



Nine Reasons Why Small Groups Usually Sink



By Stan Lubeck
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As the church grows larger, it must grow smaller at the same time. People easily become lost in a large church if they do not find a connection in a small group. The church cannot care for people as they deserve to be cared for unless they are in a small group.

Many Christians point to a healthy small group as the key environment in helping them overcome obstacles in the spiritual growth process as other believers helped them in the journey.

The largest churches in the world are all organized by small groups. Many of these churches cannot afford to build large facilities so they use their homes effectively to spread the good news of Christ's love. House churches in China were used to take the church underground and allow it to flourish in spite of persecution.

Small group ministries are not unique in the US. In fact, most evangelical churches seem to have tried to establish a network of small groups at one time or another. They understand the principles found in Exodus 18 when Jethro challenged Moses to delegate responsibilities to leaders of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. They are aware that Jesus set the pace by establishing a small group, and this small group provided the leadership necessary to keep the church moving forward after Jesus' departure.

It seems that everyone has an excuse for why small groups fail in the US. I remember receiving an e-mail from a pastor in New Jersey who said it was easier to build small groups in California because the pace is so much slower... people have more time. I had to chuckle as this pastor had the impression that everyone in California was laid back, and had a name like "moondoggie".

1. Failure to Understand the Purpose of Small Groups



Moving people from the pews into the living room is not really that significant. The important issue is in regard to what takes place “in” the small group. In the New Testament, the people were alive with the love of God and they could not help but want to meet together and support one another in the faith. As Jesus filled their lives with His love, that love naturally spilled out to one another.

Acts 2:46 states that the Jerusalem church met "in the temple" and "from house to house . . ." The meetings in the “Temple”, were in what was called Solomon's portico. This facility was probably quite large, and could have accommodated even the several thousands that were a part of the Jerusalem church. Thus, in Jerusalem, they held both large and small group meetings from house to house.

Large group meetings alone are not sufficient to give people the quality care that they need. For authentic Christian community to be experienced there is no substitute for what small groups can provide.

In Acts 20:20, Paul states, “Yet I never shrank from telling you the truth, either publicly or in your homes.” (NLT) Paul communicated to the people both in a large group setting, and the personally from house to house. He communicated the “truth”. Small group ministry must center on the word of God as our only source of truth.

We know of no church buildings that have been found from the earliest period of the church (33-- 150 AD.), and even those from the second century were homes with a large room built in. These new Christians did not allow the lack of facilities to limit what God could do in the lives and hearts of people in need of a savior. God has never been limited by facilities.

As believers meet together from house to house, they begin to “know” one another. As they discover needs, opportunities for the use of their God given spiritual gifts become apparent. As people love one another to within an inch of their lives, people cannot help but be

impressed with this love of another kind.

Small group ministries fail when they lose sight of the New Testament purpose of teaching one another, bearing one another's burdens, and encouraging one another in the Lord. The New Testament is salted throughout with exhortations to minister to "one another" in various ways. The ultimate purpose of this "one another" ministry is to make visible the invisible Christ.

2. Failure in Leadership Selection



Every organization rises or falls based on the character and competency of the leaders. The qualifications of a deacon (I Tim. 3:8-13) would serve well for the initial selection of leaders of **LIFEgroups**.

Servant leadership is central to effective small group ministry. If the people in the small group do not sense that the leader loves and cares for them as a good shepherd, then the group will always be limited in influence. Finding leadership who possess a genuine, humble heart for the flock is not always an easy task. Probably Jesus most difficult task was in transforming the twelve from selfish, me-first oriented opportunists into genuine servants of the most high God. After three years with Jesus we find them arguing about who is the greatest.

3. Failure to Give Leaders Full Ownership



Our government will entrust a multi-million dollar fighter jet to a 21 year old, while many churches would only offer that same young person an opportunity to usher in church. If small groups are to flourish there must be the understanding that the small group leaders are the most important people in the life of the church. The most important resource in the church is being entrusted to these leaders, "the lives of people." There must be an understanding that shepherding people is a high call and high privilege not to be taken

lightly.

The pastor's role is to equip the small group leader to be effective in carrying out God's unique call in life. Sometimes, churches impose a structure upon the small group that is too restrictive. There needs to be a balance between accountability and empowerment. Leaders without proper accountability and oversight by a pastor can quickly become "misguided missiles." "Every member a minister" ministry should be the goal of every church, and a common vision is essential so that there is alignment among the members for effective ministry.

4. Group Failure to Maintain an Open Chair

"Us four, no more, shut the door" seems to be the theme for small groups that become ingrown. This can be a killer since the small group will begin to die once it turns inward. Some groups last longer than others, but this limited perspective will eventually cause the group to die.



There is something special about introducing a baby Christian to any small group. A new believer is like "life giving blood" to an existing group. The group will no longer will be self-centered and self-focused.

Acts 2:46-47 They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—47 all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved. NLT

Jesus called us to be "fishers of men", not just "keepers of the aquarium." We prayerfully ask the Lord to fill the open chair with someone who does not know Jesus as Lord.

5. Church Discipline is Avoided

Jesus warned of “wolves in sheep’s clothing.” There are those who desire to be in a small group for the wrong reasons. Some people are self-proclaimed centers of the universe. Only one person deserves to be the central focus of the small group, and that is the Lord Jesus Himself. The primary agenda of the group is to connect with Jesus, and minister to one another out of the overflow of that union.



It is a privilege to be in a small group. Selfish, personal agendas cannot be allowed to dominate the group’s time together. Left unaddressed, others in the group will begin to drop out of the group.

Sin must be dealt with. Matthew 18 speaks of the process of confrontation, and Galatians 6:1 speaks of the attitude, “...if another Christian is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself.” (NLT) This kind of “discipline in love” should be normative (I Cor. 5).

Small group attendance is a privilege in the church. Participants should know that divisiveness and other disruptive behavior will not be tolerated in the group. There is something appealing about a group that is being managed in a healthy manner for all involved.

Some pastors avoid small groups because they are afraid that the group will become a “political action group” within the church. This can be avoided when issues are nipped in the bud before they become life threatening in the group.

6. Generic Groups

Family aged people need a different type of group than students or singles. While there are principles that should be followed in every small group, there



should be freedom to custom fit the group to the personality and needs of the members in each group.

Small groups should be free to develop with different formats, purposes and agendas. Some will expect a higher level of commitment than others. The important thing is that each group is “growing in godliness.”

Each leader should seek the Lord for direction on how the group should function in order to meet the unique needs of each participant. The role of the pastor is to help the leader to be successful in carrying out God’s unique call as a shepherd of the sheep.

7. In-adequate Information for Potential Leaders



According to Ephesians 4:11,12, it is the responsibility of the leadership of the local church to provide quality training in Christian work ("the work of service") to its own people. When the leadership of a church decides not to have a small group ministry because there are no qualified leaders, this is not an excuse - it is an admission of guilt! The church must be growing people at every level of spiritual maturity so that leaders are being groomed to lead and shepherd.

For many churches, the first step toward a successful small group ministry is to establish ongoing leadership team meetings. Many churches provide some type of leadership binder, or monthly equipping time. However, this is inadequate for sophisticated leadership responsibilities in today’s complicated world.

No athletic team would dream of winning the championship without a high level of commitment from the coaches and players alike. Every coach worth his salt knows that the individual abilities of the players on the team is not the most important determining factor for the success of the team. There is a “chemistry” that must characterize the team, and there is no other way for this to take place than for those players to play together over an extended period of time.

Jesus called the disciples to be “with” Him. This was a key element in Jesus’ disciplemaking plan. Jesus built a high performing leadership team out of a bunch of normal, garden variety men.

The church’s best resources and best communicators are used to train and equip the leaders of the church to do the work of ministry.

Weekly leadership team building sessions means that leaders can immediately use the knowledge they learn. This prevents the accumulation of "dead knowledge" and also avoids creating the impression that Christian work is more difficult than it really is.

When a person joins a small group, whether they know it or not, they are beginning the process of being trained to eventually be a leader in the church. We want to be careful to clearly articulate why we are meeting, and what we are trying to accomplish through the small groups as we multiply throughout our valleys. Then, no matter where a person eventually serves in the ministry of the church the values and ministry purposes that were learned in the small group will lay a solid foundation for a life of service.

Finally, each small group should develop it's own program of personal discipleship and ministry training. The weekly leadership team building sessions should be viewed as supplemental to the grass-roots discipleship practiced at the small group level.

8. Lack of Multiplication Goals



In many cases, a small group's existence is viewed as an end in itself. The group will eventually experience death if there is not a plan to “birth” another group. This “mission-mindedness” must characterize every group from it’s inception. There must be a “God sized” vision that stretches the group beyond themselves.

Good small groups tend not to stay small. Thus, when a house fills up with people, much of the interactive character of the group is lost. In

addition, outreach tends to dwindle because there is no room for new people.

In cases like this, it is natural to multiply the group in order to preserve the small size of the group, while at the same time, reaching more people.

The nation of Israel was disciplined and judged by God because they ignored the fact that they were blessed by God in order that they might be a blessing to the entire world. Throughout Scripture, God has been calling out for Himself a people on a mission to bring the good news to every person on the face of the earth. Closed small groups can fall into the same error.

Vision for planting new groups fosters the value of winning people to the Lord, building them up in the faith, and then equipping them to reach more people for the Lord.

How do we multiply groups without ripping apart the tightly knit relationships that we have been cultivating in the groups? Leaders need help in guiding the group through this essential element, so that no one becomes alienated, and everyone sees how more people can be blessed as new groups are formed.

Good planning should make it possible for close friends to stay together most of the time, thus minimizing the disruption involved in planting new groups.

9. Small Groups are Viewed as Optional, Rather than Essential, to the Life of Every Believer



In some churches, the large worship meeting and/or teaching meetings are viewed as essential, but the small group is considered an option--helpful to some, but not necessarily normative for healthy involvement in the local church.

If the church fails to establish a vision in the minds of its members for full involvement, the result will likely be a very poor level of participation in the small group program. Often, only those with little to do will spend the time it takes to become meaningfully involved.

Jesus met with the multitudes, but he invested his life in a few chosen men who would carry on after he was gone. He called out twelve, graduated eleven, and focused on three. Following Jesus' example we can obey His command to make disciples as we cultivate small groups where people can be known, cared for and equipped for ministry.

We cannot make disciples as modeled by Jesus unless people are in small groups. We cannot care for people as they deserve to be cared for unless they are in small groups. These small groups become the "quality care system" and the "leadership development environment" that is essential for helping people connect, receive care, and be equipped for ministry in building the kingdom of God.

There is nothing more fulfilling for any Christian than to be able to say with John, "I could have no greater joy than to hear that my children live in the truth." 3 John 4 NLT

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