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Growth
Potential
of Groups

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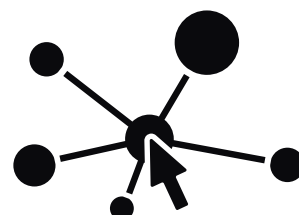
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The Case for Small Groups

Darrell Johns / SGI Committee Chair

Have you noticed that some leaders are quick to jump into the latest church growth fad? Have you also noticed that some leaders seldom, if ever, jump into any church growth fad, even when that fad turns out to be a proven principle? What about small group ministry? Is it a fad or a principle?

Small group ministry is known by a variety of names, including Cell Ministry, Care Groups, Home Fellowship Groups, Home Friendship Groups, and an array of other creative tags. Small group ministry is modeled after the dual strengths of the early church, which met publicly and house to house (Acts 2:46). This practice led to spiritual and numerical growth, while building a relationally healthy church.

As a leader, are you hesitant to get into small group ministry? It can be a significant undertaking. Maybe you have reasoned that your church is not large enough for small groups. Perhaps you are worried about the potential hazards of home meetings. Timing and readiness on the part of the church are vital. As with any ministry, there are pitfalls to be avoided.

In his book *The Purpose Driven Church* (Zondervan, 1995), Rick Warren observed that churches grow warmer through fellowship, deeper through discipleship, stronger through worship, broader through ministry, and larger through evangelism. Small group ministry can help facilitate all five of these dimensions of a healthy, growing church.

In the early church, meeting in homes was organic—a natural part of their culture.

I've never found a biblical description of their structure or organization. They just did it. But by meeting house to house, the disciples discovered a powerful means to church growth.

In small groups, they were able to fellowship and break bread. Through home groups they continued in prayer and in the Apostles' doctrine. The combination of public worship and home meetings cultivated a healthy church that grew in number daily (Acts 2:47).



Small groups were linked to the health and growth of the church. Small groups are not a ministry fad; they are a biblically based method.

As a local church grows larger, some people struggle to connect to the body. New believers are not only changing value systems and lifestyles; they are also changing social circles. Some new people connect quickly, finding friends in the church. Others get stuck on the fringes, never finding their place in the body of Christ. One of our outstanding team members at Atlanta West observed that the people who are the hardest to love need our love the most. The hard to love person needs the acceptance found in a nurturing small group.

Organic small groups exist in the modern church but they are formed as families, friendship circles, and sometimes cliques. Relying on organic small groups to provide a nurturing atmosphere for those who need it most is not the best approach. If you depend on organic (naturally formed) small groups, you will miss many people who will not find their place in a circle of friends.

Organic friendship groups may not go beyond superficial socializing to experience fellowship as practiced in the Bible. It can take a long time for a group of friends to get comfortable enough to spend time in prayer and the Word together. The naturally formed (organic) friendship group may never reach a spiritual dimension.

It is more likely to happen when prayer and Bible study are part of the small group experience by design. By intentionally forming small groups, the local church ensures that everyone can be included in a circle of friends.

The spiritual design of the small group also encourages true fellowship, not just social interaction. Worship, Bible study, and prayer can all occur when small groups operate under the guidance and encouragement of the church.

Consider the following positive aspects of organized small groups:

- Small groups enable evangelism and form a comfortable entry point into the church. A motto of our ministry team is: "We meet people on ground to lead them to holy ground."
- Small groups nurture new believers by surrounding them with mentors.
- Small groups deepen relationships.
- Small groups provide outlets to develop the many ministry gifts that are already resident in the church.



- Small groups are often good for the pastor. They can lift the pastor's load while multiplying his shepherding ministry.
- Small groups are effective at growing the kingdom of God by providing a vital complement to public worship.

Small group ministry is part of the biblical design of the church. It is a principle that, once implemented, can help your church reach its potential!

Darrell Johns

Darrell Johns serves as pastor of Atlanta West Pentecostal Church, assistant general superintendent of the Eastern Zone, UPCI, and chair of the Strategic Growth Initiative Committee of the General Board.



The Growth Potential of Groups

FEATURE ARTICLE

JAY JONES

IDEA IN BRIEF

In this article, Jay Jones calls church leaders to move toward a Spirit-led disciple-making culture modeled after Acts 2:42. He contends that small groups are vital environments where believers are formed through authentic relationships, biblical teaching, prayer, and mission. He urges pastors to train group leaders as shepherds who care for souls, not just managers of meetings, and to evaluate spiritual growth through changed lives rather than filled chairs.

Ultimately, he envisions small groups as places where disciples make disciples and the Church expands organically through Spirit-empowered relationships.

For most of my ministry, I have heard of and shared the importance and success of small group ministry, and have implemented groups in our church in different ways. My goal in doing so was to lead our church into stronger connections, deeper discipleship, and broader engagement. But after many attempts I found that even with good organization our groups weren't producing the kind of spiritual transformation we were searching for. They were well attended, the discussions were polite, but something was missing.

Maybe that's been your experience as well. Somewhere along the way, the system started feeling more like a program than a movement and didn't yield the results we had hoped for.

The truth is, we didn't need more meetings to fill our calendar or more programs to manage, we needed more disciples and true-life transformation. And that required something far deeper than just a curriculum or surface-level connections. It required an intentional shift in our culture.

Every pastor feels the pressure to “get people connected.” We read the statistics, attend the conferences, and hear the same message in every book: small groups are the key to growth.

So we follow the scripts, organize the groups, create sign-up sheets, train facilitators, and plan out a calendar. But after the initial excitement fades, we’re stuck realizing that a system alone can’t produce the spiritual depth we long for. People might gather weekly but that doesn’t mean they’re growing weekly.

The problem with programmatic small groups is subtle.

Usually, they’re built around content delivery instead of spiritual formation, and our group leaders become discussion moderators instead of shepherds.

Our members attend the meetings, but if they’re not experiencing life change, they grow discontent. Everyone leaves with more information, but not really transformation.

Information isn’t bad; it is vital to shape the way we think. Discipleship, however, transforms who we are. Therefore, if our groups only transfer knowledge, they will never reproduce maturity.

In Acts 2, we see the early church gathering daily, breaking bread, and continuing steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine. What was instituted was not a program; it was a lifestyle that fostered change in the spiritual identity and behavior of the participants. They didn’t meet to discuss the latest curriculum; they met for community, prayer, and mission, and that resulted in the growth of individuals and the expansion of the Church.

If our small groups don’t lead people toward transformation, accountability, and obedience to the Word, then we may miss the mark at making disciples.

What Acts 2:42 Teaches About Relational Discipleship

Acts 2:42 gives us the blueprint: “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.” This is not merely a list of prescribed activities. It is a snapshot of the rhythm of relationship in the early church. Each phrase reflects a different dimension of discipleship:

- **Doctrine:** learning and living truth together.
- **Fellowship:** mutual care and accountability.
- **Breaking of bread:** shared life and hospitality.
- **Prayers:** spiritual dependence and intercession.



Together, these activities form a pattern that is both relational and spiritual. Effectively, it's truth shared in the context of vibrant, prayer-filled, spiritual life.

That's what discipleship looks like on a practical level. It is not just gathering in a circle. It is walking together toward Christlikeness. For the early church, the Word was rarely heralded from a pulpit, though that has powerful significance. More often, it flowed through conversations in households and gatherings of friends. The church wasn't a building, it was a community on mission.

When we reimagine small groups through the lens of the Book of Acts, they cease to be an addition to Sunday our services and instead become the heartbeat of the church.

They become places where doctrine is lived and modeled—not just taught; where fellowship means more than friendliness; where the Spirit moves as freely in a living room, community center, or coffee shop as it does in a sanctuary.

As pastors, our role is to lead our churches toward that kind of culture—one where discipleship happens naturally because relationships are spiritual and intentional.

Training Group Leaders to Shepherd, Not Just Facilitate

Every small group rises or falls on leadership. Some leaders manage systems and processes, while others minister to people. The difference is whether they see themselves as facilitators or shepherds.

- A facilitator runs a meeting. A shepherd cares for people.
- Facilitators ask discussion questions. Shepherds ask life questions.
- Facilitators follow a script. Shepherds follow the Spirit.

When we're training small group leaders, our goal should be not to simply make them great facilitators, it is to make them great disciple-makers. This begins with redefining their calling. Leading a group is not about pulling off a gathering, it's more about cultivating souls. We train leaders to:

- **Pray over their group members by name.** Discipleship begins in prayer.
- **Listen for life moments, not just discussion responses.** True care involves hearing beyond words.
- **Model vulnerability.** A leader who pretends to have it all together sets unreal expectations and stifles authentic growth.
- **Create pathways for next steps.** Whether it's serving, developing spiritual fruit, baptism, or mentoring others, every group should help people take steps forward in spiritual maturity.



When leaders grasp this mindset, their groups shift from mere meetings to authentic ministry. In our own church, I've watched the difference firsthand. The most effective groups aren't necessarily led by the most outgoing personalities. They're led by people who genuinely love others, listen to the Spirit, ask powerful questions, and create environments where people can encounter God in real ways. The pastor's role, then, is to invest deeply in those leaders and to shepherd the shepherds. The more you pour into them, the more they can pour into others.

Measuring Spiritual Growth Over Attendance

I value measurable indicators that help assess the health of our church, which often result in numbers. Typically, pastors and leaders are trained to count and value attendance in the church because it is a visible indicator. Attendance, however, is not the same as transformation. And a full house doesn't always equate to full lives.

If we want disciple-making groups, we must measure what matters most. Here are a few better questions for pastors to ask:

- Are people reading, praying, and obeying the Word more consistently?
- Are relationships growing deeper through confession, accountability, and encouragement?
- Are new believers being mentored by mature ones?
- Are members discovering and using their spiritual gifts?
- Are testimonies increasing, not just attendance?

If we can answer yes to these questions, we will see expansion in our church. People who are living transformed lives will naturally invite others to experience what changed them.

In Acts 11, when Barnabas saw the grace of God in Antioch, he wasn't counting heads, he was acknowledging transformed hearts. As pastors, we should do the same. Look for grace. Listen for life change. Celebrate spiritual fruit. As the famous animation studio Pixar says, "Culture is the stories you tell and the things you celebrate".

One practical tool we've used to help measure progress is a simple Growth Conversation—a short monthly talk with our group leaders. Instead of asking, "How many are attending?" we ask, "Who's growing?", "Who's new?", and "Who's next?" Those three questions will tell you everything about the health of your groups. When you measure growth in this way, you'll find that people who might never preach a sermon are still effectively and confidently making disciples.

Multiplying Groups That Multiply People

The final mark of a disciple-making culture is multiplication. As God declared in Genesis, the things He created were intended to, "bring forth after their own kind". Multiplication of groups, and multiplication of disciples is a natural byproduct of a healthy church.



When the number of disciples multiplied in Acts 6, it was not a result of launching more programs. It was due to ministry being distributed and shared. The apostles released others to serve and the result was growth that could not be contained. Philip the “good believer” became Philip the deacon, and then became Philip the evangelist. This all happened because someone gave him the opportunity to grow.

Small groups are the perfect environment for that same kind of multiplication. Every group should have at least one apprentice—someone being prepared to lead their own group in the future. That’s how we move from addition to multiplication. Multiplication doesn’t happen by accident; it’s built through intentional steps:

- **Spot potential early.** Look for faithfulness before you look for skill.
- **Invite people into leadership gradually.** Let them host, pray, or lead one part of the discussion. Growth follows ownership.
- **Mentor as you go.** Leadership development is often caught through proximity and shared experiences.
- **Celebrate sending.** When a new group is added, honor that publicly. Let the church feel the joy of expansion.

I’ve found the most powerful discipleship movements happen when pastors see groups as a harvest to cultivate instead of a program to maintain.

Every small group is a potential new group or new church in seed form—a place where disciples are made, leaders are trained, and ministry expands.

When we release people to lead, we multiply the voice and reach of the Word. And when the Word multiplies, the church multiplies. As Acts 6:7 says, “And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly.”

From Meetings to Movement

No doubt every pastor has wondered if all the structure and planning they have implemented is truly working. We have launched campaigns, built websites, and led our people to try new things, but sometimes the fruit still feels thin. What our church needs is not another ministry to launch but a movement of disciple-makers. And movements are born when pastors lead with intentionality, humility, and faith that the Spirit of God still works through ordinary people.

When small groups move beyond meetings and become Spirit-led communities of disciples who authentically live out Acts 2:42, growth becomes inevitable, organic, and Spirit-driven.



Our goal is not just to fill homes with people; it's to fill people with purpose; to shape lives; to build disciples who make disciples.

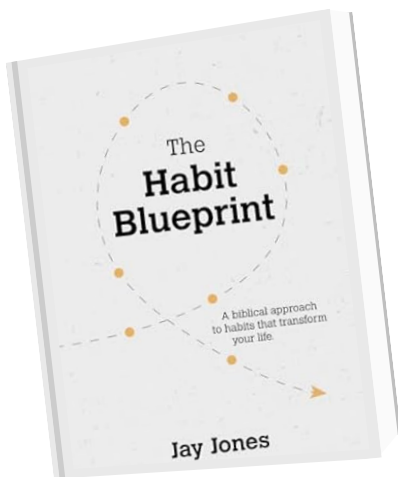
This is how the church becomes unstoppable—not through bigger programs, not through classes and curriculum, but through smaller circles of Spirit-filled, transformed believers who carry the mission beyond the church.

If you are a pastor wondering where to begin, start simple.

- **Recast the vision:** groups exist to make disciples, not simply gather.
- **Reinvest in your leaders:** shepherd them so they can shepherd others.
- **Reframe success:** lead your groups to value transformation over attendance.

When you do, you'll find what the early church discovered—that the most powerful growth often begins in living rooms, around dinner tables, and through relationships centered on becoming like Jesus.

The book of Acts is not merely a history of what the church *was*; it is a pattern for what the church *can be*. May we experience the multiplication of disciples in our churches through the Spirit-led pattern of gathering with purpose.



Jay Jones

Jay Jones serves as district secretary of the Michigan District UPCI and pastors the Pentecostals of Kentwood. He is passionate about helping churches and leaders build systems that sustain growth and discipleship. He is also author of the recent release, *The Habit Blueprint*.



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Training is the Small Group Secret Sauce

Lee Ann Alexander

In academia, scholars often use the term “waves” to describe different phases of a movement (such as with Westward expansion in North America). I think the term can apply to phases of our practices within the church, and I would argue that we’re in a third wave of the small group ministry movement.

While some argue this model of ministry dates back to the 1600s, I stand with those who claim the first real wave of small group ministry came from John Wesley who used groups strategically for deep discipleship. Certainly that predates any of us, but do you remember the cell group wave of the late twentieth century? I would technically call that the second wave of small group ministry. Perhaps in those days you read about David Yonggi Cho, who started Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea. As the church began to grow rapidly, Cho launched a network of cell groups to balance the pastoral care load and accommodate further evangelism and church growth. Cho’s model became the inspiration for the cell church model to spread globally. The timing could not have been better for the American church where the 1960s cultural fragmentation and radical polarization highlighted the need for coming together. (Sound familiar today?) In the last quarter of the twentieth century, North American seminaries of various denominations began to encourage the use of small groups to build community and reach people.

Yet even then I remember criticisms of the model. Allow ten to twenty people from your church to gather in someone’s home and talk about spiritual topics? What if someone asked a question no one could answer? Worse, what if someone answered it incorrectly? What if conversation turned to the church and the group became a greenhouse for gossip or even criticism of leaders? What if the group leader gained popularity and an Absalom-type situation unfolded?

These questions exist because these scenarios can happen. However, no growth is without risk. The nature of growth involves pushing into new and sometimes uncomfortable areas. The point is not to tighten the belt to guarantee none of those worst-case scenarios can ever happen but rather to prepare a plan that accounts for risks and mitigates them so we can still pursue growth.

In a nutshell: the answer is training. We could avoid ever trying anything new to protect against risks, or we can step into new territory with training to guide those involved.



Can we guarantee an airtight foolproof A-to-Z system? As we know with any area of ministry, there is no such thing. However, the success of so many churches in small group ministry signals that with proper vision, strategies, and training, small groups are crucial to both evangelism and discipleship.

Roots and Reflections

I remember the first small group master I ever saw in action. His name was David Saucer, and he led our college and career class (in the olden days before we named that demographic Hyphen). We came out of excellent Sunday school classes where teachers did a superb job of asking us questions I now know are nonnegotiable for learning—questions that prompt deep-level thinking. So it wasn't that we had never been given a chance to talk at church. But in this case it was more than just discussion that made us a group; it was something deeper that I still analyze all these years later.

I don't know who trained David Saucer, but here's what I think worked for our group:

- **Care.** He genuinely liked us. And that's not always an easy thing when working with impulsive world-by-the-tail nineteen and twenty-year-olds. But I remember texting the Saucers to ask for prayer during a pivotal life decision. Why them? Because I knew they cared and were invested in me.
- **Vulnerability.** Every group member must share if they are to grow. To share, every group member must feel safe. Part of what made our group safe was that David Saucer shared his own journey. Because he did, we did.
- **A Spiritual Bent.** I can see how you could build a crowd for young adults with food and fun. The food alone would have done it for broke college kids. But it was more than getting a crowd. From day one there was no question that our primary purpose was to grow in God. The conversations were guided beyond how our weekend was, what we were doing, and even our life struggles (although we talked about all of that). Each time we came together, the leader had a plan to bring our time together home a single point that would help us connect more deeply to God. I can point back to days the power of God fell and our group became a prayer meeting where we bowed under the glory of His visitation.
- **Putting Us to Work.** On an April morning that was technically cold by Louisiana standards, he took us to a Habitat for Humanity build site where we spent the day nailing up plywood on a house that would later shelter a family in need. I remember getting lost deep down backroads of our rural parish helping deliver turkeys to families the night before Thanksgiving. It was more than virtue signaling. Since it predated camera phones, the only memento I have of any of it is a picture from a throwaway camera someone used to snap a photo at the Habitat for Humanity site. We weren't serving to prove a point; we were serving because a leader wanted to instill in us that it's what people who love Jesus do.



In this century there are additional training topics to cover with leaders. But I'm still convinced that to whatever degree those leadership tactics were intentional or instinctive for David Sacuer, they were effective then and still are foundational for group leaders now.

Practical Steps for Training

If you don't train group leaders to lead effectively and you don't train your church to participate, don't be surprised if small groups don't work.

Success in any area of ministry requires training—planning, preparing, modeling, and celebrating what we want to see repeated.

With the many people and the huge investment of time involved, training is especially important for small groups.

- **Train Your Church.** Small groups work best when the entire church buys into the vision of small groups. If it's just another thing on the calendar, it's just another thing on the calendar. And that's all it will ever be. But if you can communicate the value of groups and demonstrate your passion for this as missional discipleship, it has the potential to build powerful momentum. Some churches temporarily alter their weekly formats to engrain small group participation. You know your church best, but give serious thought to how the launch of small groups can communicate that they are central to the holy work of discipleship.
- **Train Your Leaders.** It is tempting to leave small group leadership to the extroverts. If we could just assign all the extroverted personality types a handful of people to invest in, we'd be all set, right? Not so fast. I admire the extroverts who never meet a stranger, but the diligent work of discipleship also requires a strategic consistency to systematically invite and follow up with people in a group. My point is that pairing introverts who tend to be administrative and extroverts who tend to be free-flowing is often a recipe for success. But even then it takes significant preparation and training for these leaders to click together and follow a clear plan from senior leadership. Training is crucial.

What I've Learned Lately Training Group Leaders

A few years ago I read *The Content Trap* (Random House, 2016). I'll confess that as a publisher and an author, I bristled at the book's suggestion that the delivery system is more important than the actual information a resource contains. I probably will never buy into that theory completely, but I have recognized more and more that training does something much more significant than just provide helpful information for people. The information is crucial, yes, but it does so much more.



- **Training signals to volunteers how seriously the church takes the ministry.** Think of the contrary. If you turn people loose to figure out a ministry with no direction, they may begin to define success in ways that are not in alignment with the vision of senior leadership.
- **Training signals appreciation.** Many of the training events I'm involved in are tied to gestures of appreciation. Even without gifts and tokens of tribute, the fact that church leadership takes an evening to invest in its volunteers always infuses a jolt of energy into the group as they realize they are valued.
- **Training gives volunteers confidence.** Yes, the information in the training helps them navigate scenarios with right understanding, but it also adds an intangible advantage. When you tell people they can do something, they usually believe you.

Now consider the opposite ramifications of the above benefits.

Without training, people lack confidence, don't feel appreciated, and assume their ministry is not important to the church. Sounds like a recipe for disaster or at least volunteer burnout.

Why It Matters

I'll go ahead and tip my hand: I believe groups need to have a disciple-making focus. To grow exponentially, our churches have to expand at a rate that is too big for the pastor to personally disciple every newcomer. I see a powerful synergy that happens when we get a newcomer into a personal Bible study to walk through Scripture canonically and then a small group where they can make friends and talk about Christian living topically.

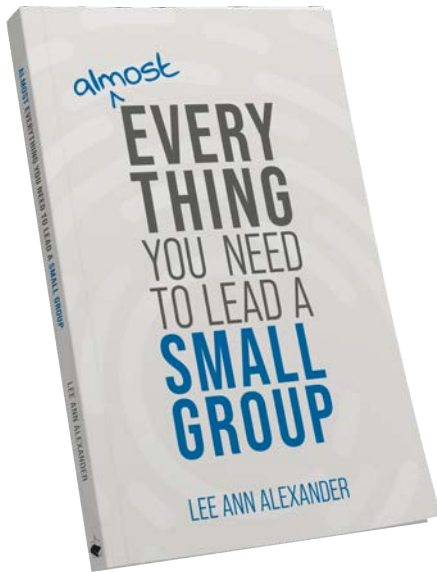
When our church started small groups, the first group I led with my nephew was an affinity group for whitetail deer hunters. We had a blast, but I realized night one when a newcomer to the church showed up at my front door that we had just catapulted into a new mission. We made a spur of the moment decision to invite families and expand the conversation beyond our hobby of hunting.

That was a year ago and now that man and his wife are coleaders in my current small group as we walk through the Book of Ephesians on Thursday nights.

Are one-on-one Bible studies necessary for discipleship? Absolutely. Is faithful church attendance necessary for discipleship? Absolutely.



Are small groups necessary for discipleship? Yes. Discipleship requires asking questions about Christian living and building real friendships within the church. I'm convinced that the more intentionally we train leaders to guide meaningful conversations, nurture relationships, and model Christlike living, the more a passionate core of the church will rise to carry out its vital mission of making disciples who, in turn, make more disciples.



Lee Ann Alexander

Lee Ann Alexander is associate editor in chief of the UPCI and senior vice president of Pentecostal Resources Group. In addition to hosting the *Wholyness Podcast*, she has authored three previous books: *More than Grasshoppers*, *Teaching to Transform Hearts*, and *Because I Belong to Jesus: A Guide for Conversations with Kids about Holiness*. When she is not traveling to consult with or minister in churches, she serves in the teaching and discipleship ministries of her local church, the Sanctuary.

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Launching a New Small Group Ministry in Your Church

Paul Records

Let's be honest. Starting a new small group ministry in a church can feel overwhelming. If you are a pastor or leader tasked with overseeing this process, you might be feeling a mixture of hope and hesitation. You know this could shift the culture of your church in a major way. Perhaps, you have asked yourself questions such as: What if people don't sign up? What if leaders aren't ready? What if the congregation has more questions than answers? How will the changes that small groups bring affect our current ministries?

These are all natural concerns. But take heart, launching a healthy small group ministry does not happen in a single event. It unfolds through a series of intentional phases. One step at a time. One decision at a time. The wake of a new small group ministry often brings a missional shift toward helping people grow in *circles* (spiritual community), not simply *rows* (Sunday services). With each passing phase, you will gain clarity, build momentum, and begin to witness the long-term fruit of deeper community and active disciple-making in your church.

As you prepare to launch a small group ministry, consider approaching the process with a four-phase framework. Each phase will clarify where to focus your energy so that the launch of your small group ministry is purposeful, prayerful, and aligned with your church's overall mission. As Habakkuk 2:2 says, "Write the vision and make it plain." In the same way, a small group ministry needs a clearly written vision that others can read, run with, and rally around. When expectations are clear and goals are written down, everyone involved can move forward with confidence.

At the outset, let's identify these four phases and then give definition to each:

PHASE 1: Preparation

This is the phase of *vision discovery* in which you lay the foundation for future success and effectiveness. In this phase, the focus is on seeking God, clarifying the "why" behind your small group ministry, and writing down the vision in simple, compelling terms. At the outset, take time to do your homework and prepare your team and church to embrace small groups as a ministry strategy.



- Spend time in prayer and fasting for wisdom and clarity.
- Meet with your leadership team in advance to gain vision-alignment.
- Develop a strategic growth plan for the ministry.

This is also time to articulate core values for your small group culture. Will groups be sermon-based? Will they meet in homes or on the church campus? What outcomes are you hoping to see in the lives of participants?

PHASE 2: Pre-Launch

The second phase is about *vision clarity* and structure building. This is where you begin turning vision into strategy. The goal in this phase is to develop the systems and infrastructure that will support your small group ministry once it is launched. It may include:

- Recruiting and training group leaders or facilitators.
- Creating a resource toolkit and selecting lesson content for leaders.
- Hosting team meetings to build unity and answer potential questions.
- Building a contact list or database of potential group participants.
- Planning your first semester or term of groups (schedule, format, signup process, etc.).

In the pre-launch phase, pastors play a crucial role. Long before your groups go live, begin shaping the spiritual soil through your preaching and teaching. Use sermons and devotional moments to highlight the biblical necessity of community, sustaining spiritual relationships, and the need for cultivating group relationships. Communicate the role relationships play in the development of our faith. Emphasize themes like shared burdens, mutual encouragement, and the “one-another” verses of the Bible. Practically, consider teaching a sermon series on biblical community or sharing testimonies of transformation through group disciple-making.

You might also consider passing out small group discussion guides tied to your sermon series to model the kind of life-on-life dialogue groups are meant to foster.

Casting vision early cultivates momentum so that when the structure is in place, the larger church is ready to embrace it.

When you speak often and clearly about the “why” of groups, you’ll find your congregation far more ready to embrace the “how.”



The Path to Launch

Whether your church has fifty people or five hundred, launching small groups will require customization, regular communication of ministry goals, and probably a few caffeine-fueled planning sessions.

With wisdom and foresight, I encourage you to anticipate and ask the right questions before the semester starts. Here are a few examples:

1. Who will lead the groups?

When identifying potential small group leaders, look for “hot coals” and “untapped leaders” rather than “spotlight saints.” Spotlight saints are often the same 20 percent of people who already carry 80 percent of the ministry load, and adding more to their plate could easily overwhelm them. The best future leaders are often quietly consistent rather than the loudest in the lobby. Focus your attention on individuals who are teachable, relational, and faithful, even if they don’t yet recognize their own leadership potential.

2. When will groups meet?

Will meetings take place weekly or monthly? Will they gather on the same night to create a unified church-wide rhythm, or will they scatter across different nights? Will small groups replace the midweek Wednesday night service or will they meet on a separate day of the week?

3. Where will groups meet?

Who is willing to open their home, and who would rather lead at the church or a coffee shop? Some people are gifted hosts, others are strong teachers, and some excel simply at connecting with people. A few may be skilled in more than one area, but not every leader can or should do everything, so match roles to each person’s strengths.

4. How will you define a semester or term?

Decide whether your groups will meet for eight weeks, twelve weeks, or another set period, and determine whether you will pause for major holidays. A pre-determined calendar helps people plan ahead, since most families and volunteers already organize their schedules around familiar rhythms like school semesters and holiday seasons. In most churches, the three best times to launch a new semester are at the start of the year in January—often following your annual vision-casting service—shortly after Easter when attendance and energy are high, and in the fall when school resumes and families are returning to their regular routines. Thoughtful timing can significantly increase engagement and make it easier for new participants to join in naturally.



5. What will launch Sunday look like?

Gather your team to brainstorm how to create a vibrant scene—tables set up across the lobby, group leaders smiling and greeting people, sign-up sheets ready to go, and plenty of energy in the air. To make the event effective, use clear signage so guests can easily find the right group for them. Provide either printed group lists or a digital sign-up option using a QR code to make joining simple and accessible. Most importantly, coach your leaders to engage personally with attendees. Encourage them to initiate conversations, share stories, and warmly invite people to join their group. Instead of standing passively behind a table. A well-executed launch Sunday can set the tone for a thriving semester of small groups.

6. How will you handle childcare?

This is often the most asked (and sometimes the most avoided) question when planning small groups. It is important to decide early how your groups will accommodate families with young children. Some groups choose to rotate childcare duties among members so the responsibility is shared. Others offer a small stipend to help cover the cost of babysitters, making it easier for parents to participate consistently. Still others embrace a kid-friendly model, welcoming children into the group environment and keeping things relaxed (with plenty of Goldfish crackers on hand). Whatever approach you choose, clarity and consistency are key. Parents will appreciate knowing exactly what to expect and will be more likely to stay engaged if there is a childcare plan in place.

7. What's your plan to train and support leaders?

Don't throw your leaders into the deep end of the pool and hope they can swim. Equip them with clear expectations and ongoing guidance. Begin with a simple orientation that covers the basics of group leadership. Provide a concise job description so each leader knows their role and establish a plan for regular coaching or check-ins throughout the semester. If your leaders are not fully prepared, consider delaying launch Sunday until they are. It is far better to start strong with trained, confident leaders than to rush ahead and risk burnout or frustration among team members. A thoughtful investment in leader preparation will pay off in the health and longevity of your small group ministry as a whole.

8. What benchmarks will define success?

While attendance is one way to measure progress, it's not the only or even the most important indicator. True success in small group ministry includes stories of personal transformation, developing new leaders, and real-life disciple making. Ask yourself: Are people growing in their faith and relationships? Are your leaders thriving? Are new people finding a place to belong and connect? Are your groups helping members become more engaged and assimilate into church life?



Finally, are people discovering their gifts, stepping into service, and being developed for future leadership? Defining success through both numbers and narratives will help your ministry stay focused on the overall mission of the church. It does not have to be one or the other.

9. How will you multiply groups over time?

Group multiplication does not happen by accident. It requires intentional planning. Identify potential apprentices (or group leaders in training) so they can learn alongside experienced leaders and gain confidence before leading a group of their own. Keep a steady pipeline for developing new leaders so your ministry continues to expand in a healthy, sustainable way. Without this focus, you may end up with one large group that functions more like a small congregation meeting in someone's living room indefinitely. When that happens, the span of care often exceeds the group's ability to meet relational needs effectively. A proactive approach to multiplication ensures that every person continues to experience meaningful connection, care, and is disciplined effectively.

PHASE 3: Launch Day

Launch day marks the official start of your first small group ministry semester or term. It's the day when all the vision, planning, and prayer becomes visible. It's also a day full of faith, excitement, and yes—a little uncertainty. This is not the finish line; it's the starting gate! The spiritual focus at this point is *vision realization*.

Many churches utilize some type of “Small Group Ministry Fair,” a fun and welcoming event focused on recruitment (often held immediately after a Sunday service). At an event like this, the church lobby, fellowship hall, or even an outdoor space is transformed into a hub of connection. Various tables are set up, each representing a different small group, complete with creative signage, snacks, and interest-based props. Think of it as a blend between a community open house and a ministry expo. Group leaders stand behind their tables, available to answer questions about their group's focus—whether it is Bible study, parenting support, an outreach initiative, a men's or women's group, or an activity-based gathering.

Attendees walk around, browse printed group descriptions, scan QR codes to sign up on the spot, and get a feel for the people leading each group. Some churches even add a few extra touches like serving light snacks, coffee, or giveaways to encourage participation and create a celebratory atmosphere.

A small group ministry fair serves not just as a sign-up event but as a strategic first impression for your small group ministry as a whole. It's a chance for members and newcomers alike to see the diversity of group options and feel the warmth of the church's relational culture.

Ultimately, it's about helping people take a meaningful next step to engage in community in the church.



Whether you host a “small group ministry fair” or not, you will need to think through how you can make signing up for small groups easy and simple for new church members.

PHASE 4: Post-Launch

After the excitement of launch day settles, the real work begins. One of the greatest challenges a small group ministry faces is *mission drift*—slowly shifting from the original goal of disciple-making to lesser things.

What you’ve built and worked so hard to launch is worth sustaining, refining, and strengthening over time. This means reinforcing the relational disciple-making culture you hoped to establish from the beginning, continuing to recruit people to join groups, coaching your group leaders, and celebrating publicly the redemptive stories that result.

The spiritual focus in this phase is *vision sustainment*. Moving forward, you will have to juggle the real and often unexpected challenges that come with group ministry life—like the small group that was accidentally promoted with the wrong date (and nobody shows up, except for that one faithful family who brought a casserole for twelve); or the tornado of hyper toddlers that sweeps through a living room Bible study casting Cheetos on innocent bystanders; or the wildly popular group that’s somehow magnetized the entire church, while the group focused on Leviticus finds itself a little lonely.

As the pastor or small group director, your role is to keep communicating, celebrating, and cultivating the values that made the small group ministry matter in the first place. When you do, you’ll discover that the messy, sometimes unpredictable, always people-filled work of groups is also where the deepest spiritual transformation occurs.

Launching small groups often creates a culture shift in a church. Over time, with consistency, vision, and thoughtful investment, your small group ministry can become the relational backbone of your church’s disciple-making strategy. So, keep asking the right questions. Keep adjusting. Keep the focus on people over programs. And don’t forget to reflect and celebrate along the way.

Planning for The Dip

In conclusion, I want to further emphasize a point about the successful launch of a new small group ministry: anything new without a sustainable strategy will eventually bust.



To help frame this concept, I often share what I refer to as “the dip.”

By referring to “the dip,” I’m talking about that inevitable moment in any new ministry when the confetti has settled and the initial buzz of excitement wears off.

You launched with energy. People signed up. The foyer buzzed with curiosity and conversations at your small group fair. And then, somewhere around week five—or semester two—people stop showing up like they used to. Group leaders hit snags. Enthusiasm fizzles. And suddenly, you’re wondering if small groups were just another passing trend.

Welcome to the dip.

Just the other week, I was consulting with a church staff that had excitedly launched a new small group ministry initiative. They kicked off with over twenty brand-new group options and an inspiring call to action. Week one felt like a win. But as the year unfolded, momentum slowly faded week by week until only one lonely group remained.

When we gathered to assess what had gone wrong, it became clear that they had launched small groups and then shelved them like another church department (i.e., out of sight, out of mind). There was no long-term strategy in place to support, sustain, or strengthen the ministry once the initial excitement wore off. Group leaders received little training, coaching, or a shared definition of success. I’m sure you can see how this created the dynamic of each small group leader paddling the canoe in a different direction. This is why “planning for the dip” matters.

Any new initiative—no matter how inspired—will eventually lose steam unless supported by a sustainable, systematic strategy.

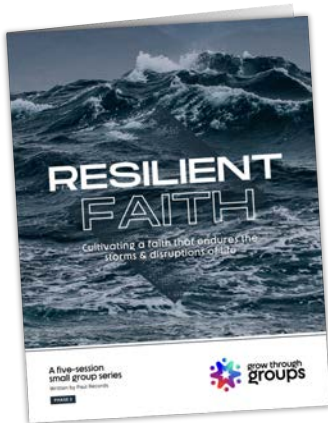
Before launching semester one, start thinking about semesters two and three. Around six months in (or by semester two or three), natural rhythms shift. People reassess their commitments. Leaders hit obstacles. And ministry momentum will begin to plateau.

To thrive beyond your first semester, forward-thinking is essential. Begin by defining what flourishing looks like for your church. What does a healthy small group culture look like six months from now—or a year from now? Name it and use that vision to guide your decisions. Create a leadership pipeline by identifying potential new group leaders early and develop a system in which aspiring leaders can apprentice under more experienced leaders.



Map out your calendar ahead of time. Start planning the next two semesters before the current one ends. This creates rhythm, predictability, and breathing room within your church's yearly schedule. Build in intentional breaks. Take a month off between semesters so leaders and members can rest and reset before launching again. Don't be discouraged by the dip; expect it and plan for it. Build wisely, prepare intentionally, and continue investing in your leaders and team members.

As your first semester ends, take time to celebrate what God has done. Share testimonies from people whose lives have been transformed through group life. Honor your group leaders publicly, and commission a new wave of leaders on the main stage so that the entire congregation can participate. Advertise new strategic groups that meet emerging needs in your church and remind everyone of the reason why small groups exist—to build community, foster disciple-making, and help people grow together in faith.



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Paul Records

Paul Records is a church planter, author, and serves as the director of Grow Through Groups with the Pentecostal Resources Group.



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Making Small Groups Work

Dr. Mel Reddy

The following article is an interview of Dr. Mel Reddy by Paul Records regarding the impact and deployment of small groups at The Sanctuary Church in Cedar Park, TX—a diverse church Dr. Reddy founded with his wife, Lisa, deep in the heart of Texas.

Core Philosophy & Vision

PR: Let's start with the big picture. How would you describe the role small groups play in the overall vision and growth strategy of your church?

MR: Honestly, small groups aren't just another program for us, they are the heart of what we do. Small groups aren't a ministry of the church—they *are* the church. We aren't a church that does small groups. We are a small groups church!

When I look at the New Testament, I see believers meeting both in large gatherings and in homes. Jesus Himself poured into a small group of disciples, showing us that real change happens in close relationships (Mark 3:13–15).

Discipleship moves at the speed of relationships. For us, small groups are where discipleship, care, and mission come alive. They are how we live out the Great Commission. We are not just making converts, but making disciples who are rooted, accountable, and living out their faith daily (Matthew 28:18–20).

PR: In what ways have small groups helped facilitate weekly disciple-making in your congregation?

MR: We know that disciple-making really sticks when it happens in relationship. Our groups give people a place to wrestle with Scripture, pray for each other, have fun and build godly friendships, and encourage one another. People join groups for connection—but they stay for transformation.



It's not just about learning—it's about growing together and holding each other up. People find that it's a lot easier to live for God when they are not doing it alone. That's how Jesus did it, and it's how we see real transformation today.

Launching & Structuring Groups

PR: What did it look like when you first introduced or launched small groups? Were people receptive? How did the introduction of small groups change your overall ministry culture?

MR: Our roll-out of small groups was a different approach. We did not start with market-based groups (groups that people self-select) but instead started with community groups. These were what we labeled as “care communities” in which each person was assigned to a community for pastoral care. This is how we provided follow up and member care. We celebrated milestones such as weddings and baby showers, and served people in times of loss or need with meals.

So, this approach showed us that we were meeting a variety of needs for a variety of people and it gave us a strong foundation to build from. It truly is a way for our church to provide the connection and support people need.

This is so we can grow big but still feel small. We are still able to make each person feel valued and connected! When we launched community groups, we leaned heavily into the biblical reasons for community. We also commissioned our group leaders in a Sunday service, so the church understood this was an extension of pastoral care. Since everyone in the church was assigned to a group (this was based on various factors, but that's a whole different conversation), they received care automatically and we didn't have to rely on them signing up.

After a couple of years of successfully implementing community groups, we added semester-based small groups. These groups gave people more opportunities for connection based on their interests. Since we had already built the concept of groups into the DNA of our church, this addition was well-received.

PR: Can you walk me through your systems for small groups each semester? What key steps or rhythms have made it successful?

MR: We have three semesters for our interest-based small groups; *Spring* (Feb-April; 10-12 weeks long); *Summer* (June-July; 6 weeks); *Fall* (September-November; 10-12 weeks long). This schedule allows for breaks during the holiday season. For instance, we always end the fall semester the week before Thanksgiving, allowing us to focus as a church on spiritual renewal leading up to January. Then we have breaks during the months of May and August to supplement school schedules.

Every semester, we follow a rhythm. We are still finding ways to tweak those processes. About midway through the current semester, our small groups coordinator starts recruiting leaders for the next semester.



But even before that, we encourage current leaders to help us identify potential new leaders. Recruitment is an instrumental part of the process, and it takes time—but this is what ensures the success of our groups. Potential group leaders submit an application to lead a group. This is done every semester, even if it is an anchor group that is offered every semester

On that application, they provide their preferences for meeting times and dates, frequency of meeting (weekly, biweekly or periodically), target audience, etc. They also complete a ministry covenant in order to lead the group. This covenant is different from our teaching or platform covenant (unless they are doing a teaching group). The reason is because we want to involve as many people as possible.

When we are about three weeks until the end of the current semester, we start announcing from the pulpit that we're planning for the next semester. This keeps the group culture and commitment at the forefront, even when we are on a break.

When we are three to four weeks before the start of a new semester, we open registration. We usually mention small group registration no less than three times in a service, and I am sure to mention it from the pulpit as well.

Our small groups coordinator leads a registration kiosk in the lobby, and people can also register on their own on our website or with a QR code. We offer a variety of means for registering to cast a wider net. Throughout registration season, we highlight various groups and share stories of how small groups have been transformational. A week out, we compile rosters and send them to group leaders. That way, they can see who has signed up and can start following up with them.

On launch Sunday, we celebrate the new semester with community group luncheons at various locations across the city. This builds buzz for being in community and is always a fun way to begin a semester. Throughout the semester, we have open enrollment, allowing people to register at any time.

Throughout the semester, our small groups coordinator maintains weekly communication with groups leaders to see if they need support, and to help track attendance. Our coordinator also asks for pictures that we use in service promos and on social media.

Continual contact and group member care is one of the most crucial elements of ensuring the success of our groups. We have had groups that were duds and leaders who eventually fizzled out. We have had to step in and provide a new leader mid-semester when folks have had family, medical, or life issues that prevented them from continuing.



Training & Coaching Group Leaders

PR: What does your small group leader training or onboarding process look like? How do you set your group leaders up for success?

MR: We start with the “why”—casting vision and showing the biblical roots of small groups. Then we get practical: how to host, how to lead discussions and engage others, how to redirect difficult situations, and how to care for people. We also discuss how to ensure the safety of everyone involved.

I mentioned we have a covenant each leader is expected to follow for accountability and guidance. We also encourage leaders to identify other people in their groups who could potentially lead and give them opportunities for development.

My prayer is that we just don't launch small groups—we launch disciple-makers. Our goal is to build their confidence and provide them whatever they may need to be successful.

PR: How do you provide ongoing coaching, support, or feedback to your small group leaders throughout the year?

MR: I mentioned that our small groups coordinator has weekly communication with our leaders throughout the semester. This is for feedback, support, suggestions for improvement, etc. At the conclusion of each semester, our leaders complete an exit survey that indicates what worked well, challenges, suggestions for improvement, etc.

We also provide leadership trainings throughout the year. Leaders see the value in this ministry and how what they are doing truly impacts eternity. The most important thing for us is for our leaders to feel valued and appreciated.

PR: Have you found any particular tools, habits, or rhythms that help group leaders stay healthy and effective long-term?

MR: Sustainability starts with soul health. Healthy leaders build healthy groups. We encourage leaders to stay rooted in prayer and connected to each other. We make ourselves and the small groups coordinator available to support our leaders.

Leading a group should be a joy, not a weight. We encourage all group leaders to find a group activity that they enjoy doing and to follow their interests. Sometimes, we encourage them to take a break for a semester. The bottom line is that we've got to be intentional about cultivating and stewarding the health of our group leaders in order to cultivate a healthy ministry culture.



Managing Growth & Multiplication

PR: What advice would you give to churches that are struggling to grow their group numbers or stuck with the same few faithful groups year after year?

MR: Get to know your people. Find out what they are good at, their hobbies, what they do outside of church, etc. and recruit them to do similar things in a small group context. Each group leader has a unique value-add they bring to the body of Christ. Discover what that is for them and encourage them to use it for the glory of God.

Also, as a senior leader, stop trying to control it all. I do not think a leader needs a minister's license to lead a bike-riding group. If you desire to be a small groups church, then the church needs to feel the ownership of small groups. Find ways to engage the people who have checked out. Help them see groups as a way they can contribute to the church and maintain a meaningful connection to the body of Christ.

Keeping Groups Fresh & Relevant

PR: What strategies have helped you keep your small group ministry fresh and engaging?

MR: Go back to the “why.” Don't assume people remember. Programs don't change people—relationships do. Make personal invitations, celebrate every win, and try new formats. We have “online only” groups, hybrid groups, and of course in-person groups. We want to meet people where they are.

We have some anchor groups that are offered every semester, but we also mix things up by rotating topics and points of focus, even encouraging once a month outings and fellowships (like Taste of Texas BBQ Lunch Group, Serve Our City, and Drive-Thru Prayer). We encourage people to serve and partner together. The best groups don't just look inward—*they look outward*. Make small groups about meeting the needs of the community. Most importantly, listen to feedback and adapt to what people need.

Real-World Lessons & Encouragement

PR: What's one hard lesson you've learned about small group ministry—and how would you advise other leaders to avoid it?

MR: One tough lesson: if you neglect your leaders, your groups will suffer. Early on, we were so focused on launching groups that we missed caring for our leaders. We got overwhelmed with the administrative aspects of things and our leaders were overwhelmed by lack of support. Thriving groups start with healthy leaders. We used to ask every leader in the church to lead a small group. Now, we prioritize their health—spiritually, emotionally, and relationally.



We ask existing and future leaders to *consider* leading a group once a year rather than every semester. This has been a much healthier rhythm for some. And some leaders still are not able to lead a small group, and that's okay.

PR: What's a story or moment from your group ministry that reminds you why this work matters?

MR: I'll never forget when one group member faced a sudden health crisis—the loss of the husband. The church family rallied around her family with meals, prayer, and support. When people rally around someone in crisis, the gospel becomes visible. That love touched the mother and kids. Now, this family loves our church. This family's kids have been baptized this year, and the mother is actively serving in the church. I believe this happened because their small group (and our larger church) adopted them as their family. We must never be too big to care for the needs of the one.

PR: If you were to sit down with a pastor just starting to implement small groups in their church, what would you tell them to prioritize above everything else?

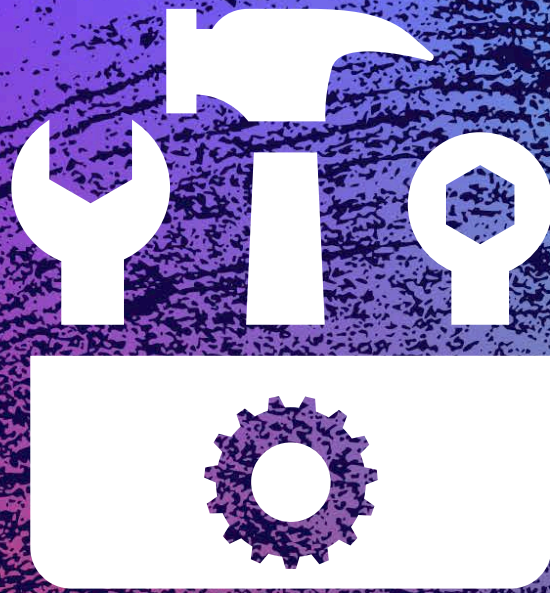
MR: Focus on building a culture of authentic relationships rather than building a mere program. Do not fall into the trap thinking you need to plan thirty groups your first semester. Your church might only be able to sustain four to five groups right now—and that's okay! The authentic community experienced in even a single group will be meaningful for those who take advantage of it. Curriculum and structure matter, but people need to feel known and valued. When relationships are strong, discipleship follows. When relationships are healthy, there is spiritual health in the church.

Resist the urge to compare yourself to other churches. Our approach to small groups may not work for everyone. Find an approach that works for your church. Strive for excellence, not perfection. Be sure to celebrate the impact of your groups and highlight the wins—even if they are small! Share stories on social media and over the pulpit about good things happening. Do not be afraid to try new and different approaches. Each group should be a place where people genuinely grow in their faith and serve others. That may mean starting small—focusing first on a few key groups while you strengthen your systems, train your leaders, and build a healthy foundation. As those groups thrive, you can then multiply at a pace that keeps both your leaders and members spiritually strong.

Dr. Mel Reddy

Dr. Mel Reddy is a Beeson Scholar, holding a Doctor of Ministry degree from Asbury Seminary, a Master of Theological Studies from Urshan Graduate School of Theology (UGST), and a Master of Arts in Counseling from Regent University. Mel is an adjunct professor at UGST and Urshan University, focusing on Applied and Pastoral Theology. He and Lisa are the proud parents of Jude.





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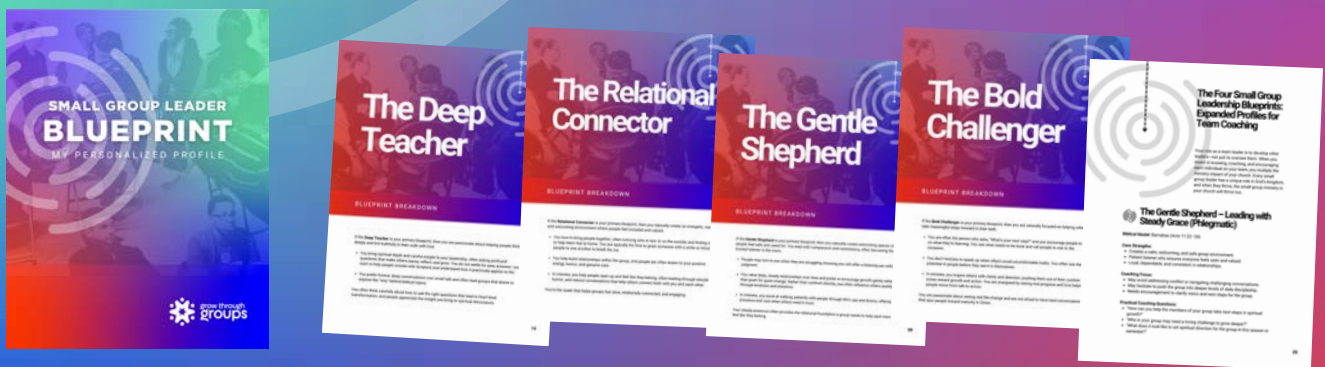


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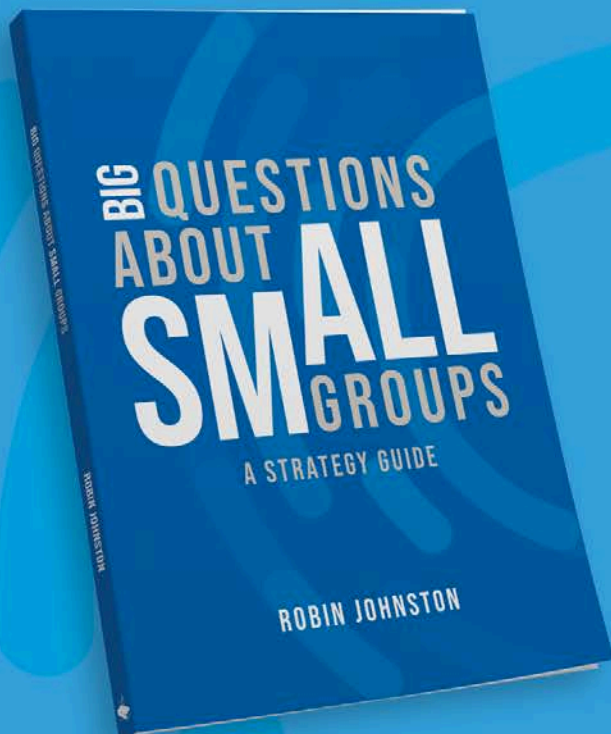
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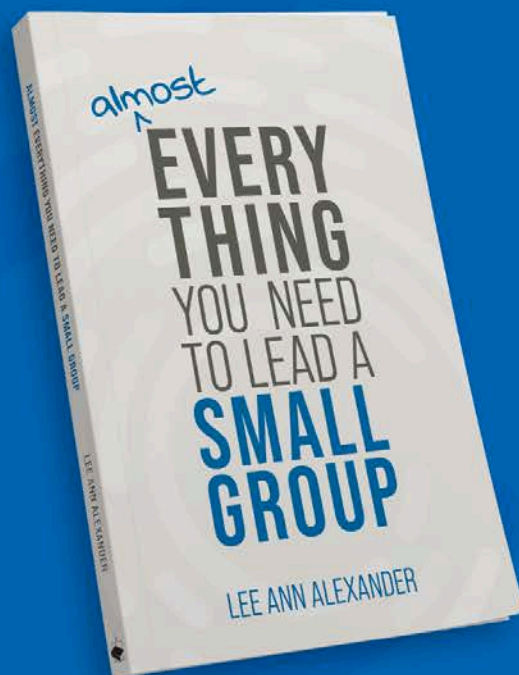
ALMOST EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO LEAD A SMALL GROUP LEE ANN ALEXANDER

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Strategic Growth Initiative (SGI) Resources



The Strategic Growth Initiative (SGI) was born in the heart of General Superintendent David K. Bernard as God gave him a vision for growing the North American church. The General Board of the UPCI approved the forming of SGI for the purpose of highlighting growth in the areas of the number of churches and ministers in North America. The four focus points of SGI are outlined below along with resources available through the Pentecostal Resources Group.

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