

Developing and Using Small Groups

Beginning small groups requires much work, time, prayer, and a vision.
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The implementation of small groups is one factor in the growth of some churches. Church growth experts say small groups are an important factor for growth, whatever the church attendance. Beginning small groups requires much work, time, prayer, and a vision.

Reasons for Small Groups

1. They provide another entry point into your church. In the past, Sunday school, worship services, and special events served as entry points. While these still offer opportunities, we must continue to search for ways to increase the opportunities people have to become involved in our churches. For a variety of reasons, some people are intimidated by walking into a crowd. They feel more comfortable with a smaller group. Others prefer the anonymity of a large group.

2. They are an effective evangelism tool. Small groups offer a place to discuss daily life and to receive encouragement and support. They provide a setting where questions are easier to ask, helping non-believers and new believers to learn more about the Christian lifestyle.

3. They are an effective means to care for the people. Whatever the size of your church, it is impossible for the pastor to provide all the care people need. We already practice this through a variety of ministries. Additionally, some will find it easier to talk with a church member, especially if they are new to the church or don't know the pastor.

4. They accelerate spiritual growth within the people. In a small group, usually 8–12, people are more comfortable in sharing needs and concerns. This leads to accountability and an atmosphere that nurtures growth.

5. They shift the work of the church to the people. Ephesians 4:12 talks about "equipping the saints to do the work of the ministry." As Christians, we are saints, whether or not we are comfortable with the term. The early church demonstrated how empowering lay leaders accomplished the work of the church. Community people expect the pastor to be involved in ministry. When the laity, however, takes this role, the impact is greater.

Dale Galloway, former pastor of New Hope Community Church in Portland states "No church with more than 50 members can be effective in pastoral care without enlisting and enabling the lay people to do daily work of pastoral care."

Needs of People Today

According to a Gallup poll, there are six needs people have today:

1. To believe life is meaningful and has purpose
2. To have a sense of community and deeper relationships
3. To be appreciated and respected
4. To be listened to and heard
5. To feel that one is growing in faith
6. To have practical help in developing a mature faith

It is easy to see how small groups provide a means of meeting these needs.

What is a small group?

A small group consists of eight to twelve people who meet regularly to learn and care for each other. The focus of the group plays a significant role in determining the makeup of the participants. Some groups focus on specific needs for a definite time span. Others are more general in focus without a preset ending time.

For example, a parents of teens group may find participants changing yearly. A single parent group may find the same people attending for several years. While the two groups have a similar focus, the differences in marital status limit the ability to meet together.

Other groups designed for spiritual growth and development may find their makeup includes both sexes, married and single adults. Whatever the makeup of the group, they soon learn ways to improve their lifestyles.

Determine the purpose of each small group. The purpose may be evangelism, discipleship, shepherding, or service. Some groups may feel they want to include the four purposes. However, the emphasis each purpose receives will vary from group to group.

Beginning New Groups

Begin with one group as a model. As interest and involvement increases, the small groups multiply. Using the scientific cell growth as a model, the small groups multiply rather than dividing.

Share your vision of small groups with the pastor and others in the congregation. People won't volunteer until they catch the vision.

It is important that group meetings begin and end on time. If the group determines one hour is enough, stick to that timeline. If you exceed the time limit, it makes it easier for members to skip a meeting, especially following a long workday. However, members need to feel comfortable to stay a few minutes longer.

New groups are formed when the number in the group exceeds 12–15. Groups this size lose the ability to function effectively because the time for each member to have input becomes limited. More people in a group requires higher leadership skills. Multiplying groups also allows more people to become involved in ministry.

When a small group doesn't keep multiplication as a goal, it is easy to become very comfortable with the group. This limits the group's ability to attract and keep new people. A healthy small groups keeps evangelism as a continuing mission.

Job Descriptions

Group leader

1. Contact, by phone or home visit, all prospects and members
2. Work with the host/hostess to make people comfortable
3. Talk and pray with the assistant leader and host/hostess before each week's meeting
4. Initiate conversational prayer during the meeting
5. Lead the lesson and discussion
6. Complete a report form for each meeting

Assistant leader—Leader-in-training

1. Contact, by phone or home visit, all prospects and members
2. Open the meeting by introducing guests and using an icebreaker activity. Some icebreaker suggestions:
 - Today was a good day because
 - My favorite color is
 - My favorite time of day is
 - One good thing that happened since last meeting
 - My favorite season is
3. Make announcements as needed
4. Lead the sharing time
5. Plan the refreshment schedule as needed
6. Arrange babysitting if needed
7. Lead the lesson and discussion occasionally at the request of the group leader

Host/hostess

1. Be responsible for a comfortable setting for the meeting. It might be a home, clubhouse, restaurant, room at church, etc
2. Set up refreshments before the meeting begins
3. Arrange the chairs. A circle with an empty chair for the guest is one option
4. Have extra Bibles and pencils for those who forgot
5. Set an atmosphere of love and acceptance for everyone

Principles for Dynamic Small Groups

1. Each small group must use and keep in equal balance the following three principles:
 - *Share a life-centered testimony*—illustrating what the lesson taught. Sharing personal experiences with a group generates feelings of belonging.
 - *Conversational prayer*—talking to God builds unity by praising him and by praying for expressed needs.
 - *Bible application*—teach to encourage a relationship with Jesus rather than the Christian culture.
2. Encourage participation without pressure. The leader is a "guide on the side" rather than a "sage on the stage." Interactions are easier if people can see one another. Remind participants that "passing" is okay. Avoid calling on people to read aloud or reading around the group. Contact ahead of time those you want to read aloud.
3. Respond immediately to an expressed need. Love responds immediately. Pray for the individual and need as it is expressed.
4. Encourage everyone in the group. Make each person feel his or her questions and responses are important. Avoid put-downs.
5. Follow-up between meetings is important. If a need or concern was shared, contact the individual during the week to offer encouragement and support. Contact visitors and encourage them to attend again. Contact regular members to express appreciation.
6. New members brought into the group keep it alive and growing.
7. Don't allow one person to do all the talking. One solution is to identify a member of the group that is comfortable with having a question directed toward him or her. Use this person's name in the question.
8. Keep learning—you don't have all the answers. Good leaders are learners. Life is a journey. We are always learning.