

Practical Ministry Skills: Small-Group Assimilation Strategies



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Leader's Guide

How to use "Small-Group Assimilation Strategies" by BUILDING SMALL GROUPS in your regularly scheduled meetings.

Welcome to *BUILDING SMALL GROUPS*. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you train and direct the leaders of your small-groups ministry. The material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders, and has been selected by the editors of *Leadership Resources at Christianity Today International*.

Our "Practical Ministry Skills" training downloads are completely flexible and designed for easy use. Each download focuses on a practical theme that is relevant to small-groups ministry, and is comprised of brief handouts focusing on specific aspects of that theme. The handouts give a succinct and practical overview of the issues most relevant to your goals. You may use them at the beginning of a meeting to help launch a discussion, or you may hand them out as brief primers for new small-group leaders or coaches.

The theme of this download is "Small-Group Assimilation Strategies." It's designed to help with three tasks: using small groups as a method of assimilating visitors into the larger church body, turning church members into group members, and helping individual groups become more attractive to potential members. Each handout can be used as part of a training session for large groups of leaders and coaches, or as a way to encourage and educate people individually. Simply print the handouts you need and use them as necessary.

For example, to explore seven ratios that are important to church-wide assimilation, see "Why Small Groups Are Vital to Assimilation," by Win and Charles Arn (p. 5–6). To read about subtle strategies for bringing church regulars into small groups, see "The Power of Subliminal Marketing," by Larry Osborne (p. 7–8). And be sure to look at Reid Smith's article "Inspiring People to Assimilate Themselves" (p. 10–11) for tips on proper assimilation etiquette.

Our prayer is that this material will equip your group leaders and coaches to successfully assimilate new members into your church and small groups.

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

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Avoiding the One-Method Trap

Why using small-groups in the assimilation process requires several options

1 Corinthians 9:19–22

When churches include small groups as part of their assimilation process, they often adopt one or more of two harmful practices: 1) they set participation in a small group as a prerequisite for membership, or 2) they cast participation in a small group as the “completion” of the assimilation process.

The problem with these practices lies in their rigid nature. On the whole, people desire freedom and flexibility in pursuing relationships with God and others. That means severe setbacks can occur when a church’s assimilation process becomes intimately connected with its membership process. People resent the impression that they are not part of a church community just because they didn’t complete all the “steps” involved, or because they didn’t ultimately land in a small group.

Instead, the key to using small groups for the purpose of assimilation is to be relentlessly creative in helping people take their “first step” toward community—in other words, providing several opportunities for relational momentum to build. Here are some examples of these kinds of opportunities that I’ve had success with over the years.

- **Personal invitation.** When it comes to community, God’s kingdom is all about relationships. There is no greater “strategy” than one friend encouraging another to journey with him or her in Christian community. That’s why the supreme indicator of your ministry’s success is participants who feel compelled to invite their friends.
- **Affinity and shared-interest groups.** Affinity groups are formed on the basis of a common status—things like gender, marital status, age, parenting issues, season of life, and so on. Shared-interest groups are organized around a common activity—hobbies, intellectual pursuits, recreational activities, and so on. Either group type helps people step into group leadership, serves as a front door into your church’s community life, and provides new ways for people to connect any time of the year.
- **GroupLink.** This is a “connection event” where everyone interested in joining a small group gathers together for food and fellowship. Over the course of an hour or so, attendees are encouraged to spontaneously form new small groups. Once all of the new groups have clustered together, hosts are appointed, and a short-term (4–8 week) curriculum study is distributed for groups to use during their first season of life together.
- **Affinity-based special events.** Host educational or social gatherings that are interactive in nature and would be attractive to different affinity-based people groups. These are usually larger events that include a smaller, discussion-group breakout at the end. Examples include a seminar on a book, movie, or spiritual conversation; the ALPHA Course; a marriage retreat; or a “Parents with Young Kids” connection.
- **After-service ministry fairs.** Get people while they are at church! Invite small groups and ministry teams to represent themselves wherever people exit after weekend services, and invite people to check out different ways to get involved. This can be done in a fair-like fashion once or twice a year. It allows the whole church to actually meet existing group leadership and survey what is currently available. Some people need this personal touch before they feel comfortable enough to commit.
- **Newcomers’ dessert.** Host a relaxed, 90-minute gathering every 6–12 weeks designed to welcome newcomers to your church. Have your church staff present, offer a variety of desserts, and provide free childcare. This helps newcomers feel more at home and gives you an opportunity to get this “instant affinity group” fired up about plugging in and becoming part of your community life.

SMALL-GROUP ASSIMILATION STRATEGIES

- **In-house DVD curriculum.** This approach involves creating your own DVD-driven curriculum that is used in groups simultaneously with the weekend message series. The seismic shift of this small-group assimilation strategy is that you are not asking people to *join* a group, but rather to *start* a group with people they already know. What makes this approach so effective is the combination of two things: 1) The curriculum's "home-grown" factor where group participants get to hear and see their own pastors delivering the group content, and 2) The "campaign-factor" where the curriculum builds upon everything that everyone just received the prior weekend.

—REID SMITH; copyright 2008 by Christianity Today International; originally appeared on Smallgroups.com.

Discuss:

1. What parts of our assimilation process are rigid? How could they be changed?
2. Which of the methods above has our church used in the past? What was the result?
3. Which of the methods above would be easiest to adopt? What steps can we take to start them?

SMALL-GROUP ASSIMILATION STRATEGIES



Why Small Groups Are Vital to Assimilation

Seven important ratios for closing a church’s back door

John 6:66

One important factor determining whether a church visitor will become a member is the church environment into which that visitor is entering. Fortunately, such environments can be monitored using certain ratios. In fact, here are seven ratios that each have a significant effect in closing the evangelistic back door and encouraging visitors and new members to become involved with a church for the long haul.

Friendship ratio—1:7

Each new person should be able to identify at least seven friends in the church within the first six months of attending there. Friendships appear to be the strongest bond cementing new members to their congregation. If they do not immediately develop meaningful friendships in their church, expect them to return to their old friendships—and ways—outside the church. Seven new friendships are a minimum; 10, 15, or more are better.

The time factor is important as well. The first six months are crucial. New people not integrated into the body within that period are well on their way out the back door. The following chart clearly illustrates the importance of establishing friendships in the church during the first six months. Note that all 50 “converts that are now active members” could name 3 or more friends in the church. The “dropouts” show almost the opposite pattern in the new friendships they did not establish in their churches.

➤ Number of new friends in the church within six months	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9+	Total
➤ Converts that are now active members	0	0	0	1	2	2	8	13	12	12	50
➤ Dropouts	8	13	14	8	4	2	1	0	0	0	50

Role/Task Ratio—60:100

At least 60 roles and tasks should be available for every 100 members in a church. A role or task means a specific function or responsibility (choir, committee member, teacher, officer, etc.). Typical churches of 300 members have no more than 80 roles and tasks available. And of those 80 roles and tasks, 60 are filled by 30 people (the willing workers with more than one job). The remaining 20 roles and tasks are filled by an additional 20 people, thus involving 50 out of 300 members. Would such a typical church have a place for new members to find meaningful responsibility? Probably not.

So the lack of variety and number of roles/tasks/ministries in most churches creates an environment that actually produces inactive members. Such a church of 300 needs to open itself to newcomers by creating at least 100 new roles and tasks. Not busywork, but kingdom work—“Great Commission work” that focuses on meeting needs and changing lives.

Group Ratio—7:100

At least 7 relational groups—places where friendships are built—should be available in a church for every 100 members. Our research shows that plateaued and declining churches fall far short of this group-to-member ratio. The consequence of too few groups for members to build meaningful relationships is a high rate of inactives using the back door. Good questions to ask are: How many groups does our church have per 100 members? What percentage of the congregation is a regular part of one or more groups? How many new converts and new members have become a regular part of such groups in the last two years? How many have not?

This ratio in a church will provide important answers to the question, “How open is this church to newcomers?”

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New-Group Ratio—1:5

Of every five relational groups in a church, one should have been started in the past two years. The reason new groups are important is that established groups usually reach a saturation point sometime between 9 and 18 months after their formation. When a group reaches this saturation zone, in most cases it stops growing and no longer assimilates new people. Two or three members may leave and two or three may fill their places, but for all practical purposes, the group remains plateaued.

How do you know when a group has reached the saturation point? You make a graph. If a group has not grown in the last six months, it has probably reached saturation. One remedy is simply to form new groups, with new people involved. This provides for continued freshness in the group life of a congregation. It also decreases the number of inactives and helps close the evangelistic back door.

Committee Member Ratio—1:5

One of every five committee members should have joined the church within the last two years. New board and committee members bring fresh and exciting ideas, along with vitality. They are positive and enthusiastic about their new church, ready to earn their sense of belonging. They provide the best source of volunteers.

A regular review of the boards and committees in a church to assure the 1:5 ratio will encourage openness in the power structure and assure that the church never forgets its real mission.

Staff ratio—1:150

A church should have 1 full-time staff member for every 150 persons in worship. This ratio is a good indicator of a church's commitment to growth. If the ratio reaches 1:225–250, it is unusual to see any significant increase in active membership. While more persons may join the church, the evangelistic back door will open wider. Adding a staff person before this point is reached helps a church anticipate the influx of new persons and provides a church environment to accommodate them.

We suggest the first person hired after the pastor be a person to minister full-time in the area of evangelism and church growth, including the incorporation of new members into the fellowship. This person will normally pay for him or herself through new giving units added to the church within the first year and a half. In some churches we have worked with, the new staff person's salary was paid within nine months.

Visitor Ratio—3:10

Of the first-time visitors who live in the church's ministry area, three of every ten should be actively involved within a year. Calculating the visitor ratio provides three insights into a church's attitude toward newcomers: (1) it indicates the present members' openness to visitors; (2) it indicates the priority of visitors in the functioning of the church; and (3) it indicates the effectiveness of the church's follow-up strategy.

Whether persons are transferring to a new church or trying their first church, they always visit before joining. Visitors are the only source of new members (except for the children of believers). If visitors do not feel genuinely welcome, needed, and wanted, they seldom return. Our studies indicate that through an effective strategy, some churches are seeing four of every ten local visitors come back a second time. An incorporation strategy that focuses on these second-time visitors will result in 70–75 percent of them joining within a year (hence the 3:10 ratio of first-time local visitors joining within a year).

The typical nongrowing church, on the other hand, sees only 10–12 percent of its first-time visitors join. Such a percentage, it turns out, is almost the exact number a church can expect to lose each year through transfer, death, and falling away.

—WIN AND CHARLES ARN; excerpted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP Journal, © 1984 by Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit LeadershipJournal.net.

Discuss:

1. Which ratio does our church need the most help in matching? Which ratio do we match best?
2. What steps can we take to increase opportunities for our newcomers to develop lasting friendships?
3. How many of our small groups have reached the saturation point? What steps can we take to start new ones?



The Power of Subliminal Marketing

How to “pull” church members into your small-groups ministry

Acts 2:46–47

Larry Osborne is lead pastor of North Coast Church in Vista, California as well as an author and president of the North Coast Training Network. For over 22 years, North Coast has had 80 percent or more of its weekend attendance meeting in sermon-based small groups. It’s a model that started when the church was less than 200 and continues to work with a weekend attendance approaching 7,000 on a weekend.

When promoting small groups, leaders often fall into the trap of only emphasizing a “push” style of marketing. By this I mean they encourage participation in small groups from the pulpit, announce signups in the bulletin, or hold some sort of a church-wide campaign to get people to sign up for a group.

There’s nothing wrong or harmful with these methods. At North Coast, we use them to publicize our small groups at least three times a year. But a church opens itself up to a variety of potential negative consequences when it *exclusively* uses a “push” style of marketing.

First of all, many people develop a natural resistance to any idea that they are constantly prodded to adopt. Instead of creating a desire to join a group, a glut of pulpit announcements and “commercials” can make people think, *Oh, no, here we go again....*

Another unintended negative consequence has to do with the way differing personalities respond to an idea. All churches have “joiners”—people who will sign up for an activity just because they are told to do so. A push can be very effective with them. But we all know there’s a whole other group of people who tend to resist any kind of pressure. While their excuses might sound reasonable—“You don’t understand my busy schedule,” for example—the real reason they don’t join is simply that they won’t be pushed into anything. Then there are the “late adopters.” These are people who will never be convinced by anything we say, but only by seeing that everyone else has already joined in. A “push” can never effectively reach them.

But the biggest problem with “push” marketing—even successful “push” marketing—has to do with unmet expectations. If we push people into something that turns out to be not as great as we promised, they’ll never let us push them into anything else again.

The Value of a “Pull”

An alternative to a “push” is to use a subliminal, word-of-mouth style of marketing that creates a “pull” toward your groups. You see, most Christians in the small-group movement forget how many people have never been in a small group. They no longer remember the fears that other people have about joining a small group. It’s one thing for a new Christian to go a church building where they know they can sit in the back and escape if things get weird. It’s another thing altogether to walk into a stranger’s home where they know they’ll be stuck until the meeting is over.

Subliminal marketing uses lots of little reminders to drip the importance of participating in a small group into nearly everything the church does. The difference between the powerful but soft pull of subliminal marketing and the harsh push of traditional marketing is much like the difference between a glacier and an avalanche. An avalanche creates a lot of noise and commotion, but its effects are gone within a few years. A glacier, on the other hand, creates a Yosemite.

Creating a “Pull” in Your Church

Here are some of the steps I’ve recommended over the years to help churches subliminally and successfully “pull” new members into their small groups.

- 1. Make sure key leaders are involved.** One of the first questions anybody asks when they are pondering whether to join something is, “Who else is in it?” If your key leaders aren’t visibly involved in your small-group ministry, it will be very difficult to get other people to join in. But when those key leaders are involved, they act as a magnet—they actually pull people into groups, because they send a strong message that “this is the place to be.”

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2. **Cut the competition.** In order to keep key leaders involved in small groups, most churches need to cut some of the other ministries competing for time. If a church has so much programming that people are stretched too thin—whether it’s Adult Bible Fellowships, Sunday schools, midweek programs, or large community outreaches, and so on—small groups inevitably will fall to the back of the priority list.

When key leaders are too overwhelmed with other church meetings and activities to be in a small group, it sends a clear message to the rest of the congregation that small groups aren’t that important. It’s inevitable that people will look around and notice that all the power players are too busy to be in a small group. And they can’t help but ask, “Why should I be in one?” Even worse, when key leaders step aside, you’ll be forced to put non-leaders into small group leadership. And whenever non-leaders are asked to lead something, it’s not long until most people stay away.

3. **Provide a preview.** Another step I recommend is to include discussion questions or some kind of curriculum material within the weekly bulletin. This works especially well at North Coast because our small groups are primarily sermon based. We have a folded sheet in the bulletin with the front side reserved for sermon notes and the inside pages and backside filled with the questions for that week’s small group meeting.

This allows people who aren’t already in a group to know exactly what kind of questions are asked. Most people read them and think, *That’s not so hard. I can handle that.* By showing everyone the questions ahead of time, we create a comfort zone for the hesitant or shy personality who worries that the groups might be too deep, too threatening, or might cause them to look like a fool. You can have all the announcements in the world, but these folks won’t join anything without first knowing what goes on in there.

4. **Consistently reference the small-group experience within the sermon.** Our sermon-based small group material doesn’t simply regurgitate the sermon; it looks into parallel passages and deeper into things we brushed lightly during the message. That allows us to make comments like, “In your growth-group homework this week, you’re going to look deeper into this issue,” or, “We don’t have time to read it right now, but in your small group this week you’ll explore the way that God worked this out in the life of a man named Abraham.” Such references send a subtle message. People in the congregation begin to think, *I guess everybody’s in a group.*

As a side note, you don’t have to use a sermon-based model in order to include these kinds of references. You can still consistently mention common group experiences and opportunities, and still give the subliminal impression that it’s normal and positive for everyone to be involved in a small group. It’s just easier to do with sermon-based small groups.

A Landmark for Success

Small groups can powerfully alter the DNA of church for the good. They can make the “one anothers” of the New Testament normative. But for a small-group ministry to do so, it has to first reach critical mass. In most cases that will be somewhere between 40 and 60 percent of your average *weekend attendance* number (which is a different number than *all* of the people who attend your church on a regular basis). Less than that, small groups will be very helpful and do a lot of good things, but they won’t impact the core of your church in the same way that reaching critical mass will.

So I like to ask leaders, “How many adults do you have on a typical weekend? And what percent of that number are currently in a small group?” Whenever I hear a number approaching 40 to 60 percent, I know that their small groups are changing the DNA of the church so that they have something more than just a crowd. They have a church.

—LARRY OSBORNE; copyright 2008 by the author and Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. In what ways do we “push” people into small groups? In what ways do we “pull”?
2. How much competition exists between small groups and other ministries for the attention of our key leaders?
3. What steps can our church take in the next three months to increase the “pull” of our small-group ministry?



Thriving After a Small-Groups Campaign

Four steps to a smooth transition into “normal” group life

Acts 2:41

Successfully transitioning out of a small-groups campaign is as challenging as launching one. Churches that wait until the campaign is over to plan the next step will lose momentum and spend valuable leadership equity. Instead, use these four keys to create a smooth transition from campaign to “normal” group life.

Conduct a Thorough Debriefing Halfway Through

If you have a campaign that runs six weeks, you need to interact with those leaders at the three-to-four-week mark. Depending on the size of your ministry and whether you have coaches in place, this debriefing can be done in a leaders’ huddle or over coffee. Either way, it’s important to give leaders a chance to share what God is doing in their groups. Many churches promise that God will do remarkable things in the lives of our people if potential leaders get on board. But how often do we give them a chance to talk about them?

A mid-term debrief also allows for problem solving. Some people will be confused by the material and how it fits together, and some will wonder what to do with the challenging people in their new groups. This is the time to talk about what comes next. If the group is new, the mid-term meeting is the time to introduce options for the group and to begin the new leader affirmation process.

Affirm New Groups and Leaders

One of the greatest assets of a small-group campaign is that people can test drive a small group. In a non-threatening way, people who have never been in a group get a taste of community. For that reason, it’s important to acknowledge the shift from the campaign to normal small-group life. When a group decides to continue on, my church follows these four steps:

1. **Congratulate the leader and members on becoming an official small group.** It helps to give a different name to groups that start during a campaign—something that distinguishes a short-term group from a continuing group. Mark the change with an e-mail, note, or phone call.
2. **Invite/insist that new leaders join your leadership development track.** For your church this might be a series of classes, for others it might be more personalized coaching.
3. **Connect the leader with a coach.** You can do this during the campaign or after the dust settles.
4. **Move the new leader into your church’s membership process.**

Help Some Groups Conclude Graciously

It is acceptable that some groups do not continue after the campaign. To help a group conclude graciously, we encourage the leader to thank the people for their participation. Being part of a group for six weeks was a risk and a sacrifice. Also, celebrate the good things that emerged from the group, such as getting to know new people and learning about the Christian life. Finally, make sure people who want to be in a group know the process for joining a new group.

Provide On-Demand Curriculum

There is no shortage of curriculum options for small groups, which can be overwhelming. As groups reach week four, we send out a short letter highlighting our three suggestions for the next study. Groups may choose a different option if they want, but many leaders appreciate our work in finding great resources for them.

—BILL SEARCH; copyright 2004 by Christianity Today International. Originally appeared on www.Smallgroups.com.

Discuss:

1. What has been our biggest frustration in transitioning out of small-group campaigns? How do these steps address that challenge?
2. How can we develop the infrastructure needed to debrief in the middle of our campaign?
3. What steps can we take to help some of our campaign groups conclude graciously?

SMALL-GROUP ASSIMILATION STRATEGIES



Inspiring People to Assimilate Themselves

Make sure you're thinking accurately about potential small-group members.

Romans 15:7

Assimilation has always sounded like a threat to me—"Watch yourself, or you'll be assimilated!" The truth is that we do *not* assimilate people. We show them how they can assimilate themselves. The distinction is important. A person cannot be forced into deeper community with others any more than they can be forced into feeling like they belong. It has to happen naturally.

People instinctively engage their own process when considering something that requires a personal commitment—like joining a small group. It is an extremely sensitive and personal process in which most do not like others to tamper. Therefore, a church's "assimilation process" needs to come alongside the individual's process.

Assimilation Etiquette

These guidelines for assimilation can help small-group leaders welcome new people into their groups without being intrusive or invasive.

1. Begin with the assumption that *God* calls people to a community where they can grow in loving him and others—we do not call them.
2. Offer all the information people need in order to make a decision on whether your small group is right for them, and do so up front.
3. Communicate this information in a variety of forms: written, web, video, and personal invitation. Be sure they know whom to contact if they would like to talk in person with somebody about their questions.
4. Be up-front about your group's goals, and about what you hope to see accomplished in the lives of potential members. For example, that they build meaningful relationships with others, be empowered in spiritual growth, serve God with their gifts, and so on.
5. Be sure to communicate what potential members can expect to happen in their lives as a result of involvement with the group. Answer the unspoken question: "What's my motivation?"
6. Show potential members the process that people typically follow in joining the group, but don't force them to take steps that are not relevant for them. Allow *them* to stay in control of the process, and to get involved at their own pace.

People want to know that their involvement in a small group will add value to their lives. They do not want to hear about what they "have to" or "should" do—the last thing they need is another meeting to attend or another item to add to their "good Christian" checklist. People want to be part of something that is life-giving, life-transforming, and that impacts the world around them for Christ. They do not want to be more spread out; they want more depth and meaning.

Proper Assumptions

The assumptions that group leaders hold about potential members shape the assimilation process of their groups. In other words, what you already think about potential members will affect how you behave toward them. Here are some assimilation-related assumptions to consider as you form a vision that will compel people to assimilate themselves into your small group:

- **Do not assume that people:** are lacking quality relationships just because they are not connected with others at your church; need to be in a small group in order to feel like part of your church community; are needing or wanting the same thing as you when it comes to your assimilation objectives; find fulfillment in only one kind of community; will follow a process with several steps in an orderly way before they get more involved; and will feel assimilated even if they have completed the final step of your process.

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- **Do assume that people:** want to fit in and belong; want to invest their time in meaningful ways; need to be invited before they feel included; need to be encouraged before they get more involved; are naturally motivated to improve their lives, but need help in addressing areas where they feel unsatisfied; and appreciate communication and clarity when it comes to how to get more involved with your group.

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Discuss:

1. Do you agree with all six points of assimilation etiquette? Why or why not?
2. In what ways are our small groups life-giving and life-transforming? In what ways can they be improved in those areas?
3. What assumptions have we been operating under that might be harmful? How can we adjust these in the short and long term?

SMALL-GROUP ASSIMILATION STRATEGIES**Varying Your Small-Group Routine**

Practical advice on keeping your members interested—both new and old

Acts 20:9

A set routine for how meetings operate makes group members feel more at ease because they know what to expect. A schedule and a plan make a leader's job much easier, too. However, just as students need to take a break from the grind of studying, small-group members occasionally need to take breaks from the usual curriculum. Groups can become dry and dull after a while, especially if they use the same teaching methods week after week. And when interest wanes, attendance often becomes sporadic.

“How can I keep them coming back?” leaders may ask. Here are several suggestions for revitalizing your group.

Changing the Routine

Occasionally changing the way the group studies is one alteration leaders can make. You could play a game, for example, or watch a film clip that ties into the topic of the lesson. Be sure to ask group members for suggestions. If you find that the chosen material no longer holds peoples' interest, poll your members to learn if the problem is because of the subject matter or the way it is being presented.

Finishing what you start is admirable, and leaders tend to think that if their group begins a book study, they must finish it. Sometimes, however, people grow tired of the subject they are studying and are ready to move on. Be flexible enough to wrap things up more quickly if you sense your group is ready to make a change.

Another idea for breathing new life into group routines is to invite a guest speaker. This might be someone who has firsthand experience or expertise with the topic under study. In general, group members would rather hear from someone that has personally been through an experience than read about that experience in a book. Guest speakers can also answer questions, whereas book studies may occasionally leave things unaddressed.

Suspending the group topic for a week or so to cover another topic of interest can also re-energize your group. One small group I belonged to occasionally scheduled a Tough Questions Night. On that night, members came with difficult questions that the group looked up answers to in Scripture, and then discussed. We didn't always end up with tidy answers, but talking about such issues can be an enlightening experience for group members. They not only learn more about the topic, but also find that they are not the only ones wrestling with it.

Grouping Your Groups

Larger groups might consider occasionally organizing members into separate small groups to facilitate discussion. Breakout discussions are beneficial when covering lots of material in a limited time, or when a group's large size limits sharing time.

Small-group discussion and sharing typically decreases with the size of a group since shyer members may become intimidated. Breaking down the group can help members become acquainted with each other and provide more time for in-depth discussion. You may want to start the group meeting as a whole, and then assign a group discussion leader for each breakout group. Each of the smaller groups can then report back on what they learned after reconvening with the larger group.

Sharing Gatherings

You can take a slightly different approach from the breakout groups mentioned above by allowing members of your small group to gather with members of other groups. Unlike the “group within a group” scenario, where the purpose is to facilitate discussion, these gatherings can be for social purposes—or to allow a couple of groups to participate in the same study. Occasional intergroup gatherings also prevent groups from becoming too isolated and cliquish.

Temporarily merging one group with another for a combined group study allows members to learn together. You can make it a onetime event or a series of gatherings, depending on the study's purpose. Merging a seasoned couples group with a young-marrieds group to work on marriage enrichment would be one example.

SMALL-GROUP ASSIMILATION STRATEGIES

Gatherings such as these provide great mentoring opportunities so that those who have experience can share what they learned with those who have less experience.

Good things can come from group collaboration, but keep these important safeguards in mind:

- Make sure that you plan well enough and far enough in advance to publicize the shared event to all potential participants. Don't hold last-minute combined gatherings. Your lack of planning will only frustrate those who come.
- Find a point person to help organize and lead the event.
- Solicit feedback from group members after the gathering to see what they thought was done well and what needed improvement. Find out if they are open to doing a joint event again in the future.

Turning Study into a Game

Do you really need to shake up your routine? Try turning study into a game. Our small group had been looking at different religions and their foundational beliefs, comparing them to Christianity. Some of the religions we had studied included Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Judaism.

Debbie, our leader for the evening, decided to turn what might otherwise have been a dull learning process into a game. She pulled out exact lines of text from the book and handouts we had studied and wrote down excerpts on strips of paper that represented a truth or fact about a specific religion or its beliefs. She did this without identifying the religion. Examples included "Not by grace, but by good works do you enter heaven" and "They do not believe in celebrating birthdays or holidays." She placed these strips into a gift bag and then divided our group in two. Then she had a team member draw out a slip of paper and read the belief statement/description aloud.

The team that drew the belief statement received a point if they pinpointed the religion or cult that adhered to that belief. If a team missed, the facilitator gave the other team the opportunity to earn a point. It didn't take long before the group members' competitive natures took over.

People loved the game, and it was beneficial in several ways:

- It helped group members realize how much (or little) they understood.
- It helped them compare and contrast what other religions believed.
- It helped them grasp and commit to memory key foundational beliefs of Christianity and compare them to those of other religions.

Remember, having a set group routine is much like depending on a favorite product brand at the store. We know what to expect, and there are no surprises. But sometimes varying the routine can add variety to our gatherings and make them more interesting.

So be on the lookout for signs of restlessness, sagging membership, or lack of interest. If you notice these symptoms, it may be time to stir things up a little with some imaginative changes.

—TEENA M. STEWART; excerpted from [Successful Small Groups](#), © 2007 by Beacon Hill Press of Kansas city, MO. Used by permission of the Publisher. All rights reserved. Visit our website at www.beaconhillbooks.com to purchase this title.

Discuss:

1. When have I noticed members of my group becoming restless or inattentive? Is there a common trigger for such behavior?
2. Which of the above suggestions has our group tried? What were the results?
3. What steps can I take to "stir things up a little" in my group during the coming months?



Keys to a Welcoming Small Group

How to transition from a clique to an open community

Mark 6:11

Note: This article was originally written about an adult Sunday school class. It has been adapted for small groups.

David and Beverly stood in the doorway of the home and looked at the unfamiliar faces. Beverly had coaxed for weeks to get David to the small group. David kept citing a bad experience with “religious people,” but he was finally willing to try again since they had just moved to this area. *Maybe this time I’ll meet some nice people*, David thought. *Maybe this time*, Beverly prayed, *someone in there will introduce David to Jesus.*

I shudder to think how many Davids and Beverlys visited our couple’s group and walked away with needs unmet. We didn’t realize it, but we weren’t giving them a chance.

Our pastor first noticed the problem. He called one evening and asked if I would join him for breakfast at a local restaurant to talk about our couples group. I wasn’t sure what he was driving at. The group was well established—it had existed for 15 of our church’s 35 years, and I had taught or co-taught the group for the past 8 years. If anything, we were typical. I took up the offering and taught a Bible lesson. My wife, Judy, did everything else.

As we met that morning, the pastor pointed out that slowly, almost imperceptibly, our group was losing attendance. In a year’s time our average attendance had dropped five people. “Growth occurs on the edges,” he said, “and you’re not taking in new people.” Judy and I decided to do a little research.

We had begun a guest book several months earlier. As we examined it, we realized that many people had visited, but we didn’t recognize any of the names. None had ever returned! As a matter of fact, we couldn’t think of any regular group members who had been coming less than three years.

Judy and I decided it was time for action, and our first step was to set a goal: Have one visitor feel accepted and return consistently. We defined acceptance as never having to feel or say, “I’m an outsider.” With this in mind, we began to see contradictions between what we wanted for the group and what we actually did.

Intimate or Accepting?

We found out quickly that our group could not be both intimate and accepting in the same breath. Our basic format was comfortable. People entered and sat in a semicircle. We took an offering and asked for announcements—typically someone’s illness and the need for a few meals to be brought over. Someone else often told of a recent answer to prayer. This led into conversational prayer and thanksgiving. Next, we turned to our Bible lesson, continued from the previous week. We closed with prayer.

Our regular attenders enjoyed the format and grew spiritually with it. But if we wanted to accept newcomers, we knew that something had to change. Our pastor had asked one man why he and his wife didn’t attend our group. The man shook his head. “I can’t go in there again,” he said. “They pray out loud. I can’t do that.”

Intimacy among old-timers is desirable, but visitors call it a clique. We decided to sacrifice intimacy if it prevented an accepting atmosphere. We knew that scolding the regular attenders wouldn’t help, so we began to experiment with the class format.

A Plan for Acceptance

Over time, we found that acceptance comes when the group offers natural steps to involvement. We created a progression, repeating it each week in case other newcomers dropped in:

1. **We began with no one seated.** A person walking in would see people standing and sipping coffee or tea, talking from behind the protective shield of a Styrofoam cup. At the call to order, everyone chose seats at the same time.

SMALL-GROUP ASSIMILATION STRATEGIES

2. **We required no previous experience with the group.** Prearranged announcements covered only upcoming events and programs. The lesson began with humor, but not inside jokes. We found that locking a visitor out of a punch line is fatal to growth. We also found that singing worked poorly with fewer than 30 people, because each person perceived his or her voice as too conspicuous. When we did sing, we kept songs simple and made words available, often displaying them up front so newcomers weren't the only ones looking at the words. Our lessons did not require knowledge from the previous week. For serial topics, we began each lesson by summarizing salient points from the previous lessons.
3. **We required no previous experience with the Bible.** The text was stated at the beginning of the lesson. Once people realized they needed Bibles, we offered them to everyone who did not have them, with the day's key verse already marked. For those who had brought Bibles, we briefly explained how to find the key verse. (The first time I explained that Psalms was in the middle of the Bible, one of our regulars laughed. But now our old-timers realize the person next to them truly may not know.) We geared our discussion questions toward opinion, personal experience, or what could be answered solely from the morning's text.
4. **We prepared people for greater participation.** I asked people to form small circles only after they had milled around, chosen seats, and heard some content. And first I would instruct each person to be prepared to give first and last names and to answer a simple question about himself or herself. By having a few seconds to prepare their comments, people were not as apprehensive about starting conversations.

Also, we had people jot down their thoughts before we asked them to talk with the five or six people they'd just met. Only then did we ask for volunteers to answer the question before everyone. As a result, timid people began speaking up more. Sometimes we'd hear, "Mark had a good answer. Go ahead, Mark. Tell him what you told us."

5. **We discouraged natural group selection.** We formed circles by various methods—parts of town the attenders were from, birthdays, and so on. This kept old friends from clustering at the expense of newcomers.

In addition to this regular routine, we offered other avenues for meeting needs of deeper intimacy and Bible study. Regular attenders were encouraged to participate in supplemental Bible studies. We handled intimate prayer requests through auxiliary prayer chains. We formed subgroups of four couples that got together once a month for three months for deeper fellowship.

We also encouraged regulars to develop a ministry mentality. Once every five or six weeks we discussed how to help newcomers: What help do people need when new in town? What would make a newcomer comfortable in a group of strangers? Why do we structure the group this way? Sure, new couples attending the group for the first time sometimes caught us talking about them, but the subject was how much we wanted them.

—DON MICHAEL McDONALD; adapted from *The Magnetic Fellowship* (W Publishing Group, 1988), copyright by Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. Do we agree that intimacy and acceptance can't be emphasized at the same time? Of the two, which is more important to our small group?
2. Which of the five steps to involvement do we currently practice well? Which have we overlooked?
3. What are three steps our group can take to becoming more welcoming in the coming months?

SMALL-GROUP ASSIMILATION STRATEGIES



Closing the Back Door

How does your church rate on the vital ratios that church growth experts identify?

Acts 2:46–47

Ratios are crucial when it comes to creating community—staff cannot be stretched too thin, believers need meaningful relationships to be tied to the church, and small groups need to pursue a healthy balance in congregational life.

Church growth experts Win and Charles Arn determined the following seven ratios. Rate your church on them; then, after each description, place a check in the box that best describes your church. Use the discussion questions to chart a course forward.

	This completely describes us	This somewhat describes us	This does not describe us
Crucial Ratios			
1. <i>Friendship ratio—1:7</i>			
➤ Each new person should be able to identify at least seven friends in the church within the first six months.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. <i>Role/Task Ratio—60:100</i>			
➤ At least 60 roles and tasks should be available for every 100 members in a church.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. <i>Group Ratio—7:100</i>			
➤ At least seven relational groups—places where friendships are built—should be available in a church for every 100 members.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. <i>New-Group Ratio—1:5</i>			
➤ Of every five relational groups in a church, one should have been started in the past two years.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. <i>Committee Member Ratio—1:5</i>			
➤ One of every five committee members should have joined the church within the last two years.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. <i>Staff ratio—1:150</i>			
➤ A church should have one full-time staff member for every 150 persons in worship.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. <i>Visitor Ratio—3:10</i>			
➤ Of the first-time visitors who live in the church’s ministry area, three of every ten should be actively involved within a year.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

—WIN AND CHARLES ARN.; Copyright © 1988 Christianity Today International. Adapted from *The Magnetic Fellowship*.

Discuss

1. In what areas are our ratios most like the ones the authors recommend? In what areas are our ratios least like the ones the authors recommend?
2. How would our church be different if we pursued some of the ratios recommended here?
3. Choose one area of weakness. How can we address it in the next month, quarter, and year?



Further Exploration

Websites and books to help your church and groups welcome new members

BuildingChurchLeaders.com. Practical resources from Christianity Today International.

- “Assimilating Visitors into Your Church” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Turning Visitors into Attenders” Assessment Pack
- “A Welcoming Church” Assessment Pack

BuildingSmallGroups.com. Small-groups training resources from Christianity Today International:

- “Connecting Newcomers” Training Theme
- “Effective Turbo Groups” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Re-Launching a Small-Groups Ministry” Training Theme

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

Smallgroups.com. An established website dedicated to equipping small-group leaders to make disciples and strengthen communities.

[Finding Them, Keeping Them: Effective Strategies for Evangelism and Assimilation in the Local Church](#) by *Glen Martin*. An excellent way for laypeople to understand the science of church growth (Broadman and Holman, 1992; ISBN 978-0805460513).

[Successful Small Groups: From Concept to Practice](#) by *Teena M. Stewart*. A solid and practical book that covers all the bases (Beacon Hill Press, 2007; ISBN 978-0834122373).

[The Seven Deadly Sins of Small-Group Ministry](#) by *Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson*. A very useful troubleshooting guide for church and ministry leaders (Zondervan, 2005; ISBN 978-0310267119).