

Focus on Small Groups: Adult input

Sunday 14.04.2024 Alison Farnell

	<p>I'm grateful to Allan for the opportunity to share with you today something that is very close to my heart, and that is how we, as Christians, become more the people that God calls us to be, his disciples. If you like, about discipleship.</p>
	<p>Allan has already introduced me as Alison Farnell and explained that, although I'm quite new here at St Thomas', I'm going to be encouraging and coordinating the small groups here in St Thomas'.</p>
Slide 1	<p>I've spent the last couple of months visiting and talking with each of the current leaders of small groups in the church. *That is the leaders of what some call a Bible Study group, or a home group, a connect group or a cell group. Talking with Allan, we decided that to use the term SMALL GROUPS is the most helpful going forward, an umbrella term which embraces all the different types of Small Group that we have. Listening to what the small group leaders have had to say has blessed me enormously, hearing all that God is doing amongst the various, different groups. In the next few weeks, I'm looking forward to visiting each of the groups and getting to know you all better. And in particular, discovering how the small groups are equipping individuals to fulfil the motto that St Thomas' has, on the top of the slide To be Christ Focussed, Community Facing Church Family.</p>
Slide 2	<p>We currently have 7 different small groups meeting. On Wednesday night, there is a group led by Peter and Lynda Handcock and 'Connect @ Castlemead' led by Judy Wright.</p>
Slide 3	<p>There are 3 groups meeting on Thursday night, Kay & Geoff Carter and Chris and Martyn Whittock lead groups made up from the St Thomas' congregation, while Jamie & Carrie Farnell and Alison Bennett lead a group made up of folks from both St Thomas' and Kingfisher congregations.</p>
Slide 4	<p>Then last but by no means least, Martin Bridgewater, with Pat Kirbey lead a Tuesday night group, and Margaret Hewitt leads a group which meets on Thursday afternoons. The pictures of these folks are all displayed at the back of church near the entrance.</p>
Slide 5 1. Prayer bubble 2. Fellowship bubble	<p>As I said, I've been listening to the small group leaders, and heard so many positive stories about what happens amongst small group members. 1. Praying and supporting each other was high on the list of what goes on.</p>

<p>3. Bible reading bubble</p>	<p>2. Straightforward fellowship together and enjoying each other's company also featured high on the list.</p> <p>3. But the main focus of the group meeting was always learning more about Christian faith, sometimes that was through reading and studying the Bible together, or through reading a Christian book together, or following a course, like the recent Lent course, which one small group chose to do in their group rather than altogether in church.</p> <p>One group leader summed that up as, ' Supporting each other in faithful Christian living' or 'Doing life together'!</p> <p>All of those things contribute to what I understand as DISCIPLESHIP, growing in Christian faith, becoming more Like Jesus, being his disciples.</p>
<p>Slide 6</p>	<p>I am not a sailor, never have been! But you may know that some of my family are keen sailors, and as I've been involved for several years with the Broads Adventure holiday, which some of our young people and leaders got back from yesterday, I've learning a bit along the way.</p> <p>When I saw this flyer for next Easter's Broads Adventure holiday, it immediately made me think of small groups.</p> <p>From what I hear, each of the groups has its own style of doing things. Each group is different yet similar.</p> <p>A bit like each of the yachts on Broads Adventure, where each one has a different skipper and crew, Each boat has its own particular characteristics or even peculiarities, or simply peculiar characters!</p> <p>but, as you can see from the picture, they are doing what I understand is called 'Sailing in Company' all going in the same direction, all with the same focus maybe taking slightly different routes as they tack forward but 'Sailing in Company'!</p> <p>Looking at this picture and reflecting on 'Sailing in Company', I felt convinced that God was saying, it's OK for each group to be different, to have its own characteristics,</p> <p>But with the wind of the Holy Spirit in our sails, moving forward together, sailing in company as members of this church, we can encourage each other as disciples, encountering God as we study the Bible together and live faithful Christian lives.</p>

<p>Slide 7</p>	<p>Of course, there are many ways and places where we can learn from the Bible, grow in faith and become the disciples Jesus wants us to be. Worshipping together this morning is one such way! But I was very struck by this ABCDE from Lawrence Singlehurst & Trevor Withers. Writing about small groups in 2021, they said that when:</p> <p>All are involved Becoming disciples Creating Community Developing missional lives And Encountering God</p> <p>Then, we encourage each other to become Missional Disciples, that is followers of Jesus who live out the Gospel of Jesus in every place that God puts us and all the time.</p> <p>Very much the message of the Lent Course that we have been following.</p>
<p>Slide 8</p>	<p>I couldn't resist sharing with you this wisdom about Christians studying the Bible. Luke and I were work colleagues in the 1990s, and yes, he was fresh out of school then and I was almost old enough to be his Mum!</p> <p>We all enjoy a good meal, don't we? But from my personal experience, I agree with Luke, I think it always tastes better when I am sharing that meal with someone else! And here, Luke is saying that when we are trying to take in and digest God's word, its sometimes best done in company! So I am very happy to be in the role of encouraging that to happen in small groups!</p>
<p>Slide 9</p>	<p>Over the last few months, getting to know folks here in St Thomas', at various times people have said to me that they'd really like to be in a home group but for different reasons the existing groups don't work for them.</p> <p>So how about small groups at a different time of day, or on a different day, or even with a different focus by way of studying the Bible with others?</p> <p>I think that would be great, provided that we are all 'Sailing in Company', to quote my sailing analogy!</p> <p>BUT!</p> <p>Our current groups are pretty much at capacity. Some are already too big to enable everyone to adequately share together. So, we need some more small groups! Hopefully by September at the latest, that can happen.</p> <p>And So</p> <p>We need some more small group leaders.</p> <p>I want to ask you all to consider whether this is something that God is calling you to be? Has he given you the skills and gifts to do this? (Explain Feedback box and sheet)</p>

	<p>Side A is for you if you are not currently in a small group. Maybe now is the time to join one, perhaps at a different time or a different day, or studying the Bible is a different way. Have a think, and get the form back to me in this box which will be at the back of church for the next 3 weeks.</p> <p>Side B is for you if you are already part of a small group. I'd love to hear from you about what you value about the group.</p> <p>And to all of you, there is that vital question, is God asking you to use the gifts he has given you to lead a new Small Group? Do get in touch with me if God is speaking to you about that!</p>
<p>Slide 9 External video</p>	<p>We now have a guest to tell us about the role of a small group leader. Many of you know that Martin Bridgewater has been in enforced isolation for a long time as he has had to avoid infection. But he has managed to continue as a small group leader remotely, well supported by Pat Kirbey.</p> <p>So I asked Martin to tell us how he understands the role of the small group leader.</p>
	<p>As Martin has said, the small group leader is a facilitator, sort of 'holding the rudder' and steering the group. I wonder, could that be you?</p>
<p>Final slide Blob picture</p>	<p>Maybe you switched off earlier when I was talking to the children. In case you did, you can each take a lovely swimming blob picture home to think about! There are some at the back if you haven't got one.</p> <p>A blob to jog your memory and, if you think reading the Bible with other Christians is important, maybe encourage you to take steps to join a small group.</p> <p>Is it important to you that you continue to grow in your Christian faith? Are you keen to learn more about being a disciple of Jesus? Would you enjoy digesting that meal of Bible study along with others?</p> <p>Then getting into a small group and swimming there together is a really good way to do that!</p> <p>Maybe you are already in the pool swimming lengths? Maybe you are a beginner disciple practising strokes in the shallow end? Maybe you are dipping your toe in the pool or hanging onto the edge? Or maybe you are on the edge and ready to take the plunge and get swimming? Or maybe, for now, you just need the time to rest or play on the pool side- and that's OK!</p> <p>Whichever blob person you identify with, just ask God if he wants you to be doing things differently in the near future.</p>