

# THINKING BIG

creating an effective small  
group ministry

# INTRODUCTION

**Thinking big about how, why and what kinds of small groups we are creating should be a big deal.** This is not a book on how to better lead your small group. Rather it is written for the leadership teams of churches who want to sharpen their small groups ministry strategy. With a dizzying amount of small group ministry models, it's hard to know which one is right for your church and context.

This e-book will reveal some of the thinking behind the way Common Ground goes about small group ministry, but more importantly, it will help any leadership team find their tailor-made approach.

Common Ground Church consists of about 10 churches who are at various stages in their individual journeys. Each of them is committed to small groups. We value a radical cross-pollination of ideas and learning, which creates an intense learning and sharpening environment. This document captures two decades of these learnings.

Our first confession: we don't have the silver bullet solution for small groups ministry. That's because we have never discovered a problem-free approach! Whenever we try a new approach to small groups, it comes along with a new set of pros, and a new set of cons too.

To find the right answers, we must begin by asking the right kinds of questions. We have found that, before looking at different models, the most important step in creating or reevaluating small groups ministry is to ask the following 8 questions.

The rest of this e-book seeks to guide, probe and elaborate on each of these questions in greater detail.

Here's to more healthy small groups!

## THE 8 MOST IMPORTANT QUESTIONS IN SMALL GROUP

1. What biblical theology drives small group ministry in our church?
2. What do we hope small groups will achieve?
3. How do we identify, raise up and release new small group leaders / groups?
4. How do we assimilate new people into small groups?
5. How do we continue to strengthen small group leaders?
6. How do we catalyze deeper community in small groups?
7. How do we catalyze greater discipleship in small groups?
8. How do we catalyze an outward focus in small groups?

We suggest that when a leadership team of a church fails to grapple to clarify and agree in all of these 8 issues, there will be a serious leak. It may feel like hard work to reach this clarity, but a lack of clarity will always create much more complexity and work down the line. Rather do the proactive work on the front end than the reactive work on the other end.

We also suggest that as a leadership team keeps on revisiting these 8 questions, they will keep on producing new answers.

We suggest that every second or third year the leadership team goes over these questions once again – with the goal of either confirming the agreed upon approach or make changes. An increase in experience-forged learning as well as exposure to the practices of other churches will tend to throw new light on these questions.

Then write down the church's strategy for doing small groups. This forces complete clarity and serves as a reference document for all the leaders.

In the rest of this paper, we will equip the leadership team to answer these 8 questions for themselves.

Not included anywhere in this paper are some other useful ideas...

**1) As leaders read some recommended books on small groups:**

- Small Groups with Purpose: How to Create Healthy Communities (by Steve Gladen)
- Sticky Church (by Larry Osborne of North Coast Church)
- Community: take your church off life-support (by Brad House of Sojourn Church)

**2) As leaders, refer to some useful websites:**

- Smallgroups.com
- Smallgroups.net
- Smallgroupnetwork.com

**3) Identify a point person on the staff, or if it is a small church, a committed volunteer with plenty of time, to be the small group champion.**

**4) Create and run small group leaders training twice a year. You are free to adapt from ours.**

## **1. WHAT BIBLICAL THEOLOGY DRIVES SMALL GROUP MINISTRY IN OUR CHURCH?**

The temptation is to overlook this question entirely. When we do, we tend to be pragmatically motivated rather than theologically motivated.

Pragmatism is important, but if we want to see our small group ministry thrive for the long-haul, we need to root it not only in what works, but in what's important.

Theology tells us what is important. It is the root system wherein our convictions can grow.

There are pragmatic reasons for small group ministry. The most obvious one is that it is the number one strategy for closing the back door of the church. People tend to come to a church's Sunday meetings, but if after some time they have not made friends they tend to move on. An effective small group ministry has the power to make the church 'sticky' relationally. People who come first on Sundays and then, sooner rather than later, find their way into a small group tend to stay with the church.

For some church leaders this pragmatic reason is all they need to be motivated toward a thriving small group ministry.

But there are deeper, theological reasons a small group ministry is important. The pragmatist asks, 'What is the advantages of having an effective small group ministry?' This is an good questions. But it is not the most important one. Rather we should ask, 'What is true about God and what matters to him that will motivate our efforts in small group ministry?'

Even more basically, the pragmatist starts with the question, 'What matters to us and how can we make it happen? The theologian starts with the question, 'What matters to God and how can we make it happen?'

When we train small group leaders, when we remind our church why small group ministry is so important, we should steep them in theology not pragmatism. Theology is the first thing, pragmatism is the second thing.

So what theology best motivates the prioroty of small group ministry in a church? Common Ground keeps on revisiting six...

### **1) The doctrine of the Trinity.**

God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, an eternal community of love. He makes us as humanity in his image. As such, we are relational beings. Our relationality and social nature is not merely a survival mechanism in history, but is rooted in the very fabric of our deepest wiring, and the heart of God.

Jesus prays that we as the church would be one as the Triune Persons are one. As we are brought into union with Christ, he simultaneously unites us to each other (1 Cor 12:13). The love relationships within the Trinity set the standard for Christian relationships – where we humbly celebrate, enjoy, serve and collaborate each other other. The love within the Triune God also empowers our relationships – his overflowing, unconditional love flows over into us, and sets off a cascade of love as we love each other as the people of God, and overflow as the people of God in loving mission and service to a world in desperate need of love.

If we attend a large group gathering, but fail to form deeper relationships with a few, we fail to enjoy and express the Triune love that can only flow in our commitment to each other. To the degree that we are isolated from each other, to that degree we fail to reflect the image of God, which Christ has come to redeem.

## 2) The metaphors of the church.

There are many metaphors for the church in the New Testament – body, temple, army, family, bride, sheep, branches and more.

We know that these images emphasize our relationship to Christ (head of the body, cornerstone and inhabitator of the temple, commander of the army, husband of the bride, shepherd of the sheep, stem of the branches).

But we tend to forget how most of these images also emphasize our relationship to each other:

- Church as family: With God as our Father, and Christ as our older brother, we love each other as brothers and sisters.
- Church as body: Each of us is a distinctive member joined to each other, belonging to each other, functioning in unity of purpose.
- Church as temple: We are built into and onto each other, stone upon stone, lives tightly interlocking.
- Church as army: We are fighting units, standing shoulder to shoulder in battle – never fighting with each other, but rather fighting for each other, and alongside each other in a spiritual battle of eternal consequence.

## 3) The one anothers of discipleship.

Though Jesus called his disciples to follow him, he also taught them to love one another, as he loved them. He taught them to humbly serve each other (John 13) and to forgive each other (Matt 18) for example.

In the epistles, the apostles teach the church to love each other with what has been called 'the one anothers'. As a sample of an even greater list, we are to....

- *Accept one another – Romans 15:7*
- *Admonish one another – Colossians 3:16*
- *Be at peace with one another – Mark 9:50*
- *Be kind and compassionate to one another – Ephesians 4:32*
- *Be patient, bearing with one another in love – Ephesians 4:2*
- *Build each other up – 1 Thessalonians 5:11*
- *Carry each other's burdens – Galatians 6:2*
- *Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another – 1 Peter 5:5*
- *Confess your sins to each other – Colossians 3:9*
- *Encourage each other – 1 Thessalonians 4:18*
- *Forgive each other – Ephesians 4:32*
- *Honor one another above yourselves – Romans 12:10*
- *Instruct one another – Romans 15:14*
- *Live in harmony with one another – Romans 12:16*
- *Love one another – John 13:34*
- *Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling – 1 Peter 4:9*
- *Pray for each other – James 5:16*
- *Serve one another in love – Galatians 5:13*
- *Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ – Ephesians 5:21*
- *Use whatever gift (you have) received to serve others – 1 Peter 4:10*

The deeper command under all these commands is find some people with you can make a mutual commitment to learn to love in these ways.

If we only connect with other Christians in services where we face the front and sing together and sit under the Word together (which is imp[ortant]), or if we only socialize with other believers in fairly superficial ways (which is important) but fail to commit to some whom we will learn to love in these ways, we are being disobedient to all these commands.

If love is the main thing, and it is, the litmus tests of the effectiveness of all the Christian content we may imbibe through preaching or reading, and all the spiritual experiences we may have while we are praying or singing, is the degree to which it shapes our way of relating to others, starting with the fellow-believers we are commanded to build up in love.

In short, there is no authentic discipleship outside the context of relationships.

#### **4) The way the early church met in homes.**

A cursory reading of Acts causes one to see how central homes were to the life of the church. Even when they had larger meeting venues (like the Jerusalem temple in Acts or the lecture hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus) they still met in homes. The clearest snapshot of this is Acts 2:42-47...

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

This meeting in homes was not the idea of the apostles. Rather it stemmed back to the ministry strategy of Jesus. So much of his ministry happened in homes, especially but not only around meals (for example, the house of Peter, or Zacheues, or Simon the Leper, or Lazarus). And, when he directed the 72 to minister, he directed them to enter homes and announce, 'Peace to this house'.

Without church buildings, many of these newly planted early churches were house churches, and as the church grew in various cities, there would have been a network of them. As a sample...

- “[Peter] went to the house of Mary ... where there were many people gathered in prayer” (Acts 12:12).
- “[Paul and Silas] went to Lydia’s house where they saw and encouraged the brothers, and then they left” (Acts 16:40).
- “Greet Prisca and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus ... greet also the church at their house” (Romans 16:3,5).
- “Give greetings to the brothers in Laodicea and to Nympha and to the church in her house” (Colossians 4:15).
- “Paul ... to Philemon, our beloved and our co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church at your house” (Philemon 1-2).

To sum up: These four biblical arteries – the Trinity, the images of the church, the one anothers of discipleship and the Acts strategic emphasis on homes – serve as the deep arteries that, when tapped into, provide a very deep theological motivating for small group ministry.

## **2. WHAT PURPOSES EXACTLY DO WE HOPE SMALL GROUPS WILL ACHIEVE?**

As we learn from other churches, two maxims are helpful:

Adopt from no-one; adapt from everyone. We can learn something from any and every church! But we should not uncritically import the methods of others, even if they work well in that church.

Incarnate not duplicate. Just because something works well in one place does not mean it will work well in another. This is because every context is different. Every church leader needs to do the hard, honest and creative work of re-contextualizing the ideas, insights and practices of other churches into our own.

One of the reasons this is so important is that in various churches, small groups are intended to achieve different purposes. In one church, for example, small groups might mainly be about community. In another, discipleship. In another, mission.

The uncritical adoption of another church’s model without being clear what we hope small groups will achieve is folly.

There are two questions that the leadership team must come to agreement and clarity on...

## 2. WHAT PURPOSES EXACTLY DO WE HOPE SMALL GROUPS WILL ACHIEVE?

### 1) Will you be a church with small groups or a church of small groups?

This question is not semantic.

A church with small groups is one where small groups are optional. The leaders might mildly encourage people join a small group. It might be that the leaders hope people get involved in something other than merely coming on Sundays – perhaps a course, or a serving ministry, or a small group.

The result of this lack of emphasis is that perhaps 20 to 30 percent of the church are in small groups.

Now compare that with a church of small groups. In this case, the church leaders see small groups as imperative and non-negotiable. They strongly encourage or even insist that members are in groups. They see small groups as one of the main delivery vehicles for the church's vision and purposes.

The result of this kind of emphasis is that a much higher percentage of the church are in small groups – perhaps 50-100%.

(One other implication of being a church of small groups is that it will be expected that senior staff and leaders will themselves participate in small groups, or in the oversight of small group leaders.)

Having this many people in small groups is wonderful and has many advantages, but it does come at a cost: the leaders are forced to cull or say not to many of the other things we might have been able to do as a church midweek if our people were not committed to this weekly gathering.

Common Ground has decided that we are a church of small groups. This means that we plan on getting as many people as possible into small groups. Alongside Sunday meeting, it is the second delivery vehicle through which we hope to do most (certainly not all) of what we do as a church. Why is this? The final question led us to this conviction...

### 2) What purposes exactly do you hope small groups will achieve?

This is the most important question.

There is power in clarifying purposes! Once we have articulated clarity of purposes, we can now better...

- 1) Create a model that will more likely achieve these purposes.
- 2) Train and resource small group leaders accordingly.
- 3) Help small group members adjust their efforts and expectations.
- 4) Evaluate the effectiveness of each small group and the small group ministry as a whole.

Although there may be pragmatic answers to the question (like closing the back door of the church, or meeting the felt needs of people), we need to go back to theology for our answer.

For this point, it might be helpful to share Common Ground's answer to this question. We come up with four answers. (Notice that we have done some work on wordsmithing our answers, because we will so regularly repeat this in Sunday messages.)

**a) Small groups are for belonging.**

"They devoted themselves to ... fellowship. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts" (Acts 2:42, 46). We see here God's plan for the church is that we belong to each other in mutual friendship and love.

In Common Ground the preacher might say, "Every now and then someone comes to me, and says the terrifying words: 'I have been coming for 6 months now. I really like this church. But I just don't feel I belong.' This is heart-breaking feedback. When I ask what small group they are in, most times they say they're not. Now I bite my tongue at this point, but I think: how did you ever think you would experience belonging if you made no effort to build some relationships in a small group. Linger longer on Sundays are great for socializing, but not for going deeper."

**b) Small groups are for caring.**

"All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need (Acts 2:44-45)". We see here that God's plan for the church is that, in difficult times, we would be able to stand with and support each other.

In Common Ground a preacher might say, "Another thing, every now and then someone says, to me – equally mortifying – is: 'You guys talk about love, but I have gone through a hard time lately, and no body stood with me.' Again, this is devastating to hear. So I ask what group they are in. They say they intended on going, or they once tried one out. But nope. Again I bite my tongue, but want to say, "How did you think people could care for you if they did not even know about your struggled?" In fact, I tell my kids, "Most of the difficult things that will happen in your life you can't control. They arrive when you least expect them. But what you can largely control is who the people will be to help you weather those storms. Perhaps your best investment in your future self is the community you intentionally seek out and build today, especially while the good times roll.""

As an aside, but related to the question of care, this is Common Ground's pastoral care strategy in three statements...

**We believe that every believer should shelter under the care of pastors.** The New Testament teaches that each church is led and cared for by a team of elders / pastors. These leaders need to keep watch over the people under their care. Part of the process of church membership helps people entrust their lives to the care and oversight of these pastors, as well as making it clear exactly which people those elders are accountable before God for.

In a small church, such as most of the ones we find in the New Testament era, it is likely that every one in the church can be cared for directly by such pastors.

**We believe that as the church grows numerically pastors need to raise up other leaders who are under-pastors of the people.** Pastors have a lot of responsibilities over and above the direct and personal care of individual believers, and when there are too many people to care for to too few pastors, it is best to follow the under-shepherd strategy of Moses in Exodus 18 and the Apostles in Acts 6. In both these biblical examples, the senior leaders needed to be able to focus on those things that will take the whole church forward, and to limit the amount of time they give to individual sheep.

The way to do this is to multiply suitable and qualified leaders who will care for smaller groups of people. In this sense the pastors are now indirectly pastoring the people through other under-pastoral gifts. The pastors need to especially care for these under-pastors who in turn care for the lives under their care. That said, the under-pastors can still draw on the expertise of the pastors in doing so, and may need to call in 'bigger guns' to deal with more difficult situations.

And each person in the church is still free to meet with pastors, although the expectation of access needs to be tempered by the reality of limited capacity. In Common Ground these under-pastors consist of the small group leaders, and in bigger congregations, also the community leaders who oversee the small group leaders who might not be elders.

**The priority of both the pastors and the under-pastors is not to build the people to them as leaders, but to each other.** A careful reading of the New Testament causes us to place the emphasis on mutual care, not pastoral care. In the New Testament there are only a handful of passages which speak of shepherding-leaders (John 21, 1 Peter 5, 1 Thes 5, Hebrews 13:7,17 for example) but there are over 50 one another passages.

Mutual care trumps pastoral care as the predominant way followers of Jesus are cared for. Pastoral care at best supplements and supports mutual care, but should not replace it. This means that pastors should lead the church in such a way as to organize for mutual care. Small groups under small group leaders, who are under the care of community leaders / pastors is the best way to do this.

As we reflect in Common Ground on the people who tend to come into difficult times and then end up swamping the pastors, or who accuse the pastors for their lack of care, it is usually those people who joined the church, and saw the pastors as their pastors, but did not get into a small group where mutual care was the first response to their situation. The learning is that, especially when most pastors are bivocational and therefore very limited in time and capacity, we simply cannot care directly for a church that has grown into the 100s. We need under-shepherds to assist us, and each person must be invested in finding a caring community of mutual care.

### **c) Small groups are for growing.**

*“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42). This implies not only that they were being informed by good teaching, but that they were being transformed by it.*

In Common Ground, a preacher may say, “If Jesus’ pattern of calling disciples to follow him and then arranging them into a community as they did so is anything to go by, we simply cannot follow Jesus in isolation. Life-change happens in the context of relationships.”

“In particular, processing the teaching of God’s Word is one of the better ways to not only be a hearer of God’s Word, but also a doer (James 1:22). We are all in danger if we just hear God’s Word on Sundays but then don’t process it with some people as to how to work it out in our lives. Small groups often discuss the Sunday message in an attempt to close the gap between what we hear on Sundays and the lives we live the rest of the week. Here we find some people who can help us to do this by challenging us, holding us accountable and encouraging us.”

### **d) Small groups are for encountering Jesus.**

*“They devoted themselves to ... prayer. They (were) praising God” (Acts 2:42,47).*

A preacher in Common Ground might say, “It’s commonly known that our vertical relationship with God tends to flow into our horizontal relationships with people. So, as we receive his love, we are empowered to love others. But it is less commonly known that it works the other way too: horizontal relationships undergird vertical love too. For example, Paul prays for us: “I pray that you all, being rooted and grounded in love, may ... together with all the saints... grasp the love of Christ” (Ephesians 3:17) See? We can’t fully grasp and encounter Jesus’ love on our own. We need brothers and sisters who walk with us in our journey of getting to know God better. As we read and discuss God’s word together, and as we pray together, and pray for each other, and maybe even sing together – we tend to experience Jesus and his love in ways we couldn’t on our own. Like in a bring-and-share picnic other people will share with us their piece of Christ and revelation that we do not have. That way, together we can get to know and encounter Jesus.”

In summary, in Common Ground, a healthy small group is one that helps everyone in the group reach higher levels of belonging, care, encounter and growth.

### **3. HOW DO WE IDENTIFY, DEVELOP AND RELEASE NEW SMALL GROUP LEADERS AND GROUPS?**

By the far the most important and most difficult part of small group ministry is releasing suitable people to lead these groups. Two bed-rock insights must not be forgotten in small group ministry...

First, we need more small group leaders. With new small group leaders, there can be no new groups. Second, we need better small group leaders. Without committed, healthy small group leaders, there can be no committed, healthy groups.

Different churches come up with different strategies for releasing more leaders, and better leaders. Very practically, this manifests in different strategies for starting new groups. Each church's leadership team can ask four questions to develop their own strategy...

#### **1) Will we multiply or plant new groups?**

By multiply, we mean that as a support leader is selected and prepared in one small group, that the group is able to multiply into two, with the previous leader taking half the people, and the emerging leader taking the other half.

By planting, we mean that one or more support leaders are selected and prepared in an existing group, and they are planted out to start their own small groups from scratch. They might take one or two people from the group, but in the main, the existing group continues as it was.

The strengths of the multiplication model are:

- There is something biological about it – it is like one cell dividing into two. Many churches have been able to do this very successfully.
- The new group is immediately strengthened by the presence of several people, not only a planting leader. It is less of a daunting experience for the new leader who can enjoy this support.

The weakness of the multiplication model are:

- Relational circles do not like to be separated. The average person who has experienced two or more such multiplications will often feel quite 'wounded' by the forming and 'loss' of relationships. This weakness can be mitigated against by: 1) telling people as early as possible that multiplication is the end goal, 2) discipling a missional heart in the group where it is explained that the multiplication is an act of love, letting go of some of arrangement for the sake of disconnected people whom God wants to connect.
- It is very difficult to divide people well – it is very common for one group to thrive and the other to not thrive, because the chemistry of relationships is wrong in one of the groups or one group somehow landed up with the 'stronger' members. This weakness can be mitigated against by being attentive to chemistry, and to making sure that each group gets an equal amount of 'strong' people.

The strengths of the planting model:

- It naturally identifies the more adventurous people who will be inclined to step out on this new adventure in God. The apostolic spirit of the Gospel is beautifully evident as these new people 'go' in faith.
- New people prefer to join new groups. In other words a disconnected person will be more likely to go to and be absorbed by a group where they are part of the first few members rather than one where the 3 or more people already have established relationships from their prior group.
- Relational circles are not torn apart.
- It tends to be easier to attract new people to a group where there are only 1 or 2 people, because these newbies are not entering into an established circle of relationships.

The weakness of the planting model.

- It is a daunting experience to step out, and there may be fewer people who would be willing to do this than in the multiplication model where many others join them in the mission.

In Common Ground, we used to primarily multiply small groups, but over the years we now primarily plant new ones.

What both models have in common however is the understanding that existing small group leaders carry the primary opportunity to spot other potential leaders. As a general rule it takes leaders to spot and create new leaders. This boils down to three basic steps:

- Delegating responsibilities. In God's kingdom before someone can be trusted with an appointment (i.e. a formal role), they need to be trusted with an assignment. Existing leaders should work hard to delegate responsibilities to some other people – such as asking them to facilitate the conversation, or to spearhead the WhatsApp group.
- Seeking confirmation from the community leader. In Common Ground each small group leader is under the care of a community leader. If the small group leader spots a new potential leader, it is wise to bounce that idea off the community leader. This will save one the potential mess of inviting someone to prepare to lead, only to find out that the community leader knows or sees something they do not.
- A fire-lighting conversation. We anticipate that the average new leader will have as a critical part of their onramp into leadership a conversation with a leader, where the leader says something to the effect of, 'As I have been praying about people that I think could start / lead their own group, I keep on coming back to you. You seem to have the relational warmth and the spiritual warmth that is required. Would you prayerfully consider this possibility?'

## **2) Will these groups be open or closed?**

By 'open' we mean that, at any time, new people are welcome to join. By 'closed' we mean that, once there are a certain amount of people committed to the group, no more people are free to come.

For example, North Point Church has closed groups that run for 12-24 months, and people are asked to commit to this journey. Using various methods, they populate a group upfront and then let them launch full and closed.

The strengths of 'open' groups are:

- It aligns with the fact that all groups tend to grow slowly.
- It naturally replenishes a group where some people have, for whatever reasons, have stopped coming.
- It keeps the people outward focused in their orientation.

The weaknesses of 'open' groups are:

- There is a lot of come and go.
- Especially for the more introverted people, the presence of new people makes it feel less safe.
- The group may grow too large for real depth of conversation and relationship.

The strengths of 'closed' groups are:

- It tends to call for greater commitment from people who understand that they hold one of 'the limited seats on the bus'.
- The group feels safer when the same people come, which means that relationships tend to go much deeper.

The weaknesses of 'closed' groups are:

- Disconnected people may be forced to wait a period of time before a group opens up for them.
- They can be quite inward-looking.

In Common Ground, we prefer open groups, but some groups ask special permission to cap their group, which we are usually willing to oblige by.

## **3) Will these groups be temporary or permanent?**

'Temporary' groups of a pre-set ending point – they could run for 8 weeks, or a year for example. Temporary groups are usually also closed groups. 'Permanent' groups run indefinitely, and may be open or closed.

In Common Ground, like most churches with small groups, we run permanent groups. For example, at the start of each year it is assumed that you return to the group you were in last year.

North Coast Church has pioneered closed 10 week long groups. Three times a year, they run for 10 weeks. They do a big drive each time, and people sign up afresh each time. Many people sign up for the very same groups they were last in, but others prefer to sign up for new groups.

The strengths of the 'permanent' model are:

- It creates a sense of stability in the church and in people's lives.
- Relationships take a long time to go deep.

The weaknesses of the 'permanent' model are:

- People are hesitant to commit for the long-haul, so they may never come to a group at all.
- It is difficult to get out of a group one does not like.
- It is more difficult to recruit small group leaders who rightly fear being a leader forever – and often will burn out after enough time.

The strengths of the 'temporary' model are:

- Most people don't like to make open-ended or long-term commitments.
- It is easier to recruit leaders, and it also gives them a rest between each run.
- It keeps things fresh, and allows people to make new friends.
- A person might opt out of the start of a 10 week run, but can easily onramp back into small group life in 4 months time.
- It creates a natural 'out' for people who do not like the group they were in.

The weakness of the 'temporary' model are:

- It requires a tremendous amount of administration and energy to restart groups three times a year.

For the last few years, in Common Ground we have done a hybrid model. Every year for 6 weeks in February-March, we run a video-based teaching series in small groups. We invite people to come along to existing groups just for those 6 weeks, and then decide if they want to carry on. We also start temporary groups, led by a temporary host, and – if the group succeeds wonderfully – we try to upgrade to become a permanent group led by a permanent leader. Additionally, for permanent groups, we have suggested shut-down periods in the middle and the end of the year so that small group leaders can have a break.

#### **4) Is the bar high or low for new small group leaders?**

By 'high bar' we mean that potential small group leaders have received high levels of preparation and screening – and have a more challenging job description. By 'low bar' we mean that they received low levels of preparation and screening – and have a far less challenging job description.

North Coast church for example looks for small group leaders who will commit to lead for 10 weeks. Their job is to to 1) facilitate the formation of friendships and 2) facilitate a conversation based on a Group Guide based on the previous Sunday message. This is an example of low bar leadership. The training given is minimal.

Other churches may opt for a much higher bar. They would expect the small group leader to be the pastor and disciple-maker of the people in the group. This is a far greater, long-term ask and the training is more advanced.

Rick Warren of Saddleback Church pioneered the Host Strategy, which opts for low bar leadership. In their annual campaign series, the recruit people to host a 6 week long small group, populated by people they invite. They are asked to H.O.S.T.:

- o Have a heart for people.
- o Open up your home.
- o Serve a snack and drink.
- o Turn on the Screen.

They receive a brief one session training, and are given all the video and booklet resources they need.

As the 6 week group commences, community leaders keep contact with these hosts (notice they are not called 'leaders'). If the group seems to be thriving, the community leader suggests that they continue on as a group, and invites the host to small group leaders training so they can be upgraded to becoming a leader. (Notice here that, though initially, they set the bar as low as possible, and then seek to slowly raise the bar as the person gains confidence.)

If the host however does not continue, either a leader is found in the group, or the temporary group comes to an end after 6 weeks, which is exactly what people expected. The hope is that they will sign up again next round.

The strengths of the low-bar approach are:

- Many more people will volunteer, who will in turn invite many more people to come to their group. This means many disconnected people will become connected.
- As hosts are encouraged to populate their groups, they tend to invite people they know – which means that there are already relationships in existence, and the chemistry of the people will likely be successful. Also, this carries the possibility of transforming an existing relational network into a spiritual community.

The weaknesses of the 'low-bar' approach are:

- Many hosts will start groups, but then will evidently prove to be seriously inadequate for the task of being a small group – even if they were to be trained.
- Some people have their first experience of small group life in a lousy group, and then not try again in the future.

The strengths of the 'high-bar' approach are:

- A healthier, better trained, more committed small group leader will tend to create a much stronger small group.
- More work is done before groups can start, but staff and community leaders are saved the work of cleaning up messes on the other side.

The weaknesses of the 'high-bar' approach are:

- It will likely prove very difficult to get enough small group leaders to have enough groups to contain a large percentage of the church.
- Many could-be leaders will not volunteer, though a low-to-high-bar approach would have effectively drawn them in.

In Common Ground, we generally take the 'high-bar' approach, though many of our congregations will take the low-bar approach in our annual superseries when we create video teaching for the small groups for 6 weeks. In that time we will invite people to start their own groups based on the HOST model of Saddleback.

But even though our bar is high, we try to lower it realistically. Small group leaders who start / lead permanent groups need to:

- Be warm relationally.
- Be warm spiritually.
- Evidence teachability.
- Have done our membership course.
- Do our small group leaders training.

Notice, we do not expect our small group leaders to:

- Be teachers. In fact, about the worst thing a small group leader can do is to try do a mini-teaching every week.
- Be pastors. Though they are asked to care for the well-being of the people in their group, we ask them to do this primarily by creating a culture of mutual care in their groups. They can also turn to community leaders and elders if they are dealing with a person in their group who has problems that are beyond the capacity of the group to deal with.

## **5. HOW DO WE CONTINUE TO STRENGTHEN EXISTING GROUP LEADERS?**

Effective small group ministries are all built not only on the availability and initial training of small group leaders, but – more importantly – the ongoing support, re-inspiring and upskilling of these leaders.

Without this continuing care, many (if not most) small group leaders tend to fade out through discouragement or a sense of isolation.

Here are some ideas for doing this...

### **1) Understand the idea of a multi-level care network.**

In Exodus 18, Moses adopts a method of caring for the people by creating several levels of leaders, each caring for some people under them.

Every leader needs to be cared for by another leader, who themselves is cared for by another leader. This is limited by the fact that a leader can only care for a limited amount of leaders. So, if a church has 12 small groups, ideally you will need 3 community leaders to each look after 4 of these small group leaders. The community leaders themselves will need to be looked after by someone.

Since Common Ground congregations are led by a team of pastors, we tend to make each of these pastors play a function community leader. As pastors, they then care for each other, and are cared for by a lead pastor.

Depending on the experience-level and capacity of the community leaders, and the experience-level and self-sufficiency of the small group leaders, the amount of small group leaders can vary. For example, one community leader might look after 3 groups, and another 7.

## 2) Clarify the community leader job description.

Essentially community leaders exist to serve small group leaders by:

- befriending them
- praying for them
- encouraging them
- keeping contact with them
- assisting them with facing common challenges
- celebrating with them in victories
- suggesting ways they can be upskilled
- keeping them connected to the larger vision of the church
- helping them identify potential leaders/hosts

How exactly, and to what degree this is done, may vary from church to church as well as group to group. The general rule is that, though all leaders need care, more care should be to those small group leaders who are new, who are going through a difficult time, or who are leading challenging groups.

Community leaders should give priority care to small group leaders in this situation. This care might involve meeting with them for coffee or visiting their group. In contrast, a flying small group led by an encouraged small group leader may only need a regular WhatsApp voice message of encouragement.

That said, it is general safe to specify what this care will look like, both so that community leaders can feel they are succeeding and so that small group leaders know what to expect.

For example, in one church community leaders might be asked to host a meal every year where they invite their small group leaders to come along. The community leader might give some encouraging input, and group leaders can share with each other prayer requests as they break bread together and pray for each other. Or community leaders might be expected to get a coffee with each leader twice a year – perhaps during the week, or after a Sunday meeting. (Over and above this, there will be events for all small groups where typically time will be apportioned for community leaders to hub with their small group leaders.)

### 3) Invite small group leaders to inspiring small group leaders gatherings.

Between 2 to 6 times a year, host events that are designed particularly to empower and encourage small group leaders. Intern leaders can also be invited so that they catch a vision for small group leading.

Steve Gladen of Saddleback Church lists many things these gatherings can do for the small group ministry:

- reaffirm why they do what they do
- honour them and show value for what they do
- connect them with others in similar positions
- help them see what part they play in that vision
- give people a chance to see their community leaders up close and personal and to hear from their hearts and ask questions
- recruit new volunteers
- instill discipline and motivation to carry the vision forward because people will sacrifice for a vision but not a task
- produce excitement through a demonstration of community
- show the authenticity and integrity of the leadership

He also advises, 'Include personal recognition in the event. It costs you nothing to recognize people— the youngest, the oldest, the longest doing group life, the newest leader. . . . You get the idea. Think of reasons to highlight them. Be sure to recognize spouses of leaders— they are often the unsung heroes.'

People need to leave this event more connected, inspired and equipped.

## 6. HOW DO WE CATALYZE DEEPER COMMUNITY IN SMALL GROUPS?

As previously said, one purpose for small groups is the formation of real community.

The most common mistake made is to assume that just because people attend small group meetings that community is being formed. This is not always the case.

We should train small group to form community. Each group and church can inspire its own strategies for doing so.

### 1) Here are some things small group leaders can do, which we have found really helpful in Common Ground:

Leaders should model vulnerability. Authentic community requires authenticity. This means that people feel free to share when they are struggling. The best way to create a safe place for people to share is for the leader to share vulnerably themselves. We think of Paul who said to the Corinthian church, 'I have opened my heart wide to you – now open your heart to us' (2 Cor 6:21-22).

Food brings the people together. Across every culture, nothing brings people together like eating food together. Although the average small group meeting cannot realistically include a meal, small groups should have meals together some times, and should always have refreshments and perhaps some snacks.

Get people to share their stories. Especially when a group is new, allocate time for every person or couple to share their life and faith story.

Socialize outside meetings. This is probably the most important secret to taking community to the next level. A small group that informally gets together for weekends away or has a meal together makes the relationships go much deeper.

As the group grows, use subgrouping. For part of the night – perhaps the discussion or the prayer time – subdivide the group into small groups.

Create a WhatsApp group. This allows people to stay connected throughout the week, as well as to share prayer requests and information about the next meeting. Don't allow people to spam this though.

Assign people community-building tasks. Instead of the small group leader feeling they have to drive community, ask someone to do things like: organizing the weekend away, organizing the birthday list, organizing the practical response to a person in crisis (such as someone in hospital, or someone who has just had a baby).

Use communion to build community. If you have communion, make this the major event of the night. One idea is to do the following: As you break the bread, share where you are broken this week. As you drink of the juice, share what experience you have had of God's grace this week. Pray together and for each other.

Spontaneously minister to people. When someone shares something deep and vulnerable, it is sometimes best to say 'Can we pray for you right now?'

## **2) There are three structural emphases that can also help the building of community in small groups.**

Protect small group nights. In Common Ground, for example, our calendar reflects the night small groups are meeting, and we are very hesitant to cancel small groups for the sake of other events we want to put on.

Group people based on similar stages of life. There are many people who would prefer a group consisting of people from all stages of life, and these can make for wonderful community. But our experience is that these groups are far and few in between, and very often come undone. People generally form community more easily with people of a similar stage of life. This tends to happen quite naturally, but you can be even more intentional and identify the groups:

- university students
- twenties
- young marrieds
- older married
- singles
- empty nesters

Openly encourage group-seeking people to look for groups where they feel they fit. The two main factors that tend to determine the relational strength of a group are 1) the commitment levels of each person in the group and 2) the chemistry between the people.

Since chemistry is hit and miss, we visit 2 or 3 groups if needed until they find one where they feel they can relate to some of the people in the group. We also train small group leaders to walk the delicate balance of saying to guests that they they would love to have them, but that if they want to visit another group that's totally cool.

Consider the preferred group size. On the positive size, the bigger a group gets the more energy there is, the more the extroverts thrive and the more there can be a great group night even when many are absent. On the negative size, the bigger the group gets the less personal it becomes, the more introverts become threatened, and the higher the chances are of people coming less – because they feel their absence won't be felt.

There is wisdom in a cut-off size of people. As a general rule, a group can grow to the size of the home where the group meets. The average group can grow to say 10 regulars.

However, it may not be wise to insist of cutting off group size. Through the use of subgrouping and many assistant-leaders, some of the night can be quite intimate, even if other parts of it are far more gregarious. Also, some leaders have a tremendous gathering gift, and can draw and hold a far greater amount of people than the average leader, especially if big enough homes are used.

## **7. HOW DO WE CATALYZE GREATER DISCIPLESHIP IN SMALL GROUPS?**

There are many churches that have come to question the disciple-making efficacy of small groups. It is one thing saying that growing in Christ is one of the purposes of the group, but that does not mean that this is actually happening.

Said differently, community might be happening but discipleship is not necessarily happening.

In fact, the Reveal Survey done with 80000 people revealed that people who are newer in their faith tend to experience spiritual growth through their involvement in a small group, whereas people who have been Christians longer don't.

Why is this? Two main reasons:

1) Small groups tend to be safe. More is required to keep growing than sitting around talking and praying with other Christians. Active service is required. Missional living is required. Small groups tend to be safe, whereas discipleship thrives as people step out of their comfort zones in their service of Christ.

2) Small groups tend to be high-support but low-challenge environments. For instance, when people are invited into a small group what is emphasized is the safe, accepting relationships. No one expects to be heavily challenged or to be held accountable for making changes in their lives. Small groups tend to be supportive, whereas discipleship thrives as people are challenged and held accountable.

## **1) Here are some things small group leaders can do to catalyze greater discipleship in their groups:**

Create a culture of 'next steps'. The very idea of following Jesus implies that we are trying to discern the next thing Jesus wants us to do, and then do it – or die trying. The small group leader can regularly ask people, 'So what is the next step that Jesus is calling you to do?' Then, the answers can be written down, and in the following weeks the answers can be read again, and people are asked how they are making progress on these fronts.

Especially emphasize the next steps of personal spiritual disciplines and serving within and beyond the church. The Reveal survey mentioned earlier shows that people tend to keep growing spiritually when they are daily reading and reflecting on Scripture, and when they are active in their love and service of others – whether through serving in a ministry team in the church, or serving those in need in the city, or in reaching out to people far from Christ. Though small groups cannot do this, small groups can help people start and fortify these activities.

Perhaps pair people with accountability partners. So rather than asking every person in front of all the others how they are doing on their 'next steps', make sure everyone has someone whom they can mutually hold accountable. Even more important than the 'How are the next steps going?' is 'Who is the person you are accountable to for doing your next steps?'

Be sure to encounter God together in prayer. Small groups tend to be more horizontal (us communicating with each other) more than vertical (us encountering God together). This must be countered through helping people encounter God together in times of prayer and worship. Steve Gladen gives some ideas for doing so...

- Silent prayers. Take time to be still and listen. Give group members time to silently commune with God.
- Solitude moments. Have a small group meeting during which members are asked to go away by themselves with their Bible for 30 minutes. This can be done outside in a park setting or just in a home by allowing members to go to different parts of the house and then come back together and share with other members of the group.
- Meditation. Meditate on passages of Scripture. Perhaps provide group members with paper and pens to write their thoughts after meditation.

Encourage some people to venture out and start their own groups. No one grows more than the leader. When a person starts to plateau spiritually in a group, the group leader can encourage them to start their own group – this will help them to grow in a whole new way.

## **2) There are two structural emphases that the church leadership can use to help people grow in their discipleship to Jesus through small groups:**

As a general practice create sermon-based small groups.

Some churches, like North Point Church, allow small group leaders to select their own curriculum. Other churches, like Saddleback and North Coast Church, create Group Guides based on the Sunday message.

In Common Ground, we encourage small group leaders to most often use our Group Guides based on the Sunday message, yet from time to time, for a month or two, they are free to select some Bible study resource.

There are a few reasons we err on the side of sermon-based group guides:

- The Bible places emphasis on doing what we know. James 1:22 and Matt 7:24 stress that we grow in our faith as we apply God's Word – not just hear it. Sunday messages tend to be a download of knowledge, but little time is given to help people put it into practice or consider its implications for our lives. Small groups however can close the gap between the Sunday message and the lives we live.
- People tend to be able to absorb one thing at a time. If people are working through a certain topic on Sundays, reading a different topic in their devotions, and then are working through some unrelated content in their groups, all of it is less likely to stick. By focusing on one thing – on Sunday and in the subsequent small group – people are more likely to remember and apply what God is teaching them.
- It keeps all small groups (and people in the groups) moving in the same direction. Imagine each small group as a boat in a fleet. When all are working through the same content, it creates an alignment of each group and person to the current emphasis of the church as well as to each other. A fleet requires that all boats move in the same direction.

Creating these sermon-based group guides must be done well. Here are some guidelines for creating a Group Guide:

- Get the Group Guide to people as far in advance as possible. If possible create the group guide the week before. This is only possible if the preacher prepares far in advance through a written manuscript. Failing that, the group guide should be created as soon as possible after the Sunday message – and sent to the small group leaders.
- Even if the preacher has not finalized their message, push them in advance to decide on an application question they will put into their message. This will mean that at some point in their message they say, 'Those of you in small groups this week, one question you will discuss is....' This question must then be in the Group Guide.
- Use open-ended questions. These should generally progress from understanding ('What does this mean?') to motivation (So what? Why is this important?) and finally to application ('Now what? What difference can this make in your life?').
- The Group Guide should consist of five parts:
  - o Pray
  - o Introduce the topic in a get-to-know-you way
  - o Very briefly recap the message
  - o Dig into God's Word for greater understanding
  - o Apply to our lives
  - o Pray

- Pray. Very briefly invite the Holy Spirit to transform us through his Word and our talking and praying together.
- Introduce the topic in a get-to-know-you way. Based on the subject of the night, find a question that gets people onto this subject but also provides a chance to get to know each other better, or to share about some current aspect of their lives. This kills two birds with one stone – introducing the subject and building community. Keep this part tight though. There are greater goals for the night yet...
- Very briefly recap the message. It is remarkable how people will have forgotten what was preached on the Sunday before. Also, many people were not there. So restate the biblical text and the major points of the message. Another option is to ask some form of the question, 'What stuck out to you in the Sunday message?'
- Dig into God's Word for greater understanding. Either the group can re-read the Scriptural passage used the Sunday before, or another Bible passage that revisits the same theme can be provided. Ask two or three questions that make people delve into the passage, allowing them to glean fresh insight. Where possible try reconnect this text to Jesus and the Gospel in at least one of the questions.
- Apply to our lives. This is by far the most important part. The Sunday message tended to specialize in observation and interpretation of the text, but may have been very generic when it comes to application. The more personal people are here, the better. Ask people, 'Now what? What difference can this make in your life?' and sometimes, 'What makes it difficult for you to obey God in this way?'
- Pray. Suggest a create prayer angle.

Create gender-based groups of 3 or 4.

One way to off-set the lack of intensive personal discipleship in small groups is to encourage people to find two or three other people of the same gender they can meet with outside of the group meetings – say every second week for a very early morning, or a breakfast or a lunch. The express purpose of these groups of 3 or 4 is to be far more intentional about helping each other feast on Jesus, fight their sin and fulfil their mission for example. It is best not to set up these Groups of 3 or 4 as an alternative to normal small groups, but rather as a supplement to them.

## **8. HOW DO WE CATALYZE AN OUTWARD MISSIONAL FOCUS IN SMALL GROUPS?**

The two major weaknesses of small groups as they are normally practiced is that they are poor at disciplinemaking and that they tend to be inward-focused and not a meaningful vehicle for reaching people far from God. We will address the latter weakness now.

### **1) Here are some things small group leaders can do to catalyze greater missional potency in their groups:**

Do a service project together. Appoint someone in the group to explore options for what the group can do together to meet some need somewhere, then do that together as a group. It is unlikely that this service project can be a weekly one, but the whole small group might be willing to set aside a Saturday afternoon to do something for example.

Put on a purely social event where unchurched friends and family are invited to come along. This way we can introduce our one sets of friends to our other set of friends. This is a kind of pre-evangelism event.

When an unchurched person arrives in the group, coach the group to change tack. Christianese language must be abandoned for example. Inclusive language should be used. Don't make the person do anything they would likely feel uncomfortable doing for example – like reading or praying aloud, or being asked to share.

Use the group to enlist every person to a life of everyday, relational outreach. Ask the group to share the 3 people far from God that they are praying for and regularly interact with. Perhaps write these names down and pray together for their salvation. Share any stories of spiritual conversations you have had with people in the preceding week. Practice sharing your testimony with each other as a group, then encourage people to look for natural opportunities to do the same with people far from God.

Encourage people to host of a temporary group, or become a new leader of a new permanent group. Using the superseries video-based content, encourage people to populate the group with people they know who do not go to church.

### **2) There are three ideas the church leadership can use to help people do mission with Jesus through small groups:**

Schedule the entire group to volunteer in events or on Sundays a few times a year. For example in one Common Ground congregation, every Sunday a different small group is scheduled to do welcome, offering-collection, clean up and coffee team.

Reach unchurched people and plant new groups using Alpha. Alpha is a group-based way of reaching people for Christ and connecting them into community. In an Alpha course, trained table facilitators and their helper invite unchurched people to come along to the opening night for a no-pressure meal and a presentation.

There they hear a provocative talk that hopefully inspires people to do the rest of the 6-10 week Alpha course as a means of exploring the meaning of life using Christians resources. The people who sign up or show up in the following weeks are arranged in set tables. Ideally these tables consist of predominantly unchurched people. Over the weeks, each table tends to experience some attrition as people drop out, and sometimes two tables may be joined together. As the course unfolds, and especially on the Holy Spirit weekend, many of the people come to faith. Later in the course, the entire table is invited to attend church together on a specific Sunday, sitting together. When a table works really well, many times these tables can be transformed into an ongoing small group that onramps into the church.

Common Ground has used Alpha like this with mixed results. But all in all, we have started many small groups in precisely this way, and many people whom we likely could not have reached in other ways, have been reached.

Consider the idea of mid-sized missional communities. Mike Breen in the UK has pioneered a method that has been adopted by many churches, including Austin Stone in Texas, where a few small groups team together in an ongoing service project or mission. We have not done this in Common Ground, but many churches have thrived using this strategy. Small groups may consist of 5-12 people, while these groups are 20-50 in size. In other words, they are still small enough to care for each other, but they are also big enough to dare to make a sizeable difference in a particular subgroup or need in the city. Breen advises that each mid-sized community is planted in a crevice of need in the culture or city. As many ways as there are to engage specific groups of unchurched people with the gospel, or to serve specific groups of people with a need, is as many kinds of mission these large groups commit to. To find out more about these, google 'mid-sized communities'.