

Practical Ministry Skills:

Become a Church of Groups

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How to Use This Resource

Take a quick peek here to maximize the content in this training download.

In 2001, *Building a Church of Small Groups* was released, and we learned the story of Willow Creek transitioning from a church *with* groups to a church *of* groups. In other words, they went from a church with many ministries—which *included* small groups—to a church centered on small groups as *the* way of doing life and ministry.

Nearly 10 years later, the terms have stuck, and countless churches have embarked on the journey of becoming a church *of* groups. Rather than offer a buffet of ministries for church members to choose from, these churches are clear upfront: small groups are the core of our ministry and the way we develop disciples. If your church is ready to transition to a more focused, holistic approach to small-group ministry, this Training Tool will serve as an excellent resource.

Steps to Become a Church of Groups

The articles in this section will show you the steps to successfully become a church of groups. Learn the initial steps to change the culture of your church in "Culture Shift" on page 7, and discover the 8 steps to create a small-group structure that fits your context in "Establish a Small-Group Structure" on page 13.

Help Along the Way

Beyond learning the steps necessary to transition, you'll need help along the way as you implement key steps. M. Scott Boren explains the importance of having an accurate picture of your starting point in "Start Where You Are" on page 16, and Bill Search gives tips for forming a vision that matches your context on page 19. Then Allen White challenges you to think outside the one-model approach, and Ben Reed shares practical tips for keeping group leaders in the loop during (and after!) your transition.

—AMY JACKSON is Managing Editor of SmallGroups.com.

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Betting the Farm on Small Groups

The reason for becoming a church of groups is not that it's easier—it's more effective.

By Jay Firebaugh

As a pastor, I've helped transition a church to a "church of groups"—a cell church—and then I served as the senior pastor of a church that has been a cell church almost from its inception. As a result, pastors who are either transitioning their churches or who are exploring the idea often contact me. The one thing I tell people most often is that cells or small groups cannot be just one of many options offered to your people. You simply can't line up small groups alongside other ministries and allow your people to choose which ministry they'll be part of to grow and mature in their walk with Christ.

Small groups are incredibly labor intensive, and if you're going to put in the work, you can't allow other ministries to sabotage your small-group ministry. If you're going to do cells right, you need to know how much time, leadership, and energy they require. Healthy small groups don't run on their own. This is where pastors often err.

Cells are a New Testament approach to leading the church in such a way that believers are genuinely involved in one another's lives. This involvement results in spiritual growth, discipleship, evangelism, and more. Though the approach is an ancient one, don't be fooled into thinking it's easy.

The reason for becoming a church of small groups is not that it is easier, but because it will be more effective. In truth it is *not* easier. After all, in small groups, we equip others to do ministry rather than doing it all. Just think of all the times you've done things on your own because you knew it was easier to do yourself than to explain and train someone else to do it!

When I was leading the church through the transition to become a cell church, we often said we were "betting the farm on cells." By this, we meant that we knew small groups had to be *the way*—not *one of the ways*—we ministered. In transitioning, we were constantly asking, *How can we do this through a small group rather than through another ministry?* The focus on simplifying our ministry efforts created more time, leadership, and energy throughout our church.

We used to have a hospital visitation program. In the transition, we ended it and started having people in our groups visit fellow group members in the hospital. We also had a greeter ministry. We phased it out and created a rotating schedule that assigned different cells to serve in this role. For other special tasks around the church, like communion, a large group of deacons used to be in charge. In our transition, we reduced this group to a core of deacons who could equip groups to serve in these roles and ensure that all the tasks were taken care of by groups. And every time we dispersed a ministry, we would challenge our people to get tied into a cell because that's how we'd be handling those ministry aspects now.

If a church is truly going to make small groups work in the real world, it will have to choose better over good, and most effective over "the ways we've always done it." Not everybody is ready or able to make the shift, but as somebody who has done so, I can tell you there is no better way. The gain is worth the pain. The result is seeing your people genuinely part of the ministry rather than simply watching it. It's seeing people ministered to, cared for, and growing in ways you only hoped for. It's seeing evangelism happen because everyone gets involved in the process of loving people into openness to Jesus. As someone who has been there, I could never go back!

—JAY FIREBAUGH is the Director of Small Groups at New Life Church in Gahanna, Ohio; copyright 2003 by Christianity Today.

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Transitioning to a Church of Groups

How one church allowed a defining moment to propel them forward

By Mark Ingmire

From the church's beginning in 1964, Savannah Christian Church (SCC) was a church with small groups. There was never a doubt that we would have small groups—we've always valued Christian community and studying the Bible. We used Sunday school and weekday Bible studies for the first 35 years, and the church grew to around 500.

In the mid-90's, however, not everything for SCC was peaceful. A strong division formed over worship styles which resulted in half of the leadership walking out of a congregational meeting never to return. This left the remaining leadership wondering if this defining moment would begin a downward spiral for SCC. Fortunately, it resulted in increasing the impact of SCC in Savannah and the region.

The leadership prayed and fasted for weeks, seeking God's plan for the church, and God blessed SCC with exponential growth. The church doubled in size in three years. And then it happened again. The church couldn't hire staff quickly enough. Plus, we ran out of meeting space. It was clear that a new structure and strategy had to be implemented to meet the needs of the growing church. We needed a strategy that could meet needs and continue to make disciples in the midst of rapid growth. The leadership decided the only way to accomplish this was to move from being a congregation *with* small groups to a church *of* small groups. In small groups, everyone could be connected and disciplined, and we could start new groups easily as they were needed.

Leadership Unity

In order to make this huge shift, all of the leadership had to be on board. And it was clear that we were when we made our first big decision: groups would have to meet off-site to leave the church open for other ministries, including children's events.

We also made the decision to have small groups in our youth and children's ministries, to reflect the adult ministries. Plus, we made the decision that all leaders would have to intentionally recruit and train volunteer leaders so we'd never be short. These wide-sweeping decisions wouldn't have been possible if we weren't unified.

Shared Ownership

To build a culture of small groups in the church, the leadership decided that every ministry needed to own the value of small groups. Ownership happened naturally because many people participated in the process. They were elders, pastors, and ministry leaders who were stakeholders in the new vision. All of the church's ministries, from nursery to senior adult, didn't just say they valued small groups. Instead, small groups were foundational to every ministry.

This included all forms of our children's ministry. The nursery was no longer a place where parents simply dropped off their children. We purchased specialty tables with chairs built into them so that they could meet in a semicircle and share songs and stories appropriate for the age group. The elementary ministry still had a large group time with singing and a short lesson, but more than half of the time was spent divided into grade-specific small groups. These small groups were discussion-based to help students process and apply what they learned from the lesson. The middle and high school ministries added small groups in church member's homes during the week. I've seen the amazing fruit in my own kids' lives from these small-group experiences.

Senior Pastor Support

A church can have small groups without the support of the senior pastor, but to truly become a church of groups, the senior pastor must fully support the ministry. Our senior pastor owned his role as primary vision caster, and he set an example for the congregation by being in a small group. He continues to raise the value of small groups through stories of life-change in his weekend messages. He shares stories of life-change he hears from the staff as well as what he experiences in his own small group.

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Weekly Practices

Besides raising the value of groups in the weekend messages, we also made inviting people to join small groups a weekly practice. The last announcement each week sounds something like this, "If you are not in a small group, get in a group. You're missing the best part of Savannah Christian Church. Visit the small group table in the lobby."

While other ministries have to request table space from week to week, the small-group ministry has a permanent spot in the lobby. Every weekend, people can stop by to pick up a group list, sign up for a group, and ask questions.

Small-Group Champion

While our senior pastor is the primary vision caster for small groups, his job is not to build the small-group ministry at the church. Initially, we gave one of our adult ministry pastors the responsibility of keeping small groups in front of the church and building the small-group ministry. As a result, the number of small groups grew to more than 40 groups.

Within two years, the church hired a new staff member whose sole responsibility was to champion small groups and keep the momentum in transitioning to a church of small groups. We eventually hired a part-time staff member to focus on connecting people to small groups. Today the number of adult small groups has grown to over 300, and we have three full-time pastors serving the group leaders.

The Importance of Purpose

From the beginning of our church, the purpose of small groups has been to grow disciples. Pastoral care and Bible study are secondary to the goal of making disciples. While it was easy to keep this clear early on, it increasingly became more difficult as the number of adult small groups grew.

This problem became incredibly clear to us when we asked our group leaders to share with us the purpose of small groups. A veteran leader and a new leader gave very different answers. We realized we needed to continue sharing the purpose of small groups in a clear way so that everyone at our church could give the same answer. We have to share that purpose repeatedly so that it sticks.

Keep Small Groups on Track

Making SCC a church of groups was a process that the leaders knew would take years. We made the commitment not to say, "Let's see how it goes after a year." Instead, we committed to a model and have stuck with it.

The church has had to fight drift toward large group programming and events. SCC has traditionally been a church that likes programming and events for ministry. Many churches like this model because many pastors prefer to do all the ministry rather than equip others to do it. A growing small-group ministry, however, happens because ministry is shared.

One simple way we keep small groups central to the ministry of our church is aligning all of our small groups, from children through adults, with a weekend message series at least once a year. This unifies the efforts of the church and raises the value of small groups in the eyes of the congregation.

Prevent Drift

Transitioning from a church with small groups to a church of small groups is never complete. There's always the danger of drifting away from the being a church of groups. Sometimes staff changes can cause us to lose focus. Other times church-wide initiatives threaten to steal our focus. Sometimes rapid growth makes us scramble and look for other ways to do ministry. When there's change in the church, the tendency is to drift from our purpose, but those are the times we need to stick to our values.

To prevent this kind of drift in your church, have a plan ahead of time. For SCC, the drift prevention strategy includes setting small-group goals that are evaluated every year. This keeps us from getting off track too much.

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The process of transitioning to a church of groups is no small task. In fact, it's an ongoing process that will take longer than you think. But as we move toward that goal, we're experiencing great fruit along the way.

—MARK INGMIRE is the Small Groups and Adult Education Pastor at Savannah Christian Church in Savannah, Georgia; copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. Is your church leadership unified about small groups? Why or why not?
2. Who is the identifiable champion for small groups? How is he or she visible?
3. How clear is your vision for small groups? How well can your leaders articulate the vision? What about your congregation?

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Culture Shift

Four initial steps to become a church of groups

By Carolyn Taketa

Culture eats strategy for breakfast.

This leadership axiom speaks to the challenges of changing any organizational culture, whether in business or church. No matter how outstanding the strategy, if it clashes with the existing culture of an organization, it's likely to fail. Every church has a culture, both implicit and explicit. It is the DNA of your church—the way the church sees itself, makes decisions, does ministry, influences people, and sets priorities. Moving a church culture from "with" groups to "of" groups is no easy feat. Most of our churches are probably somewhere along that spectrum.

To shape culture takes time, patience, persistent focus, and leadership buy-in. This is even more true in groups ministry, which by its nature, is highly relational, messy, time-consuming, continual, and somewhat unpredictable. Here are some tips I've learned as our church has moved further along that spectrum toward being a church of groups.

Refocusing a Ministry

Nine years ago, our large church had only a dozen small groups, mostly left over from a Purpose Driven Campaign a couple of years earlier. There was no pastor, point leader, department, or budget devoted to small-group ministry. The only staff support was a part-time administrative assistant shared with the whole adult ministry area. Needless to say, small groups were not a high value for our church at that time. But groups had been a vibrant part of the church in the past, and people missed it. So as the church grew and the need for groups became more apparent, we took four important steps to restart the small-group ministry.

Step 1: Designate a ministry point leader.

We re-launched our small-group ministry by hiring a part-time ministry director. It will depend on your church's context whether you hire a new person, add this responsibility to an existing staff position, or appoint a lay leader. Whoever you choose, it's critical to designate someone whose job is to focus on and grow small groups. The small-group ministry cannot move forward without someone paying attention to it and nurturing its growth. Moreover, identifying a point leader gives this person authority to influence culture and sends a message to the church that groups matter. Ideally, this person has experience and skill in leading groups, is convicted about the biblical mandate for community, and is passionate about creating environments where people can engage in authentic, mutually discipling relationships.

Step 2: Get the lay of the land.

Before the newly appointed small-group point leader begins making any changes, it's important to get the lay of the land. With the possible exception of a brand-new church plant, in most settings, you will need to take some time to figure out the history of small groups at your church, as well as the current state of the ministry.

If the point person has been part of the congregation or the church staff previously, he or she has the advantage of knowing the church culture and having some relationships to build upon. Find out what groups, if any, currently exist, and have a conversation with each leader. You can do this via survey or e-mail, but there are substantial advantages to doing it in person. Ask existing and former leaders their story, how they came to lead a group, what happened in the ministry, and how the church can support them going forward. It's a great opportunity to listen, learn, develop relationships, heal church-inflicted wounds, and cast vision for the future. Seeking input from volunteer leaders and asking how to serve them better is a great habit to develop, even long after your ministry is going strong.

Step 3: Experiment, build, sustain, and then repeat.

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There are so many ways to start new groups. To determine the best initial strategy, consider your church history, context, level of leadership buy-in, and congregational readiness. For example, you might choose to start with a big bang through a church-wide campaign with a large number of hosts and groups. Or you might want to start a small number of groups with hand-picked leaders most likely to do well. Another option is to put together a small group of potential leaders and lead them for several months to train and equip them to lead their own groups when the training period is over.

Whatever strategy you choose, call it an "experiment," and give yourself permission to learn from it regardless of the outcome. Build the ministry by sticking to the plan and giving it enough time to work. Then sustain the wins you get, figure out things to adapt for greater effectiveness, and experiment again. Remember, like the game of football, touchdowns are won mostly by working the ball down the field 10 yards at a time, rather than by one long pass. As long as you keep encouraging existing leaders, equipping new leaders, and developing healthy small groups, you will be moving the ministry forward one group at a time.

Step 4: Build trust with leadership.

A critical part of building a culture of groups is to develop trust and credibility with church leaders—from your senior pastor and elders, to current and potential small-group leaders. Some people will lean in right away, but others may hang back until you have won their trust or the ministry has proven itself to be fruitful. Whenever you have an opportunity to share, in formal or informal settings, be prepared with a story from small groups of life change, discipleship, or church assimilation. Don't miss an opportunity to share how the new focus on small groups is creating good results.

In the early years of building the small-group ministry at our church, we had leaders who were excited about the vision, and leaders, usually more established leaders, who were not quite enthusiastic. Given the numerous staff transitions and vision whiplash in the past, these leaders were understandably skeptical of the church's new commitment and wanted to be left alone to lead their groups as they wanted. It took much time—in some cases years—before we won them over through our consistency, focus, persistence, and patience.

One of the ways we helped those skeptical leaders is to intentionally choose the language we used. For example, we were careful not to "mandate" or "require" compliance. Instead, we "strongly encouraged" participation and publically affirmed the activities that were in line with our vision. We also offered valuable resources to leaders to help them grasp the vision and lead well. The key is to stay on message and be clear, invitational, and relational.

We often hear about how the senior pastor needs to be the biggest champion for small-group ministry. That would be ideal, but if that's not the case, don't let it hinder or discourage you. Senior pastors have so much on their plates. Regardless of their level of enthusiasm and buy-in for the ministry, you need to keep working the plan you've developed. Senior pastor buy-in will look different in each church context and may include platform time, lobby presence, common language, group stories from the pulpit, a seat at the decision-making table, and financial resources. It's great to have the pastor's total support, but work with what you have and continue investing your time and energy into shaping the culture and building the ministry.

Healthy ministries transforming people's lives and relationships will always stand out. So when you focus on building, sustaining, and growing the ministry, you will build trust with both the church leadership and the congregation.

So Much to Be Thankful For

Nine years into our small-group experiment, we are thankful. God has provided a vibrant small-group ministry with 1,400 people in groups, about 40 percent of our weekend attendance. I serve as the full-time director, and I'm part of the executive leadership team. I lead a staff team that effectively shepherds the group leaders. We have earned the support and trust of senior leadership, many of whom are now small-group leaders. Our culture has dramatically shifted toward being a church of small groups over the last nine years, but we still have room to grow. And I'm fine with that, as long as we are consistently engaging and growing our church body in life-changing, mutually discipling relationships through small groups.

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—CAROLYN TAKETA is the Executive Director of Small Groups at Calvary Community Church in Westlake Village, California, and an editorial advisor for SmallGroups.com; copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. Who is responsible for building the small-group ministry? What is the history of this role in your church: Have others held this role? How were they received?
2. Taketa refers to small groups as an "experiment." How often do you give yourself permission to let groups be an experiment to learn from?
3. What steps have been taken to gain buy-in from leaders? What still needs to be done?

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How to Develop Disciples in a Church of Groups

Five steps to bring clarity to your new structure

By Dr. Rod Dempsey

What is your plan to develop disciples? Following Jesus requires commitment, understanding, practice, good examples, and personal mentoring. The best environment to make progress in following Jesus is a small group of brothers and sisters intent on obeying everything Jesus commanded (Matthew 28:20). There are many ways to refer to this group of brothers and sisters following Jesus. In different contexts, they are referred to as cell groups, discipleship groups, Sunday school classes, house churches, and missional communities.

Whatever you may call them, groups can be an intentional force for discipleship if you make them key to your church and become a church of groups. Let me explain: most churches have groups, but they may not be a priority within the overall structure. A church *with* groups is a church that has groups, but they are not the main priority of the church. The focus in churches with groups is primarily on the programs and ministries that revolve around the Sunday morning service. The underlying philosophy of the church is that the building is the focal place where church happens. Groups meet predominantly at the church building. The church has people attending small groups, but many times it's less than 50 percent of the Sunday morning attendance. The pastor believes in small groups, but many times is not involved in a small group. In short, a church *with* small groups views groups as a good thing, but not the main thing.

A church *of* groups has a different approach and attitude when it comes to small groups. A church of groups believes that it is critically important for every follower of Jesus to attend and get involved in a group. A church of groups views small groups as the main priority of the church. All of the staff members are in a small group. The senior leaders talk about the importance of being in a group on a regular basis. There is an intentional plan to develop small-group leaders. The groups are a place where fellowship, pastoral care, peer-to-peer counseling and meeting needs takes place. A church of small groups is continually praying for laborers and leaders to be sent into the harvest fields (Luke 10:2). Churches of groups have groups that meet out in the community, and group members are impacting their community. A church of groups believes that the body of Christ is formed when the members come together to connect to the Head (Jesus), connect to and serve each other, and connect to and serve the community. The groups and the members of the groups are the visible expression of Christ in a community.

To make the transition and become a church of groups requires an intentional reexamination of the church's core vision, values, views, vehicles, and verifiers. It's not a haphazard exercise, but a thorough, detailed, and measured plan to follow the Great Commission's mandate to make disciples. To make this transition, I believe there are certain steps to put into place that will allow the church to make progress in this worthwhile and mission critical endeavor. In my 30 years of ministry practice and small-group involvement, I've discovered five steps that can aid and assist churches desiring to transition from a church *with* groups to a church *of* groups.

1. Develop a Clear Vision

You must have a clear vision for the direction of your discipleship groups. Habakkuk 2:2 puts it this way, "Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it." Without a clear vision for a discipleship ministry, the people in your church will be unsure and confused. To become a church of small groups you need a clear and compelling scriptural foundation. Passages like the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:36–40), the New Commandment (John 13:34), and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16–20) are great places to start.

Acts 2:42–47 gives us the example of the first group of believers and what they did. We can surmise that they were attempting to obey the clear teaching of their Master and were trying to structure the church to reflect the Great Commandment, New Commandment, and the Great Commission. Ephesians 4:15–16 lays out the responsibility of the church. The body is to be connected to the Head and the saints are to "grow to become in

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every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." The importance of the discovery and use of spiritual gifts should also be a part of the discussion so that every person can do his or her part (See [Unlock Spiritual Gifts](#) for how to help group members discover and use their spiritual gifts.).

2. Create Core Values

Your values need to come from Scripture. For example, in the Great Commandment and the New Commandment, Jesus is explaining to his disciples that love for God, love for our neighbor, and love for one another should be front and center in our discipleship effort. These core values may be stated like this, "Our goal is to develop people who love God, love one another, and love our neighbors." Along with a value statement, you may want to communicate a motto like: "We believe three things: We need God, we need each other, and our community needs us." Another motto may be something like: "We are here to bring glory to God by declaring the Gospel, developing the saints, and deploying the members into the community to show and share the message of King Jesus.

3. Present Clear and Concise Views

You'll need to be clear about the role of the pastor, the role of the saints, what a disciple looks like, what the process of discipleship involves, what a spiritual leader looks like, and what spiritual leaders are responsible for. Not being clear on these topics allows the church to drift into old patterns and ways of doing ministry, which makes change nearly impossible. An old saying comes to mind regarding this matter, "Fog in the pulpit is mist in the pew." If we are not crystal clear on these subjects, the existing culture will define them for us and we'll fall into the familiar "clergy versus laity" labyrinth. To become a church of small groups requires clarity. That clarity begins to melt away the fog around discipleship.

Clarity comes from examining key passages and principles and developing firmly held convictions on who does what and how the church should be functioning. For example, Ephesians 1:23 says that the church is his body. If you accept this as a controlling view of the church, then you need to be working on connecting the members of his body to the Head, to each other, and to his mission.

4. Determine the Vehicles

The leadership of the church needs to research different small-group models and choose a model that will accomplish the vision, core values, and views of the church. Will your groups be open or closed? Will you have cell groups or free market groups? Will you call your groups house churches or organic small groups? Will the groups meet in neighborhoods, on the church property, or a combination of both? For a fuller understanding of the different small-group models take a look at the [SmallGroups.com Models Tool](#).

5. Identify Verifiers

To become a church of groups, you need some quantifiable and measurable verifiers to ensure you're meeting your goals. Stephen Covey, in his book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, explained the importance of beginning with the end in mind. This means that you spend time describing what the future should look like in your context. Then you align all of your vehicles, views, and core values toward accomplishing that future.

For example, to become a church of small groups you may create verifiers that measure how healthy your groups are and how well they're creating disciples. For example, you may want to measure how many groups you need so that all attenders are able to join a group. That is, if you have 500 attenders on Sunday morning, and you want 12 people per group, you need 42 groups. You might also set a goal for having a leader, an apprentice, and a host for each group. In this example, you'll need 42 leaders with 42 apprentices plus 42 hosts. Altogether, that's 126 leaders in your small-group ministry. Another good verifier would be to measure how many group members spend time reading the Bible and praying. You might set a goal for 80 percent of group members to have these kind of personal devotions.

By measuring the health of your groups and group members, you're effectively measuring the health of your church. If you have healthy group members, healthy group leaders, and healthy groups, you will more than likely have a healthy church. If you want to become a healthy church of groups, you'll need a clear vision, core values, concise views, controlling vehicles, and comprehensive verification. Develop a plan and

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stay with it!

—DR. ROD DEMPSEY is Associate Professor of Educational Ministries at Liberty University Baptist Theology Seminary as well as the Discipleship Pastor at Thomas Road Baptist Church; copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What are your values and views? Are you able to articulate them for leaders?
2. What are the verifiers—the goals that you will measure in your ministry?
3. How will you measure your goals?

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Establish a Small-Group Structure

Eight steps on the journey to become a church of groups

By M. Scott Boren

A pastor newly tasked with overseeing the development of groups at his church wanted to meet with me to learn about different small-group models. After we discussed a few of the most effective small-group models, it became clear that he was seeking the right destination for his church—a clear picture of the best model out there that he could drop into his context. As we talked about the differences between various group models, I offered a different perspective: "The key is not in finding the *right* model to imitate. The key is to develop *your* right model, one that fits your context and your situation. It's a journey, not a destination."

Most, I've found, want a small-group blueprint or plan that they can simply implement in their situation. We assume that if another church has worked out the kinks, then we won't have to. While working with churches for over 20 years, I've been a student of how churches make the transition from their current state into a flourishing small-group system. Along the way, I've found this one principle to be true: There are a lot of "right" models. The key is to walk through a process that will lead you to develop *your* right model.

A Process of Formation

In my research, coaching, and consulting, I've found that churches that have developed the most effective small groups are those who have walked through a process that forms people for community and mission. This is a spiritual formation process, not just a structural implementation process. We need to be formed as God's people in a way that fits the goal of community and mission. In other words, we have to be the right kind of people to make small groups flourish. Simply implementing a good strategy—while helpful—won't make that happen.

This formation process happens on four levels:

- Personal formation—Individuals are disciplined to live in love.
- Community formation—Groups learn how to live in healthy relationships with one another.
- Leadership formation—People are equipped to lead as servants who wash feet.
- System formation—Structural elements are developed that support the life of the church, some of which are almost invisible.

We are formed by the spirit to live in community, which lies at the heart of effective group life. Community is a work of art, a thing of beauty. And only beauty can beget beauty. This cannot simply be structured or forced. We have to learn how to live in the beauty of loving one another in community on the journey.

In many cases, the people within a church have learned to follow God in such a way that does not require community. Putting them into groups will not change that. They'll just have group meetings—not community.

An 8-Step Process

Here are the eight basic steps to this process of forming a path of spiritual formation on the four levels mentioned above.

Step 1: Start Where You Are

This one truth can change everything for the better. Many church leaders want groups, but they're not aware of the reality they currently live in. And most group proponents simply begin with the need for groups, and then jump into strategy. But if you jump into strategy before you're ready for it, you can actually set back your journey by years.

Leaders, therefore, need to assess a few things to determine the readiness of the church. Then they'll know how to wisely proceed.

Leaders should ask:

- What is the sense of urgency versus complacency within our congregation?

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- Considering the history of our church, how much value have we placed on groups?
- How do people connect relationally within the local culture of our church's context?

For more on Step 1, read "Start Where You Are" on page 16.

Step 2: Learn Together

Learning and effective leadership are always social endeavors. If you think you can simply dream up a small-group strategy in your office and lay it on your people, you are sorely mistaken. Attending a conference on groups alone and returning with a grand scheme for how everything will be done is a recipe for failure.

You need a team—one comprised of people who have the ability to step away from the system and gain an accurate view of what's going on. Some talk about this as the ability to "get on the balcony" and observe the journey. Most people leading groups are simply walking the journey. They aren't thinking about how the journey is progressing, what is coming next, and what has been overcome. It's a rare ability to be able to take a step back and get a fuller picture, but that's what you need on your team.

Step 3: Chart the Course

Once you know where you are and you have a team of people who can work with you, chart a general direction for groups. This is not about establishing a fixed destination or an absolute vision for what the group system will look like. Instead, this is about setting a trajectory so that people can learn along the way.

The first thing to do here is to absorb as much as possible about various group strategies. Don't read just one book on groups and get to work. Read five or six. Read online articles and resources like the [Models page](#) on SmallGroups.com. Work as a team to learn about group strategies before you start implementation. This will help you chart a wise course.

This step works best if you think in terms of two parallel tracks for groups. The first is a connecting track. This track includes groups that will help people experience community in a safe way. (More on this in Step 4.) The second track (explored in Step 5) is an experimental track, one that focuses intentionally on life in community and on mission.

Step 4: Develop Connecting Experiences

Most people in church today will say that they're ready for things like discipleship, community, and mission. They'll say they want to see the Great Commission realized in their local contexts. But good intentions and being ready for it are two different things. In most cases, 90 percent of a local church needs connecting group experiences where people can take safe steps into community. They just aren't ready for more.

The best way to give these people a place to get their feet wet in group life is to provide short-term, program-driven group opportunities. The key is *short-term*. If people are asked to join an open-ended group and they have not been equipped with relationship skills that are crucial to successful community (conflict resolution, for instance), then the only way out is failure—and that's something you can't afford. You want to provide group opportunities that set up people for positive experiences, while at the same time preparing them for more.

Step 5: Foster Group Experiments

While 90 percent need connecting groups to get started, there are often a few—maybe as few as five to seven people—who are ready for more. They sense God's call to live in community and participate in God's mission. This group serves as a seedbed or a foretaste of what groups might look like in the future.

These groups are often called "missional communities" or "missional small groups," but the name used is irrelevant. The point is to facilitate at least one of these experimental groups that goes deeper and expects more than the connecting groups. These groups can't be programmed. They're experiments, organic in nature. After a season, maybe even up to a year, others can be included in the experiments.

If missional communities are already in place in your church, then Step 6 involves evaluating those that are truly living out the vision and those whose actions don't match their name. Those living the vision should serve

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as a remnant that sets a model for others to follow.

Step 6: Establish a Spiritual Formation Environment

Your small-group journey as a church will ride the back of your spiritual formation journey. Group life and discipleship go hand in hand. Woven into Step 4 and Step 5 will be tools and experiences that integrate spiritual formation on a personal level. At this point of the journey, however, spiritual formation must become integrated into the life of the church. More than offering some classes or hosting some retreats, this is about creating a process that will move immature believers along a path toward maturity. The goal is to integrate this spiritual formation process into the life of your groups, thereby establishing a discipleship culture, not just a discipleship program.

Step 7: Establish the Hidden Support Practices

Beneath the surface of every great small-group ministry over the last 60 years, there's much more than groups going on. There are hidden ministry practices that support the life of groups. Most miss this because they only see the obvious—what actually occurs in the groups themselves. But the unseen is what keeps the groups on the journey. These are things like communicating vision, investing relationally in leaders, continually training and coaching leaders, and praying for the ministry. As stated earlier, community is a work of art. These hidden support practices foster environments where this beauty is much more likely to occur.

Step 8: Keep Walking

There are no destinations in relationships. Relationships are always in process, and it takes work to keep moving forward. It's very tempting to look for some kind of magical elixir or missing ingredient that will make groups work, but I assure you that none exists. We either grow in love on the journey or we don't. We either equip people to grow in love or we don't. And this takes time and repetition. As we learn how to do this with a few, we can expand it to more and more.

If you try to implement all of these steps at once, you might as well try to eat a watermelon whole or sail around the world in a day. Every great journey is taken one step at a time. These eight steps break the journey into doable and accessible legs so that you know where you need to focus your energy at each milestone. After all, God works with us where we are, taking us on surprising and serendipitous twists along the way, which will result in a unique group model that best fits your church.

—SCOTT BOREN is the author of several books including [Leading Small Groups in the Way of Jesus](#) (available February 2015); copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How much do you know about different small-group models? How can you find out more?
2. Who is on your team? Who can help you chart a course for the small-group ministry?
3. Who in your church is ready for an experimental group? How might you get this group started?

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Start Where You Are

Before you make a plan, gain a clear picture of your current reality.

By M. Scott Boren

A traditional Sunday school church wants to deepen community, so they start home small groups. But they soon realize that all they have is a less organized Sunday school program meeting in homes.

A suburban pastor sees how people are disconnected, scattered, and lonely. But how do overly busy people add yet another activity to their lives? They try weekly small groups, but it's too much. So they settle for a social meeting once per month, which lasts for seven months and dies off.

After doing groups for ten years, a pastor hears about the vision for missional community. With great passion and vision, they change the name of their groups to missional communities, but the groups keep doing what they've always done.

You want the experience of community—the kind that is infectious, life-giving, and offers hope to the world. We are made for relationships. It's part of God's design. But how do you form a ministry of groups that offers community like that? Where do you start the journey to groups that live out community and mission?

No matter the journey, the best way to get there is to start from where you are. While this sounds incredibly obvious, I've found that this is probably the most overlooked step in the process of leading a church into group life.

Missing Reality

In the three real-life situations depicted above, all of the churches were focused on their vision—what they wanted to accomplish. And while that's good to keep in mind, when I started working with these churches, it became obvious that they lacked any awareness about the current state of the church's strengths and weaknesses. They had lost touch with the life patterns of the people in the church. And they had not done any work to understand the context in which the church was set.

They thought the problem was about the way they did groups. But the problem was that these churches failed to implement group strategies that took into account their context.

Groups are about people. As soon as we think that the issue is structural in nature, that a strategy will fix the group problem, then we undermine that which makes groups work in the first place: relationships. In order for a church's relationships to work differently, we have to understand the way the relationships work *now*. We can't lead people to a new place if we don't understand where they are currently.

For instance, if a church has been shaped by decades of programmatic church life that requires clergy direction, fixed events, and printed curriculum, it doesn't matter how much you talk about relationships and community. Those old church patterns are part of the unspoken way that church works. If the leadership does not understand this fact, they can't lead the church into a new way of relating.

Or consider a church where most people say they're committed to live in community with one another and reach their community with the gospel, but the reality is that people just want things to return to the way the church did things in the 1970s. And they want the pastor to fix it. Bringing in a new strategy might brighten things up for a short while, but it won't result in great small groups.

Exegesis

When preachers attend seminary, they take classes on biblical exegesis, a technical term that simply means deep understanding or critical interpretation. When we preach or teach Bible classes, we aim to do so with a sound knowledge of what the Bible means. We start from where the Bible is coming from, and then move those truths into our lives.

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In a similar way, we need to do exegetical work to understand our starting point. We need to become aware of our reality. Only then can we develop an understanding of what is going on and what it will take to move forward. We must develop a deep understanding of three domains:

1. The church
2. The life of the people in the church
3. The local context

Exegesis of the Church

When I work with a church, one of the first things I do is listen. Through a series of interviews and surveys, I gather their stories. I want to hear where they've been, what led them to this point in the journey, and how they feel about it. How can we understand where God is leading a church if we don't understand how God *has been* leading it? How can we see where we might be off right now, if we don't understand how we have been off in the past?

One of the hardest things for church leaders to do is have an accurate view of their own journey. I find that they either think they are far ahead of reality or they think they're much worse off than reality. This is the reason you need to ask questions about the church that you would not normally ask. For instance:

- What are the highs and lows of the church's life?
- Where have the main transitions occurred?
- What are the unique strengths?
- What are the weaknesses?
- What has occurred within the last three years that we should celebrate?
- What has occurred within the last three years that we should mourn?
- Where are the places that people are expressing a sense of urgency?
- Where are the places that people are stuck in complacency?

From a strategic point of view, the last two questions are especially crucial. Without a sense of urgency, at least within a pocket of people, it's hard to move a church into a new reality. People don't change because you have a great new idea. Change is an emotional issue and people refuse to change not because they don't want your new idea, but because they don't want to give up what they have. Therefore, exegeting the church is a way to help people develop a sense of urgency about what God is already doing and what God wants to do in your church. (Note: It's often helpful to get someone from the outside to help you see this reality accurately. As leaders of the church, we have blindspots, and others can help us gain a more accurate picture.)

Exegesis of the Life of the People in the Church

The deep understanding that comes as a result of this work is not directly about how church people relate to the church vision or programming. Nor is it about moral issues. This is about understanding how people do life in your context. Questions here might include:

- What is the standard of living? Blue collar? White Collar?
- What is the ethnic makeup?
- What is the average commute to work?
- Describe work patterns of individuals.
- How do people spend their free time?
- Describe the involvement of kids in extracurricular activities?
- Where do people live in relationship to the church building? How has this changed in the last two decades?
- Identify how people relate to others, describing things like established friendships vs. transitory connections, and consistent contact vs. limited interaction.
- Outline the nature of the relationships and connectivity within the membership of the church, asking questions like: To what degree are friendships dependent upon church programming? To what level do people feel connected to others in the church?

Exegesis of the Context

Awareness of what is going on in the local context is something missionaries have done for generations, but it's not something that comes to mind when we think of developing groups in our own context. But it's crucial

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for two reasons. First, the church is called to be salt and light in our local context, and that requires that we understand our context. Second, it's helpful to understand how the relationship patterns of those within the church compare to the relationship patterns of those outside the church.

Questions to exegete the context might include:

- How has the neighborhood changed in the past decade?
- How does the neighborhood perceive the local church?
- What are the opportunities that we have as a result of what's going on in our context?
- What are the challenges that we face in this context?

After reading this, you might be wondering where the action is. Pastors are, after all, held accountable for what kinds of ministry they produce. And if your job is to get groups started or to take groups to the next level, you feel the pressure to do something to make that happen.

While you may be eager to jump in and get stuff done, I would argue that we've gone down that road for far too long. Without understanding our starting point, we set ourselves up for failure when we try to implement a plan. Do the work of understanding your context up front, or you'll have to do it later.

—SCOTT BOREN is the author of several books including [Leading Small Groups in the Way of Jesus](#) (available February 2015); copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. Take an honest look at your church and answer the exegesis questions in the article. What new insights have you gained?
2. Who on your team can you discuss these insights with? What other church leaders need to know these insights?
3. How do those insights affect your plans for the small-group ministry?

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Create a Realistic Vision

Take your church's context, culture, and history into account.

By Bill Search

Not too long ago, a friend of mine told me excitedly about his trip to Real Life Christian Church in Idaho. He'd read a book about how Jim Putman conducts his small-group ministry, and had signed up for a week-long program at the church to find out more. He was enthralled and full of ideas on how to change his church *with* small groups into a thriving, disciple-making church *of* small groups. I poured cold water on his passion as I openly questioned why he would torture himself in such a way.

To be clear, I love Putman's book, his passion, and his church. But my friend's church was very different, and it had a different leader with a different set of skills. As the adult education pastor of a large church, my friend had little power to implement Putman's vision. He could certainly craft a handful of disciple-making groups that reflected Putman's ideas, but he wouldn't be able to do so churchwide.

Several years prior, I witnessed (and challenged) another friend who had fallen in love with Randy Frazee's fascinating neighborhood model of group life. However, his church wasn't set up to implement a neighborhood approach, and it wasn't long before my friend had to find a new church to serve.

These situations also remind me of a married woman I counseled some years ago. The strong, silent man she fell in love with was having a hard time communicating his emotions. She wanted to know how to help him become a better communicator. I gave her some advice but ultimately warned her she wasn't going to make progress changing her husband's personality. She'd better learn to love the man she married as he was and figure out how to navigate his personality if she wanted a long, happy marriage.

Learn to Be Realistic

Here's the deal: Unless you're the senior pastor, you may have influence, but you'll have little power to completely alter the DNA of your church ministry. For 15 years I served as a small-group and education pastor in two very large churches. I watched group trends come and go and I watched idealistic small-group pastor friends ebb and flow with frustration.

If you're implementing a small-group ministry, you'd better have a clear grasp on the overall philosophy of ministry of your church. The group ministry in most churches is a subset of the overall church culture. If your church is an outreach-oriented church your groups will be very outwardly focused. If your church is highly relational, the groups will take a social tone. Neither of these are necessarily bad things, but you'll need to understand them so you can work within your church's culture. For instance, if your church loves fellowship, a Putman-style disciple-making group structure probably won't work well.

Most pastors are idealists. We enter ministry knowing that without God's blessing we are fighting a lost cause. We dream of thriving, passionate Christians who will sacrifice anything for the Jesus they love. But that idealism is sometimes misdirected. Like Don Quixote, there are occasions when we fight the wrong battle. We don't just fight for the gospel—there are times we fight for a philosophy of ministry or a way of doing group life. In those cases we can attack our own church leadership if they don't share our vision.

Determine Your Church's Context

In order to grow a healthy ministry (and keep your job), I recommend you think like a missionary by examining your context and implementing appropriate steps. Get a feel for the context of your church to understand what small-group structures might work. Consider these questions when examining your context:

1. What is the ministry heritage of my church? Historically, how have people gotten involved and grown spiritually in your church (by classes, groups, seminars, sermons)?

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2. What does my senior pastor like? If he or she has a passion, you're wise to tap into that. You'll get more sermon mentions, support, and budget considerations if the senior pastor is on board from the start.
3. What does my senior pastor dislike? Most senior pastors I know have an opinion on what helps (and what doesn't help) a person grow spiritually. If you are advocating a system he or she doesn't support, you're heading for deep frustration.
4. What does your church need? Do people need deeper relationships? More Bible knowledge? Better connection with God? Even more, what do the people in your church *feel* they need? If you try to scratch an itch no one knows they have, you won't get very far.

Choose an Appropriate Model

Once you've examined your context, implement an appropriate group vision and model for your church. Each church I've been at has done small groups differently, and I loved them all. These small-group models worked because they matched the context of their respective churches. Get started by implementing these steps:

Familiarize yourself with the principles behind small groups. Books like *Small Groups on Purpose* by Steve Gladden and my book *Simple Small Groups* discuss groups from a principle level. You can apply these principles regardless of your small-group model.

Research and understand different small-group models. Many types of groups can work regardless of your specific model or context. Support and recovery groups (even if you only have one), Bible study groups, Fellowship Groups, newcomer groups, short-term groups, special-focus groups, and Alpha evangelism groups all can work in any model. Each of these bypasses the need for whole-church involvement. Use the [Models Tool](#) on SmallGroups.com for a great intro into several types of groups.

Consider churchwide strategies. If you and your senior leadership feel your context lends itself to whole-church model, explore different models. Systems that require vision casting from the platform, focus from leadership, and budgetary resources won't work unless it's driven by senior leadership.

Choose a vision and model that fit your context. You might be in love with Ralph Neighbor's cell group system, but if you're in a Bible Study Fellowship type of church you'd better adjust your expectations to fit your church.

Communicate with your senior leadership. Confirm that your vision for group life is congruent with your senior pastor's vision and the vision of the church as a whole. If it's not, you have three choices: alter yours, convince the leadership yours is the best, or look for another job. Any other option will result in the third choice.

Disciple your leaders. Whatever vision you decide on, focus 75 percent of your efforts on developing and discipling your leaders. Take a cue from all the great parachurch organizations: They change the world one leader at a time. So work with your core group of leaders and help them implement the vision.

Small-group models and trends will come and go, and it can be informative to read up on the newest ideas. Whatever you do, keep your church's context in mind, and choose and implement a vision that works in your context. When you do that, you'll be happier and you'll see growth in your ministry.

—BILL SEARCH is author of [Simple Small Groups](#) and the Senior Pastor at Rolling Hills Christian church in El Dorado Hills, California; copyright 2013 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How well do you understand your church's context and culture? What can you do to understand it further?
2. How well do you understand your senior pastor's vision for the church and for the small-group ministry?
3. Which small-group models and types of small groups especially appeal to you? Why?

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Multiple Models in One Ministry

Why you should consider incorporating several types of groups

By Allen White

One of the beautiful things about small groups is that they're highly customizable—at least that's the beauty for the group leaders. Tracking multiple types of small groups, on the other hand, can be a headache for the small-group pastor or director.

That's why it makes more sense to many pastors to use one model across the entire small-group ministry. It's efficient and easy to keep track of. Pastors are busy people who need all of the efficiency they can get.

In a perfectly efficient world, pastors could use one system to connect, train, and organize the entire congregation into groups. Unfortunately, there are no systems like this. On top of that, it's not what's best for the people who will be involved in group life. When there's only one type of group model, people are forced to respond with "yes" or "no"—take it or leave it. And the fact is that many will say "no" because that model doesn't fit their needs.

Now, don't get me wrong, I like systems and control (especially the second one). A single group model is easier for me to manage, lead, and develop. There's only one thing wrong with this picture: there's just too much "me."

We live in a world of infinite choices. Someone can walk into Starbucks and order one of 87,000 drink combinations—and that's just coffee. People can flip through hundreds of cable channels to find exactly what they want to watch, or surf the billions of sites on the Internet for hours to learn more about a specific hobby or trend. In the church, however, pastors believe everyone should fit into one neat system for discipleship. Then they wonder why only 30 percent (or fewer) of their church members are interested in small groups. One size simply does not fit all. People need a variety of ways to connect and grow.

Tending a Garden of Groups

In my early years of group ministry, I tried to identify the perfect strategy for small groups. I read some great books and attended seminars and conferences. Then God gave me a new picture of groups: an image of plants in a nursery with the small-group pastor as the gardener. All of the groups need water, sunlight, and nutrients. But they don't all need the same amounts, and they certainly don't grow at the same rates.

This image caused me to realize that some groups serve best by offering intensive Bible study, and others serve best by centering on support for a particular issue, or even on a common hobby. Some groups thrive when they meet to discuss the weekend's message. Others thrive when they can choose a study to meet a felt need. Diversity and variety work well with groups.

All of this begs the question: What is a small group? If we encourage our groups to (1) connect with and care for each other, (2) apply God's Word, and (3) serve others, groups can take on an infinite number of formats. This can happen in a women's weekday Bible study, an evening couples' group, a weekend motorcycle group, and even a Sunday school class. On the other hand, if our definition dictates that a small group meets weekly in a home to discuss the weekend sermon, there's only one way to participate in group life. Some will take it. Others will leave it.

When the church I served in California managed to connect 125 percent of the average adult attendance into groups, we were using five different group models simultaneously. Some have asked me if that created confusion. The truth is each small group was only following one model—the leaders weren't confused. The only potential confusion was mine.

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How to Incorporate Several Models

When considering using several models simultaneously, here are a few things to think about:

1. What groups do you already have?

When I arrived at my new assignment in South Carolina, I discovered women's Bible studies, men's accountability groups, parenting groups, couples' groups, singles' groups, off-campus groups, on-campus groups, free market groups, host home groups, and adult Sunday school classes. After assessing the groups to see if they met the above criteria—connection and care, Bible application, and serving others—I blessed them and left them alone.

This is where small-group pastors and directors often make a mistake. The temptation is to consolidate a hodgepodge of groups into one system or to align them with a single method. A lot of effort goes into breaking what doesn't need fixing. To force existing groups to accept a new model in a common system doesn't make sense.

2. Where do you want your next wave of groups to go?

While you shouldn't coerce your existing groups to head in a new direction, you can direct new groups into a new initiative. Your initiative might be introducing service into group life or focusing on accountability in groups.

At the church I served in South Carolina, our initiative was a practical one: only start new groups off campus because we were running out of space. When we trained our new leaders, we stated up front that groups would meet in homes or in a public place like Starbucks or Barnes and Noble. There simply weren't any rooms available on campus for new groups.

With this new initiative, there are two important things to note. First of all, no group currently meeting on campus was asked to move off campus. I didn't want to break what was working. And second, over the course of four years, we started four groups on campus who had no other place to meet, including a group for single moms where the church provided the childcare. These were exceptions. We let them be exceptions. And that's okay.

3. Who do you need to connect?

If the church is in a place where 70 percent or more need to be connected into groups, then a church-wide campaign can be an effective way to recruit a large number of leaders and connect members into groups. People offer to open up their homes and either invite friends to join them or welcome people assigned from the church. A video-based curriculum helps the host facilitate the discussion and takes away the fear factor of leadership.

If the church is already mostly connected into some sort of groups, then a church-wide campaign could provide great synergies among your existing groups. More than likely, though, it won't produce an overabundance of new groups. There's a reason why the last 30 percent or so haven't joined the type of groups you've offered: they don't like them. They might prefer getting together with a couple of friends at a coffee shop. They might have odd work schedules. Or they might be looking for a type of support or study that you're currently not offering. Church-wide campaigns won't help connect these people into groups. You'll have to figure out what they're looking for first.

4. How is God inspiring people to meet?

If you remove the limits from group formation, potential leaders will become very creative. In our church in California, a leader started a group on a commuter train. Every Tuesday morning, the group gathered in a section of the train on their way to work. A group of engineers in downtown Tampa couldn't make it home to the suburbs in time to have a group, so they met during lunch at their workplace. A group of law enforcement officers formed a first responders' small group because they could speak each others' language and weren't asked to fix other group members' speeding tickets anymore. A group of guys met weekly for Bible study and several times a month to make barbecue. They're called the "Holy Smokers."

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If you offer an invitation for people to innovate, they'll present new and creative ideas for group life. If you keep them firmly within the boundaries of one group system, they'll take it or leave it. Sure you might have some odd ball ideas, but those are the exceptions, not the rule. And they might just meet the needs of some of the people still unconnected at your church.

5. How do you train and coach groups formed from multiple models?

When it comes down to it, all groups are expected to meet the same goals: provide connection and care, Bible study, and service. It's just how they go about it that will vary from group model to group model. You don't need separate systems to manage different groups. You will, however, need to coach these different leaders in unique ways as they face conflict and challenges. On the other hand, all leaders need training in many of the same topics. It's possible to bring group leaders together around common topics for training, yet coach them individually within their specialty.

In the last church I served, I led a monthly meeting of volunteer leaders who oversaw our entire small-group ministry. Each person at the table was responsible for a different type of group: men, women, couples, singles, parents, and neighborhood. Each of them coached the leaders specific to the type of groups they oversaw. That way, one person was overseeing all similar groups in the ministry, and when these six leaders came together, we had an accurate picture of what was happening across our entire small-group ministry.

There is beauty in the potential for diversity in group life, and that diversity doesn't need to cause a headache. As your small-group ministry grows, you'll have to rethink your leadership structure, but don't allow that work to hold you back from creating the kinds of groups your people need. As you diversify your groups and allow several models to exist, you'll have greater opportunities for connecting the unconnected in your church and for seeing amazing spiritual growth.

—ALLEN WHITE is a pastor, teacher, writer, and speaker; copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What might be the benefit of offering different types of groups in your ministry?
2. What kinds of groups do you currently offer? What kind of variety do you have?
3. What models do you think best fit your context?

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Effectively Communicate with Group Leaders

Keep everyone in the loop during and after your transition.

By Ben Reed

The first year of marriage for my wife and me was the most difficult. We moved to a new city in a new state. We started new jobs. We changed schools. We switched churches. Everything in our lives was new. On top of that, we lived on next to nothing. Both seminary students, we worked side jobs to pay our bills.

As tough as our new life of changes and financial stress was, we had a much bigger problem that made our lives difficult: We had no idea how to communicate with one another. It just wasn't coming naturally.

The Why

Why did we have to learn? Because we were married, we loved each other, and we knew that if we weren't actively headed in the same direction, we were headed in opposite directions. Even passive, nonexistent communication moves you somewhere.

Communication, or lack thereof, is never neutral. The question is whether you're headed in parallel directions, or beginning to veer off course from one another. An ever-so-slight move off course can have a huge impact down the road.

This is true for small groups, too. In effect, small groups are churches within a church, which means that a local congregation is a combination of multiple small groups, or multiple churches, coming together to worship. It's a beautiful thing. All those groups are filled with people, and how we communicate with them will determine the trajectory of the groups.

There's a danger in not communicating well to small groups. Without oversight and leadership, small groups become unhealthy pockets of church life. It's far too easy to get disconnected. They're meeting somewhere private, and they're led by lay leaders. They're talking about tough issues, and there isn't a guide to handle every situation that comes up. Without a coach checking in regularly with the group leader, a group can get really weird, really quickly.

Even if a group starts out strong, things can turn south. Andy Stanley says, "Vision leaks." Over time, without a constant drip of communication, leaders will lose the vision. The group will drift from the primary mission. Leaders will lose focus, and they'll find themselves off the intended course. Without clear, consistent communication, lots of weird things can happen. And you can't afford that when you're transitioning your ministry's vision.

The How

You may be nodding your head in agreement, knowing from experience how quickly things can go sideways in a small group when communication has broken down. Leadership owes it to group leaders to give thorough, reasoned, compelling communication.

In order to do that, church leaders should use all means necessary to ensure delivery. Choosing the correct method for the information you're communicating is important, though. Before you put your next message together, read through the different methods below.

E-mail

I send out weekly e-mails to all our leaders. These aren't individual, personalized emails. They're sent out en masse. There are a couple of important things to remember about e-mails:

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- Keep it brief. Nobody reads long e-mails.
- Spam filters can work against you when you send out mass e-mails.
- Most people don't pay too much attention to mass e-mails, so make them short and to the point.
- Consider creating two-part e-mails. In the top half include the bullet points. In the bottom half, include an expanded version with more information for those who are interested in reading more.

Phone Calls

Phone calls are great when I want to ensure people get information in a timely manner. Some people simply don't check their e-mails very often. Or they only skim their inboxes. A few important things to remember about phone calls:

- It takes a lot of time to make calls. But it's worth the effort for some communication.
- Solicit volunteer help if you get overwhelmed with this. Phone calls are easy to delegate if you script out the information.
- Don't be frustrated if you end up leaving voicemails rather than actually talking to people. Still, more voicemails will be listened to than e-mails read.

Social Media

If the information is important enough to send an e-mail or make a phone call, you should blast it out on social media, too. It's free! It's also one more channel to speak into the lives of group leaders who may be more likely to check their Facebook or Twitter feeds than their e-mail. A few important things to keep in mind about social media:

- Don't make it only information about events (dates, times, locations, etc.). Use social media to share blogs and articles as well.
- Use hashtags so that no matter when a group leader jumps into the stream, they can track conversations back over time. Be consistent, though, by using the same hashtag.
- Some people love social media. Some people hate it. Some people are intentionally off the grid. Maximize social media, but don't depend on it.

Meetings

An e-mail, phone call, or Facebook update doesn't even come close to the power of a sit-down meeting over a cup of coffee. The relational equity you build when you carve out time in your schedule is unparalleled. A few important things to remember about meetings:

- This is the most powerful form of communication. Use it wisely, and don't overdo it.
- Be mindful that you're meeting with someone who has a full-time job, a family, hobbies, and other responsibilities. Don't waste his or her time.
- You can accomplish more in an hour-long lunch meeting with a leader than you can in a dozen e-mails.
- Don't use these meetings to only talk about dates and times. Cast vision. Deepen your relationship. Let them know you care.
- These meetings are especially great for helping a group leader think through specific issues within their group.

Mid-Sized Gatherings

Gather leaders together in larger groups when you want to rally the troops, cast new vision, or train on important ministry-wide topics. A few things to remember about mid-sized gatherings:

- Some things work great in this setting (like casting vision) while other things don't (like deepening personal relationships).
- Keep in mind that you're taking up personal time of volunteer leaders, so make the content excellent.
- Be sure to give group leaders time and space to connect with one another, not just with the content you're sharing. This helps them feel connected and allows them to share stories of group life with one another.

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- After these gatherings, send a follow-up e-mail to everyone—even those who didn't attend—recapping the content.

It's easy to grow frustrated when leaders drift off course or lose the vision we have for the ministry. But maybe the issue isn't them: it's your communication. Learn how to communicate the right message in the right way, and you'll get the right results.

—BEN REED is the lead small group pastor at the Lake Forest campus of Saddleback Community Church; copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How will you initially share the vision and trajectory of the small-group ministry with group leaders?
2. In what ongoing ways will you continue to cast vision to your group leaders?
3. How do you currently keep in touch with group leaders? In what ways can you improve your communication?

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Further Exploration

Websites and books to help you become a church of groups

[SmallGroups.com](#). We specialize in equipping churches and small-group leaders to make disciples and strengthen community.

- [Create a Compelling Vision](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Improving Communication for Effective Small-Group Ministry](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Casting a Vision for Small Groups](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Making a Case for Small Groups](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Empower Small-Group Leaders](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)

[BuildingChurchLeaders.com](#). A website with practical training tools for various church leadership roles.

[LeadershipJournal.net](#). A website offering practical advice and articles for church leaders.

[GiftedforLeadership.com](#). A website ministering to women leaders.

[Building a Church of Small Groups](#) by *Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson*. Donahue and Robinson share revealing glimpses of Willow Creek's journey to becoming a church of small groups (Zondervan, 2005; ISBN 978-0310267102).

[Creating Community](#) by *Andy Stanley and Bill Willits*. Learn how North Point Community Church structures their small groups and created a small-group culture (Multnomah Books, 2009; ISBN 978-1590523964).

[Real-Life Discipleship](#) by *Jim Putman*. How Real Life Ministries structures their small groups to make disciples (NavPress, 2010; ISBN 978-1615215607).