

Home Groups for Urban Cultures

Reviewed by Joseph H. Hellerman

Neumann, Mikel. Home Groups for Urban Cultures. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1999. xxii + 197 pp.

This stimulating study investigates the thriving small-group ministries of several churches located in five very different urban settings around the world: Chicago (USA), Mumbai, formerly Bombay (India), Accra (Ghana), Caracas (Venezuela), and Moscow (Russia). The author, Mikel Neumann, and his wife served as missionaries with CB International for 23 years in Madagascar, where home groups increasingly became central to the couple's ministry priorities. Neumann's own cross-cultural experience with small groups convinced him that "different cultures require different approaches," and his book represents a highly readable and often inspiring attempt to substantiate and quantify this conviction.

Neumann's work examines small-group ministries in the five cities listed above through the lenses of eight practices which the author found present in each culture he surveyed: *Vision, Structure, Leadership Development, Teaching, Evangelism, Prayer, Caring, and Worship*. What proved particularly fascinating were the varying degrees of priority assigned to each of these eight aspects of ministry by home group programs in different cultural settings. Emphasis upon *Structure* varied, for example, from Accra's *Deeper Christian Life Ministry*, which schedules every small

group at the same time of the week (Sunday 5:30-7:30 PM) and prescribes group activities right down to the minute (e.g., 3 minutes for opening prayer), to the much less rigid approaches found in Moscow and Chicago. Similar differences were uncovered for most of the eight characteristics. The analysis of these aspects of home group ministry constitutes the bulk of Neumann's book and proved to be the most effective and convincing portion of the work, as well.

At a higher level of analysis, the author exerts some effort to coordinate the varieties of ministry orientation uncovered in the five urban settings with the unique cultural contexts in which they are located. The goal here is to explain the successes enjoyed by home group programs which exhibit such marked differences in priorities and ministry execution. For this purpose Neumann draws upon three approaches to cultural analysis represented, respectively, in the works of Edward T. Hall, Geert Hofstede, and Donald K. Smith. Hofstede, for example, cites individualism (versus collectivism) as an important dimension of cultural variation. Neumann aptly notes in this regard that the Chicago ministry, unique among the author's subjects in its emphasis upon one-to-one mentoring, reflects (and appeals to) the uniquely individualistic orientation of American urban society (163).

I write as a NT scholar, an "armchair" anthropologist, and a pastor-practitioner, and I must say at the outset that I found Neumann's book eminently helpful in my role as a local church leader committed to a home-group centered approach to ministry. I was delighted to be informed of eight key activities which appear to characterize effective small-group ministry in every cultural setting. These eight priorities, moreover, functioned very effectively as the organizational template for most of Neumann's book (chapters 3-10). Even more valuable were the specific examples of the varying ways in which these practices found expression in different cultural settings. The careful reader is convincingly cautioned by means of this study to beware of "quick-fix" methods or programs which promise to generate successful home group ministries in the local church *across* cultural boundaries. Instead, the minister is encouraged to become sensitive to

his community's distinct cultural setting and to program small-group activities appropriately. Accordingly, the author cites as one of the major implications of his study the need for the pastor "to find a church in a similar cultural context that has a home group ministry and study it" (166). To summarize, Neumann's book both (a) persuaded this pastor-reader of the necessity of a culturally sensitive approach to small group programming and (b) provided a myriad of examples of just such an approach in action. In this regard, *Home Groups for Urban Churches* is a valuable addition to any pastor's library. It was refreshing to read a book about small groups which moves beyond method to the more foundational issues of culture and context. And there is an added bonus, as well. Neumann illustrates his work with numerous stories describing the wonderful work of God in the lives of churches and individuals around the world. Nearly all of these narratives are informative and spiritually inspiring. Several are so moving that they will find their way into my illustration file for Sunday sermons.

Neumann is not as strong, however, when he seeks to *explain* the varying emphases of the subject ministries through the use of the tools for cross-cultural analysis outlined in Chapter 2. Some of the problems here can be excused due to the length of the book. Extensively surveying five urban settings, and then proceeding to provide a nuanced cultural analysis of the results, using resources such as those provided by Hall, Hofstede, and Smith, constitutes a project which is clearly too ambitious for a book of this size. The result is that these tools for cultural analysis, which appear so promising in Chapter 2, find little meaningful application in the pages to follow. Thus, not until Neumann discusses *Worship* (Chapter 10) does the reader encounter any extended use of Donald Smith's 12-fold breakdown of communication systems (introduced in Chapter 2). And even here the fit struck this reader as rather artificial and less-than-enlightening. Insights generated from the works of Hall and Hofstede appear more often but, again, not in any systematic fashion. A two-page attempt to "pull it all together" in this regard graces the conclusion (163-64). The brevity of Neumann's stimulating comments

here only serve, however, to leave the reader to imagine what marvelous insights could have been gained through a more thorough and systematic analysis of the “whys” of these cultural variations.

This is not to assert that the more analytical portions of Neumann’s book are devoid of intriguing observations. At one point the author provocatively notes that “while the home group *reflects* culture at some points, it also *moderates* extreme aspects” (90, my italics). For example, home groups, in the author’s view, moderate the highly individualistic orientation of American culture. The general impression one receives is that, from Neumann’s perspective, the moderation of cultural extremes is a good thing. Impressions such as these, however, only encouraged this reader to ponder further, “*Is the moderation of cultural extremes always the biblical ideal for Christian ministry, or are some cultural tendencies simply unbiblical to begin with?*” Neumann discusses, for example, the “power distance index” (PDI), identified by Hofstede as an important cultural characteristic. Societies are assigned a high PDI to the degree that “the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Neumann, 30, citing Hofstede). Religious groups in high PDI societies reflect the broader culture’s social stratification with elite leadership. Neumann notes that home groups mitigate this cultural extreme to a degree, but he seems satisfied to conclude that “tendencies in these directions will continue to exist” (30).

Here, however, the biblical teachings call for more than simply the moderation of a cultural extreme. The ancient Mediterranean world was preeminently characterized by marked social stratification, along with the incessant quest for personal (and familial) honor often associated with high PDI cultures. Jesus attempted to do more than “moderate” this cultural extreme. In his teaching (Mark 10:42-45) and his life (and death), Jesus prophetically challenged the high power distance index of his culture, and instituted an alternative society of surrogate siblings in which members were to outdo one another in showing—not seeking—honor (Mark 3:31-35; Romans 12:10). I would argue

the same for certain other cultural extremes, as well. I suspect, for example, that if the Spirit had his way, our churches in America would not simply *moderate* the radical individualism of American society but, rather, adopt a counter-cultural social orientation which would—like the early Christian churches—be much more collectivist than individualist (to borrow Hofstede's terms) in nature.

A final critique has to do with the author's use of biblical data. The attempt to justify small groups from the OT and the NT, and then to argue biblically for the presence of both a large group and a small group setting as normative for the people of God, did not convince this reader. I would have preferred to see Neumann argue—and he could have done so quite convincingly—for small groups from the NT data, and to simply leave it at that. There are good sociological reasons, I believe, for larger congregational gatherings in most cultural settings, but I am hard-pressed to find a consistent biblical precedent along these lines. Scholars believe that the church at Rome had fragmented into a number of house churches by the mid-50's A.D. We have no evidence of any collective meeting. And where is the large group at Philippi? Examples could be multiplied. Finally, Neumann should have run his manuscript by someone familiar with the Greek NT. His flatly erroneous statement, "The word translated 'pray' in Philippians comes from the Greek word 'agonize'" (123) caused this reader more than a little agony and undermined the credibility of an otherwise fascinating chapter on the place of prayer in the vibrant churches surveyed by the author.

In summary, I strongly recommend Neumann's book for the pastor or thoughtful parishioner who is seeking a more culturally nuanced understanding of small group ministry. The book would also serve well in a seminary course (D. Min., perhaps) on small group ministry. Neumann's message—that "different cultures require different approaches" (xvii)—needs to be clearly heard by anyone bringing leadership to a small group program. Scholars and theologians, on the other hand, will profit more from the questions raised by Neumann's book than by the answers given, and they will have to look elsewhere for a penetrating analysis

and biblical critique (a) of cultural differences and (b) of the effects of culture on Christian ministries.

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