Great Small Groups for Students

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By Michael C. Mack and Ed Mills.

Adapted from "How to Start and Maintain Small Groups for High-School Students" by Michael C. Mack and "Student Small Groups at the Core" by Ed Mills

Leader's Guide

Great Small Groups for Students

Small groups can be used in a youth ministry in at least two ways: as a primary system of care, support, and discipleship for the youth of the church, and as a method of outreach for teens who do not know Christ. Careful planning can help your church accomplish all these goals.

Goal:

Prepare to launch effective student groups through selection of leaders, types of groups, and curriculum.

How to use "Great Small Groups for Students."

The following materials can be used for either personal or group training to help develop Small-group leaders.

Training Others

If you use this material to train other Small-group leaders, you may want to modify the handouts as necessary. Personalize them by printing on church letterhead or adding your church logo to the design. Each handout can be used in separate, brief training sessions, or you can combine all of the material into one session.

Read through the materials and any listed Scriptures ahead of time. Then prepare the materials as needed:

- Make enough copies for all of the participants.
- Provide food, drink, and other materials that will make your training sessions more comfortable.

Allow five minutes for everyone to read through each handout. Then discuss the questions provided, or consider questions such as:

- "Why are these principles important for a successful small group?"
- "How well does your small group currently incorporate these principles?"
- "What one or two practical steps could we take in the next year to improve in this area?"

Pray

Pray for insight in understanding the importance of student groups and how they can help young people build relationships with each other and God.

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

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Small Groups: The Core of Student Ministry

Provide the opportunity for young people to center on people and purpose.

1 John 1:3–4

I believe the very core of effective student ministry is student small groups. Small groups are about developing and growing relationships with others and with God. Small-group relationships provide one of the greatest opportunities to communicate the good news *and* facilitate life-change discipleship. Ministry to students must be people-centered *and* purpose-centered in the context of Small-group ministry.

Here are some of the many ways small groups help us to develop community and accomplish all of these biblical purposes:

Student small groups create a bridge to the youth group. Unless students who visit your church or youth group are loved, welcomed and connected with other students, they will not be coming back. It is important to connect each student with six to eight people *every* time they come to church or an event. We do this intentionally even in large group settings by sub-grouping into small groups. This facilitates interaction to help the students connect with one another. Sub-grouping will build a bridge for them to sense they belong to your group and church.

Student small groups extend pastoral care. There is no way that a student pastor can minister to every member of the student ministry. God never intended pastors or youth pastors to do "all" the ministry. They *equip* others for ministry. Every member of your student ministry is a minister, *and* a mission field. In small groups, students and adult leaders learn that they are responsible to care for others in the context of a loving and supportive community. This is accomplished through listening, prayer, encouragement, accountability, and spiritual development.

Student small groups create community. I have seen many kids get involved in self-destructive gangs because they are searching for belonging. What they really need is a constructive community of students who accept, forgive, heal, love, care, and encourage. Small groups can provide each of these vital elements of Christian community.

Student small groups enable crisis intervention. From time to time, everyone finds themselves overcome by the pressures of life, or just plain stressed out. They need someone to listen, care, and help. During times of crises, students desire a place that is safe. They want a place where they can share struggles, fears, and find help without being condemned. A small group can be a safe place where students can receive and give help.

Student small groups can carry out the mission of discipleship. Discipleship has many stages. There are students who are seekers, new believers, baby believers, maturing, and those who are being equipped for ministry. A small group is a great place for a student to become all that God desires. It is a place to question, struggle, find answers, develop, and mature in Christ as they allow him to transform their personalities. It can be a healthy place for accountability, confrontation, encouragement, love, or just to have fun as they learn and grow as Christ's disciples.

Student small groups help us to introduce students to the Good News. Small groups help introduce to the good news many people who may never be reached through programs in the church. At times, it is easier for youth to invite their friends to a Small-group meeting at a house than to invite them to a church. Small groups can help us connect the student's story with the story of God. These small groups can help the unbelieving come to terms with the brokenness of their relationship with God.

Student small groups encourage and develop friendship. Small groups are the places where students can develop deep and lasting relationships. When we seek a healthy balance in student ministry, we will allow all members to participate in the Small-group process. This will help them develop friendships that will last forever!

Student small groups help identify and respond to needs quicker. Small groups usually are flexible and adaptable. The leader and group can respond to the needs of the students better and faster than any organization in the church. When needs present themselves, the leader and group can respond immediately. The small group is positioned to deal directly with hurts and facilitate the healing process quickly.

Student small groups develop leaders. Through small groups, we are able to discover, develop, and deploy emerging leaders. We can intentionally train students with the essential skills for ministry. We can help them to develop the type of character that Christ desires. We can equip them to continue the process of discipleship with others.

Student small groups must be at the core of student ministry. This community connects them with God and others, and teaches them to live out the biblical purposes of worship, evangelism, fellowship, discipleship, and ministry.

—ED MILLS. Used with permission from *www.SmallGroups.com.*

Discuss

1. How is our current student ministry structure set up to accommodate small groups?
2. What do our students need the most from our church? How can student small groups meet those needs?
3. What is the purpose of our student ministry?

Student Group Foundations

Answer basic questions, such as who will lead, who will attend, and what will happen.

Hebrews 12:15

Lay the essential groundwork for organizing student small groups by beginning a few months before the groups actually begin to meet. This is particularly important when groups meet at or are organized around a particular high school.

Student Leaders or Adult Leaders?

The first question you might ask as you plan small groups for youth is: What types of groups are we going to utilize? Actually, this decision involves several levels of choices. The first choice is whether you want to have student-led or adult-led groups or both.

Student-led groups are facilitated usually by juniors or seniors. Student leaders are recruited and trained in the summer. Permission for use of school facilities should be sought from school, if necessary, also during the summer. A great kickoff event is "Meet Me at the Pole" in September. Take the "pole" inside to launch small groups. These groups are usually designed to reproduce new groups when the number of participants reaches about 12. An apprentice leader in the group prepares to launch a new group at some time during the year. Student-led groups can include at least four types.

- **Prayer groups:** Christian students meet before or after school to share and pray for their school and one another.
- **Share groups:** Christian and non-Christian students meet before or after school to discuss concerns. Students encourage and support each other and open and close with prayer.
- **Seeker groups:** Students who want to learn more about Jesus Christ come to these before- or after-school groups. They may also meet in a student's home in the evening. Start with three or four Christian friends who then go out and invite unchurched friends to the group. Because the group is built on friendships, great dynamics are going to happen. Studies have shown that one-on-one evangelism is not very effective with teens. But Small-group evangelism works with positive peer pressure. Teens love to hang out in groups, so use that to reach them.
- **Club groups:** Students meet to discuss issues that concern them. It's not necessarily a Bible study, but the Bible is used to filter discussions and find solutions.

Adult-led groups can be led by any adults from the church: parents, youth ministers or coaches, or others. New groups can be launched after a retreat or some other big event, at the beginning of the school year, and as needed. Adult-led groups also include at least four types.

- **Investigative and inquirers studies:** Teens come and explore what it means to have a personal relationship with Jesus. They learn how to become a Christian and what it means to be part of the church. These are often led by parents of teens who invite their school friends. Another twist is the "Bible debate party." A teen invites unchurched friends to his or her house to talk about whatever they want to discuss. The only rule is that the parent leaders get equal time at the end to show what the Bible says about the topic of discussion. The teenagers have freedom to express themselves, but in the process, they get the opportunity to dig in, think, and see what God says about the issues they are concerned about.
- **Growth groups:** These groups are for new and growing Christian youth. They meet in the evenings either in homes or at the church building.
- **Support groups:** Christian and non-Christian students who need encouragement or support in a particular area attend these groups. They may focus on a particular issue, such as divorce recovery, addictions, abuse, how to share one's faith, even school subjects several students are interested in or need help with.

- **Leadership groups:** Students who are challenged to grow as disciples and leaders can be part of these groups. Those who "graduate" often go on to lead student-led groups.

Just Boys, Just Girls, or Both?

Another choice concerns whether single-sex groups or mixed groups work best. For teens, groups of all guys or all girls seem to be best. In fact, some youth ministers observe that once teenagers are in a same-sex group, it's difficult to get them into a co-ed group. Why? Teens will not be as embarrassed to open up in a same-sex group as they would be in a mixed group. There's also the distraction factor. And then there's the idea that "If I say what I think, that girl (or guy) I like will think I'm a dork."

You can have single-sex groups meet every week in the month except one. Once a month, bring together two groups to make a large co-ed group. Also, plan a celebration once a quarter. Serve a meal at the church building and invite the parents (either same-sex, opposite sex, or both parents). Of course, be sensitive to kids from one-parent families.

—MICHAEL C. MACK. Used with permission from *www.SmallGroups.com.*

Discuss

1. What relationships does our church have with high schools in our community? Are there leaders who can coordinate extracurricular activities at school?
2. Who are the students in our church with potential to lead their own groups?
3. How many of the groups listed above exist in our church? Of the rest, which should our church form first?

Ingredients of a Great Student Group

Leadership and focus are necessary to help student groups contribute to the church.

Psalm 119:9

Be intentional about the basic elements of your student small groups. You will need the right number of students, competent leaders, and a way for the students to dig into the Word of God.

Numbers

Small groups for youth generally work best with three to fifteen teens. Smaller groups are good for high accountability, while larger groups are great for fellowship. Beyond fifteen students, communication is hampered and usually only the most talkative will share.

Keep the seating close and in a circle so every person can see everyone else's face.

The Leader's Role

Leaders must assure that group members are accepting toward one another; that there is mutual respect in the group; that there is confidentiality, particularly when deeper issues are raised; and that members are committed to the group, to attendance at the meetings, and to being on time.

The leader sets the pace of the meetings—modeling what is and isn't appropriate sharing, being vulnerable when needed, and accepting everyone in the group. The leader may also need to arrange transportation for those who don't drive.

The leader is usually more than just a facilitator. He or she is a shepherd, checking with members between meetings, caring for them, modeling Christlikeness, discipling them and training those who may someday lead other groups.

Curriculum

What should you study in your groups? That depends, of course, on what type of group it is. One way to decide what to study is to ask your teens what they are interested in. Find out what concerns them.

Topical studies are acceptable for short-term studies, but they are not enough. We need to get students into the Word. Research by the Gallup organization found that only 13 percent of teens, most of whom attend church services regularly, say they read the Bible often. Teens need to see the Bible is relevant to their lives. They are deeply concerned with big questions about life: Who am I? How do I get along with others? Where do I fit in? What do I believe? When teens search the Scriptures with these questions in mind, and when they begin to formulate the answers to life's biggest questions by an understanding of God's Word, the Bible becomes relevant.

Here are a few other ideas. Do an occasional service project as a group. Try an overnighter, a short trip, or a retreat together. Keep a list with each participant's name, address, telephone number, e-mail address, personal web site, birthday, and other relevant information. Find reasons to celebrate whenever you can. Take photos of your group. Adopt a grandparent for your group.

Both Large and Small Groups Needed

In youth ministry, both large and small groups are needed. If students are involved only in a small group, they will not feel like part of the entire fellowship. Teens like being part of something big. They enjoy big parties, and they like being in big crowds. They need big church groups too. But they also need small groups, where they can be the individuals they are and where they can express themselves and learn from others. Only in small groups will they really feel connected.

Especially today, teenagers have a need for intimacy. Many teens do not receive much attention at home, but they will get it in their small groups. In an age of ever-distancing relationships, small groups provide friendships and a source of caring, encouragement, and support. With the increasing pressures on teens today, they need a place to be refreshed, a place where they can see God active in their lives and the lives of others.

—MICHAEL C. MACK. Used with permission from *www.SmallGroups.com.*

Discuss

1. How can we improve the way we train our student Small-group leaders?
2. What are our students most interested in learning? How do we find this out?
3. How well does our student ministry integrate with the life and ministry of the entire congregation?

Further Exploration

Websites, magazines, and books to help build your student small groups.

Smallgroups.com. Small-group training and curriculum from Christianity Today International.
-"Growing Small Groups" Training Theme and PowerPoint
"Healthy Small Groups" Training Theme and PowerPoint
"Small Groups" Assessment pack

WillowGroups. Small-groups resources site of the Willow Creek Association
www.willowcreek.com/smallgroups

Ignite Your Faith magazine, the new name for the former Campus Life magazine. Helps students understand their culture and better live out their faith for Christ. Related website is **igniteyourfaith.com.**

Impact: Student Ministry That Will Last a Generation *Steven Patty and Steve Keels, editors.* A guide to help ministry leaders explore the implications of Jesus for ministry to youth. (B & H Publishing Group, 2005; ISBN 0805425845)

Purpose-Driven Youth Ministry *by Doug Fields.* The youth pastor of Saddleback Church defines nine foundations for purpose driven ministry. (Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 1998; ISBN 0310212537)

Shaping the Spiritual Life of Students: A Guide for Youth Workers, Pastors, Teachers & Campus Ministers *by Richard R. Dunn.* Reach this first all-postmodern generation by helping set the pace of their lives. (InterVarsity Press, 2001; ISBN 0830822844)

Small-group Strategies: Ideas and Activities for Developing Spiritual Growth in Your Students *by Laurie Polich and Charley Scandlyn.* Provides a strategic approach to planning group meetings, caring for students, and helping them grow in discipleship. (Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2005; ISBN 0310258014)

Student Ministry for the 21st Century *by Bo Boshers with Kim Anderson.* Provides instructions to help youth workers energize their groups, and establish strategic approaches to growth. (Zondervan, 1997; ISBN 0310201225)