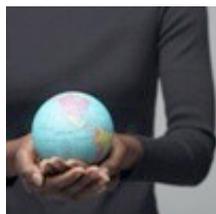


Missional Small Groups



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Leader's Guide

How to use "Missional Small Groups" by SMALLGROUPS.COM in your regularly scheduled meetings.

Welcome to SMALLGROUPS.COM. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you train and direct the leaders of your small-groups ministry. Selected by the editors of the Discipleship Team at Christianity Today International, the material in this download comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.

SMALLGROUPS.COM Training Themes are not just another program. Each theme contains materials on the topic you choose—no tedious program to follow. The materials work when you want, where you want, and the way you want them to. They're completely flexible and easy to use.

You probably already have regularly scheduled meetings with small-group directors, coaches, and leaders. SMALLGROUPS.COM Training Themes fit easily into what you're already doing. Here's how to use our material during your training meetings:

1. Select a learning tool. In this theme of "Missional Small Groups," you'll find multiple types of handouts from which to choose:

- ◆ Bible Study
- ◆ case study
- ◆ activities
- ◆ interview
- ◆ devotionals
- ◆ resources
- ◆ assessment tools
- ◆ how-to articles
- ◆ retreat plan

2. Select a handout. Suppose, for example, you want to get a basic understanding of how missional thinking works in small groups. Select "Missional Small Groups" (pp. 15–16). Or perhaps you want to explore a real-life situation of a small group of people making a difference through missional practices. Consult "Small Church—Global Outreach" (p. 12).

3. Photocopy the handout. Let's say you selected "Small Church—Global Outreach." Photocopy as many copies as you need—you do not need to ask for permission to photocopy any material from SMALLGROUPS.COM (as long as you are using the material in a church or educational setting, are not charging for it, and produce less than 1,000 copies).

4. Prepare for the discussion. We recommend you read the Scripture passages and identify key discussion questions. How will you apply the principles to specific decisions your church is making?

5. Lead the discussion. Most handouts can be read within five minutes. After you have allowed time for reading, begin the discussion by asking one of the provided questions. Be ready to move the discussion to specific issues your church is facing.

Most SMALLGROUPS.COM handouts can be discussed in 15 or 20 minutes (except the Bible study and Activity, which may take longer). Your small-group leadership team will still have plenty of time to discuss its agenda.

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

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MISSIONAL SMALL GROUPS



Are We Stewards of Justice or Just-Us?

Christians need to actively work for justice on both a small and large scale.

Malachi 3:5

God Cares About Social Justice

In Malachi 3:5 the Lord says: “So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers, and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me.”

God’s people were oppressing hired workers, forcing them to live below the poverty line or to survive on minimum wage. They were forgetting widows and orphans—the people in ancient society who ended up destitute because family was the only social security system. The poor were falling through the cracks. God’s people were rejecting the aliens, the non-Jews—looking down on those with green cards, avoiding those who couldn’t speak Hebrew, or did so with a thick accent.

So Malachi was saying to God’s people: We don’t have the luxury of ignoring the needy, of being stewards of “just-us.” No, we’re called to be stewards of justice. It’s our job to remember the poor and the powerless.

When biblical archaeologists dig down into the ruins of ancient Israel, they find there are periods when the houses are more or less the same size, and the artifacts of life they unearth show a relative equality among the people. During those periods, interestingly enough, the Hebrew Prophets are quite silent. They have very little to say. But the archaeologists’ diggings also uncover remnants of huge houses and tiny little hovels. These and other objects show a period of great economic disparity among the people. Not surprisingly, it’s during these times that the Prophets are most outspoken, denouncing the great gaps in wealth and the neglect of the poor.

A Lack of Social Justice Will Bring About God’s Judgment

In the face of such inequalities, Malachi says the Lord will come to judge God’s people. And in fact, the New Testament says the Lord did come some 400 years after Malachi—in the person of Jesus Christ.

What Malachi anticipated has happened. The Lord has come in judgment—but also in grace. Certainly the Lord continues to come to us today with words that might make us a little hot under the collar. But Malachi would have us believe the judgment of the Lord does not come to destroy us. Rather, it is like a refiner’s fire—purifying, cleansing, and consuming the imperfections. It’s getting rid of that which prevents us from being all that we can be for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Christians Should Participate in Social Justice

The prophet Malachi is mobilizing all who claim to be God’s people, whether citizens of this nation or any other nation, to be stewards of God’s justice. This is a large part of the church’s mission, isn’t it? It seems to me that we could call the church’s mission Operation Finite Justice. Finite justice is the money and the time given by this church and by individual members of this church. Finite justice is not forgetting soup kitchens and overnight shelters. Finite justice means reaching into the river of human despair and rescuing people who are drowning—offering them relief. It might also mean moving upstream to see who or what is throwing them in the river in the first place—and doing something about that.

When Henry David Thoreau was thrown in jail for a short time because of his opposition to America’s involvement in the Mexican War, one of his friends came to visit him. Looking through the bars, the friend asked Henry, “What are you doing in here?” Thoreau responded, “I have to ask you: What are you doing out there?”

Not a bad question.

—HEIDI HUSTED; excerpted from our sister publication PREACHING TODAY, © 2006 Christianity Today International. For more sermons like this, visit PreachingToday.com.

Discuss:

1. Do I agree with the first two points of this Bible study? Why or why not?
2. Do I participate in social justice? Does our small-groups ministry? Does our church?
3. What opportunities to participate in justice are available in our local community?

MISSIONAL SMALL GROUPS



Small Groups and the Mission of God

Alan Hirsch talks about the untapped potential of individuals and small-group communities.

Colossians 2:2–3

Alan Hirsch is an experienced church planter and the founding director of Forge Mission Training Network. His most recent book, [The Forgotten Ways](#), represents an contemporary interpretation of the missional explosion of the early church and the recent house-church movement in China.

What does the term *missional* mean to you?

Well, that's one of those very difficult terms because it's so widely used. But for me, it primarily refers to a church that organizes itself around the mission of God, or the *missio dei*, which refers to God's involvement in the world—his redeeming it to himself. In *The Forgotten Ways*, I say that it's not so much that the church has a mission, but that the mission has a church. So when I think of the term "missional church," it's in that order—that a church has somehow bonded itself or identified itself as a primary agent of the mission of God in the world.

What about the term *organic*?

Of course that one has been made famous by Neil Cole, but *organic* for me is the idea that human organizations—just like living systems—are made up of very complex structures, and they have a life of their own. It's a term that's in contrast to a more mechanistic view of organization. So when I refer to organic systems, I'm thinking of a type of leadership and organization that is closer to the rhythms and structures of life itself.

In a general sense, how have you seen small groups fit into missional churches, or into communities with a more organic structure?

It's interesting, in a number of the situations I know of where you've got very large churches beginning to adopt the movement ethos laid out in *The Forgotten Ways*, almost inevitably they see their small groups as a leverage point for a number of things. Discipleship, for example, can be best facilitated in a small group—if it's well done—as can the idea of mission. Also, missional capacity and missional reach are very much higher in a small group than in a large building that requires people to come to you.

But I think the big switch for us will be to stop thinking of small groups as prop-ups to the "real deal," weekend-based church. In reality, small groups are major elements of the church. In fact, they are themselves churches. And that's the big switch. When people are able to see small groups as churches in and of themselves, therefore fully capable of doing all the functions of an *ecclesia*, then the revolution is on.

But if we keep them as just back-ups to keep people associated with a large church, then I think all we will do there is facilitate community and Bible study and prayer, but there can never be a multiplication movement at that point, because mission isn't featured. Discipleship doesn't really cut in very deeply there.

Speaking of *The Forgotten Ways*, you mention six elements of missional movements that have been present in your research. They are: 1) the profession that Jesus is Lord, 2) disciple making, 3) a missional/incarnational impulse, 4) an apostolic environment, 5) organic systems, and 6) *communitas* instead of community. Which of these elements connect the most with small groups?

First of all, "Jesus is Lord" is the central element around which all of the others gravitate. It's the idea that our experience of God is qualified through Jesus, and that comes to us through the form of monotheism as a claim over our lives. So that becomes a central, pivotal piece.

Disciple making is a pivotal element of all movements. In fact, it's my suggestion that this is the most critical piece other than the profession that Jesus is Lord. That's because disciple making is where the belief that Jesus is Lord plays itself out through the individual and the community. Quality control, and the embodiment and transmission of the gospel are all played out there, as well.



Alan Hirsch
"My study of movements has shown me that every Christian carries the potential for world transformation."

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The element of “organic systems” may also be interesting to small-group leaders. One thing I mention in the book is the difference between reproducing and reproduce-able. One of the problems with the larger church as we know it is that it’s not very reproduce-able. It takes an incredible amount of money, a type of leadership that is very rare—the whole thing is a relatively rare phenomenon, really. But that’s not true of small groups.

Then there is the idea of *communitas*. This should be interesting to small groups because *communitas* represents a kind of community that develops in the context of a shared ordeal or challenge that calls people out of a normal understanding of themselves. They are centered around the kind of experiences that turns friends into comrades. Often our sense of connection and reliance on each other is minimal, and what a *communitas* will do is restructure the relationships between people and help them experience and interact with each other in a fundamentally new way. In essence it means putting the adventure back into the venture.

I’d like to look specifically at the disciple-making element for a moment. You mentioned in the book that disciple making is a crucial, pivotal element in the process. What makes it so important?

It seems to me that if we fail to make disciples—that is, people who can become like Jesus Christ, which is a basic definition of discipleship—if we can’t get that right, then it doesn’t matter what else we do because there will be a fundamental weakness in our ministry. The lack of disciples will undermine any effort beyond that. But if we succeed in developing and creating an environment where people really can become more Christlike, it seems to me that the movement is on, and everything else will have a substantial basis along with it.

The problem is that we are being disciplined every day by our culture, and it’s done very profoundly and very well—and I say this with a background in marketing and advertising. There are billions of dollars going into advertising, which is not just selling us products. There’s much more of a religious dynamic going on. So if we as a church or a small group don’t disciple in the way of Jesus, then the culture gets to have the primary say. And I have to say that, despite our best efforts, the culture is winning at this stage.

In your book, you echoed a statement by Neil Cole that the bar has been set too low in most modern churches when it comes to disciple making. Can you explain that a bit further?

Yes, what Neil says in effect is that we need to raise the bar on our expectations for disciple making and lower the bar on our expectations for church. And I think he’s right. I mean, that’s exactly what the early church did, and it’s certainly what the Chinese church is doing. In a martyrdom movement, you’re raising the bar extremely high. People are going to die, and the churches teach them how to die well.

But in our culture, we tend to reverse that. We deliver all the goodies up front, and then we wonder why people don’t become disciples. My question is: Why would they? What’s with all that stuff about “death to self”? Why should I change, and why should I volunteer for all that heavy lifting when I’ve got my snout in the trough right now?

So how can we raise the bar for a typical American small group? How have you managed that in your own experience?

What we’ve done to make sure that discipleship is taken seriously is embed within the covenant of each group a certain set of practices. The problem with most communities of faith is that they are confessional. They believe in the Great Commission, they believe in discipleship—they’re saying the right things. But they don’t address behavior.

So what we did is develop a set of practices designed to produce embodied values in the lives of our group members. And we called those practices TEMPT—Together we follow, Engagement with Scripture, Mission, Passion for Jesus, and Transformation. How each unit or group engaged in these practices was entirely up to them, but it had to be observable that they were practicing them.

It’s ironic. When you “do church” well, you create dependency, because then people can’t reproduce it themselves. We had to break that. We had to communicate that all disciples carry within themselves the potential for world transformation. We wanted to communicate that you have the power to do this, so don’t outsource it to other people. That’s the Faustian bargain at the heart of many churches—that people outsource their primary gifting, calling, and function to the institution, to the professionals in ministry.

How can small groups avoid contributing to this dependency?

Small groups can play a tremendous role in moving out of the dependency, but they have to move from being Bible studies and prayer groups to being mission agencies. And they need to take seriously the idea of a

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common set of disciplines that begin to form them and shape their culture—not just a common set of beliefs that everyone agrees on for life. You have to get at their behaviors.

In *The Forgotten Ways*, it seemed to me that your idea of *communitas* is defined almost as a lack of safety, or a lack of comfort.

That's part of it, yeah.

So how can that be achieved in a middle-class, American small group? How do we make people feel unsafe and uncomfortable here?

Well, it doesn't have to be all danger, although I do believe that risk and adventure are important for us. We go and watch it in the movies all the time, partly because we've outsourced it to the movies. But deep down in the human heart is a desire to do something of note—to test oneself, literally. But we've lost the art of it.

And so I think our churches and small groups need to take on tasks and functions with a very real possibility of failure. We need to do something where, unless we find each other and all work together, we're going to fail. We need to put ourselves in situations like that and see what happens. There's going to be failures, of course, but we need to try. Because when people find themselves in those situations, their very relationships with one another are restructured.

Can you think of an example?

Yes. Think about a small group of 20 or 25 people that adopts a rubbish dump in Mexico City—a place where a community of people are literally living off the rubbish dump. And that group says: Over the next 10 years (take it over a long time, not a short-term project) we are going to spend a significant part of our holidays and unpaid leave, and every one of us is going to go down there and help the people build a little village. We're going to get those people off that rubbish dump. We're going to bring whatever expertise we have to go and do this thing. We're not just going to send money; we're going to go there and do this thing ourselves.

I promise you, if a small group does that, they will be different people in 10 years time. Now, that might sound like a lot, but a group from where I am in Southern California could easily do that. And it doesn't have to be that ambitious. I know of a group that adopted their local park in a similar way. They cleaned it up, they set up barbeques and played volleyball—they were creative.

But the main thing is for people to just get out—and I say this with all love and respect—just get out of the house. It's too safe in our houses. We need to start inhabiting the places where other people inhabit. If you can pull off “church” in a third place, in a place where people go to spend their spare time, you will be forced to contextualize your message and get away from the bad three-chord choruses and stuff like that.

Because often our small groups in our houses are run like mini-churches, aren't they? We do the same thing we experience on Sunday, but it's just bad. We have a mother and son combo on the guitar, and the Bible study is never quite as good as the pastor's sermon. It's a back up. It's just mini-church done badly. I mean, are there other ways to worship God than singing songs in public? Surely there must be, for goodness sake. God can be worshiped in all ways, so go find them.

Is there anything else you'd like to mention to small-group leaders and point persons in terms of what we need to learn or unlearn as we go about our ministry?

Let me just say that all of this is very hard for anyone in the West to hear, because we've become so blinded to our own potential. We take part in the institution of church, and we're knocked out by it. But my study of movements has shown me that every Christian carries the potential for world transformation. Even the youngest Christian has within themselves a power beyond belief. It seems that God continually takes the most unlikely people in China, for instance, and uses them to literally transform villages and towns.

So my encouragement to people is to trust what God can do through them. It's more than what we've been told to believe.

—ALAN HIRSCH; copyright 2008 by the author and Christianity Today International. Join the conversation at www.theforgottenways.org.

Discuss:

1. How do Hirsch's definitions of *missional* and *organic* fit in with our understanding of the terms?
2. In our efforts at disciple making, have we set the bar low or high? What have been the results?
1. When was the last time our group tackled an activity or ministry that included a very real possibility of failure? What was the result?

MISSIONAL SMALL GROUPS



Are We Missional?

Use this assessment to get a picture of your ministry's "missionality."
Acts 2:42–47

So many groups that once self-identified as *cell church*, *meta-church*, *house church*, *seeker-sensitive*, or *purpose-driven* now claim to be *missional*. It's such a buzzword that it's fair to ask, "Is there really such a thing as a missional church?" Although some use the term glibly, I believe the answer is yes.

Use the chart below to determine how your small-group ministry—or individual small group—lines up with basic missional values.

	Definitely Describes Us	Describes Us	Doesn't Describe Us	Definitely Doesn't Describe Us
Resources Are Held Loosely				
We feel the pain of basic human needs being unmet in and around our community.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Much of our programming and finances are directed outward.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We are willing to cut back on programming, when necessary, in order to leave space for breathing and living.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Our ministry participants don't demonstrate a sense of entitlement ("We've always done this; we pay for it, and you owe it to us!").	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Spiritual Formation Is Experiential				
We are not satisfied with spiritual formation that is primarily cognitive ("I believe this to be true").	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We consistently prioritize faithful living during the week over worship at a weekend event.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
For the most part, our participants have eschewed a "benefit-oriented faith" that assumes Christianity automatically promises a better marriage, better portfolio, and greater meaning.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Participation in God's Redemptive Plan				
We embrace and contribute to the ethnic and social diversity of our local community.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Our participants are more interested in works of justice, reconciliation, and peace than theological debates or historical Sunderings.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We embrace and contribute to breaking down denominational barriers in our community.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

—TIM CONDER; excerpted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP Journal, © 2007 Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit LeadershipJournal.net.

Discuss:

1. In which of the three sections does our small-group ministry most reflect missional values?
2. In which section does our ministry show the most dissonance with missional values?
3. What are practical ways that our small groups can engage and serve their local communities?

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Can Our Ministry Change?

Use this assessment to identify potential hurdles in your transition to missional small-groups ministry.

Mark 2:21–22

There are four important principles to keep in mind if your small-group ministry is trying to become more missional in its focus and practices. Use this assessment to get a sense of which principle—or principles—has the potential to trip you up.

Answer each question with one of the following: “This completely describes our small-group ministry,” “This somewhat describes our ministry,” or “This does not describe our ministry.”

	Does Not Describe	Somewhat Describes	Completely Describes
Anticipate and work through conflict.			
➤ Our group members are relatively flexible and would be open to a change in the direction and style of our ministry.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
➤ Ministry leadership has open communication with most of our groups and all of the most influential leaders.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
➤ Our leaders anticipate and are prepared for the loss of some small-group participants.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Show “controlled release” while releasing control.			
➤ Our small-group leadership is willing to stand firm until a missional mindset begins to take hold.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
➤ Our small groups can function with ambiguity as leaders, and staff take on different roles in the ministry.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
➤ Ministry leadership will not be tempted to over-control the various expressions of missionality that arise from the shift.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
➤ We are willing to let individual groups dream up their own ways of addressing the needs of our community.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Recognize there will be personal losses.			
➤ Our group leaders do not require accolades or attention to perform excellent ministry.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
➤ Our staff is prepared for cutbacks as some paid positions are handed over to volunteers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Stamina is required en route to better days.			
➤ All of our key staff and leaders believe it is vital for our groups to become more missional, and they are willing to endure the changes that will accompany our transition.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

—CHAD HALL; adapted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP Journal, copyright 2007 Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit www.LeadershipJournal.net

Discuss

1. In what ways are we most prepared for a shift to missional small groups? Least prepared?
2. What will our small-groups ministry need to lose in order to become more missional?
3. Are our group leaders and participants committed and ready for the challenges ahead? If not, what would it take to prepare them?



Fighting Roof-Tile Syndrome

What are you willing to sacrifice in order to bring people to Jesus?

Mark 2:1–12

The Case Years ago I was invited to speak at a small church in a semi-rural lakeside community. I arrived a half hour before the service, and the building was still locked. So I drove down the town's main drag, which the church was on. There, between the main street and the lake, were thousands of people gathered for a community-sponsored half marathon. A local band was already playing on a flatbed. Coffee kiosks were doing a booming business. Runners were stretching, limbering up. The local radio station was giving live color commentary. It was a festival.

I drove back to the church and found the building open. A church deacon met me at the door, took me to a small office, and, before we prayed, told me how upset he was—on Friday, the church's parking lot had been freshly paved. On Saturday, someone ("probably one of those people here for the marathon") had driven an RV into the lot. Turning it around, they'd creased the soft asphalt.

The deacons had called an emergency meeting for Sunday night, and the outcome would likely be that they'd use the church's savings (they had over \$50,000 in the bank) to hang a chain across the entrance of the church parking lot and prevent any further damage.

I decided, there and then, to preach from Mark 2, where a paralytic's friends break apart a roof to bring him to Jesus. I stood up, read the text, and asked, "What roof tiles do you need to break? What are you willing to suffer the loss of for the sake of reaching the thousands of people right outside your door?"

What Would You Do?

- ◆ Have you ever had personal property damaged during a small-group meeting or outreach event? How did you respond?
- ◆ How does it make you feel when you notice others prioritizing money and "things" over people?

What Happened

Good story. But there's a problem—it's taken me a long time to heed its lesson. I went back to my own church and happily resumed the business (in my own way) of guarding roof tiles, all the while speaking about how important it is to care for our community.

And then one day I realized—this entire church body could perish overnight, and the community wouldn't notice us missing. It was doubtful they would care.

We were huddled together—a barricade of backs enjoying immensely the preaching of Jesus, but seeing very little of the bone-deep, heart-turning forgiveness of Jesus. We were seeing lesser still of the heart-stopping, crowd-stirring healing of Jesus. We were avoiding controversy, to be sure, but only by avoiding those who needed the forgiveness and healing of Jesus.

Thus began my own revolution. In word and deed (slowly, slowly), I am changing. In word and deed (slowly, slowly), so is our church. We are repenting of being a barricade of backs, and training to be a posse of roof-tile breakers.

—MARK BUCHANAN; excerpted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP Journal, © 2007 Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit LeadershipJournal.net.

Discuss

1. Describe a time when our church or small group operated as a "barricade of backs." What was the outcome?
2. Where does roof-tile syndrome show up most often in a small-group setting?
3. How can we prevent roof-tile syndrome in our small groups?



Losing Our Vision

One man's journey away from a "respectable" small-group ministry
Revelation 2:1–5

The Case In the early 1990's, I began working for an organization that consulted with churches in alternative ways of being the church. The founder of the ministry challenged the programmatic way of church life and promoted an organic way of being a missional people through small groups. Almost every day, I would field phone calls from pastors who longed to find a different expression of being the people of God.

However, something happened in the late 1990's. Small groups suddenly became the respectable way to organize a church. Large-church pastors began promoting small-group structures as the way to grow a church and to reach the lost. Overnight, our organization went from being a fringe outfit to a popular phenomenon with large churches, seminaries, and denominations asking us how to do church.

But during my last five years with that ministry, I became frustrated with what I saw going on in the small-group movement. While small groups had entered into the land of respectability, I felt like something was missing. As I began to dig into the writings of the early small-group pioneers, I realized that we had gotten off track.

In short, good old American pragmatism had turned small groups into a modernistic program that leaders could control and produce growth. As a result, I—along with many other small-group trainers—promised pastors and small-group leaders a trip to the moon. Most of us bought into a set of small-group myths that resulted in growth but little radical transformation. For most churches, they developed groups of people who were doing traditional church in their homes. The program was different, but it was still a program.

What Would You Do?

- ◆ How would you turn around a small-groups ministry that had embraced respectability over authentic transformation?
- ◆ In your mind, what is the difference between ministries that are program-oriented and ones that are missional/organic?

What Happened Working as a pastor again, I have been forced to search for alternatives for facilitating community. I began asking questions: What are the missional elements that must be present to develop small groups that are much more than a popular program that gets lots of people to conferences? What are the ways of living in community that actually confronts rather than accommodates the average American lifestyle?

I am now at a church where I wrestle with these same questions on a weekly basis. The answers emerging in our midst will not be the same ones that emerge in yours. Small-group community is crucial to the future of the church, but the exact form of it will vary from ministry to ministry.

Running small groups as a program is too simplistic. But running small groups as a way to facilitate the journey toward becoming a missional organism holds unlimited potential.

—SCOTT BOREN; copyright 2007 Christianity Today International. Originally appeared on Smallgroups.com.

Discuss

1. Has the structure of our small-group ministry changed in recent years? If so, how?
2. How does our current ministry compare with the practices and ideals of the early small-group pioneers?
3. What must our ministry do to maintain a missional focus and practice?



Stepping into Something Frightening

One woman's story of missional service and commitment

Hebrews 13:3

All sorts of things get in the way of doing what we're called to do. Sometimes it's sloth; sometimes we simply get distracted. But often it's fear that stands in the way. And sometimes the only way to conquer fear is, as the commercial says, to "just do it."

Dire Circumstances

In the early 1800s, English prisons were pits of indecency and brutality. In the women's division at Newgate Prison in London, for example, women awaiting trial for stealing apples were crammed into the same cell as women who had been convicted of murder.

Eating, sleeping, and defecating all took place in the same confined area. Women begged or stole to get clothes, alcohol, and food. Many became despondent in such conditions and sat around in a drunken stupor, stark naked. Some even starved to death.

In short, it was no place for a lady—especially a seemingly delicate one such as Elizabeth Fry.

One Faithful Light

Fry, the daughter of an English banker, married at age 20 into another wealthy family. Children came quickly, one on top of another, and eventually numbered 11 in all. Fry spent her days caring for her children and entertaining people of high society.

Yet years earlier she had sensed a call to work on behalf of the downtrodden. While still a young bride and mother, she gave medicine and clothes to the homeless and helped establish a school for nurses. And at age 33, she found the courage to step inside London's Newgate Prison and begin visiting female prisoners. Friends and prison officials warned her about the risk of both the disease and the violence to which she was exposing herself, but she waved aside the warnings and kept visiting.

Soon, visiting wasn't enough. She taught the female prisoners basic hygiene, as well as sewing and quilting. She read the Bible to inmates and intervened for women on death row.

To 19th-century observers, Fry's efforts produced a miracle. Many of the reportedly wild and shiftless inmates became, under her care, orderly, disciplined, and devout. Mayors and sheriffs from the surrounding regions (and later from other European countries) visited Newgate and began initiating reforms in their own jails and prisons.

Today Elizabeth Fry is remembered as a pioneer in prison reform. And yet the only thing that separated her from many others of her day was her willingness to step into a frightening environment to see what she could do.

—MARK GALLI; excerpted from *Leadership Devotions*, copyright 2001 by Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. What lessons can our small-groups ministry learn from the example of Elizabeth Fry?
2. What are some frightening places, situations, or circumstances in our community?
3. How can individual small groups—and our ministry as a whole—serve as a light in these frightening areas?



Small Church—Global Reach

How 25 people changed the world through an act of love.

Matthew 25:44–46

In this age of overflowing megachurches and high-profile Christian ministries, can a tiny congregation hidden in the middle of America make a difference?

Consider West Covington Baptist Church as proof that the answer is yes. Kalkidan Tessema, a 4-year-old Ethiopian girl, is alive and well today thanks to this northern Kentucky church with a Sunday attendance of about 25 people.

A Global Connection

Last year, when member Grace Wilson received e-mails from Southern Baptist missionaries in Africa about Kalkidan’s plight, she felt compelled to act even further by bringing the need to the attention of her church. As a result, West Covington Baptist arranged for a life-saving operation that has impacted an entire African community and transformed the life of Grace’s church.

“It has shown us that we can make a difference,” says Grace. “One person can make a difference, not just in our local community but in our global community.”

“It has definitely changed our outlook on how God can work when we’re willing,” adds West Covington’s pastor, Chuck Overton.

A Child in Need

From birth, Kalkidan suffered from a rare colon disease that forced her father to regularly flush it with water. After several operations, doctors told her family there was nothing else they could do and to prepare for the toddler’s death. With Grace’s encouragement, her congregation agreed to sponsor a U.S. visit by Kalkidan and her father, Gashway, an Ethiopian evangelist whose salary is the equivalent of \$50 a month.

Media coverage of the operation helped bring in additional gifts, which totaled more than \$18,500 by the time Kalkidan and her dad returned home last September. With funds left over, West Covington Baptist is sending the Tessema family a \$125-a-month stipend. The money supplements Gashway’s modest pay and ensures they can purchase the nutritious food needed to maintain Kalkidan’s health.

Though the heavy media coverage of the event didn’t inspire many new visitors to West Covington Baptist, Pastor Overton knows Kalkidan’s story is having a widespread effect. He has heard of other area ministers urging their congregations to perform similar good works.

“We don’t know what God’s going to do in other churches because of this,” he says. “We don’t know what God’s going to do in this little girl’s life in Ethiopia.”

If nothing else, this miraculous journey has shown Overton and his flock that a small church can, indeed, change the world.

—KEN WALKER; condensed from our sister publication *TODAY’S CHRISTIAN*, © 2007 Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit Todays-Christian.com

Discuss:

1. What applications does this story have to our small-groups ministry?
2. How can our groups become informed about the needs of our community, both locally and globally?
3. How can our church assist individual small groups in reaching out to serve?



Missional: Possible

How to help your church look upward, inward, and outward.

Matthew 28:19–20

When asked, “What kind of church do you serve?” leaders are finding that denominational qualifiers or adjectives such as *innovative*, *emergent*, *contemporary*, *liturgical*, and *purpose-driven* don’t get to the heart of the question; they tend to over-emphasize a particular aspect of the church. Instead, leaders are (re)discovering that the essential calling of the church has less to do with the way a church is organized—its doctrinal distinctions or style of music—and more to do with the *missio Dei* (mission of God).

United Kingdom blogger Andrew Jones explains: “*Missio Dei* stems from the Triune God: the Father sends the Son, the Father and the Son send the Spirit, the Father and Son and the Spirit send the church into the world.” So a missional church is about doing God’s work in the world today. In this sense, the missional church isn’t a new emphasis, but is a renewed focus on what has been (or should have been) there all along.

Mike Breen, pastor at Community Church of Joy near Phoenix, Arizona, believes the missional church is something very old, very fundamental, and very much at the core of what it means to be church. “Missional church is radical only in the sense that radical means root,” he says. “The missional church is rooted in not just the New Testament church of Acts, but in the mission of Jesus himself. A missional church lives out the church’s three-dimensional calling: to be upwardly focused on God in worship that is passionate; to be inwardly focused on community among believers that is demonstrated in relationships of love and compassion; and to be outwardly focused on a world that does not yet know God.”

Redirected Resources

Becoming missional means redirecting resources toward the world. This means church leaders take a hard look at how money, time, and energy are allocated. Is it for the sole benefit of those in the church, or invested in God’s mission to the world?

For Community Church of Joy, the journey outward involved shifting from being a staff-led and consumer-driven church to being lay-led and contributor-driven. In such a context, staff become encouragers and equippers. Those spotlighted as frontline performers of ministry are those who serve Jesus in the world.

“The analogy is a football stadium,” Breen says. “In the past, the majority of our church members were in the stands watching and applauding the paid staff on the field. The staff was worn out from doing all the ministry. Meanwhile, the lay members were well rested but resistant to getting in the game. Now that is reversing.”

Getting people active in ministry can get its start in worship. For a congregation like Community Church of Joy, which had perfected the seeker-sensitive approach, missional worship meant a major reversal. “Back then,” Breen explains, “we would say in worship, ‘You don’t need to stand or sing or give. Just relax, sit back, and observe.’ Now, we say you do need to stand and sing and give. In effect, we are now much closer to a Reformation theology of worship in that worship is ‘the work of the people’ of God, not just observing and supporting the work of paid staff.”

Taking It into the World

Missional churches activate laity to carry out God’s mission in their various spheres of life. This creates a community of Christians who let the upward focus on God in the worship service impact their orientation and activity during the rest of their lives. This means inviting the lost and making worship hospitable to others on weekends, but also working for God during the week.

Janetta Cravens, pastor of First Christian Church in Macon, Georgia, describes an attitude shift being made among her leaders: “We are moving from seeing ourselves as a church who needs members from the community to seeing ourselves as being in a community whose members need the church. We’ve realized we’re here to serve the community in unique ways.”

For instance, when the city of 100,000 stopped its curbside recycling program, First Christian Church converted part of its parking lot into a collection site for aluminum, plastics, and paper. And since earth stewardship is important, the children made door hangers about the recycling opportunity and delivered them, with cookies, to homes and apartments in the neighborhood.

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Community Church of Joy has organized groups of about 50 people. Breen says, “These groups are small enough to have their own unique vision—such as ministering to shut-ins or working with the homeless—but they are big enough to do something about that vision. Each group owns a specific aspect of God’s mission for the world.”

Two Distractions

But if being missional is the essence of being the church, why isn’t every church missional? Because many churches have turned attention to matters that distract and deter from the mission. Two main distractions often block a congregation’s missional expression.

The first is *self-preservation*. Janetta Cravens says her congregation is beginning to rediscover and refocus on God’s activity in the world rather than the church’s activity for itself. “The Builder generation came back from WWII and built churches that could withstand bombs, metaphorically and sometimes literally. The focus was on an institutional church so solid that it could endure, and yet that focus on preservation too easily became the very identity of the church. The church began to exist for the sake of the church.”

The other primary distraction is *church growth*. When the emphasis is on bringing the world to the church, the church’s mission of going to the world can get lost.

Jack Mercer, pastor of Harrisonburg (Virginia) Baptist Church, says his church stumbled on this point. “Our mission statement is based on the Great Commission, and so we looked at those words of Jesus and everything was fine—until we tripped on the word *go*. Jesus tells us to ‘go’ and make disciples, but we were just trying to get people to ‘come’ into the church so we could make disciples. We needed to shift our activity from getting people into the church to going out to the people of the world.”

Obviously, attracting people to the church is not necessarily wrong. In fact, it’s important not to view *missional* as the opposite of the term *attractional*. Placing these concepts at odds puts the church into an either/or contrast that is neither accurate nor helpful.

Leith Anderson, pastor of Wooddale Church near Minneapolis says, “I think attractional is really a subset of missional. Churches ought to be attractional. After all, there is an attractive appeal to the mission. Churches that don’t attract people to the gospel or even to the institution will not live out the mission because they won’t live at all. The problem arises when attracting people to the church becomes the mission.”

Brian Wright, pastor of Northeast Baptist Church near Atlanta, also believes that being missional is attractive. Northeast is a rapidly growing small church. After three years of leading this church, Wright says, “We believe that by serving those around us, we show them Christ, which does have an attractional quality. Still, the primary goal is to serve, not to attract.”

In fact, when Northeast recently started two neighborhood groups, the one that advertised fun for the kids, games, and free food got a mediocre response. But another group invited people in the community to work alongside churchgoers in addressing community issues—from providing sandwiches for a soup kitchen to baby clothes for a shelter. The service group attracted more involvement from both the church and the community.

—CHAD HALL; excerpted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP Journal, © 2007 Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit LeadershipJournal.net.

Discuss

1. Would our church be identified as a “missional church”? Is that our goal?
2. Does our church suffer from either of the distractions listed above?
3. Does our small-group ministry as a whole reflect missional values? What about my individual group?

MISSIONAL SMALL GROUPS



Missional Small Groups

Why a substantial change in our way of thinking is worth the risk.
2 Corinthians 5:17–20

Outreach has a way of turning small groups inside out. And that's not a bad thing. Struggling groups and small-group ministries usually find help not by focusing on their own internal issues, but by looking beyond their problems and giving attention to the needs of those outside their immediate relational circles—in other words, by becoming missional.

First, let's define what we mean by *mission* and *missional*. Mission is the intentional crossing of boundaries from faith to non-faith in order to proclaim by word and deed the Good News of Jesus Christ. Missional is a way of describing the thinking, nature, and behavior of Christian churches, organizations, and believers that are seeking to introduce pre-believing people to the person of Jesus Christ.

I believe that small groups are *essential* to empowering God's people in mission. Small groups are not meant to create new comfort zones for people. Rather, they possess the latent potential for emboldening believers to go *beyond* their comfort zones and to do things they never imagined themselves doing. Every group can find a way to be missional in a manner that is natural for its own unique group dynamic.

The Problem—Self-Centeredness

There is a natural slide toward introversion in small groups. It's a product of a scarcity mentality that many group leaders have unknowingly adopted—a kind of thinking that is protective, hoarding, territorial, and inwardly focused. The group life that results from this mindset is contrary to the nature and purpose of the body of Christ. In fact, groups that remain self-focused eventually implode because of the vacuous dynamic that is created by prolonged introversion—they become empty on the inside. The fire fades and momentum coasts to a stop. The same is true of churches.

God wants every believer to share his grace with the world around them (2 Corinthians 5:17–20). If this is true, then how could small groups not be utilized, in some way, evangelistically? At our church, I encourage all groups to reach out—but I do not prescribe *how* groups should reach out. Instead, I present different opportunities that appeal to different kinds of groups depending on their make up and focus.

The Benefits of Missional Practices

When put into practice, missional ideas build up individuals and benefit small groups as a whole. When group leaders communicate missional principles on a regular basis, they give their group members the extra encouragement and help needed to push beyond the outward edges of their comfort zones.

As such, a mission-minded small-group ministry—whether focused on local community, far away, or both—should accomplish some or all of these results:

- Enable believers to reach out and serve together in ways that would be impossible as individuals.
- Expand the number of entry points into the community life of your church.
- Provide platforms for invitational evangelism and ready-to-go outreach teams for missions that help believers enter into new territory and cultures for Christ.
- Provide a deeper bond between group members than Bible study alone can accomplish (James 1:22–25).
- Ensure that group life is well rounded, which helps believers to be well rounded, too.
- Empower believers to be active in personal evangelism and release their creativity in outreach.
- Allow believers to “go deeper” in their understanding of God's Word because they are putting what they learn into practice.
- Increase ownership and involvement in the group.
- Bring new believers into God's kingdom and the group, which the Lord always uses to refresh and enliven a group dynamic.

MISSIONAL SMALL GROUPS

Sometimes people feel like the presence of newcomers will negatively affect the friendships that are forming in their group. This is a myth. When a group takes a protective and territorial posture toward its size or acceptance of newcomers, it suffocates. A group needs to breathe. New participants feed a group's dynamic like oxygen feeds fire. In other words, new participants bring new life. Consider this: There are a lot more options for dealing with challenges that come with growth than there are in dealing with the problems of decline.

Adopting Missional Practices

There are many ways small groups can engage in local or cross-cultural missions. Start with prayer and think in terms of baby steps. Your group probably will not start with organizing its own mission trip halfway around the world. However, most people are open and ready to begin praying for the people in their lives who do not yet know Christ. This externally focused prayer has a way of cultivating missional hearts.

Prayer also ignites brainstorming about outreach and service ideas. This is critical to do as a group. Small-group leaders can bring options for discussion, but it's vital that they involve everyone in the process of determining how the group can expand its circle of influence together. Take time to share the benefits of service and outreach, answer questions, and give everyone a part to play in organizing the specifics.

The Lord will show your group how it can make a difference near and far. You might begin with Acts 1:8. Think through what constitutes Jerusalem (local–citywide), Judea (citywide–regional), Samaria (statewide–countrywide), and the ends of the earth (countrywide–worldwide) for your group. What does each sphere look like in your community, and what opportunities exist within each?

There are a variety of ways your group can reach out together:

- **Invitational:** Invite pre-believing friends to your group and your church.
- **Event-based:** Link your group outreach to church events (like serving together during the weekend services or special outreach events).
- **Community service:** Identify needs in your community that touch your group's heart; then serve together (e.g. community clean-up day, providing school supplies for underprivileged kids, food delivery, helping the homeless, and so on).
- **Web-based:** Use social networking sites, e-vites, blogs, interactive online sharing, strategically-placed ads and alerts, and more—all as tools for service and evangelism (see more at www.webevangalism.com).
- **Sponsorship:** Support a child (www.compassion.com), a family, or village (www.harvestofhope.org).
- **Focused Prayer:** Adopt a people group in prayer (www.joshuaproject.com or www.adoptapeople.com).
- **Mission trips:** Contact a member of your church's pastoral leadership team and share that your group would like to go on a mission trip together. Learn about what your church is already doing and get a couple of recommendations on organizations that can help with the planning.

Adopting a missional focus probably won't be easy for your group—especially at first. But when you overcome the natural, internal resistance to stepping outside the safe boundaries of your group and serve those on the other side of your world (figuratively or literally), you'll discover a new passion and purpose in your life, and in your group's life.

But remember—missional small groups are not only about reaching those *outside* of your groups. It's also about reaching those *inside* of your group and helping them discover things within themselves that would have never have come out if they had not ventured beyond their comfort zones.

Thinking on such benefits for both your small-group participants and the many lives—near and far—that will be touched through their self-giving love, it's easy to see that crossing the boundaries of what feels safe and familiar is a worthwhile risk for everyone involved.

—REID SMITH; © 2007 by Christianity Today International. Originally appeared on Smallgroups.com.

Discuss:

1. Would we describe our small group as primarily inwardly focused or outwardly focused? Why?
2. Looking at the list of the benefits of missional practices, which of these have we experienced?
3. What would we consider to be our “Jerusalem”? How has our group impacted that community thus far?

MISSIONAL SMALL GROUPS



Community and Mission

How emerging and missional values are changing the face of the church

Matthew 7:24–27

The Small-Group Movement: Recent History

It's no secret that there are multiple movements taking place across the kingdom landscape. Only time will tell which ones will survive and thrive. One thing is for certain, however: communal life is central to almost all of the current emerging/missional expressions of church life.

More intentional than the previous generation, the rising cadre of church leaders consists largely of communal architects, shaping the church into smaller communities for greater missional impact and presence. Not since Wesley's little bands of the 1700's, the haystack prayer gatherings of 1806 and beyond (starting from a small group of five and launching prayer groups still today), and the Jesus Movement of the 1960's have we seen such a church-wide emphasis on community.

The small-group movement that burst onto the scene in parachurch groups in the 1950's–70's began to find a home in the church in the 80's and 90's. Meta-church models, cell churches, mini-churches, discipleship groups, recovery ministries, and evangelistic groups emerged. As a result, churches began to embrace group life as important for growth, but still treated this form of community as a program—a “we do groups” mentality.

But the last 10 years have seen a move beyond that narrower focus. Groups are still essential to spiritual growth, but are now connected to larger, mid-sized communal gatherings.

Communal Life in All Shapes and Sizes

House churches, neo-monastic communities, ministry teams, small groups, neighborhood gatherings, and missional communities are all examples of the Church becoming increasingly communal as it becomes increasingly mission-focused. This emphasis among emerging church adherents—many of whom are 18–35, though not limited to that age— is refreshing.

Less interested in *building* churches, emerging church leaders strive first to *become* the church, seeking a dynamic and fluid communal life centered in the places where people work and live. Being the church is essential—that means serving neighbors, a presence in the community, and a desire to live in proximity to those not affiliated with a church.

Group life in this emerging environment is more organic and less programmatic. Nonetheless, small groups of people gathered for prayer, study, service, or “hanging out” at the coffee shop are central to the way of life espoused by these various communities. Here are a few distinctions of these groupings from the “small groups as a program” approach that was more common in the previous decade.

- **From strategic model to organic structure.** Emerging church leaders see group life as organic, but also recognize the need for structure. That structure, however, is not a set model or system that all must follow, but rather a driving set of values and experiences. Small groups emerge from larger communal gatherings—some intentional, some long-term, and others short-term and highly fluid. The mid-sized community is the place of connection and relationship forming. Smaller groups form for specific growth and service purposes. As we have always said, “The structure serves the people; the people do not serve the structure.”
- **From content to process.** A renewed emphasis on process—intentionally engaging with truth relationally and holistically—will shape the way groups do Bible study and spiritual formation in the emerging/missional generation. This shift from Bible *study* to Bible *practice* reflects Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7:24–27. Groups are interested in how we are becoming a community instead of being content with what the community is doing (Bible study, prayer, etc.). The relational environment and process of a group—at dinner, serving the poor, reading Scripture—is just as vital as the topic or focus of the group.

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- **From building a program to creating an environment.** A “group program” that is carelessly added on to a church driven by events will fail. Communal environments must be created churchwide. In these gatherings, spiritual journeys can be understood as people connect and next steps toward growth and relationship can be discerned. Small groups are formed to meet needs, to learn biblical truth, and to pursue growth.
- **From on-site training to decentralized development.** Busy schedules keep leaders from attending training events. So taking leadership development to leaders—in homes, coffee shops, etc.—is a growing trend. Rather than training a leader and then looking for a group for them to lead, communities are formed and leaders begin to emerge.

Church Movements

As I speak with emerging leaders and communal architects, it is clear that smaller groups and expressions of community are essential to their mission. Just this week I met with a number of leaders. Some are moving into apartments, starting a small core community of five to seven, and beginning to connect with others. The goal is to become the church in that space, and then to replicate that experience elsewhere.

One leader envisioned an area of apartments and rental properties filled with such groups, describing it as “missional acupuncture.” He targets these areas because, here in Chicagoland, over 40 percent of people live in such areas and less than 5 percent of churches have any ministry there. These are dense, small areas that are ideal for starting missional groups and communities that embrace the value of small groups but have a more organic fluidity because of relational proximity and density.

In suburban culture, there is a great desire to connect and recover a communal life lost during the fragmentation of the modern era. As a result, neighborhood gatherings are beginning to become the hub of community life, spawning small groups, short-term learning communities, serving teams, and a variety of ad hoc gatherings.

While some house churches are larger (40–60 people), many new house church movements have 9–12 people per church, and intentionally reproduce if the group gets much larger. Reaching people where they live requires a model that is flexible and easily reproducible—something void of the constraints of traveling to a church building across town.

The Future of Small Groups

Small groups are not going away. Actually, they are more essential than ever in light of the move away from large classes and programs and toward young churches meeting in homes and rented facilities. Groups of six to ten people meeting two to four times a month for prayer, study, fellowship, and support are still effective and valid expressions of community. Many of us have grown by leaps and bounds in such settings. They may offer what other gatherings generally cannot.

A monthly neighborhood gathering is great for connection, basic sharing of resources and ideas, and serving the needs of the community. Intentional spiritual development, however, is lacking without regular connection with fewer members in an environment where deep change can be provoked and evaluated. While spontaneous connections and impromptu gatherings are essential to communal life, they do not replace the need for focused groups where spiritual guides (shepherds and leaders) can prompt growth and facilitate achievement of the group’s purpose.

Small groups provide a place for intentional personal reflection; learning spiritual practices; gaining wisdom and feedback about habits, decisions and character traits; and for building trust with a few who really know you and your story. This contribution to the kingdom remains a core expression in thriving modern and post-modern churches alike. Though the terminology and structure will vary across movements, the support and nurture provided by small group life is a common thread.

—BILL DONAHUE; copyright 2007 Christianity Today International. Originally appeared on Smallgroups.com.

Discuss:

1. How would we describe the “recent history” of our small-groups ministry?
2. In general, do our small groups contribute more to *building* the church or *becoming* the church?
3. Looking at the four bulleted paragraphs above, where does our small-groups ministry stand in the scale between “missional small groups” and “small groups as a program”?

MISSIONAL SMALL GROUPS



Break the Huddle

How to help individuals and groups get in the game

Genesis 12:1–3

The best college football game ever played pitted one of my favorite teams, the Boise State Broncos, in the 2007 Fiesta Bowl against the winningest football program in the nation since World War II—the Oklahoma Sooners. It was touted as David versus Goliath.

The game was spectacular. It included an 18-point comeback by Oklahoma, trick plays, many dramatic, game-on-the-line moments, several unbelievable fourth-down conversions, and a spectacular overtime win by the underdog. Then, as if that wasn't enough, the star player for Boise State proposed marriage to his head-cheerleader girlfriend on national television.

As I watched the end of the game, I wished I could have been in the Boise State huddle as they gathered to call one last-ditch trick play after another. I can imagine the smiles of confidence on the player's faces, the nervous energy, the “we can do it” attitude.

The Purpose of the Small-Group Huddle

What does all this have to do with small groups? Plenty. I like the comparison of a small group to a football team. A football team huddles to plan, to encourage each other, and to rest for a few seconds before running the next play. Huddles can be exciting places, but nobody ever won a game while in the huddle.

In other words, the huddle has a vital purpose, but it would be silly to stay in the huddle when there is a game to be played. It is simply a means to an end.

Small groups sometimes place too much emphasis on the meeting time, as if it alone defines the group. In reality, it's just the huddle. It is a safe and comfortable place to encourage one another, build each other up, and minister to one another. It is a time to plan and prepare for the next play. But the real action happens when we break the huddle to make an impact.

Blessed to Be a Blessing

We are blessed to be a blessing to others, not to remain in a Christian comfort zone—a holy huddle. Abraham is a good personal example of this:

The Lord had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people, and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:1–3).

Before Abram could be a blessing, he had to leave his comfort zone and go where God would show him. The apostle Peter had to get out of the comfort zone of his boat to walk on water. Jesus had to leave the ultimate comfort zone of heaven to save us. The apostles left “everything” in their comfort zones to follow Jesus.

How Groups Grow

Staying in the holy huddle obviously hurts the serving and outreach impact of the group and the church; it also displays a blatant disobedience to Jesus and his commission. But I want to focus on two other ways that remaining in our comfort zones will damage our small-group ministries: (1) Groups that settle for safe and comfortable do not grow, and (2) People within groups who settle for safe and comfortable do not grow.

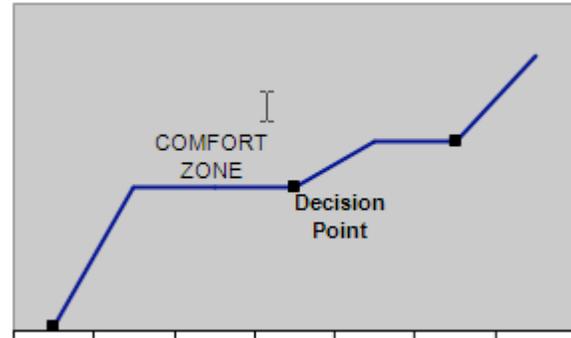
Both individuals and groups stagnate when they are safe and comfortable—when they remain in their holy huddles and do not get out on the field to take some holy risks and run some dramatic, game-on-the-line plays. Look at the following graph:

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Many groups that I've observed start in an up-and-to-the-right trajectory. Things seem good. Participants are excited, even if nervously so. New Christians often start their new life in a similar path—getting to know God through his Word, learning what it means to follow Christ, growing fast.

In time, however, that growth begins to slow down and plateau. The newness begins to wear off. Conflicts begin to arise. We settle into routines—often safe and comfortable routines. We coast.

I've seen this plateaued state have two potential negative impacts on individuals and groups: (1) They stay in this comfort zone for a long time—sometimes for the rest of their lives, unfortunately. This happens when they become satisfied and comfortable with being comfortable. (2) The individual's faith or the group life begins to wane, and the line begins to drop. Often groups at this stage begin to turn downward—sometimes quickly.



The group comes to a decision point. They can continue to settle for comfort and not really grow, or they can decide to do something risky, maybe even dangerous, to get out of their comfort zones. This often means leaving their huddles and going into their communities—into the world—to make an impact. Actually, individuals and groups come to a number of these decision points during their lifetimes. Each time they must make a decision to leave their comfort zones if they want to grow.

Two Plans for Breaking the Huddle

Small groups that begin with a plan are ones that continue to grow and make an impact. At my church, we call this a Small-Group Master Plan. Perhaps you call it a small-group agreement or covenant. The most important parts of this plan are the vision and mission statements, which help provide a destination and a course to follow. The Master Plan helps our groups make wise choices at their decision points. When groups huddle, they develop or work on their Master Plan.

We use another tool that takes groups even further on their journeys. We call it a God-Sized Plan (GSP). At some time in the group's life, they work on a GSP, which is a plan that is so big that if God is not in it, it is destined to fail. I formed the GSP planning tool after reading about Jim Collins's BHAG (Big Hairy Audacious Goal).

Every group should have a Master Plan that includes getting out of their comfort zones to make an impact in the community and the world. These plans are designed to be God-given and God-empowered. Proverbs 19:21 provides a good context for the Master Plan: "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails."

God-Sized Plans are even bigger. They are plans that help groups move even further out of their comfort zones to depend more fully on God. Ephesians 3:20 is the context for a GSP. The group realizes that God "is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us."

—MICHAEL MACK; copyright 2007 Christianity Today International. Originally appeared on Smallgroups.com.

Discuss:

1. Where does our group currently fit on the chart above?
2. Have we moved beyond our comfort zones when we reached recent decision points?
3. Does our group have a Master Plan? Does our group have a God-Sized Plan? If not, how would we develop them?



Building a God-Sized Plan

What do you want to accomplish that can only be done with God's help?

Acts 5:38–39

What Is a God-Sized Plan?

If you've read Jim Collins's books (*Built to Last* or *Good to Great*), you'll understand what I mean when I say that a God-Sized Plan (or GSP) is similar to a BHAG (Big Hairy Audacious Goal). Here's Jim's definition:

A true BHAG (Big Hairy Audacious Goal) is clear and compelling. It serves as a unifying focal point of effort and acts as a catalyst for team spirit. It has a clear finish line, so the organization can know when it has achieved the goal—people like to shoot for finish lines.

A BHAG engages people—it reaches out and grabs them in the gut. It is tangible, energizing, highly focused. People “get it” right away; it takes little or no explanation. For example, the 1960s moon mission didn't need a committee to spend endless hours wordsmithing the goal into a verbose, impossible-to-remember “mission statement.” (*Built to Last*, p. 232).

In *Good to Great*, Collins defines a BHAG simply as a huge and daunting goal. A GSP is similar, but with a few vital distinctions:

- A God-Sized Plan is something so big that if God is not in it, it is destined to fail. Acts 5:38–39 says: “For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”
- A God-Sized Plan is also God-given, or God-ordained.
- A God-Sized Plan requires a small group of believers that are committed to one another and surrendered to God and his will.
- A God-Sized Plan is a matter of stewardship. God owns the group, not the people in it. He has given it to us to invest, not horde, and he expects a good return on his investment.

Developing Your God-Sized Plan

A good GSP will flow out of your Small-Group Master Plan—also known as a group covenant or agreement. Carrying out your Master Plan as a group should help lead you into your GSP—it doesn't need to be something forced or unnatural.

A true GSP will also flow naturally from understanding the most important question for all small groups: What is God calling us to do? To get a sense of how to figure this out, write down answers to these questions:

1. What are we deeply passionate about as a group?
2. What could our small group be great at? (What spiritual gifts or talents has God given us that could be used to make our group great?)
3. What drives our “economic engine”? (What provides our group with the resources or energy it needs to carry out a God-Sized Plan? Examples include our weekly meeting, Bible study, prayer, etc.)

As a group, discuss your answers to these three questions. As the discussion progresses, you should begin to get a sense of the main direction that God is calling your group to go, or the main thing he is calling your group to do. With that in mind, begin developing your God-Sized Plan accordingly. What do you want to accomplish along that path that can only be accomplished if God pitches in?

—MICHAEL MACK; copyright 2007 Christianity Today International. Originally appeared on Smallgroups.com.

Discuss:

4. If we have not been operating under a God-Sized Plan, what has been the main focus of our small group, instead?
5. How can I, as an individual, contribute to my group's God-Sized Plan?
1. What is the biggest obstacle preventing our group from achieving its God-Sized Plan?



Further Exploration

Websites and books to help your church develop a missional small-groups ministry

SmallGroups.com. Small-group resources from Christianity Today International.

- “Re-Launching a Small-Groups Ministry” Training Theme
- “Increasing the Evangelistic Impact of Your Group” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Family-Friendly Small Groups” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Missional Evangelism” Curriculum Course

LeadershipJournal.net. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

Breaking the Missional Code by *Ed Stetzer and David Putnam*. A guide to helping your church become a missionary in its community (B&H Publishing Group, 2006; ISBN 978-0805443592).

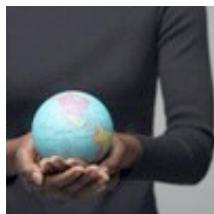
Know and Be Known by *Brooke B. Collison*. An exploration of an element missing in most group dynamics today: intentionality about relationships (The Alban Institute, 2007; ISBN 978-1566993357).

Let’s Get Started: How to Begin Your Small-Groups Ministry by *Dan Lentz*. A Help-Guide for churches who want to start, or re-start, a small-groups ministry (Standard Publishing, 2007; ISBN 978-0784720738).

Missional House Churches by *J. D. Payne*. This book takes an in-depth look at missional communities using the author’s personal experience, research, and interviews with 33 house-church leaders (Paternoster, 2008; ISBN 978-1934068250).

The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church by *Alan Hirsch*. This book is a full-blooded and comprehensive call for the complete reorientation of the church around mission (Brazos Press, 2007; ISBN 978-1587431647).

The Missional Church in Context by *Craig Van Gelder*. This book helps churches and congregations develop their own contextual ministries (Eerdmans, 2007; ISBN 978-0802845672).



Retreat Plan

How to create a weekend retreat on the theme of “Missional Small Groups”

SMALLGROUPS.COM training themes expand easily into a retreat format. Here is a sample retreat schedule you may follow for the “Missional Small Groups” theme. The purpose of this retreat is to help your small-group leaders fully understand their purpose and presence in the community around them—both locally and globally.

Friday Evening

- ◆ 8–8:45 P.M. **Opening Session:** Hand out copies of “Small Groups and the Mission of God,” the interview with Alan Hirsch on pages 4–6, and allow time for each person to read it. Then form groups of three or four. Have each group discuss the questions at the end of the interview. Reconvene for the last 20 minutes and have the groups share their comments and consider the implications of Hirsch’s ideas for your church.
- ◆ 9–9:45 P.M. **Bible Study:** Close the evening with “Are We Stewards of Justice or Just-Us?,” the Bible study on page 3. Photocopy and pass out the study, or use the handout as your notes.

Saturday Morning

- ◆ 9–9:45 A.M. **Devotional:** Set the tone for the day by handing out “Small Church—Global Reach” (p. 12). Discuss the questions at the bottom of the page and have a time of prayer, asking that God would help your team members identify ways to be more aware of global needs.
- ◆ 10–10:45 A.M. **Assessment:** Use the assessment “Are We Missional” on page 7 to evaluate your ministry’s current alignment with missional practices and principles.
- ◆ 11 A.M.–12:15 P.M. **Activity:** Use the activity “Building a God-Sized Plan” on pages 21. Allow at least 20 minutes for each of your team members to answer the questions and get an idea of what God is calling them to do. Spend the remainder of the time identifying the God-Sized Plans for individual groups and the ministry as a whole.
- ◆ NOON. **Lunch**

Saturday Afternoon

- ◆ 1–2 P.M. **Final Group Session:** Close the retreat with the how-to “Break the Huddle” on pages 19–20. After everyone has read the article, discuss your group’s recent activities and priorities in light of the “Holy Huddle” idea. Go on to the devotional “Stepping into Something Frightening” on page 11. Then pray together, asking God to provide each team member with the courage to boldly participate in his mission for the community.

You can create similar retreat plans for any of the other SMALLGROUPS.COM themes. Simply determine what you want to accomplish and select the handouts that support your objectives.