

Growing Small Groups



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Leader's Guide

How to use "Growing Small Groups" by SMALLGROUPS.COM.

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

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

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

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

- | | | |
|---|--|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bible Study | <input type="checkbox"/> case study | <input type="checkbox"/> activities |
| <input type="checkbox"/> interview | <input type="checkbox"/> devotionals | <input type="checkbox"/> resources |
| <input type="checkbox"/> assessment tools | <input type="checkbox"/> how-to articles | <input type="checkbox"/> retreat plan |

2. Select a handout. Suppose, for example, you want your small group leaders to have a tangible set of goals for improving small group ministry in the upcoming year. You could select one of two assessments in this theme: "Five Essentials for Small Group Health" (p. 6) or "Five Tasks for Small Group Leaders" (p. 7). From these options, select the one that best fits what you want to accomplish.

3. Print and photocopy the handout. Let's say you selected "Five Essentials for Small Group Health." Photocopy as many copies as you need—you do not need to ask for permission to photocopy any material from SMALLGROUPS.COM (as long as you are using the material in a church or educational setting and are not charging for it).

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

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

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

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

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Why We Need Small Groups

Six biblical reasons.

2 Corinthians 1:3–7

1. Small group members comfort one another. Everyone has something to teach. The childhood loss of one serves as comfort for others. Cancer in one supports cancer in another. Intimacy of one grows intimacy in others. “We can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (2 Cor. 1:4).

➤ *How can a fellow sufferer be the best comfort in our suffering?*

2. Small groups provide a safe environment for confession. Confession is the primary pathway to community. When we don’t want to come to the group, we’re having problems, or we’re hurting, small groups embrace us. “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” (James 5:16).

➤ *Why is a small group often the best place for confessions?*

3. Small groups provide close companions. Pain is universal; it’s just not always visible. When people in our small groups share their pain (as in hurts, struggles, temptations), it moves us to share on a deeper level. It makes us feel we’re not alone. “If we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer” (2 Cor. 1:6).

➤ *In what ways do struggling friends help us find endurance for our struggles?*

4. Small group fellowship teaches us to listen. Many times we talk out of insecurity, wanting to fill the space with words. Small group interaction shows us how much we can learn and grow as we simply listen. “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry” (James 1:19).

➤ *Tell about a time you were blessed by hearing someone’s story.*

5. Small group fellowship incites laughter. Hard times with work or family can bring us to small group meetings with empty tanks. When we’re tired, sad, or pressured, friends make us laugh. Thanks to them, we can drive home saying, “I needed that!” “A cheerful look brings joy to the heart, and good news gives health to the bones” (Prov. 15:30).

➤ *Why is laughter essential to maintaining a joyful Christian life?*

6. Small group relationships give meaning to our pain. It seems cruel for God to allow pain in our lives for someone else’s comfort—until we are comforted by someone else’s pain. Knowing that our suffering blesses others turns our sufferings into a ministry. “Our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort” (2 Cor. 1:7).

➤ *In what ways, within the small group setting, could your struggles and sufferings become a ministry?*

—BRETT EASTMAN. Adapted from “Bad Days Are Sometimes the Best Days,” LifeTogetherToday.com.

Discuss

1. Of the above reasons for small group ministry, which do you resonate with most? Why?
2. What are some of the struggles and sufferings people in our church have experienced? Do those who struggle with these things have a place to talk about them?
3. How could these struggles be turned into ministry in our church?



The Vision Behind Small Groups

Community begins with a purpose.

John 17:20–21

Russ Robinson became pastor of Meadowbrook Church in Haledon, New Jersey, after seven years of service as Director of Small Groups at Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago, Illinois. With Bill Donahue, Robinson is author of Building a Church of Small Groups and The Seven Deadly Sins of Small Group Ministry.

SMALLGROUPS.COM: What fuels your passion for small group ministry?

Russ Robinson: I was first captivated by small group ministry when I studied John 17:11–21. As Jesus faced his death, he prayed for the community his disciples would experience after he was gone. It was a radical sense of community—not just human affinity, but oneness akin to Christ’s unity with the Trinity. He prayed for those that would join the church, that they would find within that community this form of radical oneness.

I sense other places in Scripture teething out this mystery of oneness: “Then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12) and “There is one body and one spirit...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:4–6). We see bits and pieces of this oneness when God combines people who have affinity and relational history into friends that “stick closer than a brother” (Prov. 18:24).

I don’t think church has yet realized this dream of Christ’s. I want to put my gifts toward that dream.



RUSS ROBINSON

“Small group discipleship doesn’t have to turn pagans into missionaries; it only needs to help people take the next step with God.”

What roles are most important for small groups in the church?

Traditionally, small groups provide context for care and spiritual growth. The caring that occurs in small groups gives people a sense that someone is supporting and walking with them on their journey. Small group discipleship doesn’t have to turn pagans into missionaries; it only needs to help people take the next step with God. I’ve been in many groups and had many leaders, and the best thing any small group leader did was to help me figure out where God was working in my life and help me to say yes.

Small group ministry’s great, unexplored role in church history, however, is providing an expression for the priesthood of believers. Judaism was a priest-and-place religion, and Christianity adopted that expression. After the Reformation, Protestant churches adopted a pastor-and-place theology. Small groups provide the radical opportunity to hand laypeople pastoral responsibilities and to decentralize the priesthood of all believers.

What function of small groups should innovating church leaders focus on first?

When churches try to change or implement ministries, they need to figure out the leverage point in the church’s life, strategy, and history. That will determine whether a church should focus on the caring, spiritual development, or organizational renewal role of small groups.

At Willow Creek, we had a huge assimilation need. People were coming to the church but then leaving without getting involved. We needed to build relationships, to focus on the caring role of small groups.

Other churches may be frustrated with how to disciple the community of believers they’ve already built. Those churches would do best to focus on the spiritual development role.

For some churches the issue may be a need to move into the future through bringing up new leaders. Small groups could enable those churches to make more people ready to engage in ministry opportunities, to give ministry away. ➤



The Vision Behind Small Groups *continued*

Churches need to ask, “What is the entry point that is going to allow us to make the most progress in our church right now?” While small group ministry has enormous intrinsic worth and potential, you still have to introduce change on the tail end of perceived need.

What mistakes should small group ministries avoid?

Many problem issues cluster around purpose, especially when different people expect small groups to do different things. Be sure senior leadership is clear on the main intention or vision for your small groups. Too many churches begin small group ministry because small groups are the thing to do. You need to identify your theological reasons for having small groups. You have to be able to say, “This is where we’re going, and this is how small groups will get us there.” When you get that done first, you topple many issues. If you’re not clear on that, you’ll have so many issues down the road that you’ll get frustrated fast.

What did you learn about small groups when you moved from Willow Creek to Meadowbrook Church?

I learned at Meadowbrook that implementing small group ministry is more of a political than a military campaign. My mindset coming in was, *I’ve got great leaders; now we just need to execute the plan*. But I met resistance. I finally repented to our team, “I have had a military mindset; but we’re not fighting a battle, we’re winning one person at a time.” For small group ministry to work, each person must say yes to ongoing involvement, from the most eager to the most reluctant. We’re not conquering; we’re inviting people to say yes. At the end of the day, the church is as much about relationship as strategy.

Discuss

1. When have you experienced a taste of the oneness that Christ prayed for?
2. How can we better communicate the purpose and vision behind small groups to our church?
3. Which of small group’s essential roles—caring, spiritual development, or organizational renewal—does our church most need now?



Five Essentials for Small Group Health

Are your small groups focused for success?

Philippians 3:12

Keeping small groups healthy is essential for a flourishing and lasting ministry. Here are five ways to promote health.

Relationships Are a Priority

Small groups can work only when group members have regular contact outside of meetings. When group members become intimate friends, people can share transparently.

- **Our small groups get involved in one another's lives outside of meetings:**

Daily Weekly Occasionally Never

Leaders Are Trained

Many churches get the process backwards—they give people a title and then train them. Instead, we need to watch people in ministry and affirm them as we see their gifts. Adequate training also gives an opportunity to discern the character of potential leaders.

- **What kind of training have we offered to our small group leaders?**

Thorough Adequate Meager None

Leadership Is Shared

Everyone in the group has some spiritual gift. These gifts often surface through leading. Small groups can provide both opportunity and environment to explore spiritual gifting.

- **Our small groups share leadership responsibilities and opportunities:**

Frequently Occasionally Never

Groups Grow and Multiply

A healthy family raises children who want to become independent and start families of their own. They don't break relationship; they just move out and start their own families. Small groups should function in the same way.

- **Our small groups welcome growth through inviting others:**

Frequently Sometimes Never

Members Live Out the Gospel

Holistic small groups aren't just Bible studies. They gather to experience the presence, the power, and the purpose of Christ in their lives. Even if we stopped learning anything new about the Bible and only put into practice what we know today, we'd have three or four lifetimes of practical application to flesh out in our small groups.

- **Our small group members hold one another accountable to living the gospel:**

Definitely Somewhat Not at all

—RANDALL NEIGHBOUR. Adapted From "Five Essentials For Small Group Health," LifeTogetherToday.com.

Discuss

1. Tell how a small group member has blessed your life *outside* of the small group meeting. How can our groups become more involved in each other's lives?
2. What kinds of training or experiences would help our small group leaders?
3. How might our small groups move beyond meetings to active ministry?



Five Tasks for Small Group Leaders

Do you make time for the most important roles of leadership?

Romans 12:8

These five M's can help you identify your role and focus your strengths as a small group leader.

	Often true of me	Occasionally true of me	Never true of me
<p>1. I minister to the needs of our group members. One of the critical roles of a small group leader is to shepherd the people in your group. You need to pray for and actively love each member of the group. That means making sure people feel connected with other members in the group and being attentive to what people say. As the shepherd of the small group, you need to see the needs of your group.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>2. I mentor them toward spiritual maturity. An effective small group leader seeks to cultivate the spiritual habits of his or her group. You must first know the condition of those under your care. Then, as you lead the group, ask this for each person: "What is the next step in his or her spiritual maturity?"</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>3. I motivate my group members to ministry. A key shepherding function of small group leaders is to motivate each member to harness his or her spiritual gifts for service in God's kingdom. You, as the leader of the group, must model this principle. Do your members know what your spiritual gifts are? Are your group members growing in their gifts?</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>4. I multiply the life and mission of our small group. Every group member must learn to multiply his or her life by passing on the faith or through starting new small groups. As a leader, that may mean training other leaders, making sure the empty chair is always filled, or challenging group members to make a difference in their daily lives.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>5. I model a surrendered heart. Pride, arrogance, and worldly leadership have no place in a small group. God works best in our weakness. When Satan tries to strangle healthy small groups through petty conflicts among members, you, the leader, need to model a surrendered, humble attitude. What should you lay down on the altar to be consumed by the fire of God's presence? God loves the confessions and prayers of a broken and contrite heart.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

—Adapted from LifeTogetherToday.com.

Discuss

1. How has this assessment challenged you to grow as a small group leader?
2. How might you help multiply the life and mission of your group?
3. What would our church look like if our small group leaders implemented these priorities?



Beyond Playing Community

Break through pretense to authenticity.

1 Corinthians 13:12

The Case I started in a small group at our church 16 years ago and have been involved in small groups ever since. Until the last two years, I’ve observed that these groups are places for us to “play” community.

I remember Brent telling us about his week: his wife and two girls were doing well, but his job was tenuous. The next thing we knew, Brent was 30 pounds lighter and living with a woman he met on the Internet.

Why didn’t Brent tell us of his problems with his wife? We couldn’t encourage him to love and good deeds because we didn’t know his struggles.

I joined another small group of men, but after six months, I felt the same about this group as I had about those in the past. All the men were playing community. We felt like fools if we brought up a struggle or even a joy. One guy in the group, Ernie, finally stated the cardinal rule of men’s small groups: “I don’t like to do things where I don’t look like I have my act together.”

What Would You Do?

- ◆ Have you experienced groups where the members only played community? What can happen to break that relational hesitancy?
- ◆ What would you suggest to a small group leader who sees this façade of community happening in his or her group?

What Happened Though I wanted to quit the group, my leader convinced me to stick with it. Our pastor publicly emphasized the need for individual transparency and the “intentional movement into one another’s lives.” Then, my group leader encouraged the members of the group to tell our stories.

Charlie told us that he’d endured insults from his father from an early age. He had never finished college and felt inadequate. After he shared, I began to understand his insecurity and competitiveness. How could I reject someone who himself had been rejected so long?

When Kent told his story, we learned about his childhood with drunken parents who neglected him. He would cry himself to sleep as his parents were passed out. Hearing this made it easier for me to accept his intensity. It was a necessary reaction to his painful upbringing.

Then came my turn. I included the points in my life that have shaped me into who I am. Unexpectedly, I cried as I told my story. When I looked up, three of the men were crying with me. Unless my experience deceives me, these men truly care about me.

—DAVE JOFFE. Adapted from *Risking Church*, by Jim Kallam Jr. (WaterBrook, 2003). Used by permission of WaterBrook Press, Colorado Springs, CO. All rights reserved.

Discuss

1. How can hearing another person’s life story unlock understanding and transparency?
2. What have you learned from hearing someone’s life story?
3. In what other ways could our church provide opportunities for people to hear each other’s stories?



Prayer Requests for Authentic Change

Praying for one another along the painful path of transformation.

Romans 8:26–27

Read “...the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will” (Romans 8:27).

Comprehend You’d have thought I’d just cussed by the way the mouths around the table soundlessly fell open. And all I’d said was, “I don’t think I can pray that for you.”

The woman who had just asked us to pray was perhaps the most shocked of all. My home group had just finished eating dinner, and we were sharing prayer requests. With obvious distress, Kris had told of her daughter’s plan to move in with her boyfriend that weekend, and Kris asked us to pray that God wouldn’t allow it. I usually try not to take exception to people’s prayer requests, but I have a low tolerance for requests I think God will not answer. On this occasion, I didn’t keep quiet.

Once they all caught their breath, I explained. “I think all of us here can understand why you want God to stop her from doing that. If anyone here feels that’s what God wants, you’re free to pray that way. I’m wondering, however, whether asking God to override someone’s ability to make moral choices isn’t akin to witchcraft.”

I could see Kris was near seething at my bluntness, so I hurried on. “What I suggest we pray for is that God would reveal himself to your daughter. That he would let her see clearly the choice she is making. And that God will show you how to trust him and love your daughter, even if she makes the stupidest mistake of her young life.” I had hardly finished before Kris blurted out through tears, “That’s exactly what I need.”

We gathered around her to pray. Instead of praying for the situation not to take a distressing turn, we prayed for Kris. What could have been a sympathetic but shallow exercise in prayer became a marvelous discovery of how God works in difficult situations.

—WAYNE JACOBSEN

- Discuss**
1. Tell of an undesirable circumstance that God used to grow your faith. How could someone have prayed for your spirit during those times?
 2. How could this kind of prayer revitalize our small group?
 3. Who among you now needs a prayer for faith through difficult circumstances?

Pray Ask God to help you trust him through difficult circumstances.



Risking Vulnerability

A friend you can trust is a friend indeed.

1 Peter 4:8

Read “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8).

Comprehend Several years ago I shared with a friend how finances have been an ongoing source of struggle during my adult life. Managing money, budgeting, and keeping good records aren’t my strong points. This has been a source of embarrassment as well as the cause of heated arguments at home.

After I shared this with my friend, I feared he would reject me. The information I shared lay dormant for a long time. Then my fears came true. He’d heard a few rumors that stoked suspicion until it blazed into a strong expression of concern for my family, my ministry, and me. Then he dropped the bomb: “I’m getting out. I’m leaving before the shop goes down.”

A part of me thought, *I’ll never let this happen again. If I’m not real with others, if I don’t expose my life, they can’t hurt me, and I won’t be rejected.*

Four days later, a friend flew into town, and we were planning to take a drive together into the mountains. I had been agonizing over whether I would share with him what had happened. Who could blame me for keeping it to myself? So why did I feel a pull to share not only the disappointing reaction I’d been handed but also the financial struggles still present in my life?

After catching up, I launched into a monologue. The miles rolled by as I opened up about the struggles and failure that are part of my journey. I was terrified to hear his reaction. When I finally ran out of words, there was silence. I remember stealing a glance and seeing my friend staring out the window. As he continued to look at the passing countryside, he quietly said, “Nothing you’ve said or could say would cause me to give up on you and walk away.”

—JIM KALLAM JR. Adapted from *Risking Church* (WaterBrook, 2003). Used by permission of WaterBrook Press, Colorado Springs, CO. All rights reserved.

Discuss

1. Who in your life have you been able trust completely, even with your weaknesses? What made them trustworthy?
2. How have these friendships impacted your life?
3. How can small groups help people build trusting relationships that enable them to be vulnerable with one another?

Pray Thank the Lord for the people with whom you can be vulnerable.



Three Keys to Starting a Small Group Ministry

A successful start begins with your leaders.

Hebrews 10:24

So you're on your way to launching small groups at your church. But you're still wondering how it's going to work. Will people really get involved? How are we going to inspire them? How are we going to lead them?

I wouldn't worry too much about whether or not your congregation will get involved. Even though everyone is busy, the desire to belong is greater than their busyness. This need for belonging is the strongest felt need in society. Be encouraged that you're on the right track toward meeting people where they are.

Your main objective will be to spark a vision within the hearts of your lay leaders. Their roles will be primary in this small group movement. There are three leadership principles that will help you do this successfully:

1. **Lead from the heart.** People need to know that you care before they care what you know. They need to see your heart for them. So when it comes to equipping your small group leaders, the best thing you can do is to follow the example of Jesus, who called his disciples to be with him. The pastor or small group ministry leader needs to call the individual small group leaders to be with him or her. This means not only doing ministry together but doing life together. Invite the small group leaders to dinner. Find out about their lives. Then you will be better able to love them, cheer them on, and show gratitude for them.
2. **Love in word and deed.** Small group leaders need a lot of encouragement. A handshake, a high five, or a note of affirmation can work wonders in a weary heart. When you follow up with small group leaders and let them know they are doing a good job, you potentially provide fuel to keep them focused and motivated. Do not forget to remind your small group leaders of the big picture, how small groups are a means to grow believers and build up the church.
3. **Listen for growth opportunities.** When you meet with small group leaders, be prepared with thoughtful questions and challenges. Then as you listen to their responses, you can encourage them to launch what they are suggesting, to take ownership of their ideas. People love following a leader, but people follow those who let them lead.

—BRETT EASTMAN. Adapted from “3 Ways to Get Small Groups Going,” LifeTogetherToday.com.

Discuss

1. Share an instance when someone's encouragement spurred you to continue in leadership. How did that make a difference in your ministry?
2. What are some tangible ways we can build relationships between church leaders and small group leaders?
3. How could our church both publicly and privately encourage our small group leaders?



Drawing Men into Small Groups

A proven plan for reaching reluctant men.

Psalms 107:8–9

As one leader put it, “A man is a hard thing to reach!”

Yet few ministries have as much potential to revive our families, churches, and communities. When one man turns to Jesus Christ, it breaks a chain of bondage to sin and broken relationships. One changed man can set a family for many generations on a new course of joy, peace, and reconciliation.

Here’s how churches are redesigning their systems to produce men who love God, provide spiritual leadership to their families, and serve the Lord:

1. **Begin with a clear understanding of your purpose for men in the church.** The first step is to write down what you’re trying to accomplish and why. If your purpose statement is “to equip the men of our church to be spiritual leaders,” you probably wouldn’t focus on service projects. Instead, you would focus on discipleship groups.
2. **Find a leader.** All you need to get started is one man with passion to reach other men. You need to put one of your best men on this—someone the other men respect. You need to give him a budget. And you need to give him support from the pulpit. Don’t let a man elect himself to leadership if others don’t think much of him.
3. **Build a leadership team.** Invite a few other potential leaders to meet regularly for Bible study, prayer, and, eventually, strategic planning. Your leadership team must be more than a planning committee; it must be a living demonstration of what you want to reproduce. Men want to be a part of something going somewhere. If your team can offer a purpose-driven plan (versus event-driven), other men will gravitate to it.
4. **Create initial momentum.** This is best accomplished by a purpose-driven, momentum-building event built around a topic men are drawn to, such as sports, financial success, or fathering skills. We reach fringe men by providing what they need in the context of what they want. But the event itself is not the most important tactic here; it’s men engaging other men that makes the difference.
5. **Capture momentum.** Give attendees a definite next step that they can visualize themselves taking. Don’t shift them from first to fourth; offer them second gear—perhaps a small group study that lasts three, four, maybe six weeks in length. Give men every chance to hook into something. Offer Bible studies, book studies, ministry projects, leadership development with the pastor—whatever you can imagine—to sustain momentum.
6. **Repeat the cycle.** You will experience drop-off at every step. That’s why it’s important periodically to re-create momentum.

—PATRICK MORLEY

Discuss

1. What might you (or your husband, father, brother) see as the most compelling reason to join a small group?
2. Why is “men engaging other men” more important than clever programming?
3. What kinds of needs or wants do the men in our church have? How could we plan a momentum-initiating event around those needs?



Renewing Small Group Health

Revive your small groups with a fresh start.

Psalm 85:6

Often small groups become a place in the church where every person does “what is right in his own eyes.” Too often small groups operate independently like nation states, where the individual groups choose curriculum, choose frequency of meeting, and refuse any governing or leadership structure but their own.

Unfortunately, it’s often impossible to lead these kinds of closed groups toward health. It’s usually better to revive small group health by launching new groups and training new leaders in a more focused ministry strategy.

Here is a plan to move your small group ministry toward wellness:

1. **Launch a fresh small group campaign.** Align the launch with your weekend service. Your pastor could preach a six-week series on a topic, perhaps from the parables of Jesus. Meet in homes as an entire church family during the series. Prepare a handout of discussion questions from the sermon as means for people to connect and grow in the six-week campaign.
2. **Recruit hosts, not leaders.** The bottleneck in building health into small group ministry is new leaders. Fresh troops are hard to recruit. But our strategy is not to recruit leaders; it’s to recruit people who are willing to open their homes for a specific length of time. A couple weeks before the six-week preaching series begins, have your pastor make this invitation: “In a couple weeks, we are going to do church together in a way we’ve never done before. For six weeks, I’m going to preach through a series titled ‘Growing Deeper in Our Life Together.’ We would like our entire church to meet in homes each week during this time. Would you open your home to a group of eight to ten people for six weeks? If so, sign up at our host home table in the fellowship hall.”
3. **Publicly invite your church to the host homes.** Once you’ve recruited enough hosts, publicly invite your church to attend a host home for the six-week campaign. Have your hosts invite their eight to ten people with a handwritten note or letter as well as a telephone call before the first host home meeting.
4. **Roll the host home groups into ongoing small groups.** Identify leaders that emerge in the host homes during the six weeks. Make sure you have a clear curriculum plan moving forward and a way to coach your new leaders as they learn to lead.

—Adapted from LifeTogetherToday.com.

Discuss

1. How could our small group benefit from a fresh start? Perhaps a reorganizing of group members?
2. How could we identify new small group leaders? What should we look for?
3. What themes might make for an interesting six-week series? What would stir in our church a willingness to try something new?



E-Groups

For people too busy for small groups, meet in cyberspace.

Hebrews 10:25

My ideal small group would have included three good friends: Lynn, Margaret, and Susan. But they were busy people. We saw each other in church and exchanged e-mail, but the last thing any of us needed was another weekly meeting to attend.

Then early one morning I turned on my computer to retrieve my e-mail. At that moment, I saw a possible solution. Why not form an e-mail small group?

Our e-group was an instant success. We learned that an e-group offers the same benefits as a traditional group. In some ways, it's even better: no need to coordinate schedules, members participate at a time most convenient to them, and nobody misses a meeting because of illness, vacation, or lack of a babysitter.

One observable outcome thrilled me even more: though previously acquainted, we now began seeking each other out. We moved past superficial, Sunday-morning greetings. Our faceless group resulted in higher-quality face time!

Here's how to start an e-mail small group:

1. **Gather the participants.** Try to get at least four people. These should be people who not only have e-mail capability, but also regularly read it and respond. People who never check the messages you send them are not good candidates for an e-group.
2. **Designate a moderator.** The moderator initiates discussion, stimulates insightful threads of discussion, and redirects tangential conversations. Ideally, members will encourage each other to stay on the subject. But someone needs the authority to redirect when the ideal breaks down. Invite people to move off-topic discussions to private correspondence.
3. **Initiate discussion.** Post a short devotional thought, quote, or anecdote followed by a question to get the discussion going. Your subject line should give a hint of the topic and the timeframe for discussion; for example: "Psalm 1/Sept 1-7" or "Baptism/June 15-21." Address the initial thought to everyone in the group. Direct replies to be addressed to the entire group as well—it duplicates the atmosphere of a traditional small group in which all present hear the response. It also helps to avoid confusion and the danger of factions.
4. **Consider adding an occasional face-to-face meeting.** Midway through a 12-week group, I invited everyone in the group over for dinner. Despite the fact that there were a few people who had never met before, we all felt like good friends. We talked, laughed, and shared concerns...for four hours.

—MARILYN A. YOCUM

Discuss

1. Who among your friends do you rarely spend time with because of busy schedules? Might you be able to start an e-group with these friends?
2. Who in our church could initiate interesting discussions? How could we encourage these discussion-starters to consider moderating e-groups?
3. How could e-groups help our church build relationships with fringe members or attendees?



Small Groups with a Common Cause

Convert your group members' common concerns into action.

Matthew 5:14–16

In 1989, pastor Robert Lewis noticed listlessness in Fellowship Bible Church. People were complaining, “My small group is boring,” and, “I need something more.”

Lewis writes, “As an ‘equipping church,’ we had been equipping people to live better lives, have better marriages, and grow deeper in God’s Word. But we had never asked ourselves what was the end result of all that equipping. On a staff retreat, one leader asked, ‘Equipped for what?’ We had no good answer.”

Fellowship Bible Church’s small groups needed to move beyond equipping to releasing ministry. Lewis told his church, “It’s much like college. After four or five years, a student grows anxious to do something with their education. It’s time for a job.”

Over the next decade, Fellowship Bible shuffled their small group veterans into “common cause” small groups. These groups were comprised of people who had a heart for similar needs—perhaps education, housing, or parenting. The groups didn’t bite off too much (“help the poor”), but they narrowed their causes to measurable results (“give inner-city children the opportunity to go to Christian camp”). The common-cause groups not only revitalized Fellowship Bible’s small group ministry, they also transformed their city.

What about your church? Are your small group veterans searching for something more? How might your church benefit from releasing disciplined small group members into ministry? Here is an activity to help you find out.

Find a Common Cause

Divide your group into smaller groups of two or three. Then ask each group to brainstorm for a few minutes on this question: “What could we do to bless others in the place where we live?” Have each group share one of their ideas.

Then, assign one or more groups to one of three areas: mentoring teenagers, building racial harmony in the community, or planning creative worship experiences. Again, allow each group a few minutes to brainstorm this question: “How could we implement positive change on our assigned area of ministry?” Have each group share one of their ideas.

Evaluate

Distribute paper and invite people to record feedback as they discuss the following questions in their groups:

- What did you learn from brainstorming with your group about community improvement?
- During the second exercise, did you find yourself wishing you could have been assigned to a different group? Why or why not?
- What causes or ministries might inspire you to team together with other like-minded Christians?

—ROBERT LEWIS

Discuss

1. What do you need most from your small group? How would you want to be challenged and encouraged by others with a heart for the same ministry?
2. How does our church currently release members from discipleship into active ministry?
3. What concerns do our church members have in common? How could our church benefit from common-cause groups?



Further Exploration

Recommended resources for small group ministry.

101 Great Ideas to Create a Caring Group by *Thom Corrigan*. This book lists ideas that can help small group leaders care for their members and members care for each other (NavPress, 1997; ISBN 1576830721).

The Big Book on Small Groups by *Jeffrey Arnold*. This book helps small group leaders discover what makes a good group—and how to communicate that vision with others (InterVarsity, 2004; ISBN 0830823700).

Building a Church of Small Groups by *Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson*. The authors detail the why and how-to of becoming a church with small groups at its organizational core. They also include sections on training group leaders and managing the organizational transition (Zondervan, 2001; ISBN 0310240352).

How to Lead Small Groups by *Neal F. McBride*. McBride cuts out the theory to provide only practical information and step-by-step guidance. Useful in several types and stages of small group ministry (NavPress, 1990; ISBN 0891093036).

LifeTogetherToday.com. The purpose of this website is to serve churches of all sizes as they launch, build, and grow as a small group ministry. Come here often to find the training and tools you need for your small groups.

Risking Church by *Jim Kallam Jr.* This book demonstrates the principles of vision needed to transform a church into a place where people find belonging, relevance, and authentic community (WaterBrook, 2003; ISBN 1578566517).

The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups by *Joseph R. Myers*. The author challenges many claims made by small group proponents. Myers distinguishes between four spheres of belonging and explains why trying to cram everyone into “intimate” space isn’t always best. His chapter on “Searching for the Front Porch” will challenge churches to rethink one-size-fits-all small group ministry (Zondervan, 2003; ISBN 0310255007).

Seeker Small Groups by *Garry Poole*. This book focuses on drawing seekers into a deeper relationship with God. Though it focuses on evangelism in the small group setting, its principles of postmodern evangelism apply in many settings (Zondervan, 2003; ISBN 0310242339).

Seven Deadly Sins of Small Group Ministry by *Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson*. This book draws on extensive research to help you diagnose and find proven solutions to common small group ministry problems (Zondervan, 2002; ISBN 0310247063).

Small Group Idea Book by *Cindy Bunch*. This revised and expanded edition contains hundreds of tested small group activities submitted by small group experts. It further separates those activities by four stages in small group development (InterVarsity, 2003; ISBN 0830811249).

Small Group Outreach by *Jeffrey Arnold*. This book contains chapters on praying for the unchurched, inviting seekers, getting involved in ministry, reaching your neighborhood, and short-term mission trips (InterVarsity, 1998; ISBN 0830811702).



Retreat Plan

How to use “Growing Small Groups” at a weekend retreat.

SMALLGROUPS.COM Training Themes expand easily into a retreat format. Here is a sample retreat schedule you may follow for the “Growing Small Groups” theme.

Friday Evening

- 8–8:45 P.M. **Opening Session:** Hand out copies of “The Vision Behind Small Groups,” the interview with Russ Robinson on pages 4–5, and allow time for each person to read it. Then form groups of three or four. Have each group discuss the questions at the end of the interview. Reconvene for the last 20 minutes and have the groups share their comments and consider what that may mean for the church.
- 9–9:45 P.M. **Bible Study:** Close the evening with “Why We Need Small Groups,” the Bible study on page 3. Photocopy and pass out the study, or use the handout as your notes.

Saturday Morning

- 9–9:45 A.M. **Devotional:** Set the tone for the day by handing out (or presenting) “Risking Vulnerability” (p. 10). Discuss the questions at the bottom of the page, and have a time of thanksgiving to God for trustworthy friends.
- 10–11:00 A.M. **Case Study:** Present “Beyond Playing Community” on page 8. Encourage the group to discuss at large the answers to “What Would You Do?” as well as the discussion questions at the end of the study.
- 11:15—NOON. **Assessment:** Hand out “Five Essentials for Small Group Health,” the assessment on page 6, to each participant. After everyone has read and completed the assessment, have them discuss how they can work to bring health to their current (or future) small groups.
- Noon. **Lunch**

Saturday Afternoon

- 1–2 P.M. **Final Group Session:** Close the retreat with the activity “Small Groups with a Common Cause” on page 15. Have the group come together to share what God has taught them. Then pray together, asking God for guidance and wisdom as you take new steps together.

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