



Casting a Vision for Small Groups

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How to Use This Resource

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

By Sam O'Neal

If you want to launch a small-groups ministry in your church, there really are two ways to do it.

The first is to start your own small group, pour your time and effort into leading it, and then watch it grow. As you cultivate a healthy community of believers who grow deeper in their knowledge of God and impact the world around them, you'll certainly catch the attention of your larger church. And, over time, the doors may open for a larger small-groups ministry in your church. This is a more natural kind of growth.

The second way is to launch an official, church-sponsored ministry. This is a "boom or bust" method of growth. You'll still start your own small group and pour effort into helping it grow, but you'll also have the support of the church behind you to give others the same chance right away. In order for this to work, you'll need to convince the pastor and other church leaders about the value of small groups. And in order to do that, you'll need to cast a vision.

Target Audience

This download was designed to give guidance and direction to the person (or group of people) in your church who is passionate about small groups and wants to see that ministry become a core value of church life. This could be a pastor or staff person. This could be an elder or key church leader. This could also be a "regular" group leader who loves his or her small group and wants to see the ministry expanded.

Why Small Groups?

In putting together this download, I wanted to have one article that explained—briefly and efficiently—why a church should consider a small-groups ministry. I was thinking of things like: de-centralizing the church's ministry, providing a platform for leadership training, relieving classroom and parking pressures at the church building, etc.

I asked Dan Lentz to write up this article since he has been such an effective advocate for small groups for such a long time. What he sent back was not what I was expecting. Rather, it was a pleasant surprise, and a reminder for me of the true reason small groups should be raised up as a core ministry of any church.

Casting the Vision

Once you have a firm grasp on the core purpose of small groups and the place of community ministry in your church, the next step is to begin casting the vision in a targeted way. In "The Basics," Eddie Mosley gives a good overview of those steps. And Rod Dempsey provides several more items to think about in "Successfully Transitioning to Small Groups."

One of the biggest steps in this process is making an official presentation to your senior pastor about the vision and value of small groups. Rick Howerton's article (p. 16) will help you be as prepared as possible for that critical meeting. It will also give you some direction on making similar presentations to a group of elders or a church board.

And once you've got the support of the church leadership behind you, Tom Bandy's piece on "Small-Group Advertising" will be invaluable in helping you extend the vision of small groups to the new leaders and members you hope the ministry will serve.

Finally, I'm guessing that "But We Already Have Sunday School!" contains some useful information and strategies for many of you reading this. The presence of established discipleship ministries can be one of the biggest obstacles in the path of establishing small groups, and Sunday school is very common.

My Take

For what it's worth, here are a few of my own observations on the process of casting the vision for an expanded small-groups ministry. These are just some of the things I've noticed or observed as I've done the research necessary to put this training resource together.

- **Understand the "why."** Please don't look past the "Why Small Groups" section at the beginning of this resource. Before you even think of casting a vision, you need to have a vision that is worth the effort. So, why do you want small groups to be a major part of your church? Do you need more space? Did you attend a conference? Are you responding to a fad? Those reasons won't carry enough inertia to launch a successful ministry.
- **Know the ministry you're looking for.** There are certain elements of a small-groups ministry that really need to be defined from the very beginning. Chief among them is whether individual groups will be expected to "multiply" by dividing after a year or two and producing new groups. See "Casting a Vision for Group Multiplication" for more information.

Other items include: What will the groups study? Will the study material be based on the weekly sermon? What kind of support system will be set up to recruit, train, and encourage small-group leaders?

—SAM O'NEAL; copyright 2009 by the author and Christianity Today International.

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Why Small Groups?

The answer may surprise you.

By Dan Lentz

Whenever I'm faced with a question like, "Why should we use small groups?" I like to review a little background. When Jesus left the earth and ascended into heaven (Acts 1:1–15), the disciples were left looking up into the sky in wonder and mystery. Rather than going their separate ways, those disciples gathered back together in an upper room in Jerusalem.

Being together was the one thing they knew to do after spending these last few years together with Jesus. It was in the upper room that the next part of God's plan was set into motion. What transformed a few sinful and selfish individuals from sky-staring groupies to a world changing small group?

Christ's Holy Spirit.

At its core, a small group is simply a gathering of Spirit-indwelt people who have intentional growing relationships with the Lord and each other, and who use those relationships to help fulfill Christ's mission for the church. The essence of small groups is not much more complex than that.

It's tempting to try and attach a lot of other motivations for doing small groups. Motivations like: it keeps people connected, groups will help our church grow, it takes the pressure off our church facility space, and more. These motivations are valid in several ways. But until you can embrace the simple value of the early church pattern that a small group is people in mission-driven relationship to God and one another, you will always have value confusion in your church about the nature of small groups. And, without missional relational ministry, we fall short of our calling as a Christian community.

Got Small Groups?

Interestingly enough, I don't know of a church that doesn't have small groups in one form or another. Lots of them don't have declared small-group ministries, but people get into small groups regardless of whether small groups are an "official" ministry or not. People naturally and automatically seek out relationships. It's been said that if someone new to the church doesn't form a relationship with someone else within a few months, they are likely to leave the church or at best always be on the fringe.

Jesus didn't try to organize a small-groups ministry. Instead, he started a relational ministry that functioned in a small group. He modeled and taught what it means to live in relationship to God and one another through his everyday life. Yes, Jesus participated in the Jewish Synagogue activities, but his ministry was in everyday life.

Once Jesus ascended back to heaven, the believers continued the practice:

They joined with the other believers and devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, sharing in the Lord's Supper and in prayer. A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. And all the believers met together constantly and shared everything they had. They sold their possessions and shared the proceeds with those in need. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved (Acts 2:42–47, NLT).

The results of this life together are that:

- The Body, the Church, heals itself as it is fitted together in community (Ephesians 4:11–16).
- Grace is administered in various forms (1 Peter 4:10).
- People are spurred on to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:23–25).
- This biblical community creates a picture of Christ that non-believers see, and as a result, it attracts more and more people to Jesus (John 17:20–23).

Answering the Why Question Begins with Values

Settle the issue in your own mind and heart first. Is relational ministry in small groups an add-on program, one ministry among many, or part of the fabric of your overall church life? If you don't get clear on that, you will run into walls later. Even if you don't know yet where your church is on this value, at least make the issue clear with yourself before moving ahead. Otherwise, you may find it difficult to persevere through the hard work of growing small groups.

Consider what Paul said in Colossians 1:28–2:3:

So everywhere we go, we tell everyone about Christ. We warn them and teach them with all the wisdom God has given us, for we want to present them to God, perfect in their relationship to Christ. I work very hard at this, as I depend on Christ's mighty power that works within me. I want you to know how much I have agonized for you and for the church at Laodicea, and for many other friends who have never known me personally.

My goal is that they will be encouraged and knit together by strong ties of love. I want them to have full confidence because they have complete understanding of God's secret plan, which is Christ himself. In him lie hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (NLT, my emphasis).

Paul said he worked very hard to achieve the goal of people being encouraged and knit together by strong ties of love. He said the result of this work, of this knitting people together, was that these relational ties would help people know Christ himself.

You and I won't ever know Jesus Christ as well as we could unless we are knit together with others. I share my life stories with you, you share your life stories with me.

Together, we share the life story of Jesus as revealed in Scripture. And, over time, our life stories start to sound a lot more like Jesus' life story.

Watch the Language!

I have found that a big key is to watch my language, both in personal conversations and public forums. I would never say the essence of church is a building, worship service, or set of traditions. But I have learned that when I constantly say I am "going" to church or involved in things "at" church, or I ask someone "where" his church is located or what "time" church starts, I communicate that church is really about what happens in a specific building at a specific time each week. Everything else that happens in life—including family, vocation, and even small groups—is automatically seen as secondary to "doing church."

You might say it's just semantics, but your vocabulary indicates what you think and believe. Be clear about your paradigm: do you go to church or are you being the church?

Like the apostle Paul, you must have clarity about the importance of relational ministry in your own heart, and be living it yourself so you will be willing to work hard to declare it to others. When you have this clarity, then the next time you explain the "Why Small Groups?" question to the lady who just visited your weekend worship service, your elder board, or the unbelieving next door neighbor, you won't regurgitate an answer you learned from a book or small-group seminar. You will be able to speak from experience and passion.

— DAN LENTZ is an Editorial Advisor for SmallGroups.com and author of [Let's Get Started!](#)
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Discuss:

1. Before reading this article, what did I consider to be the main benefit of our church embracing small groups?
2. Has anything changed?
3. Does any part of our vision or plan need to be clarified after reading this article?

The Purpose of Small Groups

It's all about the marriage of large-group gatherings and small-group communities.

By Rick Diefenderfer

Churches begin using small groups for a variety of reasons, and some are more valid than others. Here is a list of seven reasons why your church should carve out a space for small-group community.

1. Everything in life revolves around relationships—everything. The most important relationship is reserved for our heavenly Father through his Son Jesus Christ: a vertical relationship. But let us not be so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly good. Horizontal relationships bring balance in this life. And the best horizontal relationships are covenant commitments to “do life” with others—to become connected with others in a basic Christian community.
2. Both the Great Commandment and the Great Commission emphasize this balance between a vertical relationship with God and a horizontal relationship with others.
3. A church should be large enough to celebrate while remaining small enough to care.
4. It's hard to form relationships and come into community when people sit in rows looking at the back of each other's heads on Sunday mornings.
5. In Acts 20:20, Paul says: “You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.” Many have called this combination of effective preaching and house-to-house teaching a 20/20 vision for the church.
6. In Acts 2:41–47, we read that the early Christians were involved in nine basic activities. They:
 - Believed in Jesus Christ
 - Were baptized
 - Were added to the group
 - Spent their time in learning
 - Took part in fellowship
 - Shared their possessions
 - Prayed together
 - Met regularly as a group to worship
 - Regularly added new believers to the group.

7. In *The Bride: Renewing Our Passion for the Church*, Charles Swindoll writes about these verses from Acts: "What a scene! Here in ancient Jerusalem was a group of believers whose worship was spontaneous, whose instruction was substantial, whose fellowship was genuine, and whose expressions were compassionate. No wonder so many new folks were attracted! It is no surprise to me that the Lord added to their number day after day." Swindoll adds, "When we embrace these objectives, several benefits come our way. Our eyes will get off ourselves and unto the Lord. Our own petty differences are minimized, which deepens the unity of the relationship. And all this, when kept in balance, creates such a magnetism that the church becomes irresistible. And then? Well, then we start becoming what the church was originally designed to be—irresistible!"

Why have small groups? So the church can once again become an irresistible community where a person can love and be loved, know and be known, serve and be served, celebrate and be celebrated.

Summary: In Acts 2:41–47; 20:20; and throughout Scripture we discover large-group worship wed to small-group communities. The large-group worship is the time to focus on our personal relationship with God. This is also the time to receive biblical instruction. The experience of large-group worship helps fulfill the first half of the Great Commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37).

The gathered large group then becomes scattered small groups of people meeting in the homes of church members each week. The focus of small-group community is to discuss and apply of the teaching of the previous week's message, and also to become connected with one another as we express our faith in Jesus Christ through edification and lifestyle evangelism. This fellowship and expression of our faith in Jesus Christ is the focus of small-group community, and helps fulfill the second part of the Great Commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39).

— RICK DIEFENDERFER; copyright 2000 by the author and www.SmallGroups.com.

Discuss:

1. Do I agree with all of the statements made above? Why or why not?
2. Can I state in one line the purpose for an effective small-groups ministry?
3. How does this purpose fit the current needs of our church?

The Basics

A broad overview of the steps you'll take toward launching groups in your church.

By Eddie Mosley

Have you been hearing stories about what small groups are doing for other churches? Have you ever thought about starting a small-groups ministry at your church? Here are several items to keep in mind as you begin exploring the process.

Questions to Consider

One of the first questions you need to consider is, "Am I in a small group?" Most churches think in terms of programs—what programs are working and which ones do we need to start next? But small groups are not a program; they are a life experience that requires personal involvement.

Small groups are highly relational and connect with the heart, not the head. That's why it's not a good idea to base the vision of your small-groups ministry on statistics—to say, "Small groups increased attendance at our neighbor church 50 percent." To cast the vision for small groups in your church, stories need to be told. And you must be experiencing the story yourself for it to be real and personal to others.

Therefore, the first step to casting a vision for small groups in your church is for you and your family to start a small group. Invite three or four other couples to join your group and spend three or four months together. Then you can begin to tell the stories of connection and life change that are taking place—and tell them as often as possible.

Here are some other questions to help guide your vision casting.

- **Why do you want to start small groups in your church?** This question is especially important for churches that run a Sunday school program. You'll need to help others understand why a church or staff should consider starting something new or adding to a long-time, successful program that already seems to be accomplishing the same thing.

In addition to spiritual growth for individuals, you'll want to emphasize the effect that small groups will have on church resources. That's right. Resources—like people, money, and time—are valuable commodities for churches. So emphasize freeing up classroom space and parking lots for other ministries because people will be meeting in their homes for Bible study instead of on the church campus for Sunday school. Literature costs can also decrease since most small groups purchase their own Bible study material.

- **What do you hope to accomplish with small groups?** It may surprise you, but many people will immediately be threatened by the phrase "small groups."

Maybe they've had a bad experience, or maybe they've heard some negative things about the small-group movement that was imported from South Korea in the 80's. In addition, most churches emphasize the importance of Bible study, which means your church may feel like small groups will be redundant.

So it will be important for you to emphasize that biblical discipleship goes beyond just studying the Bible. A successful small-groups ministry will include accountability, connection, service, and life-changing discussions. In other words, adding or starting small groups in your church will provide more opportunity to accomplish the vision found in Acts 2:42–47.

Only after you have addressed these initial questions will you want to move on to the stages described below.

Casting Vision to the Pastor

In most churches, the senior pastor is the ultimate vision caster for any new idea, ministry, or missions endeavor. So having the pastor's heart and leadership is vital to the success of any small-groups ministry. This may be the time to take him out to lunch and get him on board. Small groups do not need a lot of money for literature, furniture, or building space, but they do need a lot of outlets to tell stories about true community and transformation. The pulpit is the most powerful outlet for these stories.

Now is also the time to start a pilot small group with some friends and neighbors. As I mentioned above, sharing the vision for small groups cannot be successful without true stories. If you have no story of your experiences with small groups, you have no message, no vision, and no passion for what they can accomplish. If possible, identify a few other staff or church leaders who might be interested in a small group. Pray for these people often, then ask them to start their own pilot group and share their stories, as well.

These stories of life change via small groups will give you the opportunity to continue the conversation with the pastor and church staff. Encourage each of them to participate in a small group. This will increase the excitement of small groups and stories of life change will be multiplied.

Casting Vision to Church Leaders

As stories of small-group life begin to spread, more and more people will become interested in participating. This will help in casting the vision to the deacons, board members, Sunday school teachers, and other key church leaders. In addition to the stories, continue to articulate how small groups will help alleviate the need for space, enable people to serve, and build meaningful relationships.

And as more people get involved in the ministry, the need for more small-group leaders will quickly become obvious. Two practices will make a quick difference in solving this need. One is to ask each staff member to lead a group for 6 or 12 months. Second, every group must practice apprenticing. This one-two punch will ensure that you have the leaders you need for both now and the future.

— EDDIE MOSLEY is Executive Director of GroupLife at LifePoint Church in Smyrna, TN.
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Discuss:

1. What experience do I have with small groups? What stories can I share that reveal the benefits of small groups?
2. What steps can I take to help my senior pastor catch the vision for small groups?
3. What steps will need to be taken in order to get a few pilot groups started in our church? Who could lead these groups?

Successfully Transitioning to Small Groups

Eleven steps to keep in mind as you shift the gears of your church.

By Rod Dempsey

If you are thinking about making the transition to small groups in your church, there are several things to consider. First you need to decide what type of church you want to become: a church “with” small groups, a church “of” small groups, or a church that “is” small groups.

Making the transition to become a church “with” small groups is not a big deal. These churches view small groups as one of several different programs targeted at spiritual growth and discipleship. Most churches already have some small groups, but they may not be aware of where they meet, who leads them and what they are doing. That is a church “with” small groups.

To become a church “of” small groups requires some retrofitting of the church’s model, and usually some rearranging of priorities. In addition, you will probably need a staff person involved in overseeing the groups, and maybe even some support personnel. Small groups in these churches receive attention from the senior pastor, and they are included in the church’s budget and calendar planning. The leaders may receive some training, and the church regularly adds new groups throughout the year. That is what a church “of” small groups looks like.

The transition to a church that “is” small groups is no small feat. It requires a complete transformation from an organizational model to an organic model. Practices flow from principles, and principles come from passages. Serious work is done to exegete what a New Testament community looks like. In these situations, the senior pastor becomes the point person for the small-group ministry. Sunday morning Celebration services are simply a collection of groups that gather together for praise, teaching, and worship. Groups multiply on a regular basis. Other programs and ministries are de-emphasized and may even be cut from the church altogether.

Whatever level of transition you decide upon, here are 11 things you will need to keep in mind. These are based upon years of personal transitional experience.

1. **Seek God’s direction from his Word.** Examine passages like the Great Commandment, the Great Commission, and the New Commandment and ask yourself the question, “Are we following the exhortations from these passages? Are we developing Christians that look like these passages?” Go to Acts 2:42–47 and Ephesians 4:11–16 and ask yourself whether or not you are following the example of the early church. Go to Colossians 1:28 and examine whether or not you are seeking to present “every man” complete in Christ. The focus is on the individual. Are you developing every person in the body to stand before Christ and not be ashamed?

2. **Make sure the senior pastor is in the lead position.** The job of “making disciples” is not to be delegated to others in the church. Pastors are to “make disciples.” That is their job description. Preaching, leading, fundraising, counseling, marriages, funerals—all of these are part of making disciples. The things of the ministry should not take our focus off enabling and empowering individuals to reach their full potential related to the Great Commission. If we are growing and developing disciples, Jesus has promised to “be with us.”
3. **Adopt a model that fits who and where you are.** You may want to become a church that “is” small groups, but you may not be able to get there, or you may not be able to get there quickly. That is okay. Just make sure that you are emphasizing the right priorities from the Scriptures—winning people to Christ, helping them to grow in Christ, and then sending them out for Christ. Form follows function. If your goal is to become a healthy church that is producing disciples who are willing to go out from the church, then you must develop forms and structures that allow and promote those very things. Remember, “You cannot be committed to the person of Christ without being committed to the mission of Christ.”
4. **Leadership training.** Leading a group is spiritual business, and it will be opposed by the enemy if done correctly. Let’s not put people into difficult spiritual positions of leadership without some basic training in the art and science of making disciples. Basic questions like, “Why should I lead a group?” and “How do I lead a small-group discussion?” or “How do I handle a challenging group member?” People need answers to these questions before they start leading a group.
5. **Launch the new groups!** After much prayer and planning and training, you will eventually need to launch some new groups in your church. I like to launch groups in the fall after Labor Day. Everybody is back for school and their minds automatically begin thinking of a fall routine. This is a great time to launch a group ministry. After you launch the new groups, you need to decide whether or not the groups will meet all through the year, or on a school calendar (taking the summer off). Either approach has strengths and weaknesses, and you’ll need to determine what best fits your situation.
6. **Grow the groups in quantity and quality.** Special attention must be given to the new groups so that they will grow strong and healthy. When a mother gives birth to a newborn, special attention is given to the baby’s growth and development. The parents are very concerned about every aspect of the baby’s well being. If the baby does not grow and develop, it could become sick and die. The same is true for the new group.
7. **Retrain the leaders to retain the leaders.** After the initial training period, we do not leave the new groups as orphans. We check on them through personal

mentoring and coaching. We invite them to attend some additional training courses at the church, or to attend a small-groups conference out of town. We could purchase a book about small-group leadership and give a copy to every small-group leader and discuss during our coaching clusters. The idea here is that leaders need additional training to stay focused and to improve the quality of discipleship.

8. **Over communicate.** Rick Warren has made this statement: "People are down on what they are not up on." Most ministries are guilty of not communicating enough with the people in their church. Let's make sure that small-group leaders are getting enough information from the leaders of the ministry.
9. **Utilize a coaching structure.** I like the 5 x 5 model of coaching. This means one pastor for every five directors, one director for every five coaches, and one coach for every five groups. This model is based on Exodus 18, where Jethro told Moses that the thing he was doing "was not good." As a result, the Israelites implemented a structure based upon thousands, hundred's, fifties and ten. Attention should be given all the way down to the individual in the organization.
10. **Pray.** This is very simple, but very difficult. Joel Comiskey did a study on several groups that were healthy and multiplying, and he discovered that there was one common denominator between them: the leader of the group prayed one average one hour a day. So emphasize the importance of prayer in your groups, and you just might see miraculous things happen. Remember: "Nothing of eternal significance ever happens apart from prayer."
11. **See God's blessing.** Jesus said in the Great Commission that if we made disciples, he would be with us. We can receive the promise of the power and presence of Jesus Christ with us—if we will determine to make disciples. Small groups are the best place to make disciples, because Christianity is more caught than taught.

Making the transition to become a church "of" small groups or church that "is" small groups is possible if we intentionally and strategically make the decision to make disciples that bring glory to Christ. Look over this list of 11 suggestions and circle the top 2 or 3 areas that need attention. Then prayerfully meet with your team and formulate an action plan to transition into a disciple-making church!

— ROD DEMPSEY is Chairman of Discipleship Ministries at Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary. Copyright 2009 by the author and Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. What type of church do we want to become: "with," "of," or "is"?
2. Which of the steps mentioned above have we already addressed or accomplished? What fruit have we seen?
3. Which step will be the most difficult to tackle? How can we get started now?

Presenting the Vision to Your Senior Pastor

An in-depth look at your first step in casting the vision for small groups.

By Rick Howerton

"I have to start a small-groups ministry for my church." Did you catch the first word in that sentence? That's a very lonely expression: *I*. Most times, when a lay leader or staff member determines that their church needs a small-group ministry, they are the *one* individual that has come to this conclusion. This is a tough place to be, and a tough way to get anything really accomplished.

In order for a small-groups ministry to take flight, it must first be blessed by the senior pastor and church board. If presented purposefully, passionately, wisely, and effectively, the dream of successful small groups may be embraced wholeheartedly by the church and used to renovate broken lives for generations. If presented poorly, it may explode on the runway and never gain enough speed to become airborne.

Pastor Priority

The lone small-groups visionary must first capture the heart and the head of the senior pastor. For the majority of American churches, that position is where the buck ultimately stops.

When presenting the dream of small groups to your church's senior leader, there are a few things you should be aware of before you make your pitch:

- Effective senior leaders have their own vision for the church. Your vision for small groups must assist in accomplishing the senior pastor's vision.
- Most senior leaders are trying to infuse a healthy balance of their church's core values—preaching, teaching, worship, discipleship, evangelism, service, and so on. Be sure to identify which of these values will benefit from small groups.
- Your level of effectiveness in accomplishing work in the past will affect the pastor's willingness to try something new on your recommendation. If you've presented ideas in the past but have not followed through, that could be a problem. Before approaching your pastor, make sure you have a complete strategy worked out. Outline what needs to be accomplished and how the work will be completed for at least the next 18 months.

The Pitch

When presenting the vision of small groups to your church's senior leader, make an appointment—don't just "drop by." And be sure to set aside enough time to do a well-prepared, well-organized, well-rehearsed presentation. On the same note, leave enough time to answer any questions that may follow.

Do your homework so that you can produce information and stories that will help your pastor become enthusiastic toward your cause. This is doubly beneficial because the same information that excites your pastor will excite other key leaders the pastor will have to sell this ministry to. Remember: You are handing your senior pastor ammunition for later conversations he will have with board members, elders, and other key leaders.

Here are some focus points for building enthusiasm:

- **Acts 2:42–47.** This biblical basis for small groups is a great starting point.
- **Statistics.** Tell of churches that are doing small groups well—the percentage of members who are involved, any increase in attendance, the number of people who have chosen faith in Christ through the small-groups ministry, and so on.
- **Benefits.** Lay out the benefits that small groups will provide for different sections of the church. For example, if the church chooses to replace an evening worship service with small groups, there will be one less sermon to prepare. Staff will have more opportunities for personal spiritual growth, meaningful relationships with lay-leaders, and less programming to prepare for. There will also be less childcare needs.
- **Vision.** Share your vision for small-groups ministry. Remember: A vision is “the mental image of the final outcome”—a snapshot of what the church will look like when the ministry is up and running and flourishing. You should be able to describe your vision in one paragraph.

But you must have more than a vision. You must also be ready to present a strategy that is built around principles and practices. Visions are exciting, but pragmatists will see your vision as just another dreamer’s dream if there is no workable plan capable of turning that vision into a reality.

The Plan

So your presentation needs to include a plan. If your senior pastor is enthusiastic about your vision and the benefits of small groups for your church, then communicating this plan to the elders/church board will be the next step.

Your plan needs to include the following:

- Your vision for small groups (as described above).
- Why you believe this ministry is important to the church at this time.
- The basic principles and practices of small-group life, especially if they differ from the traditional Bible studies that have been a part of the church’s classes to this point.
- The kinds of groups you anticipate will make up the small-group ministry. (Will they be affinity groups, neighborhood groups, age-segregated, or something else?)

- What changes in the weekly church calendar and/or leadership structure will be necessary?
- A line item budget outlining expenditures for the first year of the small-group ministry.
- The number of additional staff members that will be required, if any. You may not need a new staff person, but additional hours that will be needed from you and/or your assistant will be a concern of the church leadership.
- The number of new lay leaders that you anticipate will be necessary to accomplish the ministry—and where you'll find them.
- A step-by-step process for getting this ministry off the ground. This process could include: 1) Putting together a core team of people who value small groups, 2) Crafting a purpose statement for the ministry, 3) Creating core values, 4) Recruiting the first generation of small-group leaders, 5) Training the first generation of small-group leaders, and 6) Empowering the first generation of group leaders to lead groups of their own.

You will also need to be prepared to answer the following questions:

1. With everything the church is already doing, why do we need a small-groups ministry?
2. How will we determine who will be in a group together?
3. How will you enlist group members?
4. How many people will be in each group?
5. How long will these groups last before multiplying?
6. What will each group do about childcare?
7. How can we be sure there is no false teaching in these groups?
8. How will this ministry help in our goal to make Christ known to those who don't yet have a relationship with him?
9. What do you want to see happen in each person's life that invests their time to one of these groups?
10. What level of commitment do you need from me/us?

The answer to question number 10 is very important, since it will affect each person in the room. Here is the level of commitment that you can reasonable expect from (and request of) your church's leadership:

- A commitment to allow you and your team the time necessary to get the ministry up and running. If done right, this could take up to a year.
- A commitment to pray for you, your leadership team, and the ministry.
- A commitment to bless failures as opportunities to learn.

- A commitment to be involved in group life. These key leaders are models for the rest of the church. If your church is presently a Sunday School church, request that senior pastor and board members be involved in either a small group or a Sunday School class. If you are going to be a small-groups only church, it will be important that each board member and the senior pastor be involved in a small group. It would be ideal if a few of them would be willing to lead a small group of their own.

You may be asking yourself the question, “Why would I spend hours researching and preparing for these conversations when I might get turned down anyway?” The truth is, many people with dreams come to their church leaders with a vision. But few have done their homework. When important questions are asked, they have no answers. And so they are turned down because they weren’t well prepared.

Take the time to do your homework. Prepare to host a great presentation, and you will have a much greater chance of getting permission rather than being refused the opportunity to make Jesus famous through small groups.

You won’t be a lonely “I” for long. If you are able to share your vision and a strategy to accomplish it, you’ll soon be surrounded by your senior pastor, church board, and a small-group leadership team that are all excited about small groups in your church. Imagine what could be accomplished then!

— RICK HOWERTON is the “Small Group-Ologist” for [Serendipity by LifeWay](#). Copyright 2009 by the author and Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. Does the information here seem daunting? If so, why?
2. Which of the steps outlined above will be the simplest to accomplish? Which will be the hardest?
3. What is the first step that needs to be taken, and when can you take it?

Before You Find Your Leaders

Eight questions to ask when you are ready to begin the recruiting process.

By Rick Lowry

When a church launches a small groups program—or has only a few groups and wants to enlarge the current program—leadership is a key issue. How do we find those initial group leaders?

But before you begin that all-important search, you'll need to answer these questions to help things go as smoothly (and successfully) as possible.

1. What life stage is our church experiencing? If this is a newly planted church, small groups can be built into its DNA right from the beginning, and small-group participation can become the normal expectation of anyone in leadership. The church's initial overall leadership team can also become the small-group leadership team.

An existing church, on the other hand, will have already developed systems for care and discipleship, with key leadership roles built into those systems. Either the current shepherding structures will need to be changed, or the current leaders will need to shift their thinking about where to invest their leadership gift. In this case, the change to a small-groups model will involve a more complicated and challenging recruitment process.

2. Are we in agreement about our goals? In one way, leadership candidates are determined by what a church is trying to accomplish with its small groups. For example, in some churches the small group focus is mostly on fellowship, and the main Bible teaching happens elsewhere in the church program. For this model, socially outgoing people may be the best recruits to seek out as small-group leaders.

If the desired focus of small groups is Bible study, a Bible student who communicates clearly may be the preferable type of person to recruit. If the groups are to equip for ministry, yet another type of leader may be needed. If these are to be prayer groups, prayer warriors may be needed as leaders.

3. What are we asking potential small-group leaders to do? People in the church are more likely to say yes to a leadership position if they can learn in advance what their job will be. A clear, concise ministry description of the small-group leader's role will be essential to successful recruitment.

4. Have we made our senior minister the first small-group recruit? Every church has one or more key leadership roles, and these leaders need to be on board and in full support of the small-groups program in order for it to thrive. In most churches, the support of the senior pastor is crucial. In a team leadership setting, it's vital to get the whole team sold on the idea of small groups.

Other church leaders (elders, deacons, board members) need to be willing to participate in a small group, as well. It's even better if they lead one. The church's most respected leaders must be willing to stand up in front of the whole church and say (often), "Small groups are important to us. I'm a member of one—and I think all of you should join one, too."

5. Will we start with small steps or a grand scale? Occasionally, churches begin small-groups programs on a church-wide scale. (Again, this is easier if you are a church plant, but more complicated if you introduce small groups to an existing overall church program.) If this route is chosen, the desired program can be in place relatively quickly—but issues of administration, promotion, and the headaches of playing the role of change agent are factors that leaders must be prepared to handle. In an effort to develop a large number of leaders quickly, some churches have been able to utilize church members who already have shown good leadership in other ministry areas.

More often, churches approach the development of a small-groups program one step at a time—usually over a period of years. The strategy might be as simple as "start one good group and let the word spread."

Another method that has been successful for many churches is what's usually called a "turbo group." In this setting—which works especially well for smaller churches—a small group meets for set amount of time (six weeks, six months, one year). Everyone in the group is recruited with the idea that, at the close of the group's time together, they will go out and start small group of their own. In this scenario, the small group is a sort of "learning lab" where members get a chance to try out their small-group leadership skills in a safe setting before launching their own group. In a turbo group, a team of six couples can multiply from one group to six groups, and create the synergy for the church's small-groups program to grow from there.

6. Do we have our eyes open to Christian community already happening within our church body? In an effort to create a corporate small-groups program where "one size fits all," the Christian community that is already happening in pockets around the church sometimes gets overlooked. For example, a Sunday School class of 12–15 people that meets weekly, studies the Bible, stays in touch, and takes care of each other through the week is basically a small group (which makes their teacher a small-group leader). Do they have to be broken up just so they can fit into some other small-group paradigm?

Or the senior citizen's group that meets regularly and does all the things a small group does for each other. Instead of a home, they happen to do it in the fellowship hall once a month. They also are a type of small group, with its own leadership structure. During a transitional setting, when a small-groups program is trying to get traction, it might be easiest to create good will with the seniors by avoiding changing their way of taking care of each other in Christ. We might even commend them on "being ahead of the rest of us" in creating real Christian fellowship. They could keep on doing community in the way that is meaningful for them.

Every church has “small groups” that have grown spontaneously outside the official church program. Recognizing them as genuine places of community provides new small groups and new small-group leaders.

7. How can we begin with our strengths? A small-groups program can be built around a church’s effort to concentrate its resources. For example, one church had been in decline for many years, and wanted to grow. They had limited resources, so they decided to focus on reaching out to young families in their area. The plan included building small groups for these couples, with young couples taking leadership in the groups. This strategy worked well for that church, and they were able to build both their church and their small-groups programs from that one foundation.

8. What conference can our leaders and potential leaders attend together? Nothing inspires excitement about small groups like attending a small-group leaders’ conference as a team. Leaders who have already signed on are pumped up, and attendance by potential small-group leaders makes it an easy sell to bring them into official small-group leadership. Many small-groups program directors have discovered that if they can get key leaders and potential leaders to a significant conference, the attendees will come home as strong supporters and promoters.

— RICK LOWERY is the Small Groups Pastor for Crossroads Christian Church in Newburgh, IN. Copyright 2009 by the author and Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. Are any of these questions surprising? Why?
2. Which questions have we already addressed successfully? What has been the fruit?
3. In order to move forward with our small-groups ministry, what question do we need to answer next?

Small-Group Advertising

All those looking for a small group, please raise your hands!

By Tom Bandy

People want intimacy, and your church is ready to start small groups. A natural fit! But how do you connect the yearning of the public with the opportunity of your ministry?

Let's imagine you have a mission to connect with seekers and mature disciples. You have appointed a great small-group leadership trainer, and you have trained some terrific small-group leaders. Some of the groups may be based on a curriculum, some may be based on a common interest—but none of the groups have attracted much attention. How do you get the word out?

The very nature of small-groups ministry means that traditional church advertising won't work. The *last* things you want to do are:

- Put a sign-up sheet on the back wall of the sanctuary
- Build an information booth in the center of the refreshment hall
- Offer a phone number in the newsletter
- Advertise in the newspaper
- Attach flyers to car windows in the mall parking lot

You can't communicate intimacy through mass media distribution, and you can't arouse interest with generic lists of intriguing topics.

Wise churches are getting the attention of marginal members and community seekers in three basic ways. These all require some serious research into the lifestyle segments that dominate your primary mission field (based on the average distance people drive to work and shop). This research will tell you media preferences, recreation venues, topics of special interest, and even the kind of retail shopping and restaurants various publics frequent.

Once you've done the research, do the following three things.

Personal Invitation

The most effective personal invitation happens *between people of similar lifestyles*. Don't expect an affluent, married empty-nester with a passion for golf and a taste for Starbucks to get very far inviting a struggling, single 20-something with a passion for extreme sports and a taste for beer to a small group. Even if the affinity is on target, the trust gap will rarely be bridged. Men invite men; women invite women; teens invite teens; and keep going with almost any imaginable demographic.

Maybe your church does not reflect the demographic diversity of your zip code, and maybe you're wondering how anyone in your church can make a personal invitation to people who are so different. Fortunately, personal invitation is like the game of dominoes. Every piece has two numbers, and every person has at least two sides to their identity. Match one side of your identity to that of a seeker, who has yet another side to their identity, and they match that to another seeker, and so on. If you have ever played the game of dominoes, you know that the chain of connections wiggles all over the table, configures in strange shapes, and follows unexpected directions.

That's what happens when small groups grow through personal invitation. Let the personal invitations direct the flow of small-group multiplication. Don't expect small groups to conform to prearranged plans.

Micro-Targeted Location

Every lifestyle segment (and all the micro-cultures that explode like popcorn in your mission field) has particular places where they gather. These gathering places may be in cyberspace—and you can certainly take advantage of advertising your small groups in the websites, chat rooms, forums, and facebook pages that they frequent. Or you can just Twitter.

However, most lifestyle segments still have physical places where they tend to gather: certain kinds of restaurants, entertainment centers, sports venues, continuing education opportunities, fitness and health care centers, and elsewhere. That is where you post flyers, hand out brochures, and especially station real live people who can hang out and talk with peers.

Notice that smart advertisers for consumer products similarly identify these micro-targets for posters, billboards, videos, and freebies in order to sell products that are considered "trendy" by that particular lifestyle group. They may even spend money to co-sponsor events, lifting the profile of their company (church?) and its relevance.

When you deploy people to hang out, have them model the values and beliefs of your church, and engage people in conversation—but be sure they actually fit in and enjoy being there. It's not a chore. It's a blast! People are only attracted to other people *when those people are enjoying themselves*.

Community Networks

There is already an underground communication network in every neighborhood, town, or city. These are people who regularly connect with each other because they share particular hobbies or interests; or because they are committed to common service projects; or because they share specific health care concerns or are supporting each other to overcome addictions and disabilities. If you have topical small groups that intersect with these networks, then you need to contact clubs, social services, hospitals, and health care centers and ask them to pass along your small-group opportunities. Be

sure to demonstrate your trustworthiness by revealing your core values and positive beliefs.

We have said it many times in small-groups ministry, but since we so often miss the point it bears repeating. Small groups are about relationships first, and topics second. It is less important for many people to attend a curriculum or affinity group *for people in general*, and more important for them to attend a group *specifically for people like me*. Topics are one thing, but being with the right group to talk about them is even more important.

Make It Quick

Once you know who, how, and where to communicate, perhaps the greatest challenge for churches seeking to spread the word about small group opportunities is what to say. Most churches overestimate the available time for communication. You don't have time for an explanation. You only have time for a data burst. The attention span may only be a byte measured in a few seconds.

So, what are the most important things to communicate?

1. **The Benefit.** People need to know instantly why this opportunity is a blessing not to be missed. What's in it for them? What beneficial change will occur? How will it improve their lives tomorrow?
2. **The Environment.** People need to know if the ambience of the conversation suits their lifestyle. Where will it happen? What kind of atmosphere will there be? How will it engage all five senses?
3. **The Timeline.** People need to know when it will happen and how long it will take. Time is their most important possession, and you want some. Will it be at the right time and last just long enough?
4. **The Leader.** People need to know if the leader is credible. It's not about name, title, office, or educational degrees. It's about experience, spirituality, and trustworthiness. Who is the leader?

These four things need to be delivered within seconds—and delivered clearly, concisely, and honestly. Don't waste a lot of time informing people about the sponsoring church, or the denominational affiliation, or the published curriculum, or extra perks. Just give them a hyperlink and they can look it up.

That's another thing to remember: Your website backs up the data burst. If people are intrigued enough to learn more, the first thing they want to read are endorsements from former users.

Borrow the strategy from Amazon.com. Whenever they list a book, they sort out all the reader responses to provide the "Most Helpful *Favorable* Review" and "Most Helpful

Critical Review.” Do the same for your small groups using exit interviews or follow-up evaluations. Whether they are favorable or critical, provide the *most helpful* comments on your website. More than anything else, that may be the clincher for anyone to commit to a small group.

— TOM BANDY is the founder of www.ThrivingChurch.com. Copyright 2009 by the author and Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. What has been our most effective method of “advertising” so far? What has not worked?
2. Do we have a strategy for making personal invitations more effective? How can it be improved?
3. What can we do to improve the effectiveness of our website when it comes to promoting small groups?

But We Already Have Sunday School!

Casting a vision for small-groups in a Sunday school culture.

By Mark Howell

Churches everywhere are asking if it's possible to build a small-groups ministry without destroying an existing Sunday school system. What's the answer? I've found it is a qualified "Yes." It's actually "Yes...but there are five critical steps in building that small-groups ministry that will predetermine your success." Here they are:

1. Be sure you have the facts about how things really are.
2. Clarify and communicate the reasons for building a small-groups ministry.
3. Develop your plan well in advance.
4. Think multiple steps; look beyond the first steps to the next and the next after that.
5. Execute your plan while staying alert to the feelings of people.

Be Sure You Have the Facts

You'll need to gather some important information before you start constructing a small-groups ministry. Start by asking three questions:

1. What is your average adult worship service attendance?
2. What was your Easter adult worship service attendance?
3. What is your average attendance in your adult Sunday School?

Why these three questions? They should give you an idea about the percentage of your adults that are NOT connected to an adult Sunday School class.

Next, survey your adult Sunday school department or class leadership to find out a very specific detail: Who was the last person who became a regular attendee in your class who didn't come straight from another Sunday school class somewhere else? Why ask this question? Adults who are not currently giving you 2.5 to 3 hours on Sunday (including the worship service) are unlikely to begin doing so. I've been asking this question for the last four years, and I have yet to discover a single person who began attending a Sunday school class once they were already an adult. At the same time, across the country there is increasing evidence that a neighbor is much more likely to walk across the street to come to a group meeting in your home than to walk into an unknown lobby in an auditorium.

Recognize that in order to engage the unconnected members and attendees in your congregation, you will need to try a new thing. Two important quotes illustrate this point. And Stanley says, "Your ministry is perfectly designed to give you the results you are currently getting." Craig Groeschel says, "If you want to reach people you're not currently reaching, you'll have to do things you're not currently doing."

Is this a pain-free first step? No. However, if you believe that life-on-life is where life-change happens, than reluctance to help the unconnected for fear of upsetting the status quo is irresponsible.

Clarify and Communicate Your Reasons

The second step in building a small-groups ministry in a church with a Sunday school culture is to clarify and communicate your reasons for such a ministry. Both elements are critical.

First, you'll need to *clarify* your reasons. Here are a few to get you started:

1. Adults who aren't already attending a worship service *and* a Sunday school class are unlikely to start. (See above.)
2. On-campus classes or studies have a more restricted start and stop time (i.e., we begin at 9:00 a.m. and must be out by 10:15 a.m. so that the next class can set up). The shorter format makes it difficult for groups to relax and engage in meaningful conversation. Off-campus groups provide an opportunity for a warmer, less structured meeting without the time crunch.
3. Reaching neighbors and friends is made much easier when the invitation is to "come on over" as opposed to "meet us in the parking lot."
4. An off-campus strategy allows for unlimited growth. You aren't restricted by available space.

Second, you'll need to skillfully *communicate* your reasons. Here are two keys:

1. Vividly paint the picture of the people you are trying to reach. Talk about specific demographic types (young families, families with teens, empty-nesters, and so on).
2. Talk about the preferences of the group you're trying to reach. Craig Groeschel has said that, "If you want to reach people that no one else is reaching, you're going to have to do things that no one else is doing."

Develop Your Plan in Advance

Next, you need to develop your plan well in advance. That is a very hard thing to do for some. The natural predisposition is to operate in a "ready, fire, aim" mode. Maybe even a "fire, fire, fire" mode. But slowing down to plan will help smooth over unnecessary ruffles for the rest of the organization.

Here are some key ingredients in developing a plan:

- Develop an FAQ sheet about small groups before you do anything else.
- Identify the key opinion leaders in your existing Sunday school organization and make time to work through the idea with each of them in advance.

- Start with a “pilot.” Easter is a great opportunity to start a few “toe in the water” groups (Late September/early October or late January/early February are other good times). The idea of a pilot is that it gets a few unconnected folks connected, *and* gets you a few great stories to use later.
- Capture the best stories of how much it means to both group members and leaders. If possible, capture these stories on video for later use to recruit hosts and members for a major launch.
- Talk about group life as a way of doing what we all know is important: spending time with other believers, building solid relationships, studying the Bible, serving together. You can talk about the benefits without slighting the more traditional approach.
- Begin working with your Sunday school leadership to develop small group components there. Learning that leads to practical application. Sharing that leads to authentic life-change. Two-way communication as opposed to a master teacher/listener format. Enhanced out-of-classroom time. Clarifying what a win looks like in every environment will make it easier to genuinely suggest that life-on-life learning is essential, and can happen in more than one way.

Think in Multiple Steps

To build a small-groups ministry in a church with a Sunday school culture, you’ll need to think multiple steps. Much like the way a NASCAR driver learns to think about the turn *after* the one just ahead, you’ve got to think about the steps after the ones just ahead. Why does a NASCAR driver need to think about the turn *after* the one just ahead? The simplest answer is that they need to come out of this turn with the next one in mind. The best drivers are always thinking about what’s next.

How does this apply to building a small-groups ministry in a church with a Sunday school culture? As I often say, you’re not going from A to Z. You’re going from A to B—on the way to Z. Don’t call where you are Z. Call it B and a half. Are you still going to Z? Yes! It just takes several moves to get there.

Once you’ve launched a few groups you’ll be ready to move on from B and a half You can do that by:

- Taking advantage of a church-wide campaign is an easy way to encourage many in your congregation to test-drive a small group. Nothing gives you as much leverage as an alignment that combines sermon topic and small-group discussion. Here’s the script: “In order to get everything possible out of this season in our church, you need to be in a group that’s using the curriculum that goes along with what we’re talking about on Sunday.”
- Selecting several DVD-driven studies to recommend as follow-ups to the launch study. Plan on recommending a best choice for all your newest groups in week 3 or 4 of the launch study.

Caution: Although you can simply let your on-campus classes use the curriculum there, it is almost always more effective to ask everyone to be part of a group that meets in a home for these six weeks. Assure your classes that although you value what they have in the class, for the purpose of giving everyone the full experience, it will be best if they participate, too.

Stay Alert to Feelings While Executing Your Plan

Finally, stay alert to the feelings of people while you execute your plan. First, re-clarify the purpose of your Sunday school ministry, but keep in mind that it is working for some. It may only be working in their opinion and may fall very short of your hopes for their discipleship needs—but that’s almost never the doing of the participants. Want more for your members? You’ll have some work to do on the Sunday school ministry itself, but that’s a separate issue.

Second, when you’re launching a small-groups ministry, you’ll most likely take advantage of several different marketing tools. Stories inserted into your pastor’s messages, worship service announcements, bulletin blurbs, website, and newsletter/e-newsletter articles all present opportunities to strategically describe what a small group offers in a way that doesn’t make your Sunday school advocates feel like chopped liver.

Third, if you do the hard work on the front end of re-clarifying the purpose of Sunday school, small groups, and any other discipleship oriented activities, it will be much easier to promote the importance of being connected.

— MARK HOWELL is the founder of SmallGroupResources.net; copyright 2009 by the author and Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. Have we already completed any of these five steps? Have we done it correctly?
2. Have we developed our plan for small groups and Sunday school to coexist? Has this plan been tested and reviewed?
3. Who are three people from the Sunday school ministry that we need to talk with before implementing our groups ministry?

Casting a Vision for Group Multiplication

Practical advice for shifting the culture and focus of your ministry.

By Rick Howerton

For many small-group leaders and coaches, just the word multiplication can evoke tension. They remember battles fought with leaders or group members when they were responsible for motivating those down the flow chart from them to birth a new group.

Too often, churches launch a small-groups ministry without instilling the birthing of new groups into its DNA. Those leading and attending first generation groups experience community like they never have before, and they don't want to see that experience come to an end. The beauty of the experience is so fantastic that when you request that they birth another group, you have a mutiny on your hands. (You say birth a new group; they hear about the group they are presently doing life with.)

Therefore, if you are going to successfully grow your small-groups ministry through multiplication, the most important thing you can do is stress the value of multiplication from the very beginning. Make it a core element of the overall ministry, and of each individual group.

Of course, there are many current small-group ministries that would like to shift to a multiplication model, but did not take that step when the ministry was started. If you're in that situation, there is hope. Below you will find an excess of principles and practical ideas to help infuse the value of multiplication into the very being of your coaches and small-group leaders.

A New Paradigm

The first thing you'll need to do is declare principles and values that will help your coaches and group leaders understand that the multiplication of groups is more important than the comfort of small-group members. You'll need to help your people see that the Kingdom is more significant than an individual group's holy huddle.

Remember this fact: In order to get people to change what they're doing, they must first hear, understand, and embrace new principles and values. In other words, a new paradigm must be realized. Once the new paradigm is part of the communal mindset, those at every level of leadership will be open to new actions.

To help with this paradigm shift, you'll need to identify some basic principles that can be voiced to redirect and instill the value of group multiplication. These are not slogans or catchphrases. These are an articulation of what you have chosen as core principles of your small-groups ministry. Here are some examples:

- For the Kingdom to grow, groups must multiply.

- Jesus longs for people to be in meaningful relationship with himself and with one another. When small groups multiply, there is a renewed commitment to both of these relationships.
- Any species that doesn't give birth to a new generation dies. This is true in the biological world as well as in the small-group world. Groups that don't multiply in 24 months die or become stagnant.
- When a group has multiplication as her goal, there is an energy in that group that cannot be achieved any other way.
- Multiplying new groups is the reason for apprentices. Future leaders may never achieve their full potential or find their role as shepherds if groups do not make multiplication an important responsibility.
- Multiplication is the most effective way to welcome more people into Christian community.
- Multiplication is the most satisfying accomplishment of small-group leadership.
- When group leaders birth a new group, the full potential of their leadership has been realized.

Spreading the Word

Once you've identified the new values that you want to communicate to your coaches and group leaders, the next step involves the actual communication of those values. When something is part of an organism's DNA, it is always there. We only recognize that something is part of us when we are reminded of it.

Try these ideas to continually remind your group coaches and leaders of the value of multiplication:

1. When you recruit a new coach or small-group leader, make sure they know that multiplication is an expected responsibility.
2. Model group multiplication as you lead your turbo groups or first-generation groups.
3. Make it a requirement that every group start with an apprentice or have one in place no more than two months after the group's first meeting.
4. Highlight the value of group multiplication during small-group leader and coach retreats, at monthly huddle meetings, and any other training events your ministry hosts.
5. Add a section concerning multiplication to any weekly reports that are turned in by small-group leaders.

6. When meeting with small-group leaders and coaches individually, discuss the birthing of new groups with them.

As you seek to communicate the value of multiplication, your coaches will be invaluable allies. Ask coaches to proactively discuss the birthing of new groups when meeting with their group leaders. Here are a few questions they can use that will effectively create a conversation about multiplication:

1. How do you think your group will respond when it comes time to multiply?
2. You know that we ask groups to multiply so that we can make small-group life possible for more people. When is it that your group is due to plant a new group?
3. How can I aid in helping the people in your group understand the importance of planting a new group?
4. When do you think your apprentice will be ready to lead a group of her/his own?
5. When your group multiplies, how many people do you anticipate going with the new group?

Finally, the different parts of a church's ministry offer many ways to help shift your small-groups ministry to a multiplication mentality:

- **During worship services.** Ask the senior pastor to publicly affirm group leaders when they birth a new small group. This moment of affirmation could come as a sermon illustration, or at the beginning or end of a service. You can also have "Small-Group Sunday" and use part of the service to affirm the groups and group leaders that have birthed new groups that year.
- **Prayer.** When meeting with a small-group leader, pray specifically for the group's health when they enter the multiplication phase. Set aside time when meeting with coaches to pray for groups that are about to multiply. You can even ask the church to pray for small groups that are in the process of multiplying.
- **Verbalize the vision.** Statements that capture your vision for small-group multiplication will be helpful. Something like this will work: "Imagine a city that is experiencing not just revival, but reformation, because every one of our small groups invites unbelievers into group life and multiplies every 18 months."
- **Create heroes.** Identify those who are parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents of small groups and make them the champions of your ministry. That is, highlight the people who have birthed multiple generations of small groups.
- **Electronic communication.** Send out e-mail blasts celebrating a group that has just birthed. Or if you Twitter, send a tweet when you're on your way to celebrate with a small group who is planting a new small group through multiplication.

— RICK HOWERTON is author of [Destination: Community](#) and a Q & A panelist for SmallGroups.com. Copyright 2009 by the author and Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. What is my first reaction to the term *multiplication*? Why?
2. Is it time for our church to shift the focus of our group ministry toward multiplication? How do we decide?
3. Which of the steps listed above will be most helpful for our particular church culture and ministry setting?

Seven Advantages of Sermon-Based Small Groups

The lecture/lab model is great for both small groups and Sunday mornings.

2 Timothy 4:1–2

At North Coast Church, where I serve as senior pastor, we've had a long and interesting journey with small groups. We had no groups when we first started out. But after a while, I began to realize that our congregation was more of a crowd than a living, breathing community. So we launched small groups, and things began to change immediately.

For a number of years we hunted down the best curriculum available and provided it to our groups. They grew, and people's lives did change. But when I put together a sermon series called "The Company of the Committed"—in which I wanted to paint the picture of what a committed Christian lifestyle would look like on a day-to-day basis—we experimented with our first sermon-based groups. The response was off the charts. It was so positive that we never looked back.

Over the years, I've noticed that tying the study guide to the sermon has several advantages over a curriculum-based model. Here are seven of the most powerful advantages.

They Increase the Educational Impact

A number of years ago, I heard about a study that Harvard conducted for one of the military branches. Apparently the military was sending people to different conferences and training sessions, and they wanted to maximize the educational impact of those sessions by figuring out what helps people learn—and most importantly, retain and apply—the information they receive.

Some of the best minds at Harvard tackled this study, and they uncovered three ways to maximize the benefit of any training experience. The first was maintaining a high sense of expectation. The study showed that if people went into a training experience with high expectations, they generally learned and retained a lot more. Obviously, this one is common sense when it comes to churches. If people are coming to your church thinking, *Oh, this is going to be boring*, then you can probably understand why they're not retaining what you say.

But here's the second ingredient. The Harvard researchers also discovered that if people took good notes during the training experience, the educational impact and the life-change upon returning home would accelerate measurably. The third key had to do with discussing the material with others. If they got together and discussed the notes—and the broader training experience as a whole—their education impact and subsequent life-change was significantly increased. .

Strangely enough, those last two things are exactly what using a sermon-based small group model forces people to do.

They Pull in the Marginally Interested

The second advantage of sermon-based small groups is the way they can pull in the marginally interested. All churches have marginally interested people—people who come in late on a Sunday morning and slump onto a chair in the back of the sanctuary, waiting to see if a funny story or a good joke can pull them into a higher level of interest.

But it's a different story when a marginally interested person enters a sanctuary full of people who will be discussing the sermon later in the week with their small group. That's because a much higher percentage of the people will be taking notes and paying close attention in order to be prepared for their small group. There's a different feeling in the air. And so that marginally interested person—who doesn't want to stand out—tends to sit up a bit straighter and pay more attention simply to fit in. I see it at North Coast all the time. And since everyone else seems to be taking notes, they start doing that, as well.

They Reach More People

Sermon-based small groups also help churches reach more people in another very simple way, and it has to do with weekly attendance. Everyone misses church at one point or another. But how often do those people come clamoring to the church office to get a tape or CD of the sermon they missed? It may happen sometimes, but not often. But what if those people attend a small group later in the week and have to discuss that sermon they missed? They will almost always listen online or come by and pick up a CD.

And when those CDs are picked up, they are often passed on to others, shared, or given away. And so the end result is that more people end up hearing the message.

They Sharpen the Church-Wide Focus

In most churches, everyone listens to the same message, which does create a sense of unity. But when a church uses sermon-based small groups, everyone *interacts* with the same message, which really sharpens the focus.

I grew up in a very different style of church. We went to church on Sunday morning and heard one subject. Then we went to Sunday school and heard another subject. Then we went back on Sunday night and heard a third subject. And then we came back for the midweek service and studied a fourth subject!

I never had a clue what series we were in or what it was all about. It was just a mishmash of subjects. At North Coast, we cover less material with sermon-based groups, but our people know what we're covering. Our focus is sharper.

They Mainstream New Believers

In the small-groups world, it's kind of an unwritten rule that you don't put new believers in with a group of long-time Christians. The new believers get intimidated. They get swallowed up—especially by those overachievers who can pronounce all the big words and places

properly. New believers often can't figure out if it's "Job" or "job." So we have to keep them away from the long-time Christians and start new-believer groups instead.

But does that really make sense? Is it really the best idea to get the nursery full of little kids and then make sure no adults show up? I don't think so. And it's certainly not the best way to make sure people stick with the church and grow. But sermon-based groups give us another option.

I don't watch a lot of movies, so when I come across a group of people critiquing a certain film, I generally try to stay out of their way. I get intimidated by my ignorance. But if those people are talking about a movie that I've actually taken the time to see, I'm in on the discussion. I stand my ground because I saw the film, and I have an opinion that's based on my own experience. And in our culture, everyone thinks they are an expert on what they've experienced.

The same is true of new believers who participate in a sermon-based small group. When Larry Long-Timer begins to pronounce all of the difficult words and throw out quotes from John Calvin or Chuck Swindoll, the new believer is more likely to stand his ground and offer his own opinion, because he's experienced the sermon himself. He'll feel like an expert based on his own experience, even if he feels lost when it comes to the genre of the Bible.

They Eliminate Idiot Questions

Every small-group curriculum I have ever seen has had at least one idiot question. For instance, if we're doing a study based on 1 Timothy, and the opening verse says, "...from Paul to Timothy," and then question number one in the curriculum guide is, "Who wrote 1 Timothy?" I call that an idiot question. It bores people to death. But there's a good reason those idiot questions are in every curriculum study guide. Because without the idiot questions, you can't set the context.

But when small groups are sermon-based, the context is set in the message. The sermon gets everyone on the same page. So group leaders are free to get right into the parallel passages and personal application.

They Help with Leadership Recruitment

If you're going to lead a group Bible study on Colossians, you need a pretty good grasp on the entire book. Otherwise you'll find yourself saying things in chapter one that don't fit with what's said in chapters two through four. You also need to understand the difference between a good question and a bad question. In addition, you'll need to bring some of your own research and ideas to the study; otherwise, you're going to be answering a lot of questions with, "I don't know." That's a pretty high bar to get over.

But if you lead a sermon-based small group, all you need to be is growing spiritually, excited about God's Word, and have the ability to draw group members together and keep them together. Unlike skilled Bible teachers, I've found that these kinds of people grow on trees!

In my experience with recruiting group leaders, there are not many people who can lead an inductive Bible study, but there are lots of people who can facilitate a discussion of a sermon everyone has heard. Few people can teach well, especially in our culture of mass media and heightened expectation. But God has always made sure there are enough shepherds for his flock. At North Coast, they are called small-group leaders. And when they aren't asked to do too much, they aren't too hard to find.

— LARRY OSBORNE; excerpted from the [Small-Groups Starter Kit](#), copyright 2008 by North Coast Church.

Discuss:

1. Which of these advantages is most appealing to our church and ministry?
2. What weaknesses exist in our ministry that might be bolstered through sermon-based small groups?
3. Can we identify a couple of steps we need to take in order to start a sermon-based small-groups ministry (or a sermon-based option to our current ministry)?

Further Exploration

Resources to help you . . .

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

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

[CTPastors.com](#). A website offering practical advice and articles for church leaders in pastoral roles.

[WomenLeaders.com](#). A website ministering to women leaders in the church.

Creating Community: Five Keys to Building a Small Group Culture

Andy Stanley and Bill Willits

Multnomah, 2004

The authors describe how they established a small-group culture at North Point Community Church.

Destination: Community

Rick Howerton

Serendipity House, 2007

A ministry manual to help you lead a dynamic and redemptive small

Finding the Flow

Jenn Peppers and Tara Miller

InterVarsity Press, 2008

Find a fresh take on leading small groups from two women who have collaborated to bring together their experiences in small-group ministry from their Denver-area.

Let's Get Started: How to begin your small-groups ministry

Dan Lentz

Standard Publishing, 2007

A Help-Guide for churches who want to start, or re-start, a small-groups

Successful Small Groups: From Concept to Practice

Teena M. Stewart

Beacon Hill Press, 2007

A solid and practical book that covers all the