Sunday 06/09/24 – Panama Methodist Church

Sermon Title: Chapter 1 "A New (Old) Kind of Small Group"
"The Class Meeting" Sermon Series: (Part 1 of 8)

(Slide 3 – Hebrews 10:24-25)

(Slide 5 – Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke quote)

> **"We have no doubt, but meetings of Christian brethren for the exposition of scripture-texts, may be attended with their advantages. But the most profitable exercise of any is a free inquiry into the state of the heart"**
> (The Class Meeting, pg. 3).

(Slide 13 – Ephesians 4:32)

At one of the churches that I used to pastor, I met the daughter of one of the church members who attended the church. This daughter was a devout Christian, and she had been baptized and confirmed in the church. She went to church virtually every Sunday since she was baby through her high school graduation, and often when she was home from college.

I remember talking to this person one day, and I expressed my concerns that some churches were watering down the gospel, not preaching repentance, and salvation in Christ. I told this person that I truly believe that these realities seem to

really be hurting some churches. She agreed, and then what she told me next completely shocked me!

She told me even though she was baptized, confirmed, and raised in the church I was now serving, that she never had a personal relationship with Jesus Christ until she was in college. Why might you ask? She said in college she was very involved in an Evangelical Christian student group. People preached the gospel with a full heart and the power of the Holy Spirit, they gathered in small groups, and they had passionate worship and Bible Studies. Within no time, she repented of her sins and gave her life to Jesus Christ. She was born again and had a personal relationship with Jesus Christ!

She then came back to the church of her childhood full of the love of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Some of the people in that church were in the same place as her, but some thought her experience was strange. Some of those folks knew and followed Jesus in their heads, but she wondered it they all had experienced the saving repentance of Jesus in their hearts, like she did. She said that some seemed to talk about Jesus more intellectually or factually, but she wondered if they all spiritually knew Jesus Christ.

It is not that everyone has to have an identical spiritual experience, but is Christ living in us? Is Christ in our hearts, in our daily walks, and do we know him? The Christian Faith and the Christian Church can sometimes be compared to

a cruise ship. If any of us has ever seen or been on a cruise ship in a major ocean harbor, we would quickly see a massive, I mean a massive ship. On these ships there are often many floors. I have heard sometimes there could be 10-20 floors on them. Our faith in Christ is like that too. As I am saying this, this morning, what floor is our faith on today? Are we on floor 1? Are we on floor 20? It is not a competition, and no one is better than anyone else, but do we want to deepen our faith? Do we want our faith to increase?

I remember listening to the late and great Rev. Billy Graham talking towards the end of his life, and even though the Lord used him to literally bring millions and millions of people to faith in Jesus Christ, he lamented what maybe sometimes could have happened after those conversions. After people left his grand Crusades for Christ, many of them coming forward for the altar call, repenting of there sins, and accepting Christ as their Lord and Savior, Bill Graham commented what happened to the people after that? How do we increase our faith? How do we go deeper with Christ? Further, how many of us want to deepen our faith in Christ? How many of us ever watched people like Rev. Billy Graham on television, and thought, "I want to have faith like him!" Do we want our faith to grow and to deepen?

One way that many churches and Christian communities have deepened faith and have grown is through small groups. These are sometimes called "Life

Groups," "Cell Groups," "Home Groups," "Class Meetings," or sometimes even "Home Churches." For the next eight weeks we are going to be journeying together to learn about small groups, to understand how they work, to read what the Bible says about them, and to prayerfully ask ourselves if want to deepen our relationships with others and deepen our own faith. Our journey these next weeks will be in part looking at the book "The Class Meeting" by Dr. Kevin M. Watson.

(Slide 1 – The Class Meeting Picture)

This book discusses the historic way that Methodists did small groups. These groups were and are called "Class Meetings," even though they are not academic in nature. This book helps us to look at how we can create our own small groups or "Class Meetings," and how we create many in and through this church if we want. They can meet anywhere, they can include all different kinds of people, all with the goal of growing closer to Christ and to each other.

Each week, I will be referencing each of the eight chapters of this book, along with scripture, real life examples, and some testimonies. This morning, we will touch on some of Chapter 1 from "The Class Meeting" book called: "A New (Old) Kind of Small Group"

(Slide 2 – Chapter 1: "A New (Old) Kind of Small Group")

The Methodist Movement essentially created small groups, and many other Christian denominations and churches since that time have created their own

versions of small groups. The book "The Class Meeting" challenges us to resurrect small groups for the times and the realities that we are now living in. The vast majority of churches that I have seen growing and thriving have had many small groups.

(Slide 3 – Hebrews 10:24-25)

My main preaching scripture for this morning is Hebrews 10:24-25, that says:

> **[24] And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, [25] not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching** (Heb. 10:24-25, NRSV).

The Apostle Paul in his letter or epistle to the Hebrews is saying that we should get others to love more and do more good things for each other. Not only this, but the Apostle Paul also said that we should "provoke" one another. I looked up the definition of the word provoke on the Merriam-Webster online dictionary. It says this:

: to call forth (a feeling, an action, etc.) : EVOKE
: to stir up purposely
: to provide the needed stimulus for
: to incite to anger (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/provoke).

The New International Version or the "NIV" though says to "spur" one another. The King James Version or "KJV" says "provoke," and the English

Standard Version or “ESV” says to “stir up.” The New Living Translation or “NLT” say to “motivate,” and the New American Standard Bible or “NASB” says to “stimulate.” Other editions of the Bible have other words to, but “provoke” really jumped out at me in the NRSV.

I do not read “provoke” as necessarily aggressive, but what I think that the Apostle Paul is saying is that getting people to love one another and do for one another is really really important. So important in fact that the word “provoke” is used in some Bible translations. Further, the Apostle Paul is also saying that within this to not neglect meeting with together, as some don’t do this nearly enough. The Apostle Paul also says that we should encourage one another, as the Day or coming of Christ is approaching.

Before getting into to some of the framework for church small groups, let us look at a quick promotional or overview video of the book “The Class Meeting”

(Slide 4 – The Class Meeting – Promo Video)

So, as we saw in this video, this will be the journey that we will be making over the next eight weeks to learn more about small groups, and hopefully we can start and join in on our own small groups.

At the beginning of each chapter of “The Class Meeting” book is a quote, and in the first chapter, called once again, “A New (Old) Kind of Small Group” is

a quote from the first two Methodist Bishops in what is now the United States. Bishop Francis Asbury and Bishop Thomas Coke, where the church supply company "Cokesbury" comes from said:

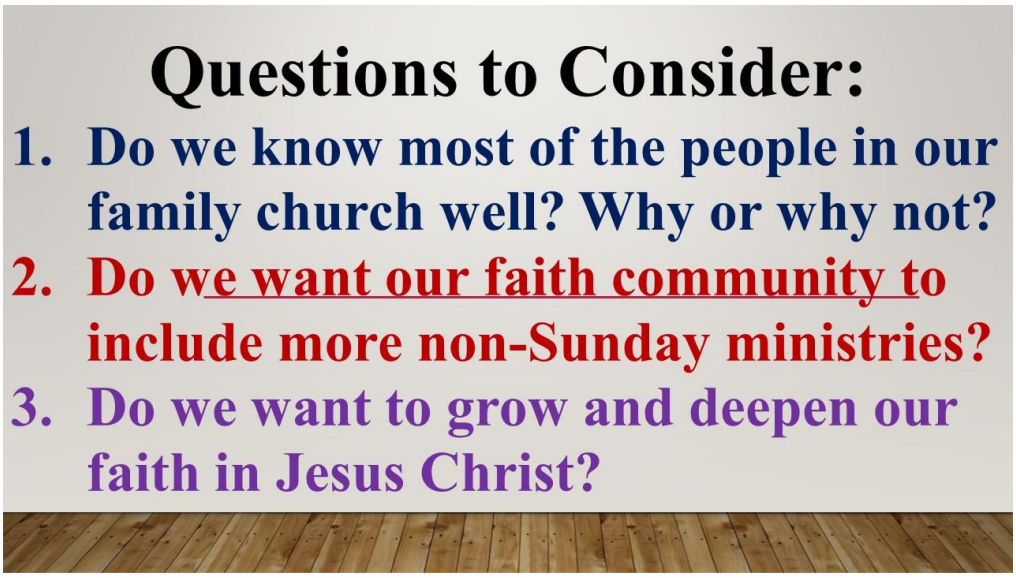
(Slide 5 – Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke quote)

> **"We have no doubt, but meetings of Christian brethren for the exposition of scripture-texts, may be attended with their advantages. But the most profitable exercise of any is a free inquiry into the state of the heart"**
> (The Class Meeting, pg. 3).

Getting together socially as Christians and as friends is good. Doing a book study and a Bible study is also good. Given this, Bishop Asbury and Bishop Coke are saying in this quote that small group focused on Christ, sharing our faith, and growing together is "the most profitable exercise" to grow faith, fill our hearts, and grow as a Christian family.

As we are entering into this journey about learning about small groups through scripture and the book we are reading, here are some questions to consider:

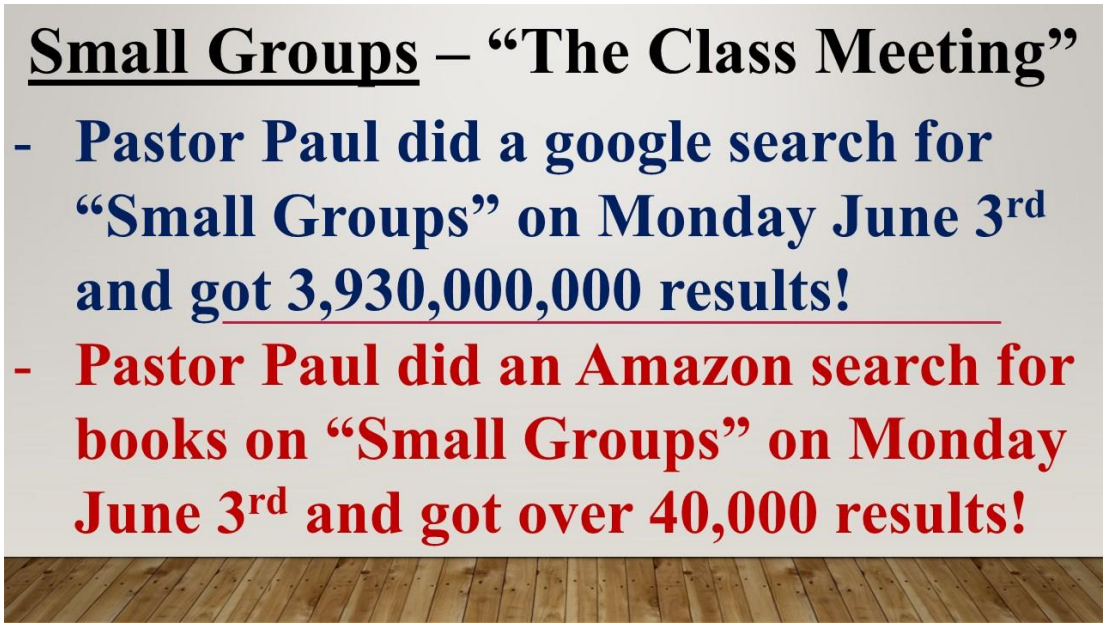
(Slide 6 – Questions to Consider)



I am asking all these questions rhetorically, so that we can think all be thinking and praying about how we would answer these questions. What would we say our answer would be for question number 1? How would we answer question number 2? How would we answer question number 3?

As we are continuing to think about the topic of small groups or "class meetings," just how popular of a topic do we think small groups are? Here are a couple of numbers that I found:

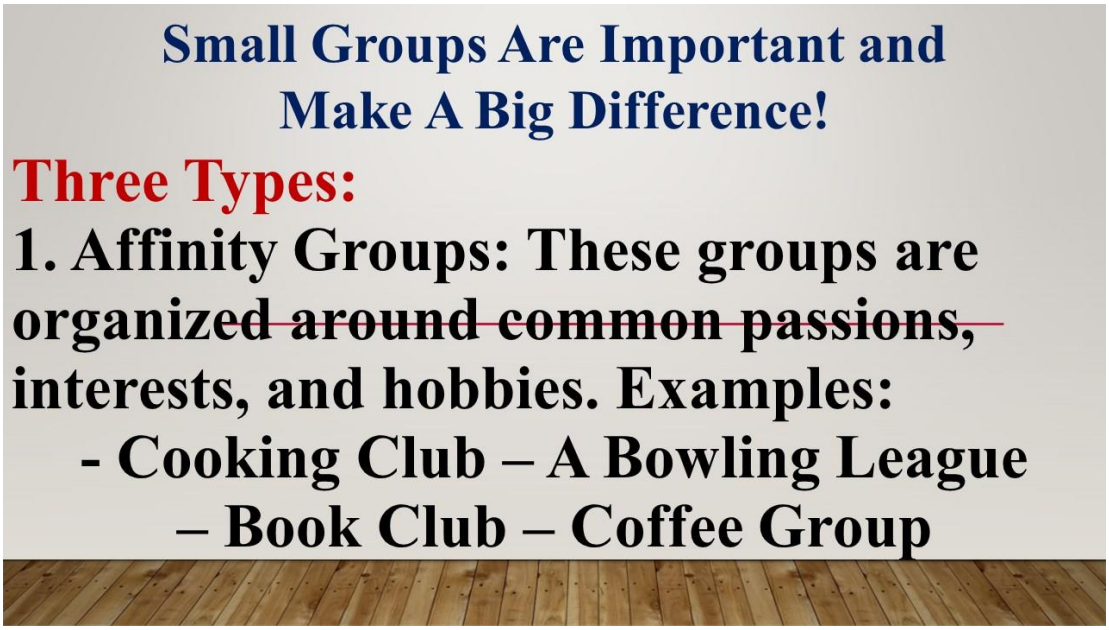
(Slide 7 – Small Groups – "The Class Meeting" Numbers)



To me, these numbers were massive! This tells me that the topic of small groups is a big and sought after topic!

Briefly, let me explain three types of small groups, and we might find that we already belong to one or more similar groups. The first group is "Affinity Groups":

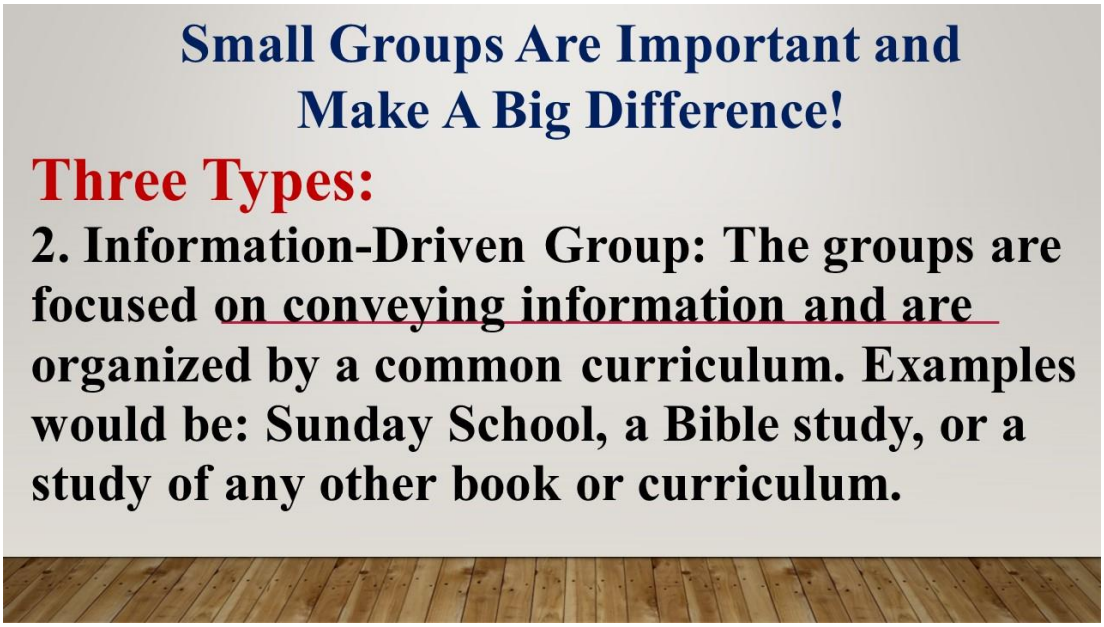
(Slide 8 – Small Groups – "The Class Meeting" – Affinity Groups)



Anyone here, whether through church or something else part of one or more

"Affinity Groups?"

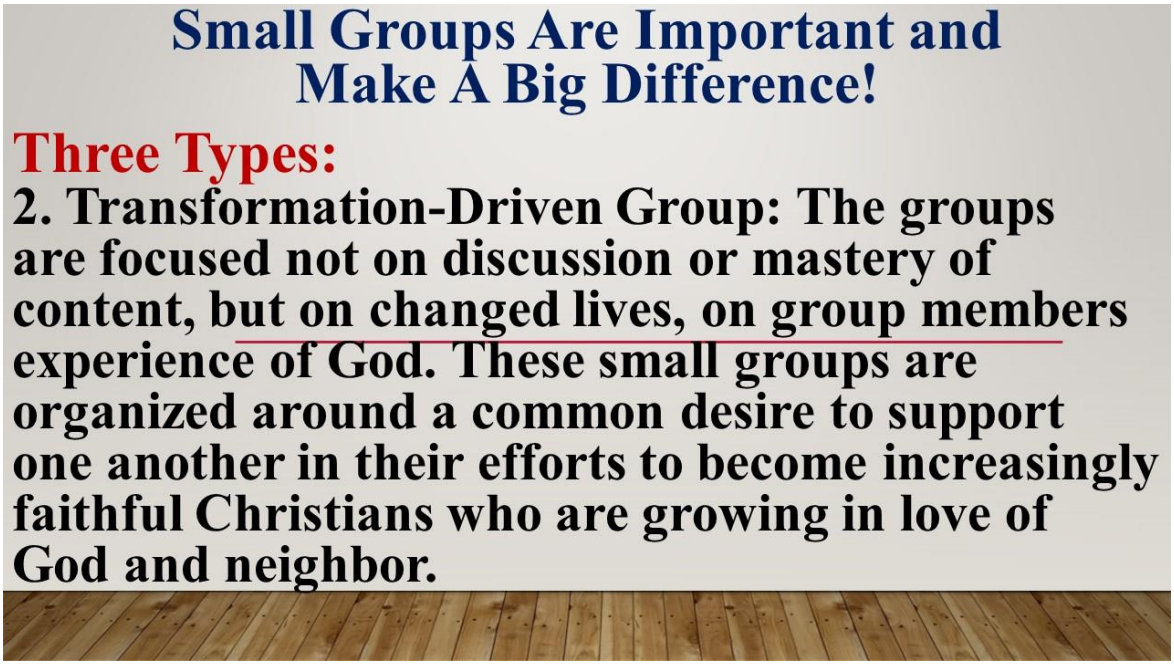
(Slide 9 – Small Groups – "The Class Meeting" – Info-Driven Groups)



Anyone here in one more “Information-Driven Groups” here at church or elsewhere. Remember that none of these groups are bad, but “class meetings” or small groups are a different kind of group.

The last kind of three small groups are “Transformation-Driven Groups,” which is what a “class meeting” or church small group is:

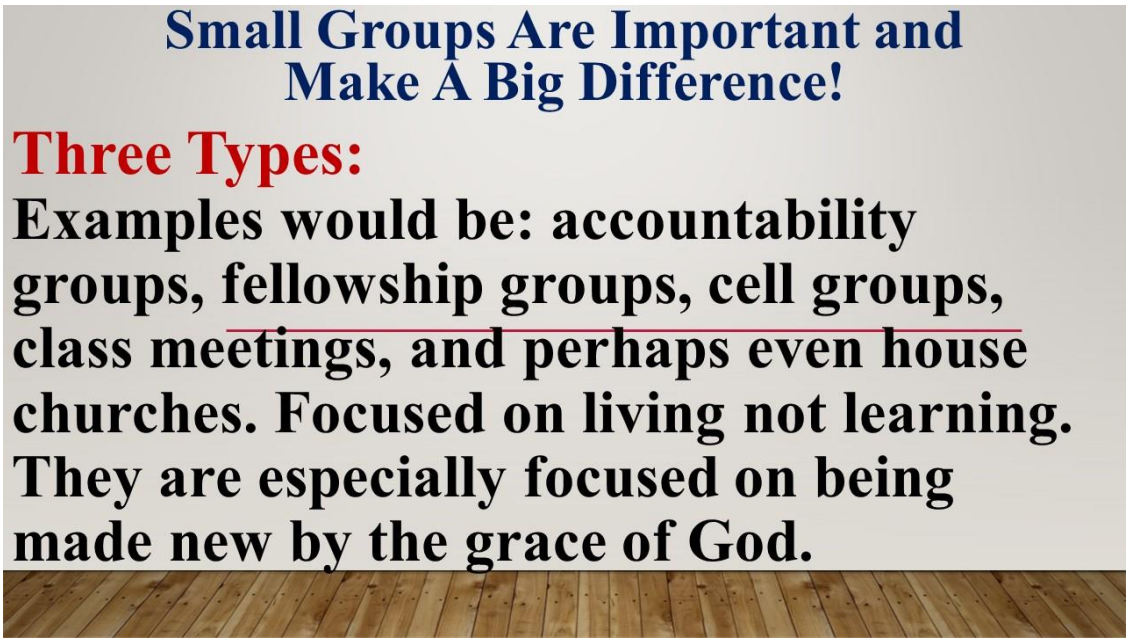
(Slide 10 – Small Groups – “The Class Meeting” – Transfor.-Driven Groups)



How many people here are part of one of these small groups here at the church, or anywhere else in your life? How many people see this description and the topic “Transformation-Driven Group” and have no idea what this is? In addition to the Wednesday “Class Meeting” pilot group, this church as many of us know, also has Band of Brothers and Rooted. These are great small groups. You get to know people, you share your faith, and you grow closer to Christ. During

these next two months, I am hoping to create more small groups so that we all will have the opportunity to grow in relationship with each other, grow closer to Christ, and see the church strengthened. Here are some examples of Transformation-Driven Groups):

(Slide 11 – Small Groups – Examples – Transformation-Driven Groups)



I personally have really enjoyed being part of our Band of Brothers small group, and the people in this group are truly woven together, their faith in Christ has been strengthened, and the men in this group are grateful for this group. I know that we also have the "Rooted" women's group, and my guess is, is that the women in this group feel the same way about their small group.

What I am talking about is the continued transformation of us, and lives around us. Imagine if new people that are not part of this church became part of

new small groups, and imagine what it could do for them, their faith, and sense of belonging.

Over these next couple of months then, I pray that we will all learn and grow together, so as to better understand how our faith and the faith of many can grow. Among other things that I feel that God is calling this church to, the biggest things, the most powerful thing is transformed lives. Worshiping passionately, loving extravagantly, and witnessing boldly is what we are called to do, but all this of ends up in lives transformed for Christ.

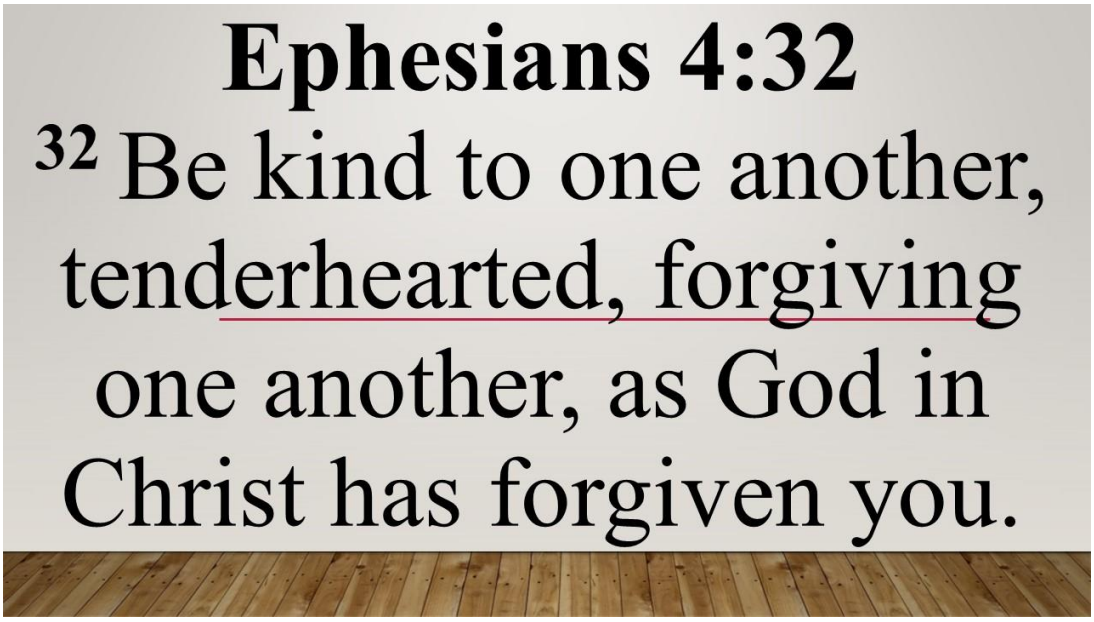
(Slide 12 – Transformation-Driven Groups – The Small Groups We Need!)



To bring this first of eight messages to a close then, be praying and thinking about how you can deepen your faith, how you can grow closer to others, and how this can further transform us and this church. Lastly, I want to share one more

scripture as we walk along this journey to learn about and consider small groups or in Methodist language, “Class Meetings.”

(Slide 13 – Ephesians 4:32)



Are we supposed to challenge each other in love? Yes. Are supposed to change and become more like Christ? Yes, but we can do that by being kind and loving. We can accomplish this by loving each other. When love each other, and lovingly hold each other accountable we are better fulfilling the mandate of the gospel. There are times that we must call out evil, cruelty, and sin, but the way we generally grow the kingdom is the love the heaven into people.

God loves us and He is for us, and as the body of Christ we are called to love, serve, and care for one another, and Christ has done for all of us. So once again, be praying and considering your thoughts on at some point entering into a week’s small group. Not now, but in the coming weeks. Where would you want to

meet? Who would you want to have in your small group? Who can invite to this group, knowing it could lead them to Christ, or bring them closer to Christ?

I believe, with all my heart, and all my soul that this church is on the edge of a spiritual breakthrough that we have seen in a while. I pray for it. I am excited about it, and I cannot wait to see what our Heavenly Father, though Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit does in a place called Panama, NY. May it be so and amen!