

The Big Picture on Small Groups

Leader, get ready to take part in a savory slice of real life.

Psalm 34:3

By Angie Ward

Imagine something small, starting something big.

It happened once, when a simple carpenter shared his life with 12 close friends. For three years, they ate together, played together, learned together, traveled together, laughed together, cried together, and even fought together.

Their lives were changed, and then they went out and changed the world.

Do you believe it can happen today?

Imagine the direct descendant of that group of followers—the Church—doing the same thing today. Groups of a dozen people—sometimes a few more, sometimes a few less—sharing life together. Eating together. Playing together. Learning together. Traveling together. Laughing together. Crying together. And even fighting together.

**Whatever you call them, small groups have the potential to change lives.
And your church. And the world.
It can be done. It *has* been done.**

Small groups have been known to:

- Hold an entire church together when its leader confesses to moral failure.
- Transform neighborhoods, communities, and even entire cities by selflessly demonstrating the love of Jesus in practical ways.
- Laugh together 'til the wee hours of the morning.
- Hold a broken member with strong arms of support – physically, emotionally, spiritually, and even financially – during a time of crisis such as divorce, death, or illness.
- Spur individuals to greater personal spiritual growth.
- Instill a knowledge of scripture and a hunger for prayer.
- Share breakfast, lunch, dinner, dessert, high tea, midnight snacks, and pizza of all sizes, styles, and temperatures.
- Foster spirited discussion on matters both eternal and earthly.
- Introduce scores of friends, neighbors, and co-workers to a newfound relationship with Jesus Christ.
- Become (imagine this!) best friends.
- Transform the entire culture of a church by moving its attention outside its own walls.
- Serve as a laboratory for developing greater relational skills and health, sometimes even through conflict.
- Pool their financial resources to impact the life of a child, another family, or a missionary.
- Celebrate! Births, birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, graduations, accomplishments—anything from new babies to national championships.

Small groups can do all these things, yet are even more than the sum of their parts. Small groups are more than “just” a Bible study, although they provide the opportunity to study God’s word. They are more than a prayer group, although they can provide a “bridge line” to the throne room.

More than just a fellowship time or social hour, small groups can serve as the foundation for deep, truly life-changing relationships.

Healthy small groups have the potential to serve as a microcosm of the church, in its purest form: a safe place where people can encounter God, and find the resources and relationships to nurture their spiritual growth.

Starting or maintaining an effective small group ministry is not easy, of course. Relationships never are. "Successful" small group ministries—the kind that change lives—are clear about their purposes and intentional about their programs, yet remain focused on people. Having a small group *program* does not automatically equate to changed lives. Relationships cannot be institutionalized. Growth cannot be manufactured.

Yet while every church is uniquely called to minister in a particular setting, there are some commonalities to effective small groups:

1. They take *commitment*, and that commitment must spring from all of the church's key leaders, from the senior pastor on throughout the entire organization. If the Small Groups Pastor is the only person committed to small groups, they will at best become a niche program for a few others in the church.
2. They require a *clear purpose* based on an understanding of biblical principles and an understanding of the spiritual growth process. How do small groups fit into the mission of your church, how are they different from a Bible study, a support group, or a social club, and how will you determine whether or not they're effective?
3. They require *leadership development*. This is different from just recruiting people to fill roles; it involves reproducing the vision of fully functioning, "mini-churches" into a growing contingent of mature Christ-followers who are then equipped and released to help make it happen.
4. They take *time*: time to pray through the best approach for your setting, time to communicate the vision of small groups, time to implement a strategy, and—most important of all—time to allow relationships to grow.

No, small groups aren't always easy. But the benefits are worth the effort. Participants build deeper relationships than would ever be possible on Sundays alone. People stay connected to the church, even when they can't always attend church. Pastors are able to share the responsibilities of spiritual care. The church grows bigger, smaller, and deeper, all at the same time. Lives are changed, and then those people go out and change the world.

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