Practical Ministry Skills:
Effective Affinity Groups

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Effective Affinity Group

Leader’s Guide

How to use “Effective Affinity Group“ by SMALLGROUPS.COM in your regularly scheduled meetings.

Welcome to SMALLGROUPS.COM: Inspiring life-changing community. You’ve purchased an innovative resource that will help you train and direct your small-group leaders and coaches. The material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders, and has been selected by the editors of Leadership Resources at Christianity Today International.

The theme of this download is “Effective Affinity Groups.” The handouts give a succinct and practical overview of the issues most relevant to your goals. They can be used as part of a training session for several group leaders, or as a way to encourage and educate people individually. Simply print the handouts you need and use them as necessary.

For example, to get a good understanding of what an affinity group looks like, see Rick Lowry’s article “What Counts as an Affinity Group?” (p. 3–4) and “Affinity—Exclusivity or Commonness?” by Bill Donahue (p. 5–6). You can also get some good ideas for specific affinity groups by reading “One-Thing Groups” (p. 15–16) and “Story-Time Groups” (p. 17), both by Mike Lueken. Finally, Linda McCullough-Moore gives very practical advice in “Affinity Groups: Challenges and Suggestions” (p. 11–12).

Our prayer is that this material will help your church effectively start and maintain affinity-based small groups.

Need more material, or training on another small-groups ministry topic? See our website at www.SmallGroups.com.

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Effective Affinity Group

What Counts as an Affinity Group?

A brief definition with helpful examples
Acts 6:1–6

One Wednesday morning not long ago, I walked into the local Cracker Barrel and saw eight of the men from our church sitting around a table over breakfast. I asked them how this group happened to be together. They replied, “We all volunteer for the facilities ministry at church on Wednesdays. Last year we decided to arrive an hour before we start our work, have breakfast together, and mutually encourage each other as Christian men.”

That’s a great example of an affinity group. Affinity is when a group of people with a common interest get together—parents with young children seeking advice and support, a sports team, or even a kinship built around a love of gardening. For another example, meaningful personal encouragement comes when a person with the gift of mercy is able to share a mercy-giving activity with others who have the same gift. Or when a prayer warrior is able to participate in a prayer meeting with others who love to intercede.

When churches use the term “affinity groups,” they usually are referring to a type of small group that is distinct from a regular “home Bible study” or “care and support” group. The possibilities of affinity groups are unlimited, and fall under multiple categories.

Ministry and Service

Some small groups exist in order to serve together. They meet regularly, pray together, they may even do some Bible study—but the focus is to help each other put wheels on their faith. They may do one-time ventures or tackle large projects that take an extended period of time. They might serve within the church body, but many churches also promote groups serving outside the church walls.

For example, one small group in Evansville, Indiana, gets together regularly to help fix up an old building where Teen Challenge hosts ladies in a crisis pregnancy situation. Another group has caught the vision for missions and involved themselves in praying for and reaching those who need Christ worldwide. Some have even visited a targeted area as a group, to pray or to work alongside existing missionaries.

Common Interest

A common interest affinity group is one in which participants are attracted to each other through some area of shared personal interest. Most common interest groups find that their shared interest makes a good starting point, and they later build elements of deeper Christian community into their time together, such as Bible study and prayer.

Some examples are:

- A group of ladies meeting during their Wednesday lunch hour to scrapbook and pray for each other.
- A group of Christian men who enjoy motorcycles getting together once a month on Saturday morning to ride with sponsorships, then giving the money to the local crisis pregnancy center.
- A few Christian artists forming a weekly meeting to discuss how Christians can reclaim the arts for God’s Kingdom, and sponsoring events that make it so.
- Several pastors of small, rural churches who network once month to talk about the unique challenges of ministry in their setting.
**Effective Affinity Group**

**How Affinity Groups Form**

Affinity groups usually form spontaneously, whenever people who have something in common decide to get together. Many churches encourage affinity groups to start “organically,” with minimal direction from church programming. Other churches sponsor regular mid-sized gatherings to help affinity groups get started—a large number of people with a common interest come together, and during the event form smaller groups that can launch off into intentional communities. Many churches that encourage affinity groups also suggest a registration of the groups, for the sake of accountability and communication.

—Rick Lowry; copyright 2009 by the author and Christianity Today International.

**Discuss:**

1. What kind of affinity groups have I been involved with?
2. If I could choose a ministry or common interest to build a group around, what would it be?
3. Would a larger gathering of potential affinity-group members be worthwhile for our church? How can we set it up?
People group together. And affinity almost always plays a role in how we connect. But in recent years, the “affinity group” has come under attack and its viability has been questioned. Do such groups promote shared ignorance or exclusivity, tearing apart the fabric of biblical community? Do they promote true fellowship? Should they be replaced by diverse gatherings of men, women, and children of all ages, races, languages, and incomes? Isn’t affinity a narrow concept?

The issue is not “affinity”—it’s people. Small groups work perfectly until people show up! Let me explain what I mean. Affinity is not “exclusivity” or “likeness”—it is “commonness.” It is a means of connection, not a characteristic of community. Greater affinity does not automatically produce greater community. A gathering of young mothers may experience a less true community than a more diverse group of people, but not because they are young mothers. And greater diversity does not automatically produce greater community. Just go to any college campus and watch how students group together.

Three Ways Most Groups Form
Three primary connection strategies exist today for forming groups—geography, purpose, and affinity. Each serves the kingdom and contributes to God’s plan for building his church. Each has biblical precedent. And churches that integrate all three will flourish.

- **Geography.** Old Testament tribal groupings were family-centered, and geography played a significant role in their formation, particularly concerning where the tribes pitched their tents around the tabernacle (Numbers 2) and the land they would ultimately occupy (Joshua 13–22). New Testament Christ-followers gathered in homes (Acts 2:42–47; 20:20), implying some connection around places they lived.

- **Purpose.** In Exodus 18, groupings were influenced by the task at hand—adjudicating the disputes among Israelites. In Acts 6, seven Greek-speaking Jewish men who were full of the Spirit and wisdom were chosen to manage the distribution of food to neglected widows. Likewise, elders and deacons reflect small groups designed for a purpose—shepherding roles in the church.

- **Affinity.** Jesus chose a group of young Jewish, Galilean males “that they might be with him and that he might send them out” (Mark 3:14). This group was a community with a cause. But it was more than simply a short-term training group or a serving team—it was a small group that spent much time together. It served as Jesus’ primary place for modeling kingdom life and relationships, yet it did not include gentiles, women, children, or families; was not centered in a neighborhood; and disbanded after about 3 years.

So affinity—as one of three major entry points into small group life—plays a role in organizing people, even when a task needs to be done. But it must never be used as an excuse to promote exclusivity unless the purpose of the group so dictates (our church elders, for example, are not an inclusive grouping). These affinities—drawn from a larger community or an entire congregation—can produce small-group experiences that foster spiritual transformation, Christ-like compassion, and achievement of mission.

I have overseen and led all kinds of groups. Presently, I lead a geographically based men’s group, and I have in the past led training groups, serving groups, youth small groups, intergenerational groups, and couples groups. Each has been an experience in biblical community. But it was not the organizing principle that fostered community.

**What Makes a Group Connect Deeply?**
I have observed that the greatest factor influencing the possibility of experiencing true community in a small-group setting is what sociologists call “cohesion.” Cohesion is the perceived need for a group by its members. The greater the perceived need, the greater the cohesion. And the greater the cohesion, the greater the
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community. Groups in Numbers 2 and Acts 6 were organized differently (one by geography and the other by purpose), but there existed a great need for each kind of group.

One Alcoholics Anonymous participant summed it up well when he said, “When I am late to church, people stare at me with frowns of disapproval as though I am not as responsible as they are. But when I am late to AA, the meeting comes to a halt, and everyone stops to hug and welcome me. They realize that my lateness may be a sign that I almost didn’t make it. They understand that my desperate need for them won out over my desperate need for alcohol.” Desperation drives people toward community—and keeps them there.

Christians met often in the early church because they desperately needed one another—for strength, hope, prayer, learning, and resources. How they grouped was less an issue than the true need to be together. I have been in, or visited, all kinds of groups—neighborhood, affinity, task-based, you name it. Sadly, many lack an essential dependence on one another. It is in our poverty and weakness that we find help and hope. Community, as someone has said, begins at the edge of suffering. I agree.

Perhaps this is why you can experience a deeper level of connection in a gathering of Vietnam Veterans who have never previously met one another than in a neighborhood community of affluent suburbanites who spend their days hanging out at the tennis club. Both groups have a high level of affinity—but only one has suffered deeply and desperately needs fellow members. One experiences community; the other shares a social camaraderie. People in pain will drive many miles to gather together; people without pain, or who cannot admit they are broken, will barely drive 5 minutes to join a community. It’s just not convenient. Life’s too busy.

Perhaps this is why I experienced deeper fellowship among the poor and racially oppressed in South Africa than I find in suburban America, where connections are often shaped by self-interest instead of brokenness and sacrifice. “Every Christian community,” said Bonhoeffer, “must realize that not only the weak need the strong, but also the strong cannot exist without the weak. The elimination of the weak is the death of fellowship.”

So however we find ourselves connecting—geography, purpose, or affinity—let us proclaim our dependence, desperation, and weakness. It is here that we will find true community.

—BILL DONAHUE; copyright 2004 by the author and SmallGroups.com.

Discuss:
1. Is our group formed by affinity, geography, or purpose?
2. In what ways are we leaning toward exclusivity? How can we nip these leanings in the bud?
3. What steps can our group take to form greater cohesion?
In small-group ministry, a variety of groups can be formed. The most common are heterogeneous groups, which aim for diversity among the group members, and homogeneous groups, which bring together people with similar backgrounds and characteristics. The concept of homogeneous groups is simple: college people are more likely to get along with college people, singles with singles, and homebuilders with homebuilders. But let’s be honest: developing a cohesive group with certain people, even homogeneous people, can be next to impossible.

At Willow Creek Community Church, we try to go one step further. We believe that even among people similar to each other, some people are naturally attracted to one another. So we aim for a third kind of small group: the affinity group. People may or may not be alike in terms of age, profession, or family status, but in forming our small groups, we seek to link those who naturally want to spend time together. In other words, they like each other.

We believe only true affinity—that sense of natural bonding or “chemistry”—leads to cohesiveness. People simply aren’t motivated to bond to people they don’t enjoy. They may work together peaceably enough, but they won’t have the dynamic relationship that true friends have. We’ve found that groups based on affinity are more likely to remain together for years. An arbitrarily or artificially formed group, on the other hand, often collapses after a few months.

Thoughtful Placement
Our commitment to the affinity principle means we hold regular “placement interviews” for people who want to join a small group. A staff member meets with groups of three or four people to get to know them. He finds out, for instance, what they do for a living. A brick layer, for instance, might not have much affinity with a brain surgeon; they may think differently and enjoy different interests. Although they may live in the same community and have kids about the same age—making them homogeneous in some aspects—they may not be particularly compatible.

The placement meeting also determines such factors as how long people have been Christians, the depth of their spiritual life, and their motivation for small-group involvement. From that, we develop ideas about where they might best be placed.

Our staff person takes the information to the appropriate leaders, matching prospects with likely groups. A leader, for example, will be given the names of three couples who, based on the staff interview, might mix well. The group leader meets with the prospective members and works through a set list of questions. The leader then reports back to the staff, stating which prospects he or she would like to have in his or her group.

The key is to let the group leader make the decision about whom to invite into the small group. If people like one another, they’ll stick together. But if they don’t, you can have great curriculum and leaders, but the small group won’t work.

Common Objections
But what about the people no one chooses? That can be a problem with this method. In some cases, our staff has had to tell people they can’t be placed immediately. The staff, however, has promised to continue to find a leader. At the same time, the prospects are encouraged to take advantage of other ministry opportunities at Willow Creek to develop relationships.

It can be difficult to tell people that. However, we try to prepare our people by warning them in advance that it may take three to six months, or longer, to make the proper placement. Most are willing to be patient. After all, a small group has the potential to have a monumental impact. People will wait for the right group.

Even with people who are just a bit eccentric, we are usually able to find leaders who are equally eccentric, and the group works well.
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Long-term Leaders

We want our small groups to succeed. That is why we are so careful about the placement procedure. We believe disciples will not be made unless the leader wants to spend time with the group members. When leaders are allowed to choose their own members, they will do a better job, feel more positive about the experience, and be more motivated to serve again.

Management consultant Ken Blanchard says the usual organizational pyramid should be turned upside down, so that the upper leaders are serving those individuals who minister to the congregation, who in turn make the impact on the world around them.

We feel that if we meet the needs of our small-group leaders, we’ll meet the needs of others. If, on the other hand, we burn out our leaders with an unnatural ministry fit, no one will be served. No matter what support we provide our leaders, it’s how fruitful they feel that determines whether they’re motivated to keep serving.

—Don Cousins; copyright 2006 by the author and SmallGroups.com.

Discuss:

1. Do our small groups follow a homogenous pattern, or are they heterogeneous?
2. What is my first reaction to the interview process mentioned above? What are some ways it might work in our church? In what ways might it be harmful?
3. Do our groups currently experience deep connection and long-term leaders? If not, how can we experiment with affinity groups as a way to help?


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**Keeping Affinity in Focus**

*Forming relational bonds is only the first step along the journey to true community.*

Matthew 28:18–20

**Affinity:** A natural attraction, liking, or feeling of kinship; relationship by alliance.

For years, small groups have formed around affinities—retirees, young parents, empty nesters, singles, business professionals, sports groups, and so on. Whether it is age, vocation, family status, hobbies, or personal interests, affinities have proven successful in creating the context that helps all types of groups develop relationships and bond into a community. But is the end goal to get a small group to just bond?

Consider Jesus’ 12 disciples. When Jesus first called them, what was his purpose for his group? Was it to do Old Testament study and discover affinities they had with one another? To be sure, Jesus was a master teacher. Additionally, there were some affinity factors that helped them bond. They were all Jewish men, and all from the region of Galilee (with the exception of possibly Judas Iscariot)—but that’s where most of the initial affinity stops. The first disciples had a great deal of variety in vocations, temperaments, political ideologies, and family status. Some of those differences would have certainly been a barrier to affinity. And indeed, Scripture records more tension among the disciples’ group than affinity.

Scripture also leads us to believe that discovering affinity while doing a study was not Jesus’ primary purpose for this group. Jesus, in perhaps his most urgent prayer for his disciple group, prayed this: “As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified. My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:18–21).

**Oneness:** Relationship characterized by unity of purpose and love even in the face of extreme opposition.

Jesus prayed the oneness of the disciples would be comparable to that of Trinity! After Jesus prayed for his disciples, and just before Jesus ascended back to heaven, he told them: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:18–20).

**Commission:** Authority to carry out a special assignment.

We all have a shared mission: to make disciples of Jesus. In small groups, affinity, kinship, or even friendship is not the goal—they are only stepping stones to something far more important: oneness and commission.

Jesus’ sacrifice and the coming of the Holy Spirit made oneness possible—a oneness that is a picture of God’s love to the world “so they will believe.” But he didn’t stop there. He gave us a commission to carry out in community together. And that commission is to make disciples as we go. We are in danger if we get caught in the trap of thinking that the Great Commission is the job of someone else in the church, not our small group.

So how can you tell if your group has developed an affinity, but has not embraced its commission? Here are a few symptoms:

- Your group of young parents loves to be together and have agreed to rotate children’s devotions and childcare among the adults. This is stated in the group covenant, and yet several members are unwilling to volunteer to be with the kids.
- Your group of 18 adults wants to keep meeting during the summer because there’s still plenty of people that come, even with several on vacation each week. But the group won’t hear of birthing a second group in the fall, even though the living room is full to overflowing.
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- Your group has been meeting together for three years and always has someone eager to plan social nights for the group, yet there isn’t anyone who is motivated to plan a group service project.
- Your group of eight adults could easily add a couple of individuals, but won’t, for fear of disturbing the group’s relational intimacy.

Do these groups have affinity? Very likely. Do these groups have a biblical oneness in community? Possibly—at least in the sense that some of the “one anothers” of Scripture are being lived out. But for many groups, embracing the Great Commission may be a wall they can’t get over.

Without question, the process of moving from affinity to oneness to commission takes time. Affinity definitely can lead to mission, but many times it does not. Groups form, bond around affinities, become loyal to one another, become protective of group status, drift towards an inward focus, stagnate, and then sometimes dissolve.

Experience reveals and research confirms that group relationships and group bonds remain the most healthy when a group keeps moving through the journey of discovering affinity, building oneness in community, and embracing their mission to carry out the Great Commission. Remember: affinity is only a stepping stone along that journey. It’s just the beginning.

—DAN LENTZ; copyright 2004 by the author and SmallGroups.com.

**Discuss:**

1. What stage is our group currently in—affinity, oneness, or commission?
2. Does our group demonstrate any symptoms of being comfortable with affinity and not willing to move forward?
3. What steps can we take to move our group closer toward fulfilling Jesus’ Great Commission?
Having a number of small affinity groups within a church serves to promote spiritual growth and develop community in rich and unusual ways. The members of these groups are able to relate to each other in areas of comfort, expertise, and identity. Being in an affinity group also allows each person to be part of the church congregation at the intersection of daily life and Christian fellowship.

However, affinity groups can sometimes present as many challenges as they do opportunities. Here are some of the most common challenges I’ve encountered with affinity groups, as well as suggestions for addressing them.

Challenge: Common Interests May Get in the Way
One danger of affinity groups is that the affinity around which the group is formed can get in the way of more important items, like prayer and spiritual growth. Consider a group of people who meet weekly to play basketball and pray, for example. Because the activity is fun and exciting, there can be a real temptation to spend a little more time in the game each week, and a little less time connecting with God.

Another example would be a discipleship group for Christian businesspeople. In that case, there might be a strong inclination for group members to relate to one another as if they were still at work—forming a hierarchy and emphasizing efficiency over relationships. This would interfere with the group developing a level of trust and openness. There might also be a strong pull to discuss work, and never get to the issues of faith and the heart.

Suggestion: A fixed agenda for the group can help in this regard. The leader can clearly state—and frequently re-state—that the purpose of the group is to grow in Christ through fellowship with a group of people who have similar interests. The leader can be firm in defining the group as a place where members come to talk about prayer, feelings, failings, and concerns. A good way to begin each meeting is to go around the circle and ask each member to respond to the question, “How is it with your soul?” The humor and strangeness of the question gives people permission to speak of things they can discuss nowhere else.

Challenge: If All Members Are the Same, Then Who Is the Leader?
Members of affinity groups usually view one another as peers. For that reason, having one member assume a leadership role can sometimes feel uncomfortable.

Suggestion: Affinity groups often work best when the leader does not share the common occupation, interest, or life situation around which the group was formed. Believe it or not, the leader being an outsider can actually help the group members form stronger relationships, since it highlights the bond they all share.

Also, when the leader does not share the particular affinity of a given group, it puts him or her in a position to ask questions for information and clarification, which again forms a bond among the participants. Think of a group of elderly knitting aficionados, for example. If the group leader isn’t skilled at knitting, the rest of the ladies can come together as experts and help her learn the skill. Further, having such a leader serves as a constant reminder that the purpose of the group goes beyond the initial shared affinity.

Challenge: How to Select Group Members
Deciding upon membership of any given affinity group must be handled prayerfully and carefully. Most small groups in a church are open to everyone who wants to participate, so the idea of a small group that in any way limits its membership can cause hurt feelings and misunderstandings.
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**Suggestion:** This is best handled by determining in advance the likely composition of the group, and making this clear from the first announcement. When people hear an official announcement and have time to process the information before determining whether they want to be in the group, they usually understand the need for boundaries. A married couple would not be accepted as members of a singles group, for example, no matter how close existing friendships might be.

With any small group, the single most important function the leader serves is establishing and being consistent with boundaries. Something as minor as starting and ending on time can have a profound influence on a group. Similarly, it might fall to the leader to be the one to say that a particular person would not be a likely fit for the group. This is difficult and must be done in love, but it also presents a wonderful opportunity. If someone is turned away from a particular group, the church now has a perfect opportunity to form a new group with that person as its first member. Many wonderful affinity groups have been started because one person was in need of a group.

**Challenge: Affinity Groups can Create Competition**

Affinity groups can sometimes foster a feeling of competitiveness in the area of shared interest. For example, a group for mothers of small children can become a place where parenting is put on display and a child’s success or failure is measured and assessed. Or, the undertone in a group of artists may come to revolve around artistic accomplishment and recognition, with lots of occasion for envy and pride.

Affinity groups are especially prone to these comparisons precisely because of the common work or life situation that initially forms them.

**Suggestion:** The first and most important tool for dealing with this problem is a direct and repeated teaching that the truest and most important affinity for the group is the grace of God and the shared life in Jesus Christ. This must be the constant theme of any group—that what is shared is fallen humanness and redemption in the Lord, and that sharing this makes members of the group also members of one body, one family in Christ.

In addition, this problem is an opportunity to directly address the sin we all share in competing and trying to feel adequate by being more successful than another. As a group develops trust over time, these are areas that can be shared and addressed. One way to initiate the conversation is to ask, when one member tells of a particular success, “How does it feel as a mother (as an artist) to hear this? Do you think that artists (mothers) compete with one another?”

**Challenge: Multiple Affinity Groups Can Create a Hierarchy**

Having a number of affinity groups in a given church may foster a feeling that there is a pecking order among the groups. For example, a group of choir members may feel that there activity is more important than another group that meets to play softball, and that their group should receive a greater percentage of the church’s time and resources. This is nothing new. The disciples came to Jesus asking who would be greatest in heaven, and on another occasion requested prime seating there! Affinity groups can even foster cliques and divisions.

**Suggestion:** It is good to have a plan from the start that each affinity group will be of some specific service to the church. The choir members rake leaves or shovel snow. The softball players do childcare one Saturday a month. Each group must have a firm understanding that they are part of a body which is totally dependent upon the other body parts. The hand has no self interest—it scratches the head; it pulls on the boots. In addition, periodic get-togethers of all groups can be a good reminder of unity in Christ.

Finally, any attempt to begin small affinity groups within the church will profit greatly from a training session for new and existing group leaders. This is an exciting project for any congregation, and one that blesses both individuals and the community of Christ.

—LINDA McCULLOUGH MOORE; copyright 2009 by the author and Christianity Today International

**Discuss:**

1. What positive experiences have I had with affinity groups in the past?
2. Are any of the above challenges currently affecting our small group? If so, how can we implement the suggestion solutions?
3. How can our church prepare current and future affinity-group leaders to deal with these challenges?
I can see it in my mind’s eye: a life that is seamlessly filled with the love of Christ. I can see myself living out my hobbies, mowing my yard, and enjoying the relationships around me. It is a vision I have had for my life and for others for a very long time. It is what I call a life-integrated ministry that engages popular culture while sharing the gospel. What and where are these communities for us to engage? They are all around us: bicycle clubs, LAN parties, Texas Hold’em parties, sports leagues, work-out gyms, book-reading clubs—subculture after subculture after subculture.

Wikipedia defines “subculture” as a group of people with a culture (whether distinct or hidden) that differentiates them from the larger culture to which they belong. And if that’s true, then subcultures are all around us. We are a part of one as Christians, and sometimes we find ourselves too immersed in that subculture to even realize there are other social networks around us.

**A Subculture Case Study**

A few years ago I purchased an Xbox just so I could own and play a game called *Halo* (you may have heard of it). It was shortly after playing this game that I realized I needed to play it with friends, so I invited them over and we had a blast! After a couple of months of mayhem, my friends invited their friends, and then their friends invited their friends, until we had about 18 people showing up on a weekly basis to play *Halo*.

We were creating a subculture, although in some ways we were actually engaging a subculture that already existed. I knew this to be true because many of the guys (and a gal) who were showing up already played *Halo* online—we had simply brought those two subcultures together.

After about 9 months of us playing every week, I kept having the urge to show the guys I was a Christian. I wanted to open the gaming night in prayer or something, but for some reason it just did not feel right. Some of the guys who played the game were Christians, but I waited. One night, one of them asked if we could pray for his cousin, who had just committed suicide. And of course we did. After we finished praying, we started up the Xboxes and began the video game madness, just like every other evening.

But it was that prayer and that night when God took our simple community and started bringing gamers to Jesus.

One by one, guys started turning their life to Christ. We saw baptisms, guys attending celebration services after being away for years, people serving in ministry and leading small groups—even sacrificial giving. How did all this happen? One answer: God’s grace. We were there to just play video games, but God had other plans. I am glad he did.

**Practical Steps**

As I’ve gained experience in these subcultures, I’ve learned new ways to be more intentional about creating opportunities for spiritual conversations:

- **Pray.** Pray that God gives you the right spiritual moments in which the group can be a part.
- **Hang out.** If you’re already in a subculture, try to get the group together in a different capacity. It doesn’t have to be church, but do something other than shoot each other in video games. Go to a bar, catch a movie, play darts—something that allows conversation.
- **Keep it real.** Even if you are not engaged in a “Christian” subculture, like a traditional small group, you don’t have to keep faith matters at arms length. A lot of the guys at our *Halo* parties are now Christ-followers, and we talk about church because we love it. We are not afraid to keep it real. Be yourself.
- **Have fun.** Most people think Christians are boring and do not know how to laugh. We make sure there is plenty of that in our group!
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It has been almost five years since we first gathered to play Halo, and we are still at it—playing Halo 3 in a finished basement at that same friend’s house. Guys are still showing up who do not know Jesus because someone who plays invited them. We’ll see what happens. But I am so excited that God has taken would could be a mindless gaming experience and turned it into a mission field.

—Eric Metcalfe is the Adult Ministry Champion for Community Christian Church and the NewThing Network. Used with permission, © 2008.

Discuss:
1. What kinds of subcultures am I aware of? What subcultures am I a part of?
2. Do I agree that a fruitful community can form around something like playing video games or working out? Why or why not?
3. What subcultures am I a part of that could
When piles of clutter are slowly taking over my garage, I often try not to notice. But after weeks of mess fatigue, I’ll decide it’s time to clean. When I survey the magnitude of the job, however, I am often overwhelmed and don’t know where to start. So I don’t. I pour a cold drink and disappear into a televised golf tournament.

The same thing happens in spiritual formation. With so many areas where we are categorically unlike Jesus, it’s easy to become overwhelmed and not do anything.

So our church developed One Thing groups. The purpose is to experience transformation in one messy corner of life, attend to it in community with a few others, and cooperate with God’s Spirit to become more like Jesus in that area. These groups help people move beyond wishing for transformation to actually experiencing it. The key phases are identification, attention, conversation, planning, and action.

**Identification**
A group of three to six people comes together, seeking to identify one area God wants to change. Each person will likely have a different “one thing.” This is better than forming a group where everyone’s is the same.

This phase involves conversing with the group to identify where transformation is desired. The Sermon on the Mount is a good guide for identifying a “one thing.” Anger, lust, control, prayerlessness, judgmentalism, and worry are some of the typical starting points.

**Attention**
In this phase, each person pays daily attention to their one thing. For example, if the issue is anger, they reflect—in detail—upon the circumstances surrounding the emergence of their anger. Where were they? What was said? Were they tired at the time? Journaling is helpful here.

It is crucial to note when the one thing arises internally, even if the actual behavior is absent. For example, when a person feels anger rising, they reflect upon the situation, even if they may not express that anger. This process takes several weeks, and people may experience a degree of depression because they realize, like never before, how integrated this one thing is into their life.

As people attend to what they thought was their one thing, they often find a deeper level of discovery. We call this “the trap door phenomenon.” As we walk with our one thing for a period of time, a trap door often springs open and we come to a greater understanding of what’s really at work. For example, anger may actually be more about control or doubt or fear.

Several trap doors can open before finding the core “one thing.”

**Conversation**
The first two phases usually take a couple of months. The group continues with open conversation about the specifics behind the issue. The facilitator keeps the discussion centered on authentic formation and not mere accountability (“did or didn’t I this week?”). The goal: to move beyond behavior modification toward actual heart change. Family-of-origin issues, one’s life story, and honesty about one’s pain and motivations are vital.

**Planning**
The Holy Spirit is the driving force in heart change. We cannot make it happen ourselves. But if we do nothing, it most certainly will not happen. So each person devises a reasonable plan for spiritual formation. An example:
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In order to cooperate with God in the transformation of my anger, I am going to:

- Spend 15 minutes in silence three times a week
- Spend an extended time in solitude and silence once a quarter
- Memorize Matthew 5:21–26
- Confess when I sin to my One Thing group
- Invite their questions and counsel
- Practice God’s presence in the transitions of my life (walking, driving, doing dishes, and so on).

**Action**

People in the group work the plans they have established and continue to discuss how things are going. Surprisingly, as transformation begins to occur, many discover how hard it is to live without their one thing. One Thing groups bring people face to face with their actual spiritual intentions. At times, we have to face the fact we really don’t want to change.

One Thing groups have helped our people understand that transformation is a process that happens in the details of our lives. While it is an act of God’s grace, it doesn’t happen without intentional effort. It isn’t a magic formula, but it does help people focus so they can cooperate with God in their spiritual formation.

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

**Discuss:**

1. Has there been a time when I attempted to change a habit or behavior, but failed? What happened?
2. What have been some of my best experiences with accountability? What have been some of the worst?
3. If I were to participate in a One Thing group, what would my “one thing” be?
A few years ago, I had a bedtime routine with my kids that included telling them a story about a boy named Ernie. His adventures were as far-fetched as I could make them: Ernie and the elf, Ernie and the monster. Ernie inside a pinball machine. As absurd as the tales were, the kids hung on every word.

Stories, no matter how old we get, are captivating to us. Fantasy stories touch a deep place within us that longs for adventure and heroism. True stories, on the other hand, bind us together in shared experience. They forge community. For the Christ-follower, biography can become a type of theology as God is discovered through the meandering journey of one’s life.

The spiritual significance and power of our stories have led our church to develop “Story Groups.” These are small groups that work through a 20-week curriculum designed to help people understand the importance of their life stories in their formation toward Christ-likeness. Story groups are discussion-oriented, with assignments designed to trace the hand of God through our personal history with the ultimate goal of having each person present his or her story. This process may be painful, but also amazingly liberating.

As the group works through the curriculum, each person begins to write his or her story. They delineate seasons; elaborate on crucial events, relationships, and experiences; and describe the impact these things have had on their hearts. How did it affect his view of God? Did she make vows or changes at certain junctures? How did an event trigger anger, fear, anxiety, or a new desire? Obviously, for some, this process will resurrect old wounds and painful memories. But the intent of the Story Group is to journey toward accepting my life as my story. It is a way of facing the truth and embracing it.

A healing process occurs as group members read or share their stories with one another. I have seen initial fears dissolve as people open their hearts and vulnerably share with the group. Many people imagine they are alone in the pain they have experienced, the burdens they carry, and the pressure they feel. But hearing another person’s story helps us recognize our commonality. We suddenly see that we are not alone on the journey. This is both comforting and encouraging.

Of course, whenever people open up in this manner, it can be dangerous. Vulnerability always is, and no amount of covenant-making or contract-signing will reduce the risk. But what is the alternative? Sadly, what we often see in small groups is people hiding the truth about who they are behind inductive Bible studies and a prayer time. While these activities are good, they can keep us hidden. We may never reveal who we really are. But in a Story Group, I am called to share the truth about my life and who I am, while holding firmly to the truth that my identity is in Christ.

Some may wonder, why bother?

If we are new creatures in Christ, if the old is gone and the new has come, why spend so much time focused on the past? But simply because something is “gone” doesn’t mean it cannot affect our lives today. Many people carry their pasts into their present relationships and circumstances. And large numbers of people, knowingly or unknowingly, expend enormous amounts of energy each day fighting the truth of their story.

Part of our spiritual growth must include facing the truth about ourselves. And the best way to deal with the story of our lives is to turn directly toward it, walk right into the middle of it, and learn, with others, to accept the story as it really is.

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

Discuss:
1. Does the idea of coming face-to-face with my own story sound appealing or disconcerting?
2. Does the idea of sharing my story with others sound exciting or frightening? Why?
3. What are some ways that we could begin incorporating our own stories into our current small group?
Imagine calling out everyone with the gift of evangelism to begin a “Going Group” that would encourage other groups in your church to share their faith. Imagine calling out everyone in your church with the gift of mercy or service to begin a group-based “Helping Hands” ministry. The possibilities are limitless! A small-group ministry is a strategic means of unleashing the latent power of the spiritual gifts that God has placed within your church body.

**Laying the Groundwork**

When people with a similar gifting and similar passions come together in a small-group environment, they bond quickly and often experience a series of defining moments. In other words, life-change happens because people’s gifts come to the surface and the group finds ways to use them. This is a revolutionary thing because life-transformation usually happens slowly for individuals—we have to figure things out for ourselves. But when a small group is used as a “situation room” or “brainstorming center” for ministry and mission, it produces activities and conversations that allow the Holy Spirit to do his work.

This scenario is exciting because people are likely to respond to things that tap into their dominant spiritual gift(s). In fact, a person’s spiritual gifts are usually closely aligned with their calling and can help to further define that calling. This creates great energy in a group’s initial gatherings, because people tend to be passionate about what they are called to do. It is nothing short of awe-inspiring to watch someone realize that their gifts are part of the Lord’s plan, and that by using them with a focus on serving him, they can fulfill the life God wants for all of us.

One challenge in taking this approach is communicating with the church body about spiritual gifts often enough, so that members of the congregation will learn their gifts and catch the vision for gift-based groups. It’s also important to develop a database of the collective gifting within the church to help evaluate opportunities and potential contacts. You can address both issues by teaching about spiritual gifts in your core classes, and by using a gift-assessment activity.

**Starting a Group**

When a gift-based small groups forms, it’s best to start with a discussion of realistic tasks in which the members can engage together. These tasks can address needs within the church or community—that doesn’t really matter. But it is important to ensure three things:

1. Whatever the group decides to tackle first should be given a definitive ending point. It’s okay if it becomes an ongoing activity, but give people a trial run to start with.

2. Clearly decide who the leader is for the emerging group or ministry team. It would be good to spontaneously appoint this person in the presence of everyone assembled.

3. Develop a plan for reporting the outcome of a completed effort to the larger church body in order to encourage the formation of other gift-based groups.

Remember—these groups or teams are not necessarily being organized to address current ministry needs within the church body. What you are doing is implementing a highly relational strategy that starts with what people are already gifted to do and passionate about doing. You are creating externally focused ministry by helping people recognize a need that they may not have discovered without the call to activate their gifts for Christ.

For example, a member of your church could be an entrepreneur in using the Internet in business. He offers a workshop that is open to the community in “Making the Internet Work for You.” In the workshop, he introduces himself as a member of your church and shares how he was prompted to do what he is doing because of the small groups in your church. At the end of the workshop, he offers an opportunity for people to sign up for a 3 to 6 week group that has a theme related to the workshop’s focus. In this case, maybe this short-
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term group could be: “Using Technology to Strengthen Your Family and Faith.” Other members of the church could be invited to be a part of this short-term shared interest group in order to create a forum that is encouraging the mixing of seekers and believers. All along, he is up front about the intent of the workshop and the group, sharing his hopes for the people attending.

Another possibility is creating a “Hope & Action” small group that is team-led by those with spiritual gifts in mercy and evangelism. Make the initial meeting informational, and then invite people to sign up for a two-session group, which leads to a short-term team that is focused on raising awareness in the church about HIV. Another step beyond this is to form long-term action teams from those attracted by the initial gathering that will provide care for those who are affected by the disease.

Being proactive in identifying ministry opportunities will allow your groups to be missionally strategic in their response, instead of reactive to the “tyranny of the urgent” that ordinarily arises within the church and is directed overwhelmingly to the needs of existing church members. This will inspire a subconscious shift from a foxhole mentality to being a visible and active force that is prepared and ready for engagement.

**Take the Next Step**

One way to expand on this idea is to create strategic partnerships with local parachurch or volunteer agencies. For example, if a church wants to reach out to students on a college campus, it is more prudent to work with those who have been successful doing so versus trailblazing an effort with an inexperienced team. It becomes a matter of identifying a point person with the heart and the appropriate spiritual gift mix to contact the leader of an on-campus Christian ministry (i.e. InterVarsity Christian Fellowship) in order to develop a cooperative outreach effort.

This approach has several benefits, but here are the two biggest: 1) You are blending your church members with those who live in the world you are wanting to reach, and 2) You are providing a local church fellowship where student believers and pre-Christians can attend and grow together. Small groups can be formed around this new initiative when relational traction develops between those who are reaching and those who are being reached. The shared information and resources will allow your church to use the inroads already made into the community and subculture to reach people with the Good News.

**A Suggested Process for Creating Gift-Based Groups**

1. Survey or collect information from your church’s database. Offer a list of spiritual gifts, and let people indicate which ones they have based on their heart and experiences. You can be more specific by using a spiritual gift assessment that helps people confirm their gift-mix.

2. Compile the information collected and categorize it on the basis of spiritual gifts. For example, group everyone with the spiritual gift of evangelism together, everyone with the spiritual gift of shepherding together, and so on.

3. Invite each group with the same dominant spiritual gift to gather together for one evening at the home of a key leader, or at the church. Use this opportunity to brainstorm. Do not make the mistake of assigning tasks or projects; avoid leading them with early recommendations. Ask group members to dream about their dominant spiritual gift in action. What does that look like? Let the vision of their gifts being used for God define the content of what happens in this first gathering.

4. Your job is to provide guidance as to how this initial gathering can continue as a short-term small group (3 to 6 weeks) based on their feedback. After group participants experience the excitement of being creatively engaged with others who share their passion, they will likely want to continue in the group after its first term. The group could evolve into a long-term small group that is focused on meeting needs in the church or in the community. Whatever you do, let its growth be organic.

—REID SMITH; copyright 2006 by the author and SmallGroups.com.

**Discuss:**

1. What spiritual gifts have I been blessed with?
2. If I could choose an activity to participate in based on those gifts, what would it be?
3. What would it take to assemble a small group around that activity? What is preventing me from doing just that?
Further Exploration
Websites and books to help start and maintain affinity small groups

Smallgroups.com. Small-groups resources from Christianity Today International.
- Small-Group Evaluations Assessment Pack
- Small-Group Leader Orientation Guide
- Building a Culture of Discipleship Training Theme

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

Creating Community by Andy Stanley and Bill Willits. Five key discoveries that have helped North Point Community Church connect over 8,000 people through small groups (Multnomah, 2005; ISBN 978-1590523964).


Making Small Groups Work by Henry Cloud and John Townsend. This book provides small-group leaders with valuable guidance and information on how they can help their groups to grow spiritually, emotionally, and relationally (Zondervan; ISBN 978-0310255123).