

GUIDE

Starting a Small Group Ministry Guide

Step-by-step guide for launching or revitalizing small groups in a mid-size or large church -- from theology through structure, leader training, group care, and multiplication culture

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Equipping pastors and leaders to serve with excellence, integrity, and lasting Kingdom impact.

The Theology of Small Community

The small group is the primary vehicle for the kind of community that Sunday morning cannot provide: the deep, knowing, accountable relationships in which genuine discipleship happens. A congregation without a healthy small group infrastructure is a congregation in which most members are anonymous -- known by others to be Christians, but not known by others to be the specific struggling, growing, doubting, hoping, praying people they actually are. This guide provides a comprehensive framework for building a small group ministry that produces genuine community and genuine formation.

The Theology of Small Community

The New Testament church met in homes (Acts 2:46, Romans 16:5, 1 Corinthians 16:19). This was not primarily a matter of necessity -- they had access to larger spaces. It was a theological choice about the size of community in which genuine formation happens. The household gathering of 8-15 people creates the conditions for the practices that form disciples: honest sharing (you can be genuinely honest with 12 people in a way that is impossible in a room of 200), mutual accountability (12 people can notice and respond to each other's struggles; 200 cannot), shared prayer (praying for and with people you actually know is transformatively different from corporate prayer), and mutual service (a group of 12 can actually care for each other in crisis; 200 cannot). The theological foundation of small group ministry is the conviction that Christian formation is inherently communal.

The Four Essentials of a Healthy Small Group

Essential 1: Biblical content. The small group must be grounded in Scripture. Not lecture-format teaching (that belongs in the larger gathering), but guided discovery of the biblical text together. The best small group Bible studies do three things with a text: observe what it says, interpret what it means, and apply what it requires. Essential 2: Genuine community. The small group must create space for authentic relational engagement -- honest sharing of real life, real struggle, and real growth. A small group that only discusses the weekly sermon topic without genuine personal sharing has missed the irreplaceable community dimension. Essential 3: Accountability and prayer. Members pray specifically for each other and hold each other accountable to specific growth commitments. Not performance-based accountability that produces shame but grace-based accountability that produces change. Essential 4: Mission orientation. The small group exists not only for its own members but for its neighbors. A small group that is entirely inward-focused gradually becomes a spiritual country club. A mission-oriented group regularly asks: Who are we serving together? Who in our neighborhood needs what we have?

Launching a small group ministry begins with the theological conviction above, then moves through: (1) leader identification and training (small group leaders are the most important volunteers in the congregation; they deserve serious training); (2) group formation (how groups are composed -- homogeneous by life stage or diverse; open or closed membership; geographic or affinity-based); (3) curriculum selection (one approach for all groups or flexible autonomy?); (4) coaching structure (who coaches the coaches?); and (5) health assessment and group care. The guide works through each of these components in detail.

Reflection and Discussion Questions

1. What is the most personally significant insight from this resource for your specific ministry context right now?
2. Where is the greatest gap between the principles here and your current practice? What is one specific step to begin closing that gap?

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3. Who in your leadership community needs to engage with this material? How will you bring them into the conversation?
4. What accountability structure will you put in place to ensure the commitments you are making here are actually kept?

The work described in this resource is not the extraordinary work of exceptionally gifted ministers. It is the ordinary, daily, faithful work of people who have decided to take their calling seriously -- to prepare, to pray, to show up, and to trust God with what only he can do. Do the ordinary things with extraordinary faithfulness. That is the whole of it.

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