

Why SMALL groups are such a big deal and getting bigger everyday!

by Brett Eastman

Seven things every pastor needs to know about the emergence of small group ministry.

There is no simple solution to growing a healthy, balanced body of believers. Yet a thriving small group ministry may be one of the best-kept secrets to fulfilling the biblical purposes of the church -- and solving many of the issues of evangelism and stewardship that can confound pastors. Here are seven reasons why every pastor should consider investing resources into building a healthy small group ministry:

1. Small group community is a primary felt need in America, let alone in our churches.

In South Orange County there is a community known as one of the top 10 fastest growing developments in the country. For every new home that is built, there are 10,000 applications.

Part of the appeal of this community is that it is built from the ground up *for* community. Its ads sell a return to the "Mayberry RFD" days where everyone had a front porch, a "true" neighborhood community and a sense of "family" even among friends.

I even met a woman whose formal role was the "Community Director." Her job was simply to create and cultivate the sense of community where people feel loved, supported, needed and have a true sense of "belonging." This sounds awfully close to somebody else's role to me!

She goes to ten cul-de-sacs a weekend. When she returns to check in on the cul-de-sac leaders, (which she helped to identify and train) she helps them launch other social events like progressive dinners, costume parties and charades nights. This person's job included a weekly trip to new and existing cul-de-sacs with a truck filled with fresh Starbucks and Krispy Kreme doughnuts.

This model is very simple, effective and transferable to any one of your church members or small group leaders. You could encourage your members to host a back-to-school picnic, end of summer party or just a weekend barbecue -- and not for the purpose of selling homes but seeing our homes used by Christ.

I did this last summer in our neighborhood by renting a "bounce house." It cost me \$75.00 for the day, and almost every family joined in the fun. Just being curious, I asked every adult if they would be open to do a six-week Bible study on a topic of marriage, family or relationships. It was a home run.

This fall, why not consider bringing your church to the community instead of always trying to get the community to come to your church? You might just be scratching a real itch.

2. Small groups are the best place for significant life transformation to happen.

Most pastors and church leaders assume small groups are a great way to connect their congregation into community. This is definitely true. They are a great tool for closing the back door and helping people not just do life alone - but do life together.

However, as Rick Warren recently shared in his message titled "Better Together," used as the kick off message for the [40 Days of Community](#) event this fall, small groups provide a place for people to fulfill all five purposes of the church. Small groups aren't just for *fellowship* or where people can grow deeper in relationships, but also for *discipleship* where people can grow deeper in their relationship with God. Small groups study God's Word together, fulfill God's call in *missions* together, *worship* together and discover their [SHAPE](#) for *ministry*. The truth is all five purposes can be "better together."

Bill Hybels, founder and senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, used to always say, "Life change happens best in small groups." It's the only place where you can "talk back," says author Rob Lacey, and discuss the implications that lead to greater application of biblical truth. Bob Buford, founder of the [Leadership Network](#), said to me on a phone call recently, "There is a definite shift in the church from just a procrastination model seen in churches all across America, to a greater demonstration model of Christianity that leads to greater transformation of our hearts."

With the introduction of new DVD and video teaching delivered directly into classrooms in our churches and even living rooms, we can get the best of both worlds -- proclamation and devotion. This model doesn't compete with Sunday school, but in the churches we have had the privilege of coaching, they are finding it is a wonderful compliment to the teaching. Members don't just want more teaching, but more *talking* about the teaching. All Christian educators know that talking about what is being learned leads to greater integration and application. This results in the greatest transformation of all - transformation of the head, heart and life!

3. Small groups can exponentially grow your church.

Most pastors would love to grow their church. But how?

One of several ways is to realize that as you grow your church larger, you need to grow it smaller at the same time. I've had the privilege of serving at two mega churches with thousands in attendance. But I grew up in a small church of less than 100 members. I now know that if my pastor would have followed some of the simple steps we learned in the [40 Days of Purpose](#) event, he could have easily doubled or tripled the active attendance in our church. Our small family church, like 70 percent of the churches we work with, had a healthy or at least an active Sunday school program. The problem is they had most of their eggs in one basket. This basket can and does work, but the addition of a healthy, growing small group ministry could have exponentially multiplied their growth.

In the early 1950s, Sunday school was designed to be a tool for assimilation and even evangelism. But over the years it has ended up being used primarily for education. Today, there are few churches that have an extra Sunday school classroom available. And the average Sunday school class size is 12. It's impossible to grow your church through Sunday school, because brick and mortar limit your growth unless you keep building more educational space -- which most churches can't afford.

The beauty of off-campus groups is that there is the potential for unlimited growth. As soon as you limit your program to onsite Sunday school, you'll limit your growth. Rick Warren says, "Don't let the shoe tell the foot how big it can grow." Small groups can be a primary, if not secondary, way to grow your church.

Ironically, during the first 300 years of the church people didn't meet in the temple courts; it was just house-to-house ministry. It has moved from house-to-house ministry to temple courts ministry. The truth is we need more house-to-house ministry to grow our temple courts.

4. Small groups are not a program but a primary model for doing church.

I've talked with many senior pastors who say that small group ministry is just one of many programs in the church. But small group ministry is the *primary* one taught in the New Testament.

The book of Acts teaches that the early church met as a *church gathered* and a *church scattered*. Somehow we have reduced things down to temple courts (*church gathered*) and temple courts (*church gathered*). No wonder the church in America in general is in decline.

Maybe now we can work together on what it takes to help our people not just do life alone, but to do life together just like Jesus.

And the best part about this is that Jesus didn't just tell us to do it, but he modeled it through his own life and ministry. How about you? Are you doing

your life in community with a few like Jesus did? Maybe it's time. Trust me on this one -- it will transform your church like nothing you have tried before.

Doing life together is a biblical model, not a fancy program.

5. Small groups ministry will become the primary means to lifestyle evangelism in the future.

Building relationships is the most non-threatening, natural way to have an authentic connection with an unchurched person. And your home is the safest place on earth to hear the most dangerous message in eternity. Fifty percent of people invited by a friend will say "yes" to a short, six-week Bible study in someone's home. Fifty percent!

If you simply showed up this weekend and challenged your people to follow God's call and not "do their life alone" but "do their life together," it could change your church overnight. Simply ask them to write down names of six to ten people they would enjoy doing life together with and challenge them to call these people this week. Secondly, create a video table after the service to either "check out" a DVD/video curriculum with a few study guides for the week if they will call a few friends. Challenge them with the value of community.

Here is the best part when jotting down their circle of friends and who to invite to a group: most people don't consider if they are Christian or not. They just ask, "Is this someone I'd like to do life together with or hang out with for six weeks?" In at least 40 percent of the churches with which we consult, people are inviting those who do not know Christ, are new in their relationship with Christ, are not growing in their relationship with Christ, have never been in a small group or haven't made spiritual life decisions in a long time.

You may not be ready to reach out to your community yet, but this simple idea could connect your entire congregation overnight and help to connect a large part of your community over time. Please don't miss the idea -- you or your church will never be the same.

6. Small groups are the crock pot for training unlimited leaders.

Bill Hybels said at the Leadership Summit last August, that small groups were one of the top performance drivers in the church of tomorrow. Rick Warren says they are a "leadership engine" or "factory of the future." Either way don't underestimate the power of community to train and develop community leaders.

I call it the crock pot method because catalyzing them or mobilizing them to lead is easier. The real challenge is developing leaders that don't just launch a group for six weeks, but leaders that last for a lifetime. That's what I'm giving my life to do -- and here are a few ideas that can work for you.

First, challenge all groups to de-emphasize apprenticeship and focus on rotating and sharing leadership. This will grow every member into a leader, not overnight but over time. When you rotate leadership in the groups, ultimately people are being prepared better than if they were to participate in a ten-week, small group leadership training course. The best way to learn how to lead is to experience it. One turn deserves another, and you pass the curriculum on to the next person to facilitate the next time.

Second, use campaigns two to three times a year to align the weekend with the small group study to create an excuse for asking all existing groups to take a six week vacation to host a short term group in their community. Thirty percent of the Saddleback groups did this during our first 40 Day campaign, and do it again and again every fall. Even if you have done 40 Days before or have yet to host a churchwide campaign, test drive this idea -- it will amaze you just as it did us at Saddleback!

Third, make sure you give them "plug-and-play-just-add-water" DVD/video curriculum. Everyone is not called to be a teacher or a leader, but they are called to be shepherd of a few. Lead like Jesus and simply ask them to be like Jesus -- the rest will be history.

7. Small groups will help to increase weekly giving and the response to any capital campaign.

Glen Kruen, the executive pastor at Saddleback, said that giving increased well over 25 percent during the 40 Days of Purpose campaign. This was true across the country. Not only will a church's weekly giving go up, but also when they do a capital campaign, they will see a significant return on their investment.

I have seen this with every church we have coached. Many of the churches we have worked with postponed their campaigns until after they connected another 25-75 percent of their church into groups. This is critical because not only will the overall financial health be better but the spiritual health of the church improves, and this is vital whenever you talk about finances.

Willow Creek's executive pastor Greg Hawkins, who ran its capital campaign, said that over 60 percent of the people who gave to the capital campaign to raise over \$75 million for their new facility came from small groups. Overall, the water level in any church's giving goes up. When you get people cared for, and they feel loved, there's a tendency to give more.