

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

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“Something old, something new, something borrowed something blue, and a silver sixpence in her shoe.” During the Victorian era, ladies were encouraged to either wear or carry these things when they were married. It was considered to be good fortune to have them in your possession on your wedding day. I’m not sure that this custom is still being honored by modern day brides, but the phrase “something old, something new” did capture my attention. According to this English wedding rhyme, that may be quite ancient in origin, the something old stood for “continuity” with the past and the something new stood for “optimism” regarding the future. Well I thought, in terms of the beginning of our Small Group Ministry at Bedford Presbyterian Church, this phrase, “something old, something new” just about sums it up. Small group ministry is old because it dates back to the earliest days of the Christian Church, and yet at the same time it’s new because God’s people have just recently rediscovered it.

So let’s begin by taking a look at its origin. In the book of Acts, the writer, Dr. Luke, provides us with a summary of what life was like in the earliest days of the Christian Church in Jerusalem. Those accounts are recorded in Acts 2:46-47 and Acts 5:42. When we examine these verses of Scripture, we immediately begin to see that the Early Church could be described as a fellowship of believers:

- who were devoted to the teaching of the Apostles and to spending time together as they prayed and partook of the Lord’s Supper.
- who experienced the miraculous power of God through signs and wonders.
- who were generous in meeting the needs of one another even if that meant selling their possessions.
- who were faithful in their desire to worship the Lord.
- who were filled with a spirit of joy as they met together.
- who were a part of a church that was experiencing dynamic growth.

In these verses of Scripture, we are also informed as to where all of these things took place. First of all, there were large group gatherings. They went to the Temple in Jerusalem and met in the outer courts of that magnificent building. But they also met in smaller gatherings that took place in each other’s homes. That’s what Luke tells us in Acts 5:42, “Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.”

As the church continued to grow and expand throughout the Roman Empire, that same principle of large and small group gatherings continued. For example, when Paul went on his missionary journeys, he would frequently speak to large group gatherings in local synagogues. These were places, very similar in size to our sanctuary, where Jewish people would gather to pray and study God’s Word. When asked to speak, he would tell those in attendance about Jesus Christ.

Sometimes he was warmly received and sometimes he wasn't. During those missionary journeys he was also doing something else. He was establishing small groups of Christians who met in each other's homes, and many of these eventually grew into large churches. For example, in Romans 16:5, he refers to Priscilla and Aquila and extends his greetings to "the church that meets in their home." In Colossians 4:15, he writes, "Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and Nympha and the church in her house." Then after identifying himself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus, he addresses those to whom he is sending this letter by saying in verse 2, "To Philemon, our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home."

So to sum it all up, small group ministry originated in the earliest days of the Christian Church. It's been around a long time, and throughout the centuries, especially during times of persecution, Christians have met together in each other's homes to study God's Word and to pray. Unfortunately, however, this approach to Christianity was gradually forgotten. There are a lot of reasons for this, but simply put churches began to think of themselves as rooted to a specific location where God's people would gather, principally on Sundays, for worship and for religious instruction. Oh, from time to time there might be a cottage prayer meeting in someone's home, but to be perfectly honest, almost everything related to the Christian faith was scheduled to occur in a specific place, the local church. That's the way I was brought up, and I suspect the same is true for you.

However, during the second half of the twentieth century, the idea of Christians meeting together in one another's homes was rediscovered. It burst onto the scene as a new way of doing the Christian faith. For example, when the Communists took over in China, all our missionaries had to flee the nation. Most of the churches were closed by the government and atheism became the official religion of the nation. It appeared that China had been lost to Christianity. But that was not the case. God's people were still meeting, and they were doing it in a new but in reality an old way. It became known as the "House Church Movement," and when the doors of China were reopened to the world, we discovered that there were now millions of Christians meeting in homes all across the nation.

During that same time, something of a similar nature was beginning to take place in countries like Korea and right here in the United States. Christians began to rediscover the Biblical idea of small groups. In Seoul Korea, a church of over 100,000 members came into existence based around the idea of small groups. Yes, the church had a large building where services began early on Sunday mornings and continued throughout the day. But the secret of its growth, both numerically and spiritually, was their small group ministry. There were hundreds of small groups, and they met everywhere throughout the city. In America the same thing was beginning to take place, and my wife and I had the opportunity to learn about it.

During the time that I had pastored a downtown church in Portsmouth, Virginia, a new congregation called Western Branch Community Church had been established in a neighboring city. It experienced dynamic growth, and I had the privilege of getting to know the pastor. He told me

about their small group ministry. So you know what we did after I retired. We began attending and then joined his church, because we wanted to learn more about this new way of doing Christianity. We soon discovered that it was not only Biblical, but that it was the best way and perhaps the only way to reach people for Christ in today's world.

So let me take a few moments to tell you about what we experienced. We met with a group of other Christians on Thursday evenings at 7:00 pm. Since everyone was just getting home from work, we would begin with a pot luck dinner. You never knew what was going to be served. One night we arrived and everyone had brought fried chicken. After eating and enjoying fellowship with one another, we would begin with a time of worship, usually a short prayer and several songs. Then we entered into a discussion of the previous Sunday's sermon. Questions based upon the Scripture passages in that sermon had been emailed to everyone in advance. The emphasis during this time of discussion was placed not only upon what the Scriptures had to say to us, but how those Scriptures could be implemented into our lives on a day by day basis. Indeed, this is what Jesus has commanded us to do. He said, "He who has my commandments and who keeps them, he it is who loves Me, and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself unto Him (John 14:21)." You see, being a Christian is not just going to church, listening to a sermon, singing some songs, and going home. It's like being an apprentice where you not only acquire knowledge but you learn how to put that knowledge into practice. In our small group meetings we discussed what had been presented the previous Sunday, and then we shared with one another how those truths could be implemented in our own lives. As a result we began to experience real spiritual growth. Just as Paul stated in Ephesians 4:13, we were becoming more mature, beginning to measure up to and become a little more like our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Then after our time of discussion, we entered into a time of prayer. We prayed for one another, asking the Lord to help us to grow in our faith as we put His Word into practice. We also prayed for our families, our friends, and our fellow church members. We prayed for our nation and for God's people all around the world. We spent a considerable time in prayer as we opened our hearts and our minds to the Lord, seeking His presence and asking for His guidance.

In a word, our small group experience helped us to get know the Lord and one another in ways that would never have possible otherwise. It was truly a life changing experience, and not only for ourselves but for others. We began inviting our friends and neighbors. Some of them began attending the group meetings and eventually a number of them joined the church. In fact, our group became so large that we had to divide it into two groups, each of which then began to experience growth.

And that is what we are hoping and praying will take place right here at Bedford Presbyterian Church, that this new small group ministry will help our church to grow, both spiritually and numerically. It has been unanimously approved by the church's Session and during this past summer four couples have been trained to serve as leaders of this new ministry. I will be introducing them to you in just a moment.

But before I do, there is one more thing that I need to share with you. One of the things that I have learned is that change can be difficult. Whether we are young or old, many of us don't like it when things change. Changes upset us and mess up our routines. I experienced that a long time ago. I went to the grocery store one day and read the sign on the front of the building—"Under New Ownership." I went inside and found that everything was different. I was not happy. Somebody had messed up my grocery store. I went home and told Sherry, "I'm not going to buy groceries there anymore." But since it was the closest grocery store, there weren't really many other options. So I went back, pulled out a shopping cart and started buying the week's groceries. I had to admit that in many respects it was the same old store that I was used to, the same clerks and the same basic layout, but it was also new. There were new products on the shelves and they were arranged in a way that was easier to find. Best of all, the prices were lowered. I could buy more for less. So I decided that perhaps the changes were not so bad after all. So I continued to shop at this new/old grocery store down the street from where we lived.

I hope that you will have a similar kind of experience with regards to our new small group ministry. Give it a try. I think you will like it. And if you visit one group and just doesn't seem to fit, try another one. That's perfectly alright. No one will be upset. We want you to be a part of group of Christians where you can serve the Lord and grow in Christ.

In closing, I am reminded of what the apostle John wrote in his first letter, chapter two, verses seven and eight. He said, "Dear friends, I am not writing a new commandment, for it is an old one you have always had, right from the beginning. This commandment—to love one another—is the same message you heard before. Yet it is also new. This commandment is true in Christ and is true among you, because the darkness is disappearing and the true light is already shining."

"Something old and something new. Something borrowed and something blue." Just as a bride and groom are creating something which is new, so it is with our new small group ministry at Bedford Presbyterian Church. But just as a wedding is based upon traditions and practices dating back hundreds of years, this new ministry has its origins in the earliest days of Christianity. And like anything worthy of Christ, ultimately and finally it is based upon His commandment that we should love God and that we should love one another.