BY BRIAN DANIEL AND RICK HOWERTON

Small Group *Life*

ministry manual

A New Approach to Small Group Ministry

LifeWay | Small Groups

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Foreword

by David Francis

Some may wonder whether the director of Sunday School at LifeWay supports Small Group Life. The answer is a resounding yes! Let me address three possible reactions to that support from three different perspectives.

Reaction One: Small Group Leaders

There are those within the small group movement who might say, "If the Sunday School Guy is for this resource, then it couldn't possibly meet our needs." But most small group leaders are not anti-Sunday School. Rather, they just want to see people in their churches connect with God and others, grow spiritually and relationally, serve within the group and the church, and go outside the church in ministry and evangelism. And they believe that a small group is the best means to do so. Small Group Life is not a Sunday School "quarterly" that has appropriated the "Small Group" label. It is a small group resource designed for the following audiences:

1. Churches that know they need a sustainable strategy to accomplish the second step in their disciple-making process.
2. Churches with an inadequate church campus (or none at all) to accommodate a growing ministry of adult groups.
3. Churches that want to help their groups tackle the problem of biblical illiteracy without sacrificing the dynamic of biblical community.
4. Churches that are frustrated that their groups are not "kid friendly" and desire for the kids to have a Bible-centered learning experience so they'll look forward to "small group" as much as mom and/or dad.
5. Churches that realize the value of a printed resource that helps guide a group's discovery and application of biblical truth and each other's stories, but frankly can't afford ten-plus dollars per person every few weeks.
6. Churches that require the flexibility of an every-week or an every-other-week format.

Reaction Two: Sunday School Leaders

Some may ask, "Are you abandoning Sunday School?" No! My position on Sunday School is well established. It continues to be, in my view, the premier "step two" strategy for churches that are blessed with the facilities to accomplish it. That is no longer the reality in many churches, especially newly planted churches. Just

as many in the small group movement are waking up to the disturbing reality that there is little biblical depth in their groups, a growing number of us in the Sunday School movement are coming to grips with the reality that there is often precious little biblical community in our classes. I've tried to address those issues in my last two books: *The Discover Triad and Connect*[3]. In both cases, I have been strongly influenced by the small groups movement. In *The Discover Triad*, I advocate for a consistently dynamic Bible study experience that includes the three facets of scripture, stories, and shepherding, all revolving around the facet of stories. Basically, the argument is that "No one's story is complete until it has intersected with God's story, and that happens best in a community where people are hearing one another's stories." In Connect[3] I exhort groups to move beyond being just a class, to becoming a community, and engaging in commission. Here's a challenge. Think about starting a couple of groups that meet during the week instead of Sunday morning. Small Group Life could be the perfect resource for such an experiment.

Reaction Three: I Need to Do Both! Tell Me More!

There is one group I think will be delighted with Small Group Life and the strategy behind it: those church leaders who desperately need a solution to a growing ministry that has outgrown the capacity of their facilities to multiply the number of adult groups. Most growing churches need to provide adequate space for preschoolers and children on the weekend, and that increasingly means capturing space currently occupied by adult classes. Here are a couple of scenarios where Small Group Life might be an ideal solution:

1. You need to move or multiply adult groups, but you want to retain direction over the "scope and sequence" of Bible study, and want your adult groups on the same page as much as possible. (Note: Small Group Life can be used by on-campus groups as well if you want overall consistency—as long as they are small!)
2. You want to do the first scenario eventually, but want to take an introductory step by moving your on-campus ministry toward a "small groups" mindset.

There are probably other scenarios. Churches inevitably figure out creative ways to utilize LifeWay resources as solutions to challenges we didn't identify! I think your groups are going to love Small Group Life. Let us know what you think!

Foreword

by Ed Stetzer

My first assignment for ministry was to plant a church in Buffalo, New York. Back then, in the late eighties, it was a lonely endeavor and few others were doing it. In fact, most people planting churches then were either splitting off from a church they no longer liked or starting a church where no one else would go. Only by God's providence was I counted in the latter and not the former. As my wife Donna and I set out to begin a new church among the urban poor of Buffalo, we knew that a different tactic would be needed than anything we had done before. It was a moment to embrace change.

As we moved into a new city around new people, one thing we needed was community. After all, God does not intend for believers to be alone in their journey. I knew it would take more than just meeting physical needs and holding once-a-week services to reach those people. Seeing God change a place like inner city Buffalo would mean that His people (us) would actually have to get involved in the lives of its citizens (them).

But one thing all church leaders are mindful of is this: the us-them scenario is messy. It involves knowing more about people than just their favorite football team and where they grew up. It also involves allowing them to know more about us than we may have been comfortable with in past relationships. I came to the conclusion that the change needed for our mission field would be found through redemptive community. But entering this type of relationship requires the willingness to change. We in the church must be willing to change how we do ministry and those outside the faith must be willing to investigate a change of life.

Embracing change in a new church start is often easier than in established churches. But I have learned that all change has a price attached to it—even when it is for our good and the good of the church. No matter if your church started in this century or the last one, there are moments when leaders see the need for change. Hopefully, you are in the position where making adjustments to your ministry will exponentially increase your impact in the community. If so, then I'm glad you are exploring the effectiveness of a small group ministry in your church.

I meet and speak to church planting leaders on a regular basis. Rarely do I meet one who is completely satisfied with their small group ministry. Most of us in the church planting and missional church world are constantly on the hunt for something that will help people dig deeper in the Word and grow deeper in relationship to one another. The change we hope to witness is that the people we lead will bind their lives together so the power of the gospel can take hold of an entire city. To that end, we often need the guidance of those who have journeyed farther ahead and delved deeper into the mission.

With Small Group Life (SGL), your church has the opportunity to receive that guidance. Based on a foundation of biblical truth, the writers of Small Group Life utilize solid research and extensive experience in small group ministry to give a new tool for spiritual growth among believers. But beyond those who are fellow believers, this is a resource to introduce unbelievers to the key doctrines of the Bible without overwhelming them with religious jargon. As a church planter and one who trains church planters, I know we are in need of culturally relevant methods like SGL to do both.

We find ourselves in a spiritually curious culture. It is one where the search for meaning is done through story, journey, and sincere questions. SGL uses these elements as the foundation in its methodology to lead your small groups forward to spiritual maturity. An effective small group ministry using solid study materials with prepared leadership can make an eternal difference. As I look to the future of ministry in the English-speaking world, I am encouraged that if we will be faithful to seriously engage the Word to discover God's truth and engage people to meet their needs—then the kingdom of God will unfold before our very eyes.

Why this? Why now?

Small Group Life, the new series from LifeWay Small Groups, adopts the new Connect–Grow–Serve–Go model as the core of its experience. Values such as redemptive community, discovery-based Bible study, and a streamlined approach to the small-group experience are also foundational to the series.

As we continued work and planned to launch the new Small Group Life series, it became clear to us that we needed to create something—a web site, manual, or some other tool—as a companion piece for small-group pastors, education ministers, and small-group leaders. Because of the paradigms we've incorporated—some recognizable, some not, some perhaps utilized in different ways—we've created *The Small Group Life Ministry Manual*.

The manual itself has been written to help you incorporate Small Group Life into your church, understand the small-group dynamic it espouses and endeavors to create, and because of the way we've made it available, build your entire small-group ministry around this new series.

- We felt there was a need to tell the Small Group Life story. The project itself began more than two years ago, and the process includes hundreds of small-group members and leaders.
- We wanted to provide a tool to help leaders implement Small Group Life into their churches. Both the nuts-and-bolts of how to use SGL as well as the underpinning philosophy are described.
- The ministry manual also provides a forum for unpacking and defining our incremental discipleship model, or "intentional meandering," approach to small groups.
- A tool like this also gives group leaders practical, step-by-step, instruction for leading a Small Group Life Bible study.
- Co-writers Brian Daniel and Rick Howerton are able to provide a unique, behind-the- scenes, kind of narrative that lends insights into the production and accompanying educational philosophy from Brian as well as the "Why?" from small-group expert, trainer, and "Small Group-ologist" Rick Howerton.

As always, we believe that the Holy Spirit will be present as your small groups meet. Given His presence, we feel it our responsibility to create an environment in which hearts are open and members are able to accept God's invitation to the journey to which He is calling each of us. This is the guiding principle behind Small Group Life. *The Small Group Life Ministry Manual* is the blueprint for putting SGL to work in your church.

I. The Small Group Life Story

Genesis

Although the genesis of Small Group Life is rooted in several factors, the idea is really the result of a convergence of several contributing events. Internally, Serendipity House had just come into LifeWay and was producing effective small-group resources. LifeWay's Sunday School and Discipleship efforts were also producing resources that could be used in small groups. Serendipity studies focus on building redemptive community; LifeWay studies focus on building biblical depth. While the LifeWay resources have aspects of community building and the Serendipity studies don't fail to deliver biblical depth, there seemed to be a need to capture the best of both worlds. In 2007, word began to circulate about a massive study that Willow Creek Community Church was about to wrap up. Their conclusions, later released in *Reveal: Where Are You?* (which we will discuss later), surprisingly disclosed that the Willow Creek model for making disciples was not nearly as effective as their numerical growth might have indicated. Their frank appraisal sent shock waves across the church leadership spectrum.

The "perfect storm" generated by all of these factors and others led us to revisit what we were currently offering small groups and invited us to reassess how we could meet the needs of churches in such a vital area of ministry.

Listening Sessions

Not content with the findings of *Reveal* alone, late in 2007 we decided to begin a campaign to learn as much as we could about what small-group leaders need to succeed in their role of facilitating God's work in the lives of people. Over the course of the next 4–6 months, we regularly hosted both formal and informal listening sessions. These sessions occurred in places all over the United States: Tennessee, Georgia, Oregon, and California, to name a few. We met with churches of different denominations and of varying sizes. We spoke with Sunday School churches and small group churches alike.

Several general themes began to emerge over the course of this early work and education:

- Given the present economy and the number of church plants and growing churches implementing small groups, there was a need for something even more affordable than our most economical product mix.
- Because of the time demands on the lives of not only the small-group leaders, hosts, and facilitators but also group members, it was clear to us that a new small-group resource should be streamlined with minimum leader preparation, yet should still meet the expectation for good, sound content.
- As a reaction to the Willow Creek study, groups wanted to be sure that their small-group Bible studies address the growing concern with biblical literacy and spiritual formation.
- A new small-group resource needed to be flexible. Group leaders, particularly church planters, like to be able to download and customize. They like having the option of using a video within their studies. They want something that meets the needs of their groups, whether they meet every week or every other week.
- We learned that an easy-to-lead children's Bible study component that integrates the adult principles would be a welcome addition to any small-group Bible study.
- Because of the growing number of dissatisfied and stalled disciples, any new small-group material would need to include a component that gets people acting on their faith and invites them into their communities with missional ideas and ways to contribute to the world we've inherited.
- Small-group Bible studies need to build community *and* contribute to the spiritual maturity of disciples of Christ.

Small-groups trainer and "Small Group-ologist" Rick Howerton made time during his busy travel schedule to sit down with small-group leaders of all sorts. In his conversations with small-group pastors and group leaders, multiple intangible needs emerged concerning small-group resources:

- Small-group pastors are aching for resources that target the heart so that those for whom they will answer to God (Col. 1:28) look more like Christ when they complete a selected study.
- There were many good resources available, but none were connecting all the needs we were discovering in our listening sessions.
- Church leaders would continue to spin their discipleship wheels until some resource provider listened, learned, and responded.
- Small-group pastors realize that transformation is more than the instilling of information.
- These church leaders were keenly aware that involving group members in random studies without continuity would not accomplish the goal of making mature believers.
- A disciple-making process had to be integrated throughout a series of resources that, when utilized by the same group over an extended period of time, would make it likely for a learner to become a mature disciple.
- A balance between knowing truth, embracing truth, experiencing truth, understanding the heart of the Truth-Giver (God), and applying truth is necessary for healthy spiritual transformation.
- These small-group pastors made us vividly aware that when God's story speaks into our stories, redemption is possible—even probable.

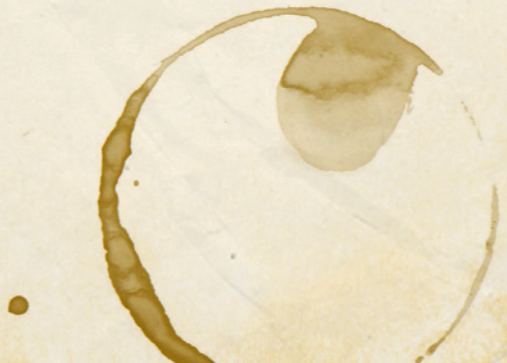
The Prototypes

Once we made our conclusions it was time to go to work. We created three prototypes—each incorporating the set of guiding principles listed above—and tested them with control groups. Each design originated from external sources. We determined that this was the best way to avoid the "group think" phenomenon that often leads research back to its original conclusions. We hosted feedback conversations within our own teams. Additionally, we asked several small-group pastors to review each prototype and hosted a survey that included 50 small-group leaders.

There was a variation of design and educational method among the prototypes. One was more casual while another looked more like a traditional Bible study "quarterly." One prototype was best described as "content-heavy" while another incorporated much more white space in order to appear more open and inviting. We wanted to test a prototype with a lesson plan we felt to be linear next to another we would describe as "nonlinear." Since helping leaders prepare and facilitate was a big part of our internal debate, we paid particular attention to the responses associated with our leader notes. We explored whether to include a separate Leader Guide in the back, whether to incorporate leader notes into the study, and how to take advantage of the sidebar.

This aspect of the Small Group Life story was interesting in that it confirmed for us just how diverse the small-group community is. While a contingency of those sampled still appreciated the linear, content-heavy model, it became evident to us that the largest contingency wanted to be invited into a conversation during which scriptural truths could be examined, discussed, and applied. These leaders approved of our desire to take small-group members on a spiritual journey that stresses community and discipleship as God works redemptively in their lives.

We assessed all the input, critiques, and survey results. We chose one of the prototype designs and incorporated what people liked most about the other two. Once approved, we created an outline for the first issue, hired a writer, and started planning the Small Group Life Pilot Project.



The Pilot Project

Taking on something of this magnitude and Kingdom importance necessitated a field test. We decided that we needed our pilot groups to test one entire issue for 12 weeks. We wanted a diverse mix of churches and groups for the pilot in order to have the most dynamic interaction with pilot groups. As a result of this decision, we found churches from different evangelical denominations. Small Group-ologist Rick Howerton was vital in finding churches that represented the many different demographics we needed to engage. We included church plants of varying degrees. There was a Sunday School class in Georgia involved in our pilot. A church in Kentucky used the opportunity for a churchwide campaign based on the curriculum. We had new groups. Old groups. Groups that had been creating their own curriculum. There was a group with several international members, as well as a group comprised of very mature believers.

As we began to dream Small Group Life, Rick was ecstatic to see that this resource could be effective in any church no matter which small-group model a particular church was doing. There are at least five core small-group approaches: Open Groups, Closed Groups, Free Market System groups, Cell Church groups, and Organic Community Groups. There are many variations on each of the above groups, and many churches utilize a hybrid of these groups.

Each time Rick consulted with a church, he asked the small-group pastor if what we were creating in Small Group Life would meet the needs of his/her church. In almost every instance, no matter which approach the church was involved in, the answer was a resounding, "Yes."

Not only that, having been a church planter himself, Rick was vividly aware that the resource we were about to fashion was ideal for the church plant. Many church plants engage individuals who have been hurt, disappointed, or even debilitated by church in the past. And church plants have a higher rate of persons choosing to become Christ followers than most established churches. A resource that is effective in systematically moving an individual toward healing and spiritual maturity is vital in a church plant. When the Small Group Life resource is utilized, hope, healing, and spiritual maturation are the outcome. Another amazing possibility is that a church planter is creating future leaders by simply using the resource as suggested. Most church planters had the same response as the small-group pastors Rick spoke with about the resource: "Yes, we need this."

Small-group pastors as well as church planters were very open to piloting the resource, if for no other reason than to find out if it delivered all that we suggested it would. Churches from Ohio, Arizona, Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Georgia agreed to participate; and we had between 140 and 200 individuals in the pilot. We kept notes from regular contact with group leaders through e-mail and telephone conversations. We used surveys with the group leaders as well as group members to learn about their experiences, what they liked most and least, and how Small Group Life was contributing to their spiritual journeys. The results were, surprisingly, relatively consistent throughout the pilot.

While we entertained a fairly broad scope of responses to various questions in our surveys, we had primary objectives related to interior engineering, effective Bible study, delivery of content, and our promise to build community. We were able to incorporate what we learned by reengineering the sequence of the Bible study. We created additional space to add more questions, to include more context and biblical background, and to provide greater transition from one point to the next by deleting elements that were not deemed as effective as we had hoped.

While the process has required a great deal of discernment and willingness to return to the drawing board, we believe we have invited you, the small-group leader, into the process and incorporated your responses every step of the way.

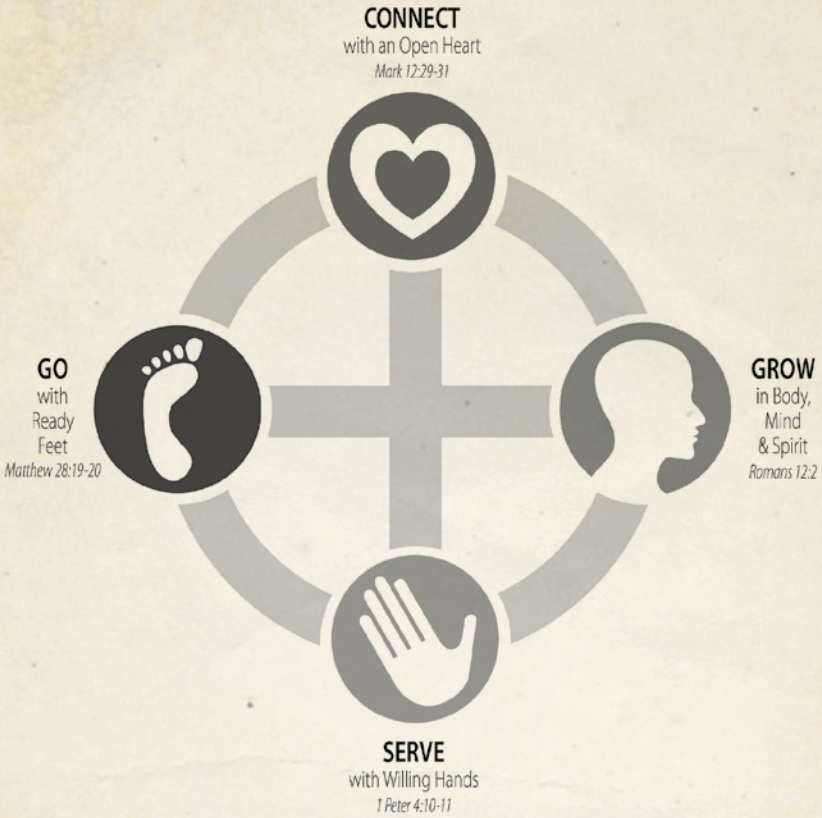
The Plan

Life seldom happens in neat, tidy ways but rather is like a story—full of unexpected twists and turns, laced with adventure, wrought with difficulties and danger. The Bible is revealed to us as a narrative as well. This is why we call each Small Group Life issue an Episode. After all, life is a series of episodes. We will release four Small Group Life Episodes per year. An Episode of Small Group Life includes:

- 12 different small-group experiences, or "Scenes"
- 12 Connect interactions to begin each group time
- 6 missional Serve/Go challenges
- 6 engaging quotes
- Commentary Scripture notes
- Downloadable videos online
- Family devotional ideas

The family devotional ideas draw from the free downloadable Children's Bible studies we've created just for Small Group Life users. Look for them at *www.lifeway.com/smallgrouplife*.

Each Scene flows from Connect to Grow to Serve/Go. We adopted this approach to move groups from community to discipleship to service, then back to community.



Although our scope and sequence isn't as comprehensive as others, this method is an intentional decision to allow groups the level of autonomy that they have become accustomed to. Our goal is to provide a continuity plan assuring small-group pastors that (1) the Bible is being taught, and (2) group members are being exposed to basic doctrine and key events in the biblical narrative.

We'll explore in greater detail how these components have been created to work together later (page 33). Before that we would like to examine a little more about our definition of community and why community is the best context for growing disciples. We also want to explain in a little more detail how we have responded to Willow Creek's *Reveal* study before describing the Small Group Life Promise and how to utilize Small Group Life in your groups.

Reveal

Willow Creek began the path that culminated in *Reveal* back in 2003 as they began to consider the transition from a capital campaign to "What do we do now?" Like most organizations, they began with a set of presuppositions, or what the study refers to as hypotheses, and hired a third party to dig deeper to see how the current reality measured up to these presuppositions.

What Willow Creek found was very surprising to them. Although the published report goes into much greater detail, we'll try to reduce it to its foundational points relevant to Small Group Life and how we have responded. Basically what Willow Creek learned was that involvement in church activities does not predict or drive long-term spiritual growth—"spiritual growth" here is defined as "behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs related to a growing love for God and others" (see Matt. 22:37,39). What they found instead was something the study defined as "spiritual continuum." As God interacts with people outside of the faith, these individuals will enter into church life as explorers first. From there, people tend to advance along this spiritual continuum through four primary stages:

- Exploring Christianity
- Growing in Christ
- Close to Christ
- Christ-centered

This alone isn't groundbreaking. Obviously, the church's role in spiritual growth is significant early in the continuum. As individuals enter into the spiritual journey to explore Christianity and move into the "Growing in Christ" stage, the activities the church offers feed the desire to grow into greater and greater Christlikeness. But the real revelation came when the research took a deeper dive into the next two stages: "Close to Christ" and "Christ-centered." Some conclusions were correct about people in these two stages; they tended to be tithers, more willing to engage in outreach and evangelism, and more active in serving. However, what they didn't expect was to find that a great number of this group described themselves as "stalled" or "dissatisfied."

Those of us that are parents completely understand the following metaphorical comparison. When our children are young they require us to change their diapers, feed them, and take them everywhere they need to go. As they grow older they need less of this type of attention and care … but not less of parents. It changes. A grown child, for instance, might need parental advice even late in life. He or she might need help planning a wedding or making a big decision like buying a house. Personally, I've had to learn that my daughters need a less "goofy" dad as they've grown older and have gained more stability and wisdom.

Most of us understand this process and how the role of a parent changes. Comparing this to a church's role in the lives of those early in the spiritual continuum is similar to caring for young children. But *Reveal* wonders aloud: "Are we expecting the same programs to work for 'Close to Christ' and 'Christ–centered' that work for 'Exploring Christianity' and 'Growing in Christ'? Do we need to be better parents of those 'Close to Christ' and 'Christ-centered'?"

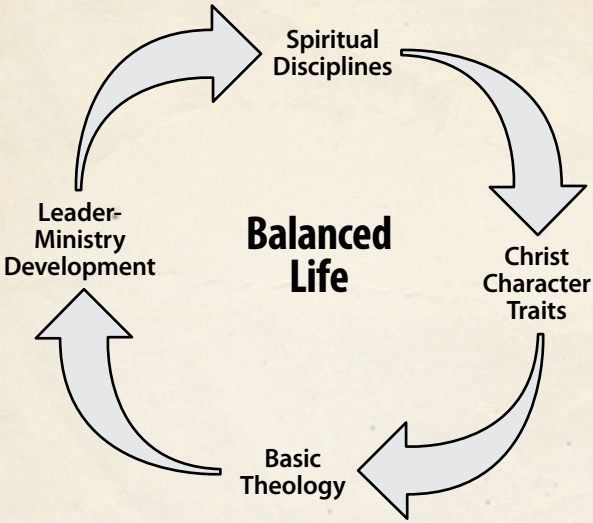
"So if the church isn't the driving force behind the later stages of spiritual growth, what is? That's where the second external element of spiritual growth comes into play: personal spiritual practices. These practices include prayer, journaling, solitude, studying Scripture—things that individuals do on their own to grow in their relationship."[2]

Over the last ten years, Rick Howerton has had the opportunity to sit one-on-one with hundreds of small-group pastors, adult-discipleship directors, and collegiate ministers. Different think tanks have shown Rick that these individuals are longing to see the kind of transformation take place in the lives of their people that they saw happening in the lives of believers in the Book of Acts. The conversation always seemed to come back to this: "Something is missing. I'm just not seeing the spiritual transformation with the people involved in my ministry that I know God has for them." Most of these leaders would go back to their ministries and tweak the worship service, add a new dimension to the small-group meeting, send people on more mission trips, and so forth; or, they added a new program to the long list of pre-existing opportunities the church or college ministry already offered. In most instances the same leader would voice the same frustration 12 months later. *Reveal* unveiled what most leaders had intuitively understood for decades: something was missing.

We came to realize that four basic areas (Spiritual Disciplines, Christ-Character Traits, Basic Theology, and Leader-Ministry Development) had been discussed in these conversations many times. But no one had ever put the puzzle pieces together. What Small Group Life strives to do is to complete the circle of principles and practices that create an environment where unhindered spiritual transformation can occur.

Take a look at the graphic below. This is the model for discipleship we have adopted for Small Group Life. Looking at the model, you can see that the four areas mentioned above contribute to the balanced life of a disciple:

1. Spiritual Disciplines
2. Christ-Character Traits
3. Basic Theology
4. Leader-Ministry Development



We in the editorial staff check each small-group experience against this criteria before sending it out to the churches. Admittedly, at times this has been more art than science. The objective is that each Episode meets the expectation of addressing these issues within the small-group dynamic.

Note that the first step toward a balanced life addresses one of the primary issues surfaced by *Reveal*: personal spiritual practices. The spiritual disciplines Small Group Life has identified to include, but are not limited to, the following:

Prayer — Bible study — Community — Quiet time (abide) — Lament — Adoration — Worship — Solitude, retreat — Fasting — Evangelism — Stewardship — Spiritual warfare — Scripture meditation

In addition to the practices identified above, however, Small Group Life also acknowledges a set of personal disciplines that work in concert with the spiritual disciplines. Personal disciplines exist to get us out of our comfort zones to work in areas different from our defaults. These areas have been described in various ways, but I like the term "shadow side."[1] Personal disciplines challenge us to move away from our defaults and into our shadow sides in order to avoid a one-sided

spirituality. These disciplines are unique to individuals. For instance, I'm a reader. Not a bad thing. I could sit by myself with a book for hours—if not days. Although reading isn't in and of itself unhealthy, if allowed to default to my preferred behavior too often I would not exercise that part of me that needs community. So a personal discipline I have adopted for myself is making a point to join friends for lunch more often, put myself in social situations that require me to interact, and accept public-speaking invitations when they are extended.

Through various means, Small Group Life routinely asks group members to step away from their comfort zones and engage their shadow sides. Just like we cannot rely on romance alone to fuel a marriage but must also count on effort, attention, and listening, those in "Close to Christ" and "Christ-centered" stages must continue to wrestle with the mysteries of the faith and their own spiritual pilgrimage. This resource is unafraid to ask the demanding questions of life and invite group members into the tension of both/and, where the question is just as important as the answer. We believe this is what these two stages require in Bible study. Small Group Life is more than curriculum; it's a journey.

Beyond this method of challenging the most mature stages identified by *Reveal*, Small Group Life continues to do the things that foster spiritual growth in the lives of those "Exploring Christianity" and "Growing in Christ." All aspects of Small Group Life contribute to the community building that's so important to "Exploring" and "Growing."

A Case for Intentional Meandering

Look again at the graphic and notice the arrows: Spiritual Disciplines to Christ-Character Traits to Basic Theology to Ministry-Leadership Development then back to Spiritual Disciplines. The cycle repeats itself as it contributes to a balanced life. A few years ago I was talking with a popular speaker when he told me, "You guys are so good at what you do. But you've got to quit trying to answer everything."

As a product of the so-called modern era in which the smartest people in the room were the ones holding the most facts, I did not develop a healthy respect for "the question." Instead, I held "the answer" in high esteem—so much so that I devoted a good bit of my early life to amassing answers. But what a little more than 40 years has taught me is that knowledge without the mediation of the heart has little value. Or, as Bruce Springsteen has sung, "The facts, they don't amount to much." And the facts alone don't. They are cold. As we continue to transition from the modern era to the postmodern era, we need to reassess the role that proposition will play on the spiritual journey.

During our pilot and prototype stages we routinely ran into the terms "linear" and "nonlinear." These are strange terms in a world that demands, in the end, things to make sense and be succinct. But even in the world that needs to draw conclusions, we were still drawn to the idea of a nonlinear progression. The nonlinear progression seemed much more organic and lifelike, especially given that life doesn't come at us in straight lines. So what we've done with Small Group Life is concluded that where a linear model tends to tell, a nonlinear model will invite. And this is how we have begun the process of unpacking not only those two terms but also the tension between proposition and mystery. Your Small Group Life experience comes complete with alternate endings.

Small Group Life places tremendous value on scriptural integrity and the inspired Word of God. We've included commentary notes on the text for additional biblical insight and background. We have added call-out boxes with unique background material and definitions. But we have also placed a very high value on question and discovery. In short, we fully expect the Holy Spirit to be present during your group time. But here's the kicker: we don't expect everything to happen at once. There is a lifetime. There is a journey to consider. There's a t-shirt that reads, "All that wander are not lost." Our goal is to guide you and your groups on a spiritual journey that intentionally meanders. This meandering will take you into Gideon's vat and Daniel's den. You'll follow John the Baptist and sit at the feet of Jesus. These excursions will lead through the doctrines and the traits of Christ and into the disciplines that drive you into deeper relational closeness to Christ. Small Group Life will build community for those who are exploring and growing, while at the same time inviting those "Close to Christ" and "Christ-centered" to consider new frontiers with God and within their own hearts.

Redemptive Community

Community means so many different things to us. The connotations range from our neighborhood, to the street we live on, to our town or city, to a bond of some kind that exists among a group of people. When "community" first became the buzz, I held fast my more civic understanding of the word. It was difficult for me to begin to engage the intimacy this term had begun to take on. But my problem understanding "community" in a more intimate context goes beyond mere definition. See, early in life—through a series of events we can for the most part just describe as a "life"—I vowed that I would never need (or want to need, for that matter) any help from anybody. I could do it myself. And if I couldn't, I would take my chances rather than risk being let down.

It has taken me a long time to realize it, but this vow came out of a deep-seated feeling of abandonment that resulted from the divorce of my parents and the subsequent total lack of a relationship with my father. One day he was there. The next he wasn't. And the 6-year-old kid was left to figure it out on his own.

That's where the Enemy in the Greatest Story enters the scene, of course, and speaks into circumstances like mine with lies—lies, you should know, that are very, very easy to believe. It wasn't much of a leap from where I was to concluding, "You're alone. There is no rescuer. No one is going to come for you." All decisions that come out of this kind of vow begin to form the false selves with whom we become so familiar.

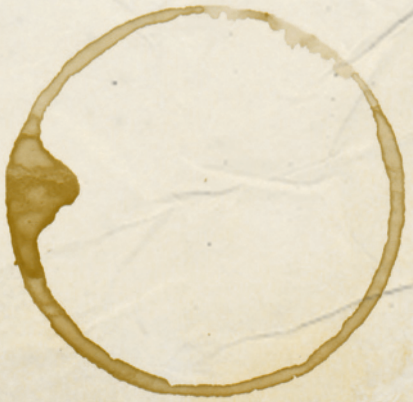
The process goes like this. We are born into *Saving Private Ryan*. We storm the beaches of our adolescence and, bobbing and weaving, make our way to adulthood. We manage to avoid many of the Enemy's attacks, but not all of them. Somewhere along the way we are wounded. Into these wounds the Enemy speaks lies. I've told you mine. In my circles the journey of confronting the false self has been called the Critical Path to Healing.[3] It is the path to "healing" because, in order to demolish the Enemy's strongholds, the false selves first have to be identified and the vows renounced. Only with God's help can our agreements with lies be redeemed (Joel 2:25; Rom. 8:28). But—and this is where small groups enter the picture—this sort of redemption happens best within the context of community. We are called into community. Jesus surrounded Himself with community. Ecclesiastes tells us that we are strongest in community.

This conversation is incomplete without some commentary on the heart. "The heart" gets a lot of mention. Trust me, as a product of the American South, my whole life I've heard stuff like "bless his heart" to a point that any reference to the heart has become cliché—even references to the "heart" as the place where the Holy Spirit resides. We've produced a couple of resources (*Canvas: Heart* and *Story. Narrator.Intrigue* in the Soul Café series) that have tried to explore the meaning of "heart," but I still find myself wanting to go deeper into this understanding. Perhaps the best description I've found is, "The heart is what people mean when they use the word *me*." The bottom line is this, though: Your heart has both a memory and an I.Q. Ever wonder why some memories, though they seem miniscule and irrelevant, remain? It could be because it was there, during those moments, that the heart picked up on something subtle that conjured either past pain or joy.

The case can also be made that, since God has placed eternity into our hearts, those subtle moments are not subtle at all, but remind the heart of the role we have been called to play in the story God is telling; or, your heart quickly identifies the particular event as an event in the Larger Story that began before Genesis and extends beyond Revelation. Regardless, nothing of importance escapes the heart's eye. But we believe that within the context of redemptive community—a place where people are doing life together with authenticity—we can help one another decipher the revelations of the heart. We believe that God speaks the language of the heart. And we believe the Bible when it tells us that we, as believers, have been given a new heart (Jer. 24:7; 33:3; Ezek. 36:26).

The best definition I've come across for community is this: "a group of people unwilling to settle for anything less than redemptive community." This describes a group of people unwilling to let one another continue to live out of their wounds, the lies, the agreements, and the vows. Similar to what we've done with incremental discipleship, this understanding of the community colors much of Small Group Life. Whereas many of Serendipity House's studies dive so deep into this process and many of our other undated studies tend to stay clear of such psycho-spiritual matters of the heart, Small Group Life tries to chip away a little at a time with intentional questions. And where Scripture lends itself, we trust the community of believers and the Holy Spirit to be at work in the lives of group members.

This becomes important for those times when you will bump into a question that many people will refer to as "too personal," when in fact it is only a demanding question asked to help us know more about God, identify what we really believe (at times quite different from what we say or even think we believe), and see what He is revealing deep within our own souls. A friend told me once, "God allows unfortunate events to bubble up in my life not because He is mean, insensitive, or uncaring, but because He desperately wants me to hear something vital. And even more than that, because He wants to redeem it all." Small Group Life leaders and facilitators have embedded leader notes to help identify these moments in group life.



Rick Howerton on How to Foster Redemptive Community

The pool of redemptive community is a precarious one. Each person will approach this pool in his own way in his own time. Some will sprint angrily away from the glistening water of redemptive community and seat themselves in a seemingly safe haven as far away as possible. Self-created barriers are evident: arms crossed, legs folded, completely disengaged (they probably need the cool waters of redemptive community the most). Some will saunter slowly toward the pool but stop a few feet short and peer in anxiously, waiting to see what happens to those who enter into that pool. Others will take a seat at the pool's edge, feet dangling in the warm waters of possibility. These friends sense that something wonderful could happen but are not sure they are willing to immerse themselves in this mysterious environment. And some will do a swan dive into the blue waters of redemptive community. It is there they will experience life like never before and be forever bonded to others who have already experienced the freedom and release found there. And then, much to his or her amazement, it is realized, "The Trinity has been inviting me to join Him here since the beginning of time."

One of the goals of an effective small-group leader is to create an environment that draws group members into conversations that are conducive to redemptive community. A few things you can do to create this atmosphere:

1. Break It. Early in each study there is a Connect section, or icebreaker activity. Be sure each group member answers the icebreaker questions you choose to use. The primary goal of the icebreaker is to involve group members in the conversation early on so they will feel comfortable to answer deeper questions later in the conversation.

2. Model It. The discussion questions in Small Group Life have been carefully crafted. These questions will lead group members to speak of their own journeys. Before others will answer revealing questions, you may need to answer them first. You will know if you need to do this if after you ask a question, no one responds for a minute or two. As you answer the question, be sure to give the last 10% of the story. Bill Hybels once spoke of the last 10%. Most people are open to telling you 90% of their stories but they leave out the last 10%. For instance, if asking, "What was the greatest trauma you experienced in high school?" someone might respond by saying that she had an argument with her best friend. That's 90% of the story. The last 10% of the story is that they haven't spoken to each other since, and they have been greatly affected by the distance between them.

3. Encourage It. A few suggestions:

- If no one responds to a question, call someone by name and ask them to reply.
- If one individual talks so much others cannot speak, ask him or her privately to keep his or her comments to a minute or two.
- If some in the group seldom speak, contact them before the meeting and let them know you want them to respond to a question that is coming up in the next study. Let them know what that question is so they can prepare. When they do respond, thank them and let them know how much their responses mean to you and the group.
- After asking a question, wait as much as two minutes before saying something. In most instances someone will get the ball rolling if you wait long enough.
- If you are having a real problem with getting people to discuss, give attendees an index card and ask them to write down a response to a question. Then ask them to read back what they have written. Do this for one question each week until the group answers questions without the cards. At some point someone in the group will probably speak up and say, "These cards aren't necessary." At that point, the cards really aren't necessary.

4. Hero It: Create Heroes. When someone speaks out (especially individuals that don't speak up often), thank that individual and say something like the following statement: "Thanks so much for giving your input. Every person's input is important to the rest of us as we learn what God is telling us by hearing from one another." Each time you do this you create a hero. Others will see what you are asking of them and your words of affirmation will be pursued by other group members.

5. Interrupt It. There will be times when God does something fantastic in the group meeting. A sin is confessed for the first time, a staggering marriage situation is unveiled, an incapacitating past experience is voiced, and so forth. In these instances you will sense that continuing to work through the study is simply diminishing what God is trying to accomplish. Stop everything and allow the group to lay hands on and pray for the individual. Share in the moment of grief. Ask group members to speak words of wisdom and tell the individual what God has to say to him or her through His Words found in the Bible. The Holy Spirit may lead you toward much more appropriate modes of ministry in these situations. He is very, very creative in His ministry to and through us. But allow yourself to make the person more important than the study. It is in these times that an environment of redemptive community is most evident and most powerful.

6. Listen for It. The small-group leader as an active listener lets individuals know they are being heard and are valued. When someone is speaking, keep eye contact with him or her, nod in agreement when possible, and don't exhibit body language that would lead him or her to believe you are shutting him or her out (arms crossed, legs crossed, glancing about the room as they are speaking, etc.).

7. Draw it Out. Redemptive community can only happen when someone acknowledges the need to allow God to redeem something that has occurred in that individual's life. You will sometimes need to draw that acknowledgement out of a group member. During the conversation you will sometimes need to read between the lines. For instance, if your topic for discussion was the story of David and Goliath and the question was, "Who was the giant in your life when you were a child, and when did you finally stand up to that giant?" you will most likely get some very important responses. If someone in the group is unable to speak but is moved to tears, you will want to speak to him between meetings and see what the situation was that brings this depth of pain. It may be that, for the first time, a debilitating experience is unveiled and you can then work with that individual to help him allow God to redeem this devastating circumstance or relationship.

8. Do It Between Meetings. Remember this principle: "The amount and depth of conversation that takes place during meetings is directly related to the amount and depth of conversation that happens between meetings." When groups and group members communicate with one another between meetings, the life-transforming conversation that will take place during meetings is greatly enhanced.

9. Don't Rush It. Progressive Intimacy is a natural part of every group member's experience. Progressive intimacy simply means that group members go through somewhat consistent stages of Connection. Below you'll see these steps as I perceive them, based on my experiences as a small-group leader:

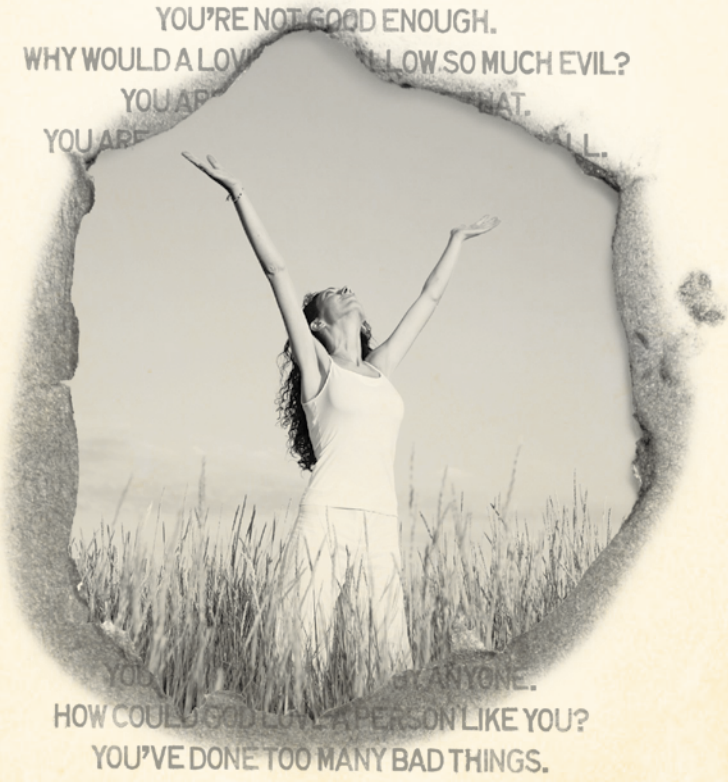
- Invitation (honored to be part of the group)
- Expectation (Prior to first meeting emotions arise concerning possibilities for group experience and group relationships.)
- Intimidation (First meeting-—new people, new surroundings, need to be loved and accepted overwhelmed by what seems to be the depth of spiritual lifestyles of others)
- Inhibition (inhibited because people still don't know if this is a safe haven or a dangerous relational jungle)
- Exploration (exploring their place in the group)
- Evaluation (This mental exercise asks questions vital to the individual. Who am I in this group? Do I really fit in? Are these people really accepting me? Do I really accept them?)
- Actualization (I accept my role in this group, the people in this group, and the leader of the group. This group and I have a shared goal, like passion, and sincerity of heart to see God act.)
- Reconciliation (I know and accept my place in this community of believers. I trust them to know my needs and respond and to keep conversations confidential. We are Christian community with like goals and callings. I am reconciled to living the principles espoused in the group covenant.)
- Exhibition (Since I have learned this is a safe environment and I have concluded that I am accepted here and am a person of worth to these people, and because deep in my heart I realize I am part of this community, I can exhibit the real me.)
- Elation (There is no place I'd rather be. Being me is fun, exciting, and relaxing. I am elated to spend time in this environment.)

The length an individual is in each of these stages will differ from person to person. Also, some people will skip various stages and move directly to the next. Some will get stuck in a stage and never choose to move forward unless prompted to do so by a life experience, a conversation with a group member, or a planned activity like a retreat or mission trip. And others will go forward, then some experience will force them back to prior stages (someone breaks a confidence, attacks them publicly or behind her back, and etc.).

The Small Group Life Promise

For every church that takes their small group ministry through Small Group Life, we promise to:

- Take members on a **formational-discipleship** journey
- Engage them in **ministry and service** projects
- Make it easy to build **community** (assist in assimilation by "opening the front door and closing the back door")
- Provide spiritually enriching ideas for the kids



The Formational Discipleship Journey

In a 2008 article in *Christianity Today,* Richard Foster was quoted as saying, "We are always being spiritually formed." Given this, the opposite is most likely true as well. That is, that the Enemy is always looking for ways to de-form us, or deceive and accuse us to the point we seek refuge behind our false selves. If spiritual formation can be defined as the process of being conformed into the image of Christ for the sake of others, then this can also be applied to the formational-discipleship journey that Small Group Life has been created to facilitate. But it can only serve as a guide and, not coincidentally, that's all we have intended it to be. The small-group pastor, leaders, and members must be willing to pick up the "brushes" with their varying colors and paint the empty canvas that's been provided.

This formational-discipleship journey is broad enough to include the ways God works to re-form and redeem us and the transformation into greater and greater Christlikeness that results. Each day provides us with a new curriculum for life. Small Group Life teaches us more about ourselves, life, and God.

Ministry and Service

It's not enough to study. It's not enough to worship. It's not enough to meditate. The spiritual pilgrimage asks you to be more than what you've become. It requires putting action to thought and legs to ministry. I've never thought that people don't want to serve; rather, the effort to be missional amounts to the proverbial one-feather-too-many in the lives most of us lead. We are called to be salt and light—to go. When Jesus stood before the world to announce His mission as it is documented in Luke 4, He read from Isaiah 61:1-2. The missional invitation to all of us resides in these words, too:

The Spirit of the Lord God is on Me,
because the Lord has anointed Me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and freedom to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of our God's vengeance;
to comfort all who mourn.

The Serve/Go challenges fall under the Leadership-Ministry movement in the incremental discipleship approach to balanced life. Each Small Group Life Episode includes six Serve/Go challenges included to get group members out of their comfort zones and into the world. We've tried to vary the activities from simple to planned, from individual to group mobilization, with some in between. So one week your group might be helping a widow or single adult while another week you'll simply be looking to buy somebody's coffee in the morning. The idea is to avoid overwhelming group members, yet still asking professing believers to give something of themselves.

The small-group pastors we spoke with, with very few exceptions, believed the missional aspect of Small Group Life to be one of the most exciting. There are three reasons for their elation concerning this aspect of Small Group Life: (1) Groups that turn inward seldom live long lives and very, very few ever multiply. Groups that are missional see beyond themselves. Giving missional directives on an ongoing basis is a constant reminder that groups are to connect with those who are not yet followers of Christ, and it organically instills a mission mindset. (2) Groups involved in mission endeavors bond in much deeper ways than those who simply have ongoing meetings, parties, and involve themselves in recreational activities. (3) Most churches that make small groups a key element of church life desire their groups to be on mission, but small-group pastors often do not have the time to create lists of mission opportunities or to dream up personal missional expressions.

This piece of the Small Group Life puzzle is one that is missing in many resources. Be sure to make these mission opportunities part of your small group's experience and lead group members to join you on mission. As you do you'll see selfish people become giving people, discontent individuals become more satisfied with their own lives, and broken people begin to be put back together. It's impossible to serve others and allow your heart to remain spiritually stagnant.

Where Community Can Be Found

Our research showed that the majority of small-group pastors and small groups are looking for two things: community and discipleship. Small Group Life promises to do everything a printed piece can do in order to create an environment where redemptive community is possible. Without compromising Bible study, we will include questions that endeavor to get to the heart of individuals to help them come to a better understanding about how God wants to speak into their lives. There is always—no matter where a person is on the spiritual continuum—more healing to experience and more of God to be encountered.

Additionally, activities and experiences associated with Connect and Serve/Go will also contribute to community. The various media Small Group Life will include—such as suggested movie clips and music and downloadable videos—also foster a greater sense of community as we take advantage of the many art forms available to us. The quote we have opted to include as a part of each topical introduction should also contribute to community building as it resonates with hearts and minds in the group.

General Editor

Even with the listening sessions, the prototypes, and the pilot groups, we still felt like there was one more element that we could pursue: contribution, suggestions, and insight from a practioner—a person living and breathing in the world of small groups. Because of this we invited Saddleback Church small-group pastor Steve Gladen to serve as General Editor. Saddleback Church (*www.saddleback.com*) has thousands meeting in small groups every week. As small-group pastor, Steve is responsible for growing and managing this ministry. He also plans and hosts an annual conference for small-group leaders and has written several small-group leadership resources. As General Editor Steve has agreed to ensure our content adheres to basic small-group principles and practices, contributes to growing leaders within the group, and creates an effective small-group dynamic. We're excited about this partnership and fully expect it to make Small Group Life as good as it can be.

Moving Forward

Now that we have established the foundation for Small Group Life and shared the story of this project, we want to take a closer look at each section of the Small Group Life experience. Each Scene is comprised of the following components:

- Introduction
- Connect
- Relevant quote
- Grow
- Serve/Go
- Scripture commentary notes
- Family devotional ideas
- Leader Notes
- Leader Guide

Our objective in the next part of this book is to go into great detail about what each section has been designed to do, how each supports the Small Group Life Promise, and a little about how we came to our conclusions.

At various times Small Group-ologist Rick Howerton will add his thoughts about how the elements of Small Groug Life contribute to the small-group dynamic. The small-group space needs to be a place where biblical truth is taught. But it also needs to be a place where this truth comes alive. The spiritual journey is a quest. It is God's invitation into the adventure. Redemptive community is the place where hearts come alive.

II. The Small Group Life Method

Overview

The core values of Small Group Life are **flexibility, affordability,** and **continuity.** Given the present state of our economy and our desire to help churches steward their resources as well as possible, we've committed to a **low-cost product** all along. This commitment led to decide against a separate leader's guide. Instead, we have included a leader's guide in the back of each Episode of Small Group Life. To compensate for the lack of a separate book and incorporate additional guides and insights for the leader/facilitator, we've also embedded multi-functional leader notes into each aspect of every Scene. Each group member should have either a copy of the book or one of our downloadable experiences for preparation for following along during the group meeting and other activities.

We've made Small Group Life **flexible** for you in a couple of ways. First, we wanted to make each episode work both for groups that meet every week and for groups that meet every other week. Because Small Group Life Episodes have each been created as a 12-week experience, we've included the Second Take for groups that meet every week. For variety, we chose different verses for study and support in the Second Take. The questions will also take groups beyond the first experience. In the Second Take, the Connect exercise might incorporate media or take groups a little deeper. Time guidelines are the same for the Second Take. Although we don't recommend it, some of our pilot groups incorporated the Second Take into every meeting.

Small Group Life also offers flexibility through the various ways groups can purchase the material. Episodes of Small Group Life can be bought through four different channels:

Quarterly Order Program
Using the LifeWay quarterly order program, episodes of Small Group Life can be purchased as they are released at the introductory price of $3.50 each. For more information, visit www.lifeway.com/SmallGroupLife or call 800.458.2772.

Online Downloads
Groups can also purchase Small Group Life as PDF or RTF downloads. The RTF documents allow for easy customization in the event your church wants to add content, incorporate its logo, or alter the material to better suit your congregation, demographic, or particular sermon series. Each group receives unlimited downloads for $30 per release. Think about it—for a group of 10 that's just $3 per person. To find out more, visit www.lifeway.com/SmallGroupLife.

Subscription
You can arrange for Small Group Life to be delivered directly to each group member's home through our personal subscription option. The subscription price is $16.95 per year (four episodes), which includes shipping and handling. To subscribe now, visit www.lifeway.com/magazines.

Retail Stores
Episodes of Small Group Life can also be purchased at any LifeWay Christian Store. Check the store near you or visit www.lifewaystores.com to find available episodes of Small Group Life at the regular price of $5.95.

What Is Life To You?

Each Small Group Life issue begins with an expression of the word "life" that's found on page 1. Because notions and expressions of "life"—who you are, where you are, what you face, what is God revealing—are so central to Small Group Life, this page in every episode has been set aside for various manifestations and demonstrations of life as you know it. Because this is your place—or anybody else's place—to express life, we're looking for you to submit your artistic renderings. Call it "life graffiti." For more information e-mail our graphic designer Darin Clark at *darin.clark@lifeway.com*. Here is an example:

Streamlined

We've built each small-group experience—two experiences per Scene—to last about 50 minutes. Through our pilot we learned that this is a very inexact science (if it can be said that there's science to it at all). Grow is almost always 30 minutes. Connect and Serve/Go, one on each side of Grow, will use the remaining 20 minutes. Even with our planning and intentional use of our word economy, there were still pilot groups that either spent much longer than 50 minutes or raced through the content in much less time than we allocated. Knowing that most groups spend a few minutes socially and often enjoy snacks or share a meal prior to Bible study, we concluded that most groups meet between 1 ½ and 2 hours. Whether you're a small-group leader or small-group pastor, be mindful of the time guides that we've included for each section. Doing so will help you get to the point where your members are wishing the group had gone longer instead of looking around for a clock or at their watches.

One of the responses we heard over and over during our listening sessions was that whatever we did, it needed to be streamlined. When dealing with adults in small groups we realize that the conversation has great potential to take on a life of its own. Our streamlined approach can best be described as a biblical guide to your small-group time. We have intentionally avoided giving all the answers in order to encourage and invite participation. Additionally, we have not taken extreme measures to avoid tension. Sometimes a level of tension is exactly what a group needs in order to move along the spiritual continuum. A conversation that goes out of its way to avoid tension can become rote and cliché. Consequentially, many small groups fizzle out precisely because they spend months refusing to "go there."

Beyond our streamlined approach is a progression pattern we have already described as nonlinear. Just to reiterate, we define a nonlinear Bible study as a study that "invites" as opposes to "tells." Simply put, instead of a proposition-based small-group experience, we utilize "discovery-based" Bible study that places a higher value on the question than more linear and modern approaches to learning. This effectively facilitates redemptive community without compromising our promise to grow disciples.

We addressed the issue of **continuity** somewhat in the section covering the *Reveal* study Willow Creek Community Church directed. By "continuity" we mean to say that over a three-year period your groups will be exposed to basic doctrines of the Christian faith, foundational events recorded in Scripture, and traits of Christ. As a person responsible for small groups in your church, you no longer have to worry about the pitfalls of a la carte Bible study, nor will you ever wonder what your groups are studying. It's also important to realize that our continuity model will encourage your groups to get out into the community through Serve/Go.

Offering a streamlined and nonlinear approach provides the opportunity both to grow in knowledge of the Bible and spiritual maturity while also creating an environment for group members to wrestle with their deepest *emotions*, *questions*, and *doubts*. This is what our listening sessions revealed about what small-group pastors and small-group leaders are looking for in a new small-group Bible study experience.

Rick Howerton on Nonlinear, Discovery-Based Bible Study

A linear approach to Bible study, in many instances, seats a group of people in rows facing a well-studied teacher who presents information he or she gathered the week prior to the class meeting. The espoused information has been drawn from respected curriculum creators and/or commentaries written by theologians of the highest order. And while there is certainly a place for classes of this type, because we are after heart transformation rather than just the instilling of information, we have chosen a nonlinear approach.

A nonlinear approach like the one found in Small Group Life is characterized by a circle of friends seated face-to-face. The list of invitees includes each group member, the Holy Spirit as the teacher, Jesus as the model of redemption and the power through which redemption is given and received, and God the Father speaking freedom through His Word to His children. The synergy experienced in this circle of friends is one of unprecedented power.

As group members allow the drama of a biblical passage to unfold, the characters come to life. Individual group members witness their own abilities, flaws, sins, hurts, regrets, and misguided decisions unveiled as they see themselves in the imperfect characters in the biblical account. The group members will realize that they too are imperfect beings making perfectly normal human mistakes and that their lives are also full of past stories affecting the way they presently feel about life and themselves. Many of them will realize for the first time that the Enemy has been using their past experiences to hold them captive and keep them from the freedom that God offers, preventing them from enjoying the adventure of journeying with Him.

Through a simple conversation, these understandings will be realized. But also through these conversations God will use the spiritual gifts of various group members to calm and care for the person who has come to know these realities. The Holy Spirit will guide those with biblical understanding to others in the group who may not have the same knowledge, so these more knowledgeable group members can unveil passages that will speak into the discouraged person's situation. Those who have already been through what the traumatized individual is revealing for the first time will be vivid reminders that you cannot only survive but you can overcome the misdiagnosed self-perception that you've lived with for so many years. And group member will walk alongside group member as long as it takes until this close friend is free of the baggage that he or she has been carrying so long.

Nonlinear Bible study leaves room for the Holy Spirit to direct the group places they may have never considered going to discuss situations that have never been discussed before. And, because of the flexibility of the group meeting, the group will be able to deal with a group member's present situation and brokenness at the time it is occurring and in the moment that it is brought out into the open.

But nonlinear Bible study is not just about healing broken hearts. Nonlinear Bible study leaves room for the Holy Spirit to teach us what God's Word is telling us, to reveal a group member's spiritual giftedness, leadership abilities, and passions and to unveil His future expectations of a group member. Nonlinear Bible study demands each group member to be real and authentic, doing life without putting on airs and false faces. When this circle of the highest order comes together, miraculous things happen. A friend of mine who pastors a traditional church asked that I come and speak with his church about small groups. Afterward he described his experience while being part of a small group. He said something like this: "When a small group meets it's like having an old-fashioned revival service every week. People come expecting God to do something very special. Before the group meets there is lots of laughter and real-life conversations. Then when the group meets, people confess sin and everyone cares for and prays for one another. Not only that, people really do expect God to show up and heal people and set people free. And then everyone celebrates."

When leading a nonlinear Bible study it's important that you relax and leave room for the Holy Spirit to work. You as a small-group leader need to be able to read the room and the people in that room. If there are tears, uneasy moments of silence following a biblical expectation that seems outrageous, a confession of sin, an unveiling of an addiction, a reminiscent story from someone in the group of abuse or mistreatment (most often from childhood or teen years), or couples verbalizing their discontent with one another, it is time to set aside the study because the Holy Spirit is opening the door to do something amazing.

These are the most special of all times in small-group life. A miracle is possible at this moment. God has opened the door for someone to begin the process of being set free or finding peace of mind, perhaps after decades of being bombarded by negative thoughts and personal guilt. Stop and have the group pray, allow individuals to speak words of encouragement, ask the individual what the group can do so that he or she can overcome. You will then want to meet with the group member away from the meeting and see how desperate and deep the situation

really is. You may need to refer the member(s) to a Christian counselor. But remember this: The group will always need to remain by their side, encouraging and connecting with them as they go through the process necessary to be released from the Enemy's grasp. The group is who they trusted first to speak with about their situation and so the group is their first line of love and defense.

Scene Introduction

Each Small Group Life scene begins with an introduction. The introduction includes a short description of the topic and a compelling visual image. The introductory paragraph can be used in much the same way. We do not recommend making this a part of your group time. Paragraph-style prose such as this does not contribute to a good group dynamic. Rather, we suggest that you direct group members to this aspect of Small Group Life at some point prior to the meeting—at the conclusion of the meeting looking forward to the next, in a mid-week e-mail, or as a post on the group's Facebook wall or message board. This sets expectations and general group parameters.

The descriptive paragraph is included to prime the group for your small-group conversation. Because we're not all linear or even nonlinear learners, the graphic has been added to appeal to the visual learner. We encourage group facilitators to draw members' attention to the graphic either in a mid-week e-mail or in a preceding meeting. Ask the members to identify the emotions the image may evoke. Does it conjure any particular memory or stir anything deep within the heart? If we get it right, the image will tell a story that's relevant to the topic at hand.

We recommend challenging group members to interact with these images outside of group time. Journaling exercises that take questions to God and introspection that asks questions about any sort of emotional response can be very redeeming and spiritually fulfilling in the lives of believers. An example of what is being described here and other aspects of Small Group Life can be found on our Web site:

www.lifeway.com/SmallGroupLife.

Downloadable Videos

Another tool for individudal introspection at your disposal is found at the Small Group Life Web site: downloadable videos. Although able to be incorporated into the group time between Connect and Grow, these videos are perhaps best utilized by group members prior to coming to the meeting. Each of these downloadable videos complements Small Group Life Scenes in one of the following ways:

- Identify a spiritual discipline and explore its practice
- Identify an attribute of Christ and examine it in today's context
- Expound on one of the commentary-like call outs
- Take a closer look at the text of a particular passage that is included in the study
- Use the video to further develop a biblical personality or figure
- Engage the topic at a broad level, such as "Atonement"
- Cross-reference the topic with a biblical event, character, or verse that isn't included in the study
- Provide additional background and contextual information

The videos often ask provocative questions and leave them with group members. In addition to some of the other methods we've included, the videos serve as yet another way to keep group members in the moment, challenging them throughout the week to stay engaged, prayerful, and with hearts open and available to God.

Rick Howerton on Individual Introspection

When group members spend time in individual introspection, the group meeting will take on a dimension many groups have never experienced. Some of the outcomes are:

1. Group members arrive at the meeting anticipating the conversation that will ensue.
2. Group members look forward to telling what God has revealed to them, so sparking the kindling that leads to a conversational bonfire will not be difficult.
3. As group members speak of experiences God reminded them of, what God spoke to them, or even if they realized nothing "extra special," the group will continue to build community as someone else in the group most likely experienced something of the same nature. Any time two people connect concerning a life experience they have a common bond that may create a deeper connection.
4. The group will become more and more God-centered. As group members hear from God in their introspection, they become more and more aware of the fact that He is speaking to them. And if He will speak to them in times alone, He will speak to the group and work in the lives of group members as a whole. It is at this point that miraculous things may begin to occur.

You will find that getting group members to do this on a weekly basis will demand you as the group leader do the following:

1. Involve yourself in the Scene Introduction weekly.
2. Speak of what you experienced when you spent time with the Scene Introduction.
3. When others in the group talk about their time with the Scene Introduction, point out how important this is.
4. Suggest that group members schedule this time so it is a set-aside, uninterrupted time daily.
5. Suggest that married couples with children take turns watching the children so both the husband and the wife will have some alone time to be with God.

Connect

It's unreasonable to believe that your group can go "zero to 60" without some intermediate step. Connect eases the group into each of the six scenes found in an episode of Small Group Life. Connect is comprised of three elements. One of these elements is the icebreaker, or "warm-up." The icebreaker:

- Uses an activity, question, or movie clip that invites everyone into the conversation
- Gets group members accustomed to hearing their voices in the group setting
- Establishes context for discussion in a very general way
- Creates a good level of comfort because it is light and often humorous
- Builds community through personal, yet safe, disclosures and storytelling
- Always precedes the relevant or compelling quote

Group leaders should be sure to watch the time during this part of the Small Group Life experience. In most cases we've allocated 15 minutes so there's just enough time for everyone to contribute.

Rick Howerton on Connect

Leader, as you begin the icebreaker time you need to know that you probably have four types of people in the room. There is the person who is hesitant. They are **hesitant** to join in the icebreakers because they don't like to speak about themselves in any setting. These persons just have a difficult time telling their stories at any level. Then there are those who are **disgusted** by these questions. These individuals see the icebreaker questions as trivial and irrelevant, or they are Bible beasts and can't see any reason to discuss these insignificant things when the group could be talking about the deeper things of God. Then there are those who are simply **apathetic** about icebreakers. These types may run so fast with work and/or family responsibilities that they simply show up for the meeting exhausted or disengaged. They are willing to join in and will speak honestly and openly but could care less if this part of the meeting even happens. Then there are those who **anticipate** the icebreakers. These group members just enjoy being together, laughing, and getting to know more about other group members, and look forward to what transpires during the icebreaker time. What I want you to see, group leader, is that three of the four categories would be just as happy if you didn't do the icebreakers and the most verbal of the categories will shut this time down if you let them. The icebreakers are vital to the experience. Here's why.

Great small-group meetings happen when every group member is engaged in the dialogue throughout the meeting. Icebreakers are the perfect starter for group meetings because of this fact. Icebreakers would be better termed "Conversational Thermostats." They set the temperature for the rest of the conversational experience. Icebreakers do this better than anything else because they allow people to respond to low-level disclosure questions, questions anyone can answer without much thought or intimidation.

The best way to get every group member involved in the conversation is to be certain each of them speaks early in the meeting (by using icebreakers) and are encouraged by the group leader after doing so. The rhythm of the icebreaker time should be (1) question asked, (2) group member responds, (3) small-group leader encourages the individual for sharing, then (4) telling that individual in some way that they will look forward to hearing from him or her again throughout the meeting. This is repeated with every small-group attendee. If you as a group leader will do this you will create the kind of environment necessary for a dynamic conversational experience as each person knows that his input is honored, respected, and anticipated.

There are a few important responsibilities you as a group leader have if you are going to set the conversational thermostat at the right temperature:

Limit the amount of time spent on icebreakers by telling the group beforehand how much time each person has to share. Before starting the icebreakers, remind the group members that icebreakers are the fuse leading to the explosion and are not the dynamite of the experience. Let them know that you really want to hear from each of them but that it would be best if they would limit their comments to a certain amount of time. You will determine how much time each person gets by the number of people in the group.

Don't allow follow-up questions. You may have someone in the group who just loves to find out more. Your icebreaker may require a one-word response but the individual with a penchant for wanting to know more could turn a 30-second response into a 4-minute dialogue, which, in most instances, will lead down a rabbit path that takes the group off of the primary topic for the evening.

Make sure everyone shares. If someone says they can't think of anything to say, tell him or her, "We'll come back to you." Be sure you do come back and require a response after going around the room. If you come back to them and they still don't have anything to say, you might ask them one of the following questions: (1) Have you ever had an experience like someone else described? If so, tell us about it. (2) Which person's story most relates to your life? What did they say that makes you think so? (3) What would your best friend or spouse say about you concerning this question if they were here?

After each person shares thank them for what they said, speak a word of encouragement, and let them know that you (1) look forward to hearing from them later in the meeting, (2) always appreciate what they have to say, (3) really look forward to the wisdom they'll bring to the conversation later, (4) are grateful for what they've brought to the conversation in weeks past and know they'll bring some great stuff forward this week.

Most importantly … Group leader, DO NOT SKIP THE ICEBREAKER TIME! As I meet with and consult small-group leaders, I find that they are often discouraged that their groups don't have life-transforming conversations. Many of these group leaders can't even get their small groups to have a substantial dialogue. At least 80% of the time I find that these groups do not do the icebreaker time. It seems the hesitant, disgusted, apathetic types suggested this time was insignificant. Someone in one of those categories then asked the group to take a vote, and the group, due to the intensity of the request and the ignorance of the requestor, concluded they would not do icebreakers any longer. Group leader, don't allow a vote. If you do, you'll find yourself asking questions and then listening to silence much more often than you'd like.

A Bit More on Connect

In addition to the icebreaker, Connect also includes a relevant quote. This quote could come from a famous author, church father, movie, or any other source. We want these to be engaging and thought-provoking. To introduce Mystery, for instance, in the first Small Group Life release we chose the following from *Alice in Wonderland:*

> *I almost wish I hadn't gone down that rabbit hole—and yet—and yet—it's rather curious, you know, this sort of life! I do wonder what can have happened to me! When I used to read fairy tales, I fancied that kind of thing never happened, and now here I am in the middle of one!*

Our desire is to encourage group members to take a moment to consider the beauty and mystery that's found in the life of a disciple of Christ. The follow-up question asks how Christianity is like a fairy tale—wonder, a Hero and a Villain, intrigue, twists and turns, a paradise lost and regained, and a daring rescue just begin the list. Drawing from the world around us reminds us of the many ways God works and the many things He chooses to work through. It also puts us more in touch with a culture growing increasingly antithetical to the faith.

We recommend using the quote that's been included in a couple of ways:

- If the facilitator wishes, he or she can ask the group as part of Connect if anyone has any sort of response either to the quote or to the accompanying question. If the leader utilizes the quote in this way he'll want to abbreviate the icebreaker time. It is a good idea to mix up your Connect time to appeal to different learning styles and personalities.
- Another recommendation is using the quote as a mid-week (or off-week) teaser for the next Small Group Life meeting.

Small Group Life pilot groups responded very positively to Connect. It's important for group members to hear their own voices early on in the meeting in order to feel comfortable contributing during the Grow portion of the small group experience. Connect is comprised of a few different layers, but don't feel pressured to use them all. It's a good idea, instead, to use the multiple layers to give the beginning of each small-group gathering a fresh feel from time to time.

Grow

Grow is the heart of the Small Group Life experience. This is the Bible-study portion of your small-group time. It includes relevant Scripture or a biblical event or figure to consider, leader notes, and guided prayer suggestions. Grow has been designed to be discovery-based Bible study as opposed to proposition-based. We've addressed some of the differences between the two and why Small Group Life has landed where it has in Part 1. For starters, the streamlined, discovery-based approach to Bible study fosters and builds community—the sort of community that can be defined as redemptive—without compromising basic Bible teaching. But this approach also contributes to basic small-group principles and practices.

If you plan to use one of the downloadable videos found at *www.lifeway.com/smallgrouplife*, just prior to Grow is going to be the most effective place. The videos are created to be used either as a way to prime the pump and begin thinking about the next group conversation by group members individually or as a part of the group experience. The current trend leans more toward individual videos, but these 3-5 minute Small Group Life videos can work either way.

Grow will usually focus on a central theme using relevant Scripture and 6-8 questions. An ancient proverb says, "A bird doesn't sing because it has all the answers, a bird sings because it has a song." Francois Fenelon once asked, "To just read the Bible, attend church, and avoid 'big' sins—is this passionate, whole-hearted love for God?"[4] These two ideas taken in concert have helped us conclude that the question is a key component on the journey to redemptive community. The questions found in Small Group Life can be identified as belonging to one of four categories:

- Observation (What is this passage telling us?)
- Interpretation (What does the passage mean?)
- Application (What will I do to integrate this truth into my life?)
- Self-revelation (How am I doing in light of the truth unveiled?)

Grow employs an incremental discipleship model. Small Group Life has been created to guide groups on a redemptive journey that leads to incremental discipleship and spiritual growth while building redemptive community along the way. This redemptive journey meanders through the four areas that contribute to a balanced life: (1) Christ-character Traits (2) Basic Theology (3) Spiritual Disciplines (4) Leadership-Ministry Development. (See page 19.)

Our desire is for Grow to have a very organic feel to it. We believe that this adds to the aesthetic appeal. Research has also shown that "white space," or the absence of side-to-side and top-to-bottom words, has a more inviting sense to it, thus making group members feel more comfortable and willing to contribute. The relative merit of the content is lost when people feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of words on a page. The wide-open sense you'll encounter in Small Group Life is very intentional.

Even though there are leader notes throughout each Small Group Life scene, they are probably most relevant in Grow. There was quite a bit of discussion surrounding the leader notes. The decision to keep costs to churches down necessitated the decision not to create a separate leader's guide, but we didn't want to leave the leader/facilitator without any help. Nor did we wish to create a situation during which the leader felt like he had to flip back and forth between the study and the guide in the back, taking into consideration that in today's world we don't always make time or even have time for preparation. We're also trying to get away from the linear, modern approach that takes advantage of the sidebar but also encroaches on our desire for white space. In the end, we decided to embed our leader notes using a different font, set aside and away from the flow of the experience.

But we also adjusted our standard strategy for leader notes. In the past these notes have been along the lines of "special information," almost like a little peek behind the curtain. But we thought that, since everyone in the room will have access and read them, why not make them work for us in other ways? So our Small Group Life embedded leader notes, identified by the yellow highlighter, not only help the leader create the best small-group environment and offer special insights but also contribute to developing future leaders and identifying the "why" inherent in the question. Put another way, these notes help group members understand the art of leading a small group. They will, at times, identify the particular small-group principle that a question supports. Other times a leader note might explain why this question is important. This way, those in the group can have a better understanding of a healthy group dynamic while also learning a little bit about small-group leadership.

So the embedded leader notes:

- Contribute to leader development within the group by identifying aspects of small-group principles and practices
- Provide helpful instruction
- Offer suggestions
- Add insight to specific questions

In addition to the highlighted leader notes, you'll find call-out information set aside in a colored box. This information adds extra-biblical insight to the text that is being examined. For instance, when Gideon is visited by the Angel of the Lord in Judges 6:11-13, we include a short description and background for "Angel of the Lord." Not only helpful in contributing to the group's understanding of the mood and tension of the moment, this call-out offers some insights on the topic of revelation and how God has historically revealed Himself to His people.

Grow essentially works the same in the Second Take offering. The Second Take may drive a closer examination of the text that has already been identified, ask participants to explore a second personality or event, or use several biblical references as the core text for the topic. The Second Take Grow tends to have less content. We felt like groups would come into any topical conversation *the second time* with pre-formed contributions and questions for discussion. As a result, we felt like we needed to create less in order to allow the group an opportunity to take on new directions if a situation presented itself. Both Grow experiences conclude with a guided prayer opportunity.

Rick Howerton on Intentional Meandering

Small-group leaders, remember this … not many over-churched types know how to "meander" into the Bible, and most of us are learning to guide our group into healthy meandering. Most of us have been taught over years of past experience to go hunting when we get together for a Bible study. Our goal is to capture a thought or an idea, dissect it, understand each piece we've pulled out, and leave having had some "a-ha" moments. We then silently and smugly walk away believing, "I'm more spiritually mature now." We believe the equation is, "Information = Transformation."

But the truth is, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Cor. 8:1b). Hunting for unknown treasure while diving into God's Word is vital, but if all we do is walk away with another notch on our belt, another tidbit of data to talk about with a fellow Christian, transformation may not be the outcome—a more dangerous pride may well be the result. But when believers come together in loving and caring relationships, willing to speak openly about their hesitation to believe God's revealed truth and to openly confess their wavering trust in the God of the Word, others can speak into their cynicism and can, in most instances, help the struggling friend over the great divide and into the land of obedient Christianity.

Small Group Life has chosen to take us far beyond information into the world of transformation—a world where groups experience God within a community of people who are all seeking His direction. This small band of believers wants to do more than just know God's Word; they long to allow God's truth to reveal who they really are, make uncomfortable demands, speak words of hope and help, and unveil promises to cling to and ideals that they know they must embrace but are hesitant to accept fully. This circle of authentic people doing life together longs to see what God's inspired Word is revealing to them individually and as a community. They are willing to say when they are hesitant to embrace an idea or expectation. These people are open to hearing from others and allowing others to hold them accountable and speak into their journeys when they find themselves in the realm of confusion, discomfort, or biblical misdiagnosis. Bottom line, Small Group Life Bible-study experiences allow small-group members to assist one another in exploring God's extravagant love and embracing what so many perceive as His unrealistic expectations.

Small-group leaders, if you have people in your group who have come from traditional information-based Bible-study experiences, you will need to help them move from a paradigm that simply seeks information to a paradigm that is tireless in its pursuit to experience God's revealed truth and redemption in community. In Isaiah 42:16 God tells us, "I will guide them on paths they have not known."

This will be a new paradigm for many. You will need to guide them toward searching their own hearts to conclude if they truly believe and embrace the truth and expectations found there; toward speaking openly concerning their honest evaluations of the passage; and after having done all of this, toward allowing other group members to speak into possible disbelief or unwillingness to consider these unknown paths. You will also need to help group members hold one another accountable for acting upon the expectations that were found in the passage of Scripture.

Small-group leader, our editorial team's masterful edit of each Small Group Life study gives you the format and the questions necessary to have a substantial and life-changing experience. But you may need to utilize some of the questions below to get your group members to the core of who they are and what they think. You may need to ask group members:

- How does your paradigm differ from what God says?
- What keeps you from being willing to change your paradigm?
- What actions or activities are you currently involved in that contradict God's expectations?
- What voice or voices tend to override the voice of God? (Could be parents, a teacher, a professor, a coach, a boss, etc.)
- What attitude keeps you from carrying out the responsibilities God just revealed to you? (Embarrassment, humiliation, etc.)
- What responsibilities are keeping you from embracing God's expectations found here? (taking care of my family, my job, etc.)
- What will be the outcomes of changing your paradigm or what you do? (Always lead the group member back to faith and God's taking care of us when we carry out His directives. Some passages would include Ps. 1:1-3 and Josh. 1:7.)

Serve/Go

Serve/Go is one of the several elements that completely separates Small Group Life from other small-group resources. During our listening sessions we continued to hear from small-group pastors about the need for a small-group Bible study with a much greater "missional" focus. One of them told us that he would love to see something that "put feet" to what his groups were studying in the Bible. Reconsider Fenelon's question, "To just read the Bible, attend church, and avoid 'big' sins—is this passionate, whole-hearted love for God?"[5] The answer is certainly "no." The life of a disciple is about much more than the mere art of being present. It's about putting feet to ministry (Jeremiah 22:16). Accordingly, we concluded every Small Group Life topic with a missional challenge called "Serve/Go."

Not coincidentally, we were most interested in seeing what our pilot groups had to say about this particular element. Through our conversations with pilot leaders and members, we repeatedly asked them how this element was going. To include this sort of activity in a resource is a relatively new venture, and we weren't sure how our groups would respond. The survey results had a very wide range. Though several of the newly-formed groups chose not to mobilize, most of the groups loved the idea and said that they did not have a hard time picking and choosing which Serve/Go challenges to use. There were several that wanted more options that had no costs associated (something we all understand).

We knew in the beginning that we might have to rethink our approach to Serve/Go. As a result of the pilot groups we have included one Serve/Go activity per episode topic. These range from small, individual missional opportunities to group mobilization. (Even though we realize that many groups want to engage in more ambitious activities, we've tried to keep those activities to a minimum due to the reality of financial costs.) Keeping in mind that Serve/Go rolls up under Leadership-Ministry Development, there may be Serve/Go activities that help group members better understand who they are created to be, what makes them come alive, and how God has wired them. This sort of awareness inevitably makes us better servants.

Serve/Go fits in wonderfully with groups adhering to the 2-1-1 format. Typically, this format allows for 2 Bible study meetings, a group get-together or outing of some kind, and a week off every month. Our missional Serve/Go challenges work for the group outing, the off-week, or both. Regardless, this feature gives your groups a great opportunity to be a witness, contribute to the community, and put into practice the message of the gospel. Participating in God's redemptive mission yields tremendous growth opportunities for your small groups. It also galvanizes those "stalled" or "dissatisfied" disciples and gets them out into the world for ministry.

Rick Howerton on Encouraging Missional Living within Your Group

As you begin to discuss the possibility of doing something away from the meeting time, your group may balk. Many group members work full-time jobs, have family responsibilities, and are involved in other important community ministries or organizations. Or, if your church is program-driven, some of your group members may have meetings other nights of the week or be working on a future project spearheaded by another ministry they are involved with. Not only that, some of your group members may be business travelers. Business travelers long to be home with family when they aren't traveling, and their spouses carry a double load throughout the week when the traveler is out of town working. It's important that we as group leaders are sensitive to these situations while guiding the group to be missional. A few suggestions would be:

- Make being missional part of your group covenant. This will establish it as an expectation for group life.
- Plan your mission endeavors far in advance. This allows group members to clear their calendars for those dates.
- Involve the group in pre-existing ministry opportunities for which your group will only have to show up and work without doing all of the preparatory work.
- Allow those who can't be there the day of the mission experience to be on the team that prepares for the work. They can still play a vital role without having to be there the day the group is on mission.
- When possible, be certain group members are given responsibilities in areas they are gifted in and enjoy. When you do this, each group member finds joy in the work.
- Ask group members who are unable to be involved in group mission projects to carry out the individual missional opportunities outlined in the study. Then let them tell their stories at the next meeting.

Scripture Notes, Family Life, and the Leader's Guide

The last two-page spread of every scene includes Scripture Notes and family life. For every Small Group Life scene there are Scripture notes for chosen Grow texts. These are tools not only for leaders and facilitators but also for every group member. These notes are taken from the Holman Commentary Series. Generally, these notes provide additional depth, add background and context, and contribute unique insights. Taking into account the growing concern with biblical literacy today, we've included these notes as yet another way to make the Bible come alive

for groups. Providing context and background is always helpful. But for some of us it also adds a layer of depth to any Bible study. Below is an example of the notes for Romans 8:28 in our first issue.

> **Romans 8:28** God called us to a holy life on the basis of His purpose and grace, and it is that purpose to which we have been called that this verse invites our submission. Our new life in the Spirit is based on God's good purposes for our lives, and that includes suffering. Read literally, it is easy to see why some consider this the greatest verse in Scripture. It tells us that nothing happens outside of God's plan for our good.

We've come to expect biblical insight to be a part of any Bible study. Because of our commitment to the group dynamic, we have opted not to place this sort of material within the group meeting itself. These notes can be included in the small-group experience at the appropriate places, or group leaders may just choose to make group members aware of them in order for individuals to use the notes however they see fit—whether it's for additional insight during the group meeting, preparation, or personal devotion. For so many, getting "the story within the story" adds a great deal to any Bible-study experience.

Family Life is a follow-up to the free downloadable children's activities we call Small(er) Group Life. (These children's activities are downloadable at *www.lifeway.com/smallgrouplife* and are free to Small Group Life users.) Family Life includes follow-up questions that (1) reinforce biblical learning and spiritual growth and (2) provide an entry into spiritual conversation and discussion with your children. There are four parts to this page:

1. Memory verse. Memory verses are a key component of any biblical formative journey. Each scene of Small(er) Group Life will include a memory verse for the children. The Family Life page begins with the memory verse.
2. What They Experienced. An FYI for participants about what their children discussed during their group time. This gives parents an opportunity for spiritual conversation and follow-up with their children.
3. Family Devotional Idea. There are two of these—one for each "take." These are typically very simple and have been included as a way to begin spiritual conversations centered on the week's topic.
4. Family Activity. Different from the devotional that is usually a question or statement intending to lead to interaction. The family activity is just that: an activity to do together.

The Leader's Guide is found in the back of the book and is packed with all kinds of information, suggestions, and instruction for the group leader/facilitator. Leaders should consult the Leader's Guide prior to each Small Group Life meeting for a quick review. The Leader's Guide provides:

- Scene-by-scene preparation ideas, helpful suggestions, and additional instruction
- Core small-group values
- General tips for setting a great small-group environment
- Tried and true principles for leading a successful meeting
- Support for sharing your stories and sharing your lives
- Group directory

Small Group Life avails itself for all sorts of different leadership styles. It has been created to work effectively for both the leader that always seems to find himself preparing for group meetings at the last minute (if at all!) as well as the leader that enjoys spending time in preparation and study. With our quotes, Scripture notes, call-outs, and introductory material, the same can be said for group members. We know that in today's world—whether we like it or not—there are many, many demands on our time. We don't want the pressures and expectations of the world that surrounds us to prevent small-group participation. The Leader's Guide is yet another way that we've made Small Group Life flexible.

Small (er) Group Life

We've made Small(er) Group Life free, downloadable, and so easy a teenager can lead—which is not a slight on the merit of teenagers in this role, as much as it is a reality for so many groups. For so many churches and groups, there just isn't much of a solution for the children during group meetings. As a result, babysitting and/or video represent just about the only options. For these groups we have created Small(er) Group Life.

Each episode of Small(er) Group Life identifies supplies that will be needed for that week's activities. Also needed are a worship CD, a worship DVD, and a CD of games—all described with relevant ordering information, Web sites, and prices. These purchases will be required about two times per year. Beyond the list of supplies there is practically zero preparation involved. Each Small(er) Group Life experience works in a way similar to this:

Supply List. A list of supplies provides everything that will be needed. Here is an example:

- ❑ Several small balls or balloons
- ❑ *100 Action Games* CD-ROM
- ❑ *Worship Kidstyle* DVD
- ❑ *Worship Kidstyle* CD
- ❑ Disney's *The Lion King* DVD

Bible Truth & Memory Verse. Provides both a truth statement and Scripture. For example, God gives us the power and the courage to stand against evil. "Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" John 14:27.

Interact. Usually 5 minutes, this interaction sets up the Bible truth. It will usually provide easy-to-follow instructions with bold words such as "ask," "say," and "share."

Movie Connection. The time allocation for this step will vary based on the length of the movie clip—assuming a clip is being utilized. In this example we are using *The Lion King*. A short discussion follows the movie clip. The discussion will begin with a question, a directed conversation, and conclude with an example or illustration.

Bible Connection. This is the time when the Bible is taught and incorporates a "story time" approach.

Hands On. It's important to get children up and moving at various times. Directly following Bible Connection we've scheduled a time to do just that.

Praise and Worship. Hands On is followed by a time of worship.

Pray. Small(er) Group Life concludes with a time of prayer.

A sample of Small(er) Group Life can be found at *www.lifeway.com/SmallGroupLife*.

Depending on the activities, the movie clip, and how group discussion and story time goes, Small(er) Group Life will probably not be more than an hour nor less than 30 minutes. Our research led us to conclude that most children spent time with the adults until Bible-study time, so we planned Small(er) Group Life to cover about the same amount of time as the adult Small Group Life—50 minutes.

Small(er) Group Life activities have incorporated LifeWay's Levels of Biblical Learning. We will also identify one of the eight concept areas for each activity. Our writer has written the experiences for Kindergarten–4th grade. Our hope is that 5th and 6th graders can participate as "assistant" teachers if they are mature enough. Each group will have to decide how to handle children ages 5 and under. Without a doubt, a great number will be able to participate in Small(er) Group Life.

What Is Life To You?

As we've explored, life tends to come at us like a story—one that is far from neat and tidy. There are unexpected twists and turns. There is a Villain. But there is also a Hero-Redeemer fighting for us and battling for our hearts. The truth is, the way we process these events will dictate what we ultimately believe about God and our role in the story. For each of us there is a separate and distinct expression of life. Through each of us God is revealing a different story as He invites us into a redemptive journey. And each story is beautiful. Not only a Bible study, Small Group Life also takes into account the many different stories alive in each small-group setting and extends an invitation to greater discovery.

The spiritual journey is not about being comfortable and safe. It's far from it. The disciple's journey is a quest. It is God's invitation into the adventure. Small Group Life is the space where life is given the opportunity to grow, retract, expand, and happen. Small Group Life has been created to be a guide on the expedition of life.

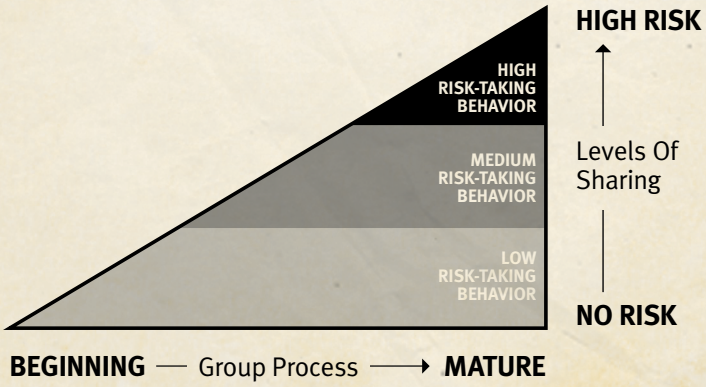
A Final Note from Rick

I am so very honored to have had the chance to give some suggestions to small-group leaders and pastors. This resource is groundbreaking. It answers the questions small-group leaders have been asking. I would love to hear your stories. When you have "God-moments" between group members, during group meetings, with your spouse, between you and God, or with your family because of Small Group Life, I'd love to hear about it. My e-mail address is *rick.howerton@lifeway.com.* I hope to hear from you soon.

1. Robert M. Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 57–63.
2. Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Reveal.* 2007. p. 43).
3. Although writers like John Eldredge, Dan Allender, and Larry Crabb have articulated similar conclusions, I first heard this from former Serendipity House Publisher and present LifeWay Undated Publishing Managing Director Ron Keck.
4. Francois de Salignac de La Mothe Fenelon, *The Seeking Heart* (Sargent, GA: The Seed Sowers, 1992), 138.
5. Ibid.

Sharing Your Stories

Small Group Life is designed to help you share a little of your personal lives with the other people in your group. Through your time together, each member of the group is encouraged to move from low risk, less personal sharing to higher risk communication. Real community will not develop apart from increasing intimacy of the group over time.



Sharing Your Lives

As you share your lives together during this time, it is important to recognize that it is God who has brought each person to this group, gifting the individuals to play a vital role in the group (1 Corinthians 12:1). Each of you has been uniquely designed to contribute in your own unique way to building into the lives of the other people in your group. As you get to know one another better, consider the following four areas that will be unique for each person. These areas will help you get a "grip" on how you can better support others and how they can support you.

G – **Spiritual Gifts**: God has given you unique spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12:3-8; Ephesians 4:1-16; etc.).

R – **Resources**: You have resources that perhaps only you can share, including skill, abilities, possessions, money, and time (Acts 2:44-47; Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, etc.).

I – **Individual Experiences**: You have past experiences, both good and bad, that God can use to strengthen others (2 Corinthians 1:3-7; Romans 8:28, etc.).

P – **Passions**: There are things that excite and motivate you. God has given you those desires and passions to use for His purposes (Psalm 37:4,23; Proverbs 3:5-6,13-18; etc.).

Welcome to Community!

Meeting together with a group of people to study God's Word and experience life together is an exciting adventure.

A small group is ... a group of people unwilling to settle for anything less than redemptive community.

Core Values

Community:
God is relational, so He created us to live in relationship with Him and each other. Authentic community involves sharing life together and connecting on many levels with the people in our group.

Group Process:
Developing authentic community requires a step-by-step process. It's a journey of sharing our stories with each other and learning together.

Stages of Development:
Every healthy group goes through various stages as it matures over a period of months or years. We begin with the birth of a new group, deepen our relationships in the growth and development stages, and ultimately multiply to form other new groups.

Interactive Bible Study:
God provided the Bible as an instruction manual of life. We need to deepen our understanding of God's Word. People learn and remember more as they wrestle with truth and learn from others. The process of Bible discovery and group interaction will enhance our growth.

Experiential Growth:
The goal of studying the Bible together is not merely a quest for knowledge, but should result in real life change. Beyond solely reading, studying, and dissecting the Bible, being a disciple of Christ involves reunifying knowledge with experience. We do this by bringing our questions to God, opening a dialogue with our hearts (instead of killing our desires), and utilizing other ways to listen to God speak to us (group interaction, nature, art, movies, circumstances, etc.). Experiential growth is always grounded in the Bible as God's primary means of revelation and our ultimate truth-source.

The Power of God:
Our processes and strategies will be ineffective unless we invite and embrace the presence and power of God. In order to experience community and growth, Jesus needs to be the centerpiece of our group experiences and the Holy Spirit must be at work.

Redemptive Community:
Healing occurs best within the context of community and relationships. A key aspect of our spiritual development and journey through grief and pain is seeing ourselves through the eyes of others, sharing our stories, and ultimately being set free from the secrets and lies we embrace that enslave our souls.

Mission:
God has invited us into a larger story with a great mission. It is a mission that involves setting captives free and healing the broken-hearted (Isaiah 61:1-2). However, we can only join in this mission to the degree that we've let Jesus bind up our wounds and set us free. As a group experiences true redemptive community, other people will be attracted to that group, and through that group to Jesus. We should be alert to inviting others to encounter God and authentic Christian community.

Leading a Small-Group Experience

You will find a great deal of information in this section that is crucial to success in leading a small-group experience.

Reading through this and utilizing the suggested principles and practices will greatly enhance the any group experience. You need to accept the limitations of leadership. You cannot transform a life. You must lead your group to the Bible and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Setting the Environment

General Tips:

1. Prepare for each meeting by reviewing the material, praying for each group member, and asking the Holy Spirit to join you at each meeting. Make Jesus the centerpiece of every experience.
2. Create the right environment by making sure chairs are arranged so each person can see the eyes of every other attendee. Set the room temperature at 69 degrees. Request that cell phones be turned off unless someone is expecting an emergency call. Have music playing as people arrive. Create a fun and inviting atmosphere.
3. Try to have water available for early arrivals.
4. Have people with the spiritual gift of hospitality ready to make any new attendees feel welcome.
5. Be sure there is adequate lighting so that everyone can read without straining.
6. Be aware of the four types of questions: Observation (What is the passage telling us?), Interpretation (What does the passage mean?), Self-revelation (How am I doing in light of the truth unveiled?), and Application (Now that I know what I know, what will I do to integrate this truth into my life?).
7. Connect with group members outside of meeting time.
8. Don't get impatient about the depth of spiritual growth group members seem to be experiencing. Real change at a heart level takes time.
9. Be sure pens and/or pencils are available for attendees at each meeting.
10. Never ask someone to pray aloud without first getting his or her permission.

Every Meeting:

1. Before starting one of the Small Group Life videos or a recommended movie clip, do not say, "Now we're going to watch a video." Instead, initiate the segment by telling the group a little bit about what to look for. The meeting should feel like a conversation from beginning to end—not a classroom experience.
2. Create a sense of engagement and interaction through your time together.
3. Remember, a great group leader talks less than 10% of the time. If you ask a question and no one answers, wait. If you create an environment where you fill the gaps of silence, the group will quickly learn they needn't join you in the conversation.
4. Don't be hesitant to call people by name as you ask them to respond to questions or to give their opinions. Be sensitive, but engage everyone in the conversation.

Remember:

Each small group has its own persona. Every group is made up of a unique set of personalities, backgrounds, and life experiences. This diversity creates a dynamic distinctive to a specific group of people. Embracing the unique character of your group and the individuals in it is vital to helping group members experience all you're hoping for.

Treat each person as a special, responsible, and valued member of the group. By doing so you'll bring out the best in each of them, while creating a living, breathing, life-changing group dynamic.

Group Covenant

As you begin this study, it is important that your group covenant together, agreeing to live out important group values. Once these values are agreed upon, your group will be on its way to experiencing true Christian community. It's very important that your group discuss these values—preferably as you begin this study.

Priority:
While we are in this group, we will give the group meetings priority. All the sessions are integrated, with each session building on the sessions that precede them.

Participation:
Everyone is encouraged to participate, and no one dominates.

Respect:
Everyone is given the right to his or her own opinions, and all questions are encouraged and respected.

Confidentiality:
Anything that is said in our meetings is never repeated outside the meeting without permission for all of your group members. This is vital in creating the environment of trust and openness.

Care and Support:
Permission is given to call upon each other at any time, especially in times of crisis. The group will provide care for every member.

Accountability:
We agree to let the members of our group hold us accountable to commitments we make in whatever loving ways we decide upon. Unsolicited advice giving is not permitted.

_____ _____

I agree to all of the above date

There's a train a comin'

Small groups are becoming very popular, but many church leaders have begun to question their methods and approaches. Are participants growing spiritually? Is every study biblically sound? Is there any rhyme or reason to choosing a particular study?

We created Small Group Life to address these concerns. And we wrote this ministry manual to introduce you to Small Group Life. Inside you'll discover how and why this resource was birthed, what each part of the study is designed to do, and how to use this resource to make the most of your small group experience.

There are many small group resources to choose from out there. Small Group Life is one of the few, if only, that offers a long-term, intentional plan for spiritual formation. So if you're ready for a small-group experience that is actually going to take you somewhere, it's time to hop on board.

About the authors

Brian Daniel has written and co-authored several small-group Bible studies for Serendipity House. He is the former editor-in-chief and current editorial project leader for LifeWay Christian Resources.

Rick Howerton is an author, speaker, church planter, and one of the premier leaders of the small-group movement. He honestly believes that small groups can, and will, change the world.

A **Connect** Resource

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