

Research Paper: CULTIVATING OUTREACH IN SMALL GROUPS

Starting a small group is difficult for most people to accomplish. Growing a small group can be equally difficult. This paper will address this topic from the perspective of how to make small groups outreach-minded. First, there will be an analysis of the problem of getting people to come to the small group. Then the need for leadership structure will be considered. Finally, the best practices for group leaders will be proposed. Together, the aspects presented herein should provide a basic framework for moving small groups toward being outreach-oriented.

ANALYZING THE PROBLEM

In order to create some outreach strategies for small groups, it seems necessary to first analyze what motivates unbelievers to start attending. People have an intrinsic need to be part of a social community, to participate in positive interactions that edify and connect them.¹ They are looking for people of like-mindedness to themselves, an affinity or commonality of who they are and what they are interested in.² People want to find other people who have a meaningful cause they can comfortably relate to and enjoy.³ Also, they want to fit into a group of friends who are supportive, accepting, and caring.⁴

Of course, this need for commonality immediately presents a huge obstacle for small groups who are actively pursuing Christ-likeness to bring in people who have very little or no interest in religion, let alone pursuing it.⁵ There are two basic solutions to this impasse: either the group must essentially discard its religiousness to become purely social in nature; or the group has to find ways of attracting and drawing in the unbeliever to gradually rise up to the group's level of spirituality.⁶ Obviously, the latter solution is the only acceptable one if believers are to maintain their saltiness, as mandated in Matthew 5:13. Therefore, the most favorable and the most potentially productive strategy for small groups seems to be to find ways to attract and draw in unbelievers by appealing to their wants and needs, particularly their social ones because small groups are social by nature.⁷

With sensitivity to this disparity and other gender or cultural preferences, small groups can try to capitalize on existing friendships, familiarity with co-workers, hereditary bonds with family members, and proximity contacts with neighbors - in other words anyone they have a relationship with already.⁸ A relational connection has strength to help draw the unbeliever into the group, and group members should each work their existing social networks to extend those connections with unbelievers into the group.⁹

Openness by unbelievers to connect is also more ripe when there is: a prospect of having fun; something to gain; relief from boredom; satisfying curiosity; or an intriguing non-threatening event to check out.¹⁰ Again, understanding the thinking and perspective of the target unbelievers

¹ Walton, 106; Womack, 40; Colan, 44.

² Womack, 39, 40; Kent; Gladen, 208.

³ Colan, 44; Stewart, 100.

⁴ Walton, 103; Womack, 40.

⁵ Gladen, 63.

⁶ Ibid., 94.

⁷ Womack, 39-40.

⁸ Gladen, 106, 40; Earley, *Pocket Guide*, 147.

⁹ Donahue, 132.

¹⁰ Earley, *Pocket Guide*, 53; Beaupre.

is critical in connecting with them.¹¹ This should be a paramount determining factor when formulating activities to successfully connect with unbelievers, creating the right atmosphere within their areas of interest.¹²

Research findings assert that people are also more open to being connected with when they are going through a major life change, a crisis, or are experiencing a need they cannot fill by themselves.¹³ Discovering what the needs are locally will require group members to make observations, asking questions, listening, and learning in their community.¹⁴ As needs are identified and understood, the group can formulate practical events, social programs, or holistic services that meet those needs or serve their community, being very diligent at making sure to include effective ways to facilitate relationship building within those events or programs.¹⁵ If a need is ongoing, then arrangements can be made to supply support for that need on a longer-term basis, which may provide additional opportunities to build relationships over time through repeated contact.¹⁶ Similarly, if there is need for a support group, then the support group can be constructed in a way that fosters connection to the small group and its spiritual values.¹⁷

LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE

For small groups to take on an outreach mindset, there needs to be a push to move in this direction, which must come from the leadership, starting with the senior pastor.¹⁸ Support, endorsement, and promotion of small groups outreach needs to actively, clearly, and consistently come from the pastor.¹⁹ The pastor should genuinely want the church to grow and thereby want the small groups to grow.²⁰ He should cast a vision, so to speak, for small group growth and establish a culture of this kind of thinking within the other leadership and within the congregation.²¹ As Jesus implored His disciples in John 4:35 NIV, "...I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.", so too should the pastor do likewise to his congregation. The pastor could do sermon series on outreach, highlight growing groups from the pulpit, and utilize testimonials and stories that tie-in to small group outreach.²² Through his committed teaching and modeling, he should take the lead in battling the natural closed-group mindset by championing the open, outward-looking, outreach-oriented approach to community life of the church and its small groups.²³

Following the pastor's visional direction, the church's leadership should prayerfully formulate a comprehensive long-term plan and set up corresponding structures to cultivate outreach and growth of small groups.²⁴ Lay-people who demonstrate a solid outreach mindset can be recruited, trained, developed, and mobilized to lead small groups to grow.²⁵ They can be taught

¹¹ *Putting*.

¹² Gladen, 40.

¹³ Yeakley, 15.

¹⁴ Boren, 131, 147, 148.

¹⁵ Hunsicker, 196; Arnold, *Small Group*, 105; Ford.

¹⁶ Stiles.

¹⁷ Murrow.

¹⁸ Cho, 110.

¹⁹ Donahue, 41.

²⁰ Wagner, *Grow*, 52.

²¹ Kent; Wagner, *Grow*, 52; Kennedy.

²² Kennedy; Abel.

²³ Kent; Donahue, 142, 59.

²⁴ Ford; Wagner, *Grow*, 77; Freshour; *10 Helps*.

²⁵ Kent; Kim, 11.

to think like a new visitor, seeing their group atmosphere through the eyes of an unbelieving guest.²⁶ Free curriculum, outreach resources, and ongoing training should be made available to them.²⁷ A pastor or a pastoral care team should be designated to adequately oversee and support the small group ministry as it grows.²⁸

Additional support could be supplied in the form of the church sponsoring small groups campaigns or connection events, correlating them to other church ministries or functions and then tracking the results.²⁹ Funding for small groups growth could be earmarked or budgeted for.³⁰ The church's strategy for supporting growth in small groups could also include: coordinating the creation of a widening variety of kinds of small groups targeting different needs; establishing an ongoing system for signing-up; and nurturing harmonious cooperation with other ministries in the church.³¹ Fortification of these outreach ventures could be achieved by teaching the entire congregation about evangelism, outreach principles, group amicable multiplication dynamics, and having a passion and a sensitivity for seekers.³²

Effective advertising can give a boost to the outreach efforts of small groups. Churches can significantly impact the growth of small groups through the skillful use of quality relevant affordable advertising that successfully reaches the target audience and delivers a carefully-crafted clear message.³³ Because effective advertising needs to be so technically structured today, it should be thoroughly thought out and of professional quality as well.³⁴ An advisable tactic to accomplish this is to retain a skilled advertising person to coordinate and implement the church's advertising strategy that may span across a variety of social, Internet, and other numerous forms of advertising.³⁵

BEST PRACTICES FOR GROUP LEADERS

Parallel to what the pastor is doing to move the church corporately toward outreach-mindedness, small group leaders should be doing essentially the same types of activities on a more personal level with individual members of their small group.³⁶ For small groups to be effectively outreach-oriented, their leaders must first firmly possess and then consistently promote being missional in how members engage each other and the world surrounding them.³⁷ Small group leaders will need to find ways and put in the work necessary to challenge and motivate members to take outreach action.³⁸ Instilling in members the visional direction and passion of connecting with and impacting others through outreach is a tough challenge that leaders will be wise to embrace.³⁹

Leaders must strive with perseverance to create and maintain an approach that keeps the focus on outreach in every group function, and not slip into easily letting group functions be devoid of

²⁶ Lawless.

²⁷ Ibid.; Kennedy; Kent.

²⁸ Lawless.

²⁹ Ford; Gladen, 209.

³⁰ Ford.

³¹ Kennedy; Logan, 126.

³² Gladen, 33; Donahue, 127; *Turning Passion*.

³³ Freshour; Michael.

³⁴ Freshour; Wagner, *Church Planting*, 106.

³⁵ Beaupre; *10 Helps*.

³⁶ *Outreach/Visitation*, 1.

³⁷ Gladen, 53; Boren, 131.

³⁸ *Outreach/Visitation*, 2.

³⁹ Boren, 11; Barna, *Marketing*, 110.

outreach intentions.⁴⁰ While “huddle and cuddle” is the natural tendency within small groups, leaders should safeguard against defaulting into this by deliberately structuring elements into the meeting agendas that cultivate outreach-mindedness.⁴¹

In their conducting of group meetings, small group leaders should ensure that the atmosphere is welcoming for newcomers and sensitive to their perspective.⁴² Members should be conveying an attitude of love and concern for the newcomers, and should not get ruffled or feel threatened by newcomers’ worldly behaviors.⁴³ Common courtesy and hospitality should be extended forthright, with comfortable seating, lighting, and other meeting amenities.⁴⁴ Consideration to newcomers should be shown, especially in regard to the use of church language, confronting with Scriptures, and studying advance theological topics.⁴⁵ To connect with newcomers, it is advantageous to utilize curriculum that is user-friendly to newcomers and accommodates their beginner’s entrance to group life and their elementary biblical understanding, or lack thereof.⁴⁶

Certainly, leaders cannot accomplish all of this accommodating by themselves, but must enlist the help of group members.⁴⁷ Therefore, there will need to be teaching and training on how to treat newcomers, and on the dynamics and nuances of outreach and missional community.⁴⁸ To teach the biblical basis for outreach, leaders should use Scriptures, such as: the Samaritan woman at the well account in John 4:4-42; or 1 Corinthians 9:22 NIV where Paul declares, “To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.”⁴⁹ Even in the teaching of other topics, members should be regularly challenged to think about reaching the lost for Christ.⁵⁰

Part of the discussion time in meetings should be devoted to strategizing, planning, and implementing outreach activities, projects, and events.⁵¹ Brainstorming is a good way to come up with effective techniques for fellowship gatherings that will build relationships with unbelievers.⁵² Throwing parties with good food is one excellent, irresistible, crowd-drawing outreach activity that simultaneously adds “fun, excitement, ownership, interest, and involvement” to the fellowship time of the group.⁵³ Surfing the Internet will yield countless ideas for enjoyable, entertaining, recreational, service, and other kinds of outreach.

A key principle of effective outreach is inviting people, because in order for people to come to a small group’s outreach event, they have to hear about it, be interested, and be invited.⁵⁴ But they are not likely to come unless they have a relational connection to someone in the group.⁵⁵ So making contact, building a relationship, and then inviting to come are all equally-important interdependent outreach aspects that need to be taught and regularly emphasized in the small

⁴⁰ *Outreach/Visitation*, 1; Earley, *Pocket Guide*, 118; Gladen, 94.

⁴¹ Boren, 11; Stiles.

⁴² Donahue, 134; Arnold, *Seven Tools*, 23.

⁴³ Donahue, 135, 136.

⁴⁴ Romans 12:13; Arnold, *Seven Tools*, 23; Donahue, 137.

⁴⁵ Colossians 1:28; Donahue, 137, 138.

⁴⁶ Donahue, 60, 145.

⁴⁷ Donahue, 62.

⁴⁸ Kim, 11; Barna, *Marketing*, 110; Donahue, 142; Boren, 34.

⁴⁹ Gladen, 49.

⁵⁰ Luke 19:10; Kent.

⁵¹ Stiles; Severance.

⁵² Donahue, 151.

⁵³ Donahue, 150; Gladen, 63; Earley, *Pocket Guide*, 53, 164, 165; Earley, *8 Habits*, 83.

⁵⁴ Earley, *Pocket Guide*, 52.

⁵⁵ *2012 20 Awesome*, 2.

group.⁵⁶ Designating an empty chair in group meetings is a visible way to keep outreach fresh in the thoughts of members.⁵⁷ Selecting an evangelistic coordinator and an evangelistic apprentice are additional ways to keep outreach active in the small group.⁵⁸ In addition, praying for insights, direction, opportunities, and boldness will supply the divine empowering needed for effective outreach.⁵⁹

One often-overlooked opportunity to extend the connection potential with a new visitor is to make follow-up contact after the visitor has first attended a meeting or event.⁶⁰ In a short phone call, valuable feedback can be gained, acceptance can be conveyed, questions can be answered, and a subsequent invitation can be offered.⁶¹ A topnotch small group leader will ensure this contact is done in a timely manner.⁶² If in-person care is needed, the leader can make a visitation to encourage and minister.⁶³

CLOSURE

One valuable insight that was gained in doing the research for this paper is the need to make it easy for potential leaders to start leading a small group by supplying them with self-contained curriculum that does the teaching for them until they are trained, equipped, and ready to generate their own lessons and teach. A reality that was encountered is the multitude of outreach event ideas there are available on the Internet. One concern that seemed to be minimized in all of the resources that were consulted is what to do with individuals who continue to be detrimental to the group, and whether or not to preclude their initial entry into the group.

Through this research, perhaps motivation will be created to re-focus and re-energize efforts of ensuring that newcomers feel welcome and get relationally connected to the group quickly. Perhaps a viable solution is to recruit and authorize the warm-and-friendly group members to initiate contact with and facilitate connection to newcomers the very first time they attend. If this approach proves successful and workable, then it could possibly be expanded and implemented in other ministry contexts in the church.

In conclusion, it is apparent that making small groups outreach-oriented is a complex but solvable problem. The material presented in this paper should be useful in accomplishing this goal. With these creative and effective techniques, small groups can carry out missional goals that reach other people for Christ.

⁵⁶ Earley, *Pocket Guide*, 148, 146, 145.

⁵⁷ Donahue, 132.

⁵⁸ Gladen, 92; Donahue, 144.

⁵⁹ Stewart, 98; Barna, *Marketing*, 110.

⁶⁰ Barna, *User Friendly Churches*, 100.

⁶¹ Ford; Earley, *Pocket Guide*, 151; Donahue 135.

⁶² Earley, *Pocket Guide*, 151.

⁶³ Kim, 9.

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