



part 1

small-group basics

1 small groups—big impact

There are two things you cannot do alone:
marry and be a Christian.
—Paul Tournier¹

Ask a leader of a growing and thriving church why the church is growing and thriving and he or she will likely tell you that small groups are a major reason. I have been involved in Christian small groups for many years and have seen firsthand the life transformation they bring about. Small groups secure a strong foundation for those wanting to experience the fullness of Christian community and grow mature in Christ.

Though many churches use the term *small groups* to refer to them, in reality small groups are known by a diversity of labels. You might hear them dubbed cell groups, Bible study groups, fellowship groups, affinity groups, recovery groups, core groups, community groups, branch groups, home-life groups, support groups, or even care groups.

Many more names abound. Despite the myriad of names, most Christian small groups have several features in common. They provide a sense of community and support for church members while giving them a safe and enjoyable atmosphere where they can learn biblical principles and grow in spiritual maturity together as a family.

More and more churches are developing effective small-group ministries because they realize such groups are crucial for a healthy church ministry and for the maturation of the Christians they serve.

Key to Kingdom Building

A crucial part of church planting includes learning as much as possible about the community in which you plan to build. A church planter and his wife establishing a church in a small northern California town canvassed residents in a door-to-door survey. Their interview included questions about lifestyle and culture and revealed a prominent felt need. Despite being sur-

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rounded by neighbors in a highly populated area, many people expressed feelings of isolation and loneliness.

The fierce independent American spirit and quest for financial security leaves many Americans materially wealthy but spiritually empty and lonely. We live in an extremely busy society where people rush from one commitment to another. Gone are the days of extended families living under one roof and horses and buggies passing in the streets where people could greet one another. Things moved at a much slower pace back then. Nowadays it isn't uncommon for people to go days or even weeks without ever seeing or speaking to their neighbors. Privacy fences and garages allow people to come and go without ever having face-to-face encounters.

In addition, people no longer live in one place all of their lives. Job transfers often require that they move away from friends and family, and though they may pride themselves in their independence, in reality people may feel cut off from the world. America was built on the pioneer spirit, one of independence and self-sufficiency. All of these combined factors make it difficult to feel a sense of belonging. Inwardly they may ask, "Does anyone really care?"

Janet called Wendy, a friend she hadn't spoken with in awhile, and learned that Wendy was experiencing this sense of disconnectedness. At the core of these feelings of isolation was a painful divorce. "How are things going?" Janet asked.

"I just can't seem to feel connected at my church," Wendy said. She explained that rather than go to the church she had been attending while married, she felt it would be less awkward to start afresh. (Her husband still attended the previous church.) At her new church she served in several places—singing in the choir, helping with Vacation Bible School, and attending Sunday School, but she still felt isolated and detached.

Her new church was large. Her Sunday School class had as many as 50 to 75 people on a given Sunday. The large size prevented people from sharing on anything but a surface level. When Janet asked Wendy if her church had small groups, she was surprised to hear that they didn't. Wendy wrestled with what to do and considered church-shopping again. A divorce recovery group or group for older singles might have been a better fit, connecting her with people in similar circumstances.

People need to be needed and accepted. The search for that sense of family and belonging brings many people to church in the first place. If they don't feel they fit in within the first couple of visits, they will often move on. Those who stay, but remain only a part of the crowd rather than integrating into the core, usually experience disconnectedness and discontent. Churches that know how to connect their members instill in them a sense of belonging. These churches do better at retaining individuals for the long term.

Preventing exits from the church community is possible when we involve people in ministry opportunities shortly after their arrival. Even though Wendy felt out of place at her new church, some of her felt needs were being met through serving. This contributed to her loyalty despite her ambivalence. Volunteer opportunities allow people to give something back and to feel needed. When they know others are counting on their service, they become reliable, consistent members. Even more importantly, volunteering facilitates connecting with other people. Yet volunteering alone doesn't always fulfill the connection need.

Small groups can meet this felt need for belonging on a more intimate level. One of Jeff Stewart's roles as pastor of discipleship and small groups at Northgate Christian Fellowship is overseeing small groups and their development. When asked to explain why small groups are so important to the health of a church body, Jeff observes, "Small groups allow for a more concentrated form of ministry to be accomplished. People cannot build up and utilize intimate trust levels in other church venues."

Every church, no matter its size, can benefit from small groups. The larger a church grows, the more crucial it is to have them, because the sense of alienation increases with the size of the church body. Can you think back to an experience of coming to a church for the first time and not knowing anyone? Now imagine coming back the next week and the next. You are only going to get to know people during or after the service, with perhaps only 5 to 10 minutes of socializing, maybe seeing different people each time. A typical worship service experience provides a scant chance for getting to know and bond with the other church attendees. Relationships remain surface.

That sense of disconnectedness leads to becoming a missing-in-action member. Attendance will be spotty at best, and people may drop off the radar screen completely. Their needs are more likely to be met in a small-group setting than in a large group. "The potential for meeting people's needs is much higher in a small-group setting (face to face vs. face to back of head)." So reads a clever quote on New Hope Community Church's small-group Web page, an extension of their church's main Web page. New Hope, based in Walnut Creek, California, realizes that a worship service only affords people the opportunity to get to know the back of the head of the person who sits in front of them. Community is surface level because of insufficient time for relationships to expand to anything else.

Another benefit of small groups is that responsibility for shepherding and caring for the flock is taken off the shoulders of paid staff and placed elsewhere—a very biblical model. When Moses felt overwhelmed by his duties caring for the Israelites, Jethro, his savvy father-in-law, suggested that he assign

people to oversee and make judgments over small groups of people (see Exod. 18:13-27). This allowed Moses to tend to other matters.

Church staff must equip members to lead, yet many staff members get side-tracked with managing details that members could actually handle. Churches with small-group leaders free their staff to fulfill other areas of administrative and leadership responsibilities.

So, Uh, What's a Small Group?

Jesus carefully chose specific people to mentor. Plenty of others were in His circle of influence, but these 12 He handpicked. Jesus knew the importance of discipling others so that Kingdom work became easier. He knew that the time He spent coaching these leaders would eventually pay off. With more leaders, more people could be reached and developed into mature Christ followers.

The 12 disciples composed a small group. Jesus cultivated His friendship with them, shepherding them, training them as leaders, and sharing spiritual insights with them. He ate with them. He prayed with them and for them. He did fun things with them, found himself frustrated by them, and helped carry their burdens. He even found support from them (on a good day), and He encouraged and supported them.

Jesus' front-end ministry had back-end results. Most of the men in which Jesus invested His time and energy became leaders, though not all were as well known as Peter, Matthew, Mark, James, and John. The others, except for Judas, faded into obscurity for the most part. Little is written about them, except for Judas who achieved his own level of notoriety, yet imagine how things might have turned out if Jesus had not invested in relationships with the Twelve.

Small groups are exactly what the name says—groups that have a small membership. Although their small size is a common denominator, small groups can be as varied as the flowers in the field. A group's purpose and demographics determine what the group looks like.

Affinity groups are the essence of groups with a unique and specific purpose. John,* an acquaintance of mine, participated in an affinity group. After months of attending a men's Bible study, John still didn't click with the other group members. Eventually he dropped out of the group. Months later he began working with his church's audiovisual team. The group met weekly for planning, troubleshooting, small-group Bible study, and fellowship. He immediately felt at home and became a committed and active member. The group's primary purpose was to create audiovisuals for worship, but they also incorporated Bible study into their meetings. John felt an immediate sense of belonging.

*Not his real name.

A couple who had already raised one teen and were in the process of raising two more learned the value of affinity groups as well. Though they were seasoned parents, the ups and downs of dealing with teenage issues and challenges seemed nearly insurmountable. When the parents chatted with other parents of teens at their church, they found that these parents were also struggling in similar areas. They decided that the best solution, since no group like this already existed in their church, was to start a group for parents of teens. Before long, the new group's membership exploded, primarily because so many people wanted to participate in such an affinity group.

Many different types of affinity groups exist, and these special-interest groups are having a powerful impact on those who participate in them. We'll look at these more closely in chapter 5, but suffice it say that if your church doesn't already have some of these special-interest groups, it is well worth considering launching some.

They Come with Benefits

Small groups provide a climate where people can move from surface relationships to something deeper. With these deeper relationships come:

A safe environment for support. Many people believe that depending on others is a sign of weakness. Such independence most likely comes from pioneer days when settlers homesteaded in remote locations relying on their own resources for survival. Survivalist pride lingers today and has raised barriers preventing people from getting to know each other.

Healthy small groups excel at breaking down the walls of self-sufficiency that people erect. People hesitate to reveal what is under the surface until they feel they can trust the person with whom they've been asked to share. As group members come to know each other and grow more comfortable, they begin to open up. Trust builds slowly.

One member may decide to risk sharing something semirisky of a somewhat private nature. Other members watch and see how that information is handled by group members. If they feel comfortable that their issues and secrets will be safe, then they will also begin to let down their guard and reveal their thoughts.

Praying for and supporting each other is one of the most beneficial and beautiful things about small-group ministry. Group members become the family members people often long for but may not have close by. Galatians 6:2 reminds us to "carry each other's burdens."

In my own family, frequent relocations physically separating us from some of our most loved and extended family members have been necessary due to

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my husband's job. Many times I have felt closer to the members of my small group than I have to my own family members. This is not surprising considering the words of Jesus in Matt. 12:50: "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." Our love for Jesus Christ unites us and makes us one. With a commitment to follow Christ, we become part of a larger family.

Assistance with helping members explore biblical principles. Attending a worship service once a week gives attendees some biblical foundations, but it doesn't allow them to learn on a deeper level. Church members lack the opportunity to turn to the person in the pew and discuss their observations and thoughts on a particular scripture passage. (Well, actually they can, but the pastor might not appreciate it.)

Proverbs 27:17 says, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." In other words, when we are exposed to others and their skills and knowledge, we sharpen our own biblical skills and knowledge and vice versa. A small group is the optimal place for this.

Today's churches face an enormous challenge of educating members about the Bible. Leadership should never assume that the people who attend their services remember the scriptural principles their parents taught them or that they learned in Sunday School. Nor should they assume that people are picking up scriptural knowledge from sermons once a week. If they come that often, they may very well be. Fewer and fewer people, however, have church backgrounds, and many today are biblically illiterate.

Even well-loved Bible stories that seasoned Christians have known since childhood may be totally new stories to many church members. James may not have heard of King David or be familiar with what a synagogue is. Elizabeth may never have heard any of the parables. We are living in the postmodern age. Not only do many people pull their religious viewpoints from a variety of religions and belief systems (many of them non-Christian), but they are often unfamiliar with even basic scriptural references as well. Providing a biblical foundation is more important than ever. Healthy small groups encourage members to use God's Word as their foundation when searching for answers to life's struggles. Groups that teach members to look up scripture passages, question, and probe God's Word are not only equipping members but also laying a foundation vital for solid leadership.

A greenhouse environment for growth and maturity. Gardeners know that a crop of healthy plants comes from cultivating the soil and creating the right environment. To avoid stunted growth, the garden must nurture seeds with rich soil, fertilizer, and water.

Small groups create this same type of nurturing environment for partici-

pants. Members need good soil (a healthy small group for starters), fertilizer (getting into God's Word and studying God's Christian principles), and water (instruction and exhortation) to make them grow. A savvy small-group leader creates a hothouse environment for members who look to the leader for godly behavior and principles. Members also benefit from cross-pollination as they discuss spiritual insights and encouragement with other members.

A place for training and equipping leaders and teachers. As a parent I was amazed at how often my immediate family members still expected me to take care of them, exhibiting a "Feed me; I'm helpless" attitude. I jokingly call this the baby bird syndrome. They behaved in this manner well past infancy, even as teens. I knew it wasn't healthy to treat them like baby birds. At some point birds must grow up and take care of their own needs.

To help them mature I've maneuvered them out of the dependency mode, taking deliberate steps to guide them toward maturity and self-sufficiency. Small-group leaders can also benefit from guiding their members toward maturity.

Leaders can't and shouldn't do all the work of the group themselves. Teaching group members to do their share moves them out of the baby bird mode and toward maturity. One of the main reasons churches should have a small-group ministry is to develop mature Christians who will become future leaders.

If you don't want a church full of baby birds, you must work on developing mature Christians. The more members grow toward maturity, the more leaders you cultivate. Small groups are often one of the easiest places to find and develop budding Christian leaders.

Allowing group members to try their hand at teaching and leading can build confidence and skill. We'll look more at leader development in future chapters.

Selling Members and Leaders on Their Value

Launching small groups, particularly in churches that have none or few, can be a daunting task. Just as gardeners first prepare the soil by tilling it and then adding fertilizer, your job will be easier if you first prepare the hearts of leaders and members before starting to build your small-group ministry.

Promote the need. It's easy to think that launching a small-group ministry requires nothing more than starting one small group. Then other people see what a successful group looks like and decide to either join it or start more groups on their own. Occasionally this is the case, but more often than not, a single new group starts without proper support or promotion, then quickly shrivels and dies.

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In order for a wide-spread small-group ministry to succeed in a church, people must become active supporters, recognizing within themselves a need for fellowship and spiritual development. It's the task of a church's core leadership to point out this need. Once members are aware of the deficit in their own lives, they recognize that small groups can meet that need.

Sell core leaders on the value. Before you invest much time in small-group development, talk it up to core leaders. Sell the value of small groups with visionary statements or practical illustrations of their importance. Don't expect the message to stick after only one discussion. Several talks may be needed to promote the idea. I've heard that it takes about 10 times to actually convey a new idea. We'd like to think someone understands our idea and that saying it once or twice makes the message clear, but often the picture we reveal is fuzzy.

Your church has influential core leaders. Approach these leaders first. Choose one power monger with whom you have the best rapport, preferably one who has the lead pastor's ear. Invite the leader out for coffee. Explain why small groups can make a difference, their value to your church body, and that the interest in small groups must start with people in the hub.

Ask this leader for suggestions on how to motivate other key leaders to see the importance of small groups. You may need to hold a meeting with these leaders to talk about small groups, or perhaps you might meet with your church board. Talking with the senior pastor may also help. Find someone to partner with who will help move the idea into the hearts and minds of key players.

You may have seen a game called gossip or telephone. Someone starts with a statement and then passes that statement down to each consecutive person. Often, by the time it makes it to the end of the line, participants have lost the original message. To avoid a similar loss in communication, explain the concept clearly to your one key player; then meet with additional leaders to explain it again so that it remains clear and undistorted. Promote small-group participation among your leaders so that the excitement becomes contagious. If you can convey the vision and importance to core leaders, their enthusiasm will be catching to the rest of your members.

Your next step is to preach it and teach it to the church body. Talking about the value of small groups from the pulpit is a simple but effective way. Consider scheduling a sermon series with illustrations and scriptures about the value of small groups. Some scriptures you may want to consider are these: Acts 4:32-35 details how early believers became one in heart and mind and how they cared for one another. Matthew 17:1-13, the story of the Transfiguration, is an example of small groups, because Jesus met with Peter, James, and John

in a more intimate setting as a way of mentoring and praying together with them. Note that Jesus purposely separated out three from the other nine: “After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves” (v. 1).

Romans 12:10-16 explains how God designed the Body of Christ to support and encourage each other:

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another (*NASB*). By divine design believers are to be not only a spiritual care network that helps us persevere but also a physical care network that covers emotional and practical needs.

In Heb. 10:25 Paul reminds us of the importance of meeting together for support and encouragement: “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” This verse stresses the value of meeting together and caring for one another and can be coupled with other “one another” verses examined in chapter 15. All are appropriate for use in a sermon or sermon series for educating members about small groups and persuading them to participate in them.

Lydia and several other women were in the habit of gathering together as a group to worship beside the river (Acts 16:13). The church in Philippi started by meeting in homes. Lydia’s was one of them (vv. 15, 40). We’ll take a more in-depth look at Lydia in chapter 2.

Use several promotional venues to make your campaign more successful. If some small groups are already established, consider inviting one or two members from these groups to speak during the worship service about how small groups have changed their lives. Recorded videos of small-group member interviews and activities impact many. Our church has used these very successfully. Be creative. Consider presenting a drama that highlights the value of small groups. Promote small groups in your newsletter and printed bulletins. Put info about them on the church’s Web site (if you have one).

Some churches include in a bulletin insert the names and subjects of their small groups, the day groups meet, and a contact name and phone number. One large church in the Bay area publishes small-group descriptions and contact info on their Web site. Putting crucial info into the hands of members makes connecting them to groups much easier. (Since Web site info is broad-

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cast all over the world, however, you may need to guard privacy by either getting permission from leaders to use their contact info or by opting to list your church phone for contact, thus bypassing any privacy issues.) Make it as easy as possible for members to connect.

Again, you'll be most successful getting people to participate in small groups if you first convince core leaders of their importance. But a creative promotion in the church should directly follow. Even after you start promoting small groups, periodically reminding members about them helps keep people interested in them.

Small groups do not magically salve away all of your church's ailments, but they can promote a more spiritually healthy church body that feels connected, loved, and valued.

Points to Ponder ***A Closer Look at Small Groups***

1. Think of people you know who belong to different churches. Do their churches have small groups? If so, what are they called (i.e., small groups, core groups, etc.)?
2. How are the small groups of other churches like the small groups at your church (if your church has small groups)? How are they different?
3. If you could take the best qualities of each of these groups and merge them into one group, what would they include?