BEYOND THE CORE
DESIGNING SMALL GROUPS
FOR THE REST OF US

Chris Surratt
Discipleship Is the Goal

The best measure of a spiritual life is not its ecstasies but its obedience.

OSWALD CHAMBERS
I am not a strong golfer. I love to watch golf, at least I have it on television while I nap, but there is little resemblance to what I have seen the pros do and what transpires when I am on a golf course. It’s probably due to the overwhelming difference in talent and ability, but a lot of it comes down to strategy—or the lack of it. When Rory McIlroy steps up to the tee, he has a well-rehearsed strategy of what he is going to do next. He has visualized where the ball is going to go. His pre-shot routine is exactly the same every time he approaches the ball. He has practiced his swing so many times that each shot looks almost identical in form. He has spent hours and hours planning his strategy and practicing before he even steps onto a golf course.

My approach to golf is simple: I swing hard, close my eyes, and hope for the best. This strategy works about three or four times a round, at best. The rest of the time it’s just awful. I could probably be a decent golfer if I would work on a strategy to hitting the ball, but I have not put in the reps on the practice range to make it happen.

This is the same strategy a lot of churches and pastors follow for a discipleship plan. We don’t really understand what it should look like, so we swing hard, close our eyes, and hope for the best.

You may be a pastor who believes a disciple of Christ should possess a lot of biblical knowledge. In their book *Transformational Groups*, Ed Stetzer and Eric Geiger found that 56 percent of pastors with a discipleship plan list biblical knowledge as their first priority. So you add more discipleship classes to pass down volumes of information. Once attendees have made it through all the classes, they should have enough knowledge to be called a disciple. This approach, however, often results with people who are educated far beyond their level of obedience.
Or you may decide a disciple should always be on mission, because knowledge will come through doing the work. The training is based on active ministry outside the walls of the church, not in its classrooms. This strategy can lead to a group of eternal baby Christians without the foundation needed to defend their beliefs.

After looking at these options, you may conclude that starting a bunch of small groups is the answer to discipleship. But groups are just a tool for creating disciples, and they will never be an effective one without an intentional plan to measure spiritual growth. According to Stetzer and Geiger, “Only 43 percent of the pastors surveyed said their church regularly evaluates discipleship progress among their congregation.” The rest are swinging hard, closing their eyes, and hoping for the best.

If we look at Jesus’s example for creating disciples, we see that it was simple but intentional. “Come, follow me,” he said, “and I will make you fish for people” (Matthew 4:19). Jesus was calling very common men to spend time with him on mission. The disciples were gaining knowledge by spending time with Jesus and one another. There was intentionality and movement in Jesus’s strategy.

Before you implement a strategy to make disciples, you have to first define what a disciple is. Just like a professional golfer, you have to envision what the end result of a shot will be. Finish this statement for your church: A follower of Christ is __________. What will a fully devoted follower of Christ at your church be like?

As I have wrestled with this question for our groups, I have landed on this working definition: Followers of Christ are striving to become more like Jesus in every aspect of their life. If a disciple is becoming more like Jesus, it takes intentional movement. No one gets there by accident.

**MOVEMENT TOWARD GOD**

Jesus’s first words to Simon and his brother Andrew were, “Come follow me.” As you think about the disciples’ journey with Jesus, you can picture them following him, always striving to take their next steps to come closer to the Master. But all of them moving at their own pace and rhythm. One mistake we make as leaders is the assumption that everyone is on the same pace in their journey with Christ. Thus we need to design pathways for these steps without regulating what those steps are.
My wife and I realized pretty early that our first child, Brianna, was going to be special. Like all first-time parents, we had high hopes for our firstborn. My first birthday gift for her was a basketball and a goal. A future professional basketball player has to start somewhere, right? But it became clear that sports might not be her only future path when she started talking when she was one year old. I don’t mean a few cute words here and there, but complete thoughts about everything. We had to ask her to not talk at the airport, because there was no way the authorities would believe she was under two years old and qualified to be a lap child. Brianna started reading on her own at three, with complete books under her belt by four. Her progress has continued at this pace all the way through high school. She is always at the top of her class in almost every subject. Although she works very hard at it, learning seems almost effortless for her.

By the time our second child came along five years later, we thought we had this parenting thing down. Ashlyn was not only going to follow in her big sister’s footsteps, but we now had the knowledge to help her surpass Brianna’s accomplishments. But it didn’t exactly work out that way. Ashlyn is very intelligent and makes great grades in school, but she has to work extremely hard at it. Her personality is also the opposite of her sister’s. The guidance we gave Brianna to succeed has to be different for Ashlyn. She would rather socialize first and then learn. Brianna starts everything in her life with a book.

We make the same assumptions about people’s spiritual growth. We create classes and requirements to keep people on the same path toward Jesus. This strategy makes for straight lines on paper, but spiritual formation doesn’t always lay out in pretty, straight lines. No two people move toward Jesus in the exact same way.

I was born with an abnormally large noggin. I would love to believe it’s because of my abnormally large brain, but my test scores proved that not to be the case. Other than
stretching out my share of turtleneck shirts in the 1990s, having a large head is not really an issue until I start shopping for hats. I have learned to stay away from the “one size fits all” section because that claim is a big, fat lie. The makers of those hats have obviously never put a measuring tape around my ginormous head.

Discipleship, too, is not a “one size fits all” process. Instead of forcing people to fit into our spiritual boxes, we should be helping people to discover what the next step is for them and what they need to do to take it. Small-group leaders need to be taught to constantly look for spiritual signals from their members. Sometimes those signals are obvious, but most of the time they are more difficult to spot.

I typically ask for prayer requests at the end of the discussion time during our small-group meetings. I try to switch up how we pray and will occasionally ask for different people to take one of the requests and lift it up in prayer in front of the group.

I noticed that one of the guys in our group had never offered to pray for a request. I was okay with that, because praying in front of a group is not always easy for everyone. One night near the end of the semester, he pulled me to the side as we headed in for the discussion and said, “I got this tonight.”

Not quite understanding what he meant, I said, “Okay, but what are you talking about?” He said, “I have never prayed in front of anyone in my life, but I think I can do it tonight. I will take one of the requests when we have prayer time.”

I said, “That’s great, but you really don’t have to. There’s nothing wrong with praying to yourself for the requests. God will hear it either way.”

He looked at me a little dismayed and said, “No. I need to do this. This is a huge step for me, and I need to take it.”

That night, he took one of the requests, and when he saw me after group, he beamed and said, “Told you I got it!”

Praying out loud at a small-group meeting may not be most people’s next spiritual step, but it was Brian’s that night. To measure if the groups at your church are moving toward God, ask these questions:
Are we training our leaders to listen for spiritual signals from their group members?
Are new groups being started with leaders being raised up within existing groups?
Are there stories of life changes coming out of the groups?

MOVEMENT TOWARD ONE ANOTHER
The transliterated Greek word for the term “each other” is *allelon*, and it’s used fifty-eight times in the New Testament. Here are just a few uses of the term:

- “Meet together and encourage each other” (Hebrews 10:25)
- “Encourage each other” (1 Thessalonians 4:18)
- “Love each other like brothers and sisters” (Romans 12:10)
- “By helping each other with your troubles, you truly obey the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2)
- “Care the same for each other” (1 Corinthians 12:25)
- “Pray for each other” (James 5:16)
- “Serve each other with love” (Galatians 5:13)
- “Forgive each other” (Colossians 3:13)

It becomes clear as you read through the Bible that we were not meant to walk through this life on our own. I am convinced that it’s possible to achieve community without discipleship, but it’s impossible to achieve discipleship without community. The original small group spent a majority of their time taking care of one another’s needs. As Andy Stanley says, they were constantly “one anothering one another.”

An effective small-group leader creates an environment where basic needs are met within the group. The first call should never be to the church office or a local agency; it should always be to the small group.
This is exactly what happened to one of our young-adult group leaders and now staff member, Wes Howard. Here is his story:

A few years ago, I rented a cabin to get away with God to try and get some clarity on a nudging I had been feeling about my job and career path. The next day I went to work after the cabin trip, I lost my job. The day after that, I attended my first community group at Cross Point. Talk about crazy timing.

Six months later, the severance package had just about run out. I was job-searching big time but unfortunately had come in second place on several opportunities. My community group was well aware of everything and was a great source of encouragement to me. Spiritually, I was growing more than I ever had before in my entire life. There came a point where I would not have enough money to pay my rent. I did not tell anyone this. I was just praying and frantically job searching.

The week the rent was due, I went to group like normal, and at the end of the night, the leader stood up and told me how much they loved me and believed in me and that they wanted to make sure that I knew that. She handed me an envelope and inside was a check. It was the exact amount of my rent, and my rent was a weird number. You couldn’t have easily guessed it. In that moment, I knew that I was right where God wanted me to be.

Wes’s trajectory was changed because his small group followed God’s prompting to take care of one of their own. Discipleship does not happen by accident or in a vacuum. It takes a community of believers who are always looking out for one another. As leaders, we need
to be intentional about looking for the one-another stories and celebrating them with other group leaders.

To measure if your groups are taking care of one another, think about these questions:

» Are they taking meals to other group members when a baby is born or someone has a death in the family?

» Are they the first responders when there is an emergency, and a group member ends up in the hospital?

» Are they pooling their resources when a group member suddenly loses a job and needs assistance for a short period?

MOVEMENT TOWARD MISSION

The final act for Jesus with his disciples was to send them out to do the work on their own. They had spent time following in his foot-steps and building community, but it was time to take what they had learned and begin to spread it across the world.

[Jesus] called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. . . .

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.” (Matthew 10:1, 5–8, NIV)

Jesus is telling his group, “I have given you all of this divine knowledge. Now it’s time to give it away.” Our small groups need easy and obvious paths to take what they are learning and give it away. As you design your systems, look for low-level entry points to allow groups to live out what they are learning. Here are a few opportunities we have at Cross Point for groups to serve together in missions:

» Neighborhood parties: We encourage our leaders and hosts to invite people in their circles of influence to group before inviting them to a Sunday service. Their
unchurched friends and neighbors are more likely to take that first step if it’s an invitation to a home and not a church building. We give our leaders some tools to help make the invitation process a little easier. Each host packet includes custom invitations to distribute to their neighbors and video training on how to make the big ask. We also encourage our groups to host neighborhood block parties during the summer. We provide a block party kit with banners, yard signs, invitations, door hangers, ideas for games and food, kids’ activities, a music playlist link, party favors, and a notebook for writing down the names and contact information for a follow-up invitation to dinner.

**Serving Saturdays:** Several times a year we help organize community projects throughout our city for our church to venture out and serve en masse. If you drive around Nashville on one of our Serving Saturdays, you’ll see red “Serve” T-shirts everywhere. Our groups serve at local schools, AIDS clinics, food pantries, women’s shelters, homeless shelters, community cleanups, other churches, and anywhere where we can make a difference. There are no strings attached to our serving. We only want to show who Christ is through acts of kindness around our community. Serving Saturday is a great vehicle for groups to serve together.

**Short-term missions trips:** There is nothing that changes a person’s worldview more than spending a week on a mission trip in a developing country. We sponsor trips throughout the year to the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Honduras, India, and Kenya. A small group that spends a week together in service in another country is guaranteed to come back ready to do anything to make a difference in the world.

Every August, our pastor does a DNA vision series where he lays out who we are as a church and why we do what we do. The first week is about discipleship, the second week is on community, and the third week is why we do missions. A couple of years ago, we decided that instead of just telling the church why we do global missions, we would show them. We quickly arranged a “Where in the world is Pete?” trip where the pastor and a camera crew hit all five of our international partners (the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Honduras, India, and Kenya) in eight days. On the Sunday of the mission’s emphasis week, we used the video to give people a visual of where we serve around the world.
The service was very effective, and immediately record numbers of people signed up to go for the first time for one of our fifteen short-term missions trips the next year. Five members of a young-adult group were there that day, and they each individually felt the tug to go on a trip but were too intimidated by the idea of signing up. When they met as a group later that night, they began to talk about the idea of going on a trip and the fears they had about signing up. By the end of the meeting, they collectively decided to go to Haiti on the next available trip. They did everything as a group to get ready for it, from having yard sales to helping with fundraising, to holding packing parties together before the trip. The fear that was there individually was erased in the context of a group. That trip to Haiti changed the direction of those small-group members’ lives because they chose to be on mission together.

We encourage new groups to form after members return from a mission trip. They have seen what the power of community can do when focused on doing good for eight days. Imagine what could happen if small groups poured that same energy into their own communities.

**Adopt-a-Blocks:** An idea passed on to us from the Dream Center in Los Angeles is that of loving your community one block at a time. Every first Saturday of the month, people from Cross Point gather in small groups to go door-to-door, finding needs and filling them. One month might be basic trash cleanup. The next month might be offering household items like light bulbs. At Thanksgiving time, they might take meals to homes that would otherwise go without for the holiday. This all culminates in a block party in the parking lot of the Cross Point Dream Center at noon.
What makes Adopt-a-Blocks work is consistency and community. Everything and everyone else come and go on those streets, so we are determined to stay. The same small groups hit the same blocks every month. After two years of persistent helping, doors that would never open in the beginning are now not only opening to our groups, but the people behind them are participating in the event as well.

Very slowly, life change is taking place because those small groups will not go away.

Give groups a list of local organizations to partner with. Lower the intimidation bar on taking an international missions trip. Organize periodic church-wide serving opportunities around the city. Make groups aware of the different serving opportunities within the church. To measure whether your groups are living missionally, ask these questions:

- Are they going on short-term missions trips together?
- Are they periodically serving together somewhere in their community?
- Are they inviting their neighbors into their group?
- Are they serving somewhere in the church together?

**IT TAKES TIME**

One reason it’s difficult to measure discipleship in your church is because it is a hard and lengthy process. Seeing life change take place takes a lot of time and deliberate effort from leaders willing to invest in life-on-life relationships. We have grown accustomed to expecting immediate results. If a new initiative is not producing instant fruit, we cut it. If a new idea is not embraced by the majority, we drop it. If a person in our group takes a step back in their walk, we move on.

But sustained life change can sometimes take months or years before it’s fully realized in someone’s life. I always cringe when I hear about celebrities who have recently turned their life over to God and are now being paraded as an example on television. They still need a lot of time and refining before finding their spiritual footing.
One of our group leaders at Cross Point told me recently that he has been investing in a group member for years with very little fruit so far to show for it. In fact, if he’s not careful during a group discussion, this person can start to swing the conversation the wrong direction and sway the group of primarily new Christians off track. But he said, “I will continue to pour into this person for as long as it takes.” This leader understands the power of persistence.

Paul recognized the power of persistence when he addressed the Christians in Corinth:

> Brothers and sisters, in the past I could not talk to you as I talk to spiritual people. I had to talk to you as I would to people without the Spirit—babies in Christ. The teaching I gave you was like milk, not solid food, because you were not able to take solid food. And even now you are not ready. (1 Corinthians 3:1–2)

How many times have we expected our baby Christians to be on solid food when they’re only capable of digesting 2 percent milk? Solid food looks great on the stats sheet. We believe disciples on solids are easier to take care of. Less crying. Fewer missteps. But change does not happen overnight.

As I sat down with a friend for coffee, he began to share with me the reason why he had lost faith in the church. After weekly Bible studies for two years at his previous church, his spiritual partner sat him down one day and explained how he would have to leave the church immediately because they were not seeing enough fruit in his life. The change they felt needed to take place in his spiritual walk was taking too much time for the relationship to continue. It was time to move on.

When I asked him what had brought him to church at Cross Point, he said, “I have never felt the pressure to be anything else than what I am at Cross Point. I am allowed to grow at my own pace. It’s truly okay to not be okay.”

Spiritual maturity is not just another box on a checklist. If discipleship is really the goal for our small groups, it’s going to take the long game to get it done. We cannot walk away from relationships when they start to become inconvenient for us.
Curriculum will not always guarantee discipleship, but a solid, biblically based study plan can help group leaders lay the foundation for spiritual growth. Although we allow our groups at Cross Point to choose their own curriculum, most new leaders and hosts struggle with what their group should be studying next. We get very little pushback when we ask our groups to study the same thing twice a year in conjunction with our church-wide campaigns. They appreciate having the guidance and the church removing the guesswork for curriculum choices. We have to remember that group leaders have full-time jobs and don’t necessarily have enough time to scour local Christian bookstores for bits and pieces of a Bible study.

To help ease the decision-making process and to provide a discipleship path for our groups, we created a curriculum menu. The menu includes categories titled “Appetizers,” “Salads,” “Main Courses,” “A la Carte,” and “Desserts.” Each category has five to six curriculum choices that have been tested by experienced leaders and proven to be good options. If the leaders pick one study from each category for a year, their group will have a full discipleship diet of curriculum.

Unlike an actual restaurant, appetizers and salads are not necessarily lighter in content than the main courses, but they are easier to manage studies to start out with a new group. Most of them are DVD driven, so the leader doesn’t have to worry about creating content each week. All of our church-wide studies fall under the appetizer category. We also include a couple of studies that are targeted toward new believers in this section. Starting Point by Andy Stanley and North Point Church5 is a great ten-week study for new Christ followers and even nonbelievers.

Main courses cover the core fundamentals of who we are as a church with studies focusing on evangelism, discipleship, and community. Like the salads and appetizers, most of these
are DVD based but give seasoned leaders the option of shouldering more of the content if they desire.

The dessert category has fun options for our groups to consider through the course of a semester. We encourage all of our groups to take occasional breaks from the studies and do something fun together as a group. A group that has fun together will grow together. These options include:

- Hosting a game night.
- Going to a baseball game.
- Meeting for a picnic in the park.
- Going kayaking.
- Taking the group camping over the weekend.

A la carte options are studies for specific demographic groups, like men, women, marriage, preparation for marriage, and so forth.

The majority of the studies on the menu are four to six weeks long. Most groups could make it through each category in a year and then repeat the rotation with different studies. We update the study choices yearly to keep it fresh with new options.

While curriculum does not guarantee discipleship, it does give a foundation for a leader to start the necessary conversations. We discovered that groups who stay with the same category of studies for more than two years begin to hear the same answers to the same questions. Having a curriculum menu introduces different perspectives on the same spiritual topics. It also gives the church leadership a handle on what is being taught through the groups.

**DISCIPLESHIP-FOCUSED GROUPS**

I was tasked a couple of years ago with developing a process for ordaining people as pastors at Cross Point. As I began to research the possibilities, I realized there was not a clear path for those who desired to be in ministry and wanted to grow in their understanding of the Bible. I was driven by Paul’s comment to Timothy: “Do your best to
present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15, NIV). We had plenty of Bible studies available through our groups, but nothing to immerse an aspiring pastor in deeper theology. We were not preparing them to correctly handle the word of truth.

The option to attend a seminary isn’t a practical choice for most church attendees or staff, so I put together a six-month crash course in systematic theology and modern church philosophy and practices. Each month a group member would study a bit of systematic theology along with a book about spiritual leadership in the church. I would occasionally have guest pastors sit in with the group to give their perspective on the topic for that month. There are also online assignments to go along with the topic (interview a local pastor, build a Bible study, write a message, etc.) to help put what they’re reading into practice along the way. The format for the group is based on open dialogue, not lectures from a teacher.

We launched the program with a small pilot group of staff members and have now expanded it to handpicked emerging leaders from our different campuses. The plan is to eventually open it to the whole church, with several spiritual leadership groups running throughout the year.

Out of the success of the spiritual leadership group, we have now developed an organizational leadership group based on the same format. This group focuses more on the core principles for overall leadership; the systematic theology component is not used.

**IT’S ALL ABOUT BALANCE**

When a golfer reaches the tipping point of going from weekend hacker to having a legitimate game, it’s because he’s managed to perfect the nuances that go into a good golf swing without thinking about it. There is a balance to the stance, the take away, the approach, and the follow-through.
Creating disciples who make disciples is not about focusing only on one aspect of discipleship; it’s striving for a balance of teaching, listening, refining, and doing. Examine your current discipleship strategy and note how balanced you are with your offerings. Are you focused just on teaching or are there opportunities for living it out? Are your groups digging below the surface or are they functioning more as social clubs? Finding that balance will change the way your church thinks about discipleship.

THINK IT OVER

» What is your current discipleship strategy?
» If you do not have a discipleship strategy, what is the first step for implementing one?
» How are you measuring spiritual growth through your small groups?
» What opportunities are you offering people to live out what they’re learning?
We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.

DOROTHY DAY,
THE LONG LONELINESS
You may have designed the best small-groups system you possibly could. You may have handpicked, mentored, and trained the brightest leaders in your church. But none of it matters if the majority of the people in your church never get connected to a group. We can spend so much time and efforts designing the structure and then assume people will just show up.

No matter how difficult you make the entry points, you can count on a core of 20 percent at least giving it a try. They are so committed to the church and the vision that they will fight through any barriers to be in a group. Make it a little easier to join a group and you might get 10 to 15 percent more to give it a go. But so many churches never get past the 50 percent barrier because it takes different approaches to move beyond the core to the crowd. You cannot have one entry point and expect to reach the final 50 percent.

NEW GROUPS

The best strategy for reaching new people is starting new groups. New people may attend an existing group once, but most of them will not continue to attend, especially if they were not invited by someone already in the group and were either placed in the group by a staff member or chose it themselves from a menu of groups on the website. No matter how open and friendly a group may be to new people, newcomers are walking onto an uneven playing field. If you ever had to move and change schools when you were growing up, you know what that feeling is like. There is already history and relationships formed within the group, and trying to catch up with everyone else takes more effort than most people are willing to give to a group. Open groups sound like a great strategy, but they just don’t work.

Our family struggled to make new relationships when we first moved to Nashville. It seemed as if everyone we met had already filled their relationship quotas. To better connect to our community, we decided to start a small group after a couple of months and open it up to anyone. What we discovered were eight other couples who were struggling just like us. Most of them had just moved to the area and were experiencing the same kind of isolation we were. Five years later, those same couples are still some of our closest friends. We would never have had those life experiences if we had not made the decision to start a new group and see what happens.
Starting a new group levels the playing field for everyone. The expectations for relationships have not been established yet. There is a mutual feeling of “we are all in this together, so let’s see if we can make this work.”

We discovered how well this could work at Cross Point when we launched a midsize group for young adults. Nashville is filled with young professionals who have moved here to chase a dream. Most of them are not connected into community and are hungry for relationships. After attempting to connect as many young professionals as we could into existing groups, we realized we needed to utilize the strategy of starting new groups to keep up with the demand. A mid-size group that met on campus allowed us to grow exponentially and also provided a constant source of new small groups. Two to three new groups were being formed every month in response to the flow of new people.

Our first question to someone requesting a group is, “Would you be interested in starting a group?” Not everyone will be ready to start a new group, but we want to at least start the conversation. So many people respond, “I hadn’t thought about starting a group, but please tell me more about it.” Just giving the option changes the mentality from consumer to contributor. They are also more likely to stick in community if the responsibility of forming that community is on them. They are no longer just kicking the tires but actually helping to build the car.

**ALL-CHURCH CAMPAIGNS**

An effective way to start several new groups at one time is by aligning your church around the same topic once or twice a year. We schedule campaigns for our major growth seasons in February and September. Doing an all-church study brings several benefits:
All of our groups are speaking the same language for six weeks. With a modified, free-market system, it’s rare that everyone in our church is on the same page. You can feel the buzz on Sundays when everyone is headed in the same direction.

We discover new leaders who would have never stepped up any other way. The push to host a group for the campaign forces people to step out of their comfort zone and contribute.

It reenergizes our current leaders. Some of our leaders need a reason to get excited about leading a group again. The excitement of a campaign brings new life to their groups.

It forces our groups staff to be creative. Building an interactive study around our pastor’s messages is not always easy. The process makes us think through every aspect of group life and how we can best set up our leaders and hosts for success.

It realigns our leaders and staff with the heart of our pastor. It’s easy to drift away from the vision of the church over time. An all-church study helps bring us back to the core values of who we are as a church. We are walking in lockstep with our senior leader.

Our pastor typically plans out his message series three to four months ahead of time, so I make sure to schedule some time with him in October and June to see where he is leaning on those campaign weeks. Occasionally he will have a solid direction, and we will build off that, but a lot of the time he is open to ideas and we are able to brainstorm together on what might work best for groups and the congregation.

Our most successful campaigns have resulted from our planning far enough in advance, with enough time to design our curriculum and put the pastor in the small groups’ living rooms on video. We discovered that people will buy into a study much quicker when it’s our teaching pastor setting up the discussion each week. We keep the introductory videos short (eight to ten minutes), and use them as a handoff to the facilitator for the big idea of the session. One of our studies was based completely online to keep printing and duplicating costs down. It also helps when the pastor releases a book and someone else does the heavy lifting of designing the study and shooting videos for us.

It doesn’t always work out to build your own curriculum for the campaign. We either do not have enough time to do it the way we would like or we can find something on the
shelf that fits perfectly with where the pastor wants to go with the message series. A few years ago, our pastor wanted to focus on the idea of God’s love. Bob Goff’s book *Love Does* had just been released, and we thought it would be perfect to build a curriculum around it for the series. After a few weeks of struggling to make the book work for us as a small-group study, we discovered that Saddleback Church’s 40 Days of Love campaign study was a much better fit. It became one of our most successful all-church campaigns ever.

With our most recent campaign, as of this writing, we were able to start over two hundred new groups. Not all of those groups will continue after the initial six-week study, but even if only half of them do, that is one hundred more groups than we had before the campaign started. I will take that success ratio every time.

**ON- AND OFF-RAMPS**

I grew up in East Texas, which means when we wanted to vacation on a beach (where you could actually see what was in the water around you), we would head to Florida. On our way to those white-sand beaches, just before the swamps of Louisiana, there was a sign on the interstate that advertised the next exit as being twenty-five miles ahead. I remember seeing that sign as a kid and immediately panicking as I quickly thought through every drink and snack I had consumed since the last rest stop. Those were always the longest twenty-five miles in my life because of the thought of no off-ramps that offered relief.

If we expect our people to have a panic-free experience with group life, we have to design easy and obvious on- and off-ramps in community. What are the obstacles that keep people from getting into and out of groups? Are they afraid to commit because it feels like a lifetime, no-way-out contract?
**Semesters**

A few years ago we decided to move to a semester format for our groups calendar. We now run three semesters through the year. Our fall semester kicks off in late August and runs through November. The winter semester starts in late January and goes to Easter. And the spring semester launches two weeks after Easter and runs through June.

The beginning of each semester gives us a natural place to start new groups with a lot of momentum. If new members come to our church during the middle of a semester, it’s only a few weeks until we are starting a new batch of groups for them to join. Defining the end of semesters reassures people that there will be an opportunity to step out of a group without feeling guilty. It also gives our leaders a chance to catch their breath before taking on another season.

Although we give our leaders a break from the burden of leading a weekly small-group meeting during the summer, we encourage them to stay connected as a group by hosting a neighborhood block party, participating in a local or global missions opportunity, and doing something fun together as a group. Just like we don’t believe church is all about the weekend, community is not all about the study. It’s healthy for a group to step out of their normal routine for a couple of months to do something different.

**Lobby Presence**

One of my favorite things to do while on vacation is attend church. That seems really odd coming from someone who makes a living by working for a church, but I am a self-proclaimed church junky. I love discovering how other churches are successfully reaching people for Christ. It also gives me a chance to just worship. Whenever I am at my home church, I am constantly thinking through everything around me instead of focusing on what God wants to say to me that morning.

I am consistently amazed at how difficult churches can make it for a new person to discover how to plug into community at their church. It’s usually not too difficult to find out where to drop off my kids. The coffee and doughnuts are featured prominently. I can follow the crowd into the main auditorium. But my path to being in a small group is nowhere to be found.
If the best way to shut the back door to your church is to get people plugged into community as soon as possible, then why wouldn’t you make that path obvious to visitors to your church? Even if your system allows people to join groups only at certain times of the year, there should be a designated spot in the lobby to tell them the why and how behind your assimilation strategy.

The volunteers in charge of that space should be equipped with the most recent information for how groups work at the church. There is nothing more frustrating for a visitor than approaching an information desk at the church and discovering that the person on the other side can’t answer his questions or has out-of-date information for the ministry. If a volunteer does not immediately know the answer, she should at least know the right staff member to ask.

**Online Options**

When I first came to Cross Point, we were still listing all of our groups in a printed magazine format. This required the groups staff to track down all the information from leaders and make sure it was all as accurate as possible before going to print. If some of the information was wrong or had changed after the print date, it was too late to do anything about it. The cost of printing devoured most of our small-groups annual budget, so we couldn’t afford to continually update and reprint the information. Offering book listings also forced people to be physically present at church when the books were handed out on a Sunday. If they missed that day, most of the groups would be already closed by the time they could get the information.

Moving all of our group listings online gave us several benefits:

- **Lower cost:** We were able to take the money we were spending on printing and use it to produce our own curriculum for all-church campaigns. It also freed up money for coffees and lunches with our leaders.

- **Flexibility:** We never worry about a group changing their information at the last minute. We can add and subtract groups from the website at any point during the semester. We can guarantee new people that the groups represented on the website are open to join at any time.
Always available: People no longer have to be present at church to get a listing of available groups. They don’t even have to attend our church before joining a small group.

Expected: In today’s online world, if the information cannot be found quickly on a mobile phone, it doesn’t exist. When I’m looking for information on a new restaurant, I don’t pull out the yellow pages and give them a call. I open an app on my smartphone. Not only does the information for groups need to be online, but it cannot be buried deep in the website. One or two clicks are the limit people will exert to find anything.

The downside to putting groups online is it can depersonalize the process. Instead of having someone with the church hand off a newcomer to a group leader, they can pick a group from a generic list. We try to combat this by not putting the leader’s information on the online listing but having the first contact come from one of our staff of group directors. This helps to ensure that the group will be a good fit, and a newcomer has someone to check with if the group leader doesn’t get back with them.

STAGE TIME
For groups to become a cultural norm in a church, they have to be talked about as much as possible. In an episode of Seinfeld, George decided the only way he could get a girl to show any interest in him was by getting his name stuck in her head like a commercial jingle. By the end of the episode, she caught herself singing his name to the tune of “Buy Mennen” without even thinking.7

People need to leave church every Sunday singing the words “join a group” in their head. This is accomplished not just through making a small-groups announcement every
week, because people start to tune out the same announcements after a while, but by becoming a natural part of the language from the stage. The senior pastor casually mentions something that happened in his group the past week during his message. The person doing the welcome section of the service talks about how the best way for people to connect to the heart of the church is through joining a small group. The service closing always includes logistics for how to investigate joining a group. After a few months of this, people who are not connected to a group start to feel like they are missing out on something.

When it is time to make specific announcements about groups, people respond best to stories, not information. Apple commercials make you want to buy an overpriced gizmo not by telling you all of the details of its processing power but through stories of how it made people’s lives better. You want to buy a Harley-Davidson motorcycle because the advertisements show a biker leaning into a curve on a beautiful day in the mountains. Never mind that you live nowhere near a mountain, you need to have that life. Leadership author and guru Simon Sinek says in the TED Talk based on his book Start with Why, “People don’t buy what you do, they buy why you do it.” Stories of life-change through the power of community are why people will give small groups a go.

Look for those stories throughout the year, and store them for when you can use them during a groups push. Put the stories on video to be shown at the end of the service. At Cross Point, we have also used them in social media campaigns leading up to a semester kickoff. Each day is a different snapshot of a story on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Instead of producing the normal program or bulletin on that Sunday, put two or three stories and a QR code to your groups sign-up website in it.

It’s also vital on those semester kickoff Sundays that how to join a small group is the only announcement. If you send people out of the building with too many messages, small groups will get lost in the mix. Doing this will take discipline and sacrifice from the other ministries in the church, but if you truly believe that life change happens best within the context of community, then small groups should be the only focus for the day.
CONNECTION EVENTS

Our sign-up to show-up percentage at Cross Point went from around 40 percent to 80 percent after implementing our connection event strategy. Before we did this, our campuses would host a typical small-groups fair on semester kickoff Sundays. Each campus would have a few leaders available in the lobby for people to meet after the service, and then they could decide if they wanted to sign up for a group. We included a sign-up card in the worship program if they’d rather fill it out and drop it in the offering.

Our senior pastor, however, is amazing when it comes to selling the vision of community for our church, so our sign-up numbers were typically extremely high. But we discovered that large sign-ups did not always equate to people actually showing up for groups. After they had a chance to go home and think about it, the fear of the unknown caused them to stay home. We needed something stickier.

What if we could eliminate the biggest imagined fears of being in a small group? We looked at what North Point Community Church in Atlanta was doing with their group link events and similar strategies at Saddleback Church, and we eventually created a version that we thought would work in our culture.

After the pastor gives the vision for small groups, we invite anyone who is interested in exploring groups further to join us for a connect event that week. Each night of the week is tailored for group leaders and hosts who will be meeting on that particular night for the next six weeks. If someone thinks a group meeting on Monday nights might work best for them, they could come to the event on Monday. If Wednesdays worked better for others, they could come on Wednesday night. And so on.

At the event, we set up round tables throughout the room with colored balloons representing the type of group and information about where the
groups would meet. As each person enters the room, they are greeted by a small-groups coach or director and handed a menu with a diagram of the room with a color key for the balloons (red = men’s group, pink = women’s group, green = married couples, etc.). After our first attempt, we discovered there was no difference between light green balloons and dark green balloons. We’re pretty sure a few married couples accidentally joined some single-adult groups that semester.

The menu also includes three questions to think about as the newcomers go about choosing a group:

› What day/time of week works best for you?
› Who do you want to connect with?
› Where do you live?

Coaches and directors are there to be a guide to help the newcomers find the right table and answer any additional questions they might have. We structure the evening as much as possible to be like a group meeting. We give them twenty minutes at the beginning to grab some snacks and get to know the people around their table. A stage host then welcomes everyone and gives the overall agenda for the next ninety minutes. We’ve discovered it’s important to keep to your word and begin and end on time. And we want to model for the attenders what we expect from our leaders and hosts at their own groups.

If we are launching our all-church study that week, we start with the introductory video for week one and walk the groups through four rounds of questions from the study. Each round builds on the last and allows the group to gradually become more open as the night progresses. After the last round of questions, the stage host thanks everyone for coming and explains how they have just experienced what it is like to be in a community group at Cross Point.

All of the typical fears—Who will be in my group? What will we talk about for two hours?—have been answered that night. All that is left to do is to decide the location and time your group will meet for the next six weeks. The host then instructs everyone to turn their menu over, which has a place for the newcomers to write down their contact information for the leader or host and a tear-off portion to record the details about the
group. If a table doesn’t already have a designated leader or a host, we ask them to decide who could host the group and/or facilitate discussion for the next six weeks.

Before we dismiss everyone, we ask the newly chosen hosts to stick around for a few minutes so we can get their information and give them a host packet and the curriculum for the study. All brand-new hosts are given the curriculum for an all-church study for free, because we want to eliminate as many barriers to hosting a group as possible. Veteran group leaders are able to purchase the curriculum at reduced prices.

The leaders and hosts then follow up the next day with an email reminding everyone at their table of the details for the next group meeting. If someone misses the connection event but still wants to join a group, they have an opportunity the next couple of weeks to join one through connection cards that we stuff in the Sunday programs or by choosing a group from our online listings.

**THE NEW FRONT DOOR**

Connection events have proven to be the best strategy for getting people *within* our church into a small group, but if we are going to make a serious dent in our communities, small groups have to become a new entry point for the church. I love the *invest and invite* strategy that North Point Church in Atlanta has taught their people for inviting their unchurched friends to church. But how much stickier would the invite be if the investment was through an invitation to be a part of a small group first?

- They will have already been exposed to the pastor’s teachings through the videos from the all-church study.
- There is built-in follow-up through the group meetings.
There is no rush to get them there on a Sunday.

It starts and continues with relationship.

The more we move away from the mentality of “the weekend is everything,” the better chance we have to reach entire cities. Don’t get me wrong, weekend services are important, but they cannot be the only tool in the evangelism toolbox. It’s natural to rely on Sundays, because drawing a large crowd is fairly easy, but creating and nurturing relationships through groups is more difficult.

Flipping the paradigm will take a concerted effort from the entire church and staff. If 90 percent of your outreach budget goes solely toward putting on a Sunday morning service, it might be time to reexamine your priorities. Small groups meeting in homes and inviting their neighbors to join them give us the best chance to reach the 40 percent who would never walk into our churches. Resource allocations should reflect how important they are to the vision of the gospel.

THINK IT OVER

What is your current strategy for bringing new people into community? Is it effective?

How difficult is it to start new groups in your church?

Do you currently offer all-church studies for your groups? If not, why not?

What are your on- and off-ramps for people to get into groups? Are they easy to take?

How common is it for people on stage to talk about groups in your church?

Where are small groups on your church’s priority list? Are they functioning as a front door for people?
ABOUT THIS EBOOK

Beyond the Core: Designing Small Groups for the Rest of Us is an excerpt from:

FOOTNOTES


2. Ibid., 71.

3. Andy Stanley, Session One at the 2013 re:group Conference in Atlanta, Georgia.


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I’m not here for the COFFEE.

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