



# The Role of Small-Group Practices on Members' Participation in Church Mission in North-West Rwanda

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**Abstract:** A lot of literature relating to small group practices in the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA) exists, but they have not done enough to address the growing need of the church members to fully participate in the ministry. This study examined how small-group practices enhance members' participation in the Ministry. It specifically examined small group practices in the Old Testament (OT), New Testament (NT), in the SDA Church, in the North-West Rwanda Field (NWRP) of the SDA Church, and how they are adopted there. The study used a scoping review approach which included secondary data from the Bible, religious and non-religious literature, and reports from the NWRP. Data analysis was thematically performed to identify various group practices. These were presented according to the study objectives. Findings showed that small groups existed in the OT and NT and included commitment to service, faith in God, obedience to God, leadership, worship, mission care, Christ-centered, community-centered, selfless, and nurturing. In the SDA Churches, practices like community, prayer, nurturing, cell fellowship, and social were exercised. In the NWRP, they practiced training and nurturing. However, most of the established small groups in the NWRP seemed to have departmental structures. This study provided additional knowledge to the understanding of the practical functionality of small groups in the NWRP. The study concluded that small groups in OT, NT, SDA Church, and in NWRP had both similar and varying practices that can be used to enhance church members' participation in the NWRP ministry. The study recommends the establishment of small groups whose practices are based on the OT, NT, and SDA Church models. The study further recommended the use of mixed methods in future studies to corroborate the findings of this study.

**Keywords:** Small groups, Small group practices, Seventh-day Adventist Church, North-West Rwanda Field, Church

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## 1. Introduction

Small groups are defined as units of people between three and fifteen individuals established to perform certain tasks (University of Minnesota, 2016; GC, 2010; Fryer-Edwards, 2006; Arrow et al., 2000; Burgess et al., 1988). They are dynamic and adaptive systems inspired by mutually interdependent and interacting members with shared identities and opportunities to perform tasks, resolve conflicts, and develop relations (Fryer-Edwards, 2006; Arrow et al., 2000).

Small groups emerge through the process of forming, storming, norming, and performing. In forming, their purpose is identified, and leaders and leadership committees are established. Their members then brainstorm how to achieve their purpose of establishment as well as make decisions collaboratively. Furthermore, they establish norms that govern the way they run their affairs which helps them to execute their plans effectively. Finally, they perform various tasks (Arrow et al., 2000; Phillips & Phillips, 1993; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977).

In the education sector, for example, small groups are channels for promoting communication, problem-solving, social, and collaborative learning through students, teachers, and staff. These skills once they are developed, they can make work easy as different individuals have different skills (Webb et al., 2009; Walberg & Paik, 2000; Springer, Stanne & Donovan, 1999). In the religious sector, small groups create healthy and vibrant churches. Church activities are shared and done according to skills the members have - preaching, ushering, teaching, passion for serving, singing, praying, healing, among others. These practices bring the church members together and make them work as teams towards spreading the word of God (GC, 2010).

Small groups provide opportunities for members to be involved in mission and reproduce new members through evangelism (GC, 2010; Burrill, 2003). White (1946) considers small groups as a foundation of Christian faith since preaching the gospel begins from home, which is a small group structure. They meet together through face to face on regular basis like Sabbath days, vespers time, or mid-week schedules and edify each other through interchange of thoughts and feelings. In their meetings, they gain spiritual strength, light, and courage. They become acquainted with one another's hopes and aspirations. Through earnest, heartfelt prayers in faith, they receive refreshment and vigor from God (Alaña, n.d).

Other roles of small group practices in the Church include ensuring that the Church members believe life is meaningful, have a deeper relationship with each other, have a sense of community and belonging, feel respected and appreciated, grow in faith, listened to, as well as receive practical support in developing mature faith (George & Gallup, 1992; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977).

These small group functions, therefore, can be classified as relational-oriented and task-oriented (Hergie, 2011; University of Minnesota, 2016). Relational-oriented aims at fostering interpersonal and social connections. For instance, they might be related in terms of sharing community outreach programs, same social media forums, resource mobilization to support their colleagues financially, morally, spiritually, or relief supplies who are bereaved, lack accommodation, medical access, tuition fees, or church construction support (University of Minnesota, 2016; Hergie, 2011; Ellis & Fisher, 1994).

On the other hand, task-oriented groups seek to generate ideas, solve problems, and promote the group's purposes-evangelism, worship, nurturing members, and praying together (McKay et al., 1995; Ellis & Fisher, 1994). Whether they are task-oriented or relational oriented, they must be characterized as community-centered and Christ-centered (White, 1946). This study deals with both categories of groups as they are block cells of the Church (GC, 2010).

The success of small groups in attaining their goals depends on the way they collaborate, the way they set clear and inspiring goals, and ethical and accountable leadership (University of Minnesota, 2016). Despite that, their success is also challenged by factors such as the way they communicate, plan activities, having some members performing less than others, as well as the required skills to perform tasks (GC, 2010).

Despite the above small groups' roles of enhancing the church members' participation in the ministry, the SDA Church membership worldwide is lukewarmly growing. Yet the present situation favors its growth in terms of new members compared to the early Church in the NT, which was very successful in growth amid hard times of persecution (Ministry Magazine.org, 2023). This lukewarm growth is attributed to nonparticipating members in the Ministry that lack proper engagement plans.

Besides, the increasing number of new members needs retention, spiritual growth, nurturing, and physical needs, and their involvement in the ministry is most of the time left to be attended by the church pastors while the regular church members are passive actors (Ho, 2000; Alaña, n.d). This complements other studies that reveal that 70 percent of Americans consider most religious Churches as unsuccessful in helping individuals to find meaning in life (George & Gallup, 1992). The Sabbath School Program report in the NWRP also indicates that the number of members participating in the Vespers program on Friday evening, returning the tithe, studying the Sabbath School lessons daily, and those who distribute Bible study lessons is 20-33%, which is low (NWRP Sabbath School Department Report, 2023).

White (1946) advises that the Church members have to be formed into small groups so that they minister not only to their fellow Church members but also to non-Church members about the meaning of life. To address these gaps, this paper sought to investigate how the small group practices in the OT, NT, and in the SDA Church could be used to enhance church member's small group active participation in the NWRP ministry. The following sections discuss how small group practices OT, NT SDA Church can be used to enhance member participation in the NWRP.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Small-Group Practices in the Old Testament**

Small groups started at creation when God established the family unit system that consisted of man and woman - Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (GC, 2010). This first family was tasked by God to fill the earth through other small groups of families resulting from their off-

springs (Genesis 1:28). As Githii (n.d.) notes, God's plan was constantly to make His own Kingdom in small groups.

Small groups played important leadership roles in the OT. For Moses, it was very difficult to handle all the problems by himself. Therefore, his father-in-law, Jethro advised him to select honest men in groups of tens, fifties, hundreds, and thousands that would assist him in leadership roles so that he doesn't wear himself out (Exodus 18:21-22). Small groups' practices are further realized by commitment to service, faith in God, and obedience to God's commandments. This is illustrated in the story of Gideon who was instructed by God to select 300 men from hundreds of thousands of the Israel army and divide them in three companies to defeat the numerous mighty armies of the Midianite and Amerikites (Judges 7:2-26). From that biblical account, the unaccountable Midianite and Amerikites were successfully defeated by the 300 men selected by Gideon, according to God's command.

Another small group practices example obedience, commitment to service, and reporting as depicted in the story of the twelve spies recorded in the book of Numbers 13. In this bible story, we see God instructing Moses to select a small group of twelve constituting one person from each of the twelve tribes of Israel to go and spy on the Land of Canaan and report all its good and bad things so that the whole Israel nation understands it before they possess it. These small group formation and practices made Moses' leadership to be easier and was a good channel of each Israelite to receive and understand God's goodness and purposes for humanity (Long, 1982).

## **2.2 Small Group Practices Church in the New Testament**

The New Testament records many examples showing how small group practices played an important role in the community and ministry. In His ministry, Jesus saw it imperative that for his spiritual mission to succeed, small group creation was needed to spearhead it. He selected a small group of twelve disciples (Luke 6:12-13; Mark 3:13-15). He trained them, interacted with them, strengthened them, corrected them whenever they made mistakes, and constantly ensured they understood their mission.

After Jesus' ascension to heaven, the disciples continued the mission by preaching and the number of believers greatly increased (Acts 2:41). By this time, Christians were worshiping in public gatherings in small groups at homes (GC. 2010). By 64 AD, Christian gatherings in public were then prohibited by the Emperor NERO throughout the Roman Empire. The early Christian worship was then conducted in small groups at their homes. These small group gatherings sustained God's

mission of redemption as more members were converted and joined the Christians amid severe persecution.

Comiskey (2019) identifies five elements that characterized the early Christian's small groups: Foundational rather than optional, transformational, life-changing, soul-winning, developing leaders, and connection. Other notable small group practices included -nurture, worship, community, fellowship, sharing, prayer, task subdivision, and Mission (Matthew 5:16; Mathew 28:19-20; Acts 2:42-47 Acts 6:1-7).

Osei-Bunsu and Dakio (2003) stress that the early church grew so dramatically that it had no steady organization and facilities allowing it to have big meetings. Nicholas (1982) says that the church's mission objectives are to guide people to the knowledge of God until they reach Christ's righteousness. The important point about small groups in the early church was that all believers worked together and in one accord. There were no spectators among the members, but all participated in small-group church activities. Their commitment and spirituality made them a good community desired by all people (White, 1946). Reporting is grounded in the Bible. The book of the Acts of the Apostles has plenty of examples of missionary reports (Acts 2:42-47; 6:7; 12:24, 23; etc church members should receive a report of their works. It should comprise different activities that include evangelism, spiritual growth, welfare ministry, stewardship, etc. Therefore, each single group enhances the energy of the other.

## **2.3 Small-Group Practices in the Seventh-day Adventist Church**

The SDA church's foundational aim is relationship, fellowship, and mission through small group practices (Alaña, n.d.). The Seventh-day Adventist Church document (GC. 2010) emphasizes the creation of small groups. These small groups should be characterized by practices such as creating a healthy and vibrant Church, training Church leaders, welcoming and caring for church members, encouraging spiritual growth, producing a good community, developing the missionary Spirit, and enhancing spiritual gifts (Nicholas, 1982).

These small groups should, however, not be church programs or small churches, or the existing departments in the SDA Church (Sabbath School, Deaconry, Women's Ministry, Stewardship, Youth ministry, and others). Rather, they should be the basic blocks of the church like the human cells constituting the human body (GC. 2010). They should help to understand the biblical concept of the church not primarily as an institution, but as a community (Alaña, n.d.). Burrill (2003) observes that small groups have been an important fragment of God's community from its beginning. They are of great support in retaining and integrating new adherents into the church's life through bible study, visitation, prayer, and discipleship programs (Otieno, 2014).

In this, Kigali SDA English Church District, found in the East Central Rwanda Field, Kanombe SDA English Church and the Light House Church in Gikondo were established from small groups of less than fifteen members in each who were fellowshipping together according to their schedules. Currently Kanombe SDA Church is having over 200 church members, while Light house membership is over one hundred members (Kigali SDA English Church Personal Ministries department, 2023).

## 2.4 NWRF Small Group Practices

The NWRF is located in North-west Rwanda and constitutes 28 districts, 286 local churches, and 129.000 Church members. Small group practices in the NWRF are not only functional but nonexistent. What is considered small groups are the existing functional Church departments-Sabbath school department where members are grouped during the Sabbath school and Bible study lessons; the committees for various departments, like Stewardship, Youth ministries, Women's ministries, deaconry, personal ministries, and others. It is reported that the participation of church members in the NWRF ministry is at a low percentage of 20-33% (NWRF Sabbath School and Stewardship Departments Reports, 2023).

To address that issue, the NWRF designed strategies that would raise awareness of the small group's role in promoting participation of church members in the ministry. A training program was carried out throughout the NWRF districts. The training objectives included mobilizing church members, understanding Church goals, Tithe and offering, and reporting. The training Programs were conducted from 2022-23. About 2300 leaders of different departments participated. More to that, about 600 church elders and church pastors were trained in a different session that took four days in 2022, and about 450 in 2023. The training took one day in each district but on different schedules in each quarter of the year (1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> quarters of each year from 2022-2023). Participants learned how to mobilize church members register them into small groups and be active in the ministry (NWRF Sabbath School and Stewardship Departments Reports, 2023).

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Design

The study used a scoping review approach for establishing related information on small group practices. A scoping review is a form of cognitive communication that uses process and repetition to identify and synthesize existing or new information on a topic. In particular, the study adopted the PRISMA-ScR guidelines in scoping review, which is simply a preferred

reporting item for systematic reviews and meta-analysis (Lockwood et al., 2019) for presentation of findings. PRISMA which stands for Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses is a methodological approach where literature and findings from various sources related to the study topic are thoroughly studied to provide conclusive results on a study objective. PRISMA-ScR basically charts out how data from the included sources of evidence is filtered to make conclusions and recommendations for a study objective in this case small group practices.

## 3.2 Data sources and data gathering procedures

The study used secondary data sources that constituted biblical sources in both the OT and NT, Christian and non-Christian literature sources, and NWRF data sources. These data sources were retrieved from science databases like Google Scholar for the reviewed literature and Google search engine for the grey literature found in published articles, books, magazines, and websites. Also, the archived reports of the NWRF were reviewed. These data were gathered based on each research question. The following keywords were put in the Google search engine to get the required data- small groups, small groups' practices in the Bible, small group practices in the Old Testament, small group practices in the New Testament, small group practices in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and in the NWRF and how they can be used to enhancing Church members' participation in the NWRF ministry.

## 3.3 Data Analysis

The data gathered from various sources was arranged into specific groups depending on their strength of small group practices. Information was also key in helping to understand the key trends in small group practices in different scenarios. This therefore meant that there was classification of the data according to the sources identified. Data indicating small group practices were sorted, put together, and categorized according to each research question.

## 3.4 Ethical Considerations

Before data collection, the researcher received a permit from the Adventist University of Africa's Research Ethics Committee. The researcher then presented the permit to the NWRF Executive Secretary. The North West Rwanda then granted authorization through a written letter for the researcher to collect data from the territory.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This section presents results and discussion which are addressed according to the research questions.

#### **4.1 Research question one: What are the OT small group practices and how can they enhance Church members' participation in the NRWF Ministry?**

Research question one sought to investigate the role of Small Group practices in the Old Testament and how they can enhance Church members' participation in the NRWF Ministry. The results indicate that small group practices in the OT existed. Their practices included selecting only committed individuals to constitute the group (honest, integrity persons), clear goal setting and understanding of the mission roles, reporting, training, motivating others, prayer, fasting, service, leadership, and obedience to God's command (Numbers 13; Judges 7; Exodus 18; Ho, 2000). These practices enabled the Israelites to succeed in their leadership roles, obedience to God and trusting in him, and defeating their enemies. Small group practices for enhancing members' participation are biblically founded and it was a God initiated plan (Stark & Wieland, 2004). To successfully enhance church member participation in the ministry, the NRWF needs to imitate those OT practices by critically identifying highly committed church members like in the case of Moses (Numbers 13; Judges 7; Exodus 18) members for inclusion in small groups that would implement those practices. The impact would be retaining and integrating new adherents into the church's life and connecting Church members and motivating them to work together to accomplish small groups goals (Otieno, 2014).

#### **4.2 Research question 2: What are the NT Small Group Practices and how can they Enhance Church members' participation in the NRWF Ministry?**

Research question two sought to determine the small group practices in the New Testament and their role in enhancing Church members' participation in the NRWF ministry. The results on small group practices in the NT were found characterized by obedience and trust in God, prayer, scripture reading, people-centered, Christ-centered, fellowship, (MinistryMagazine.org, 2023), love for one another, sacrifice for service, goal setting, clear mission understanding, sharing resources to cater for the needy, reporting, family visitations, encouraging one another, commitment to God, honesty, integrity and selflessness, fellowshiping, and mission accomplishment through evangelism activities (Acts 1, 2, 4, 5, 6 & 7; Mathew 16; Mathew 7). In Mark 3:13-19 we see an example modeled by Jesus in the New Testament of becoming the inspiration of small group of 12 men whom He trained to one day take over His ministry and begin to spread Christianity throughout the world. Hebrews 10:24-25 states that we should stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to

meet, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near. I Corinthians 14:26 says that when brothers come together each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. These practices ensured everybody was part and parcel of the whole Christian family. The Church mission is a progressive work that requires room for methods used to be improved other than having fixed rules (Ho, 2000). NT model of small group practices has to be applied in the NRWF so as to lure passive Church members to participate in the ministry.

#### **4.3 Research question Three: What are the small group practices in the SDA Church and how can they enhance Church members' participation in the NRWF ministry?**

Results on the SDA small group practices indicate that the SDA Church supports their creation for varying missions. Besides, the SDA Church perceives these small groups as distinct from the existing departmental structures. Their practices include community roles, mission roles, Christ-centred roles and nurture roles-evangelism campaigns, prayer meetings, and community outreach campaigns. Small group creations are helpful because as Slosson (1989) notes, people relate to those around them the same way they relate to their inner selves, emotional selves, bodily selves, memories, wounds, gifts, and deep consciousness. In the East Central Rwanda Field of the SDA, some Churches, like the Kigali SDA English Church small groups practices have been revealed as the prayer team ministry, cell fellowships, benevolent fund, hospital ministry, missionary ministry, and social ministry. They are free from the existing Church department structures and greatly ensure church members are mobilized to participate in different mission activities (Kigali SDA English Church Personal Ministries Department Report, 2023). These small group practices need to be established in the NRWF so that they serve as an engine that drives all church members to mission accomplishment.

#### **4.4 Research Question Four: What are the small group practices in the NRWF and how can they enhance church members' participation in the NRWF Ministry?**

Results under this research question indicate that what is termed as small groups are the existing SDA Departmental structures across the districts in the NRWF. This is illustrated in the reports on comprehensive training programs that were conducted from 2021-2023 (NRWF Stewardship Department

Report, 2023; NWRF Sabbath School Department Report, 2023). The NWRF needs to have study trips to other fields and visit like East-Central Rwanda Field in the District of Kigali English Church and study how small group practices differ from the established church departmental structures. The outcome will be the establishment of independent small groups with the freedom to plan their activities for mission accomplishment. Thus, these results reveal the necessity for the small groups' recreation in the NWRF will help enhance members' participation in the ministry by helping members to restore their true relationship with God and relationship with fellow humans. The outcome is that members meet their needs as well as know how to handle issues (Ho, 2000; Slosson, 1989). Once they willingly agree to join, they willingly invest their energy for the sake of the mission.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 5.1 Conclusion

Small group practices for enhancing members' participation are biblically founded and it was God's initiated plan as observed in the OT, NT, Christian, and non-Christian literature. The OT small group practices focused on commitment to service, leadership, obedience to God, faith in God, reporting, and mission accomplishment. The existence of these small group practices enabled the whole Israel nation to succeed and prosper. To better apply these small groups of the OT., NWRF needs to move from an ecclesiastical role to a community role by creating small group practices that will inspire all church members to mission accomplishment through guided leadership, role plays, commitment to service fellowship, and relational development among church members (both new and old-regular) and community members that are non-church members. The NT small group practices of fellowshiping together, Bible study, relationship development, caring for the needy, gospel mission through public, church, and individual house visitations and campaigns, selflessness, sacrifice for the mission, transformational leadership, and love for the service are the vital attributes that characterized the early church's success in mission accomplishment. The small group practices in the SDA Church exist in other SDA Church Fields and include different established small groups regarding cell fellowships, hospital ministry, social ministry, missionary ministry, worship, and benevolent funds. They are established on the premises of community, mission, nurturing, and Christ-centeredness. To ensure NWRF succeeds in its ministry accomplishment, small groups have to be established in the same manner that characterized the NT small group practices based on prayer, sacrifice, being Christ-centered and community-centered, and focus on the mission this will entice church members to participate in the created small groups activities. The SDA small group

practices for enhancing member participation are more ecclesiastical than community-oriented- different Church Department Committees (personal ministries, Deaconry Ministries, Stewardship Ministries, Sabbath School Ministries, Women Ministries, to mention but a few), leadership training, reporting, evangelism campaigns, prayer, outreach campaigns, reporting, and contributions for the ministry, lay preachers, fellowshiping, and bible study. Although these small group practices do exist, they are rendered ineffective as the planning of the activities and decision-making is done by the church leadership and therefore lack church member ownership which is contrary to the OT and NT small group practices.

### 5.2 Recommendations

The study recommends that for the North West Rwanda Field to be successful in its mission, it has to create and organize small groups in the domains of mission, community, worship, and nurture based on the OT, NT, and SDA Church small group practices models. This will help to bring all church members on board to accomplish the mission. Furthermore, fellowshiping together in small groups like the early church Christians in the NT should be highly introduced so that group members freely feel they are loved and cared for, their needs catered for, strengthen each other in the word of God, and pray, support each other, have bible study sessions at their own pace and schedules other than the schedules set by the Church pastors and Elders.

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