and more people invest in small group functions, they should know if, and how, groups are impacting their lives. Leaders in churches should know if the small group programs are providing the appropriate environment for learning Sunday’s sermon.

Bookstores are rife with “how-to” manuals for administering small groups, but void of research materials discussing the groups’ effectiveness. Pastors are caught up in the trend towards small groups (Gladwell, 2005); however, little evidence exists explaining the benefit to congregants. Church members may feel pressured to join a group, but not have any tangible understanding of how the group will increase their spiritual growth. This study attempted to answer those questions. More specifically, this study begins to increase the body of knowledge surrounding the efficacy of a small group ministry in large churches through its measurement of retention of a sermon following organized small group discussions.



### ***Purpose of the Study***

As it becomes more apparent that small groups enable churches to meet a variety of people's needs, the problem then becomes more complex for church leaders. Pastors will wonder: Are people retaining more information? Do they more deeply understand the sermons? Are small group ministries effective? Do they matter? How can small groups serve a large congregation? Although it may seem self-evident that a small group discussion would increase the retention of a Sunday sermon, that specific outcome had not been measured. This study began to answer the above questions by measuring retention of a message after a small group discussion, paving the way for future studies surrounding small group ministry.

### ***Research Questions and Hypotheses***

Based on the previously cited research and the following literature review, the following research questions were addressed:

RQ1: What is the demographic profile of the sample and how much does each participant

retain from the sermon?

RQ2: To what extent do participant's demographics, group homogeneity, and group type (i.e., sermon-based or non-sermon-based) affect retention?

RQ3: What do people expect from a small group experience?

## **Chapter Two: Review of the Literature**

### ***Introduction***

It has colloquially been said that the Bible is the “greatest story ever told.” There are many reasons for that belief, but one is the timeless truths within its pages. For example, the Ten Commandments remain written into the fabric of the US constitution. The system of leadership and community government described in the book of Exodus is still practiced in the United States. Rules for marriage and child rearing are still observed. Also related to this paper, guidelines for creating and participating in Christian small groups are described throughout the Bible.

The history of the Christian church is long and winding, as is the role of small groups both in and out of the church. Although not a historical anthology, this study would be incomplete without a basic understanding of Christian church history, specifically, the role of small groups in Christian life. It would also be incomplete without a basic understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of small groups in general and a limited understanding of discussion as a pedagogical tool.

Therefore, the following literature review begins by explaining and defining small groups from a variety of perspectives, including pastoral and academic. Secondly, a brief history of faith-related small groups highlights pivotal moments in Christianity, specifically, biblical directives, the earliest churches, Western expansion of small groups, the Latin revolution and the current U.S. trend toward mega churches. The final section in this literature review describes the significance of student-led discussion, also called student talk, on retention.

### *An Overview of Groups*

In the 1970's, Leslie postulated "there is nothing really new about small groups" (p. 19) but the American acceptance and need for them has increased as an outgrowth of an "impersonal and computerized age" (p. 20). The American craving for small group interaction may be increasing (Wuthnow, 1998) but the academic study of small groups has been around for over 100 years.

According to Arrow, Mc Grath, and Berdahl (2000), small group research formally began in the late 1800's. First rooted in psychology, it has since found meaningful study in communication (Lager, 1982), religious studies (Icenogle, 1994), management education (French and Vince, 1999), as well as other fields. The following explains small groups from both the academic and religious perspectives.

Small groups have been examined in multifarious ways. The first perspective on which this study focused is from the literature of group relations which defined groups as inherent paradoxes, claiming that "groups are pervaded by a wide range of emotions, thoughts, and actions that their members experience as contradictory, and that the attempts to unravel these contradictory forces create a circular process that is paralyzing to groups" (Smith & Berg, 1997, p. 14). By paralyzing, Smith and Berg do not mean physically, but rather frozen in the group's ability to work together, negotiate, communicate, or progress using all available resources. Bearing in mind that in small groups the primary resources are the group members themselves, rife with skills, tools, complications, contradictions, emotions, and various backgrounds (Beebe & Masterson, 2001). For small groups to fully function, their emotionality, permeability, and resources need to be realized, thus allowing each member to struggle and grow within the group.

Groups' struggles rests in a variety of factors, one for example is the desire to serve oneself while also needing to serve the group (Beebe & Masterson, 2001, Smith & Berg, 1997). While simultaneously wanting to be a part of the larger group, an individual may resist the group's agenda to instead realize his or her own goals. This theme is evident in both biblical and present times.

Biblically, the disciples wanted to follow Christ, despite difficult decisions to do so. Each disciple was called to leave their familiar surroundings, including their families and careers, without looking back (Matthew 4:9) which would fulfill the group goal; however, there were inherent struggles when doing so, just as there would be today. Presently, people join groups for various self-fulfilling reasons, often not acknowledging the mission or purpose of the larger organization (i.e., the church). This contradiction is made more clear when examining the context of the group.

Arrow, Mc Grath, and Berdahl (2000) treat groups as "adaptive, dynamic systems that are driven by interactions both among group members and between the group and its embedding contexts. [They] do not believe that groups can be adequately understood as collections of independently acting individuals" (p. 3). Therefore, in this study it would be remiss not to include an examination of the context in which the small group[s] resides, be it an external social clique, an administrative group, or a task-oriented ministry. Considering the context "may be inconvenient from a methodological point of view. But pretending that groups can exist without a context is...counterproductive" (Arrow, Mc Grath, and Berdahl, 2000, p. 28). French and Vince (1999) refer to the context as a container – the space containing the group relations wherein groups create

learning and productivity. “Within these contexts, we learn to perceive and misperceive ourselves and each other” (Yeracaris, 1980, p. 117).

To review, “small groups” are often part of a larger organism. That larger organism could be a governing body, family, peer group, professional group, or many other groups. Icenogle (1994) clarifies that “Small groups are not the full and final word on the structure of complex human community. Small groups usually exist as parts of larger organisms of human community” (p. 99). The larger organism of the groups studied herein is the American mega-church. To more fully understand the nature of a Christian small group, a formal definition of small groups from the perspectives of biblical, dictionary and pastoral sources is necessary.

### ***Small Groups Defined***

In the first book of the biblical New Testament, Luke defines small groups as people gathered together to study the Bible, pray, and socialize (Acts 2:42). That definition serves as the basic premise for this study; however, the following further defines and describes functions, features, and purposes of small groups. First, small groups are defined in a broad sense, and then contextually for this study, from the perspective of religious based community groups and churches, as those are the groups under consideration herein.

Neither Webster’s Dictionary nor Dictionary.com specifically define “small group” ([http://www.merriamwebster.com/%22small\\_group%22.cfm?nft=1&t=5&p=1](http://www.merriamwebster.com/%22small_group%22.cfm?nft=1&t=5&p=1); <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=%22small%20group%22>), but definitions are rife among small group scholars. Beebe and Masterson (1999) define small group as a collection of three to twelve people meeting together for a specific purpose. Lucas (2001)

agrees with this definition and argues that a leadership component should be present, but that all group members can exercise leadership. Klein (1966) deviated a bit by defining a small group as a mix of people who interact with one another more than they interact with anyone else. This may indicate a family group, but she specifies that spending time together is more important than having a specific purpose. The following provides some context and the focus for this study.

The biblical scholar Icenogle begins with the notion that God Himself is a small group (1994). Christianity describes and believes in God as a trinity in three distinct, fully separate forms: God as the omnipotent Father, God as the Son manifested as Jesus, and God as the Paraclete or Holy Spirit comforter. From this perspective, God is a group unto Himself.

In a similar vein, Icenogle (1994) argued that a group can be two people earnestly seeking Jesus because where “two are more are gathered” together (Matthew 18:20) He promises to be in their midst. From the pastoral perspective, small groups have been used in a variety of contexts including counseling, Bible study, community building, evangelism, and missions (Seltzer, 1997), defined in various, but similar ways.

In the *Dictionary of Pastoral Care*, small groups are defined as task-oriented, and for activities such as prayer, studies, or missionary work (1987). The *New Dictionary of Pastoral Studies* (2002) asserts that studies of groups are not to be “confused with group therapy,” as the purpose of group studies within the church setting are to serve as “an educational tool” (p. 144) and group therapy is to heal emotional wounds. The *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling* (1990) synthesizes the above definitions and purposes of Christian-based small groups by explaining that any group, by a variety of names,

shares as its “central purpose the enhancement and development of members of the group” (p. 485).

Groups may be called different names: cells, cell groups, ecclesial groups, communities, or simply small groups, but the definition is ultimately as simple as three or more people meeting together for a specific purpose, in this case, related to growing in the church body. The following examines small group purposes and then the history of small groups in churches.

### ***The Broad Purposes of Small Groups***

“Small groups are formed for many different reasons and have different purposes” (Arrow, Mc Grath, & Berdahl, 2000, p. 4). Phillips (1970) proposed five basic reasons why people join groups: common concern for a problem, to collect available expertise, to make legislative decisions, to serve established organizations, and to implement plans or projects. Coleman, who many consider to be today’s father of the American Christian mega-church (Seltzer, 1997), asserts that the purposes of small groups are: Bible study, community and/or group building, and missions (1989). Arrow, Mc Grath, and Berdahl (2000) summarized this, from a purely sociological perspective, by indicating that “groups have two generic functions: (a) to complete group projects and (b) to fulfill member needs” (p. 47). These functions and purposes are evident in religious small groups in biblical times as well in the present, though they have not been consistently present over time.

Disciples in the New Testament met to eat, pray and study (Acts 2:42) which served as their primary gathering. Rarely would first century Christians conduct large community-style meetings. Years later, during the early days of the Protestant

reformation, Martin Luther claimed that anyone earnestly wanting to be Christian should “meet in a house somewhere to pray, to read, to baptize, to receive sacrament, and to do other Christian works” (as cited in Beckham, 1995, p. 117). Present day American Christians also meet to eat, pray and study the Bible in formalized church-based groups, but their primary meeting is a large gathering, typically on Sunday.

Hall (2002) believes that the imbalance of large meetings over small ones is in fact crippling the North American church ([www.living-stones.com](http://www.living-stones.com)), which has led many large churches to institute intimate, small group programs. This vision of one of America’s largest churches, as instituted by Rick Warren of the highly acclaimed Saddleback Church, asserts that a church should grow smaller and bigger at the same time (Warren, 1995).

Warren (1995) believes churches should be “smaller” to accommodate the need for community within today’s speeding, commuter lifestyle and “larger” to accommodate the church’s need to grow in number, but more importantly bring more people into a relationship with Christ. To accommodate these seemingly opposing needs, the specific purposes of small groups will vary by church and sometimes a church will have different groups or programs to serve a variety of purposes or interests. For example, churches may have groups with unique purposes such as mountain biking, marital counseling, dancing, prayer, grief support, or any other specific interests. As previously discussed, each of those needs can be seen in a variety of historical contexts, from biblical times up to the present day mega-churches, which is discussed in the following section. Despite many functions and purposes for groups, this study focused on one clear element of the formal small group process: how discussion impacts retention of the sermon.



### ***Biblical History of Small Groups***

“The history of the small group Christian Community is, in fact, as old as the church and as recent as the supermarket” (O’Halloran, 1984, p.9). Wuthnow (1988) claims that Americans have a long history of special purpose groups tied to our religious practices. Adding to this in 1998 Wuthnow asserted, “Americans’ fascination with spirituality has been escalating dramatically” (p. 1) to a point of frenetic searching.

Fascination with spirituality, special interest religious groups, and people living in community are certainly not unique to Americans, or any other nation, and not even any specific time period. Since human events have been recorded, there has been an interest in spirituality, God and matters of faith. This is evidenced in earliest art, writing and debate. With the specific focus on small groups in the church, the following section briefly reviews historical periods before Christ, Christ’s teaching on community, new testament beliefs and the apostle Paul’s teaching on small groups, the modern day movement into ecclesial groups, and finally, the development and phenomenon of American mega-churches in the last half century.

**Historical Periods Before Christ** Icenogle (1994) claims that the Old Testament “has no specific theology of small group community. However, there is much reflection on tribal community, marital community, familial community, and friendship” (p. 21) and the Bible’s first passages describe a small group existing between Adam, Eve and God in the garden of Eden (Genesis, chapter 2). People throughout the Old Testament raised families, fought, ate, and worshipped together. Over a thousand years before Christ was born, the idea of community, realized in small Christian groups, was built into His people when Moses delivered the Jews out of Egypt (Exodus).

During the time of exile, Moses, as commanded by his father-in-law, Jethro, developed a system of democracy enabling capable and trustworthy men to govern over “thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens” (Exodus 18:24). Doing such created a sense of community, accountability, and small group governance for ways of justice, worship and everyday tasks. People relied on one another for their daily existence as they moved from camp to camp in the harsh Middle Eastern deserts. This same principle is discussed later as it inspired George’s (1991) “meta-church” model and is commonly called the “Jethro principle” (Clark, 1998).

Hundreds of years before Christ, King David wrote, “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity (Psalms 133:1). By brothers he did not specifically mean siblings from the same family, rather he meant siblings in the Christian family who call God their father and choose to commune with one another. To live in unity meant glorifying God, serving one another, and agreeing on ways in which to live daily life. David was not addressing groups of thousands, rather each person as an individual within a community group.

Christian ecclesial groups that we recognize today as cell groups (O’Halloran, 1984), home fellowship groups ([www.calvarychapel.com](http://www.calvarychapel.com)), small groups (Donahue, 1996), special purpose groups (Wuthnow, 1988), growth groups (<http://www.northcoastchurch.com/growthgrp/index.htm>), or basic ecclesial communities (Azevado, 1987), were developed by Christ as the foundation of His teaching, thus to become the foundation of the Christian religion. It is recognized that “He is our best authority on small groups” (Barlow, 1972, p. 22).

**Christ's Teaching On Community** Jesus first chose a group of four men (Matthew 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20) who he referred to as friends and disciples. It was with these four He began working with small ecclesial groups. He later called others (Matthew 9:9) thereby enlarging his group to 12 men, who he called His apostles (Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6:12-16). The apostles met in homes (Matthew 26:26-29; Luke 10:38; John 13-17), in synagogue (Mark 6:2, Luke 4:15), and in public places (Matthew 5-7; Luke 9:12-17; John 21). They met for a specific purpose: to enlarge the kingdom of God and to spread the word of Christ. They traveled, ate, slept, conversed, struggled, suffered, and learned together. After the death of Christ, they continued their group ministry and did as God commissioned them, went out into the world and made disciples (Matthew 28:19), thus creating more small groups to teach, learn, and live in this world together.

**New Testament and the Apostle Paul's Beliefs** Indeed, small groups proliferated and became the common way to practice Christianity. In New Testament times, Bible-based small groups were the foundation of encouragement, education, and community service. Amid persecution in 70 a.d., the author of Hebrews reminds his readers to "let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another" (10:24-25). The greatest teacher and leader of small groups after Christ was the apostle Paul, who repeatedly instructed his followers to be together and serve one another (Banks, 1980). "In the Pauline communities, as indeed in all the early Christian groups, it is people who are important" (O'Halloran, 1996, p. 15).

Paul fiercely believed in the idea of community whereby Christians who were all endowed with various spiritual gifts (1Corinthians12) were meant to serve various needs

of the community and provide for one another. To the Romans Paul wrote that they were “complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another” (Romans 15:14). To the Galatians he wrote that as free citizens, they “should serve one another in love” (Galatians 5:13). By love, he did not mean romanticized or erotic love. Paul was referring to love in the sacrificial sense that one may “lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

There are examples throughout the Bible of Paul meeting with and instructing others in small groups in homes because there were no churches as we know them today. “Christians met in homes and it was there that they got the experience of the intimate group” (O’Halloran, 1996, p. 15). Within these early groups people intimately experienced a wide breadth of services, gifts, and ministries from one another (Whitehead & Whitehead, 1982).

**Rome’s Gain, A Small Group Loss** Because the Roman emperor Constantine claimed to have experienced a “divine awakening” (O’Halloran, 1984) and miracle of God during battle, he made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Rutz (1993) equates this to wheels falling off of a car, because suddenly the Christian faith was no longer practicing biblical principles, such as meeting in small groups. Rather, it turned to pagan and political principles. Beckham (1995) explains that as Constantine encouraged Christian congregations, they grew in number and began gathering in public spaces. The new Roman congregations grew away from home churches and small groups and more into parishes and traditional church structures as we see them today, both in historical and modern architecture and/or landscapes. Cathedrals replaced homes as the

desired places of worship, thus replacing homespun intimacy with guarded rules and perfunctory public worship.

Centuries after Constantine's divine awakening, Saint Patrick attempted to get back to the original intent of the New Testament and evangelized Catholic parishes in Ireland using formalized small groups (Prior, 1983). In the protestant reformation, Luther professed the benefits and Christian value of small groups (Beckham, 1995). Following Luther, one of the most significant theological shifts for small groups occurred organically at Oxford within the Church of England during the early 1700's.

While at Oxford, brothers John and Charles Wesley began a Holy Club for the purposes of Bible study, prayer, and support (Watson, 1995). Several men regularly came to John Wesley deeply grieving their own sin, needing prayer and redemption (Wesley, as cited in Watson, 1995). As a group they began to meet weekly. The small group meetings continued and grew with other men from the area. These meetings gave rise to the United Society in London and eventually formed the structure of the Methodist religion (Watson, 1995). Wesley's groups, and the resultant Methodist church, "which was organized into classes, bands, and societies, spread quickly in the colonies of America and was a significant factor in the spread of Christianity on the American frontier" (Clark, 1998, p. 44). While this new religion was spreading into the American frontier, enabling communities to meet together regularly, a movement was taking place in England enabling children to become involved in the religious education.

In the late 1700's in England a newspaper editor, Robert Raikes, demonstrated great concern for poor and needy children who would roam the streets on Sunday, their only day off from work (Ranier, 1993). Instead of allowing them to find mischief or

remain illiterate, he organized a system of religious education, which eventually gave rise to the system of Sunday school as we know it today (Rainer, 1993). As Sunday school spread across the Atlantic to the United States, it grew to serve the purpose of religious and civil education for children as well as adults (Rainer, 1993). Meeting before or after traditional church services on Sundays for religious education became the prevailing norm of small group meetings until two contemporary movements one in the East and one in the West, altered the course of modern Christianity.

Yonggi Cho's meetings in Korea and the Latin American "Comunidad de Basas" revolution of the 1950's and 1960's redefined Christianity for present day Christians. Cho's movement proved that Christian based small groups could proliferate and evangelize, even under persecution (Cho, 1984). The Latin based groups proved that Christian based small groups can serve the functions of family, when necessary, as discussed later in this paper.

O'Halloran (1984) asserts that small groups are a "growing phenomenon," inspired by the Latin churches and satisfying the needs of people engaged in human or political struggles within the US. The Latin movement toward small groups spurred the present American phenomenon of small groups and continues to fuel churches worldwide.

**The Latin Ecclesia** The spread of the small group movement into the United States can be traced to the prevalence of small groups, in Latin America, just preceding Vatican II and the pre-Brasilia industrial revolution. As people moved away from large familial village and into cities, they felt isolated and began meeting together with neighbors to pray, eat, and socialize. These simple meetings, called ecclesia groups or

base community groups, created a shift within the Latin catholic church that eventually spread up, into the United States. As with any major shift in cultural thought and action, there were multifarious factors leading to the change in religious practice. The history and effects of this shift within the Latin American catholic church, are described below.

Azevedo (1987) points out that Brazil, more than any other country, was impacted by Vatican II because of the political climate and processes of tumultuous change during the early 1960's. As the capitol of Brazil moved more into a centralized city and people were forced to move from slower paced, more family oriented rural areas, the need for faith based small groups grew stronger. Brazilian catholics began meeting together in homes and within community centers, enabling more poor and rural people to develop communities of faith and family life support systems (Boff, 1986).

Another factor encouraging the growth of ecclesial groups was the meetings and conferences of Bishops, wherein, important discussions, structural decisions and development of ecclesial groups took place in 1968 in Columbia, 1974 in Rome, and 1979 in Puebla. Affirming the actions of the Bishops' meetings, in 1980 Pope John Paul said "Above all, it makes me very happy to renew now the confidence which my predecessor, Pope Paul VI, manifested in the small Christian Communities" (as cited in O'Halloran, 1984, p. 10). Following up John Paul II, in 1992, in Santo Domingo, another meeting of Bishops took place that was sponsored by the newly developed joint task force from Notre Dame, which affirmed and supported the small groups movement (Pelton, 1997). Each meeting with the catholic church leadership furthered the development of small groups, but more importantly, furthered the belief that small groups are integral to the church as a whole.

The small groups thrived, despite political tensions between nations, difficult communication, and an unclear consensus regarding the small groups' purposes. From Brazil, the small group movement spread throughout Latin America and then to the United States (O' Halloran, 1996, p.18). The migration of catholic small groups from Latin America expanded to other denominations and geographic regions within the Americas. A prominent factor that encouraged the spread of small groups within the United States is the proliferation of small group ministries within American mega-churches.

### ***The Mega Church.***

In 1982, Whitehead and Whitehead wrote of the needs for people in the US to regain a sense of community in their fast-paced and mobile worlds. Fast-forward that pace to 2005 when people have high speed internet connections, mobile telephones, on demand entertainment, and families spread beyond far county lines. In addition to high speed living is the isolation of suburban living where it is common for neighbors to co-exist without even knowing each other's names (Frazee, 2001). The question is, how can churches, whose attendance has been declining, serve the needs of more and more people needing community? In the present era of church decline, one church continues to grow: the American mega-church.

Despite the fact that the baby boomer generation claimed that Truth is relative, studies show that the only churches whose membership is increasing are the fundamental, Bible-based (mega) churches, and by over 200% since 1950 (Clark, 1994). Common sense would dictate that a church does not become the size of a small town without exhibiting excellent character and a variety of services or opportunities to its



congregation. Consistently, mega-churches have a penchant for cutting-edge media, serving up music videos and entertainment on a regular basis including contemporary and more traditional styles. They also tailor messages to specific audiences, are more positive than condemning, and welcome all people, regardless of life's predicaments ([www.hirr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/thuma](http://www.hirr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/thuma)).

**The Mega-Church, Defined** Although defined by the American Heritage Dictionary as “a large independent, usually non-denominational worship group, especially one formed as an offshoot of a protestant church” ([www.bartleby.com/61/78](http://www.bartleby.com/61/78)), a mega-church is not simply a lot of people in the same place worshipping God. It is a lot of people, gathered in one place, satisfying a variety of needs all during the week ([www.hirr.hartsem.edu/org](http://www.hirr.hartsem.edu/org)). The New York Times described mega-churches as “sprawling villages where members can eat, shop, go to school, bank and work out as well as pray, 24 hours a day, seven days a week [and they] reflect broad cultural desires for rooting and convenience for overextended families” (Brown, 2002, p. F1). Stafford (1998) describes a mega-church as one of protestant origin with over 2000 weekly attendees; however, basing a definition solely on the number of people attending is too simple and limiting. More aptly, the American mega-church, as described by the UK's *Telegraph* newspaper, is the US's latest religious phenomenon, offering a super-sized mall of entertainment, spirituality, consumerism, and fellowship (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2003/03/31/wgod31.xml>).

The variety of services and the belief that people need to be in community has led mega-churches to institute small group ministries as a vital element of church membership. Mega-churches offer a smorgasbord of groups, focusing around various

needs and infused with various incentives to maintain attendance (<http://www.willowcreek.com/smallgroups>). Although typically found in suburbs of larger cities, mega-churches equally attract people from all demographic and psychographic walks of life ([www.csmonitor.com](http://www.csmonitor.com); [www.hirr.hartsem.edu](http://www.hirr.hartsem.edu)).

**Mega-Demographics** Unlike most churches and other social institutions, mega-churches tend to be racially representative, with membership roughly reflective of the US population. The only existing discrepancy is that there are fewer Hispanic-Americans in mega-churches than represented in the country's population (<http://www.census.gov/popest/states/asrh/SC-EST2004-04.html>; [www.hirr.hartsem.edu/faith\\_megachurches\\_factsummary.html](http://www.hirr.hartsem.edu/faith_megachurches_factsummary.html)). This discrepancy could be explained by the high number of Hispanic people who only attend catholic churches. The diversity within mega-churches confounds conventional knowledge, especially when considering that 57% of today's mega-churches were founded prior to 1961 ([www.hirr.hartsem.edu](http://www.hirr.hartsem.edu)).

The emergence of mega-churches has come quickly. In 1970 only 10 mega-churches existed nationwide. Today there are over 740 and the numbers are still growing exponentially ([www.csmonitor.com](http://www.csmonitor.com)). Churches that began with a few hundred attendees in the 1970's are now well over 10,000 in membership ([http://www.hirr.hartsem.edu/org/faith\\_megachurches\\_FACTsummary.html](http://www.hirr.hartsem.edu/org/faith_megachurches_FACTsummary.html); Stafford, 1998). In San Diego alone, there are five mega-churches with over 5,000 regular attendees at each church.

**Mega-Success** Coleman, the noted father of the present day US mega-church, built his philosophy on the simple idea that churches should grow (as stated in Sargeant,

1996) and should not be restricted by traditional forms of liturgy. Rather, contemporary churches should incorporate business and marketing strategies to win people over to God, or at least to church attendance. His strategies have been incredibly successful as the country has witnessed several churches grow to over 20,000 in membership ([http://hirr.hartsem.edu/org/faith\\_megachurches\\_FACTsummary.html#size;](http://hirr.hartsem.edu/org/faith_megachurches_FACTsummary.html#size;) <http://www.willowcreek.org/history.asp>).

One of the largest and most successful mega-churches in the nation today is Willow Creek of Illinois. The pastor, Bill Hybels, posits that if four conditions are met, people will remain faithful in attendance (<http://www.willowcreek.org/history.asp>). His four conditions are: people seek the church; the pastor provides a meaningful message; the experience at church is relevant to everyday life; and, meaningful small group interactions take place. This was confirmed by Clark (1994) who stated that stronger religions will thrive because they demand more from their participants. Certainly, meeting all four criteria can be demanding.

In a 1999 Christianity Today article, noted management visionary Peter Drucker stated that “pastoral mega-churches are surely the most important social phenomenon in American society in the last 30 years” ([www.ctlibrary.com](http://www.ctlibrary.com)). He continued to say that “This, to my mind, for my lifetime, is the greatest, the most important, the most momentous event, and the turning point not just in the churches but perhaps in the human spirit altogether” ([www.ctlibrary.com](http://www.ctlibrary.com)). Though superlative in nature, this praise is not surprising. Across the U.S. there is a prevalence of stories by people who believe they would be dead without their church. Some people travel over 70 miles each way, just to

attend church. It is commonly reported that (mega) church participation is saving families, creating victors, and changing countless lives ([www.csmonitor.com](http://www.csmonitor.com)).

This praise is not universal. Some people feel that an absence of formal liturgy or traditional services leaves a void in the biblical doctrine

(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2003/03/31/wgod31.xml>).

Others feel that the emphasis on seeker friendly services promote more relationships with people than with God (Sargeant, 1994). Others simply feel lost in a sea of people (Gladwell, 2005).

One way mega-churches are determined to connect their members is through consistent participation in small groups. Within the small group resides the community of the church and the potential to grow and learn more about the faith. The avenue for learning within the groups is small group discussion, specifically the extent to which members are talking with one another and discussing the sermon.

### ***Learning though Small Group Discussion***

One goal of the small group is to engage people in learning through discussion: to develop friendships through talk that bolsters understanding of the Bible and biblical principles. In many ways, this is similar to discussions in a classroom setting. Although one goal of a small group is to encourage informal and intimate relationships, learning is the element upon which the present study is focused; therefore, students and classroom are considered analogous to members in a church-based small group and teachers are analogous to the small group leader. The purpose of the current inquiry is to investigate whether or not discussion within small groups impacts a learner's thinking, specifically in terms of their retention.

As stated earlier, from the beginning of the Christian church Jesus taught His disciples to discuss and fellowship with one another. This type of learning has permeated Western teaching and educational “talk” has dominated Western thought since the time of the Socrates and Plato, when teaching and rhetoric were directed through verbal exchange. These processes allowed for disciples, and then students, to engage in dialogue with their mentors, which prompted higher thinking.

Discussion as a pedagogical tool has transcended centuries, as demonstrated by the ongoing practice of Socratic methods in today’s classrooms (Bacon & Thayer Bacon, 1993; O’Keefe, 1995) and small group meetings within Christian teaching and ministries ([www.christianitytoday.com/smallgroups](http://www.christianitytoday.com/smallgroups)). The Socratic method, however, can impede vibrant discussion, as pointed out by Adler (1983). He contends that it is not an open session “in which everyone feels equally free to express opinions on the level of personal prejudices....” (p.172). In the small group fellowship/teaching groups, each person should feel not only free, but encouraged to participate (Eastman, Eastman, Wendorff, Wendorff, and Lee-Thorp, 2002). This leads to a better understanding of the material being studied, even if deviating from a true Socratic forum.

### ***Learners’ Perspectives.***

Early linguistic scholars such as Chomsky (1968) and Sapir (1921) purport that language not only describes reality, but creates it. The study of educational research has primarily focused on the teacher, especially in terms of improving education and learning. Likewise, many religious studies focus on the leader or religious professional (Dittes, 1971). This is ironic because increasing the learner’s knowledge and educational experience is what should ultimately be measured. There has been a recent trend to do

more research from the student's perspective especially in the field of instructional communication (Ann Darling, personal communication, January 10, 1996). Because learners are the foci of good education, it makes sense that their learning, retention, and experience are the most effective tools for measuring pedagogical techniques and theories (Spoelders, 1987). The following are examples of students' reactions and growth patterns when encouraged to talk more in the classroom setting.

In a study of more than 1900 students from large university classrooms in Texas, students reported more learning from, and more favorable reactions to those teachers who encouraged, or allowed for more class discussion (Lewis & Woodward, 1984). Furthermore, students in a pilot program study in Queensland, Australia reported more overall enjoyment from their classes where talk was encouraged (Fairbairn, 1982). Similarly, Davidson (1972) reports that parishioners attending a church where all are encouraged to participate in discussions and leadership, also report more favorable social experiences.

When implementing 'talk-throughs' in her mathematics classroom, Vetter, 1992 discovered her students felt less frustrated, had a better understanding of overall concepts, and felt 'empowered' (p.168) by the exercises. Because mathematics can be very intimidating to some students, the talk created a more relaxed and comforting atmosphere, which enabled more learning. Likewise, pastors often comment that for many, especially new believers, finding one's way through the Bible can be highly intimidating, which is why pastors are trying to accommodate new learners and navigate and discuss more slowly (Kyle Osland, personal communication, May 10, 2005). When

learners in either educational or religious settings feel they have more control, they are more likely to actively respond (Cone, 1993).

Cone (1993) also reports that within the classroom, when students are given the freedom to express themselves in discussion, they will eventually control the discussion by calling on each other to read, leading groups, and making suggestions for classroom structure and discussion topics. Likewise, this phenomenon is replicated in the small group environment. Leaders are expected to yield positions of authority and allow the groups members to engage one another in discussion (Eastman, et al., 2002). The process of talking about issues, concepts and current events allow people to determine what they believe to be true, important, right, and valuable (Feldman & Elliot, 1990). These types of behaviors create thinkers and leaders which provide clear ‘benefits for the community and larger society’ (Fernandez-Balboa & Marshall, 1994).

An additional finding Cone (1993) reports is that group members were more likely to question each other after missing a meeting, thereby encouraging attendance. She further claims that typical absentees were encouraged to participate more and became a part of the classroom community. This illustrates the principle of accountability in a small group setting, and furthermore the transference from the educational realm to the religious realm is natural. In school people are held responsible for the particular course content. In church, people are responsible to live a biblically principled life and then given the groups’ support to maintain that effort.

### ***Chapter Summary***

Understanding the purposes and functions of small groups is vitally related to how a small group can enhance a church’s effectiveness by accomplishing its intended

mission. Understanding the historical and theoretical underpinnings of small groups also lends great insight into how an American mega-church operates using age old principles of meeting together to fellowship, pray, and learn.

Though the literature on small groups in churches is vast, it primarily reports “how to” establish and maintain a small group ministry, not the effectiveness or saliency of participating or conducting small groups or the effects on its members. Since Price, Terry, and Johnston’s (1980) study, there has been nothing further reported on the effectiveness of small group discussion within a church-based ministry. Therefore, through an abbreviated understanding of biblical and church history and small group research, this study attempted to measure the effectiveness of discussion within biblically based small groups. The next chapter explains the methodological procedures through which effectiveness and expectations were measured.



### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

#### ***Introduction***

The next few pages describe the design and methodology of this study which is a mixed method, modified replication of Price, Terry, and Johnston's (1980) assessment of organized, church-based small group discussion. The intent was to examine the effectiveness of small group discussions, specifically, the retention of a Sunday sermon. Data was previously collected within the church under investigation, enabling the researcher to use all of the information collected for this study. There were three methods of analysis used in this study.

First, descriptive statistics were used to examine demographic and group information. Secondly, inferential statistics were used to compare mean scores between groups and because there are multiple independent variables, multiple regression served as the primary analytic tool. "Multiple regression analysis allows us to estimate the form and accuracy of a relationship between a dependent variable and several independent variables at once" (Allen, 1997, p. 4); thus, allowing the researcher to more fully understand the impacts of each factor on the dependent. Last, there were two open-ended survey questions, inquiring of group member's expectations. Responses were sorted and analyzed for themes within the data using a modified version of Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory methodology. The bulk of the findings were expected to come from the multiple regression analyses.

The dependent variable was the level of retention as measured by the number of questions answered correctly on a weekly quiz, taken after the small group discussion. The independent variables must be discrete and the dependent must be continuous

(Tabachnick and Fidell, 2001). In this study the primary independent variable was the group discussion and other independent variables were basic demographic information such as level of education, religious affiliation, time at the church, and age.

The third element of this study, unrelated to the Price, Terry, and Johnston's (1980) study was the examination of participants' expectations for the small group experience. This portion of the data was examined by analyzing open-ended questions, as described later in the instrumentation section.

To further explain the methods for analysis, the following chapter details the sample for the study, survey procedures, instrumentation, and research questions. It concludes with limitations of the study. Because the data being used herein was previously collected following appropriate procedures and subjects consented to participate voluntarily, institutional review was quickly approved on an exempt basis.

### ***Sample Selection***

In quantitative studies, whereby meaning is derived from statistical data using specific methods of inquiry and calculation, the sample determines to what extent the researcher can make generalizations from the study to similar populations (Rea & Parker, 1997). The sample for this study is representative of the church population. The small group administrator for the church examined all of the groups and, under the guidance of research assistants, developed a representative sample based on demographic information to which only she and a few other church officials were privy. Every effort was made to fairly represent the congregation at every demographic level. The surveyed groups comprise a representative sample of groups that correspond to both the church as a whole and the population of small groups within the church.

The church as a whole serves over 7000 people from all over the county of San Diego. The socioeconomic diversity within in the congregation is extreme, ranging from the homeless to the very wealthy, immigrants to natives, rich to poor, and illiterate to highly educated individuals. Religiously, the church is designed for both new believers as well as lifetime Christians, so the level of spirituality is also mixed. Racially, the church is a colorful cornucopia and represents a mix of all races in the county. The pastoral staff also represents a mix of race, education, and socioeconomics. With this in mind, groups were selected to represent the highly diverse population of the church. The sample, derived by selecting certain groups, was also created based on which small groups were and were not studying the sermon to ensure a balance of treatment groups and control groups.

Seventeen groups were chosen and 16 agreed to participate. There was no incentive offered for participation, other than to assist the church. Of the 16 groups, eight discussed the weekly sermon and eight did not, totaling 105 people in the treatment group and 133 people in the control groups, for a total sample size of 238.

Every effort was made to fairly represent the congregation at every demographic level. Because all groups except one agreed to participate, there was a representative sample of the church's population. This sample is not be assumed representative of all churches; therefore limiting the generalizability of the results.

### ***Survey Procedures***

To ensure the church's study would capture the widest variety of data, as represented by the church body, surveys were distributed to a wide selection of small groups, each representing various factions within the church. Group leaders were first

asked permission and if granted, were instructed on the methods to distribute and collect surveys for two sequential weeks.

The first week groups were given a quiz, as published by the church, as well as a series of demographic questions and a series of open-ended questions, as posed by the pastors. During the second week, participants were again asked to complete the small group quiz and demographic questions.

The surveys were distributed within each small group. Most groups meet within homes, but all meet in comfortable areas where people are free to spread out their materials and seek privacy if needed. The surveys stated that answers would be kept confidential (see appendix A & B). Participants were further ensured by the group leaders that their responses were to be kept anonymous and had no bearing on the perceived performance of the group's leader. Each group was given as much time as needed to complete the survey, so as to allow each member to fully answer each question to the best of his/her ability. Upon completion, the group leader (facilitator) collected the surveys, face down, and placed them into a large manila envelop, and immediately sealed the envelop with the date and group code written on the outside.

The surveys were then given to the church's small group coordinator who graded the quizzes, inputted the demographic data, and coded each survey to avoid any confusion with other groups or further coding. This same process was repeated for the second week and the information has remained confidential as each participant's name, facilitator's name, and group code was blind to all except the small group coordinator.

### ***Instrumentation***

“At the heart of survey research is the questionnaire development process” (Rea & Parker, 1997, p. 27). The instrument for this study was developed through a series of meetings with church officials and research assistants. The questions asked were specifically designed to understand how each participant is experiencing and growing (or not growing) from participation within the small group. For the purposes of this study a weekly quiz from The Rock Church, two open-ended questions, and basic demographic information was utilized. Each quiz consisted of 10 questions, so the scores were tallied as a simple percentage (e.g., 8 of 10 is an 80%). The demographic questions related to both individuals and the whole group and the open-ended questions addressed individual’s expectations.

The surveys for this study (see appendix A and B) were a mix of open-ended questions, demographic questions, and the weekly small group quiz, as published by the church. The open-ended questions address research question three, regarding participant’s expectations for the small group experience. The demographic section asked both individual and group questions about gender, race, and education. The quiz is the same quiz that the church publishes online every week for all members of the church. The questions are prepared by a pastoral staff and deemed to be reliable measures of the sermon’s content. The original instrument included more questions, but those were discarded for this analysis. Only the data that measures the degree of the relationship among the key variables was utilized.

After completing the surveys, a pastoral staff member graded each quiz and separated the demographic portion, but attached the quiz score to the demographics for

analysis purposes. Each quiz was kept confidential and there were never identifiable notations on the survey to link a participant or group facilitator. Both the raw and aggregate scores were passed onto the researcher, as was the demographic data, separated by group, for further analyses.

This process of scoring took place twice: once a week for two weeks. Each survey was a little different (see appendix A & B) because the quiz questions were different each time. All surveys included demographic questions, to report new members or changes in participants at a meeting.

### ***Research Questions & Hypotheses***

Based on Price, Terry, and Johnston's (1980) study as well as the educational research on discussion in the classroom (e.g., Cone, 1993), three research questions were employed for this study: one involving the demographic profile of the sample, the second compares the treatment and control groups' retention, and the third inquires about participant's expectations. Each research question and corresponding method of inquiry is described below.

**RQ1: What is the demographic profile of the sample and how much does each participant**

**retain from the sermon?**

This question was addressed in a few ways. First descriptive statistics were used, including means, to assess and describe the demographic profile. Second, tables are used to list and explain the demographic profile for the entire sample as well as for each type of group, both sermon and non-sermon. The level of retention is reported though quiz scores for both control and treatment groups.

**RQ2: To what extent do participant's demographics, group homogeneity, and group type**

**(i.e., sermon-based or non-sermon-based) affect retention**

These questions were answered using multiple regression analysis to identify which of the following factors contributed to the differences in retained biblical knowledge: (a) group discussion, (b) level of formal education, (c) type of group [sermon or non-sermon], (d) time as a member of the church under examination, (e) gender (f) average age of the group, and (g) time spent in prayer. In addition to examining the individual demographics, multiple regression was used to determine if there was an effect based on the homogeneity or heterogeneity of the group.

T-stats, which are used to test hypotheses (Allen, 1997), were used to report the significance of individual variables such as age and gender. F-tests were used to report the significance of group of variables (e.g., homogeneity). Lastly, goodness of fit measures, specifically  $r^2$  and adjusted  $r^2$ , are reported to assess the regression model.

**RQ3: What do people expect from a small group experience?**

This question was addressed by asking participants to describe their expectations of the group. On the survey instrument, two open-ended questions were asked (see Appendix A and B) and the answers were scrutinized, seeking patterns and themes (Stake, 1995) as they emerged from the data. In an effort to be more consistent and produce a more valid result, the open-ended answers were first coded and analyzed by the primary researcher and then read and coded by a separate, independent, blind reader. This was to ensure that the coded patterns are consistently perceived.

After the data was codified, a third person tabulated the coded statements and verified agreement between the first and second researchers. The third reader concluded that the primary and secondary coding were in 90% agreement, with only one semantic disagreement, which is addressed in the “Relationship with God” section in chapter five

Research question three also asked participants to report their experiences, as they relate to their expectations. As described above, the responses were first analyzed first by the primary researcher and secondly by a blind reader, seeking emergent themes and patterns. This process is obviously much different than the analysis of the quantitative data, but there are benefits to this type of inquiry.

According to Miles and Huberman (1994) the “findings from qualitative studies have a quality of ‘undeniability.’ Words, especially organized into incidents or stories have a concrete, vivid, meaningful flavor that often proves far more convincing to a reader than pages of summarized numbers” (p. 1). By combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies and data analyses, the hope was to illustrate a powerful form of knowledge combining affect and intellect (Donmoyer, 1990).

### ***Assumptions and Limitations***

There are seven limitations to this study, two of which are specific to the data collection methods herein and five of which are typical of most quantitative research. The first limitation is that participants in this study self-select to each group. Despite every effort to control and create a representative sample, the groups studied are wholly comprised of people who share the desire to be in a group, thus eliminating the population of people who choose not to be in a group. Self-selection may also lead groups to be homogeneous because people often select groups with whom they are



similar, albeit comfortable. To delimit this potential effect, individual variables (e.g., education) and aggregate group variables were both measured. The survey instrument asked if the participants perceived group members to be similar or different in age, race, and education. By collapsing these variables, homogeneity was measured.

Tangentially related to self-selection is that the membership was not stable and could vary each night as a person could independently seek and randomly visit a group. This is rare, but possible. Perhaps future studies could address the need to examine the differences between people's scores who do and do not attend small groups and of people in assigned, heterogeneous groups.

The second unique limiting factor is that there were varying time intervals between listening to the sermon, discussing it, and taking the quiz. Perhaps groups who met soon after hearing the sermon would score better on the quizzes. The times and dates that groups met were not addressed on the surveys. Again, that would be an interesting factor for future research.

The other limitations of this study are consistent with self-reporting questionnaires: people incorrectly assess their own or others' behavior, people forget details, or people simply do not pay attention to the questions being asked of them. Last, this study examined a specific church with the express intent of reporting back to that church. The results of this study may or may not be generalizable to all or even any other churches.

***Assumptions*** The assumptions made are also consistent with most survey research. Primarily, the researcher assumes that all participants understood what was being asked of them, thus, answering accurately and honestly of their own free will. It is

also assumed that no member of the participating church attempted to skew the data in any way. Lastly, as is necessary for the results to be valid, the researcher assumes that the sample represents the intended population.

***Limitations*** As is true with all research, there are limits to the study. Because both quantitative and qualitative methods are employed herein, the limits are different for each research question and finding. The following addresses limits for the quantitative analyses, followed by the qualitative.

The first limitation impacting the quantitative analysis is, not all church members were available to participate. That would simply be impractical. Secondly, although it is more similar than different, the church under investigation does not represent all mega-churches. Third, as is generally a concern with survey data where a teacher or authority figure is involved, some participants may have answered dishonestly in an attempt to make the pastor seem more effective. Lastly data collection occurred previous to this study, the author is a member of the church under investigation and may have been privy to information or feel bias in ways that an outside researcher would not.

The limitations for research question three, which is qualitative in nature, are different. As with most qualitative research, the limitation is the lack of ability to generalize beyond the scope of the cases involved (Stake, 1994). People are limited to their own experiences and although every attempt was made to assess general patterns, these cannot be interpreted to a larger audience or general population, even within similar demographic groups.

### ***Chapter Conclusion***

Any quantitative study needs to pay particular attention to each step in the process to ensure the results are valid. The “inferential fragility” ([www.luminafoundation.org/research/foundationgalloway.pdf](http://www.luminafoundation.org/research/foundationgalloway.pdf)) of this study may be caused by variables not measured or considered herein, such as previous biblical knowledge, outside group discussions, or a stronger relationship between two independent variables rather than the independent and dependent. The limitations and possible outside influences were carefully considered in the final analysis and writing, and are presented in more detail in the following two chapters.

## **Chapter Four: Results**

### ***Introduction***

The purpose of this research was twofold. The first purpose was to determine if participants in a church-based small group who discussed a Sunday sermon would retain more from the sermon than participants in similar groups who did not. This result could potentially aid church leaders as well as educators. Secondly, this research sought to understand group members' expectations of their small group experience. In order to do this, two sets of groups, one that discussed the sermon and another that did not, were administered surveys consisting of open-ended questions, a quiz, and a demographic questionnaire. The groups who did not discuss the sermon made up the control group and the groups who discussed the sermon made up the treatment group. Data from the two sets of surveys were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The answers from the open-ended questions were also analyzed and are discussed herein.

The following chapter first provides a brief background of the study. Secondly, the sample and sampling method are fully described. Third, all three research questions are addressed. Research question one (What is the demographic profile of the sample and how much does each participant retain from the sermon?) was examined by presenting several tables and graphs that illustrate the demographic profile of the sample. Research question two (To what extent do participant's demographics, group homogeneity, and group type [i.e., sermon-based or non-sermon-based] affect retention?) is then analyzed using multiple regression analysis. Finally, research question three (What do people expect from a small group experience?) is addressed by examining the patterns found

within the qualitative data from the surveys in which participants were asked to write about their expectations. The chapter concludes with a synopsis of the findings.

### ***Background***

As has been previously discussed, in the last 50 years small groups have gained popularity and usefulness within U.S. churches as a place to build community and spiritual renewal (Turner, 2000; Wuthnow, 1994). More importantly, in the last decade there has been an increase in the number of churches that believe an organized small group ministry is integral to their purpose (Wuthnow, 1994); consequently, there has been an increase in the number of people participating in church-based small groups but not an increase in the amount of research examining small groups. This study begins to measure and then describe one component of small groups: the level of sermon-based retention after a discussion of the sermon. In addition, this study explores what participants claim to expect from a church-based small group.

In an attempt to measure retention, as a component of small group effectiveness, this dissertation partially replicated Price, Terry, and Johnston's study (1980) wherein Christian small group effectiveness was measured by variables addressing behavior, perception, and knowledge, including retention. Specifically, the current study examined participant's retention of a Sunday sermon by analyzing data from two sets of groups: one that discussed the sermon (treatment group) and another that did not (control group). In addition to analyzing retention data, this study also examined the demographic profile of participants as well as participants' expectations about their small group experiences.

### ***Sampling***

The surveyed groups comprised a representative sample that corresponded to the population of the church as a whole and to the demographic make-up of small groups. A comprehensive effort was made by church staff to accurately and fairly represent the 7000 member congregation at every demographic level, including age, race, gender, time at the church, and group size. When groups were chosen, the representative sample accurately reflected the congregation; however, due to unforeseeable variation in group composition, the potential exists for the final groups to differ slightly from the overall church population. This is further discussed in the limitations section of chapter five.

The demographic questions on the survey instrument were standard (e.g., gender, age) but to more fully understand the data and potential for effects on learning and retention, an additional category called “homogeneous” was created to measure the difference between homogeneous and heterogeneous groups. For this study, a homogeneous group was defined as one whose membership consisted of people of similar ages, levels of education, and race. The following sections explain the results for each research question, including further detail on the sample. Each table presents data for the control group and treatment group. The control group was defined as the group that focused on materials other than the sermon, while the treatment group discussed the sermon.

***Research Question One: What is the demographic profile of the sample and how much does each participant retain from the sermon?***

***Sample***

The sample consisted of a total of 108 male and 130 female small group members (see table 4.1), with an average age range of 26 - 30 (see table 4.2), which is reflective of the congregation. There were 105 people in the treatment group and 133 in the control group. All demographic data is discussed below and detailed tables are provided for each variable.

Table 4.1

***Distribution of Gender for Treatment and Control Groups***

Group	Men	Women
Treatment	53	52
Control	55	78
Total Sample	108	130

Table 4.2

*Age Distribution for Treatment and Control Groups*

Group	18-	22-	26-	31-	36-	41-45	46-	51-	56-	66+
	21	25	30	35	40		50	55	65	
Treatment	4	13	34	11	21	7	8	3	2	0
Control	2	23	21	17	24	16	13	8	6	3
Total	6	36	55	28	45	23	21	11	8	3
Sample										

As mentioned earlier in this section, to create the category “homogeneous,” the measures of age, race, and education level were combined. Each person was asked to report his or her own age and highest level of completed education. They were then asked if they perceived their group to be the same, similar, or different from them in each of three categories: age, education, and race. An example of this question is as follows: “In terms of age, the people in my group are: all within 5 years of my age, all within 10 years of my age, or 10+ years younger/older.” Similarly, following the question for education, a group-related follow-up question asked “In terms of education, the people in my group are: all near my level of education, mostly near my level of education, various, don’t know. Finally, the question about race was asked only in terms of the group, not in terms of the individual. The only question about race read: “The racial makeup of my group is: very diverse, mostly Asian, mostly African, mostly Caucasian, mostly Hispanic, [or] other.”



To determine if groups were heterogeneous or homogeneous, the three variables were combined: age, education, and race. If an individual indicated in all three categories that their group was similar, the group was called “homogeneous.” If people reported one or more variable to be different, the group was called “heterogeneous.” In this sample, it was found that 21% of people reported being in groups defined as heterogeneous and 21% reported being in homogeneous groups. Each variable is separately broken down in tables 4.2.1 and 4.3.1 and 4.4, with homogeneity reported cumulatively in table 4.5.

Table 4.2.1

*Homogeneity of Age within Treatment and Control Groups*

Group	within 5 years	within 10 years	mixed ages
Treatment	16	56	29
Control	24	57	52
Sample	40	113	81

As mentioned previously, the population of the church under examination is quite diverse, which is represented in the following two tables. First it is clear that people were in groups with others of “mixed education” (n=93). Secondly, table 4.4 provides the groups’ reported racial make-up. Of the entire sample (n=238) most people reported being in “very diverse” groups (n=120). Despite providing more life experience and potentially divergent world and/or biblical views, diversity in groups does not appear to have significantly affected quiz scores. These results are reported below.

Table 4.3.1

*Homogeneity of Education within Treatment and Control Groups*

Group	Same Education	Similar Education	Mixed Education	Unknown Education
Treatment	12	19	47	25
Control	25	32	46	30
Sample	37	51	93	55

Table 4.4

*Reported Race of Treatment and Control Groups*

Group	The group is diverse	Mostly Asian	Mostly African	Mostly Caucasian	Mostly Hispanic	Other
Treatment	61	0	0	36	5	0
Control	59	3	0	70	0	1
Sample	120	3	0	106	5	1

Table 4.5

*Homogeneity of Control and Treatment Group based on the Variables Age, Education, and Race*

Group	3 of 3 the same (age, education, race)	2 of 3 the same (age and/or education and/or race)	1 or 0 the same (heterogeneous group)
Treatment	51	37	1
Control	50	51	8
Sample	101	88	9

Because one purpose of this research was related to examining group discussion as a pedagogical tool or aid in education, the highest level of completed education for each participant was measured. In this sample, the mode (n=93) was “college graduate.” All levels of education are detailed in table 4.3. The table reveals that there were several more people (n=20) in the control group with “some college” as compared to the treatment group (n=24). This could be a factor of age, rather than “non-completion,” but, it is not known how this slight imbalance may have affected overall quiz scores. All other categories were mostly balanced.

Table 4.3

*Distribution of Completed Education by Treatment and Control Group*

Group	Non-High School Graduate	High School Graduate	Some College	College Graduate	Post-Graduate Education	Vocational	All Military	Seminary
Treatment	2	8	24	44	24	2	4	0
Control	2	12	44	49	23	5	3	0
Sample	4	20	68	93	47	7	7	0

One important factor in this research was determining if participants had or had not attended the previous group meeting when the treatment (sermon-based discussion) occurred. In the treatment group, 70.5% reported attending the last meeting, whereas in the control group, 79.7% reported attendance. Overall, the total attendance at the last meeting was 75.6%. Attending the group meeting was the second most significant predictor of quiz score ( $p=.01$ ), raising quiz scores by 6.23%.

One aspect of interest to the researcher was what actually occurred during the group meetings and the potential corresponding effect on the retention scores. The four most common activities for groups were measured: prayer, studying, fellowship, and worship. The time that groups spent in worship was minimal and not calculated into the final analyses; however, the other activities were analyzed and are presented in tables 4.6 - 4.8.

An examination of the results shows that both treatment and control groups answered similarly, with a few exceptions in each category. In terms of prayer there were two differences between the control and treatment groups. In the control group, 52 more people reported spending “11-15” minutes in prayer while only 20 people in the treatment group did. The other imbalance is that only three people in control groups reported spending “26-30” minutes in prayer while 14 people in the treatment groups did. From this data, the inference could be made that less time spent in prayer would yield higher quiz scores, or that people in sermon-based groups are simply more prayer-oriented. Neither of those hypotheses were measured.

Table 4.6

*Distribution of Minutes Spent in Prayer by Control and Treatment Group*

Minutes→	0-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51-55	56+
Treatment	8	30	20	26	3	14	0	3	2	0	0	1
Control	7	39	52	24	2	3	0	1	1	0	0	3
Sample	15	69	72	50	5	17	0	4	3	0	0	4

Results presented in the table for “minutes spent studying” may explain the overall quiz scores. People in control groups, who ultimately had higher scores, reported more time studying as a group than those in treatment groups. Common sense dictates that increased study time would logically lead to increased quiz scores. However, the

confounding factor herein is that the groups who studied longer and scored higher did not report studying the material actually on the quizzes. See table 4.7 for more details.

Table 4.7

*Distribution of Minutes Spent Studying by Control and Treatment Group*

Minutes→	0 - 20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	60+
Treatment	12	16	14	68	20	12
Control	1	12	16	43	35	19
Sample	13	28	30	111	55	31

At first glance, the minutes spent in fellowship may seem unbalanced, 55 people in control groups reported “11-20” minutes spent in fellowship, while only 39 people in treatment groups responded in the same way. However, upon further analysis, the time spent in fellowship was quite balanced between treatment and control groups. The mode for each group was found to be between “11 - 30 minutes,” with little discrepancy. These results are detailed in table 4.8.

Table 4.8

*Distribution of Minutes Spent in Fellowship by Control and Treatment Group*

Minutes→	0-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	60+
Treatment	17	39	37	2	3	0	4
Control	10	55	53	4	1	1	4
Sample	27	94	90	6	4	1	8

The remaining two variables used in the demographic profile asked how long each participant's had been a member of the church and a member of their small group. Despite the church's efforts to recruit new members into existing small groups, the majority of respondents (n=124; 52%) reported being at the church for over two years. Additionally, of the categories for time spent in a small group, 38% reported being in the same small group for over a year, which was the most common answer. Specific data on these variables is presented in tables 4.9 and 4.10.

Table 4.9

*Distribution of Time as a Member of the Church in Terms of Months*

Group	0-6 months	7-12 months	13-24 months	25+ months
Treatment	10	17	17	55
Control	12	10	35	69
Sample	22	27	52	124

Table 4.10

*Distribution of Time as a Member of the Group in Terms of Months*

Group	Visitor	1 month or less	1-6 months	7-12 months	13+ months
Treatment	4	8	29	18	44
Control	5	10	48	20	48
Sample	9	18	77	38	92

In summary, the sample was as representative of the church's membership as possible given the previously discussed sample constraints. The sample represented not only the church demographics, but the small group demographics as well. The next section explains research question two, which examined the effects of different variables on people's quiz scores. As was conveyed earlier, the treatment groups's overall quiz scores were lower than the control group. This result is detailed in the next section, but as a preview, aggregate quiz scores are presented below in Table 4.11.

Table 4.11

*Aggregate Quiz Scores of Control and Treatment Groups*

Group(s)	Aggregate Quiz Score
Treatment	7.51 of 10
Control	7.74 of 10
Sample	7.64 of 10

***Research Question Two: To what extent do participant's demographics, group homogeneity, and group type (i.e., sermon-based or non-sermon-based) affect retention?***

To estimate the effect that all demographic variables, group composition, and the treatment had on the dependent variable, a number of different statistical analyses were performed. First, each demographic variable was tested for significance using multiple regression. Secondly, group composition in terms of age, education and race were added to the regression model. After determining which variables had a significant effect on the dependent variable, all others were removed. The last step was comparing the treatment



and control groups' data to determine which model, or combination of variables, demonstrated the most significance. As a matter of simplicity, only the significant model is presented herein (see Table 4.12), which includes two variables: groups of mixed age and attendance at last week's group meeting.

The model, which is presented in table 4.12, was found to explain 5.9% of the variation in the subjects' quizscores ( $r^2 = .06$ ). The final linear regression model is: quiz score =  $7.40 + 6.23\text{attendlast} - .20 \times \text{treatment} - .82\text{agesame}$  where *attendlast* is one or zero depending on whether the subject attended the last meeting of the group, and *agesame* is one or zero depending on whether the group member reported the group's age as similar (within five years) or different (beyond 10 years), and *treatment* is one or zero, depending on whether the subject was a member of the treatment (sermon-based) group. An overall F-test was performed and the model was found to be significant ( $p=.003$ ).

The data revealed that the most significant effect ( $p=.00$ ) on a group member's quiz score was the composition of the group in terms of age. If the group members' ages were mixed, meaning at least 10 years of variance in their age, the group's overall quiz score went up by 8.2%. The other variable found to be a significant predictor of quiz score ( $p=.01$ ) was attendance at the previous group meeting, regardless of the meeting content. If the group member attended the last meeting, their quiz score went up on average by 6.23%. The details of this regression model are reported in Table 4.12.

Table 4.12

*The Regression Model*

Model	Estimated Coefficients		
	B	t	Sig.
(Constant)	7.937	30.204	.000
Treatment	-.196	-.914	.362
ageGroupsame	-.822	-2.895	.004
AttendLastGroup	.623	2.503	.013

a Dependent Variable: QuizScore

As previously mentioned, all other demographic variables were analyzed and none demonstrated a significant effect on the quiz scores. The treatment in this study, a group discussion of the weekly sermon, also did not affect retention ( $p = .36$ ). It is surprising and interesting to note two particular elements of these results. First, these results contradict the original study (Price, Terry, and Johnston, 1980) wherein group discussion was found to produce a significant improvement in quiz scores. Secondly, none of the following variables demonstrated significance: education, time in prayer, or time as a member of the church.

Possible reasons for a lack of significant effect from the treatment (discussion of the sermon) are that control groups were equally engrossed in the sermon material while not labeling themselves a “sermon-based” group. People’s study habits outside of the group may have affected their quiz scores. Additionally, commitment to their group and studies may have had an affect, which is demonstrated in the model as people who attended the last group, regardless of the group’s official content, scored higher on

quizzes. Anecdotally, it makes sense that mixed aged groups would score higher on a quiz because in group discussions, people likely drew from what group members shared in common, based on what each person brought to the discussion. This is further discussed in chapter five.

***Research Question Three: What do people expect from a small group experience?***

This study attempted to combine the duality of qualitative and quantitative data to gain a greater understanding of small groups in large churches, as demonstrated in research question three. By combining qualitative and quantitative data analyses, the hope is to illustrate a powerful form of knowledge: the combination of affect and intellect (Donmoyer, 1990). Research question three was addressed by qualitatively analyzing participants' responses about their expectations for the group and their group experience. The answers were scrutinized, seeking patterns and themes (Stake, 1995) as they emerged from the data. Participants' responses were coded first by the primary researcher and then by an outside reader to determine consistency within perceived coded patterns. In the analysis process for chapter three participants' responses from both the treatment and control groups were combined. Unless otherwise specified, the answers represent the entire sample.

***Method***

Multiples truths (Pacanowsky, 1989) of the participant's words were sought, and both the researcher and outside reader attempted to remain cognizant of any subjectivity, such as a preference toward a group or group member, or a personally desired result from the data (Peshkin, 1988). Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe this analysis as demonstrating theoretical sensitivity, which is the "attribute of having insight, the ability

to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand, and capability to separate the pertinent from that which isn't (p. 41). This process is obviously much different than the analysis of the quantitative data, but the benefits to this type of inquiry are evident in what was discovered from the analyses of the participant's words.

### ***Data/Coding***

There were 238 total participants in the study and of those, 182 fully completed the open-ended questions regarding "expectations." Responses from the open-ended questions were sorted and analyzed for themes within the data using a modified version of Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory methodology.

First, the data was read and coded by the primary researcher and then read and coded by a secondary reader. Both coders developed themes based on specific word choices of the participants (e.g., "prayer"). After the data was codified, a third person tabulated the coded statements and verified agreement between the first and second researchers. The third person concluded that the primary and secondary coding were in 90% agreement, with only one semantic disagreement, which is addressed in the "Relationship with God" section. Five themes consistently emerged and it was determined that one theme was overwhelmingly reported over all others.

Each theme is described below in order of reported prevalence and summarized in Table 4.13. During analysis, every word in every response was scrutinized, contemplated and coded, therefore, if a participant mentioned expectations from all five categories, his or her response could potentially exist in all five themes. Furthermore, a "response" should not be confused with an individual participant, as most participants had several responses.

Table 4.13

*Calculated Totals Of Each Response To The Five Themes*

Theme →	Bible Study	Fellowship	Relationship with God	Accountability	Prayer
Total number of responses in this category:	208	146	91	49	36
Number of times this response was first:	136	72	49	3	2

***Themes***

In Acts (2:42) Luke reported that “people gathered together to study the Bible, pray, and socialize.” Responses reported by participants illustrate that small group expectations have not strayed far from the days of Christ. When participants were asked to report their expectations for a small church-based group, the following five major themes emerged: Bible study, fellowship, relationship with God, accountability, and prayer. Of the five, Bible study was the most frequently coded theme with 87% of participants expecting to study the Bible. In the words of a participant “after all, it is a

Bible study, isn't it?!" His statement summarizes the data, but interesting reflections can be noted within each theme.

**Bible Study** The desire to learn, to teach, and to understand the Bible through the eyes, hearts, and lives of people's group-mates was reported over and over again. Not only did more people (87%) indicate they wanted to learn about the Bible, 57% wrote it as their foremost expectation of group time.

Because the Bible can be difficult to fully understand, participants stated they expected to share their questions and "discuss issues of the day" as they related to the Bible. This desire was captured by one woman who stated: "As one [who] hungers/thirsts for in-depth focus/understanding of the Word, I hope to satisfy the hunger in small group discussion. Probing intellects desire to dive deeper than what's possible in a weekend sermon." Diving deeper, questioning each other, reading together, and studying biblical texts were all expressed as an expectation of small groups. As mentioned here, people often stated that they arrive at their group meetings with a "hunger" for God's Word. Participants also reported they enjoyed hearing "answers and interpretations" from others. They "loved the discussions" and expected to know more "biblical Truth." Overall, people reported wanting "Time to go deeper - (to) gain insights from other believers" and to study "verse by verse and precept by precept."

**Fellowship** Paul reports in Hebrews (10:25) that believers are not to "forsake the fellowship," which essentially means Christians are to spend time together socializing, encouraging, and loving one another. Christ advises believers to "love one another" ten times in the New Testament. Sixty-one percent of participants of this study reported that they expected "fellowship" from their small group. Seventy-two people (30%) reported

fellowship as a primary expectation for small groups. They wanted “opportunities to develop friendships with believers” and “closer relationships to others in the church.”

Several elements of fellowship were reported. The simplest and most common was “friendship.” Others were more explicit and reported they wanted to “share joys and concerns with people that care and understand.” Many were seeking “support and encouragement” through “more intimate relationships” and “lifelong travelers” to join them in their Christian walk. When reading these responses, a cry for “deep bonds” was made clear as was a spirit of “joy in the sharing” of both difficult and proud times together. The responses were reminiscent of what Wuthnow (1990) reported about small groups fulfilling people’s longing for community. People are craving to “know and be known more personally” within an “intimate group of friends.” Most aptly stated, people wanted to “experience God through the community of His people.”

**Relationship With God** In participants’ words, “To experience God in a small group” allows for “spiritual growth” in ways unique to a community of Christian believers. People want to “learn more about God (and their) faith.” Within participants’ small groups, they expected to be “growing together in the Lord” through the “presence of the Holy Spirit” in community with others. Because God commands us to love, sharpen, and encourage one another it makes sense that people would expect to grow in their relationships with Him, as well as other believers. The expectation to increase one’s relationship with God was reported 91 times (38%) overall, and 49 times (20%) as the primary expectation of their small group experience.

Most of the data in this category were clear. People explicitly expressed “growth in my relationship with God;” however, this was the only theme where the primary

researcher and second reader had a discrepancy. The discrepancy was partly semantic. In a few cases, the secondary reader labeled an expression “maturity,” which typically is understood to mean “maturity in Christ.” Maturity in Christ, without getting into a theological debate over the trilogy (see Psalm2), would necessarily lead one to a closer relationship to God. After careful review, it was determined that the secondary reader’s “maturity” category was sufficiently included in two separate themes of the primary researcher: relationship with God and accountability.

**Accountability** When one Christian exhorts another to remain true to biblical teachings and ways to live, this is commonly called accountability. Many Christians will establish “accountability partners” to remain true in their faith, usually related to a particular issue (e.g., sexual purity, nutrition, scripture memorization). Twenty percent of participants (n=49) expected accountability from their small groups; however, only three people, all men, reported this as their primary expectation.

Although most people who stated they specifically expected “accountability” from the group, a few mentioned related issues, such as a desire for openness about everyday life events, honesty in communication, and an accountability partner. Interestingly, people in a special small group that focused only on biblical teachings about marriage, reported more answers relating to accountability. They wanted to learn how to support one another in marriage and be more accountable to each other and to God. A few participants also mentioned desiring accountability for more prayer time.

**Prayer** Prayer was the least mentioned of all five themes (15%) and only twice did participants report prayer first, as a primary expectation. After visiting several small groups and witnessing much prayer, it was odd to the researcher that people did not



report they expected prayer. As discussed later in the limitations section, perhaps a more clear definition of prayer would have yielded a different result.

Like most answers herein, responses in the prayer category tended to be explicit. In this case, participants stated “prayer” as an expectation - wanting to be prayed for, to pray with others, or simply for prayer support. One woman expanded on this and wrote that she would like to “give and receive spiritual help....and encourage others in faith.” Another person indicated she would like to “increase (her) prayer life” and have faith to grow. Prayer was also measured in the regression model as a potential influence on quiz scores, but yielded no significant correlation.

**Overall** Of the five themes that emerged in the data, Bible study was clearly the most prevalent. Given the reports of Frazee (1999) and Wuthnow (1990), it was thought that people were craving connectedness in a fragmented world. In the participants’ truths (Pacanowsky, 1989) as presented herein, people were primarily expecting “an opportunity to learn more about Christ.”

### ***Summary***

The purpose of this research was to continue to learn about small groups within large churches, specifically to understand (1) if sermon-based discussions aid in sermon retention, and (2) what do people expect from a church-based small group experience. The data from this study demonstrated that, for the church under investigation, sermon-based discussions do not aid knowledge retention, but the ages of people in the group and attendance to the small group were the strongest predictors of retention. Secondly, people who self-selected into small groups reported “Bible study” as their first and strongest preference for joining groups. Fellowship was their second reason and building their

relationship with God was third. The least reported reasons were accountability and shared prayer time. The next chapter more fully discusses the findings and implications as well as the limitations and suggestions for future research in this field.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion**

### ***Introduction***

Though the study of Bible-based small groups is as “old as the church” (O’Halloran, 1984, p. 9), there are many areas needing closer review, both old and new. The relatively recent movement toward mega-churches in the U.S. has given rise to a new area of study. As such, this research was designed to examine two elements of small groups within a mega-church: effectiveness of sermon-based discussions and participants’ expectations of the group. The analyses yielded some surprising results as well as some ancient wisdom, all of which is discussed herein. This chapter provides a background of the study, briefly reviews small group literature, discusses the results and analyses from each research question, details the implications and limitations and concludes with suggestions for future research.

**Background and Review of the Study** “The biggest challenge for the church at the opening of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to develop a solution to the discontinuity and fragmentation of the American lifestyle” (Schaller, as cited in Frazee, 2001, p. 37). Small groups are becoming an ever-important means of developing community within churches in the United States (Wuthnow, 1990). As more and more people invest in small group functions, they should know if, and how, these groups are impacting their lives. Equally important, leaders in churches should know if small group programs are providing the appropriate environment for learning and retaining Sunday’s sermon.

Bookstores are rife with “how-to” manuals for administering small groups, but void of research materials discussing group effectiveness. Pastors are caught up in the trend towards small groups (Gladwell, 2005); however, little evidence exists explaining

the benefit to parishioners. Church members may feel pressured to join a group, but do not have any tangible understanding of how the group could increase their spiritual growth or improve their lives. This study attempted to provide guidance and information to church members, small group pastors, and potentially to educators who employ small group discussion, by replicating a portion of the Price, Terry, and Johnston (1980) study in which retention of a sermon was measured after a small group discussion.

**A Summary of (church-based) Small Groups** In the first book of the biblical New Testament, Luke defined small groups as people gathered together to study the Bible, pray, and socialize (Acts 2:42). That definition served as the basic premise for this study; however, a more comprehensive understanding is needed to appreciate and understand the results and implications herein. This chapter provides only a brief discussion of groups; please see chapter two for a detailed understanding of groups in a variety of contexts.

Groups are “adaptive, dynamic systems that are driven by interactions both among group members and between the group and its embedding contexts” (Arrow, McGrath, and Berdahl 2000, p. 3). In the context of churches, specifically mega-churches, small groups provide an intimate setting, unlike the large service gatherings, where people can more deeply study the Bible, fellowship with one another and pray together. Within mega-churches, groups are called different names: cells, cell groups, ecclesial groups, communities, or simply small groups. The definition for all of these differently named groups is ultimately the same: three or more people gathered together for a specific purpose, which in this case, is related to each member spiritually growing and growing within the church body.

Wuthnow (1988) claimed that Americans have a long history of special purpose groups tied to our religious practices. Since Christ walked the earth, small groups have offered His followers a safe place to study the Bible, develop friendships, share meals, and pray. Today's groups are similar to those meeting 2000+ years ago. The difference is simply that Americans are more frenetic in their search for purpose within the small group (Warren, 1995; Wuthnow, 1998). It was within a mega-church environment that small groups were examined for this study. The remainder of this chapter describes the methods used for examination, findings of the study, and recommendations for future research.

**Methodology** Three methods of analysis were used in this study, representing a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods. First, descriptive statistics was used to examine demographic and group information. Secondly, multiple regression analysis was used to compare mean scores between groups. The dependent variable was the level of retention as measured by the number of questions answered correctly on a weekly quiz taken after the small group discussion. The independent variables were the treatment (group discussion), basic demographic information, and composite variables that examined the differences between heterogeneous and homogeneous groups. Last, there were two open-ended survey questions, inquiring of group member's expectations. Responses from the open-ended questions were sorted and analyzed for themes within the data using a modified version of Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory methodology. The sample was previously selected and data was previously collected within the church under investigation, enabling the researcher to use all of the

information collected for this study. A more detailed description of the methodology is described in chapter three.

### ***Discussion of Findings: Research Questions***

**Research Question One: What is the demographic profile of the sample and how much does each participant retain from the sermon?** The demographic profile of this sample attempted to reflect the population of the church. In the sample (n=238) there were 108 men and 130 women, with an age range of 18 - 60. Of the sample, 105 people were in the treatment group and 133 in the control group. The most commonly reported (n=93) completed level of education was college graduate and most people (n=120) reported their group was racially diverse. This demographic profile is reflective of the church under investigation, as well as many mega-churches in general (<http://www.census.gov/popest/states/asrh/SC-EST2004-04.html>; [www.hirr.hartsem.edu/faith\\_megachurches\\_factsummary.html](http://www.hirr.hartsem.edu/faith_megachurches_factsummary.html)). Three other demographic variables examined were group activity, time at the church, and homogeneity of the group.

In terms of group activity, the four most common ways that church-based groups spent their time were measured: prayer, Bible study, fellowship, and worship. Because groups reported only negligible amounts of time in worship, this variable is not discussed in detail here. The most commonly reported length of prayer time was 15-20 minutes for control groups (n=52) and 10-15 minutes for treatment groups (n=30). In terms of Bible study, both groups most commonly reported they spend 41-50 minutes in study. The last time-related demographic was fellowship. Based on the bulk of recent writings (e.g., Frazee, Wuthnow, Missler) reporting that people crave time in fellowship, it seems likely

that people would spend more time in fellowship; however, both the quantitative and qualitative data indicated that people spent more time in studies and the participants reported a higher desire for studies. Similar to time spent in Bible study, both groups most commonly reported similar time spent in fellowship as 11-20 minutes (n=94)

The last way the demographic profile was examined was by group composition including people's age, education and race. As mentioned in chapter three, these three categories were combined to create the variables called "homogeneous" and "heterogeneous." If a group member reported members of their group being similar in all three categories, the group was called homogeneous; otherwise, it was heterogeneous. The fewest number of people (n = 9) reported that their group was different in all categories of age, education, and race. Most people reported being similar in all three (n = 101); therefore, members reported sharing backgrounds ages and/or educational experiences with other group members. The only element of heterogeneity that made an impact on people's quiz scores was age. These, along with other related details, are reported in the following section.

**Research Question Two: To what extent do participant's demographics, group homogeneity, and group type affect retention?** To estimate the effect that all demographic variables, group composition, and the treatment had on the dependent variable, a number of different statistical models were run. First, each demographic variable was tested for significance. Secondly, group composition in terms of age, education and race were added to the regression model. Using stepwise deletion, the variables demonstrating no effect were removed. The last step was comparing the treatment and control groups' data to determine which model provided the overall best

fit. As a matter of simplicity, only the significant results are presented herein, which included two variables: groups of mixed age and attendance at last week's group meeting.

The data revealed that the most significant effect on a group member's quiz score was the composition of the group in terms of age ( $p=.00$ ). If the group members' ages were mixed, meaning at least 10 years of variance in their age, their quiz score went up by 8.2%. Anecdotally, it makes sense that mixed-age groups would score higher on a quiz because in group discussions, people draw from what they have in common. In same-age peer groups people would be more likely distracted by similar life events whereas in a mixed age group they would be more engaged in the discussion topic, in this case, the weekly sermon. This may have also been such a high predictor for other unknown reasons, such as commitment to the group, time in between sermon and quiz or even biblical knowledge from outside of the group. In same-aged peer groups people were more likely to be engaged by similar life events whereas in a mixed group they were more engaged in the discussion topic, in this case, the weekly sermon. These variables were not measured and are discussed in the limitations section below.

The second significant effect on a group member's quiz score was attendance at last week's meeting ( $p=.01$ ), regardless of the meeting content. In other words, regardless if the group discussed the sermon, a random Bible lesson, or an unrelated book, if the group member attended the last meeting, their quiz score went up an average of 6.23%.

All other demographic variables were analyzed and none demonstrated a significant effect on the quiz scores. The treatment in this study, a group discussion of the weekly sermon, also did not affect retention ( $p=.36$ ). It is surprising and interesting to



note that neither education, time in prayer, or time as a member of the church showed any statistical significance. These results (education, prayer, membership) are all surprising, but for different reasons.

Because group discussion is a common pedagogical tool, it was thought that people with higher levels of education would be more accustomed to learning through group discussion. While that may be true, their quiz scores were no higher (or lower) than those who had completed higher (or lower) levels of education. It seems that traditional, formalized schooling has relatively no effect ( $p = .71$ ) on sermon-based quiz scores.

In religious instruction, it is commonly taught that prayer precedes and is integral to Bible studies ([www.studycenter.com](http://www.studycenter.com)). Following this logic, the more time a group spent in prayer, the higher their retention should be. This was not significantly demonstrated in quiz scores ( $p = .33$ ); however, control groups reported spending 10 more minutes in prayer and scored slightly higher on average than treatment groups. Although not statistically significant, this result may please a few pastors.

Common sense indicates that the longer a person belongs to a church, the more he or she would retain from sermons, perhaps as simply a matter of repetition. The sermons may even begin to complement one another over time. This logic was not demonstrated in the data. The demographic of “time at the church” was not related to quiz scores ( $p = .32$ ). This could be that newcomers are zealous in their studies or that an extended length of time at the church lulls people into not paying attention. It could be for many reasons.

The last oddity the data revealed was that the treatment (discussion of the sermon) had no significant effect ( $p = .53$ ) on quiz scores. There are several possible reasons the

treatment effect did not register as statistically significant. First, it is possible that control groups were equally engrossed in the sermon material while not having labeled themselves a “sermon-based” group. It is also possible that people’s study habits outside of the group may have affected their quiz scores. People may have studied more, thus increasing their knowledge, or because their groups did not study the sermon, maybe they were more attentive during Sunday services. Additionally, commitment to their group, as demonstrated in the model as people who attended the last group and scored higher on quizzes, may have had a related unknown effect, such as commitment to church services, to increased prayer for one another, or to outside studies with group members, which could potentially increase quiz scores.

### **Research Question Three: What do people expect from a small group**

**experience?** According to Miles and Huberman (1994) the “findings from qualitative studies have a quality of ‘undeniability.’ Words, especially organized into incidents or stories, have a concrete, vivid, meaningful flavor that often proves far more convincing to a reader than pages of summarized numbers” (p. 1). It was the words of the participants that brought life to the true nature of the small group experience and has gleaned insight into the true desired purpose for small groups. As stated in chapter four, people were hungry for Bible study, desperate for friendship, and yearning to build their relationships with God.

**Bible Study** In what is commonly referred to as the “New Testament Church,” under the guidance of the Apostle Paul, Bible study was the primary purpose and content of church, albeit small group, gatherings (Acts 17:11). The desires to learn, teach, and understand the Bible through the eyes, hearts and lives of people’s group-mates were the

purposes for small groups 2000 years ago and were the most commonly reported desires of today's participants. Not only did more people (n=208; 87%) indicate they wanted to learn about the Bible, many wrote it was their foremost expectation of group time (n=136; 57%).

Despite being the proverbial greatest story ever told, the Bible can be difficult to fully understand. In their small groups, people expected to share their questions and “discuss issues of the day.” One woman captured her desire to study with others by stating: “As one [who] hungers/thirsts for in-depth focus/understanding of the Word, I hope to satisfy the hunger in small group discussion. Probing intellects desire to dive deeper than what's possible in a weekend sermon.” Diving deeper, questioning each other, reading together, and studying biblical texts were all expressed as expectations of the small groups. This directly relates to people wanting bible study: the lesson from a Sunday sermon does not satisfy everyone's need for Bible study. People crave more; therefore, they attend small groups to satiate their cravings.

Participants also reported they enjoyed hearing “answers and interpretations” from others. They “loved the discussions” and expected to know more “Biblical Truth.” Overall, people reported wanting “Time to go deeper - (to) gain insights from other believers” and to study “verse by verse and precept by precept.” Though coded separately, when studying together, the Christians participating in this study were inherently engaged in fellowship with one another.

**Fellowship** Christ advises believers to “love one another” ten times in the New Testament, Gospel records. Paul reported to the Hebrews (10:25) that believers are not to “forsake the fellowship,” which essentially means that Christians are to spend time

together socializing, encouraging, and loving one another. The participants of this study reported 146 different times that they expect “fellowship” from their small group. Seventy-two people reported fellowship as a primary expectation for small groups. They wanted “opportunities to develop friendships with believers” and “closer relationships to others in the church.” It was this type of relationship that Frazee (2001) and Wuthnow (1998) would say are most critical for the average (lonely) American.

Several elements of fellowship were reported. The simplest and most common was “friendship.” Others were more explicit. People claimed wanting to “share joys and concerns with people that care and understand.” Others sought “support and encouragement” through “more intimate relationships” and “lifelong travelers” to join them in their Christian walk. When reading these responses, a cry among participants for “deep bonds” was evident as was a spirit of “joy in the sharing” during difficult and proud times. As Paul reported to the Corinthians (1Cor 13:12), people are craving to “know and be known more personally,” within an “intimate group of friends.”

**Relationship With God** In participants’ words, “To experience God in a small group” allows for “spiritual growth” in ways unique to a community of Christian believers. People wanted to “learn more about God (and their) faith.” Within participants’ small groups, they expected to be “growing together in the Lord” through the “presence of the Holy Spirit” in community with others. Because God commands us to love, sharpen, and encourage one another, it makes sense that people would expect to grow in their relationships with Him, alongside other believers. The expectation to increase one’s relationship with God was reported 91 times and 49 times as the primary expectation. At first it seems implausible to measure growth with a relationship with

God. It can also be difficult to define. In this study there was not an attempt made to measure relationship with God, but participants did report a desire for growth and using the small groups as a mechanism for growth. That result should be noteworthy for church leaders looking for important reasons to develop a small group ministry. If small groups can be a vehicle for developing relationships with other believers and with God, small groups can ultimately assist with growing people in Christ.

This was the only theme where the primary researcher and second reader had a discrepancy. The discrepancy was partly semantic. In a few cases, the secondary reader labeled an expression “maturity,” which typically is understood to mean “maturity in Christ.” Maturity in Christ, without getting into a theological debate over the trilogy (see Psalm2), would necessarily lead one to a closer relationship to God. After careful review, it was determined that the secondary reader’s “maturity” category was sufficiently included in two separate themes of the primary researcher: relationship with God and accountability. To quell any concern over the codes for this data, all responses were re-read and tabulated by a third reader. Based on her insights, participants’ expectations in this category could be summed up in “building a relationship with God.” Participants repeatedly wrote that they explicitly desired “growth in my relationship with God.”

**Prayer** Much to the surprise of the primary researcher and the secondary reader, prayer was the least mentioned of all five themes (36 mentions, or 15%) and only twice did participants report prayer first, as a primary expectation. After visiting several small groups and witnessing much prayer, it was odd to the researcher that people did not report they expected prayer. There are two reasons why this might be the case.

First, prayer is often thought of as a private interaction with God. Christ even commands believers to “pray in private” so as not to boast. This may have impacted the reporting of this expectation. Secondly, because prayer is such a common element of both church meetings and small groups, people may have overlooked the obvious. Despite these two reasons, 36 people expressed concern for prayer.

Like most answers herein, responses in the prayer category tended to be explicit. In this case, participants stated “prayer” as an expectation - wanting to be prayed for, to pray with others, or simply for prayer support. One woman expanded on this and wrote that she would like to “give and receive spiritual help....and encourage others in faith.” Another person indicated she would like to “increase (her) prayer life” and have faith to grow. Prayer was also measured in the regression model as a potential influence on quiz scores, but yielded no significant correlation. Ultimately, as the communication link between God and His people, this researcher thought that prayer would be more highly reported and impactful, but it was not.

**Accountability** The remaining categorical code for the open-ended questions was accountability. Eleven months prior to this survey being administered, the church’s pastor spoke at length about accountability and encouraged church members to develop “accountability partners” (Miles McPherson, 7 January 2005). There may have been a few lingering effects of that message, but not overwhelmingly. People’s responses clearly indicated a desire for accountability, but, the number of times it was mentioned was negligible (%20) - important to each participant, but not valuable for the overall analysis.

**Summary** Of the five themes that emerged in the data, Bible study was clearly the most prevalent. In the truths (Pacanowsky, 1989) presented herein, people were

primarily expecting “an opportunity to learn more about Christ.” That came as a bit of a surprise to the researcher. It was thought that fellowship would eclipse all other expectations people may have of a small group. Given the reports of Frazee (1999) and Wuthnow (1990) it was thought that people crave connectedness in a fragmented world.

Hammersley (1992) asserted that “An account is valid or true if it represents accurately those features of the phenomena that it is intended to describe, explain, or theorize” (p. 69). For the purposes of this study, participant’s expectations were the heart of the qualitative inquiry. Their voices spoke clearly to the desire for and valuing of Bible study. Surprisingly, fellowship was not as strong as previously thought. Perhaps, as reported third most commonly, a relationship with God fulfilled the desire to be in fellowship and skews prior thinking about loneliness or a desire for true friendship. Most poignantly stated, people want to “experience God through the community of His people.”

### ***Implications***

The implications for this research are two-fold. First, the data supports a discussion-based small group model for sermon retention that includes mixed age groups and a commitment to attendance. Secondly, this study supports the ancient model for small groups, as reported in Acts 2:42: to study the Bible and fellowship with one another.

Inherently, there are limitations, which are described below, but the data from this study are clear. If a person wants to establish an effective small group ministry, designed to assist people in retention of the sermon, there are two strong predictors for success. Mixed age groups should be encouraged, as should attendance at every meeting. Both

variables demonstrated statistical significance. Cautiously, this result could potentially be applied to a classroom setting. A teacher could predict that mixed age classes, where students consistently attend, would more successfully retain the contents of a lecture.

The second and possibly most helpful implication of this study was the strong desire expressed by members of a mega-church who reported a craving for Bible study, fellowship, and a stronger relationship with God. In a mega-sea of people it makes sense that those seeking a relationship God would want to understand His written word and follow His instructions - exemplified best in His greatest commandments: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31). As pastors, church administrators, or lay volunteers attempt to understand small group ministry, the written words of the participants herein attempted to clarify the purpose that small groups were biblically and historically intended to fulfill: for Christians to gather together, study, fellowship, and pray with one another.

### ***Limitations***

As is true with all research, there are limits to the study. Because both qualitative and quantitative methods are employed in this study, the limits are different for each research question and finding. The following addresses limits for the quantitative analyses, followed by the qualitative.

The following quantitative limitations are divided into two basic categories: data collection and methodology. In terms of data collection, not all church members were available to participate; that would simply be impractical and prohibitive. The church under investigation claims that 40% of the people in church on Sunday are different from



the previous week (Miles McPherson, personal communication, 19 January 2006). This makes it impossible to have ascertained a specific or regular population of the church for an ongoing period of time. Therefore, despite every effort to create a representative sample, groups were wholly comprised of people who shared the desire to be in a group, thus eliminating the population of people who chose not to be in a group. When selecting the groups, there was no provision made for people who may have temporarily joined or left the group, further limiting the accuracy of the representation. Self-selection may have also led groups to be homogeneous because people often selected groups with whom they were similar, albeit comfortable.

To delimit the potential for a spurious homogeneous or heterogeneous effect, both individual variables (e.g., education) and aggregate group variables were both measured. The survey instrument also asked if groups were perceived to be similar or different in age, race, and education. By making a composite of each demographic variable, the homo- or heterogeneity of age, race, and level of education was also measured. The composite variables did not demonstrate significance in the regression model.

Another factor not considered in the data collection is the amount of time groups have between the sermon and their discussions. There were varying time intervals between listening to the sermon, discussing it, and taking the quiz. Time in between could have potentially helped or hurt participant's quiz scores, depending on how much time and how the time was spent. Last, definitions for "study, prayer, fellowship, and worship" were not provided and could be interpreted differently on the open-ended questions, thus influencing data in unknown ways.

Methodologically, other limitations of this study are consistent with self-reporting questionnaires: people incorrectly assessed their own or others' behavior, people forgot details, or people simply did not pay attention to the questions being asked of them. In this study, a teacher or authority figure was involved, which may have caused participants to answer dishonestly in an attempt to make the leader seem more effective. This study examined a specific church with the express intent of reporting back to that church and although the church under investigation is more similar than different, it does not represent all mega-churches and the results of this may not be generalizable to other churches. Lastly, although data collection occurred previous to this study, the author is a member of the church under investigation and may have been privy to information or feel bias in ways that an outside researcher would not.

Because research question three is qualitative in nature, the limitations are different. As with most qualitative research, the first limitation is the lack of ability to generalize beyond the scope of the cases involved (Stake, 1994). Secondly, people are naturally limited to their own experiences. Despite every attempt made to assess general patterns within the sample, the patterns cannot be interpreted to a larger audience or general population, even within similar demographic groups. They may, however, be applied to the specific church in this study.

**Recommendations for Future Research** Because the results from this study contradicted the Price, Terry, and Johnston's (1980) study, obviously, more work needs to be done in the area of small group discussion as an aid to sermon retention. It is first recommended that researchers examine the differences between people who choose to join groups and those who do not. It is also recommended that other variables be

examined, such as time between sermon and quiz and the amount of time spent in studies outside of group time. Additionally, clearly defining terms and using a truly random sample may yield different results.

Because churches are swiftly launching small group ministries, it is also recommended that the goals of the group ministry be clear, both for church leaders and participants. According to the statements made herein from group members, people are craving Bible studies, yet only tangentially gaining sermon knowledge. It would be helpful to know if groups who formally study the Bible improve their biblical knowledge and to what extent the sermon discussions aid in their biblical understanding.

There are multifarious elements that may contribute to a person's biblical understanding: basic reading comprehension, a pastor's oratorical skills, time as a Christian, familial teachings, and other factors believed to be spiritual - entirely unrelated to time spent studying. To discern exactly what aids a person in sermon or biblical knowledge is a confounding topic and, as presented herein, not easy to predict. Future research needs to focus on each specific variable, one at a time. Results from future research could assist churches, pastors, and perhaps secular teachers in their use of small group discussions and ministries.

*Amen*

Luccock (1951) asserted "all the great movements in Christianity have been based on the training of small groups" (p. 786). In the last 50 years small groups have gained popularity and usefulness within U.S. churches as a place to build community and spiritual renewal (Turner, 2000). More importantly, in the last decade, there has been an

increase in the number of churches purporting that an organized small group ministry is integral to their purpose (Wuthnow, 1994).

The results from this research will likely not spur a great Christian revival. This paper will likely not increase the number of small groups within large churches. It may, however, provide a bit of guidance for church leaders and possibly teachers. It may also inform church leaders of the importance and significance of small groups. Lastly, and most important, the findings of this study reinforce the central idea that no matter how much time passes, there are universal Truths expressed in the “greatest story ever told.” The ways in which people gathered, studied, and socialized by firelight over 2000 years ago is the same as people do in today’s internet-saturated, frenetic, fluorescent world.

The knowledge that a good Truth never fades creates a little more peace in the hearts of those who understand it and perhaps a curious stirring within those who do not.

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**Appendix A**  
**Week One Survey**

	<p align="center"><b>Small Group Questionnaire</b>    page 1 of 4 <b>WEEK ONE</b></p>
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Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey! Answers to this survey will be used for three purposes: (1) a tool for the Rock Small Group Ministry to plan for the future, (2) doctoral dissertation research, and (3) ultimately to help save, equip, and send out more soul-winners!

There are no right answers, just be honest. This document will remain anonymous. If you are unclear or uncomfortable answering a question, please contact the small group administrator: [melissaK@theRockSanDiego.org](mailto:melissaK@theRockSanDiego.org) or, 619.224.7625.

There are two sections herein. Section 1 asks a few open questions and includes the Rock's quiz from last week's sermon. Section 2 asks for basic demographic and small group information. Take your time and answer honestly in as much detail as you choose. Do not leave any question blank. When finished, please place your completed quiz in the group's envelope.

**Your time and honest responses are very much appreciated!**

***SECTION 1: Expectations & quiz***

**1. Did you attend *this* small group last week?**

Yes

No

**2. What do you expect to gain from your small group experience?**

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**3. Do you expect to gain biblical knowledge from attending a small group?**

Yes

No    (If yes, in what ways?)

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## Section 2: Weekly Quiz

### Transformed by Faith, Part 6


Transformation Supernaturalness

Mark 6:45-56

### Questions

1. The purpose for having the new buildings is to.
  - a. have a nice building
  - b. look respectable in the eyes of the community
  - c. reach more people with the Gospel
2. God has designed you and me to be involved in
  - a. supernatural experiences
  - b. routine experiences
  - c. bad experiences
3. God has called us to walk with him to
  - a. do things we can do without him
  - b. do things we cannot do without him
  - c. none of the above
4. God performs miracles to meet \_\_\_\_\_ needs
  - a. human
  - b. His
  - c. our ego's
5. Our part in God working miracles is that we have to
  - a. pray
  - b. read our Bibles
  - c. go
6. Faith doesn't exclude planning or preparing, but it acknowledges the problems, and \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. none of the below
  - b. continue in spite of challenges
  - c. gives up and learns from the experience
7. The moment we act out in faith, God's testing will come like waves until God's \_\_\_\_\_ is proved.
  - a. sense of humor
  - b. faithfulness
  - c. purpose
8. God allows or orchestrates difficulties in our lives as we act our faith to
  - a. torment us
  - b. mold us into what He wants
  - c. play with our minds
9. Very often opportunities to "step out in faith" are right in front of us, we simply have to
  - a. realize it
  - b. ask our pastor
  - c. focus on something else
10. The reason we don't act out in faith is because of
  - a. fear
  - b. excuses
  - c. all of the above

Saving, Equipping, and Sending-Out Soul Winners

 <b>ROCK</b> <b>CHURCH</b>	<b>Small Group Questionnaire</b> page 3 of 4 <b>WEEK ONE</b>
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## ***SECTION 2 – Demographics***

Please circle the most appropriate response.

### **1. How long have you been regularly attending the Rock Church?**

I do not regularly attend the Rock  
 (if you circled this, please answer the follow up question below)

6 months or fewer                      6 months - 1 year                      1 - 2 years                      2+ years

If you do NOT regularly attend the Rock, please check one of the following:

\_\_\_\_\_ The Rock is the only church I attend, but not with any regularity.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am a regular member at another church.

\_\_\_\_\_ I visit different churches.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am a member of this small group, but do not attend church.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am a visitor to this group.

### **2. How long have you been consistently attending this small group?**

I am a visitor to this group (please continue, your input is valuable!)

1 month or less                      1 - 6 months                      6 - 12 months                      1+ years

### **3. What does your group typically discuss or study?**

Weekend sermon    a specific book of the bible    a Christian book study  
    other                                      a mix of all

### **4. In an average meeting, how much time does your group spend in:**

prayer	_____	minutes
study	_____	minutes
fellowship	_____	minutes
worship	_____	minutes



**5. Once your group begins the study portion of your meeting, is it: (check one)**

- \_\_\_\_\_ mostly lecture from your leader or another assigned member
- \_\_\_\_\_ mostly discussion led by the leader, but most all participate
- \_\_\_\_\_ it varies, depending on the topic
- \_\_\_\_\_ we do not study

**6. Please circle your gender:**

male                      female

**7. Please circle your age group:**

18 – 21              22 – 25              26 – 30              31 – 35              36 – 40

41 – 45              46 – 50              51 – 55              56 – 65              66+

**8. In terms of age, the people in my group are:**

all within 5 years of my age      all within 10 years of my age      10+ years younger/older

**9. Please circle your highest level of education completed:**

less than high school              high school      some college      4 year college degree

graduate degree(s)              trade school              all military              seminary

**10. In terms of education, the people in my group are:**

all near my level of education      mostly near my level of education      various      don't know

**11. The racial makeup of my group is:**


very diverse              mostly Asian              mostly African

mostly Caucasian              mostly Hispanic              other

**Please place in envelope provided. THANK YOU !!!**

**Appendix B**  
**Week Two Survey**



 <b>ROCK</b> CHURCH	<b>Small Group Questionnaire</b> page 1 of 4 <b>WEEK TWO</b>
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Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey! Answers to this survey will be used for three purposes: (1) a tool for the Rock Small Group Ministry to plan for the future, (2) doctoral dissertation research, and (3) ultimately to help save, equip, and send out more soul-winners!

There are no right answers, just be honest. This document will remain anonymous. If you are unclear or uncomfortable answering a question, please contact the small group administrator: [melissaK@theRockSanDiego.org](mailto:melissaK@theRockSanDiego.org) or, 619.224.7625.

There are two sections herein. Section 1 asks a few open questions and includes the Rock's quiz from last week's sermon. Section 2 asks for basic demographic and small group information. Take your time and answer honestly in as much detail as you choose. Do not leave any question blank. When finished, please place your completed quiz in the group's envelope.

**Your time and honest responses are very much appreciated!**

***SECTION 1: Expectations & quiz***

**1. Did you attend *this* small group last week?**

Yes

No

**2. What do you expect to gain from your small group experience?**

---



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**3. Do you expect to gain biblical knowledge from attending a small group?**

Yes

No (If yes, in what ways?)

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**Section 2: Weekly Quiz**  
**Transformed by Faith, Part 8: Transformation Sacrifice**

**Questions**

1. **What does Peter do right before he rebukes Jesus in Mark 8?**
  - a. Walks on water
  - b. Denies Jesus
  - c. Confesses Jesus is the Christ
  - d. Witnesses the transformation
2. **The Bible says in Mark 8 that Jesus spoke \_\_\_\_\_ about His death and suffering.**
  - a. Plainly
  - b. In parables
  - c. By the Sea of Galilee
  - d. In Hebrew
3. **When Jesus rebuked Peter He said, “Get behind me \_\_\_\_\_.”**
  - a. Oh you of little faith
  - b. You are in danger
  - c. Satan
  - d. And follow me
4. **This passage shows us that Christianity is a life of**
  - a. Self-denial
  - b. Suffering
  - c. Opposites
  - d. All of the above
5. **We live a life of sacrifice because**
  - a. Jesus sacrificed His life for us
  - b. God likes to see us struggle
  - c. We need to earn the right to go to heaven
  - d. None of the above
6. **We sacrifice by living a life of**
  - a. Self-inflicted suffering
  - b. Self-denial
  - c. Sadness
  - d. Transformation
7. **The purpose of our sacrifice is to**
  - a. Show our strength
  - b. Get more blessings from God
  - c. Work our way to heaven
  - d. Bring honor to Jesus
8. **True transformation not only requires \_\_\_\_\_ but also a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ of sacrifice.**
  - a. Complete, Attitude
  - b. Personal, Lifestyle
  - c. Painful, Mindset
  - d. Self-Denial, Transfiguration
9. **Peter rebuked Jesus when Jesus said He had to suffer. This behavior**
  - a. Is unique – something only Peter would do
  - b. Is extreme – something people usually don’t do
  - c. Is impulsive – He didn’t really mean it
  - d. An example of what we do nearly everyday
10. **According to Mark 8, self denial requires**
  - a. A license
  - b. Setting our minds on the things of God
  - c. Keeping a diary
  - d. Lots of thinking

 <b>ROCK</b> CHURCH	<b>Small Group Questionnaire</b> page 3 of 4 <b>WEEK TWO</b>
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## **SECTION 2 – Demographics**

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(if you circled this, please answer the follow up question below)

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\_\_\_\_\_ I am a member of this small group, but do not attend church.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am a visitor to this group.

### **2. How long have you been consistently attending this small group?**

I am a visitor to this group (please continue, your input is valuable!)


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### **3. What does your group typically discuss or study?**

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                                  other                                      a mix of all

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worship	_____	minutes

 <b>ROCK</b> CHURCH	<b>Small Group Questionnaire</b> page 4 of 4 <b>WEEK TWO</b>
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**5. Once your group begins the study portion of your meeting, is it: (check one)**

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graduate degree(s)              trade school              all military              seminary

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**11. The racial makeup of my group is:**

very diverse                      mostly Asian                      mostly African

mostly Caucasian                      mostly Hispanic                      other

**Please place in envelope provided. THANK YOU !!!**