

FROM COUCH TO COMMUNITY
SMALL GROUP AUDIT



SMALL GROUP AUDIT

INTRO: Why Audit?

The world is filled with “cultural cows”: ideas, practices, and philosophies in our culture that have simply become part of the landscape and need to be inspected. For some, the time has come to be slaughtered. Others simply need a prod to wake them up and get them moving. With the right prodding, a cow is a far cry from boring, lifeless, and easy to ignore. All of the sudden it is 1000 pounds of powerful energy; and a force that demands attention.

We believe that small groups, as they are typically understood and replicated as a model throughout American churches, are a cultural cow worth inspection. The classic image we all conjure up of 8-12 Christians sitting in a circle in a living room, Bibles open, ready for discussion, preceded by fellowship and closing with prayer requests—is something that needs to be reexamined; prodded, if you will.

No one wants to be audited. Just ask anyone that has ever done their own taxes and the very word sends a shudder down their back. Audits are uncomfortable. They dig deep and require you to investigate and evaluate beyond what simply lies at the surface. Yet, out the other side stands truth and progress.

When it comes to church practices, taking a closer look can be a touchy endeavor, because many of these practices have become “sacred cows.” However, we have to recognize where we are missing the mark before we can innovate new solutions and unleash the power of groups. It’s time to prod the cow.



If you've had any exposure to small groups, then you've heard words like "authentic", "accountability" and "life together", thrown around to describe them. We have to ask ourselves:

1. Are these descriptors truly valid?
2. Should these words even be the pursuit of groups?
3. Do we really believe that our groups, as they are currently expressed, are reaching their full potential?

What This Audit Should Be:

1. A Time For Honest Reflection
2. A Time to Grow Closer As A Group
3. A Time to Brainstorm Better Practices

What This Audit Should Not Be:

1. A "Kum-Bah-Yah," Everything is Perfect Activity
2. A Gripe Session
3. An Opportunity to Call Group Members Out

How To Use This Tool: That is really up to you. You can use it as a 7 week study. You can send it home as group homework. Or, you can use it in conjunction with the "The Shift Exercise" curriculum. The most important thing is allowing group members adequate time for honest reflection. For further content check out Group Publishing's book *"From Couch to Community."*

Homework:

Before next week's discussion read chapters 2 & 3 of "From Couch to Community."

DISCUSSION #1: Groups On Mission

Not long ago Bob, our CFO and elder, made a trip to Starbucks. He waited in line, scanned the menu, and prepared to order. Much to his surprise, the ever-bubbly worker informed him that they were out of coffee. Yes, Starbucks, the embodiment of coffee was out of coffee.

Bob tweeted that morning: “There’s just something about stopping by Starbucks and they’re out of coffee that seems off mission.” (@Bobseymore)

It reminded me of the current dilemma within our small group culture. Starbucks’ mission had not changed that morning, yet everyone would agree they missed the mark. In fact, that’s why we respond to such a statement by saying, “Whaaat? Are you serious? There’s no way that just happened.” It’s hard to imagine Starbucks minus the coffee. It is why they exist. Sure they sell pastries, mugs, and dabble in underground hipster cd’s, but without coffee there is no Starbucks.

For the church, helping people far from God experience Jesus is the coffee. Every other thing the church does (including small groups) is pastries, mugs, and cd’s. People love Starbucks’ pastries, but they go for the coffee.



Discuss the following questions:

1. True or False: If our mission is to help people far from God experience Jesus then it needs to be a stamp (be a main motivation) on everything we do--including small groups. Discuss.
2. Do you believe your group operates with mission in mind? If so, how? If not, dig deep to the why?
3. Do you believe it is important that the purpose of your group fits in with the mission of the church (helping people far from God experience Jesus)? Be honest and discuss the pro's and cons of being a place that welcomes those that do not know Christ.
4. What would happen if an unchurched, secular minded person found their way to your group?
 - Would they feel out of place?
 - Would they understand the discussion?
 - What would that hour+ look like for them? What would they do?
 - Why would they come back?
5. How can your group create environments where people can feel comfortable exploring God in ways that are credible to their lives experientially and intellectually? How can your group help them truly experience Jesus?

Homework:

Before next week's discussion read chapter 4 of "From Couch to Community."

DISCUSSION #2: Is Discipleship Happening?

If I asked you what discipleship looked like in your small group, what would you say? I can tell you where my mind use used to go. It went to the same place as 95% of the people I asked. Almost every person I talked with said that discipleship in small groups was either the “Bible Study,” “Lesson Time,” or Teaching.” What was truly interesting is that across the board they answered as if they both knew it wasn’t true, but felt like they would get in trouble if they answered any other way.

Out of these discussions came the realization that small groups have led us to a pigeon-holed idea of a concept that is wide open and complex. We all know that discipleship is a lifelong journey to know God, but it feels much more attainable if we define it as an hour long Bible Study, once a week. As a result, we elevate our groups formal study time to the point where we allow it to hold our groups hostage. We feel limited in what we can do in our groups because if we believe that our study time really is our only means of discipleship, then we have to make it a central piece of what we do.

If discipleship at its core is being bound to God’s will, isn’t service discipleship? Isn’t wrestling with the questions of God in natural conversation discipleship? Isn’t sacrificing our wants for the sake of someone far from God discipleship? The door is swinging wide open with ways to explore and know God. How can we free our groups up to seek those new ways.

We are not implying that Bible Study has no place in group life. We are not even saying that it shouldn’t be done every week. We are simply saying that we should no longer force our groups to revolve around a formal Bible Study. Just as there are different learning styles, there are different ways to explore God. What draws you and your group members closest to Him may surprise you.



Discuss the following questions:

1. What activity (study, service, discussion, prayer) draws you closest to God?
2. What is the danger of elevating study as the central theme of all we do in groups.
3. On a scale of 1-10, what value do you give to group study time? How can it improve?
4. It is important to remember that we are not trying to determine whether or not Bible Studies are good or bad--rather, we are asking, is discipleship happening? Is your group helping you grow in your faith? Does your group help you draw closer to God? How?
5. If someone far from God visited your group would they be able to take part in your groups study or would they feel like an outsider? Discuss.
6. What are we denying a non-believer by subconsciously suggesting that discipleship and study are one in the same?
7. Have an open and honest discussion of what you feel the role of study should be in your group and why. (We are not suggesting one way or the other--just get a pulse for how your group feels.)

Our Definition of a Disciple: To be bound completely to God's will, through a tangible relationship with God's word, as God's spirit lives in and through us.

- Create Your own "Best Practices" for how to create disciples under this definition.

Homework:

Before next week's discussion read chapter 5 of "From Couch to Community."

DISCUSSION #3: Accountability – To Whom and What?

What are we (the church) talking about when we make the claim that our groups offer accountability?

If you asked 20 different people what accountability looks like, you would likely have 20 different answers. Especially when it comes to accountability in small groups. The truth is we (the church) are not saying much at all on the subject, leaving it wide open for interpretation. Accountability is one of those Christianese words that we use and hope that everyone understands what it means.

Unfortunately, the perception of accountability in groups is the picture of people sitting around in a circle, sharing a box of tissues, and being forced to reveal the deepest failures of their life. While that is not the truth, it is the perception. Without clear understand people morph perception into truth.

This leads to the real question...

Are small groups the proper place for accountability?

This is a question worth wrestling with. The truth is that the current perception of accountability doesn't belong in a small group setting. In no way am I discrediting the idea or need of relational accountability. However, is the proper place in a public small group setting?

What is the cost of implementing the current perception of accountability in groups to quickly? If groups that have met together once a week for 6 months are asking these deep and personal questions, then are groups become a breeding ground for an inauthentic group. Furthermore, what would it feel like if someone far from God was in the room when all this was going down? They would think we were crazy and be praying that they wouldn't get asked to share anything.

While the perception says otherwise, not all forms of accountability are invasive and uncomfortable. After all, we can hold each other accountable to small steps of faith; whether it be service, daily reflection on scripture, or prayer.

By releasing our groups from the current perception of accountability, we can actually start talking about it again and find tangible and natural ways to spur each other on in faith through accountability.

For a deeper look at this discussion check out chapter 5 of "Couch to Community."



Discuss the following questions:

1. What is the picture that comes to mind when you hear the word accountability?
How has it changed over your journey of faith? Think pre-Christ, early Christian, today.
2. Is there anything you can and should help hold each other accountable to as a group?
3. Brainstorm ways you can help hold one another accountable to daily reflection on scripture? Come up with a group plan to implement.
4. Some groups have been together a long time and have deep levels of genuine accountability. While the questions may not seem invasive to your group, what would it feel like for someone far from God that was visiting?
5. Do you believe that accountability is something that should be planned on a weekly/daily basis for group time or should evolve naturally over time? Will it actually happen without planning? Discuss.
6. What is one thing you would like your group to help hold you accountable to?

Homework:

Before next week's discussion read chapter 6 of "From Couch to Community."

4.

DISCUSSION #4: Are Groups Truly Natural & Inviting?

Small Group materials love to paint a picture of happy people in living rooms. Everyone is smiling, the rooms are always painted in soft earth tones, and the food looks like it was photographed by the same guy that shoots the pictures of the French fries on the McDonald's menu. That guy has some kind of gift! People are laughing like they are all best buddies and ignoring all the societal norms of personal space. What are these photos saying? They are saying, "Our small group is so inviting and natural."

The obvious question is...if our small groups are sooo inviting, why is it that we never invite anyone! If our groups are as inviting as they claim, shouldn't actually inviting people be a natural consequence?

If you had to pick a camp you belonged to which would it be?

Camp 1: You know everyone at church and everyone at church knows you. You've sat in the same seat for years and comfortably fit in the church routine. For you, church is easy. Your small group probably meets at a good friend's house and is mostly made up of people you have known for years.

Camp 2: You are new to the Christian faith or recently renewed your church involvement--certainly new to "Christian Practices." You're on board with what the church is asking you to do, but you aren't too sure about it. You've still got a lot of questions and need a comfortable place to ask them.

Camp 3: You aren't even sure you believe any of this stuff. At church last Sunday they called you an "Explorer"--whatever that means. Most of your preconceived notions of Christians and what it means to be a Christian are negative. The only reason you're even here is because of a personal relationship or a deep longing to search for something more meaningful in life.



Discuss the following questions:

1. Which camp best describes you?
2. Think of your current small group in relation to each camp. How would each camp respond differently to the claim of “natural and inviting?”
 - Camp One:
 - Camp Two:
 - Camp Three:
3. How can we design our group time so that those in Camp 3 can get to know and be comfortable around other members of the group? Icebreakers are not the answer here.
4. It is highly unlikely that someone in camp 3 is going to go through one of our small group connection events. What are three ways that someone in camp 2 or 3 find their way to your group?
5. Time for honesty. Why is it that we never invite anyone to small groups? Is it the nature of the group--Your own fear of asking--or Do we feel our groups aren't relevant to someone who doesn't know God?

Homework:

Before next week's discussion read chapter 7 of "From Couch to Community."

DISCUSSION #5: What is Authentic?

We love to use the term “authentic” in our small group marketing. We say that groups are a place where you can come and be the real you. Jump in, let your hair down, and take off the masks. The question is--what are we even trying to get at with all this authentic talk? What does it mean for our groups to be authentic? How do you define “authentic community?”

In *From Couch to Community* we make the argument that to truly be deemed an authentic community you need to inspect the individual pieces of “authenticity” to make up the whole concept.

- **Authentic Relationships**
- **Authentic Selves**
- **Authentic Acts**

Discuss what each of these pieces mean. How do you define them?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Something to think about: If we meet together to fellowship just because our groups are suppose to fellowship, that is not authentic action. If we plan and complete service projects just because our groups are suppose to do service projects, that is not authentic action. If I go and hang out on a friend’s porch just because I feel like hanging out on a friend porch, that is not authentic Christian action.

However...

If Christ is at the center of all we do–If we are making intentional decisions based on the mission of Christ, all of the sudden everything we do becomes authentic. Intentional fellowship becomes authentic. Service surrounding mission becomes authentic. Hanging on a porch with a group of friends becomes authentic Christian action.



Discuss the following questions:

1. What does it mean to have authentic relationships? Is it more than just being good friends?
2. Authentic selves: Why is there a struggle to reveal our “truest selves” around other believers? Should we live “filtered” lives?
3. What is the cost/risk of not voicing our own doubts and deep questions to others?
4. When we act like we have it all together, when we act like our relationship with God is always easy, what does that do to someone who is far from God trying to begin a walk of faith?
5. In what ways is your group living out authentic Christian action? In what ways is your group missing the mark in that category?
6. What do your relationships outside of church look like compared to those inside of church?

Homework:

Before next week's discussion read chapter 8 of "From Couch to Community."

DISCUSSION #6: Life Together: Is it Possible?

Whoever came up with the descriptor of “life together” for small groups is a master marketer. It sounds so calm—so clean and tidy—manageable. Who would not be drawn to the thought that we can schedule meaningful relationships into the chaos of life?

So, in the midst of the chaos, what does it mean to do life together?

Painting a picture of life together does not fit in a neat, concise paragraph, but much like our life, it splatters paint all over the page. Our lives are complex, and as a natural consequence, the concept of life together is complex. To know if our groups really live “life together” we need to filter our experience through some basic principles of life in relationship. We have identified *Seven Principles of Life Together*:

- 1. Life Together Exists in REAL Life.**
- 2. Life Together is Celebratory.**
- 3. Life Together Has Meat.**
- 4. Life Together is Intentional.**
- 5. Life Together takes Commitment.**
- 7: Life Together Shares Mission**

Chapter 8 of “*From Couch to Community*” speaks in detail on each of these principles.



Discuss the following questions:

1. What does “Life Together” really look like in today’s ultra-busy culture?
2. Take time discuss and define each of the Seven Principles of Life Together. Looking at the list, which principles do you feel is a strength in your group? Which is a weakness?
3. What do you think the following statement means?: “Some might even claim that our groups operate outside of real life.”
4. Does your group authentically celebrate each other’s “wins” outside of group time?
5. In what ways does life together take commitment? Think in terms of a new group forming.
6. Group dynamics can shroud reality. Do you feel like you have personal relationships with the individuals in your group?
7. What is your groups mission?
8. What are natural ways for your group to get to know each other better? List three activities/service opportunities you can do together over the next 6 months.

Homework:

Before next week’s discussion read chapter 8 of “From Couch to Community.”

DISCUSSION #7: Is the Typical Small Group Biblical?

As a group, describe what comes to mind when someone says, “small group.” Get as detailed as possible and create a list of what the typical weekly small group time looks like.

Now turn to Acts 2:42, every small group pastors favorite verse and the verse that is used most when talking about small groups.

“The community continually committed themselves to learning what the apostles taught them, gathering for fellowship, breaking bread, and praying.” - Acts 2:42

The model seems clear, right? Large attractational services, with smaller, more intimate breakouts. Within the breakouts, or small groups, we should include the activities of studying the Bible (apostles teaching), fellowship, prayer, and sharing a meal. Pepper in a part of verse 46, and we have these groups meet in homes, and the whole package is wrapped with a nice little bow. We have the “Perfect Biblical Small Group Model.”

However, how can we be an Acts 2:42 church and not an Acts 2:45 church? Read Acts 2:44-45.

“They shared all their material possessions in trust. They sold any possessions and goods that did not benefit the community and used the money to help everyone in need.” - Acts 2:44-45

If you prescribe part of a passage, shouldn't you prescribe the rest of it? We have so precious few glimpses at the first century church and how it operated that we tend to heighten the importance of those few times we do get a seemingly straightforward look. So much so that we idealize what we find and say, “We want to be an Acts 2:42 church.” But again, how can we be an Acts 2:42 and not an Acts 2:45 church? Especially when a few chapters later (4:32-35) it isn't verse 42 and 46 that are reinforced, but rather verses 43-45.

This brings us to a seemingly odd but ultimately freeing realization—we don't really have a “Biblical Model” for small groups at all. Jesus doesn't give a cryptic parable concerning small group formation, none of the apostles address it, and Paul leave no instructions. It is because they are not Biblical



Let me stress, neither are they un-Biblical. But the typical small group model of 8-12 Christians gathered in a living room, in a circle, to discuss a book or previous week's sermon, preceded by icebreakers and snacks, and concluded with prayer—add or subtract a few variables—is not prescribed by Scripture.

This opens the discussion of what groups should look like quite a bit!

For a more in-depth look at this idea read chapter 9 of *“From Couch to Community.”*

Discuss the following questions:

Look at the following statements of Christian Community:

- The ultimate purpose of Christ-centered communities is for them to glorify God, make his name known, and bring others into a rescuing relationship with him.
- A group of people called out by God to impact another person or groups of people who are far from God, for the name and purpose of Jesus Christ.
- A group of people who love each other, united through a common joy, and sharing and living the story of Christ.

1. If this is all you had to go on, how would that change the dynamics of your group?
2. If you could erase your notion of what a small group was suppose to be, what would it look like based on the entire story of Scripture?
3. How has the typical model for small groups acted as a cage for our understanding of living out Biblical Christian community?
4. How is it freeing that there is no “Biblical Model” for small groups?
5. The vision of the early church found in Acts 2:42-47 (as well as other places) is a description of a uniquely Christian community inside its wider culture. Is there anything uniquely Christian about our small groups that are a contrast to the wider culture of today? How can we tap into it during group time?

FINAL THOUGHTS

What if this Sunday, from the pulpit, your pastor said, “We are closing the book on small groups. Each group must dissolve effective immediately?” What would happen?

- The first question to ask--Would Christian community cease to exist?
- The follow up question--Would groups begin to form naturally within this community?
- And finally--What would they look like and what would their purpose be?

Somewhere in the answers to these questions there is a secret to the potential of Christian community. There was a time in history when communities of motivated and passionate Christians steered culture and we believe it can be done again.

With this audit, you have taken the first step--an honest evaluation of the value and purpose of our small groups and a group of believers (you) brainstorming ways to be better. If nothing else, we hope this exercise got your group talking and brought you closer.

If this study has sparked your interest on really getting your groups on mission and you're wondering what to do next, check out the follow-up curriculum titled “The Shift Exercise.” This will take you on a step-by-step journey of what you were made for and how to use your groups to impact the world in light of that.

We would love to hear the stories of your small groups journey. Feel free to share at www.culturalcows.com



SMALL GROUP AUDIT

Rate the following 1 - 10

My group...

Helps me grow in my faith	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Spends time w/ each other outside of group	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Knows why we meet together (knows its mission)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Keeps me accountable to acts of faith/service	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Is a place where explorers are comfortable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Is made up of all 3 camps of faith	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Celebrates with one another	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Has a presence in the community	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

These are the things my group does well...

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

These are the things my group could do better...

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

The current value this group holds on my life is **1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10**

I am committed to being a part of the solution and helping my group reach full potential

Sign: _____ Date: _____

Revisit this page in 6 months.

This content has been based off of the book "From Couch to Community" and is being used with permission from Group Publishing.