



Small Group Leader Orientation Guide



LEADERS & STAFF



Orientation Guide: Small-Group Leader

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Leader's Guide

How to use the Small-Group Leader Orientation Guide.

Welcome to SMALLGROUPS.COM: Inspiring life-changing community. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop group leaders who can think strategically and biblically about the church and their communities. The material for this resource was selected by the editors of Leadership Resources and Christianity Today; it comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.

"Orientation Guides" are easy-to-use resources that help prepare people to take on new roles in church leadership. Each guide focuses on a practical area of church ministry and comprises brief handouts on specific aspects of that ministry.

This specific guide is designed to help you provide orientation and basic training to new small-group leaders, and to help seasoned small-group leaders refresh themselves on their responsibilities. You may use it either for a group training session or to give individually to small-group leaders. Simply print the handouts you need and use them as necessary.

For example, examine a sample small-group leader job description (p. 13) and use it as a basis to draw up your own documents. Help that all-important initial group gathering run smoothly by examining "The First Meeting" (p. 17). And get a jumpstart on difficult situations that may arise by learning from "Small Group Problem Solving" (p. 21).

We hope you benefit from this guide as you equip your church to get new small-group leaders off to a great start and to bring experienced leaders back to the foundations of their ministry.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.SmallGroups.com.

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The Big Picture of Small Groups

Leader, get ready to take part in a savory slice of real life.

By Angie Ward

Imagine something small, starting something big.

It happened once, when a simple carpenter shared his life with 12 close friends. For 3 years, they ate together, played together, learned together, traveled together, laughed together, cried together, and even fought together. Their lives were changed, and then they went out and changed the world.

Do you believe it can happen today? Imagine the direct descendant of that group of followers, the Church, doing the same thing today. Groups of a dozen people—sometimes a few more, sometimes a few less—sharing life together. Eating together. Playing together. Learning together. Traveling together. Laughing together. Crying together. And even fighting together.

Whatever you call them, small groups have the potential to change lives. And your church. And the world. It can be done. It *has* been done.

The Benefits

Small groups have been known to:

- Hold an entire church together when its leader confesses to moral failure.
- Transform neighborhoods, communities, and even entire cities by selflessly demonstrating the love of Jesus in practical ways.
- Laugh together 'til the wee hours of the morning.
- Hold a broken member with strong arms of support – physically, emotionally, spiritually, and even financially – during a time of crisis such as divorce, death, or illness.
- Spur individuals to greater personal spiritual growth.
- Instill a knowledge of Scripture and a hunger for prayer.
- Share breakfast, lunch, dinner, dessert, high tea, midnight snacks, and pizza of all sizes, styles, and temperatures.
- Foster spirited discussion on matters both eternal and earthly.
- Introduce scores of friends, neighbors, and co-workers to a newfound relationship with Jesus Christ.
- Become (imagine this!) best friends.
- Transform the entire culture of a church by moving its attention outside its own walls.
- Serve as a laboratory for developing greater relational skills and health, sometimes even through conflict.
- Pool their financial resources to impact the life of a child, another family, or a missionary.
- Celebrate! Births, birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, graduations, accomplishments—anything from new babies to national championships.

Small groups can do all these things, yet are even more than the sum of their parts. Small groups are more than "just" a Bible study, although they provide the opportunity to study God's word. They are more than a prayer group, although they can provide a "bridge line" to the throne room.

More than just a fellowship time or social hour, small groups can serve as the foundation for deep, truly life-changing relationships. Healthy small groups have the potential to serve as a microcosm of the church, in its purest form: a safe place where people can encounter God, and find the resources and relationships to nurture their spiritual growth.

Starting or maintaining an effective small-group ministry is not easy, of course. Relationships never are. "Successful" small group ministries—the kind that change lives—are clear about their purposes and intentional about their programs, yet remain focused on people. Having a small group *program* does not automatically equate to changed lives. Relationships cannot be institutionalized. Growth cannot be manufactured.

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The Requirements

Yet while every church is uniquely called to minister in a particular setting, there are some commonalities to effective small groups:

- They take *commitment*, and that commitment must spring from all of the church's key leaders, from the senior pastor on throughout the entire organization. If the Small-Groups Pastor is the only person committed to small groups, they will at best become a niche program for a few others in the church.
- They require a *clear purpose* based on an understanding of biblical principles and an understanding of the spiritual growth process. How do small groups fit into the mission of your church? How are they different from a Bible study, a support group, or a social club, and how will you determine whether or not they're effective?
- They require *leadership development*. This is different from just recruiting people to fill roles; it involves reproducing the vision of fully functioning, "mini-churches" into a growing contingent of mature Christ-followers who are then equipped and released to help make it happen.
- They take *time*: time to pray through the best approach for your setting, time to communicate the vision of small groups, time to implement a strategy, and—most important of all—time to allow relationships to grow.

No, small groups aren't always easy. But the benefits are worth the effort. Participants build deeper relationships than would ever be possible on Sundays alone. People stay connected to the church, even when they can't always attend church. Pastors are able to share the responsibilities of spiritual care. The church grows bigger, smaller, and deeper, all at the same time. Lives are changed, and then those people go out and change the world.

Imagine something small, starting something big.

—ANGIE WARD is a contributing editor to *Leadership Journal*.

Casting Vision from Day One

How to lay the groundwork for a healthy, long-term small group

By Spence Shelton

Do you believe lives will be forever changed for the glory of God through the small group you are leading? Honestly, what is your answer to that question right now?

Here is something big you need to get your mind around: God designed transformation to happen through friendship. This is such empowering news for you as a small-group leader! As you begin leading, you *must* believe and anticipate that life-change will happen with the members your group when you press the truths of Christ into one another's lives. God is willing and able to use you as a catalyst for life-change. Will you believe him for it?

One of the most critical elements in the early stages of a small group is casting the vision for where you want the group to go. Small-group leaders commonly make the mistake of assuming their group members are as excited about and committed to the group as they are. In reality, the best thing you can give your group early on is a compelling dream they can jump on board with. The next time your group gathers, you need to be ready to give them a brief (10 minutes or less usually) but big vision of what's in store for the group. The goal of this article is to help you:

1. Get that huge vision for your group
2. Develop a strategy to take you there
3. Prepare to talk to your group about it.

Step 1: Build a God-Sized Vision for Your Group

The best place to begin building your vision is by looking at the dream Jesus has for your small group. After all, this group belongs to God, not you. So why not shoot for a God-sized vision instead of a you-sized one! Christ calls us to make disciples (Matthew 28:19). This is what Christ did, and what he called the church to do. Therefore, this is what your small group should be designed to accomplish.

A survey of Jesus' teaching in the gospels reveals four significant themes that, together, summarize what the life of a disciple looks like. They are identified here as a Gospel Identity, Worship, Community, and Mission. The two places these themes are most prominent include the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:34–40) and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–20).

- **Gospel Identity.** Disciples must find their motivation for holiness in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; any other source will leave them tired and unfulfilled. Indeed, even your spiritual activity will not earn you any points with God. God will not forgive your sins because you do good deeds. Thankfully, small groups are a great place for us to constantly remind and encourage one another in our shared gospel identity.
- **Worship.** You and I were made to worship. Worship is more than just music; it's a lifestyle. When we consider who God is and all that he's done for us, the logical response is to offer our entire lives back to him (Romans 12:1). Every action, every circumstance, even every thought is an opportunity to worship (1 Corinthians 10:31). Your group will seek to draw people closer to God by living a lifestyle of worship.
- **Community.** Jesus calls us to model him in loving one another because it is by this love the world will know we are his disciples (John 13:34–35; 15:12). He prayed to God that we would experience a unity that resembled the unity of the trinity (John 17:11; 20–23). Paul calls the church to a unity so deep it should operate like a single human body (Ephesians 4:1–16). For a small group this means being intentional to love one another as Christ loved us and to encourage one another in holiness (Hebrews 10:24–26).
- **Mission.** Every Christian is called to be a minister of the gospel through both acts of loving service and a willingness to share the gospel with others. We want to take the kingdom of God into the arts, business, education—and every other dimension of our community. We believe that the real "ministry" happens outside the church Monday through Saturday, not inside our auditorium for an hour on Sunday. We believe that the scope of God's love is worldwide and we are committed to taking the gospel to the farthest, most unreached places of the world. For small groups this means we exist for the sake of others and must fight the tendency of the flesh to serve only our own needs.

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These four themes are four foundational elements of a small group's vision. Before you keep reading, it's time to write down what the vision for your group will be:

Sample: Our small group exists to make disciples. We will push each other to always remember Christ first and to worship God as our first reaction to all life throws at us. We will love one another, especially when it's not easy to do so. We carry the hope of the world, and our group will be characterized by an active and intentional love of our world both locally and globally.

Your small group's vision: _____

Step 2: Decide on the Strategy to Get You There

To achieve this vision, your group will have to commit to a strategy. This is where you lay down a couple of important elements that are crucial to push a group towards long-term health and keep it from stagnating somewhere down the line.

Your strategy should include these elements:

- **Collective Ownership.** Even though you are the group leader, it is not your group. Each person in the group has just as much ownership of it as you. This means every one must have a role. Too many leaders place their God-sized visions on their own shoulders and burn out within six or nine months. Leader, you must be willing to delegate important responsibilities to those in your group. It's God's group, after all, and you are a member of it!
- **Multiplication.** If you are making disciples who make disciples, at some point you will have people ready to lead a new small group. If your group is anticipating this from Day 1, they will celebrate the day someone leaves to launch a new group. If you spring this on the group a week before it happens, they will mourn it. Make multiplication a part of your strategy. And as you delegate leadership roles, do so while looking for the next small-group leader at your church or in your ministry.
- **Commitment.** This is not a casual, come-if-you-feel-like-it small group. Real friendships require time and energy. So part of how you achieve your vision is by agreeing to make group life a priority. Set the bar high!
- **Confidentiality.** With commitment must come an agreement to trust one another. While this trust will only truly come as friendships are built, you can set the course for that by making confidentiality an expectation in your group. If you expect people to be real, they have to trust you are giving them a safe environment to do so.

Sample strategy: To see our vision realized, we will each actively participate in group life. This is not the leader's group. This is our group. As a disciple-making group, we will actively seek to raise up and send out those who God is preparing to be future leaders. We will prioritize group life, letting someone know in advance on the rare occasion we will not be there. We will practice trust through confidentiality in what we share with one another.

Your Group's Strategy: _____

Step 3: Casting the Vision to the Group

Good news, the hard work is done. Now we just need to share this great stuff with your group! Here are a couple of things for you to remember as you share this with the group:

- **Pray.** Your group's growth is not up to you, ultimately. It's up to God and the working of his Spirit in your group. So begin now to pray for your time of sharing this vision. Pray that God would give your group members attentive ears, and that the group would begin to unify itself around this vision.

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- **Keep it central.** When you share your vision with the group, it should be the only thing up for discussion. This should not be an afterthought. Share the vision and allow conversation around it. Ensure everyone is tracking with where you are heading. Even spend time praying together over it after your conversation has ended.
- **Keep it short.** You could spend months on this, but your people need to know that what you are seeking to accomplish is, in fact, doable. People need the key points (your vision and strategy) and they need it often. Better to reinforce this several times over the first few months together than exhaust it just once at the beginning.
- **Keep it real.** This isn't a seminary professor's lecture. It's your heart-felt belief of what group life can be like. Tell them that. Speak from the heart. Set the stage now for the transparency you hope to see happen down the road.

I know it may seem daunting now, but leading a small group is one of the most rewarding experiences one can have as a follower of Christ. You can do it!

—SPENCE SHELTON is the Small Groups Pastor at Summit Church in Durham, North Carolina.

Discuss

1. Have you experienced life-change as a result of participating in a small group?
2. What is most difficult about coming up with a vision for your small group?
3. What is most difficult about coming up with a strategy?

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How to Align Your Group and Your Church

Because things won't work if you are pulled in two directions at once

By Trevor Lee

Do you remember "tug-of-war"? It's the game where you and a few friends grab the end of a rope while the opposition grabs the other end—and then you both start pulling. Both teams exert a tremendous amount of effort, but neither team moves very far. Imagine how far you could go if everyone decided to move in the same direction! It wouldn't be much of a game, but there would be a lot more movement.

As you prepare to lead a small group, it's important that you develop and communicate a vision that moves with your church and the other group members. Because if your church is pulling one way and your group members are pulling in another, nobody will go anywhere—and you'll be stuck in the middle. But when you align the group with your church and the other group members, you'll set everyone up for great things.

Alignment with Your Church

Assuming your church's leaders are helping your small group get going, they will have specific goals they're hoping your group will accomplish. Here are some of the things you need to know about your church's hopes for your small group. (Meaning, if you don't know them, find out.)

Part of the process. It's likely the leaders of your church have a specific purpose in mind for small groups—one that fits with the overall ministry strategy of the church. For example, one of the things my church focuses on is prayer, and so we set up our small groups to be an important place where prayer happens. We rely on small-group leaders to spend at least half an hour in prayer with their groups. If this doesn't happen, we believe the group will be deficient in an important area.

The same is true for your church. They might rely on small groups for forming relationships, Bible study, prayer, leadership development, or other things. Regardless, it's important that you are clear about how your small group fits into the ministry of the church. Here are some questions to consider.

- What are the *primary* goals of small groups in our church?
- What will it take to accomplish these goals?
- How do these goals fit with my vision for the small group I'm going to lead?

Autonomy. Different churches have radically different levels of autonomy expected from small groups. In some churches the groups study the same material, meet at the same times, and have regular meetings for leaders to keep everyone on the same page. In other churches the groups are given some general guidelines and encouraged to develop their group life in the way they think is best.

Clarity on the level of autonomy you can expect will save a lot of tugging between your group and church leadership. If you're unclear about the level of autonomy expected of small groups, or if you have trouble with the way your church has set this up, talk with your pastor before you get going. And make sure you find answers to these questions:

- Who provides the material your group will use when you meet?
- What are the commitments your church expects of small-group leaders?

Vision. One of the primary ways your vision for the group can clash with your church leaders' vision is over the idea of multiplication. As you form deeper relationships with other group members, you'll find yourself struggling with the idea of multiplying your group by splitting or having some people leave to begin a new group. It's important to know where your church leaders stand on this question. And before you lead, make sure you're okay with sticking to the plan your church is pursuing.

You also need to consider what your non-negotiables are when it comes to vision alignment. For example, if you think a group should meet on Sunday night and your church would like groups to meet during the week, it's likely neither of you will balk at the idea of adjusting your expectations. However, if you want to meet once a month and your church wants groups to meet weekly to build community, agreement will be trickier.

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So before you take on a small group, make sure you can go along with the non-negotiables of your church's small-group ministry. Including these questions:

- If a small group goes perfectly, what do you think it will look like? What does your church leadership think it will look like? (If you don't know, ask someone!)
- What are the differences in the vision you have and your church leadership has? How will you work with these differences?
- What are your church's non-negotiables? What are yours?

Alignment with Other Group Members

So, you're ready to pull the rope in the same direction as your church's leaders—but what about the other people in your group? Are you on the same page with them?

Alignment with your church is largely about understanding the leadership's vision and working within it. Alignment with other group members is much more about having a clear vision and communicating it in a way that leaves little room for surprises. Setting expectations clearly from the beginning will go a long way to ensuring your group is playing with the same set of rules.

Commitment. This one is pretty easy—what level of commitment do you expect from group members? Is everyone expected to be there every time the group meets, or is it okay for people to show up when they can? Even though this isn't hard to communicate to potential group members, it is very important. If commitment levels are too low, there are some who will look elsewhere because they want a group of people who are deeply committed to each other. If commitment levels are too high, there are some who will shy away because of busy or uncertain schedules. So:

- How often will your group meet? Why?
- How often do you expect people to be there?
- What will you do if people consistently fall short of those expectations?

Relational Depth. To some extent, the depth of a small group is something that develops over time and cannot be planned. At the same time, the activities of your group will have a significant impact on how deep you go together. If an important part of your time together is sharing details of your lives, then you're expecting more depth than if you're just planning to study last week's sermon. The expectations for what will happen are different. Some people have an easier time opening up than others, so make sure you let people know how deep you expect things to get.

- What role will personal sharing play in the way your group is structured?
- How will you encourage relational depth while allowing people to move at a pace that works for them?

Purpose. As you align your group with the vision of your church, you'll develop a clear picture of your group's purpose, as well. Now you need to make sure you clearly present that purpose to prospective group members. There is nothing that will keep people from joining a small group (or frustrate them once they do) more than a fuzzy picture of why the group is together. So:

- If things go well, what will the group look like in six months? A year?
- What will happen when the group meets?
- How does this fit in with the overall strategy of the church for helping people grow in faith?

Becoming aligned with the purpose of your church and the members of your small group can be one of the most fulfilling experiences in a life of faith. So go and pull with your group and church leadership in the same direction!

—TREVOR LEE is a freelance author, pastor, and small-group leader in Colorado.

Advice from an Experienced Leader

Build confidence as you care for your people and guide exploration of God's truth.

An Interview with Kevin Rapp

Kevin Rapp is a small-group ministry coach for Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky. He leads his own weekly small group, which has been together for three years. He has led small groups for five years and has been in groups for ten years. Here are Kevin's insights and coaching tips about issues that most affect a new group leader.

SmallGroups.com: What are the three most important things a leader should keep in mind?

Kevin Rapp: First, be assured: there is a purpose for you being the group leader. Remember you are doing this as a service for God and know he will empower you to do his work. Second, be prepared. The best way to feel comfortable is to be prepared. Study what you will be covering, prepare the questions and think through how people will respond. Third, pray for the members of the group, that they will benefit in the way God desires. Pray for your wisdom and discernment and for the health and growth of the group.

What are the most important character traits of a small-group leader?

Be someone who can speak the truth of the Bible or the subject being discussed as it relates to the Bible in a way that makes it relevant. Be able to relate well with the members of the group. Many leaders are fearful of not knowing the answer to the questions. Saying, "I do not know" is far better than hoping to give the right answer. Following up with the answer at the next meeting shows you care enough to research the answer.

A leader must know how to breathe life into others, have a love or growing desire for sharing God with others, and have a desire to see others grow spiritually. I fully believe people do not care how much you know until they know how much you care. It is also very important to know how to guide discussion by commanding attention rather than demanding it. This is often done in a very gentle style. Remember that the people attending the group are typically there for fellowship and learning, in that order. If they are not enjoying the experience they more than likely will not return.

How can I contribute to a welcoming atmosphere in the group?

Greet people by name with a warm smile, ask them how they are doing and follow up on prayer requests: "John, great to see you, how's it going...how's your mom doing?" Make sure the room is comfortable, clean, and has food and drink out. Let everyone know they have refrigerator rights. Let people feel your house is their house.

How can I get the group off to a good start in the first meeting?

Share great food and drink along with great stories. Get people to share and laugh by asking some great icebreakers. Some of the best I have used are, "Tell us about yourself, your job, where you go to church," and, "What was your first job as a teenager and what stood out the most for you about this job?"

I usually make the first meeting about introduction and going over what we are going to study, including a lesson to introduce the topic. If the study is 90 minutes long, I spend 30 minutes for social fellowship, 30 minutes in study time, then 30 minutes for discussion. The study time during the first meeting is usually 10 minutes shorter due to having some good introduction questions for the group.

How much should I talk and how much should I let group members contribute?

I do my best to talk less than 25 percent during question and answer or sharing time. I am only there to guide. Do not be afraid of silence. Silence will drive others to share. It helps to smile, nod, or just look down in the book or Bible during the silent periods. People will open up and the sharing will take place.

How can I keep the discussion on track when it wanders?

Say something like, "Great point. Thanks for sharing. Let's see what others have to say about..." Affirm the person. Offending someone may cause others to avoid sharing, or hurt attendance and growth of the group. Jon Weiner, small groups pastor at Southeast Christian Church, suggests during the first meeting to let everyone know when the leader tugs on their ear, it is time to wrap up your answer or sharing. Do this in a very light-hearted but serious way.

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What if the discussion wanders to a place more fruitful than the curriculum?

I enjoy letting it go where it needs to go. I have to remember God's ways are greater than mine. People love it, grow from it, and become more involved in the group. This is often when community really takes place and the group as a whole is taken to a new level. The only caution is making sure that when the Holy Spirit has done his job, we get back to the matters at hand after giving thanks for what just happened.

How can I help shy people open up and contribute to the group?

Make an effort to get to know the shy people. When they ask you a great question or share insight in a one-on-one situation, ask them to share during the session. If they don't want to, don't push. If they do, let them know you would like to let the group know who provided you with the question or insight. When they speak others tend to really listen, because the quiet ones typically have something very valuable to say when they talk.

What do I do with the person who dominates the conversation?

Speak with the person alone on the side about this. Have the talk while still at the meeting if possible. Otherwise make a call within a day or two after the meeting. Affirming them for sharing is important. You can also get the "talker" on your team by asking him or her to share and open up. This can range from the "talker" just not talking as much or enlisting the "talker" to ask others in the group their thoughts regarding the topic.

What can I do when someone becomes disruptive or rude?

Let them know they are being disruptive or rude by giving a nod or tugging on the ear, as I mentioned earlier. If this does not work you may need to take a break and let the person know what they are doing is disturbing. Not letting this get to you and softening the blow when a rude or hurtful comment takes place is important. Change the topic, if needed.

How can I build prayer and spiritual formation into my group's life?

Ending the group time with prayer is a great way. Have the men and ladies break off and pray for each other as a group. Have the men take home a handwritten prayer request from another man and the women do the same. Include a phone number or e-mail to keep in touch. This was used in one of the first groups I led and the results were amazing. Five of the twenty people came to Christ. I had very little to do with it. Instead, the Holy Spirit did it through the group caring about each other and helping each other grow.

How do I measure success in my group?

The most important and simplest goal is for the group to grow closer to Christ and one another. It is also a great success if the group meets for more than a season and develops leaders from within to start new groups. However, the group I mentioned earlier where five people came to Christ and made lasting friendships only met for one season.

I really want to stress not measuring the success of the group with too high a standard or expectation. The first group a person leads may be a smashing success and the next not so much. Either way the success goes to God and the work is done for God.

What has been your biggest surprise as a leader?

People coming to a Bible study for their first time. The questions they ask are typically incredible because they are simply seeking the truth. They are also often intimidated about not fitting in. Treat them no differently than the others. Make them feel welcome.

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What has been your biggest continuing challenge?

Keeping up with everything going on in the lives of the members of the group on top of my own day-to-day commitments. It is important not to over commit. I need to plan my week and make sure I make time to pray for folks and stay on top of studying and preparing for the group. Having a routine and some level of organization really helps to make this not only doable, but also incredibly rewarding.

How can I build and keep confidence as a group leader?

Reading the Bible to gain understanding and deepening the relationship with God is my greatest source of confidence building. God is my greatest encourager. It has always been good to have a friend as an encourager near me. It is humbling to remember you are the one who is not only being led to do this, but you are the person the members of your group look up to and have decided to join. This is a great responsibility and privilege.

God wants you to be wildly successful. He trusts you with his children. Be excited about this and know that your confidence comes from the creator of the universe. He has confidence in you to do his work. How cool is that?

—KEVIN RAPP is a small-group ministry coach for Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky.

Job Description and Standards of Performance

Personal Ministry

Objective—To maintain a strong personal walk with the Lord by continuing in the spiritual disciplines that are necessary for spiritual fitness and growth in the grace and knowledge of God

Goals

- A. Spend time in the Bible each day, pursuing personal growth and maturity.
- B. Have a consistent prayer life that focuses on praise, thanksgiving, personal needs, the needs of believers, and the needs of the lost.
- C. Spend time in spiritual fellowship with others for the purposes of mutual love, encouragement, and growth.
- D. Be involved in fulfilling the Great Commission by reaching out to the lost, both in word and deed.

Small-Group Ministry

Objective—To lead and disciple a small group of believers toward maturity in Christ

Goals

- A. Plan a schedule of small group meetings for approximately six months at a time.
- B. Have small group meetings at least twice a month.
- C. Be responsible for making sure that each small group member knows where and when each meeting takes place.
- D. Develop a format for the small group that embraces the three vital experiences necessary for spiritual growth:
 - a. Dynamic learning experiences with the Word of God (Bible study)
 - b. Vital relational experiences with one another and with God (worship, sharing, prayer, meals, "one another" concepts, and so on)
 - c. Vital witnessing experiences with non-Christians (evangelistic gatherings, personal evangelism, community outreach, mission emphasis, and so on)
- E. Plan for social times (children included) that will promote friendships.
- F. Be available to teach, caution, and counsel one-on-one with group members when the need arises.
- G. Be available to advise or help meet the physical and material needs of group members when the need arises.
- H. Maintain personal communication and contact with each group member.
- I. Pray regularly for the needs of the small group both personally and corporately with other leaders.
- J. Be committed to attend ministry leadership meetings.
- K. Be accountable to your care pastor for your small-group ministry.
- L. Attempt to develop and disciple potential leaders within the group to help fulfill the future growth needs of the church.
- M. Delegate small group responsibilities to an apprentice leader and other committed people in the small group.

STANDARDS OF PERFORMANCE

RELATIONAL STATUS

Relationship with God

1. Spends regular time in prayer
2. Spends regular time in the Word

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3. Is a mature believer (Reflect on Galatians 5, 1 Timothy 3, and Titus 1)

Relationship to the Church

1. Is committed to the church and to the small group
2. Shows commitment financially
3. Is willing to be held accountable

Relationships with Others

1. Has a strong and loving relationship with family
2. Has a good reputation in the community and in the workplace
3. Is financially responsible
4. Shares faith

MINISTRY AND LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Administrative

1. Manages self and others
2. Leads effectively

Small Group Dynamics

1. Leads a good discussion about a Bible passage or other curriculum
2. Can facilitate relationships in a group

Personal Relational Skills

1. Is a good listener
2. Shares faith skillfully

KNOWLEDGE

Of the Word

1. Has a full understanding of the gospel message
2. Knows his or her way around the Bible
3. Understands and supports our church's doctrinal statement

Of the Church

1. Understands the ministry philosophy and strategies of our church
2. Understands the nature of the small group and its goals

Of the Community

1. Knows the demographics of our area
2. Has a feel for the issues facing our community

—Adapted from *Filling the Holes in Our Souls* by Paul Meier, Gene A. Getz, Richard A. Meier, and Allen R. Doran (Moody Press, 1992). Used with permission.

Start, Fill, and Keep

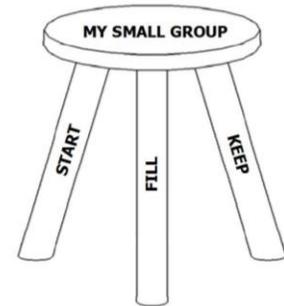
Three simple concepts that will make your group more successful

By Alan Danielson

Being a small-group leader can be overwhelming. Deciding when and where to meet; choosing, acquiring, and understanding curriculum; finding people for your group; connecting with new group members; communicating with the group—is your head spinning yet?

Don't panic. Launching your new small group well can be boiled down into three simple principles: Start, Fill, and Keep. Think about it like a three-legged stool. It can only stand if all three legs are of equal strength and equal length. In order for your small group stool to stand, all three legs (Start, Fill, and Keep) must likewise be equal strength and equal length.

Starting is about preparing for the launch of your group. Filling is about finding people for your group. And keeping is about creating a group where people want to remain for the long haul. If you don't focus enough attention on one or more of these three legs, your stool will ultimately come crashing down.



Start

Starting your group well is about just that: starting. The problem is that many people aren't ready to start their group because a solid start requires preparation. Passion is good, but preparation necessary.

So how do you prepare to start your group? First, pray. Pray that God will prepare your heart. Pray that he will empower you to lead. Pray that you will endure. Jim Egli and Dwight Marable recently released the results of a study they conducted with over 3,000 small-group leaders in 200 churches; they found that, statistically, the most important ingredient for successful small-group leaders is prayer. The following quote from their book *Small Groups Big Impact* is very telling:

We were surprised to discover that the amount of time spent preparing the Bible lesson shows no correlation whatsoever to small group growth. In other words, the leaders who spend five hours preparing the Bible lesson for their groups have groups that grow no faster than leaders who spend five minutes preparing the lesson! It does make a dramatic difference, however, how much time the leaders spends praying for his small group meeting.

Second, practice the "Marriott Principle." Have you ever had someone show up to your home unannounced? It's nice to have guests, but if you're not ready it's a bit unnerving. Marriott (and all good hotels) are always ready for guests. Make sure that you are ready to receive people when they come to your group. There's nothing more awkward for new group members than to show up and feel like they are an inconvenience. If your group meets in a home, make sure it looks like someone is home. Open the curtains/blinds and turn on a porch light. Make sure that there is enough seating. If you're going to serve snacks, have them ready early. New people will feel strange sitting in your living room while you are finishing up in the kitchen. If you're using video curriculum, place the TV where everyone will be able to see the screen.

Ultimately, just pay attention to details. Walk through your meeting location as if you were a first time guest. Ask yourself what makes the environment welcoming and what makes it a bit awkward. Enhance the welcoming elements and eliminate the awkward ones.

Fill

Sadly, some small-group leaders think, "If I build it, they will come." Nothing could be further from the truth. Filling out a form at church, meeting with a pastor or coach, and putting your group information on the church list is not a guarantee that people will come to your group. So how do you fill your group with people?

First of all, take ownership of filling the group. Don't leave it to the staff, your church website, a group catalog, or the small-groups booth in the lobby. No one will care more about filling your group than you, so own that responsibility. Secondly, adjust your expectations. Resist the idea that a successful group has 20 people. The

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biblical standard is two, three, or more (Matthew 18:20). If two or three are all you are able to recruit, thank God for the group he's given you!

Once you have owned the responsibility for filling your group and managed your expectations, you should take the following steps:

- *Pray.* Pray about who God wants in your group. Pray that God will guide you to the right people. Pray that he will give you the right opportunities to find and invite those people.
- *Make invite cards.* When you invite someone to the group, make sure you give them something tangible that tells them when and where your group will meet.
- *Look around for existing groups.* The next step is to ask yourself, "Who do I already 'group' with?" There are already people you regularly gather with in small groups. Your gaming group, a book club, other parents at little league games, your exercise partners, and your family are great examples of this. Ask the people you are already spending time with if they would like to be a part of your small group.
- *Look for "church neighbors."* Lastly, think about the people who sit near you at church. People are creatures of habit, so the people who sit near you at church probably sit in that general area every time they come. Capitalize on their habitual behavior. Tap them on the shoulder this weekend, hand them an invite to your group, and ask them to come.

Filling your group may take you outside your comfort zone, but that's a good thing. That stretching may be the next important step in your own spiritual development. Don't try to bypass God's work in your own life by just expecting people to come to your group.

Keep

Keeping people in your group is about creating "sticky" relationships. If the relational bond is strong, your group will be able to weather tough times and people will be less likely to jump ship. The first key in creating this bond is (surprise!) prayer. This not only refers to the leader's commitment to praying for the group, but to the group's commitments to praying for one another. Praying aloud for one another's needs fosters a true sense of caring. Sharing those needs outside the group time and praying for them regularly helps group members show genuine interest in one another. Praying for each other leads to group members taking action, becoming answers to prayer for one another.

The second important factor for keeping people is communication. Technology is a tremendous help with this. Copying the entire group via email is a simple, yet effective, communication tool. Starting a Facebook group and having everyone communicate via social media is also very effective. The bottom line is that people need and want to know what's going on. When people feel like outsiders, they are more likely to leave your group.

The third key for keeping people in your group is being on mission together. Groups who serve the lost together, stay together. This is what I call the "Band of Brothers Effect." Something interesting happens in wartime: those who are in combat together share a unique and unbreakable bond. Make no mistake—the members of your group are involved in a spiritual war, and nothing is more uniting for a group than to reach out to a dying world together. We see this clearly in the way that Jesus led his own small group. When he recruited his disciples he called them to "follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). He called the 12 to an active, on-mission-discipleship. Whatever you do, don't make the mistake of missing out on this key ingredient of keeping people in your group. Mission is absolutely necessary.

—ALAN DANIELSON is Senior Pastor of New Life Bible Church in Norman, Oklahoma. Alan is a popular conference speaker and consults regularly with ministries and leaders on topics relating to small groups and leadership. Learn more from Alan at www.3Threat.net.

The First Meeting

Tips to make your first group meeting succeed.

By Crossroads Church

Quality groups don't just happen. They are developed by leaders who carefully and thoughtfully seek the Lord for guidance. Please review this tip sheet two weeks prior to your first meeting.

Pray for God's blessing

Leading people is an awesome responsibility and a huge challenge. Pray daily for God to give you insight into his Word. Have a servant's heart as you lead your group. If the Lord has called you to lead the group, don't worry, he'll give you the skills to lead it.

Understand the context of your first meeting

People may be a little hesitant to being there. Don't be discouraged if they come and then don't continue. You are feeling each other out.

Prepare the meeting with an apprentice

Prayerfully recruit an apprentice who is willing to help lead the group. Partnering with an apprentice spreads the load of leadership responsibility. Identifying an apprentice also reinforces the multiplication value as God adds to the numbers. If you can't identify an apprentice prior to your start-up, God will provide one soon.

Prepare the environment

Make sure the meeting area is prepared before the arrival of group members. Leaders need to be at the door welcoming guests and assisting with name tags.

Review this checklist before the meeting:

- Name tags and large markers
- Remove all outside noise distractions such as cell phones, pagers, TV's and so on.
- Absolutely no pets in the meeting area
- Light refreshments (Group members should volunteer to bring refreshments to subsequent meetings.)
- Seating, lighting, comfortable temperature

Warm up the group with an icebreaker

Icebreakers help develop the group's relational component. Early on, they should be light and humorous. As the group deepens, you can move toward deeper sharing icebreakers. Don't rush through this, especially early in your group life. Relationships are what will keep people coming back.

Share the nuts and bolts of a small group

- Groups often meet two to four times each month
- Leaders host meeting in their homes—don't rotate too much—people may drop out because they don't know where the group is from week to week
- Meetings should last from 1.5 hours to 2 hours—begin and end the meetings on time
- Basic group agenda:
 - _30 minutes of conversation, icebreakers, refreshments
 - _30 to 40 minutes for group study discussion
 - _20 minutes for sharing of prayer requests and group prayer. (People may be quite hesitant to pray out loud. Help reduce the fear and intimidation by spending a week sometime in the first couple of months focusing on the concept and practice of prayer. Don't randomly call on someone to pray—check with him or her beforehand to make sure they're comfortable praying in a group.)
- Homework in the study discussion is optional. It is usually perceived as a positive thing, but becomes a burden if it is too time-consuming or intense.

Allow time for questions

Clearly state the details of the group. If members sense that you are unclear about the direction of the group, they may back off. Don't be fuzzy about the details. Be as specific as you can when answering questions.

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Follow up the first meeting and invite everyone to the next one

Pursue your group members after the first meeting. Often people need personal communication from the leader to realize that they are wanted and valued. Your follow-up phone call is a high touch relational message. It is incredibly vital to the growth and life of your group.

Build a scriptural foundation

At some point in your first meeting, you may want to place the role and importance of groups in a biblical framework:

- Exodus 18:19–27—Jethro gives Moses advice on how to care for the nation of Israel. Notice that the plan is to divide people into groups, each with a leader.
- Acts 2:42–47—This passage represents a description of the early church and its values. Explore what that first church did and the impact of their life together. How could this group follow this model?
- Acts 5:42—The early church had two places to meet and gather: temple courts, and houses. That church understood the value and role of both as they sought to grow in their faith—supporting each other, learning from each other, simply living life together. Group community is the relational heart of Christianity.

Aim high

Cast a vision and set goals for the group. Here are several examples:

- To grow a relationally close group that uses the Bible as a guide for life
- To discover and deepen friendships that apply biblical values to our lives
- To learn to pray for and with each other
- To go the extra mile in caring for each other
- To be the church of Jesus Christ in its smallest form

—Adapted with permission from the small-groups training manual of Crossroads Church in Loveland, Colorado.

Take Your Group Deeper

Five practices that take small groups beyond polite “sharing.”

By John Ortberg

In community we discover who we really are and how much transformation we require. This is why I am irrevocably committed to small groups. Through them we can accomplish our God-entrusted work to transform human beings. However, experience tells us that simply meeting with a group does not automatically result in spiritual growth.

Here are five essential practices that must occur to facilitate the transforming work of Christ in us. The presence of these things is what makes the difference between all-too-typical small groups and life-transforming communities of spiritual formation.

Confession: Remove the Masks

We all wear masks. We hide from each other. It's part of our fallenness. That is why one of the most formative practices in a small group is confession. Confession is the appropriate disclosure of my brokenness, temptations, sin, and victories for the purpose of healing, forgiveness, and spiritual growth. Without confession we are a community hiding from the truth.

We need to avoid “confession killers” in our groups. These include the inappropriate use of humor. Some people are embarrassed by deep honesty, so they may mock the person confessing or diffuse the atmosphere with a joke. It sends a signal that this is not a safe place to confess, and the masks go back on.

Judgmental statements also shut down confession. I recall a small group where a man admitted his struggle with lust. That was a risk, and then someone else said, “I can't relate to that struggle at all.” I wanted to say to that guy, *Why would you say that?* His statement shut down an opportunity for new openness in the group.

Application: Groups as Schools of Life

What we desperately need are small groups to be schools of life. Imagine someone has a problem with anger—a small-group leader should ask them: “What kinds of situations tend to get you angry, and how do you respond?” Give them some alternatives to sinful patterns of anger. Roleplay these situations in the small group. Then next week ask, “How did it go?” If they got it right, celebrate it. If they didn't, investigate what happened, and encourage them to do it differently next time.

If this kind of application doesn't happen in small groups, it may not happen anywhere, and people will not be transformed.

Accountability: Stand on the Scale

A scale is a tool of accountability. Small groups are the place for people to get on the scale and reveal how intentional they have been in their pursuit of transformation into the image of Christ.

We need to make key decisions on our journey of transformation: what are my commitments about prayer, about Scripture, about money, about evangelism, about servanthood, about truth? Keeping these commitments requires a community of accountability to serve as a scale revealing how we're achieving our goals or missing them.

Guidance: Decision-Making in Groups

In every church there are people facing decisions about vocations, ministry involvement, finances, relocation, and relationships. How sad if they make these decisions without the benefit of community. Their decisions may be impulsive, emotional, based on too little information. The result is too many broken lives.

Small groups should be places where people gather to hear God through prayer and listening. Every small-group meeting should include the question, “Is anybody facing a significant decision this week?” And in community the group should seek the Spirit's voice for the person facing the decision.

Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., practices this discipline by what they term “sounding the call.” When someone has a significant decision to make, the community enters a time of prayer and listening to God.

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They speak openly with each other about their sense of what God is saying. They take seriously the leading of the Spirit while avoiding any sense of superiority or control.

Encouragement: Embrace Each Other

A hug is a gesture of love and encouragement. An embrace represents what we all need from a community of transformation. We need to know that someone is committed to us and loves us. That cannot happen when we are alone, and it cannot happen in a large gathering. It's going to happen through small communities.

Today small groups have the privilege of loving and accepting human beings for whom Christ gave his life. In these groups we can supply the love, encouragement, and embrace people need to continue their journey of transformation.

That kind of love is what we ultimately need in small groups to transform lives. We can make small groups so complex and difficult, we can build the perfect small-group strategy, but if we do not have the love of Christ present, we are not really engaged in transforming people into his likeness.

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Finding the Right Bible Studies

How to choose helpful material for your small group

By Rachel Gilmore

Here is a question that strikes fear into the heart of many small-group leaders: what are we going to study next? Like the proverbial fork in the road, choosing new material can be a deceptively simple decision filled with potentially disastrous consequences. Some studies are too hard, some are too easy, some are too homework-driven, and some are too unrelated to life—all in all, there's nothing worse than getting your group members all moving in the same direction only to have people immediately get lost or wander off track.

So how do you choose which way to go?

Know Your Destination

In order to find the best material for your group, you first need to know what your group's study goal is. Consider whether or not your group wants to:

- Begin building its biblical knowledge (meaning, learning the Bible from scratch).
- Use existing biblical knowledge to dig deeper into a particular book of the Bible.
- Focus the study time around issues that connect faith with real life—things like Christian dating, marriage, parenting, developing spiritual friendships, finding a personal mission field, keeping true to Christian values in the workplace, and so on.
- Devote study time to a particular area of spiritual formation: prayer life, becoming more compassionate, resolving conflict peacefully, living patiently according to God's time, and so on.
- Spend most of your time together in hands-on service projects.
- Support and encourage one another emotionally and spiritually, building up friendships and faith.

Just as God created us to be individuals, all small groups are also fearfully and wonderfully made. What works for one group may not work for another, so don't be discouraged and don't waste your time comparing yourself to others. When your group formed, hopefully you talked about your study goals. (If not, now's the perfect time.) However, the longer a group has been together, losing and gaining members, it's possible that these goals have changed or become assumed and unspoken.

The next time you approach a fork in the study road, make time during your meeting to talk openly about group goals. Ask the questions above. Let people share their thoughts and opinions. Pray for God's wisdom and discernment. Then come to a consensus—affirm your group goal and prepare to move in that direction with your next curriculum choice.

Note: don't be offended if some members choose to leave the group and take a different path at this time. God's Word lights our way, and we need people to be traveling different paths in this world in order to make disciples of all nations. Bless those departing and continue on, secure in the knowledge that you have prayerfully asked for God's guidance and are moving forward according to the Spirit's leading.

Know Your Group

Once you know your destination, make sure you know the individuals travelling with you. Having a sense of your members' background and current lifestyles (and your own) will help you choose. So ask yourself:

- Have any of these people ever done a group study before, or is this a brand new experience for most?
- Do I have any non-believers or seekers in this group?
- Do our members attend worship regularly at our church? Another church? Not at all?
- How willing and/or able are the participants to do homework in between meetings?
- Do the people in my group like to talk, or do they typically keep their thoughts to themselves?
- Can our members discuss different perspectives/opinions calmly, rationally, and respectfully?
- Does my group see me more as teacher/instructor (having more knowledge) or facilitator (I'm the tour guide in this learning journey)?
- How much time do I personally have for study and preparation?
- How comfortable is our group with incorporating technology into our study time—watch a DVD, have follow up conversations on Facebook, use Twitter to share insights instantly during the study?
- Do any of our members have any special learning/physical needs that would impact learning/group discussions?

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If your group is made up mainly of people who have limited group study experience, or if you have non-believers or seekers attending, you will likely need to choose a low key, user-friendly study that is straightforward, incorporates personal stories, makes practical connections between Scripture and real life, and does not assume deep Bible knowledge. On the other hand, if you have a group of mature Christians who can handle Spirit-led debate, you can don the facilitator hat and lead the group through an in-depth analysis of Job or James, or maybe a character-building study on how to faithfully raise your children to be in the world but not of it.

Other group dynamics to consider are the age, gender, cultural/ethnic background, and financial situation of participants. These factors may affect things like your group's ability or willingness to utilize technology or discuss certain topics. Don't assume that everyone likes watching DVDs, is comfortable reading out loud, has access to a computer, is comfortable using a computer, or shares the same political opinions. Take time to get to know your members and find your shared values and interests. The more you know, the clearer the curriculum path will become.

Know Your Options

Now that you've identified your destination and the needs of the people traveling with you, it's time to find the best vehicle for getting there. Equipped with the answers from the questions above, consider these final qualifiers before perusing the local Christian bookstore or online retailer:

- Would my group do better with a study that covered Bible basics (key people/events/timeline), a particular book of the Bible, a relevant life experience theme, a spiritual formation topic, or something else?
- Would my group do better with a DVD-based or book-based study?
 - If DVD-based, would they prefer to watch an expert teacher/speaker present a lesson, or watch a "real life" vignette to illustrate the lesson's point?
 - If book-based, would my group prefer a fill-in-the blank workbook or open-ended reflection questions that correspond to life stories or Bible passages?
- Can I choose a study that requires homework in order to be prepared for the next lesson?
- How long will our group meet? (Consider both time dedicated for study during the meeting and total number of weeks/months you'll be together.)
- Do I need to stay within my denomination or use church-approved authors/publishers?

Note: It's always good to preview a new study before introducing it to your group. If researching online, make a short list of titles to take to your local Christian bookstore (or your church's small-group library). Plan to spend some time, maybe with another group member or two, looking through your top three to five choices. Or, if you're financially able, order a copy of your top three choices online and preview them at home. Just be sure to check the return policy on open/used products before ordering!

Psalm 119 reminds us that it is only through God's Word that we can find our way in this world. "I'm single-minded in pursuit of you; don't let me miss the road signs you've posted," the psalmist begs God (Psalm 119:10, MSG). As you approach the next fork in the road, be prepared to slow down, read the road signs, and plan carefully the way your group should go.

—RACHEL GILMORE is author of [The Complete Leader's Guide to Christian Retreats and Church Programs and Celebrations for All Generations](#).

Discussion

1. How have you selected study material in the past?
2. Did the material meet the needs of the group? If not, why do you think it didn't?
3. What questions from the article will help you better focus the direction of your next study?

Small Group Problem Solving

How to respond when people act up, act out, and ask tough questions.

By Bay Area Fellowship

Any time you bring together a group of people with different backgrounds, histories, and personalities, conflict and problems are almost inevitable. As a leader, you will need to deal with these issues both before and after they occur. This training is based on actual situations and personality types observed in small-group ministry.

Dealing with Criticism

The proper way to deal with criticism, backstabbing, or gossip, is clearly spelled out in Matthew 18:15–17. Let's look at how this Scripture can be used to deal with a common problem: criticism of the church and its leaders. As leader, you must deal with this problem before it gets out of hand. Use these talking points:

- Acknowledge the person's problem or conflict with the church. However, as the group leader, express your total support of the vision and pastors of our church. Encourage the person to share their concerns with church leadership.
- If an individual has a problem with a specific leader, you should be prepared to invoke Matthew 18:15–17 by asking the question, "Have you talked to him or her about this issue? Matthew 18 says you are to talk to them first before I can even discuss it with you."
- If the person has followed Matthew 18 and gone directly to the person but nothing was resolved, then you're to take two or three others with you for the next conversation. However, even at this point this is still not now or ever an open discussion for the group meeting.
- The same procedure applies when the criticism is of other people in the church or in the group.

Types of Disruptive Behavior

Disruptive people are those who, for a variety of reasons, want to make themselves the center of attention. These types can include:

- **The person who is very lonely or completely alone.** These people are usually great people. The problem is that the group is often the only thing they have in their lives, so they use it to talk about how unhappy they are. You may have to take this person aside and help them understand the impact they are having on the group. This can be a great time of personal and spiritual growth for this person. The group must stay positive and full of hope so lives can be changed.
- **The people who just like to hear themselves speak.** These people will overwhelm anyone who wants to talk and always have to top every story with one of their own. If you're not careful this person will be the only one talking every single week. People will grow weary of this and leave.
- **The person who shows no respect for the rest of the group.** This is the person who shows up late every week and disrupts the proceedings. This is selfish behavior and must be addressed. This is not a person whose schedule makes them late each week and comes in quietly and joins the group. Nor is this someone who is regularly on time but occasionally has disruptions come up.
- **The parents that allows their kids to run wild through the group.** Each group must have some sort of childcare arrangement. Even with childcare, make sure parents know to help their children when needed in a way that allows the group to continue.
- **The person who will stay around for hours after everyone else leaves.** Have a starting and ending time. Hold your ground and tell everyone from day one that you need their cooperation.

God loves people and so should we. However, if these issues are not addressed and solved then the selfish or even legitimate needs of one person will destroy the needs of the rest of the group.

How to Confront Disruptive Behavior

These issues must be confronted for the benefit of the entire group. Most people don't want a confrontation so when issues like this aren't dealt with, they just leave and look for another group. Keep these points in mind:

- How a message is delivered sometimes can be more important than the content. A message delivered in love can help someone change. A message delivered in judgment will always be rejected.
- Confronting someone on an issue that is hurting your group is not easy. However, for the health of the group, and to grow your leadership, you must do it.
- People cannot change until they recognize that they need to.

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- People will not change unless they want to. If the message is valid and delivered in love then how they respond to it is not your responsibility.
- Successful groups are those that work together as a team. They support each other, love each other and, many times, have to confront each other.

Answering Tough Questions

One of the greatest fears any new small-group leader has is being asked tough questions that they don't know the answers to. When that happens, remember:

- No one has all the answers.
- Saying, "I don't know" is okay. But follow with, "I'll do my best to find that out for next week." You will find that your people will respect you for that honesty.
- Don't give an answer if you don't know the answer, especially when it comes to the Bible.
- Often leaders make honest mistakes and give a wrong answer. Be humble and admit you made a mistake. People will respect your humility and honesty.
- When you get a tough question and don't know the answer, research it yourself and see if you can find the answer. This process will grow you as a leader. If you are struggling, consult your coach or pastor.
- When you come up with the answer make sure you discuss it in the group so everyone can grow from the exercise. Talk about the process of finding the answer.

Group Conflict

Your group should look and feel like a community. Communities have all kinds of people from different backgrounds and personalities. When you bring a group like this together, you will eventually have some relational conflict. Here are ways to keep these tough issues from harming the group:

- **Disagreements about biblical issues.** Try to understand where someone comes from and why they feel the way they do about the issue. This may be one of those times when you have to say, "Let's get back to this next week" so you can be better prepared to address what the Bible says about the issue. Remember that if biblical scholars disagree on many issues, then people in your group will disagree from time to time as well. Trying to prove who is right is a waste of the group's time. In these situations, change the focus to what we all agree on: the basic message of salvation through Jesus.
- **Disagreements about what the group should be.** Remember that you are called to lead this group. For you to be happy leading the group it must reflect who you are. If someone doesn't like the group as it is, then lovingly help them find a group that fits them better.
- **Dealing with tough family problems and issues.** Deal with these issues with love and care but be careful not to try to become a family counselor. Difficult issues usually require professional help. The group does not exist to counsel people through tough issues, it exists to love and support them while they're getting the professional help they need.
- **Dealing with relational issues in the group.** Conflict in the group must be resolved in the group. Let tempers settle down, talk about it before the next group, then come back and discuss it openly in the next meeting. There are times when the conflict isn't resolved and people have to agree to disagree on the issue while remaining friends. Sometimes it's better to find resolution outside the group, then come to the group and talk about the resolution.

As leaders, the best thing you can do is to establish healthy boundaries from the beginning. Make sure people do not come with an attitude of, "what can the group do for me." Instead, instill the principle that people are to come looking for what they can give to the group.

—Adapted from the training manual of Bay Area Fellowship Church in Corpus Christi, Texas. Used with permission.

The Marks of Leadership Success

Monitor the health of your group by using this assessment tool.

By United Methodist Church of the Resurrection

As your group begins to meet regularly, take time to use this assessment tool to periodically monitor its status. Give the grades yourself, and ask group members to participate as well. Keep your prior assessments and compare to see where the group has grown or to identify areas of challenge. For each category, rate the group on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest).

Shared Responsibilities

As the leader, you serve as the point person for the group, but you should not be expected to meet every need of the group alone. A healthy small group is a community of individuals who share responsibilities for accomplishing the tasks and meeting the needs of the group, with each person serving according to his or her spiritual gifts and abilities. Ensure that no group member receives an unfair share of the duties.

- | | | |
|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hosting the group at home | <input type="checkbox"/> Intercessory prayer | <input type="checkbox"/> Maintaining group roster |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Providing refreshments | <input type="checkbox"/> Planning social activities | <input type="checkbox"/> Writing encouraging notes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Leading discussions | <input type="checkbox"/> Organizing service activities | <input type="checkbox"/> Visiting members in hospital |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Leading group prayer | <input type="checkbox"/> E-mailing updates/ reminders | <input type="checkbox"/> Preparing meals for ill members |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tracking prayer requests | <input type="checkbox"/> Following up with absentees | |

Offering Hospitality

In a healthy small group, members are considerate of one another's time, property, needs, and feelings. They go out of their way to make sure that other members are comfortable, included, and respected.

- | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> New members are welcomed warmly and included in all conversations. | <input type="checkbox"/> Members are committed to attending every session. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Group members are seated in a circle to encourage conversation and fellowship. | <input type="checkbox"/> Group members respect each other's time by arriving and departing on time. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lighting and temperature of the gathering place are comfortable for those in attendance. | <input type="checkbox"/> Group members communicate needs openly (allergies to pets, special diets, and so on) and they are willingly accommodated. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> At the end of the session, all members help restore order to the home of the host. | <input type="checkbox"/> Distractions (noise, phone, pets) are kept to a minimum, or removed if appropriate. |

Connecting Each Session

The small group experience is not meant to be one-dimensional. Healthy small groups are balanced and multi-faceted. They enjoy both study and fellowship; all members respect and learn from each other.

- | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> An appropriate amount of time is spent socializing, discussing lesson, and sharing joys and concerns. | <input type="checkbox"/> Group members feel safe sharing their thoughts and feelings in a transparent manner. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> All members participate in group discussions. No single member dominates the discussion. | <input type="checkbox"/> Discussions are focused on the topic of the lesson, but flexible when a need arises. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Respect is given to each member's opinions. | <input type="checkbox"/> Sessions begin and end on time. |

Maturing Spiritually

One of the primary aims of small groups is to promote Christian maturity within the context of authentic community. The goal is not simply to amass information, but to achieve life *transformation* as small group members grow toward spiritual maturity.

- | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Group members practice spiritual disciplines to develop their relationship with God. | <input type="checkbox"/> Group members pray regularly for the joys and concerns that are shared each week. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Group members attend church regularly, and | <input type="checkbox"/> The group members serve individually and together |

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give in proportion to their income.

inside and outside the church.

Growing Relationally

The Christian faith is not meant to be lived in isolation, but in community. Healthy small groups achieve true community as they build relationships with each other inside and outside of the group setting.

___ Members feel increasingly comfortable sharing their real needs for prayer and support.

___ The group enjoys social activities together from time to time.

___ Members lovingly hold each other accountable for growing spiritually.

___ Members actively seek opportunities to assist other members of the group as needs arise.

___ Group members offer ongoing encouragement to one another to serve in harmony with their spiritual gifts and abilities.

—Adapted from group training materials of United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, Leawood, Kansas. Used with permission.

Leading a Missional Small Group

How to move beyond "normal" and start making a difference

By M. Scott Boren

Some groups feel a call to be more than a gathering of people who meet for Bible study and prayer. They want to go deeper with one another and move out to make a difference in the world around them. This urge for more is commonly referred to as a call to *mission*.

Such a call might start out with a vision to reach the unchurched for Jesus, or maybe to do some kind of ministry projects for the under-resourced. The focus lies on doing something. But lasting impact upon our world occurs when we move beyond *doing* and consider how we are *being*. While doing something mission is good, being "missional" is transforming.

A missional small group is about being something different that makes a difference in the world—not just doing outreach or externally-focused activities for those not in the church. Look at the chart below to get a better picture of the centrality of being over doing:

	Being	Doing
Focus of the mission	Group life	Outreach activities
Source of the mission	Overflow	Effort
Goal of the mission	To be a blessing	To add people to the group
Power of the mission	Love	Action
Key trait of the mission	Conversations	Presentations

Of course being missional will include "doing" things, but if we start with doing, the being often gets overlooked. Doing outreach will not make us missional. But when we examine how we are being a group, it will lead to do love people who need Jesus. Being missional is about developing a set of rhythms of love that stand in contrast to the world around us so that the love of God might flow through the community. This life of mission empowers the group for conversations instead of going out with presentations and actions.

So how does a leader invite people into these different rhythms? Normal group leadership will result in normal groups. The opposite of normal leadership is not extraordinary leadership—you need not be an exceptional leader to be a missional leader. You just need to start by taking into account a few basic leadership rhythms or patterns. These are leadership practices that might feel foreign at first, but when they become habits, they result in groups that begin to stand against the norm.

Learn the Basics of Group Dynamics

Just because a missional group moves beyond the normal group, there is no need to throw out the sound training that decades of experience has taught us regarding healthy small-group dynamics. Find a good book or training seminar on leading small groups and learn the basics. Develop skills in facilitating conversations, leading people to share in a safe environment, and how to organize a group meeting.

You may start out by following the printed curriculum in a litigious way, but it is important to develop skills in how to follow the leading of the Spirit in a group conversation so that you move beyond answering Bible study questions and deal with what God is saying in the midst of the group.

Challenge the Status Quo of "Normal" Group Life

Normal groups often provide enough community to lull us into thinking that normal is enough. And in most cases normal is better than nothing. However, if you want to change what people expect from the group, someone must present a compelling alternative. Change requires a sense of urgency, a feeling of dissatisfaction with current reality. If that does not occur, then normal will rule the day.

Lead as a Team

Instead of viewing group leadership as a solo job, think teams of two or three. Throughout the Bible, ministry happens in twos and threes. The myth of the superstar solo leader who magically pulls the group into a mystical missional experience is rarely fulfilled. There might be one or two who can carry that weight, but for the most part that is a burden that is not worth carrying.

To get started with this, pray that God will show you who might be called to participate on the team. Start connecting with some potential people over meals—without mentioning leadership possibilities. Begin to

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listen to what God is doing in them and then invite them to contribute to the group in greater ways. After they do that for a few weeks, seek the Lord's leading about when to invite them to lead as a part of a team.

Seek the Support of a Coach or Experienced Leader

To be more than a normal community, you will need the support and direction—or at least the prayer support—of someone outside the group. This person can provide insight as an outsider that we often cannot see when we are caught up in all the relationships of the group.

Practice Missional Rhythms as a Group

By "missional rhythms" I am basically talking about spiritual disciplines applied to community life. These are the unseen practices that a group does together that give it the strength to make a difference in the world.

I break these rhythms into three categories.

- *Missional Communion—the Practices of the Presence.* Groups that make a difference for God ground their life in the reality of God's presence. It is God's mission and God's presence in and through a group that makes it missional. The apostle Peter exhorted the early church to, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the *hope* that you have" (1 Peter 3:15). If groups don't cultivate practices of God's presence, then they will not live in a way that gives evidence of this hope. It is God's missional life in us that will make a difference.
- *Missional Relating—the Practices of Agape.* I see lots of groups that have no business trying to be missional. They don't know how to love each other, so how could we expect them to love their neighbors? Jesus told the disciples, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).

Missional life is a direct result of our ability to practice love for one another. Do you as a group practice listening to one another, working through conflict, and sharing meals with each other? This will require the group to become a bit more important than what we see in groups that just focus on a regular meeting. But such are the things that make a difference.

- *Missional Engagement—the Practices of Connecting in the Neighborhood.* I know that the word "engagement" is a bit different, but I don't want to use words like *evangelism* or *outreach*. Those words have become so loaded with lots of different experiences that I have found them distracting.

Missional engagement is about connecting with neighbors, friends, co-workers, or family members in a way that allows them to see the love of God in the group. This is about the practices of having meaningful conversations, being present with people around us, making time for our neighbors, listening to what's going on in their lives, and hospitality. Being missional means demonstrating a different way of life so that people can see how we live and how God lives through us.

Work with Two or Three Like-Minded Groups

In many cases, being missional is better demonstrated to communities when like-minded groups work together toward engaging a specific group of people or neighborhood. When 25–40 people offer their gifts to a neighborhood as they listen to the needs and share in conversations with people, the gift diversity can generate more impact and take the pressure off an individual small group.

Listen to the Spirit's Leading

Missional small groups come in all kinds of forms. As a group practices the rhythms of missional life, you will find that the community will naturally discover creative ways that match the needs of a context. Some might become house churches made up of smaller groups. Others might network with other small groups and celebrate together in a community. Some groups might meet at odd times because that is the need of the community. The forms will vary just as people do. Listen to the Spirit and play those rhythms.

Missional small groups are not missional for the sake of the church or to grow the group. They are not missional because it is a good thing to minister to the poor or to take up a cause. Nor are they missional to "get people saved" or get people out of desperate situations. Missional community is about being love, and usually this comes in small acts that might not seem significant. But when we are loving over time, the small things add together to make a huge difference.

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—M. SCOTT BOREN is author of *Missional Small Groups* (Baker, 2010) and a pastor at Woodlands Hills Church in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Discuss:

1. In your own words, can you sum up the difference between "being" a missional group and "doing" activities that seem missional?
2. Does your group's leadership structure seem like a good fit for a missional focus?
3. What steps can you take to help your group connect with one or two others with a similar focus?

Further Exploration

Helpful resources for small-group leaders.

Building Church Leaders: Leadership training resources from Christianity Today.

🖥️ www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com

- "Small Groups" Assessment Pack
- "Healthy Small Groups" Training Theme and PowerPoint
- "Growing Small Groups" Training Theme and PowerPoint
- "Shepherding Others" Training Theme and PowerPoint

BuildingSmallGroups.com: Training and insight on all aspects of small-group ministry from Christianity Today. www.christianitytoday.com/smallgroups/

Building a Church of Small Groups by *Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson*. The why and how-to of becoming a church with small groups at its organizational core. Includes information on training group leaders. (Zondervan, 2001; ISBN 978-0310267102)

Experiencing Community by *Thom Corrigan*. Tools to build authentic community in small groups by moving beyond meetings to building loving, supportive and encouraging relationships. (NavPress, 1996; ISBN 978-0891099383)

How to Lead Small Groups by *Neal F. McBride*. McBride cuts out the theory to provide practical information and step-by-step guidance. Useful in several types and stages of small-group ministry. (NavPress, 1990; ISBN 978-0891093039)

Seeker Small Groups by *Garry Poole*. Focuses on drawing seekers into a deeper relationship with God in a small group setting. (Zondervan, 2003; ISBN 978-0310242338)

Serendipity Encyclopedia, *Lyman Coleman, editor*. Creative ideas for small groups. (Serendipity House, 1997; ISBN 978-1574940497)

Small Group Fitness Kit by *Thom Corrigan*. Discusses the attitudes necessary to be an effective small-group leader, such as flexibility, ability to manage chaos, and willingness to make mistakes, and offers solutions to the ten most common problems that small groups encounter. (NavPress, 1996; ISBN 978-1576833261)

Small Group Qs by *Laurie Polich*. Features 600 questions designed to deepen community and explore Scripture. (Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2002; ISBN 978-0310240235)