Sharing the Journey - Introduction

By Robert Wuthnow

This book argues that the small group movement is beginning to alter American society, both by changing our understandings of community and by redefining spirituality. Its effects cannot be calculated simply at the individual level. Once all the individual testimonies are put together, something of much larger significance is still left to be understood. What is important is not just that a teenager finds friends at a prayer meeting or that a young woman named Betty finds God in Alcoholics Anonymous. These stories have to be magnified a hundred thousand times to see how pervasive they have become in our society. They must also be examined closely to see that what is happening now has never occurred at any previous time in history. Not only are small groups attracting participants on an unprecedented scale, these groups are also affecting the ways in which we relate to each other and how we conceive of the sacred. Community is what people say they are seeking when they join small groups. Yet the kind of community they create is quite different from the communities in which people have lived in the past. These communities are more fluid and more concerned with the emotional states of the individual. The vast majority of small group members also say that their sense of the sacred has been profoundly influenced by their participation. But small groups are not simply drawing people back to the God of their father and mothers. They are dramatically changing the way God is understood. God is now less of an external authority and more of an interval presence. The sacred becomes more personal but in the process, becomes more manageable, more serviceable in meeting individual needs, and more a feature of group processes themselves. Support groups are thus affecting changes that have both salutary and worry-some consequences. They supply community and revitalize the sacred. But, for some of their members at least, these communities can be manipulated for personal ends, and the sacred can be reduced to a magical formula for alleviating anxiety.

At present, four out of every ten Americans belong to a small group that meets regularly and provides caring and support for its members. These are not simply informal gatherings of neighbors and friends, but organized groups: Sunday school lessons, Bible study groups, Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step groups, youth groups and singles groups, book discussion clubs, sports and hobby groups, and political or civic groups. Those who have joined these groups testify that their lives have been deeply enriched by the experience. They have found friends, received warm emotional support, and grown in their spirituality. They have learned how to forgive others and become more accepting of themselves. Some have overcome life-threatening addictions. Many say their identity has been changed as a result of extended involvement in their group. In fact, the majority have been attending their groups over an extended period of time, often for as long as five years, and nearly all attend faithfully, usually at least once a week.

But the small-group movement has not grown simply by meeting the needs of its individual members. It is thoroughly American. It reflects and extends the most fundamental dilemmas of our society. The fact that it is well organized, has a national leadership structure, and commands huge resources is tremendously important. Yet the movement as a whole is deeply populist. It attracts people who are fed up with large-scale institutions and prefer to help themselves. The way it draws

people together is also thoroughly American. It stands in the tradition of voluntary associations and it emulates the work of churches and synagogues. In this sense, the small-group movement is a champion of traditional values. Yet its existence depends on the changing structure of the American family and the community. How it performs its functions is thoroughly American as well. It rejects the received wisdom embodied in formal creeds doctrines, and ideologies, often diminishing the importance of denominational distinctions, theological tradition, or the special authority of the clergy But it offers a pragmatic approach to solving one's problems by suggesting that the best proof of God's existence is whether one has received an answer to some personal problem or by asserting that the Bible is true because it works in everyday life. These groups apply spiritual technology to the life of the soul, implying that the sacred can be realized by following simple guidebooks or formulas, and they often substitute powerful unstated norms of behavior, focusing especially on the value of being a group member and on achieving happiness as part of one's spirituality for the formalized creeds and theological ideals of the past. The group is often able to define what is right or wrong, encouraging members to pay attention to their feelings, but also evoking these feelings and helping members to interpret them in certain ways. Thus, the movement makes faith more relevant but also risks turning belief into something that people can manipulate for their own selfish purposes.

Understanding the small group movement therefore requires us to examine it closely by subjecting it to critical scrutiny from the inside while viewing it from the outside as well. Its dramatic growth in recent decades can only be explained by considering the social context in which it has arisen. The movement's potential to alter our conceptions of ourselves cannot be understood apart from what we know about American culture at the end of the twentieth century. Ours is a highly fluid society. Many of us lead anonymous lives. We no longer live in the same neighborhoods all our lives or retain close ties with our kin. The small group movement clearly is rooted in the breakdown of these traditional support structures and in our continuing desire for community. We want others with whom we can share our journeys. Its appeal extends even beyond this desire, tapping into our quest for the sacred itself. But how? And why? How are these desires being met? Why have small groups become the way of meeting them? And with what consequences?

Providing people with a stronger sense of community has been a key aim of the small-group movement from its inception. There is a wide-spread assumption that community is sputtering to an undignified halt, leaving many people stranded and alone. Families are breaking down. Neighbors have become churlish or indifferent. The solution is thus to start intentional groups of like-minded individuals who can regain a sense of community. Small groups are doing a better job than many of their critics would like to think. The communities they create are seldom frail. People feel cared for. They help one another. They share their intimate problems. They identify with their groups and participate regularly over extended periods of time. Why they do so is important to understand, especially because some groups generate bonds of attachment better than others.

But in another sense small groups may not be fostering community as effectively as many of their proponents would like. Some small groups merely provide occasions for individuals to focus on themselves in the presence of others. The social contract binding member together asserts only the weakest of obligations. Come if you have time. Talk if you feel like it. Respect everyone's opinion. Never criticize. Leave quietly if you become dissatisfied. Families would never survive by following these operating norms. Close-knit communities in the past did not either. But small

groups, as we know them, are a phenomenon of the late twentieth century. There are good reasons for the way they are structured. They reflect the fluidity of our lives by allowing us to bond easily but to break our attachments with equivalent ease. If we fail to understand these reasons, we can easily view small groups as something other than what they are. We can imagine that they really substitute for families, neighborhoods and broader community attachments that may demand lifelong commitments, when, in fact, they do not.

The quest for spirituality is the other objective that has animated much of the small-group movement. A majority of all small-group members say they joined because they wanted to deepen their faith. Nearly two-thirds of all small groups have some connection to churches or synagogues. Many have been initiated by clergy. Many devote their meetings to studying the Bible or to discussing other religious texts. Most include prayer. Embarking on a spiritual journey is a common theme among members. Some would argue that this trend is indicative simply of thirst in the human heart for a relationship with God. But why now? Why has the small group movement become the vehicle for expressing this desire? Why not churches? Or religious television? Or individual devotional readings and meditation?

The standard answer is that the churches have become weak. People want to know God but find no guidance when they attend religious services. The small-group movement is thus a way of revitalizing American religion stemming the tide of secularity, and drawing the faithful back to God before the churches slide into oblivion. But the standard answer is wrong on two counts. The small group movement is flourishing in American Society, not because the churches are weak but because they are strong. People do not join groups simply because their hearts tell them to. They join because groups are available, because they have direct exposure to these groups, and because someone encourages them to attend. Groups are available because churches and synagogues sponsor them. Members of the clergy initiate them as part of an explicit plan for the future of the church or synagogue. They enlist leaders, create mechanisms for recruiting members, purchase study guides, and provide meeting space. In this sense, the small-group movement is an extension of the role that organized religion has always played in American society.

The standard view is also wrong, though, in suggesting that small groups are stemming the tide of secularity. To be sure, they encourage people to pray and to think about spiritual truths. Nevertheless, they do little to increase the biblical knowledge of their members. Most of them do not assert the value of denominational traditions or pay much attention to the distinctive theological arguments that have identified different variants of Christianity or Judaism in the past. Indeed, many of the groups encourage faith to be subjective and pragmatic. A person may feel that his or her faith has been deepened, but in what way is largely in the eve of the beholder. Biblical truths may be more meaningful, but the reason is that they calm anxiety and help one make it through the day. The deity of small groups is a God of love, comfort, order, and security. Gone is the God of judgment, wrath, justice, mystery, and punishment. Gone are concerns about the forces of evil. Missing from most groups even is a distinct interest in heaven and hell, except for the small heavens and hells that people experience in their everyday lives.

Indeed, it does not overstate the case to suggest that the small group movement is currently playing a major role in adapting American religion to the main currents of secular culture that have surfaced at the end of the twentieth century. Secularity is misunderstood if it is assumed to be a force that prevents people from being spiritual at all. It is more aptly conceived as an

orientation that encourages a safe, domesticated version of the sacred. From a secular perspective, a divine being who is there for our own gratification, like a house pet, rather than one who demands obedience from us, is too powerful or mysterious for us to understand, or who challenges us to a life of service. When spirituality has been tamed, it can accommodate the demands of a secular society. People can go about their daily business without having to alter their lives very much because they are interested in spirituality. Secular spirituality can even be put to good use, making people more effective in their careers, better lovers, and more responsible citizens. This is the king of spirituality being nurtured in many small groups today.

The small group movement is thus the latest in a series of culture realignments. At the start of the eighteenth century, American religion underwent its first period of realignment. The state churches that colonists imported from Europe were disestablished. Denominational pluralism, later protected by a constitutional separation between church and state, was the result. During the nineteenth century a second major realignment took place. The hegemony of a few Protestant denominations was undermined. Faith became more democratic and more thoroughly American. New denominations proliferated, congregational autonomy and diversity were strengthened, and Catholics and Jews gained a place alongside Protestants. Now, at the end of the twentieth century, denominational structures are waning considerably. Increasing numbers of people have switched from tradition to tradition to tradition. Clergy are under increased pressures to compete with other congregations for members. And the basis of competition has altered significantly, from doctrinal or liturgical distinctions to programmatical appeals. Small groups provide greater variety and allow greater freedom in selecting the religion of one's choice than ever before. They make faith more fluid, championing change itself, and creating modular communities that can be established and disbanded with relative ease.

But this discussion is simply a preview. The assertions I have made in these opening pages need substantiation. We need to understand more clearly what kinds of people have become involved in small groups. Are the participants a distinct category of the American population - differing from others in their personal backgrounds, interests, and needs or are they much like everyone else? We need to examine the varieties of these groups and their connections with religious organizations. Certainly a local prayer group must be sharply distinguished from a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. Yet we must consider carefully how the two are similar as well. Even the fact of diversity is important for us to consider. How is it possible for the small-group movement to contain such diversity? What does this tell us about American society? We also need to consider how community is fostered and how spirituality is nurtured. We must listen carefully to what those in small groups have discovered there and pay special attention to the caring they have received, the spiritual insights they have gained, the group processes by which these deeply personal transformations have been affected. Only then can we turn to the question of whether small groups are also transforming American culture.

Discussion Questions

1. PREVIEW. In the first paragraph of page 1, Robert Wuthnow gives a preview of his main points: that "the small-group movement is beginning to alter American society, both by changing our understandings of community and by redefining spirituality." Did you agree with some of his observations in this paragraph?

2. THE QUEST FOR COMMUNITY. In the last two paragraphs of page 2, Wuthnow observes that while small groups often provide a strong sense of community, this fostered community can be plagued by fluidity and weak long-term bonds. In a later excerpt of this chapter, he summarizes:

   [Small groups] help us adapt to these [everyday] pressures, but, for most of us, do not fundamentally shield us or cause us to lead our lives in a different way. To their credit, they provide us with small, portable sources of interpersonal support. Their weakness lies in their inability to forge the more enduring bonds that many of us would like or to strongly resist the fragmenting forces in our society.

   Do you identify with his comments? How or how not? Why is Heb 3:12-13 so vital in combating this shift?

3. THE QUEST FOR SPIRITUALITY. In the second last paragraph of page 3, Wuthnow observes that a redefined spirituality in small groups; namely that faith is encouraged "to be subjective and pragmatic". He goes on to describe "secular spirituality" as follows (pg 3-4):

   Secularity is misunderstood if it is assumed to be a force that prevents people from being spiritual at all. It is more aptly conceived as an orientation that encourages a safe, domesticated version of the sacred. From a secular perspective, a divine being who is there for our own gratification, like a house pet, rather than one who demands obedience from us, is too powerful or mysterious for us to understand, or who challenges us to a life of service. When spirituality has been tamed, it can accommodate the demands of a secular society.

   Have you observed this shifting definition in your small groups? How so or how not? Why is Heb 5:11-14 so vital in combating this shift?