

Re-Launching a Small-Groups Ministry



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Leader's Guide

How to use "Re-Launching a Small-Groups Ministry" by SMALLGROUPS.COM in your regularly scheduled meetings.

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 "Re-Launching a Small-Groups Ministry," 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 to explore weaknesses in your previous small-groups ministry. Select "What Went Wrong?" (p. 13–14). Or perhaps you want to explore a real-life situation of small groups being reborn. Consult "A Women's Groups Ministry Is Revived" (p. 10).

3. Photocopy the handout. Let's say you selected "What Went Wrong?" 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 five minutes. After you have allowed time for reading, begin the discussion by asking one of the provided questions. Be ready to move the discussion to specific issues your church is facing.

Most SMALLGROUPS.COM handouts can be discussed in 15 or 20 minutes (except the Bible study and Activity, which may take longer). Your small-group leadership 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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RE-LAUNCHING A SMALL-GROUPS MINISTRY



My Favorite Hero

The example of Nehemiah shows us what it takes to make a difference for God.

Nehemiah 6:15–16

Inside of every one of us is a desire to make a difference, not just to tread water. We want to feel that the world has become just a little more like God wants it to be because we have been alive. That's why I'm such a big fan of Nehemiah. He was a great Difference Maker. And looking at his life, we can explore five principles of Difference Makers in this world.

Nehemiah 1:4—Difference Makers experience a holy discontent.

The first characteristic of someone whom God uses to make a difference in this world is pain. Difference making often begins with a sense of holy discontent. There is a very personal, very deep response to some area of brokenness in the world.

- *Describe a time when you felt real pain over an area of brokenness within your sphere of life. Why did it affect you so deeply? How did you respond?*

Nehemiah 1:5–11—Difference Makers respond with urgent prayer.

Nehemiah is a Type-A personality. He's a racehorse. But when he gets the news about Jerusalem's condition, he stops everything. For four months, he pours out his heart to God every day. For four months, his fire is burning, but he doesn't do anything—except pray.

Nehemiah 2:17–18—Difference Makers take action.

Sometimes I'm tempted to give myself credit because I have a good heart and empathetic feelings about something. "I'm against hunger. I'm against poverty. I'm against spiritual aloneness." But Difference Makers actually do something.

- *What actions can you take to improve a broken situation in your sphere of influence?*

Nehemiah 6:1–14—Difference Makers demonstrate persistence.

Maybe there's something you're seeking to change through God's power—maybe it's a habit, maybe it's something in the world around you, maybe it's your marriage or your family—and you've hit a wall and you've hit opposition. Of course you have! It's a fallen, broken world. It's a spiritual battle. We can't overcome all these problems on our own. Our job is to persist: "All right, God. I'll be faithful. I won't give up."

Nehemiah 8:10—Difference Makers bring joy.

There is a time for weeping, but Nehemiah says that the bottom line of his story is not our brokenness. It's the good news that God is our God, and that he loves us. Even though we've fallen so far short, he's a gracious God. So do things to bring joy. Go and eat—not just food, but choice food. Go and drink—not Diet Cokes, but something like Coke Classic. Something that will bring you joy. And give some to people who have nothing, because this is about God's community.

- *What activities bring you the most joy? What would it be like to enjoy them as a gift from God? As an act of worship?*

—JOHN ORTBERG, adapted from "My Favorite Heroes," *PreachingToday.com*. Copyright © 2007 Christianity Today International.

Discuss

1. Which of the five principles do we demonstrate best?
2. Which of the five principles have the most room for improvement?
3. How will re-launching our small-groups program help our church make a difference for God's kingdom?

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Key Principles for Re-Launching

John Atkinson discusses several important factors for small-groups ministries contemplating a re-launch.

Ecclesiastes 3:1–8

John Atkinson is the discipleship pastor and home-teams director for Bay Area Fellowship in Corpus Christi, Texas. He is co-author of [Go Big with Small Groups](#).

SMALLGROUPS.COM: Can you give us a brief summary of your experience with re-launching a small-groups ministry?

John Atkinson: When I came on staff at Bay Area Fellowship, there were about 16 groups. But because there wasn't a pastor or ministry leader overseeing the effort, about half of them were completely unhealthy—they were basically mini-churches out on their own. So one of the first things I did was “grow” our home-team ministry from 16 teams to 8, which I know is not a very auspicious start.

We re-launched at that point with a whole new vision. I think one of the biggest problems I see with small-group ministries that fail is that there is no vision. There's no answer to the question, “Why do we have a small-groups ministry?” A lot of small-group ministries are out there because churches think, “Well, we're supposed to have one.” But if you don't have a vision for what you're trying to accomplish, you'll never accomplish it.

What are some of the first steps that church leaders need to take when re-launching a small-groups ministry?

Well, the first step is to identify a vision, for all the reasons I just mentioned. The second step is to set goals. What percentage of your congregation would you like attending small groups? Setting numerical goals gives you something to strive for. And I really challenge church leaders not to set achievable goals. Instead, set God-sized goals. Because if you set goals you know how to achieve, you don't need God. Once you have some goals, the next step is to put a plan of action into place to make the vision a reality through the goals you set.

But if I was to look back at all the churches I've worked with over the years, I think the most important step is to make sure the leadership of the church is on-board with what you're trying to do. I see more small-group ministries fail—or even if they're still there, they're not healthy—because the vision of the ministry doesn't match the vision of the church.

Oftentimes as small-group pastors, we have this grand idea about how we're going to grow the small-group ministry and get all these people involved. And we think: *I'm going to do it my way. This is how to get it done.* Then we sit down and talk with our senior pastor, and it's not the same vision.

So, as leaders in the church—those of us in the second chair and below—we need to make sure that our vision for ministry matches that of the senior pastor, because we're called to serve him. And oftentimes that means we have to humbly change our plan so that it falls in line with the plan of the senior pastor.

In fact, the most important thing you can do when re-launching a small-group ministry is to get with your senior pastor and say: “We want to re-launch this thing. Here's our vision, here's our goals, and here's our plan. And for these to be successful, this is what we'll need from you.” Because if the senior pastor isn't talking about small groups on a regular basis, or isn't part of launching the vision for small groups, then the body of the church doesn't know they need to be in one.

Besides a lack of support from the senior pastor, what are some other obstacles that specifically attack an effort to re-launch a small-groups program within a church?

One of the biggest things that destroys small-group ministries is when they begin to compete against Sunday school. As a leader, you have to make sure that when you cast a vision for small groups, everyone in the church recognizes that you're not competing against Sunday school. You're not telling anyone not to go to Sunday school, or that Sunday school is bad. Small groups are just something different. ➤

RE-LAUNCHING A SMALL-GROUPS MINISTRY

Resistance from existing leaders is also something you're likely to deal with. Several people have asked me, "What do you do with those leaders that have been there a long time and just aren't willing to follow you?" Well, making hard decisions is part of leadership. You have to be willing to say: "I've prayed my way through this vision, I've prayed my way through these goals, and I've prayed my way through this plan. I'm sure this is where God wants us to go." And maybe that means removing some leaders who've been with the ministry a long time if they're not on board with the vision you've laid out.

Third, sometimes you have a stagnant ministry because you have a stagnant leader. A lot of churches decide they want small groups, so they go out and find someone with the right pedigree and the right seminary degree—but with no passion for small groups. So sometimes getting a small-groups ministry to move forward means replacing the leader with someone who's really got a heart for small groups.

How can church leaders decide whether their small-groups program requires a total re-launch, or is only in need of a few tweaks?

For a ministry to be totally scrapped and re-started, it almost has to be completely unhealthy. And it's not hard to figure out when something is just a mess—the attitudes will be bad and the ministry will be completely stagnant.

But most ministries, if they are still operating at all, will contain a remnant of good, solid, godly leaders who are willing to follow the new direction wherever it goes. And you should always give existing leadership within the ministry a chance to jump on board. The key is to firmly lead and say, "This is the direction we're going." You'll find out quickly who's willing to follow you.

If a small-groups ministry needs to be re-launched, it's a good assumption that it wasn't growing. So how can church leaders sustain and increase numerical growth after the re-launch?

One of the healthiest things you can do for any small group, or any small-group ministry, is to keep it multiplying. The reason small groups get stagnant is because you can't put the same people in the same group year after year and keep them exciting.

We train our leaders to drop the seed on the first day of a new group. "I'm really glad you're all here, and we're going to have a lot of fun together. But a year from now, some of you will be leading a group." They don't want to scare anybody, so they just mention it. Then, a month later, they mention it again. And again. And they start building a process for multiplication by picking the people who have the most leadership potential.

We have coordinators that oversee 25 groups each. They're constantly talking to the leaders about multiplication. I never get in a room with a bunch of leaders without talking about multiplication. I never send out a training e-mail without talking about multiplication. So we've reached a point now where nobody goes into one of our small groups without recognizing that the group will multiply. And this always keeps new life coming into the groups; it keeps them from getting stagnant.

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Discuss

1. Would we categorize our church's small-groups ministry as healthy or stagnant?
2. Which of the steps necessary to re-launching a small-groups program has our church already taken? Which steps are missing?
3. Are any of the obstacles mentioned affecting the health and growth of our church's small-groups program? How could those obstacles be overcome?



Look Backward, Look Forward

Use these tools to evaluate past failures and plan for future success.

Proverbs 24:32

Here is a common scenario in small-group ministry: Your church tried small groups some time in its history, but the experiment was a disaster. You know you ought to try again, but church members are resistant when they recall the previous attempt. How can you be successful this time around?

Learn from past experiences.

The first step in a successful re-launch is to assess what went wrong last time. Below are some common hindrances to an effective small-group ministry. Assemble your leadership team and determine to what extent each of them affected your church's last attempt at small groups. At the end, identify other hindrances that weren't listed.

| | True of us | Mostly true of us | Somewhat true of us | Not true of us |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Many people in our church already experienced authentic community (through family, Sunday school, and so on) and felt that adding a small-group commitment would be a drag on their weekly calendar. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Our church failed to get key leaders on board with the idea of a sustained, supported small-groups ministry. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Our church failed to provide adequate training and preparation for small-group leaders. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Our church chose a poor time—in the calendar year or in the overall life of the church—to begin a small-groups ministry. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Our church did not provide adequate publicity for their small groups. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. Our church attempted to accomplish too much at once—aiming for a large, highly organized ministry right from the beginning. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. Our church attempted to accomplish too little—either by setting few goals, or by setting goals that were underwhelming. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. Leaders and members of our small groups were not motivated by the topic and materials to be studied. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. Our church made too many rules, leaving the groups with no flexibility to meet individual needs. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. Our church made too few rules, opening the door for divisiveness or inaccurate Bible teaching. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11. Our church failed to approach God through sufficient prayer as the small-groups program was launched. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12. Our church viewed the small-groups program as a method of increasing attendance rather than an opportunity to glorify God. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Other hindrances that affected our church's first attempt at small groups:

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Apply your findings to future plans.

After your team has a picture of what did not work in the past, use the same questions to discuss what factors will contribute to a successful launch this time around. Indicate the degree to which your leadership team has addressed each of these questions.

When you’ve finished both assessments, you’ll have a good idea of which problems were the most damaging in the past, as well as which areas need the most work in the present. Using that information, you’ll have a great chance at success in the future!

| | We've answered this question | We've mostly answered this question | We've somewhat answered this question | We've not discussed this question. |
|---|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. Are our members hungry for community and in need of small groups? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. How can we ensure total support from the key leaders in our church? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. How can we ensure that individual group leaders are trained well? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Have we chosen an optimal launch date for our church’s annual calendar? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Is publicity adequate? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. Are we biting off more than we can chew? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. Are we biting off less than we can chew? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. What initial topics and/or materials will capture people’s attention? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. How can we let groups be flexible so that they don’t feel stifled? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. How can we keep groups accountable so that they don’t produce bitterness or heresy? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11. Have we sufficiently presented our plans to God through prayer? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12. How can we approach small groups as a spiritual, not practical, endeavor? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Other questions our church needs to answer before a small-groups ministry can be successfully re-launched:

—RICK LOWRY; *copyright © 2007 Christianity Today International; reprinted with permission from Smallgroups.com*

Discuss

1. What three hindrances were most damaging to our church’s last attempt at starting a small-groups ministry?
2. What three questions have been answered well as we prepare for a re-launch? What three questions have been given the least attention?
3. What is the next step our small-group leadership team needs to take in order to prepare for a successful small-groups ministry in the future?



Gene Therapy for Small Groups

Here is a checklist of the vital steps in small-group evolution.

Psalm 139:15–16

When I was called to take over the small-groups ministry at Bay Area Fellowship, the church had 16 small groups. In the first week, I did something radical: I shut down half of them because they were unhealthy. But in the next three-and-a-half years, the number of groups grew dramatically to 177.

How did that happen? We dug down deep to adjust the very nature of the groups—their DNA—using the three basic principles below. As you review the steps within each principle, check off the ones your church has already tackled. Then, in each category, write down an idea of your own that will further strengthen your church in each area.

1. Make a Quality First Impression

- Get together with your group leaders and cast a vision for what the role of leader is and isn't, including the responsibilities. If you don't do this, leaders will do whatever they want, and the ministry will be pulled in different directions.
- Have every leader sign a covenant agreeing to follow the church leadership. This protects everyone involved, but especially the church. It must give the church the right to remove any leader who is not abiding by the covenant.

What's Next? _____

2. Tongue-Tie Gossip

- Make sure every small-group leader understands that their group is an extension of the church. Gossip is not acceptable; small groups are not a place to criticize the church, leaders, or other people.
- Train leaders to deal with these situations in the same way. If a member has a problem with a church leader, encourage them to discuss it with the person.
- Train group leaders to confront selfish or difficult people in a loving way so that one person doesn't destroy the group. The person should be taken aside and told that they are hurting the group. The person will respond positively and grow from the experience, or reject it, giving grounds for removal.

What's Next? _____

3. Focus on Growth

- Make multiplication part of every small group. This will not happen automatically, so develop and employ a plan.
- Encourage open groups that welcome newcomers. Closed groups rarely grow and often spoil into bitterness. If new people do show up at closed groups, they often feel unwelcome.
- Prepare leaders to talk about multiplication in their groups from day one. If you talk about it regularly, when the time comes to multiply, no one is surprised.

What's Next? _____

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Discuss

1. Has our church identified a unified vision for its small-groups ministry? If not, who needs to be involved in that conversation?
2. In what area of multiplication is our small-groups ministry weakest?
3. How would our church (or small-groups ministry) be different if it embodied the characteristics outlined above?



Creating a “Discipling Community”

Learning from your mistakes is a vital step in starting over again.

James 1:2–4

The Case “Small groups will produce cliques.” “My religion is private.” “I sure don’t want to sit around listening to people air their emotions.” These were some of the remarks provoked by my first attempt at initiating the ministry style of small-group discipleship in my church. I went ahead anyway.

At one service I issued a call following one of my motivational pep talks, and 80 people responded. I divided them randomly into 8 groups of 10 and arbitrarily said, “All right, you 10 will be a group. Here’s your leader.”

This proved about as effective as pushing a chain. The group members did not feel united and did not develop any real sense of intimacy. Since they derived little benefit, many decided the meetings were not worth the effort, and the groups collapsed. It was a very quick lesson.

What Would You Do?

- ◆ Have you listened to the wisdom and advice of church leaders as you prepare to re-launch your church’s small-group ministry?
- ◆ Do you have a plan in place to identify leaders and form workable groups?

What Happened

More recently, I felt a strong push by the Holy Spirit to try again. We had progressed through six years of dynamic new life, and I saw the need for the roots of our faith to grow deeper. I felt certain that the way to accomplish this was by building a thorough working model of small-group discipleship principles for congregational life.

This time, however, I resisted all impulses to start big. Christ prayed all night before choosing his disciples, and I recognized that my knees would have to hit the carpet many times before the right people would come along to help me channel our congregation into a dynamic ministry of small groups. So I prayed.

Then I shared my vision with several other people. A few of them met and prayed with me for a time; but they soon quit—some out of frustration over how slowly we were progressing, others out of bitterness over disagreements about how we should approach small-group discipleship. I continued to pray. Finally, three individuals approached me with a desire to grow through prayer and fellowship. They came within the same period of time, and I felt their presence was a direct answer to prayer.

We began meeting regularly to build patterns of growth into our lives. I modeled, trained, and encouraged the practice of five spiritual disciplines: daily time in the Scripture, daily prayer, regular fellowship, witnessing to others, and helping individuals who were hurting.

I remembered that my first attempt at creating small groups had collapsed because there was no generating center from which to equip leaders and encourage groups. The new objective was to gather together a “discipling community,” which would meet periodically as a large teaching fellowship and provide a challenge of priority living to those who attended. This discipling community would in turn provide the matrix for generating a multitude of effective small groups and small-group leaders.

—JAMES R. TOZER WITH DANIEL W. PAWLEY; *copyright* © 2007 *Christianity Today International*. Originally appeared in *LEADERSHIP*.

Discuss

1. Has our church explored why previous attempts at small-group ministry have not sustained momentum?
2. Are mature Christian leaders supporting our church’s small-group ministry through prayer?
3. Do our church leaders model the spiritual disciplines in their everyday lives for the benefit of potential small-group leaders?



A Women's Group Ministry Is Revived

Learn the benefits of moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach.

1 Corinthians 12:4–6

The Case The yearning to send and support missionaries had for decades been the glue that held together the women's ministry at Galilee Baptist Church in Denver, Colorado. But by the time I came to the church, only a faithful few attended meetings and the weekly Bible study.

As I analyzed my new ministry, I remembered something I once read: "The greatest obstacle to growth and evangelization is a ministry preoccupied with its own existence. What is needed is a fresh approach and a little sanctified ingenuity." I concluded it was time for a fresh approach.

What Would You Do?

- ◆ What are the underlying values of your small-group ministry? What's holding it together?
- ◆ In what specific areas is your ministry in need of a fresh approach?

What Happened

When it came to women's ministry, our church used to have a one-size-fits-all mentality. That meant we probably didn't fit anyone well. Our challenge, as I saw it, was to target the subgroups of women in our church. Then we could build rapport between the subgroups. Initially, we targeted the easiest group: women at home.

A survey we conducted revealed that the young mom at home felt alone. She wanted to become involved in something meaningful and stimulating. She didn't want to be entertained; she was eager to learn. In many cases, our nonworking pre-boomers, who no longer had children at home, were also looking to grow spiritually as well as use their gifts and years of experience. All the women, regardless of age, were looking for a place where they would be known, affirmed, and accepted.

We began by giving women a choice of two daytime Bible studies. One was taught by a dynamic, humorous teacher from our church. The other was an in-depth video Bible study. We also offered electives such as craft projects and time-management seminars, which often attracted non-Christians, too. So by offering a variety of choices, we not only targeted the nonworking women, but we also blended at-home women from different generations.

As our morning women's group grew, we saw a tremendous opportunity to begin an evening study for working women and single parents. Our biggest mistake in designing this program was to pattern it after our morning group. Working women's needs are different. They have little free time, and most of their needs to socialize are met on the job. They are not looking for fellowship so much as a few close friends and solid content. So we chose to focus on instruction rather than fellowship.

After trial and error, we finally developed a program that works. We offered an evening Bible study with a choice of two teachers. One mined those little nuggets of truth that new believers and non-Christians find especially helpful. The other teacher appealed to women who wanted in-depth biblical perspectives on their life and work.

—DENISE FARRAR WITH JUDIE AMEN; *copyright* © 2007 *Christianity Today International*. Originally Appeared In *LEADERSHIP*.

Discuss

1. Is our small-groups ministry suffering from a one-size-fits-all mentality?
2. How can our church identify the needs of people currently in small groups?
3. How can our church identify the needs of people not currently in small groups?



The Warehouse with Wings

Learn to deal with the inevitable resistance caused by leadership drag.

Psalm 56:1–2

Read *O God, have mercy on me. The enemy troops press in on me. My foes attack me all day long. My slanderers hound me constantly, and many are boldly attacking me (Psalm 56:1–2, NLT).*

Comprehend At one ministry conference, I visited with a pastor friend during a break. He described some of the good things happening at his church—then cautioned, “That doesn’t mean we don’t have our share of frustrations.” I said, “I don’t know any pastor who isn’t frustrated.” For leaders of any sort in ministry, frustration is the nature of the work.

In fact, the better you are as a leader, the more frustration you may be in for. Leaders have grand vision, and great visions aren’t reached overnight. Leaders want the best for everyone, and not everyone reaches their best. Leaders are goal-oriented, and in the path of every worthwhile kingdom goal stand many setbacks and obstacles. Leaders are people-oriented, and where there are people, there are problems. Leaders demand a lot of themselves, yet they have human failings. Leaders are future-oriented, yet they must live in the present. Leaders call for change, and most change is met with resistance.

So leadership by nature pushes against a high drag coefficient. Drag is the resistance air gives to the body of airplanes and automobiles as they move. Depending on the shape of an airplane wing, that drag is increased or decreased. As we strain to speed forward, sometimes it feels like the leadership airplane is shaped like a warehouse with wings. The resistance is incredible. The drag on leadership is so great that it threatens to bring leaders to a grinding halt unless they have an extraordinary level of God-inspired perseverance.

David was one of the greatest—and most successful—leaders in Israel’s history, yet his life was marked by continual, extreme hardship. For example, after the prophet Samuel anointed David as the next king of Israel, King Saul repeatedly attempted to kill David. David had to wander in the desert and in foreign lands for years as a fugitive with several hundred outcasts. Once, when David and his men were away from their town on a mission, an enemy burned their town and took all their wives and children. Not only did David face the loss of his family, but his men talked about stoning him to death!

David was the anointed leader of Israel, but he endured a lifetime of hardships as Israel’s shepherd. So don’t be surprised by the drag coefficient of leadership. With God’s help, you can endure it and overcome.

—CRAIG BRIAN LARSON; *copyright* © 2001 *Christianity Today International*.
Originally appeared in LEADERSHIP DEVOTIONS (Tyndale House Publishers).

Discuss

1. How has frustration crept in to our work with our church’s small-group ministry?
2. Is the airplane of our church designed for a large or small amount of drag? Can that drag be reduced?
3. How can we continually develop perseverance in order to produce fruit within that drag?

Pray Father, thank you that we do not face hardships alone. We confess our impatience and frustration with others—and with you. Please give us the strength to endure as our trials produce patience within us, and as that patience finishes its perfect work, so that we can be mature and complete, lacking nothing.



The Value of Mistakes

The best leaders aren't afraid of a reasonable mess.

Proverbs 14:4

Read *An empty stable stays clean, but no income comes from an empty stable (Proverbs 14:4, NLT).*

Comprehend Howard Head was frustrated with the clumsy, hickory snow skis he used when he hit the slopes. So he designed new skis with two layers of aluminum, plywood sidewalls, and a center filled with honeycombed plastic. He excitedly tried them out on the slopes, but they broke. So he made a second pair. They broke, too—as did the third pair. Howard Head went through 40 versions of skis over three years. Finally, in 1950, he came up with a design that worked, and his sporting equipment is known worldwide today.

Leaders who expect progress must allow some latitude for chaos and failure. That's the point of Proverbs 14:4. Derek Kidner, an Old Testament scholar, comments, "Orderliness can reach the point of sterility. This proverb is not a plea for slovenliness, physical or moral, but for the readiness to accept upheaval and a mess to clear up as the price of growth." Do you want your feeding trough kept clean? Fine, then don't have any oxen. But you'll have a tough time harvesting and processing your grain.

Peter Drucker recognizes this wisdom when it comes to business. He suggests, "The better a man is, the more mistakes he will make, for the more new things he will try. I would never promote into a top-level job a man who was not making mistakes—otherwise he is sure to be mediocre." Another CEO adds, "Make sure you generate a reasonable number of mistakes."

Churches and ministries that make an impact create an environment where people are allowed to make mistakes. Obsession with complete order will curb creativity. Do you want the walls in your church facility to be spotless, or do you want to reach more teens for Jesus Christ? Is it more important to avoid legal hassles and red tape, or to develop a ministry to single moms?

Leaders must create environments for themselves and others that allow for a reasonable amount of mess. That's the price for progress.

—STEVE MATTHEWSON; *copyright © 2001 Christianity Today International. Originally appeared in Leadership Meditations (Tyndale House Publishers).*

- Discuss**
4. Have we made mistakes in the past when operating our church's small-groups ministry? What can be learned from those mistakes?
 5. Is our current small-groups leadership flexible enough to allow for "a reasonable number of mistakes" during a re-launch of the ministry?
 6. How can small-group leaders and coaches learn to better recognize and learn from mistakes when they do happen?

Pray Lord Jesus, thank you for the chance to minister as your hands and feet in this world. We acknowledge our humanity and understand that we will make mistakes. But we put our trust in you, Lord Jesus, and believe that in all things you work for the good of those who love you. Please give us the courage to work boldly and produce fruit for your kingdom.



What Went Wrong?

Here are seven reasons why small-group ministries fail to soar.

Proverbs 28:13

When done correctly, small groups serve two noble purposes: growth and community. Our ultimate purpose in joining and leading small groups is to glorify God by being transformed into the image of Jesus Christ and to do our part in being ambassadors in his reconciliation work. In such a God-reflected community, we experience significant and life-giving transformation. We grow.

So why doesn't it always work? Why are small groups often so difficult to get off the ground? Why is it so hard to maintain momentum? Based on my experience, there are seven habits and poor choices that may short-circuit an effective small-group ministry.

1. We don't know what we are aiming at.

Too often, churches fail to identify targets for the macro and micro views of their ministry. For the macro view, leaders need to identify what they want small groups to accomplish in regards to the overall community of the church. Many churches look at the small-group ministry as an entity unto itself—as just another program to build and maintain. But Jesus didn't give us the mandate to build small groups; he gave us the mandate to love and serve one another.

Small groups are a vehicle for the church to grow as the family of God.

For the micro look, leaders need to identify what small groups will accomplish in the life of individual believers. What should people experience, achieve, and become when they encounter community in a small group? In all honesty, most churches don't have a clue. Jesus and Paul talked a lot about fruit. Jesus said that, when we become good soil, we will produce an amazing amount of fruit—30, 60, or 100 fold. People get excited when they realize that these words are for them—not just for their pastor.

2. We don't provide consistent basic leader training.

Your church needs leaders. As I've met with different churches across the country, I've encountered past small-group leaders who shared with me that they aren't sure if they did a good job in their groups. Today, potential leaders ask me if I think they really can lead a group well. Remember this: to be long-term, effective leaders, your people need confidence and competency.

Many churches use two ineffective options to train their leaders and instill that confidence. First, they plug new leaders into existing training meetings and hope they catch the basics through osmosis. Second, they provide their leaders with a book or a tape and hope they get something out of it that will propel them to success. But without a good roadmap, new leaders often get frustrated, resulting in a tenure that is far too short.

A better option is to design or purchase a training regimen that can be offered to all new small-group leaders. This will help those leaders identify the foundational items, catch your church's vision, learn important skills, and develop confidence to lead their groups effectively.

3. We don't provide enough support for leaders.

Would you send your children out on their first bicycle without training wheels? Likewise, your small-group leaders, especially the new ones, require support, encouragement, and propping up. In general, small-group leaders have two foundational needs:

1. *To be growing in Christ themselves.* As with all Christians, the spiritual growth of small-group leaders is an unfolding odyssey, not a destination. Most growth falls under the responsibility of the individual. Yet ministry coaches and shepherds still need to encourage the spiritual growth of their leaders, just as those leaders are expected to encourage the growth of their members.
2. *To be caught doing the right things well.* As stated earlier, many leaders live under a shadow of insecurity. When a coach or shepherd takes the time to visit small-group meetings, they can affirm the good things that were said and done.

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4. Our practiced vision and values don't match the stated vision and values.

Vision and mission statements are really important. We all need them. They give us direction, conviction, and motivation—when we actually use them. But how aligned are our stated and practiced vision and values, really, when we speak, hire, and train? How and when do we assess whether what we say we believe matches what we are actually doing?

Many churches talk community; few foster it. But in order to have a successful small-groups ministry, it's necessary to do both.

5. We value busyness over production.

“Do I have room to do one more thing?” This is the unfortunate motto of many small-group members, leaders, and coaches. As a result, attending or leading a small group becomes one of many worthwhile ministries demanding our time, attention, and allegiance. Inevitably in this situation, the church evolves in to a great place to keep people busy, but not a great place to foster spiritual transformation.

Churches and small groups must ask themselves several important questions. Are people giving their time without experiencing authentic community? Are they serving faithfully without producing transformation in themselves or the ones they serve? Are the lives of small-group coaches and leaders more frantic and frenetic than the lives of the people they are trying to serve?

Remember: busyness will not inspire anyone to follow Jesus.

6. We don't take time to celebrate.

All Christians want to hear Jesus say, “Well done good and faithful servant.” And I hope we all do. But do we have to wait for heaven to hear those words? I certainly hope we don't.

Jesus has already identified us as the fruit of his labor, and the labor of those who went before us. Why not celebrate it now? Fortunately, God already provided us with an example to follow in the Hebrew holidays. These feasts were established as celebrations of God's total provision for the Israelites. And they always involved family, friends, and food as significant parts of the equation.

We, too, need to celebrate what God is doing in the lives of our small-group members, leaders, and the entire ministry. There are several different ways to set up these celebrations, but churches should always keep in mind that God is being glorified, that we are being transformed, and that we are doing this all in the context of community. We are part of a heavenly family.

7. We talk about prayer more than we pray.

Whether part of a small-group ministry or not, Christians know they are supposed to pray. We believe that prayer makes a difference in the lives of individuals and in the health of a church community.

So, are there people in your church who consistently, sacrificially pray for your small groups? Do individual coaches pray for the leaders in their care? Do leaders pray for the members they serve? I am fully convinced that the small-group ministry I oversaw grew way beyond my leadership ability because of the prayer people invested into that ministry—and into me.

As you and your church leadership find practical answers to these questions and issues, you will discover an effective small-group ministry that makes a difference in the lives of people—and in the community of God's kingdom.

—JACK DYSON; *copyright © 2007 Christianity Today International/Buildingsmallgroups.com*

Discuss

1. Do any of the seven habits describe a current situation in our church or small-group ministry?
2. How could these problems be corrected during the re-launch of a small-groups ministry?
3. What steps will need to be taken, and who will need to be consulted, before changes can be implemented in our church's small-groups ministry?



Chronic Jump-Start Syndrome

Is your small-group ministry suffering from this common disease?

James 5:14

Small-group ministries often go through a significant period of downturn or decline. Symptoms of this sickness may include declining participation, little motivation for outreach, a lack of equipped leaders, or the absence of a ministry point leader. Many times, church leaders prescribe a church-wide “jump-start” in order to get small groups revived and back on track.

What is a small-groups jump-start?

These jump-starts may take the form of a churchwide campaign, a rally that continues for several weeks, or even a seasonal kickoff. When the jump-start works, small groups grow, new leaders emerge, and biblical community increases. For some churches, the momentum created by the jump-start is sustainable, and the small-group ministry thrives over many seasons.

In many churches, however, the ministry situation drifts back to the pre-jump-start level after the energy wears off. Many church leaders then conclude that what the ministry needs is another jump-start. This is planned and implemented, which again gives the overall ministry a little more energy and momentum. But then the situation drifts back to near pre-jump-start conditions and the cycle continues.

Too often, churches in this situation find themselves needing to perform jump-starts periodically in order to keep the ministry alive. In fact, if the church operates on a programmed ministry calendar, leaders may schedule these jump-starts into the church calendar every year—sometimes even two or three times per year.

Diagnosing Chronic Jump-Start Syndrome

There is nothing wrong with seasonal kickoffs. However, I think church leaders need to ask themselves what would happen to the health of the ministry without regular jump-start events. When a small-group ministry needs routine jump-starts to maintain any momentum or even to remain alive, I call that Chronic Jump-start Syndrome (CJS)!

Can a small-group ministry become sustainable and continue to grow without the aid of constant jump-starts? I confess that I don't have a complete answer to that question. Each ministry situation has unique circumstances and reasons why a jump-start might be beneficial. However, I do believe that it's necessary for churches to grapple with reality. If the ministry was sick prior to the jump-start and devolves back into sickness after the jump-start, then continuing to repeat that cycle will only enable a chronically unhealthy situation.

Our temptation is to accept the notion that activity creates better outcomes, or that continually doing jump-start events will create spiritual health. However, this may not be true. I believe that it is more important to step back and assess why the jump-starts are necessary in the first place, rather than launching into more activity-based efforts that are not yielding long-term spiritual health.

Questions to consider

Based on conversations with several churches about their use of small-group ministry jump-starts, here are some questions to consider in your own evaluation of why a jump-start may or may not be needed:

- Is the jump-start more of a churchwide strategy for overall church revitalization, or is it targeted for small-group ministry?
- If a jump-start were not done, what would happen to small groups over time?
- Are the condition or symptoms caused by a lack of biblical community values, lack of community vision, poorly equipped small-group leaders, unrepentant sin, lack of ministry leaders, or something else?
- Once you have identified a need that you think a jump-start could solve, keep asking the question: Would a jump-start really address this issue or only mask it?

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- Always ask the question: Is there another course of action that can create a sustainable and more effective change in the ministry besides yet another jump-start? Examples may include better ongoing small-group-leader coaching, better training, building a nurturing leadership community, a change in church leadership attitudes, more prayer, and so on.

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Discuss

1. How does our current small-groups ministry receive and sustain momentum for health and growth?
2. Is our small-groups ministry suffering from Chronic Jump-Start Syndrome?
3. Besides regular churchwide events, what are other options for increasing the momentum of our church's small-groups ministry?



The A-B-Cs of Small-Group Resuscitation

Here are three important steps to restoring the life of your small-group ministry.

Ezekiel 37:5

One of the greatest mistakes made by church leaders who want to reintroduce a small-group ministry is that they begin with an announcement from the pulpit. I have talked with dozens of pastors who took this well-intentioned step—always with catastrophic results. Those in the church with a less-than-favorable experience felt disregarded, retired leadership felt dismissed, and residual leadership (if any) felt disrespected. There is a critical pre-game plan—based on the life-saving practice of CPR—that must be executed in private before going public.

When an unconscious or unresponsive person is being revived using CPR, it is vital for the rescuer to follow the A-B-C steps for resuscitation:

1. **Airway**—Open the airway
2. **Breathing**—Breathe into the opened airway
3. **Circulation**—Perform cycles of breaths and chest compressions to restore the victim

Airway—Learn from your past, present, and future small-group leadership.

This step begins with past leadership. Set up conversations over coffee with those who were significant voices of influence in the past (coaches and long-term leaders). Ask for their input. It is very important to do the following in each of your meetings:

- Be sincere in expressing appreciation for their past involvement. Invite honest feedback.
- Be humble and listen intently to what they say.
- Be discerning about who is supportive of you and the attempt to restart the small-group ministry. Some will express support for your goal, but will not be ready to help with the re-launch. That's okay!
- Beware of those who have nothing positive to say and use their conversation with you to vent negativity. Thank them for their input and move on. Your goal is not to gain everyone's acceptance and enthusiastic approval. Your goal is to try and get the right people on your team.

Have phone conversations with other leaders and volunteers who were less involved with the ministry. It is well worth the time to interface personally with every past leader, if possible, and it will mean a lot to them that you are taking the time to ask their opinions. Regardless of whether they are optimistic, ambivalent, or skeptical, you will learn a lot from these people—even if they are not ready to jump on board with the new effort.

The next step addresses present leadership. Begin by acknowledging those that are still involved with small groups at your church. Commend them for their commitment and include them in your future planning. Invite them to join you for a vision-casting dinner (more on that to follow) that will include all of the emerging small-group leadership.

Note: When approaching present small-group leadership, it is important not to convey that you are starting up something completely new—something that will replace the past small-group ministry. Rather, stress that you are continuing to build upon the foundation of community the Lord has already established. This honors what God has done, and may still be doing, through these present leaders.

Finally, address future leaders. Begin by reviewing your church's master list of members with your senior pastor. Highlight the names of those who have been, or are presently involved in, small-group ministry. Next, highlight the names of those you and your senior pastor think are good prospective leaders. As before, arrange sit-down conversations with people you are inviting into leadership roles that carry more responsibility.

Before moving on to the Breathing phase, remember that it is vital to get the *right* people on board with your new effort. You do not want naysayers on your team. You will be two to three times more effective with a team of three leaders who are of the same heart and mind than with a mixed-bag of ten.

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Breathing—Include all leaders in a vision-casting dinner and training experience.

After you have opened the airway by carrying out your pre-game plan with the emerging leadership, the next step is to bring all those who have expressed a positive openness to re-starting the small-group ministry together for a special dinner where you cast a fresh vision. Use this event as a springboard for inviting these leaders into a subsequent training experience.

During the initial vision-casting dinner, make sure to communicate your church's:

1. Mission and core values
2. Vision of how small groups will fuel the growth of biblical community
3. History with small groups and what you have learned from earlier attempts
4. Belief in the importance of small groups and their benefits
5. Current need for small groups in order to ensure healthy church growth
6. Renewed definition of a small group
7. New support structure for small-group ministry
8. Dream of what the new small-group ministry will look like in action
9. Ongoing plan for training, providing resources, and supporting new small-group leaders
10. Love and commitment for everyone present

You also will want to incorporate a breakout session where people can discuss questions with other leaders at their table. Invite people to share questions that you will address during the training. Conclude by circling everyone up and commissioning your new small-group-leadership community together.

The final step in breathing new life into your small-group ministry is hosting an inspirational training experience that includes all of the new and existing leadership.

Circulation—Reintroduce small groups as a churchwide ministry

As mentioned earlier, many churches kickoff their attempt at re-starting small groups by going public prematurely. Do not circumvent the process of securing and uniting your new leadership community within the fresh vision underlining your new attempt. In other words, you need to have your team together before game time. This community provides the necessary backbone to this churchwide initiative, especially when there is a history of unsatisfactory results.

In addition, it is vital that the senior pastor join with the small-group pastor/director in communicating this new vision. The reintroduction of a churchwide small-group ministry should be given a place of prominence in the weekend services. This communicates that small groups are not a sub-ministry or optional program in the adult community life of the church.

Restarting an unresponsive person's circulation usually requires a cyclical repetition of breathing and chest compressions. Likewise, there can be some repetition to the application of this third step of small-group CPR. The point is to stay creative in helping people to connect and grow together in Christ. Networking with other like-minded churches and sharing creative ideas and resources helps this process.

A person who is revived through CPR does not immediately spring back to their feet and take off running. Similarly, a small-group ministry that has life restored to it needs to be nurtured and nursed back to full health over time. It requires careful and clear communication. It requires consistency in prayer and promotion during the church's weekend life. It also requires a united leadership and an openness to new seasons of community life that connect with your church's mission.

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Discuss

1. What is the current health of our church's small-group ministry? Is it in need of resuscitation?
2. Which of the A-B-Cs has our church already implemented, if any?
3. What steps need to be taken before our church is ready to make a public commitment to small groups?



Starting Over

Here are the benefits of using a finesse approach when re-launching.
Matthew 4:18–22

Once upon a time, someone tried to start a small-group program in your church and it failed miserably. The whys and wherefores of the failure are irrelevant, but you are now stuck with ever-present naysayers whose mantra is, “We tried that....” Still, you know that small groups are the most efficient way to disciple believers, and so you are committed to a resurrection. The question is: Will you use a bulldozer or something with a bit more finesse?

Bulldozing vs. finesse

The bulldozer method seems to be the approach most often used in the local church. You know how it is done: Preach up a storm about the need for effective small groups, write articles for the newsletter, stamp a date on the calendar for small-group leadership training, and so on. Bulldozers are excellent pieces of equipment, but they tend to make a mess of the landscape, ruffle a lot of feathers, and create as many problems as they solve.

Finesse is a bit gentler, and it is certainly less confrontational. Whereas the bulldozer method means trying to get a lot of people on board at one time, finesse involves getting a lot of people involved one at a time. It’s a subtle distinction, but it could mean the difference between success and another failure. That’s why, in my experience, using finesse is a lot more effective when re-launching small groups.

Finessing your way into an effective small-group ministry means starting slowly. But there is hope. Below are five steps that will help you multiply both groups and leaders. Accomplishing these will provide all the momentum you need to successfully re-launch a small-group movement in your church.

Step 1: The Passionate Eye Test

Before trying to re-launch a small-group movement in your congregation, you will want to recruit a core group of potential new small-group leaders. If you don’t multiply yourself as a small-group leader, you will end up with just one small group (or a dozen small groups, each led by one exhausted you). The main issue is finding potential leaders.

One way to discover potential small-group leaders is to administer the Passionate Eye Test. This is a simple and effective tool based on the “Hire for Passion, Train for Skills” principle—in other words, find someone who is passionate about small groups and then train them. As its name implies, the Passionate Eye Test checks for passion. It is not the end-all-be-all of recruiting, but it’s the first step to launching a small-group movement. Here is how it works.

Whenever you are in a small gathering of church people—including a one-on-one situation—share your vision for a small-group movement. You don’t need to get verbose; just share from your own passion. As you do, watch your listener’s eyes. If they glaze over, you have ruled them out as a potential small-group leader. Don’t bother trying to convince that person; simply move on to someone else.

However, if the lights go on in that person’s eyes as you share, you have found a potential leader. Make a mental note to yourself (*Invite _____ to my first small-group gathering*) and move on. Don’t tip your hand yet. Above all, do not mention their potential as a small-group leader. Remember, this is about finesse.

Step 2: Launch

Once you have seen 12 pairs of eyes light up, it’s time to get something going. There are two schools of thought here. One school would invite these passionate people to a get-together where you would share your small-group vision and invite them to become small-group leaders. If you are like me—just an average Passionate Eye Test optometrist—you may find 10 of the 12 suddenly struck with myopia and unwilling to lead a small group.

Personally, I am a student of the second school of thought: the school of finesse. That school invites the passionate people to a get-together and starts an effective small group with them. Then, as you gather every week, you can take the next steps toward launching a small-group movement.

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Step 3: Apprentice

Whichever school of thought you choose, the next step is to apprentice your leaders. If you have tipped your hand (the first school of thought), then the agenda for these gatherings will likely be task oriented—a series of how-to lessons covering whatever format your small groups are going to take.

However, for those committed to finesse, you can do no better than practicing what I call Shadow Apprenticeship (because your apprentices walk in your shadow). Over the first 8 to 12 weeks, share the leadership tasks with members of the small group. Again, you need not tell them they are in training to become small-group leaders—you simply apprentice them without their knowledge.

For instance, our small groups perform the following tasks each week:

1. Have a meal
2. Spend time in scheduled and spontaneous prayer
3. Spend time in worship
4. Share life events and use the Bible to keep us on track
5. Ask about each others' spiritual practices during the week
6. Plan evangelistic efforts and review recent efforts

Using Shadow Apprenticeship, the small-group leader handles most of these tasks in the beginning. However, during the apprenticeship process, he or she quietly asks different people to be responsible for one or more of the specific tasks each week. The small-group leader then provides positive, one-on-one feedback and helpful hints to each participant who handled a task during the week. Ultimately, the goal is for each participant to become adept at every task.

Step 4: Recruit

Recruiting is probably the most important step in multiplying new leaders. If you have fully trained your small-group participants through shadow apprenticeship, you have removed the most common objections raised when asked to take on leadership: “I can’t lead!” and “I don’t know how.” You already have trained them, and they already have been leading.

However, if you are committed to an entire movement of small groups, recruiting your apprentices involves more than just inviting them to lead a new group. You should also ask them to participate in both a mentoring and a coaching relationship, as well as becoming a mentor themselves for future apprentices.

Remember, recruiting is not a group event. Approach each of your apprentices individually. Also, when you ask people to become leaders, assure them that they will be fully supported through ongoing mentoring and coaching. They will *not* be abandoned. Finally, be honest about your expectations. We expect our leaders to apprentice the participants in their groups and to be models of the faith.

Step 5: Mentoring and coaching

Mentoring is defined as “training by participation.” At my church, we expect our small-group leaders to be part of our weekly leadership small group. In that group, we basically follow the regular small-group model, except the discussion revolves around small-group-leadership issues.

Coaching can be defined as encouragement, but it is more than lavishing praise on someone. Coaching is expecting and bringing the best out of another. We offer one-on-one coaching appointments monthly. During these appointments, we review personal goals and issues.

Do we require a lot of our leaders? Most definitely. But by setting the bar high, it’s amazing how many are not only willing to take the leap, but view small groups as pivotal in their lives.

—BILL TENNY-BRITTIAN; copyright © 2007 Christianity Today International; reprinted with permission from *Smallgroups.com*

Discuss

1. Which approach does our church usually take when launching or re-launching a small-groups ministry?
2. What people could we discuss small groups with in order to use the Passionate-Eye Test?
3. Which of the five steps best describes our church’s current small-groups situation?



Developing an Invitational Culture

Use this practical activity to help evaluate your church's methods of attracting people into small groups.

John 1:40–42

Ultimately, invitation is the key to creating small groups. When an invitational culture permeates a church, people are more likely to be connected—to belong. Think what it would be like if every person—whether long-time member or visitor—felt invited to be a part of church groups. And consider how that experience would differ from a place where it takes extra effort just to squeeze your way in. An invitation to join a small group is a good way to make people feel welcome.

Activity

In order to figure out the best way to attract people into your church's re-launched small-groups program, it will be helpful to identify what attracted your leaders to their first small-group experiences.

1. Ask each person in the training session to tell the story of their first time attending a small-group gathering. The following questions are good guidelines to frame these stories:
 - i. How did you first hear about the small group? Were you invited by a specific person, or by a church announcement, sign-up sheet, or bulletin insert?
 - ii. Why did you accept the invitation?
 - iii. Were there any obstacles that caused you to hesitate or delay after receiving the invitation? How were those obstacles overcome?
 - iv. Did the group have a clearly expressed purpose? If so, what was it?
 - v. Did you regret or appreciate your decision to attend the small group? Why?
2. As the stories are told, write down common elements or themes that overlap from person to person.
3. Once the stories have finished, use the list of common elements or themes as a starting point for your plans to invite new people into your re-launched small-groups campaign. The following questions may be helpful in that discussion:
 - i. What benefits of joining a small group were most commonly expressed within the stories?
 - ii. What obstacles were most commonly expressed?
 - iii. Which type of invitation was most effective in attracting new group members: personal or impersonal. Why?
 - iv. Did the length of the study—or the amount of time spent in each meeting—attract or repel newcomers? Why?
 - v. Were newcomers influenced more by the material to be studied or the other people within the group?

Note: If you are leading a training group with a large amount of people, it may be necessary to divide them into groups of five or six before asking each person to tell his or her story. As the stories are told, each group should identify common elements or themes that overlap. Once all the groups are finished hearing the individual stories, each one can present its list of common elements or themes to the larger group.

—BROOKE B. COLLISON; *adapted from Know and Be Known (Alban Institute, 2007). Used with permission.*

Discuss

1. What methods does our church currently use to invite people into small groups?
2. Whether a long-time member or visitor, do people feel welcome at our church?
3. Does our small-groups ministry have an invitational culture? If not, what steps can we take to move toward that goal?



Further Exploration

Websites and books to help re-launch your small-groups ministry.

BuildingSmallGroups.com. Small-group resources from Christianity Today International.

- [Create a Plan to Strategically Develop Small-Group Leaders](#)
- [Identifying and Launching New Leaders](#)
- [Small-Group Leader—Orientation Guide](#)
- [Tools for Evaluating Your Small-Groups Ministry](#)
- [Small Groups—Assessment Pack](#)

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

Smallgroups.com. This website specializes in equipping small-group leadership to make disciples and strengthen community.

[Go Big with Small Groups](#) by Bill Easum and John Atkinson. A guide to explosive growth through small-groups ministry (Abingdon Press, 2006; ISBN 978-0687491353).

[Know and Be Known](#) by Brooke B. Collison. An exploration of an element missing in most group dynamics today: intentionality about relationships (The Alban Institute, 2007; ISBN 978-1566993357).

[Let's Get Started: How to begin your small-groups ministry](#) by Dan Lentz. A Help-Guide for churches who want to start, or re-start, a small-groups ministry (Standard Publishing, 2007; ISBN 978-0784720738).

[Making Small Groups Work](#) by Henry Cloud and John Townsend. 'This is a one-stop small-group leader's guide for gatherings of all sorts (Zondervan, 2003; ISBN 978-0310250289).

[The Seven Deadly Sins of Small-Group Ministry](#) by Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson. A troubleshooting guide for church leaders—this book contains assessments and solutions for seven common obstacles to building small groups (Zondervan, 2005; ISBN 978-0310267119).

[Walking the Small-Groups Tightrope](#) by Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson. This book helps you understand and deal with six dynamic areas every group leader must manage in order to create genuine, transforming small-group community (Zondervan, 2003; ISBN 978-0310252290).



Retreat Plan

How to create a weekend retreat on the theme of “Re-Launching a Small-Groups Ministry”

SMALLGROUPS.COM training downloads expand easily into a retreat format. Here is a sample retreat schedule you may follow for the “Re-Launching a Small-Groups Ministry” theme. The purpose of this retreat is to help your small-group leaders identify lessons that can be learned from previous attempts at small groups, and key principles that can increase your chances for success the next time around.

Friday Evening

- ◆ 8–8:45 P.M. **Opening Session:** Hand out copies of “Key Principles for Re-Launching,” the interview with John Atkinson 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 the implications of John Atkinson’s ideas for your church.
- ◆ 9–9:45 P.M. **Bible Study:** Close the evening with “My Favorite Hero,” 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 “The Warehouse with Wings” (p. 11). Discuss the questions at the bottom of the page and have a time of prayer, asking that God would help your team members understand and deal with resistance from a variety of sources.
- ◆ 10–10:45 A.M. **Assessment:** Use the assessment “Look Backward, Look Forward” on pages 6–7 to evaluate your church’s past and future small-groups ministry.
- ◆ 11 A.M.–12:15 P.M. **Activity:** Use the activity “Developing an Invitational Culture” on page 20. Allow at least 30 minutes for each of your team members to share their stories. Spend the remainder of the time identifying and discussing the common elements and themes, and discussing the questions provided at the end of page 20.
- ◆ NOON. **Lunch**

Saturday Afternoon

- ◆ 1–2 P.M. **Final Group Session:** Close the retreat with the how-to “Starting Over” on pages 18–19. After everyone has read the article, discuss how finesse can best be implemented into a re-launch of your small groups. Go on to the devotional “The Value of Mistakes” on page 12. Then pray together, asking God to provide each team member with the courage to make mistakes while boldly seeking to produce fruit with their ministry.

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.