

Growth Group Report

June 2015

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Introduction

The Growth Group ministry is our major program for developing Christian maturity and therefore Growth Groups are a vitally important part of our Church. Earlier this year it became apparent that we had fewer groups than the end of 2014 and also less overall people in those groups. This prompted the need to find out more information on how Growth Groups are going, and what we can do to ensure that Growth Groups are getting healthier and stronger over time.

Part 1: Current Situation

Grow Purpose Goals

Goal (1): 80% of Church Members report that they have grown in their knowledge of God and his Word during the past year, by December 2015

Goal (2): 70% of Church Members report that they are regularly and genuinely “giving joyful thanks to the Father”, in their personal life, in Growth Groups, and in Church Services, by December 2015

Goal (3): 70% of Church Members report that they can honestly say that the overwhelming majority of members in our church are characterised by compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, by December 2015

Goal (4): 70% of Church Members are participating in Growth Groups by December 2016

Goal (5): 33% of Growth Groups have an Apprentice Leader in training by December 2015

Goal (6): 25% of Church Members are participating in discipleship pairs or triplets (Bible reading, prayer, mutual accountability) weekly or fortnightly by December 2016

March 2014 vs. May 2015

When we compare March 2014 to now, we can see a slight reduction in the amount of people in groups and the overall number of Groups:

	March 2014	Change	May 2015
Number of adults classified as “members”	726	- 43	683

Number of adult members in Growth Groups	424	- 12	412
Number of adult members not in Growth Groups	302	- 31	271
% of adult member participation in Growth Groups	58.4%	+ 1.9%	60.3%
Number of non-members in Growth Groups	15	- 9	6
Number of Growth Groups	48	- 4	44

The first thing to notice is that the number of adults classified as “members” has shrunk by 43 people (5.9%) from 726 to 683. This partly reflects the fact that we recorded a net loss of 10 members in 2014 and is consistent with our overall lower attendance at weekend services so far in 2015.¹ However the overall reduction in members since March 2014 also reflects a slight tightening of our classification “rules” – that is, we haven’t lost some people, it’s just that we have reclassified them to more accurately reflect their commitment and involvement in our church.

We currently have 60.3% of members in Growth Groups. Our goal for the end of next year is to have 70% of our members in Growth Groups (Goal 4). On current membership numbers that would mean we would need an extra 66 members in groups reach our 70% target.

During 2014 the number of Growth Groups grew from 48 in March to 52 by the end of the year. As of May 2015, however, we have dropped to 44 groups which is 8 less than our peak. The reasons for the reduction are:

- Leader has moved to another church (4 groups)
- Group has been reclassified as prayer triplet or similar (2 groups)
- Group amalgamated with another group and is no longer counted separately (2 groups)
- Leader moved further away from church and can’t lead group anymore (1 group)
- Group was stagnated and needed to be closed down (1 group)
- Leaders moved into another ministry (1 group)
- Christianity Explored follow up group ran its course and now members have moved to other groups and 1-1 discipleship situations (1 group)
- Group disbanded do to changing life circumstances of members – there was no longer critical mass to keep the group meeting (1 group)

In total we lost 13 groups from our peak of 52 last year but we’ve added 5 new groups so far in 2015, bringing us to 44 groups now. The good news is, even

¹ In 2014, 110 new individuals became members, but 120 members left our church – a net loss of 10 individuals. At this stage we haven’t done analysis of inflows and outflows so far in 2015.

though we've lost 8 groups, there are only 12 less adult members in groups than there were last year. This means that the overall group size has increased to compensate for the reduction in groups (the current average is 9.5 members per group). This means we should be aiming for at least an extra 7 groups to accommodate at least 66 people by the end of next year.

Part 2: Survey Results

Introduction to Surveys

Even though the decline in our Growth Group ministry is not catastrophic, but only slight, we can't rest on our laurels because we want to see the number and spiritual health of Growth Group members increasing year on year, not declining or going sideways. Therefore we decided that we needed to find out more information on how groups are going to better determine the way forward. To that end, we sent out paper surveys to every Growth Group, and we sent out an online survey to every adult member who is not part of a Growth Group. We received 164 responses from Growth Group participants, 32 from Growth Group leaders, and 62 responses from members who currently aren't participating in a Growth Group.

Growth Group Participants

The response from Growth Group participants was very positive. In particular:

- 97.5% of participants agreed that: "I feel cared for by members this group".
- 97.5% of participants agreed that: "We regularly give thanks and praise to God as part of our group time."
 - This is ahead of our goal to have "70% of Church Members report that they are regularly and genuinely "giving joyful thanks to the Father", in their personal life, in Growth Groups, and in Church Services, by December 2015."
- 93.3% of participants agreed that: "I have grown in my knowledge of God and his word through this group."
 - This is ahead of our goal to have "80% of Church Members report that they have grown in their knowledge of God and his Word during the past year, by December 2015."
- 89.6% of participants agreed that: "My group encourages me to share the gospel with friends, family, colleagues and neighbours."

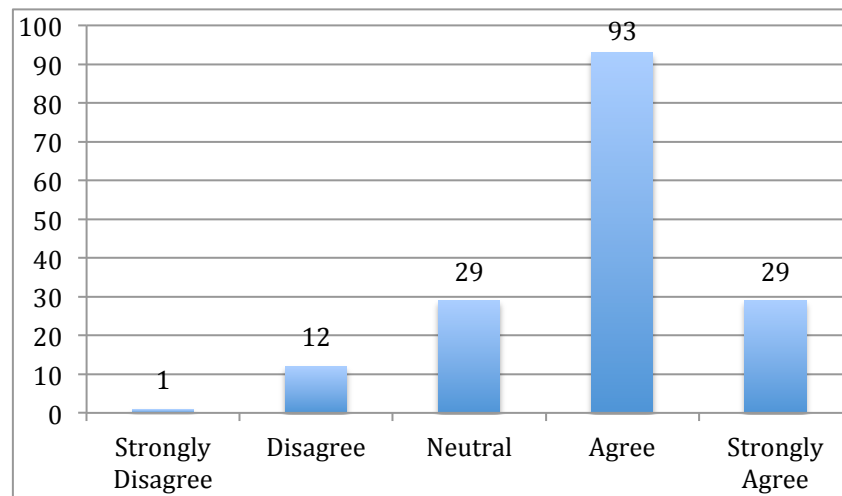
Some of the comments that participants made included:

- "I look forward to my group every week. At times they have been a lifeline knowing I am loved and accepted unconditionally and encouraged to grow in my walk with God means everything to me."
- "Our group has been the first group in my 25 years of being a believer where I have felt comfortable to admit the sin I struggle with."

- “I love my GG and have felt very supported by them and it is the best thing I’ve ever done to join one. Strongly encourage everyone to belong to a small group.”
- “Great group. Fantastic leaders”
- “Going to this Bible Study/GG is the highlight of my week.”

However a couple of notable potential areas for improvement came up. Firstly, when asked to respond to the statement “I am able to articulate the gospel easily” they were less confident than hoped for, as this graph indicates:

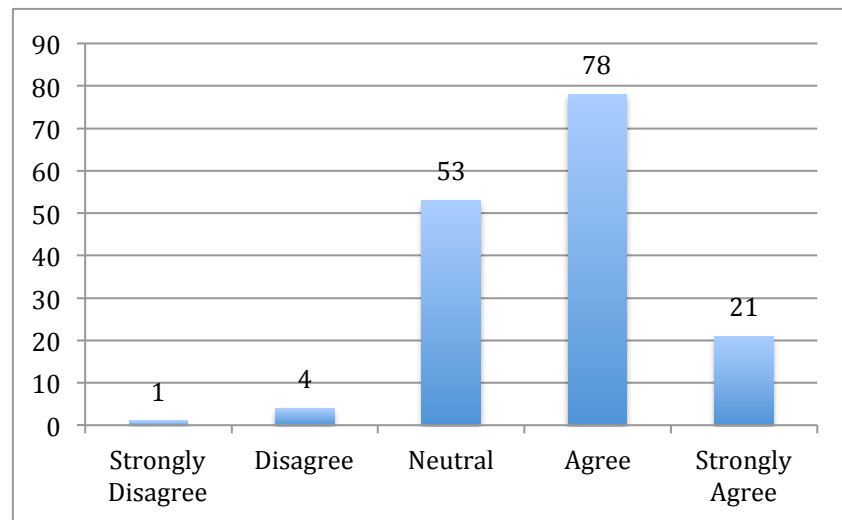
Figure 1: “I am able to articulate the gospel easily.”



Surprisingly, 42 participants (25.6%) were either neutral or disagreed with the statement, meaning that they do not feel confident in their ability to articulate the gospel easily. This is a concern because the ability to articulate the gospel is a key indicator of Christian maturity. Only 29 participants (17.6%) strongly agreed with the statement. The 93 who said, “agree”, feel somewhat confident in their ability to articulate the gospel with ease, but obviously sense that they still have room to improve.

Respondents were also asked about the connection between their participation in Growth Groups and any ministries they might be involved in. The question was: “My group resources me for the ministries I am involved in” and the responses were:

Figure 2: “My group resources me for the ministries I am involved in.”



Such a large number of neutral responses may indicate that these respondents don't feel that they have a ministry that they need to be resourced for, or that they aren't really sure how the group does help them in their ministry. Whatever the case, such a large number of "neutral" responses combined with such a small number of "strongly agree" responses indicates that to some degree, our Growth Groups either aren't resourcing people well for ministry or that some people don't see the link between what they are learning (and the encouragement they are receiving) and the ministries they are serving in.

Participants were also asked to describe other discipleship arrangements they were part of. Of the 164 who filled out the survey, 10 said they were in an "intentional discipleship or mentoring relationship", 11 said they were in a "prayer triplet" and 5 said they were in a "1-1 Bible reading" relationship.

Some of the areas for improvement Growth Group participants noted included:

- "Encourage leaders to not obsess about time. Feel so rushed. In studies/questions – perhaps the same amount but list some as optional. Offer some pastoral care training for leaders."
- "Just keep making it easy to join groups, fear kept me away from being in a group for a few years. Fear of joining a new group because I didn't know how to approach a group."
- "I would prefer to break up into small groups for prayer as I would find it intimidating to share deeply or ask for prayer @ a spiritual issue in the large group. I would like to read the bible during the study. If the study is going for a long time, some questions could be skipped. The leaders are loving & supportive and gracious hosts."

Growth Group Leaders

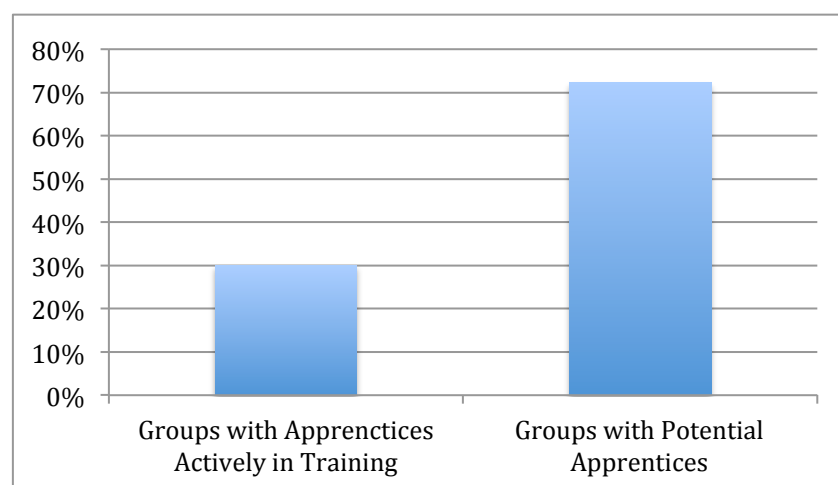
Of the 32 leaders who filled out the survey, 29 (90.6%) agreed with the statement that: “Group members are able to articulate the gospel easily”. This is interesting because there is a disparity between what the leaders said and the participants said (only 74.4% of participants agreed with the equivalent question on their surveys). It seems that leaders have more confidence in the participants’ ability to articulate the gospel than the participants do themselves.

Every leader agreed that “members of the group are characterized by compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” While 93.8% agreed that “members are growing in their knowledge of God and his word through this group.” Also, every leader agreed that they themselves are growing in their knowledge of God and his word. Related to this, leaders were also asked to respond to the statement “I am reading the Bible and praying by myself at least 4x a week”. The options were “Never”, “Sometimes”, or “Usually”. 21 leaders ticked “Usually”, 7 ticked “sometimes”, none ticked “Never” and 5 did not answer the question.

86.7% of leaders agree or strongly agree that they feel competent as Growth Group leaders – but only 13.3% of these were strongly agreed. 2 leaders (6.7%) do not feel confident in their ministry as Growth Group leaders. 74.1% of leaders are finding the Leadership Huddles helpful, 3.7% are not finding them helpful, and the rest – (22.2%) were neutral, though perhaps this is because they are not participating in the huddles (which are non-compulsory). 90% of leaders are finding the provided weekly study material helpful.

When it comes to training more leaders, 9/30 (30%) leaders have an apprentice who they are actively training to lead, while 21/29 (72.4%) agree that “there are people in my Group who I think could be trained to be leaders.”

Figure 3: Groups with Actual and Potential Apprentices.



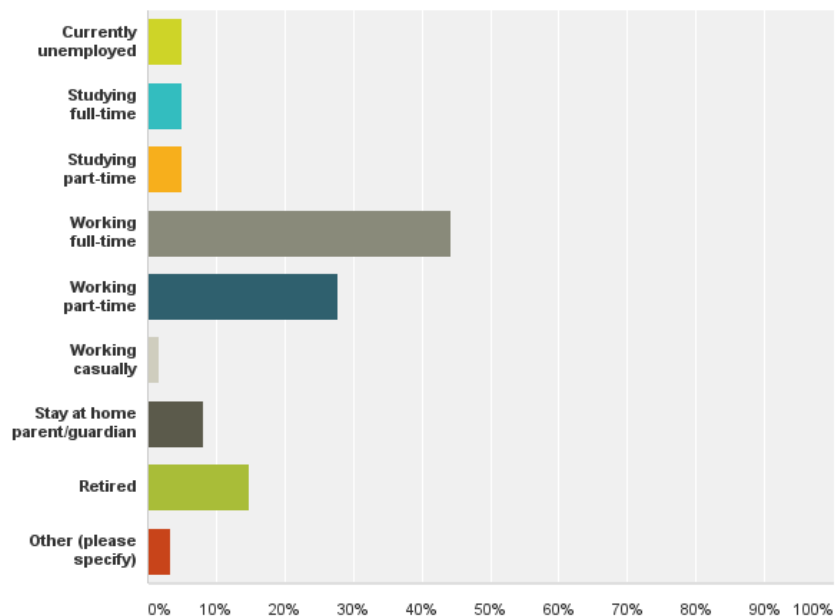
Some of the comments leaders made included:

- “The Leadership huddles to be more informal.”
- “As a leader I am always trying to identify member’s gifts and utilize them either in group or other ministries. Could be a question to ask GG leaders. Are you asking people who are not in a GG to join the Group?”
- “The weekly study material is important and improving all the time.”
- “Our church is so big and it is our G G where loving community can be modelled and seen to minister as Christ.”
- “We have a lovely, encouraging group who really care pastorally for one another.”
- “As a result of a conversation about who is your neighbour everyone was positive about stepping in when there was a physical issue. However when I asked about a mental issue, everyone said they wouldn’t intervene. When asked about supporting a Christian family where their marriage is troubled, once again everyone said they wouldn’t know how to do this. So they would allow a marriage to flounder due to an inability to say the right thing. The response from some was the church should handle this. Who is the Church?”

Growth Group non-Participants

Of the 62 who responded to the online survey for adult members who are not in a Growth Group, 44.3% are working full-time and 27.9% are working part-time. Only 8.2% described themselves as a “stay at home parent/guardian”.

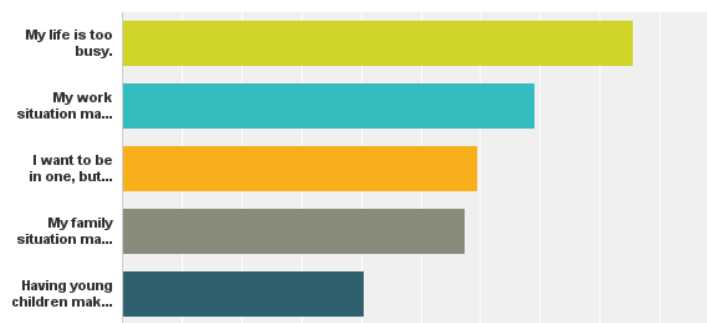
Figure 4: Employment Situation of Adult Members of Menai Anglican who are not participating in Growth Groups.



Two-thirds also said they have been part of a Growth Group (or similar) before. When asked about the reasons why they were unable to participate in a Growth Group, the top 5 reasons were:

1. My life is too busy.
2. My work situation makes it too hard (e.g. shift work, regular travel).
3. I want to be in one, but haven't been able to find a suitable one.
4. My family situation makes it too hard to be in a Growth Group.
5. Having young children makes it too difficult.

Figure 5: Top 5 Reasons for not Participating in Growth Groups



This following table gives more detailed responses:

Figure 6: Table of Reasons for not Participating in Growth Groups:

To what extent do the following reasons explain why you are not in a Growth Group? Please rate each one:						
Answer Options	Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Very much	Rating Average	Response Count
I have something else which does for me what a Growth	35	9	8	2	0.57	54
I am still fairly new at Menai Anglican.	41	6	5	2	0.41	54
I am part of a Growth Group at another church or ministry	47	3	3	2	0.27	55
My life is too busy.	13	10	12	20	1.71	55
I want to be in one, but haven't been able to find a suitable	20	12	14	8	1.19	54
Having young children makes it too difficult.	36	1	8	9	0.81	54
My family situation makes it too hard to be in a Growth	25	7	11	11	1.15	54
I live too far away from church.	46	2	4	2	0.30	54
I don't see the value of Growth Groups.	41	7	6	2	0.45	56
I have had a bad experience with Growth Groups in the past.	43	6	5	1	0.35	55
I am too intimidated to join one.	39	15	0	0	0.28	54
My work situation makes it too hard (e.g. shift work, regular	21	5	13	14	1.38	53
I don't know how to join one.	45	5	0	2	0.21	52
Growth Groups don't really help me grow.	37	12	2	2	0.42	53
I am unable to commit to a Growth Group for health reasons.	50	1	1	0	0.06	52
I don't have access to transport.	51	1	1	0	0.06	53
I don't know what a Growth Group is.	46	0	6	1	0.28	53
Other (please specify)						17
					answered question	58
					skipped question	4

Some of the comments respondents gave to the reasons why they weren't part of Growth Groups included:

- Needing to go to bed early – by 9pm, and groups often go later.
- Not wanting to be part of a women's group that just talks about peoples' problems without getting anywhere instead of studying the Bible.

- “I just don't want to replace time on studying passages and sermons to deal with others' personal problems particularly as I also observe that all of discussion tends not to lead to any resolution or action on the problems people bring to the groups' attention”.
- Already serving at church in a number of ministries and can't give anymore time (for the sake of family life balance).
- Being involved in extra-curricular activities, study and part-time work leaving no room to be part of a Growth Group.
- Having a different theological position to the church and not wanting to cause conflict in a Growth Group.
- Finding groups too passive or bland in the past.
- No one from the congregation in certain age group able to form group.

Part 3: Where to From Here?

Apprentices and New Groups

The third most significant reason why members of our church aren't in Growth Groups was; “I want to be in one, but haven't been able to find a suitable one.” So, one way we can encourage more people to join Growth Groups is by providing more options – particularly different time slots and different mixes of people. To start more groups we need to train more leaders. One of our goals for the Grow Purpose of Menai Anglican is: “33% of Growth Groups have an Apprentice Leader in training by December 2015.” At the moment we are close to that, with 30% of groups (who responded to survey) actively training an apprentice. This is encouraging. It is also exciting to see that over 70% of leaders can identify members of their group who would be suitable to train an apprentice.

Actions:

- Produce a guide on “How to Train a Growth Group Apprentice” to help leaders continue to do this well, or begin doing it for the first time.
- Ask leaders if they think their apprentices will be ready to start a new group this year or at the beginning of 2016. Work with leaders to find ways to speed up the process to ensure that we can have at least 7 new groups start between now and early next year.
- Re-invite apprentices to Leadership Huddles – press on them the importance of attending.
- Keep making pathways into groups clear. Make sure people always know how to join one. Working on promoting them in an ongoing fashion, and perhaps do a second launch later this year.

Busyness and Christian Maturity

The major blocker for people joining a Growth Group was “my life is too busy.” This is anecdotally the cause for irregular attendance at church as well. We

need to work out how to address this as a church, as there is likely to be gospel issues underneath the choices that some people are making in life.

Actions:

- Call a special meeting of staff to discuss and pray about this issue and begin to work out a way forward.

Articulating the Gospel

A large number of Growth Group members do not feel confident in their ability to articulate the gospel easily. This is a significant issue and we need to be building “gospel fluency” in our group members so they can better speak the truth in love to one another and better share the reason for the hope that they have to unbelievers.

Actions:

- Develop a curriculum particularly around “gospel fluency” in term 4 which is our mission term. Focus on training people to articulate the gospel naturally, in their own words.

Integrate with Triplets Strategy

One of our goals for the “Grow” purpose is to begin to build a culture of discipleship triplets, which function like mini-Growth Groups. When members can’t access a Growth Group for whatever reason, they can be encouraged to form a triplet that meets weekly or fortnightly, in which they read the Bible, share with one another, and pray.

Actions

- Count triplets as effectively mini-Growth Groups.
- Finalise the Triplet Guide and disseminate across the church.
- Ask some key leaders in the church to begin to initiate triplets.

I want to give special thanks to Nola Betts who did a huge amount of work to make this report possible.