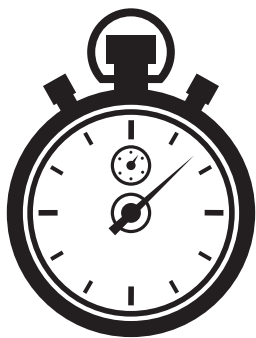


COUNTDOWN

*Launching & Leading
Transformational Groups*



David Francis & Rick Howerton



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Rick Howerton is the Discipleship & Small Groups Specialist at LifeWay Christian Resources. If you entered Rick's house on most any Tuesday night around 6:30, you'd find Rick and his wife Julie welcoming some of their closest friends: their small group made up of believers longing to live in authentic Christian community. Rick attends the church he planted, The Bridge Church, in Spring Hill, Tennessee and serves in the role of founding pastor.

David Francis is the Director of Sunday School at LifeWay Christian Resources. On a typical Sunday morning, you can find David and wife Vickie at First Baptist Church Hendersonville, Tennessee. They arrive about 8:00 to set up their pre-K room, attend the 8:30 worship service, teach their class of 4-5 year old kids at 9:45, and participate in an adult Bible study group at 11:00.



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INTRODUCTION

“Making Humans an Interplanetary Species”

Science fiction? Maybe! But it is also part of the vision of SpaceX, a company that designs, builds, and launches rockets and space vehicles. Founder Elon Musk has big dreams. Like inhabiting Mars!

Mars or Heaven?

I didn’t know much about SpaceX until our youngest son moved to Los Angeles to join them. SpaceX intends to put together a team of “the brightest talent on the planet.” Every job profile includes this challenge:

“If you’re undaunted by the impossible, actively seeking out insanely challenging projects under tight schedules, and want to work with a remarkable organization pushing the envelope of human exploration, then you will want to be part of the SpaceX legacy.”

Musk says, “SpaceX is like Special Forces... we do the missions that others think are impossible. We have goals that are absurdly ambitious, but we’re going to make them happen. We have the potential here at SpaceX to have an incredible effect on the future of humanity and life itself.”

(www.spacex/careers)

Read that last sentence again, but substitute the name of your church or group. As a group member or leader, you get to see people embrace Jesus’ promise of abundant, eternal life—a life worth living forever! That’s a mission like no other. I (David) love Rick’s vision:

A biblical small group within walking distance of
every person on the planet making disciples
who make disciples.

What’s yours?

Houston: We Have a Problem

At least Jim Lovell knew where Apollo 13 was supposed to be going when he uttered these four infamous words. In many churches, the groups ministry has a mission deficit. That is, groups don’t really know what their mission is, much less why they do things the way they do.

Critical Design and Mission Readiness Reviews

If you are in the business of designing, launching, and guiding rockets and manned space vehicles, you develop and use detailed checklists to make sure nothing is overlooked. The format of a NASA review checklist looks something like the chart below, but with many more rows. Why so much detail? Because people's lives are at stake.

REVIEW CHECKLIST					Initials:
Questions	Applicable?		Compliance?		Date:
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Comments
1.					
2.					
3.					

If we are in the Master's business of designing, launching, and guiding groups, should we not take equal care with people's spiritual lives?

Checklists and Conversations

We have tried to identify most of the major topics and terms you might use to create a checklist for reviewing the design and mission readiness of your group(s). Did you notice the NASA checklist asks the reviewer to determine if the checklist question is applicable? You'll have to make that call, too. Or have a conversation about it. Eventually, design must become a launch. Next to the signature line at the bottom of a NASA pre-launch checklist is this affirmation: "I have personally performed or visually inspected all items on the above checklist and declare them to be complete." Do your groups matter that much?

Conversation Beats Presentation

Materials are available online for presenting this material. But a presentation is not enough. Read each section in preparation for a conversation. Make notes. Jot down questions. Ponder possibilities. Nobody has to "own" or defend the ideas in the book. Just gather to discuss them. Maybe dream. Perhaps decide. Declare. Do. The countdown clock is ticking. Let's get started by reviewing some terms.

10 TERMS

Impacting Conversations about Discipleship through Groups

10.1 Discipleship

Which of the choices below best describes what you think of when you hear the word *discipleship*?

- A path or process for disciple-making that includes all kinds of groups, encourages individual spiritual disciplines and practices, and endorses and employs a wide variety of approaches to disciple-making.
- A particular kind of group defined mostly by the depth and duration of a course of study.
- A training program of the church that is made up of such groups and/or courses, distinct from and doctrinally deeper than ongoing entry-level groups (like small groups or Sunday School), for the purpose of equipping people for ministry and missions.

We so desperately want it to be the first definition. When we use the term *discipleship*, we intend it in the sense of a

- **process or path** for
- **making or becoming** a disciple.

Big D and little d: An SBC Legacy

Those of us with Southern Baptist roots have a little history to deal with when it comes to the word *discipleship*. Some of us may have chosen the second or third description—or all three. If you are not part of the SBC family, you may want to skip to 10.2 now!

In the SBC, there remains a lasting impact from a strong program ministry whose name evolved from Training Union to Church Training to Discipleship Training and then to just [capital D] Discipleship. *Deeper* and *course* became associated with the program. “University” or simply “U” was common, as was the traditional occasion: Sunday afternoon prior to the evening worship service.

We think there is a need for a type of group that occasionally takes disciples deeper than they might go otherwise. We'll call them D-groups (see 10.5) for two reasons. We want to:

- acknowledge that *every group is a* [little d] *discipleship group* in the broadest sense, and
- give a nod of appreciation for the powerful legacy of a wonderful [big D] Discipleship program.

But we'll mostly just talk about groups!

10.2 Group(s)

We will use *group(s)* throughout this book as an umbrella term that includes classes, courses, cells, circles, and any other kind of Bible study group. It includes groups by any label that gather at any time at any location. It even includes a circle of women who gather monthly to pray for missions; in fact the word circle is a traditional term for such a group. A circle is an appropriate image for groups that are small.

10.3 Small Group

Technically, any group that could sit in a circle and hear and be heard using normal voices is a small group. Calling something a small group doesn't make it one. No group is really a small group unless it is small. For the survey reported below, staff members were asked to declare which of three primary approaches to adult discipleship they personally preferred most. Later they were asked what they thought the maximum size of the preferred type of group should be (not all three). Their answers:

Maximum number of group participants	Table 10.3 - Percentage of staff who selected each range by their self-declared <i>primary</i> preference for adult discipleship		
	Small GROUPS	Sunday School CLASSES	Discipleship COURSES
12 or less	45%	13%	50%
13-16	48%	15%	12%
17-20	6%	36%	24%
More than 20	0%	36%	14%

Note that 20 is the *maximum* size; none from the small groups tribe exceeded this number, and over 90 percent drew the line at 16. There are various theories about the *optimum* size of a small group. *MasterLife* author Avery Willis argued for 8 based on his missionary discipleship work in Indonesia. For John Wesley's early Methodists, it was 12. For decades, I (Rick) have watched the small group world hold firmly to 12. The consensus seems to be:

$$12 \pm 4$$

We're guessing Jesus knew that! In actual usage, *small group* connotes more than just size. *Community* is a key concept, and *community groups* is a common synonym. In popular use, *small group* often just means "gathers away from the church sometime other than Sunday morning." Most could use the term *home group*, as that is the most popular location for off-campus groups. Location and occasion should not restrict a group from experiencing biblical community. Yet some can't see that happening in an hour on Sunday at church. So, in the minds of many, *small group* simply connotes "not a Sunday School class." They're at least half right.

10.4 Sunday School Class

The basic unit of the Sunday School is traditionally called a *class*, and its leader a *teacher*. These terms have deep roots, especially in America. Nowhere else in the world has the idea of *Sunday School* pervaded a culture like in the United States. Born in the same decade, the westward advance of the country and the American Sunday School movement are historically inseparable. Put the words *Atheist*, *Muslim*, *Hindu*, or *Mormon* in front of *Sunday School* in a web search; even non-Christians use the term and the time. **Are Sunday School classes just small groups that meet at church on Sunday?** That depends on whether they are actually small! According to the research findings in chart 10.3, a third are, a third clearly are not, and a third are in between. Let's say it's fifty-fifty. Half are more like small groups. They sit in circles—or at least semi-circles. Half are more like seminars. They sit in rows. Nothing wrong with that. Just don't call them small groups!

10.5 D-Groups

Both small groups and Sunday School classes are the typical next step for people involved only in worship. We believe churches should also encourage members to take an additional step occasionally, jumping into a group with a more intense course of study. We'll call these *D-Groups*. The "D" is a nod toward the legacy program called Discipleship, but let it stand for something(s) else. You're welcome to use the 8 Ds I (David) use to describe a discipleship path:

- **Devote** yourself to being a disciple.
- **Declare** your identity in Christ.
- **Develop** spiritual disciplines.
- **Display** Christlike character.
- **Defend** your faith and share it with others.
- **Disciple** others beginning with your own household.
- **Deploy** your gifts in missional ministry.
- **Depend** desperately upon the Holy Spirit.

Or don't use "D" at all. Some churches use "Connect Groups" and "Grow Groups." A young church in Cambridge, MA, offers both types of groups. They are described well at hopefellowship.org:

Community Groups. We believe one of the primary ways that we can mature in our faith is through being involved in a weekly, small group Bible Study. At Hope we call these Community Groups. A Community Group is a place where biblical truth is learned and lived out in the context of relationship. We have groups that meet on various nights of the week and at various locations around the area.

Equipping Classes. Equipping classes are an opportunity for individuals to focus on certain areas of the Christian faith in a more in-depth setting. These courses seek to engage areas of Christian formation from biblical and theological study, Christian witness and outreach, personal spiritual disciplines, and church life and beliefs.

Wise leaders offer a slate of such groups at least two or three times a year. D-groups function best when they are *short-term* and *closed*.

10.6 Closed group

A group is *closed* if new participants are not accepted after the first gathering. The group might also be closed in that participation is limited to members or non-members, Christians or non-Christians, those who have completed a prerequisite study, etc. Innovative metro New York City pastor Nelson Searcy's groups are built around "semesters" and are limited to those who attend worship at Journey Church (ACT 200).

Some people think I (David) believe closed groups are bad and only open groups are good. I love open groups. But let me be clear. Closed groups are not bad. They are just closed. Necessarily so for many good reasons. Especially accountability. They would be far less effective if they were open. An alternative term is *covenant group*.

Closed groups emphasize the importance of a covenant agreement. A *covenant* can be helpful for any group. It is essential to the continued health of a group that is not constrained by schedules and rooms like Sunday morning on campus groups. A covenant is essentially an agreement that chronicles a set of expectations group members establish with one another about preparation, participation, confidentiality, etc.

a. Communal Agreement. I (Rick) suggest you consider using the term *communal agreement* instead of saying *covenant*. The term *covenant* connotes demands and unreasonable expectations to some. The word *agreement* is much more welcoming and more easily embraced by the group, while accomplishing the same goals as a covenant.

b. Clocks and Kids. By far the most important agreement for a home group is this: "We will start at X PM and end no later than Y PM." Exceptions should be rare and important. The second most important for parents is "We will provide for the kids by..." These take care of the number one concern of parents: when will I be able to get my kids to bed! These decisions will involve trade-offs. We will address 8 trade-off decisions—or big choices—when the countdown reaches 8. Kids will be one of the big choices we explore (see 8.8).

10.7 Open group

A group is open if it

- **expects new people every time the group gathers, and**
- **invites people to belong before they believe.**

An open group has to be intentional about staying open. If it is, that intent can revolutionize its focus. Intentionally open groups focus outwardly rather than inwardly. Guests are treated with honor. They can become a member of a group any time. Becoming a group member does not make them a member of the church nor obligate them to become one. But signing up as a member of a group or class significantly improves the chances that they will. When they do, you need not “assimilate” them; they already are! As to curriculum:

A closed group can use any Bible study material.

An open group must restrict its choice of curriculum materials to support the intent of expecting new people.

Open then closed. In some small group churches, a group remains open until it consistently has the same ten to twelve attenders, then closes. The initial purpose of evangelism morphs into one of spiritual formation, helping the new group members grow. Why? How? (1) The group longs to evangelize. So they start with less than twelve and fill empty chairs with not-yet-followers of Christ. (2) When the group is larger than twelve, the group is too large for personal transformational conversations to occur. So they shift purposes at that point.

Open or closed?

Churches were not the first to use these terms. Group psychotherapists have long debated two essential design questions:

- **Which helps clients more, open groups or closed groups?**
- **Is the group dynamic improved—and thus the client helped—if a reading assignment is made prior to the group meeting, or should everybody just show up?**

Sound familiar? They don't have conclusive answers yet, either!

10.8 Ongoing group

The times on the continuum all indicate ongoing groups:

-----	-----	-----	-----
Twice a week	Weekly	Bi-weekly	Monthly
Sunday AM	Wednesday	1st & 3rd	2nd Tuesday
& Thursday PM	Evenings	Thursday	over lunch

Outward-focused open groups multiply their intent if the group is also ongoing, because new people don't have to wait to check out the group. An ideal solution to meet the curriculum needs of a weekly ongoing group is materials that include 13 sessions, and are economical enough to provide to all members, invitees, and guests. Each session should stand on its own, even if it is part of a unit of study. That is, it should deliver a complete group Bible study experience—from introduction to application. An open ongoing group must restrict itself from studies that *require* significant preparation or *depend* on prerequisite sessions—although discussion is enhanced by both.

**Ironically, materials designed for open ongoing groups
can be used successfully in a short-term closed group.**

10.9 Short-term group

By now, you may have already guessed that a *short-term group* gathers for a set number of sessions. That number is usually determined by the number of sessions in the study materials, plus maybe one or two more:

- an additional first gathering to introduce the materials and each other, and establish expectations or negotiate an agreement.
- an additional final gathering to wrap up the study, deal with lingering questions, and say so long.

The makeup of the people participating in the group also determines whether a group is *short-term* or *ongoing*. If the core group of participants remains the same after scheduled breaks, it is probably best viewed as an ongoing group. That is certainly true if the “in-between” time is used strategically to recruit new members, rotate leaders or enlist new ones, and/or to schedule an outing, social event, or mission activity. If the group membership starts with the first gathering and ends with the final one, it is definitely a short-term group.

Short-term, then ongoing. Some savvy church leaders use short-term groups as a step toward helping people connect to an ongoing group. A 6-week special interest class is an example. A large room with chairs set up in circles to let people “try out” a small group for a few weeks is another approach. Participants are invited to join an existing ongoing group or form a new one. Some churches flip the legacy program model. Ongoing groups gather away from campus during the week. Short-term D-groups are offered Sunday mornings on campus. New member classes are the most common. New members are presented the needed information and can also experience small group-like conversation.

10.10 Groups System

This book is written for three categories of readers:

- **Group members.** You want to understand how groups work in your church. Or, you are considering taking a leadership role in an existing group or launching a new one.
- **Group guides.** You already lead a group and have been given a reading assignment as part of your ongoing training.
- **Group system leaders.** You provide coaching for an assigned set of groups, or you are a pastor or leader with stewardship for designing, building, and operating the groups system.

To clearly distinguish between an overall ministry of groups and the ministry of individual groups, we will use the term *groups system* to refer to the larger ministry. A groups ministry needs to operate as a system. Of its many parts, perhaps the most important part is the one most often neglected: groups for kids. Do you put as much thought and energy into designing the groups system for kids as you do for adult groups? Are adult groups encouraged to send and support missionaries to kids out of their groups? Do leaders on the kids ministry team have opportunities for interaction with other adults? What are some other important questions wise leaders ask about kids and the groups system?

9 Research-Validated Reasons

To Disciple People through Groups

Get a group of leaders who design and operate group systems in a room, and you'll hear a lot of opinions. Most are legitimate. Few are backed up by solid research. These are!

9.1 Groups Help People Move to the Next Step of Discipleship

Eric Geiger & Thom S. Rainer, Simple Church, 2006

Beta conferences for newer ministers of education and Alpha conferences for pastors are intense 3-day training experiences hosted by LifeWay. My (David's) contribution is a session called "A Process Approach to Making Disciples through Groups." It relies heavily on the research findings reported in *Simple Church* (SC). We work through a blank chart like the one below. I filled it out here with possible examples just for illustration.

Chart 9.1A A Process Approach to Making Disciples through Groups					
Goal: A disciple*	A person who is becoming more and more like Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit.				
Process*	<i>Step 1</i>	<i>Step 2</i>	<i>Step 3</i>	<i>Step 4</i>	<i>Step 5</i>
	Come	Connect	Serve	Grow	Go
Primary Program*	Primary Worship	LIFE Groups	Ministry Teams	D- Groups	Mission Teams
Type of Group	Large Open	Ongoing Open	Mixed	Short-term Closed	Mixed

*examples for illustration

We first wrestle with a description of a *disciple*. What is your definition?

The next two statements are expressions of the two key takeaways from the research findings reported in *Simple Church*:

- Churches were more likely to experience sustained growth if they adopted a ***disciple-making process*** they communicated with such clarity that people knew where they were in the process and the ***next step*** they should take.
- One ***primary program*** was identified with each step in the process. The sequence matched the steps in the process.

In most church processes, the entry point is worship, and the primary weekend service is the program that aligns with it. But in reality, people can enter anywhere in the process—and do. Some people will attend a neighborhood or workplace small group long before they ever make it to “big church.” Millennials are passionate about meeting the needs of the poor. The entry point into church life may be a trip to a third world country or working with the church’s homeless ministry (step 5 in the example). Recently, a pastor reported that dozens of people showed up for the first time for a personal finance course (step 4). Helping people take the steps is more important than insisting on following a rigid sequence.

Mission Critical: Step 2

We spend a great deal of time on step 2 in the Beta and Alpha conferences. It is mission-critical. When we talk about the type(s) of groups to employ, we discuss another important principle found from the *Simple Church* research: It’s okay to have options within a step. The key word is “or.” Many churches choose a hybrid approach. They communicate:

**“Everyone should be in a group,
either
Sunday morning on campus
or
away from the campus at another time.”**

The program name needs to be broader than “Sunday School” or even “small groups.” LIFE groups, Community groups, Connect groups, etc. are popular alternatives. What are step 2 groups called in your church?

Short-term *D-groups* are a subsequent step, so *and* is required.

**“We encourage everyone to be involved
regularly in a Sunday morning group *OR* a weekday group
AND
occasionally in a more intense D-group.”**

During a recent conversation with one of the over thousand graduates of LifeWay’s BETA training, a young Christian educator and I sketched out a different way to picture all this using two tracks with the 3 process verbs his church already had in their existing purpose statement.

Chart 9.1B A 3-Step/2-Track Discipleship Process				
Step		1	2	3
Label*		Gather	Grow	Go
Program*	Track 1	Corporate Worship (weekly service)	LIFE Group (open ongoing)	Ministry Team (internal)
	Track 2	Personal Worship (devotions/homework)	D-Group (closed short-term)	Missions Team (external)

*Examples for illustration only

People are more likely to move to the next step of discipleship if

- there is a clearly defined system of groups, *and*
- those groups are expressions of a distinct program, *and*
- that program is aligned with a step in a clear process,
- so that people can know *the next step* to take
- on a *path* toward maturing as a disciple of Jesus.

By the way, in case you're wondering if a daily devotional time should be in an advanced track, only 16% of Christians report reading the Bible every day, another 12% weekly, and 20% in between (SFC 69). People in groups read it more. Bible reading matters. Groups matter!

9.2 Groups Propel Measurable Spiritual Growth

LifeWay Research, Brad J. Waggoner, Shape of Faith to Come, 2008

Participation in groups serves as a proxy measurement of spiritual growth. It is not foolproof. But generally, a person who regularly participates in a small group as well as worship is probably maturing more than the person who just attends worship. A person who serves on a ministry team is probably maturing still more. Someone who participates in worship, a small group, a ministry team, and also commits to a deeper short-term group a couple of times a year is probably further along still. And a person who takes the next step by going on a mission trip evidences the strongest indicators of growth.

But could you actually *measure* spiritual growth? Brad Waggoner, inaugural leader of LifeWay Research, identified 21 functional characteristics of a disciple, categorized them into 7 “domains,” and created a Spiritual Formations Inventory (SFI). A sample of 2,500 Protestants participated in the SFI. After year 2, the top three predictors of year-to-year spiritual growth were not surprising:

- Regularly reading the Bible and other Christian literature
- Regular church attendance
- Regular involvement in or leadership of a small group, Sunday School class, etc.

Several other activities were also reported more frequently by those who perceived they had grown significantly (SFC 273):

Table 9.2A Activities reported by people who perceived they had grown spiritually the past year	Percent of	
	Entire Sample	High Growth
Read a spiritual growth book	48	60
Read a book about the Bible	47	60
Participated in a class with homework	32	47
Participated in a spiritual gifts class	25	37

What activities correlated to those who *declined* spiritually as measured by the Spiritual Formations Inventory? (SFC 272)

Table 9.2B Activities that correlated with decline as measured by the SFI		
<i>Those who...</i>	<i>are...</i>	<i>to decline than those...</i>
attend church less than weekly	substantially more likely	who attend weekly.
are not involved in some type of lay leadership	substantially more likely	who are.
do not participate in Sunday School or some type of Christian education class	substantially more likely	who do.
do not participate in a small group	more likely	who do.

9.3 Groups Can Address the Key Attributes of Spiritual Transformation

Geiger, Nation, Kelley; Transformational Discipleship, 2012

The research reported in *Transformational Discipleship: How People Really Grow* (TD) built on Waggoner’s findings. *Seven domains* became *eight attributes*. The instrument used to measure spiritual became known as the “Transformational Discipleship Assessment” (TDA).

Table 9.3 Key Attributes that Indicate Spiritual Transformation			
Waggoner (2008)		Geiger, Nation, Kelley (2012)	
<i>Shape of Faith to Come</i>		<i>Transformational Discipleship</i>	
Spiritual Formations Inventory	SFI	TDA	
Learning truth	7 domains	8 attributes	Bible engagement
Obedying God & denying self			Obedying God & denying self
Serving God & others			Serving God & others
Sharing Christ			Sharing Christ
Exercising faith			Exercising faith
Seeking God			Seeking God
Building relationships			Building relationships
			Unashamed

These attributes are best addressed as part of a wise discipleship plan. Biblical community accelerates spiritual transformation. In fact, the authors argue that it is unlikely apart from community. The “common unity” of a group is the optimum environment for transformational discipleship. But just being in a group doesn’t guarantee a person will mature as a disciple. In order for substantial spiritual transformation to take place, it is essential that group leaders model the attributes, then encourage and expect those they lead to follow.

9.4 People in Groups Serve More Using Their Spiritual Gifts

Ed Stetzer and Eric Geiger, Transformational Groups, 2014

The contrast between the active and non-group members is stunning. Many groups take the time to discover what the spiritual gifts of each person in the group might be and connect them to roles in the group or beyond, enhancing the sense of community.

Table 9.4 Groups, Gifts, & Serving (TG 41) Survey statement or question	Response	
	Did not attend a group	Attended a group 4+ times a month
I am intentionally putting my spiritual gift(s) to work serving God and others.	42%	73%
Do you currently have regular responsibilities at your church (for example: greeter, teacher, musician, etc.)?	25%	63%
Do your regular responsibilities in your church include teaching or mentoring other people (i.e., are you a Sunday School teacher, Bible study leader, youth group teacher, etc.)?	22%	56%
Are you currently involved in ministries or projects that serve people in the community that are not affiliated with your church?	26%	47%

9.5 People in Groups Share Their Money More

Ed Stetzer & Eric Geiger, Transformational Groups, 2014

The table below says it all. Stewardship matters. Groups matter!

Table 9.5-6 Groups & Sharing (TG 41, 45-46) Survey statement or question	Response	
	Did not attend a group	Attended a group 4+ times a month
MONEY		
About what percentage of your total annual income (before taxes) do you contribute to your local church?	6.07%	10.34%
FAITH		
[I] pray for the spiritual status of people I know who are not professing Christians.	35%	60%
<i>Number of times in the past 6 months you...</i>		
Invited an unchurched person to attend a church service or some other program at church	0.88	3.18
Shared with someone how to become a Christian	0.68	2.30

9.6 People in Groups Share Their Faith More

Ed Stetzer & Eric Geiger, Transformational Groups, 2014

Groups provide a great environment to practice spiritual conversations. People can learn to share their own story, stories from God's Story, and the Point of the Story—the Lord Jesus.

**No one's story is complete
until it has intersected with God's Story
which happens best in a community
being enriched by the stories of others.**

The purpose of participating in group Bible study should not be a selfish desire for more information, but an opportunity to learn well the stories of others and tell well God's Story. Stories matter. Groups matter!

9.7 Group Members Are More Relational Toward Newcomers

Ed Stetzer & Eric Geiger, Transformational Groups, 2014

In fact, active group members are more intentionally relational in general than church members who are not involved in a group. The research found a dramatic contrast between the responses of members who faithfully attended a group and those who did not attend (TG 41).

Table 9.7 Survey statement	Response	
	Did not attend a group	Attended a group 4+ times a month
I intentionally spend time with other believers in order to help them grow in their faith.	22%	63%
I intentionally try to get to know new people I meet at church.	37%	67%
I have developed significant relationships with people at my church.	57%	89%

9.8 Guests are Good for Building Community in Groups

Many have been led to believe that a closed group creates deeper connections than an open group. The research of my (Rick's) friend Jim Egli and co-author, Dwight Marable, challenged this assumption.

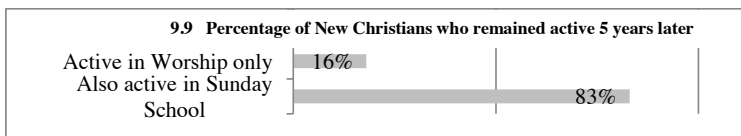
We were curious to see if open groups that are actively seeking and including new people could, in fact, experience the same level of loving relationships as closed groups. We were startled by what the statistical analysis showed. Open groups actually experience significantly more community than closed groups!"

The results are so strong that we can actually tell you that if you want to experience deeper community in your small group, you should make it an open group that is actively reaching out to others! And, on the other hand, if you want a superficial level of relationships within the group and between its members, it would be best to make it a closed group. (SGBI 24-25)

9.9 Group Involvement Makes Assimilation Dramatically More Likely

Thom S. Rainer, High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church, 1999

Dr. Rainer's team of researchers identified newcomers who had joined a significant sample of churches five years earlier and determined whether each person attended only worship or both worship and Sunday School. Dr. Rainer wrote, "The contrast between the two groups was stark and amazing" (HE 45).



These findings applied to Sunday morning groups, but likely apply directionally to weekday groups as well. The groups in these churches were aggressive about connecting new people to a group. Encouraging people to "find a group" was not enough. In these churches, a group found the people! Follow-up matters. Groups matter.

8 BIG CHOICES

Affecting a Group's Dynamics

We think there are at least 8 significant choices that affect the dynamics of any group. Each decision involves trade-offs. None are right or wrong. Each impacts the way a group works. A tool I (David) have found helpful for making decisions is the 2 x 2 matrix. It is a good vehicle for understanding, making, communicating, and deciding. Since all decisions require trade-offs, we'll start the discussion with the advantages and disadvantages of four possible combinations. And ask some questions to frame or force choices. Big choices!

8.1 Big Choice 1: Type and Duration

The main question a group leader must answer—or understand—is this: Which of the four quadrants below best describes the strategy for your group(s)? What are the trade-offs? Are there examples?*

- OPEN & ONGOING
- OPEN & SHORT-TERM
- CLOSED & SHORT-TERM
- CLOSED & ONGOING

8.1 Type & Duration	Short-term	Ongoing
Closed <i>No new people after the 1st session</i>	D-groups Mission teams	Small Groups Sunday School Committees
Open <i>Expects new people... Every time...</i>	Connection Classes Ministry Projects	Sunday School Small Groups Ministry Teams

*These examples are intended as illustrative, not exhaustive.

Why are Sunday School and small groups included as both open and closed examples? Because they can be in both—either by intent or, more likely, drifting from their mission. Drifting from a flight path places those in a spacecraft at risk. What about those in a group?

A Group is Expecting You!

	Short-term	Ongoing
Closed		
Open		

Attending an *open-ongoing* group for the first time should be a non-threatening experience, even for a first-time guest. Ideally, a newcomer can check out the group right away because the group practices the open group ideal:

**An open group
expects new people
every time the group gathers.**

I (David) have written extensively about how to tangibly flesh this out. Be there early. Share a personal study guide or member book. Wear nametags! Have a greeter. Someone with the gift of hospitality is perfect. Those with that gift comfortably and intuitively make others feel welcome in new settings. In home groups, it is almost imperative that the hosts have this gift. On the flip side:

Never ask a newcomer to:

- stand up and introduce themselves,
- fill out forms,
- pray or read scripture aloud,
- sit in an awkward place, or
- wear a nametag if nobody else is.

Instead, the greeter can fill out any necessary forms, ask additional questions, and then make a welcoming, caring introduction. Be sensitive to facial expressions that say “I’d like to say something,” but never randomly call on a guest. If you consistently practice expecting new people every time, something remarkable may happen. You may start having new people! Why? Because your group members will trust you—and each other. Then—and only then—will they actually act on your exhortations to invite others. The most important reason

people invite others to church is a man of God preaching the Word of God. How might that apply to groups?

Want to Come Help Us Tuesday Evening?

	Short-term	Ongoing
Closed		
Open		

I think that was pretty much how my youngest son Kelsey—the SpaceX kid—was first invited to participate in First Baptist Woodstock’s (GA) ministry to the homeless in midtown Atlanta. A student at Georgia Tech, he could walk there to help distribute hot dogs and initiate

spiritual conversations with the folks. He participated nearly every week. A one-time ministry project might be a better example. In addition to Ministry Projects, you’ll also see “Connection classes” place in this quadrant on Chart 8.1. The general idea is that people can participate for 4–6 weeks in a Sunday morning class that both provides useful information and simulates the small group experience. Chairs are arranged in circles or horseshoes, where groups spend a few minutes 3–4 times during each session discussing what the leader has presented. If the content is non-sequential, allowing people to start anytime, that’s an open, short-term group. Savvy leaders might even use this format for a new member class. Hopefully, participants will like the experience so much, they’ll commit to joining an ongoing group. Or better, help start one with the new friends they’ve circled up with the last few weeks.

“Last Week to Sign Up!”

	Short-term	Ongoing
Closed		
Open		

Such a headline in the bulletin suggests that you are expected to participate the entire 4–6 weeks of a group exists and implies you should be there the first week. *Closed* and *short-term* have almost become synonymous. Some add “–ended” to *open* and *closed*. A *closed-ended* group has a pre-

determined first and last gathering, usually covering a predetermined period of weeks, 6–8 being typical. “Homework” is common. That is an important trade-off decision by itself, so we will deal with it separately later.

Excuse me; Those are Bob and Sandy's Chairs

	Short-term	Ongoing
Closed		
Open		

Some churches purposefully prefer closed ongoing groups as the second step in their discipleship process. North Point Church in suburban Atlanta is a well-known example. A large, fast-growing church enjoys the rare ability to constantly launch new groups with new people.

Most of us don't. We have to work hard at reminding our groups to remain open. An ongoing group that is closed is often not closed strategically or even functionally; it is closed relationally. The group might use curriculum materials designed for open groups. Members are cordial toward guests. But everybody also knows where everybody sits. There is no need for nametags; everyone knows everyone else's name. What to do? Keep encouraging existing groups to do the little things that demonstrate they are expecting new people each time they gather. Launch new groups as often as you can. Given the choice, unless they are in the group with a friend who invited them, new people prefer to be with other new people.

What to Do if Your Small Group Closes Relationally

I (Rick) have seen the same thing in small groups that David describes above. Open small groups are just as susceptible to closing relationally as Sunday morning groups, maybe more so. Because pastors often tout a small group as the place to "make friends" or "find friends," the expectation of those attending is friendship and group members often feel as though an existing friendship might be interrupted or upended if new people join, changing the group dynamic. The way to keep a group open relationally is to: (1) covenant together to invite and be welcoming to new people, (2) remind group members, at least monthly, that a goal of the group is add people to God's Kingdom, (3) pray weekly for God to send new people into the path of group members who they can invite to join the group, and (4) be a model by bringing new people to the group yourself.

8.2 Big Choice 2: When and Where?

The next mission critical decision is where the group will gather and when. Here are the four choices with some key ideas and examples. There is no "right" choice. You have four choices: weekend on campus, weekend off campus, weekday on campus, and weekday off campus. Which of the four options best describes the strategy for your group(s)?

What are the trade-offs? Are there examples?

8.2A When & Where	Off campus	On campus
Weekday <i>(any time other than adjacent to the primary worship svc; includes Sunday evening)</i>	Homes Conf Rooms Coffee shops Anywhere!	Sunday PM Early morning men Mid-morning women Wednesday PM
Weekend <i>(before/after primary worship service; typically Sunday morning)</i>	Walking distance Shuttles	First 2 steps... Every member of family... One trip to campus

One Trip, Two Steps

	Off campus	On campus
Weekend		
Weekday		

If you have the facilities to support it, the main advantage of offering both worship and groups at the same weekend occasion and location, is that people can

**accomplish the first two steps
of the discipleship process
with every member of the family
on one trip to the campus.**

Southern Baptist churches with a “before or after worship” system average two-thirds of worshipers in a Bible study group before or after worship (4 million over 6 million). That, in a nutshell, is the crux of the big choice. It is the rare church that can duplicate that ratio with weekday home groups. The big trade-off is the creativity and investment required to keep up with growth. More parking. More buildings. Sometimes, a church is blessed with the availability of nearby space and/or parking. Then the challenge is to get people back and forth.

The Shuttle Bus Leaves Every 10 Minutes

	Off campus	On campus
Weekend		
Weekday		

First, let's clarify the use of weekend. It means whenever the week's **primary** worship service(s) is scheduled. Using *Sunday morning* would cover 99% of churches. Some churches conduct an option to Sunday services on Friday, Saturday or Sunday evenings. It's the same message

at another time. We use *weekend* to signify groups that meet right before or right after these services. Worship and groups are a tandem. You'll note that Sunday evening off-campus groups are labeled *weekday*. Instead of weekend and weekday, maybe we should use *adjacent to worship* and *not adjacent to worship*. But that would require even more explanation! Let's consider an example. For many years, Long Hollow Church in Middle Tennessee shuttled all middle school and high school students back and forth to nearby Beech High School. Lots of churches purchase, rent, or borrow space in nearby buildings. Is it worth the expense? Many churches think it is. One of the findings of the *Transformational Groups* research seems to support such an investment.

- 80% of non-participants are open to being in a group.
 - 7% said they were actively looking.
 - 63% would respond to an invitation.
- Their preference was a group that met at the church campus for an hour. (TG 11)

This was reported as a "disappointing finding." As a person with an admitted bias toward weekend-on-campus groups, I (David) actually found the finding encouraging. A primary advantage of these groups is convenience in gathering in community. The primary advantage of off-campus groups is time spent in community.

More Time Deepens Community

	Off campus	On campus
Weekend		
Weekday		

One of the strong arguments on behalf of weekday home groups is the amount of time the group gathers. Usually 90-120 minutes, compared to 60-75 minutes for a typical Sunday morning group. In my church, groups gather on a really tight schedule:

8.2B. SUNDAY MORNINGS @FBCHENDERSONVILLE		
8:30	Worship	Sunday School
9:45	Worship	Sunday School
11:00	Worship	Sunday School

We (David and Vickie) attend a small group at 11:00, after worshipping at 8:30 and teaching a pre-K class at 9:45. We know of others who also do the first three steps of the discipleship process on one trip to the church! Our group tends to linger until about 12:20 since we are the last of the three groups that share the room. Time “in-session” matters. Sunday morning groups gather more times each year, so the cumulative time together may equal that of a home group that takes breaks. It’s still not the same. Convenience or time? It’s a trade-off! Another advantage I (Rick) see to off-campus groups is that they gather where non-believers are, in settings that aren’t foreign or objectionable to non-believers: homes, coffee shops, offices, etc. This opens the door to evangelize those far from Christ and those hesitant about “attending church.” An invitation comes naturally to the pre-set group of people around where the group gathers. Some argue that it is just as intimidating to go to a strange home as to a strange church. The answer to both is the same: meet them there or go together the first time!

“Can We Use that Empty Room on Wednesday Night?”

	Off campus	On campus
Weekend		
Weekday		

I have had several conversations with adults who told me the answer to this request was a stern “no.” In almost every case, people drove to church, dropped off their kids for a 1.5 hour program, then drove to their home group and back to church again. The refusal was almost always based on philosophy, not logistics. Another trade off question: Does location make it more or less likely that a group will develop community? I (Rick) can get pretty fired up about this! One of the great myths in group life is that location ultimately determines whether a group experiences biblical community. A group is either a biblically functioning community or it’s not. And *where* a group meets has *nothing* to do with whether or not it is accomplishing the goal of being a biblical community of believers. Biblical community will be experienced in any setting, including a Sunday School classroom, when the

leader shepherds the group passionately, prays for group members daily, allows the Holy Spirit to work through the giftedness of each group member, makes the Bible the guide for daily living and group life, strives to instill principles and practices of a Christian community, and guides the group to make Christ known to those within their sphere of influence.

8.3 Big Choice 3: In What “Space” Should our Group(s) Operate?

One of the books that has most challenged our thinking about groups is Joe Myers’ *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups* (BELONG). He identifies four spaces where relationships occur:

- **Public.** Large groups. Like the crowd at a sporting event. Or worship in a big church. You may hug the person next to you after a touchdown, but you don’t know their name!
- **Social.** Mid-sized groups. Maybe 20-30. You know most of the people’s names and some of their stories.
- **Personal.** Smaller groups. Around 12, plus or minus 4. You know everybody’s name and much of their stories.
- **Intimate.** You know a lot more than names! Myers says we overuse this word related to groups. He says small groups are where you discover a very few people with whom you will share at a very deep level, but argues that it is unreasonable to expect all groups to attain such trust between all members of the group.

We are intrigued with Joe’s assumptions. We agree with him concerning the four spaces and what each of them are. We’re not so sure about his exhortation that we ought to be okay with people connecting in any one of these spaces—if that means we ought to be okay with them staying there, never moving into a smaller group. We wonder if being in any of these spaces will accomplish the primary goal of the church: to make mature disciples that make disciples. Jesus Himself spoke to great crowds—even fed **5,000** (public space). He equipped a group of **70** for a mission trip (social space). After a night of prayer, He chose **12**, inviting them into His personal space. From the Twelve, there may have been **3** Jesus included in his intimate space—Peter, James, and John. For sure, John. Self-described as “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” John’s Gospel is unique from the other three Gospel accounts in conveying deep thoughts from the Lord.

We used the words *presentation* and *conversation* on the continuum rather than lecture and discussion. It is seldom purely either/or. The trade off is the balance between the two and other learning methods. I (David) coach presenters who want to incorporate more conversation to set a chair beside the lectern. Sitting down means “I really want you to discuss the question I just asked.” Sitting quietly will eventually get a response. Sitting quietly 2 to 3 more times will break conversation wide open. Standing back up signals, “I have some more important gleanings from this passage I want to share.” With a large group, you’ll be standing most of the time. With a very small group, you may be sitting all of the time. It’s a choice that absolutely affects the dynamics of the group. In fact, the compulsion to stand is probably an indication of the gifts of prophecy and teaching. Shepherds like to sit. Exhorters are like baseball coaches: whether sitting on the bench or standing in the coaching box, they are always coaching!

8.5 Big Choice 5: What Spiritual Gifts Are the Best Fit?

This important question will make more sense further along in our pursuit of a mission-critical group design. We’ll deal with it when our countdown reaches 3. There is a really big clue as to what gift a group leader has: ask him or her the next question.

8.6 Big Choice 6: How Do you Prefer to Set Up the Chairs?

There are three basic choices: circles, semi-circles, or rows. Each one says something different—especially to guests. We’ll provide more details when the countdown reaches 5. If your groups meet in homes, you may have to use your imagination about the approximate set up.

8.7 Big Choice 7: A Hybrid Approach to Occasion and Location?

Is some of “good” better than none of “best”? Twin truths: We have never met either of the people described below.

- Having experienced a good weekday home group, he is completely satisfied with the level of community in a Sunday morning group.
- Having experienced a good Sunday morning group, she is completely satisfied with the level of effort required to participate regularly in a weekday home group.

That's just reality. People make tradeoffs every day. So instead of arguing about which is better, why don't we tell people the truth, offer both, and let them decide? That is what I (David) suggested to the young adult pastor in a prominent church among the Independent Christian Churches of Christ. He was so committed to the home group experience he was unwilling to consider Sunday morning groups. Yet he had a dilemma. Only one in five young couples remained active in a home group once they had kids. I exhorted him to be up front that the on-campus dynamics would not be the same, then asked, "Would you rather have 70 percent of your young adults in a group you believe is inferior or 20 percent in an experience you consider superior?" We talked about tradeoffs. He started some LIFE Groups on Sunday mornings. They thrived. They didn't claim to be the same. They just met the needs of young adults beginning the adventure of parenthood.

There are lots of churches where young parents would love a group on-campus. And there are rooms being occupied by empty nesters and senior adults who—if they just tried it—would love the extended time a home group provides. Not only would giving up their room be a missional thing to do; they would enjoy the sacrifice! Groups matter. One hour on-campus groups matter. Two hour weekday groups matter.

8.8 Big Choice 8: What to do with the Kids?

Table 8.8	Off campus weekday	On campus weekend
Kids at same location	Parents rotate Pay sitters	Attend their own group or class
Kids at different location	Rotate with another group Take to/pick up at church campus	Seldom applicable

As we said earlier, one of the biggest issues to consider when thinking about groups that include young families is the issue of how to best address the needs of kids and/or childcare when groups with parents met. What possibilities can you add to Table 8.8?

In on-campus weekend ministries, kids are in a Bible study group with their age-group at the same time as their parents. Most churches with off-campus groups for adults also provide group experiences just for kids on the weekends. It's disingenuous to suggest otherwise. So the real choice is what to do with the kids while parents are in a weeknight home group. Parents have primary

stewardship for discipling and protecting their kids; it's best to let them figure it out. The Sunday School movement started with kids. It will recapture its zeal when it revives a passion for reaching marginalized kids in multi-family housing, mobile home parks, and urban neighborhoods. A group that does that may indeed discover what it is really like to be a missional community!

7 ELEMENTS

of Transformational Churches applied to Groups

Transformational Discipleship, Church, Groups, Class, ---and Nametags!

We have cited research findings reported in the books *Transformational Discipleship* (TD) and *Transformational Groups* (TG). This effort to discover best practices for making disciples began with a massive research project reported in *Transformational Church* (TC). The major finding was that **all seven elements were present in every TC**. What might a small group or class look like if it reflected the seven elements? I (David) sneak in a few words about nametags, too. That's partly for fun. I am accused of being a fanatic about nametags. Why? Because I do not think there is any other single human factor more critical to the success of a group or class, especially a new one. So I am going to suggest how nametags might accentuate each of the elements, too. And maybe lighten up the discussion a little after some pretty intense stuff!

7.1 Missionary Mentality

This was and is the key distinction of a TC. It was my pleasure to lead the team that conducted the qualitative portion of the project, interviewing pastors of churches across the country who scored among the top ten percent of the first 5,000 churches completing a one hour telephone interview. I took New England. My last interview was with John, an Assembly of God pastor not far from Providence, Rhode Island. He wore pastel shirts with a clerical collar as a way to stay on mission 24-7. We made a connection not long into the hour. In response to a question about community, John took me on a quick field trip to see the nametag display in the foyer. I had said nothing! How delightful it was to listen as John extolled the value of nametags in making new people feel welcome and creating a culture that compelled people to invite others. It was seriously like listening to myself! And inviting people they were, while serving the community through an amazing array of ministries. They were, as we found elsewhere, focused on the Great Commission. You would hope every small group and class was so focused. They're not. The research shows it. Maybe the lack of nametags does, too! I have never seen an inwardly focused group that cares about nametags. I have never seen a church that insisted on nametags that was not outwardly focused. Never.

7.2 Relational Intentionality

TCs were very intentional about connecting people relationally. I will never forget the Sunday I visited Hope Fellowship, a new church plant in an historic building in Cambridge, Massachusetts. As soon as I walked in the door, I was greeted by a team of Harvard students. One said matter-of-factly, “We wear nametags; would you like one?” And was I ever glad! A unique mix of students and folks from the neighborhood, it was like the United Nations! Yet it was also immediately like family. The nametags were intentional and relational.

7.3 Vibrant Leadership

That was ten years ago. Curtis Cook is still the pastor. He has added a second paid staff member. Associate Pastor Dan Helsing’s primary responsibility? Groups! Two kinds (see page 9). That’s leadership! Leadership matters. Vibrant matters. Groups matter!

7.4 Prayerful Dependence

Chart 7	CLASS	COMMUNITY	COMMISSION
Participants	Members	Ministers	Missionaries
Focus	Me	Us	Them
Biblical Mandate	Great Confession	Great Commandment	Great Commission
“K” Words	Kerygma	Koinonia	Kenosis
Evangelism	Be nice	Be attractive	Be intentional
Conversations	What I learned	What group did for me	What we did for others
Prayer requests	General	Each other	People far from God

The TCs were praying churches. Transformational groups are marked by prayer. In *Connect3* (C3) a chart (developed by Dwayne McCrary) was included that many people have been equipped to use in leading a consultation or conference entitled “Taking Your Group to the Next Level.” As participants fill in the chart, they self-diagnose where they are. Most are motivated to move to the next level and/or strengthen some aspect of the group’s ministry. The last row in the chart illustrates the range of prayer requests you might hear in a group. Prayer requests in a group are the best indicator of at what level the group operates.

7.5 Worship

Not many books for small group leaders deal with worship. In his book, *Field Guide for Small Group Leaders* (FG), Sam O’Neal devotes an entire chapter to “Planning for Worship and Prayer.” Sam exhorts small group “spiritual safari guides” to avoid trying to do a mini-morning-service, to sing simply, and to saturate the other elements of the group experience—Bible reading, prayer, etc.—with a worshipful attitude. Ever been asked to lead prayer and not know the names of everybody who made a request? Nametags solve that!

7.6 Community

Connecting people with others and God was significantly more important in the TCs. They believe that the best environment to do this is a small group where the discovery of scriptural truth is central. Story is an indicator of community. Remember: **No one’s story is complete until it has intersected with God’s Story which happens best in a community being enriched by the stories of others.** A simple “drip” practice that will help people learn each others’ stories a little at a time involves nametags. Lead the group to consistently print three rows on their nametags each week as shown. Be creative with the third line: hometown, birthplace, favorite movie (comedy, drama), book (everybody can say the Bible!), restaurant (Mexican, Chinese, etc.), school, sport, sports team,

FIRST NAME LARGE CAPS

last name smaller not all caps

Something about yourself

athlete, Bible passage, vacation spot, hobby, etc. You will be amazed at the little connections people will make between their stories. Too often spiritual stories are limited to when someone was baptized or a mission trip they went on. Every aspect of a person’s life story has a spiritual dimension to

it. Because God is at work in every situation and longs to redeem all things, the darker moments in someone’s story also need to be told and redeemed. Some years ago I (Rick) was diagnosed with depression. I was a pastor. Yet at that time, I had doubts about God’s care for me. On the other side of the situation God was more vivid and real than ever. Telling these types of stories is not only transformational for the story teller, but also gives hope to the group members in earshot of the story. The best community is built when a group does a mission activity together: from a few hours doing acts of kindness in the community to a long-term commitment of starting a Sunday School to helping with a tutoring service for a group of marginalized kids.

7.7 Mission

Nametags can be a reminder of mission and a symbol of faith. Seriously? Absolutely! They say, “We are expecting God to send someone new to our group this week.” Something remarkable happens when a group expects new people. They invite new people! I (David) was a “secret shopper” in a fast-growing North Carolina church plant. The middle school where the church met was circular; you could walk around the entire circumference. Several mini-greeting stations were set up using school desks. Trying to sneak up to one to grab a brochure, a lady smiled and asked, “Is this your first time here?” I replied in the affirmative, and—sliding one toward me—she said, “We wear nametags. Would you like one?” I put it on and circled again. Most people smiled and spoke, many calling me by name. The next day, I learned that the folks were all in on it. The border on my nametag was red. Members wore green. Attenders who had not joined played along; they wore yellow. It was a church clearly on mission. Nametags were a tool. Not a complicated system. Just stick-on nametags. Some people do and will make fun of me for the nametag stuff. I don’t care. It’s a stickable strategy. Stick with it for six months. And spring for nametags that actually stick! It’s something any group and any church can do. It’s a start. It’s a statement. It’s a story device. It’s a stick-on symbol of faith. Of mission. Mission matters. Groups matter.

6 CHALLENGES

To Conventional Thinking About Groups

Note: These ideas first appeared in my (Rick's) book *A Different Kind of Tribe: Embracing the New Small-Group Dynamic*.

When the first moon landing was in progress, famous artist Pablo Picasso was quoted in the New York Times as saying, "It means nothing to me. I have no opinion about it, I don't care." I'm afraid this would be the response of many group leaders if asked how a post-Christian world has affected the way they shepherd their group(s). We must care. Children need faithful fathers and mothers (who stay together for a lifetime). The church needs godly leaders, and eternity is at risk for anyone who has not yet received the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ. Conventional thinking is no longer acceptable.

6.1 Six Vandalized Environments

What is keeping some of your group members from growing spiritually? Or from attending your group(s) at all?

Religion. Many today see the church not as a light on a hill, but rather as an ecclesiastical country club that cares more about itself than being the redeeming, grace-giving, need-meeting Christ to others.

Intimacy. Because a parent abused, a church judged, a friend bailed, or a sin entrapped, many become unkind, angry, hard-hearted people. They are hesitant to unveil their story because the enemy is constantly whispering, "If you reveal your past, you'll be rejected; these people will walk away from you."

Leadership. When someone proves to be a person of integrity and consistency and cares for others more than himself, he or she earns the respect necessary to lead people. But many group leaders must overcome the baggage carried by group members whose leaders failed them. The group guide who bailed on his family, the pastor who climbed into bed with a church member, and other failures of leaders must be overcome by every other leader.

Conflict. Conflict can be a positive thing for group life, if it signals that a group has developed sufficient trust to be truly honest with one another. But in a post-Christian world, many group members bail when conflict arises. That's what's been modeled for them at home and too often at church.

Commitment. Sincere, concrete commitment is key for a group to flourish. But in a post-Christian world, commitments mean little. Keeping one's word takes a back seat to enjoying one's life. Agreements are thrown to the wayside when a better option is available. A leader must build a relationship of love and respect with those they lead if people are going to stick.

Truth. If a group explores the Bible together, truth will be discovered. Yet there will be some in the room who believe truth is relative—that it changes with circumstances. Group leaders must remember that (1) many people do not believe that God is the only author of truth (which is a lie), and (2) conversations with group members must be delicately led so that while everyone is heard, God's truth rises above all opinions.

6.2 Five Relevant Phrases

When we publicize groups, it's important to use language that resonates in a post-Christian world and doesn't repel people who are far from Christ. Consider some phrases commonly used to promote group life contrasted with some that might better serve us in today's world.

Table 6. 2 Five phrases		
	Commonly said	Subtle alternative
1	Make friends.	Go on a spiritual journey with fellow journeyers.
2	Learn and grow in the knowledge of God's Word.	Explore the answers to life's complex questions.
3	Be held accountable.	Be yourself while becoming something more.
4	Meet one another's needs.	Never go it alone.
5	Become a mature disciple.	Make a difference in the world.

6.3 Four Common Necessities to Create Community

If we are going to create a transformational small group, it must become a community: "A group of people sharing a common language, common memories, common traditions, and a common vision of community."

Common language is shared by a healthy community. "Clichés that stick" captures the idea. A cliché strategically set in place could be the descriptors of what the group does, "Dinner, Discipleship, and Discussion." In community, groups develop spontaneous clichés that stick. Imagine someone tripping while going for a cup of coffee. Someone in the group teasingly cries out, "Walk much, Joe?!" For some reason, from that point on, every time someone

loses their balance or says something strange, someone in the group says, “Walk much, Joe?”

Common memories are snapshots in time that have been shared by a group of people. It could be the image of a group member hugging a homeless person while on a mission trip or the mental image of a group member consoling another at the death of a family member. When common memories become common knowledge among group members, it aids in creating a community.

Common traditions are practices that are consistently experienced by the group together. These can be weekly (eating a meal together, monthly (having a fellowship one Friday a month), seasonally (going camping together every Spring), or annually (taking a meal to a needy family at Thanksgiving).

Common vision of community needs to be shared by every group member: what the group does when it gathers, how the group will be missional, whether or not the group is open or closed, when the group will meet and how often, what the group will do with children during the meeting, etc. A group without an agreed upon vision will struggle as each group member will intuitively try to create their own vision.

6.4 Three Types of Roles

Doing groups in a post-Christian world demands that we understand, embrace, and lovingly work alongside the group members God has placed in our watchcare. There are three types of roles within groups. Individuals in the group will fit into multiple categories.

Symbolic roles give the leader a way of identifying who is in the group.

- *Convinced Biblically Functioning Followers of Christ* are fully on board and are, with all of their being, trusting God’s Word and striving to live their lives as outlined in Scripture.
- *Saved Cynics* have been hurt by the church or believers they trusted in the past. They are cautiously committed.
- *Secularized Strugglers* may or may not be followers of Christ, tilting more toward secular ideology than biblical theology.
- *Not-Yet-Converted Conversationalists* are not yet Christ followers but are willing to join the group and dialogue about Jesus and Christianity. We like these people!

Functional roles help a group be effective and efficient. These roles have different titles in different systems. What do you call these roles?

- The *Leader/Guide* has oversight for guiding all the group and is involved in and shepherds the group toward maturity.
- A *Leader/Guide in Training* is often called an apprentice as he or she is watching and being mentored by the leader so that at some point they can guide a group of their own.
- A *Missional Coordinator* is responsible for keeping missional efforts in the forefront of the group, seeking out missional opportunities, and coordinating the ministry to be accomplished.
- The *Host* makes sure the meeting location is known to all, coordinates food, and creates an environment where everyone feels welcome and at ease.
- The *Child-Care Coordinator* makes certain the children of group members are cared for during the meeting and organizes payment if required.

Shared roles transcend efficiency or function. This list reminds group leaders and members of our spiritual roles in group life.

- *Spiritual Parents* model behaviors for those in the group who are less spiritually mature, giving wise counsel to and protecting those younger in the faith. (*Almost Everyone*)
- *Fellow Journeymen or Spiritual Children* acknowledge that he or she is a child of God, under His direction, and learning to serve Him as a devoted follower of Christ. (*Every Believer*)
- *Spiritually Gifted Equals* acknowledge that every believer has a spiritual gift or gifts that need to be exercised within the context of the group. No gift is better than any other. (*Every Believer*)

6.5 Two Marks of a Missional Group

The term *missional* has been thrown around a lot and remains something of a mystery. Though expressed differently in different settings, missional includes at least evangelism and multiplication.

Evangelism will always have as its goal to make the gospel known and allow it to do its work. In a post-Christian era, an unbeliever will journey to Christ over a period of time more often than walking the aisle at a crusade. In *I Once Was Lost*, Doug Schaupp and Don Everts point out that the journey may take a long period of time with a patient friend—maybe in the context of a group—walking alongside the unbeliever as they move from distrust to trust, from complacent to curious, from being closed to change to being open to change in his or her life, from meandering to seeking, then crossing the threshold of the kingdom itself. (ONCE 23-24)

Multiplication is conventionally described as an apprentice (what I call a Leader in Training) taking part of the group to start a new one while the present leader continues with those remaining. This is very painful and may not be the wisest choice in an era when it takes much more time for a leader to gain the trust of a group member. Here are some options to consider for home groups. How might they apply to on-campus weekend groups as well?

- Groups of six – Six people remain together for a lifetime while continuing to welcome a new group of six every 18 to 24 months.
- Geographically based groups training new leaders – Groups gather based on proximity to the host home. Every eighteen to twenty-four months the group welcomes a leader in training who will, at some point, start a new mission/group in their home where there isn't a group presence.
- Lifetime groups that send out leaders – This type of multiplication happens organically. As a group leader realizes he or she has someone with leadership potential, the leader mentors them in group leadership then sets them free to go and start a group of their own.

6.6 One-Yet-Three Unseen Group Members

The very first Group models group life. This Group existed before time began and exhibits perfect unity, exercises service to One Another, and cares more about your group members than you do. The first Group to ever exist still exists today and is at your group meeting every week. Who is that group? The Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Being aware that these unseen Group Members are present and what roles they carry out will transform your group meeting.

When God the Father is given His place in the circle, selfless attitudes are intuitive, a transformational environment is created, and every person in the room is forced to consider both his sin and his future service (Isaiah 6:1 – 8).

When Christ the Son who walked the earth as Jesus of Nazareth is given His place in the circle, group members are continually reminded that they are able to enter into the presence of God and that they have a Priest who is continually interceding on their behalf (Hebrews 10:19-22). When the Holy Spirit is acknowledged as a present personality in the group, He will guide, teach, and unify the group (Matthew 4:1, Acts 8:29, Acts 10:19 – 20, John 14:26, John 16:13). We need not ask Them to be there. They are. We just acknowledge the reality. And They show up in power when we launch a new group!

5 STAGES

For Launching New Groups

Not Rocket Science

Think of a multi-stage rocket. Each stage pushes the rest. Before burning out, each stage is propelling the other stages forward simultaneously. Momentum is already created before the next stage fires. We think that's a better way to apply a century-old formula in the space-age. The idea is to work on all five stages from the beginning, with extra emphasis on individual stages when you need a "booster."

Flake's Formula: K-E-E-P. GO!

This acrostic is a way to remember a 5-stage formula for launching groups that has been propelling churches to new heights since 1920. In the same way a rocket has multiple stages, so does Arthur Flake's classic formula. I (David) have added some D-words. Though originally intended for Sunday School, the formula would work for new D-groups, too. And certainly small groups. In fact, any kind of group!

Table 5. A Slight Twist on a 100 Year-old Formula that Still Works		
Flake's Formula	Francis' Flaky Formula	
Know the possibilities.	<i>Dream</i>	Imagine what could be; where it could be; how it might be.
Enlarge the organization.	<i>Declare</i>	Announce the groups you'll launch before you need them or have the leaders for them.
Enlist and train the leaders.	<i>Develop</i>	Call out and develop leaders who can develop leaders.
Provide space & resources.	<i>Determine</i>	Plan wisely to feed people in places conducive to Biblical community.
GO after the people!	<i>Deploy</i>	Launch new groups that will not wait to be found but will find people in a posture to be transformed.

Ed Stetzer recently said to a gathering of small group pastors and directors from some leading small group churches:

- Flake's formula is old school.
- Maybe it's time for us to go back to school!

5.1 Dream: Imagine the Possibilities

The last chapter of *Transformational Groups* changes *know* to *imagine*. We like *imagine* better, too. Flake could “know” because he led churches to actually survey the community and find out who was not attending a church. In 1920, people would give you their names, addresses, birthdays, etc. In 1980, I (David) helped survey a neighborhood in Los Angeles; they still would. They won't anymore! You can't “know.” You can “imagine!” Can you imagine ten possibilities? I (Rick) believe leaders have spacious imaginations. They are different from managers, who have spacious flow charts. Every earth shattering groups pastor or education minister dreams nearly unfathomable dreams. In their minds eye, they see the end result before it ever happens. If you want to make an eternal difference, put a “Do Not Disturb” sign on your door and let God help you imagine what might be if you let Him do what only He can do through you.

5.2 Declare: Enlarge the Organization

The main idea here is to decide to add new groups in anticipation of growth rather than only in response to it. Most small group pastors, Sunday School directors, discipleship leaders, etc. are better at dreaming than implementing! We believe there is an important interim step between the dreaming/deciding and the doing stages—a declaration phase. I (David) talked recently with an education pastor in the Pacific Northwest. Our conversation ultimately revealed that the two biggest gaps in Sunday morning groups were Single Adults and Young Married Adults with Kids. There was no leader on the horizon for either group. (Sound familiar?) Yet we decided that he would claim two large empty rooms and put a sign up prominently declaring that the rooms housed those groups—in anticipation of God providing leaders.

5.3 Develop: Enlist and Train the Leaders

I (David) almost used the word “draft.” The last group of men to be affected by the Vietnam draft were those who turned 20 in 1972. I was one of them. It was not uncommon in the 1940s through the 1970s to say of someone who’d been drafted, “He was called up.” Called up! That’s what we need to do! Call up “the called out ones.” Call them into service. Develop them. Let them serve. Develop them some more!

5.4 Determine: Plan for Providing Space and Resources

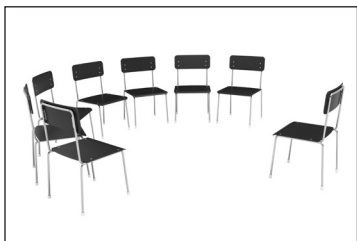
Put on your imagination again! If you can provide space on campus for groups and that fits your model, do that! If you can use room 2-3 times by implementing a multiple schedule on the weekend, do that! If homes or conference rooms or cafes are available, do that! We chose the word “determine” because we need to plan! We can’t build 100,000 rooms—or even 50,000 used twice or 33,000 used three times—fast enough to launch 100,000 new groups. To those “purists” among the “small groups” and “Sunday School” tribes who hold with conviction that “community” can only happen away from church or only at church, we beg you to get over it! Community, the necessary “environment” for discipleship, can happen in any space. As you imagine the possibilities, imagine the place too. Notice that even Flake did not say “a room.” Just a space. SpaceX has a wild idea about providing space for humans on Mars! What’s the craziest space you can think of for a Bible study group? Can you imagine a leader sitting in that space with a group of people? Can you imagine those people engaged in a wise plan of study? Have you determined a plan? Are you determined to execute it?

5.5 Deploy: GO after the People

Deploy implies action. Groups must not wait for people to find them. We must deploy to draw them! And be deliberate about it. In a passive approach, worship attenders are told, “Getting into a small group is important. You need to find one. We have people and tools to help you get in one.” Another scenario illustrates a deliberate approach. Worship participants are told, “Getting into a small group is important. We will help you find one. In fact, we believe that it is such an important step in our discipleship process, you can expect a group to come find you!” And new groups do that best. Dreams matter. Declarations matter. Development matters. Deployment matters. Groups matter.

A Vision: Anywhere There's a Place to Sit!

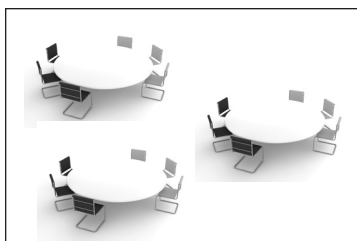
That's where we should imagine the possibilities. What are some places where you might set up a few chairs and launch a new group? Can you start seeing the world through that lens? Maybe the chairs just have to be rearranged! How would you arrange them? The choices below each have implications: for the in-group dynamics and the first impression of a guest.



What does each of the images convey to a guest about whether presentation or conversation, or a combination of the two, will likely be the experience he or she is about to have?



What other room arrangements can you include? What do they convey to guests?



4 STARTING POINTS

For Approaching Group Bible Study

Every rocket ship that has ever gone into space had as its starting point—earth. Okay, okay, I (Rick) know what you’re thinking... “Thanks, Captain Obvious!” Of course every rocket ship started on planet earth. There is no other option. What if there was another option? What if a rocket ship could take off from a cloud or from a submarine? Would NASA contract with SpaceX to launch a rocket starting from either of these places? They would not. You know why? While it might be possible to make that happen, they will always choose the best starting point. And the best starting point for a space vehicle to take off from is solid ground.

This is also true when choosing your group’s Bible study plan. Realizing what is the best starting point for your group is always going to be the right starting point for your group. There are four different approaches to studying the Bible. Let’s briefly explore each of these starting points.

4.1 Life: The Starting Point is Real-life Everyday Issues

Are there several life issues most or many in your group(s) wrestle with? Life may be your starting point. Life studies are topical and conversational. They are great as the first study for a new group and perfect for a first time group leader, especially if video is included.

LifeWay has a series of studies that have life as the starting point called *Bible Studies for Life*. Details for 6-session studies for adult groups are at BibleStudiesForLife.com/SmallGroups. For a 3-year study plan, the discipleship philosophy, and details for ongoing curriculum for all age groups, visit BibleStudiesForLife.com.

4.2 Text: The Starting Point is Book-by-Book Studies

Do you desire a higher level of biblical literacy for your group(s)? Do you want your folks to discover truths from the text of Scripture and dwell on them? A book-by-book approach that helps members experience a careful study of the text may be your starting point.

LifeWay has created the *Explore the Bible* series for groups that have the text as their starting point. Visit LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible for more information.

4.3 Theology: The Gospel of Jesus in All Scripture

Do you desire that group members discover the major themes of the Bible and that they all point to Jesus? Would you have them moved to missional activity as a theological imperative? Then theology might be your starting point.

LifeWay has created *The Gospel Project* series for those groups who have theology as their starting point. This series is a Christ-centered curriculum that examines the grand narrative of Scripture and how the gospel transforms the lives it touches. Visit *GospelProject.com* to learn more.

4.4 Your Church: The Starting Point is Customized Bible Study

Do you prefer that group members discuss the text—or a related text—taught that week from the worship service platform? Do you have regular series or campaigns? Then this is your starting point, although you may still favor one of the three above. (See also Table 1.4, p. 62.)

LifeWay's Discipleship in Context team exists to serve churches with this starting point. A team of writers take a church's future sermon content and craft transformational group Bible studies that look and sound like they were produced in a staff member's office—without the very real expense of the time and toil of any staff member! Visit *DiscipleshipInContext.com*. The demand has been so great for such customized curriculum, LifeWay will be offering a way for churches and groups to create their own curriculum materials quickly and at a reasonable cost. Learn more at *SmallGroup.com* (No "s" on the end of the URL!).

3 PURPOSES

For Prioritizing a Group's Mission

What is the Primary Purpose of Your Group(s)?

Here is yet another question that requires big choices. Notice the word *primary*. Most groups are designed to accomplish multiple purposes. They may not actually do much about all of them, but there is some expectation that they might. Thus determining the primary purpose of your group(s) is a mission critical decision.

What the Transformational Groups Research Found

For the purpose of the research reported in *Transformational Groups*, four purposes emerged from interviews with expert practitioners. When different audiences were asked to select the primary purpose from among these four, the aggregate rankings were consistent:

Table 3.1 (TG 12, 99) Survey statement or question	Group Attendees	Non- attenders	Protestant Pastors
Following Christ more closely	56%	42%	50%
Growing closer to one another	19%	24%	18%
New people hearing the Gospel	18%	19%	20%
Serving people outside the church	9%	15%	8%
<i>Two outward purposes as a subtotal</i>	27%	34%	28%

Four to Three

If you combine the last two—the outward-focused purposes—you'll be a lot less disappointed that they ranked so much lower than the first one. Doing so, you get three purposes. One should be primary.

- Formation
- Connection
- Mission

Unless the group leaders are constantly reminded, encouraged, and held accountable for supporting the group’s primary purpose, they will tend to carry out the purpose closest to their own priorities, passions, and gifts.

Different Words, Same Purposes

Groups can’t do everything. They can probably do three things. The table below shows examples of ways others have viewed these purposes and how their terms align with the three that emerged from the *Transformational Groups* research. One will be primary. Can you think of three words that might better fit your own context?

Table 3.2 Examples of 3 common purposes of groups				
Transformational Groups (Stetzer & Geiger)		Formation	Connection	Mission
A Different Kind of Tribe (Rick Howerton)		Theological	Familial	Missional
			Restorational	
Simple Small Groups (Bill Search)		Changing	Connecting	Cultivating
Allan Taylor, among others		Teach	Minister	Reach
D. Francis	3D Sunday School	Discover	Connect	Invite
	Discover Triad	Scripture	Shepherding	Stories
	3 Roles	Teacher	Shepherd	Leader
	Connect ³	Class	Community	Commission

The One Given: Bible Study

The number one purpose selected by far was the choice that results in personal spiritual development. More specifically, 97% of pastors chose Bible study as an important small group activity, the one they rated highest. Prayer was a close second (95%). Caring for group members (85%) was next. Inviting people (79%) and following up with visitors (60%) were also important. Socializing (78% during group; 68% outside regular gatherings) was important, too. And service toward those outside the church (65%) was chosen by well over half the pastors, who obviously expect a lot from their groups! (TG 99)

Bible Study is the hallmark of a transformational group. You can’t blast off without it. Developing leaders is anemic without it. The successful launch of a group requires great Bible study. The Word is the guidance system. Feeding our people well demands it. The person most responsible for how a group is led and fed is its guide. So group guides must be enlisted whose gifts are a good fit with the desired design.

The Leader's Gifts Override Design

When we recruit a person to lead a group, we need to do so with the purpose of the group in mind. A group will move towards the gifts of the person guiding it. In other words, a group will become like its leader. Therefore, leaders should be enlisted wisely. Leaders with different gifts are not a bad thing. You just have to realize that their giftedness will impact how they lead their group and how they lead their group will impact the purpose of the group. You can recruit people who fit a specific gift set to ensure that the design is carried out. Or you can recruit people with a desire and be comfortable knowing that their gift set will influence the purpose of the group with others recruited to cover the other purposes.

The prime candidates for group leaders are those with one of the speaking gifts:

- Prophecy (or prophet)
- Teaching (or teacher)
- Shepherding (or teaching-shepherd or shepherding-teacher)
- Exhortation (or exhorter)

Each of these gifts will be manifested in a different way as the leader directs his or her group.

Prophecy: I have a little church

A person with the gift of prophecy needs to preach. And will. Their group will function like a little church meeting on a another church's campus. Enough said.

Teaching: I need a bigger room

Without clear direction, the gift of teaching will tend toward a large class, with *formation* as the primary purpose, in a room with rows of chairs, where the primary learning method is *presentation*. The class will need to be organized so that others are responsible for helping with care of members, fellowship, outreach, and missional activity. A wise presenter—even one who likes to talk—will utilize smaller groups for *conversation* 2 to 3 times each session. A great fit for the gift of teaching is a content-intense, short-term, large group.

Shepherding-Teacher: I love the word “count”

Teaching-shepherds are perfect for a group that is open and ongoing, has **connection** as its primary purpose, and **conversation** as its favorite learning style. Shepherds are comfortable sitting. They have the patience to take responsibility for a *flock* that includes faithful participants, inactive folks who have strayed from the group, and new people. Remember that an open group expects new people every time it gathers. It uses curriculum materials that support open group objectives. Shepherds like this, because they don't enjoy study as much as teachers. Some argue that shepherds may be the most effective at leading a disciple-making group. This is almost undoubtedly true if the group looks much like the group Jesus led. Jesus spent three years with twelve “sheep.” Those disciples needed ongoing, long-term nurturing, prodding, and protecting. The shepherd's favorite word is *count*:

- How many did you count?
- Don't count them out.
- You can count on me!

Exhorters: I need people who are serious about this!

Exhorters can stand or sit. They encourage—like a coach! Think of a coach who can get in your face then give you a pat. That's a pretty good image. Comforter and counselor are other synonyms, from *paraclete*, the word Jesus used to describe the Holy Spirit on that final walk with the Disciples after the last supper. It means “One who comes alongside to help.” Exhorters don't mess around. They are the kings and queens of accountability: “Come faithfully. Be prepared. Take this seriously.” They make good leaders for D-groups. Exhorters enjoy short-term studies and lots of relationships. They are more people persons than teachers, but less so than shepherds. They like action, so are also a good fit if the primary purpose of the group is **Mission**. Some would argue that certain materials are designed so that a person with any gift—who is godly and growing—can successfully facilitate a group. What do you think? Are there such curriculum materials? How would that impact the goal of 100,000 new groups? How might others step in to help?

2 KEY WORDS

That Will Determine Your Ministry's Destiny

This chapter has several things in common with the letter from Jude:

- **Next to last.** Only one book, Revelation, follows Jude. Only one chapter follows this one.
- **Straightforward.** Jude was economical with word count. Likewise shall we be.
- **Prophetic yet pastoral.** Jude spoke the truth in love. The words are infallible. Ours are not. But we speak the truth—as we see it—as men who sense a word from God that two words will shape the destiny of group ministry in the future: *new* and *small*.

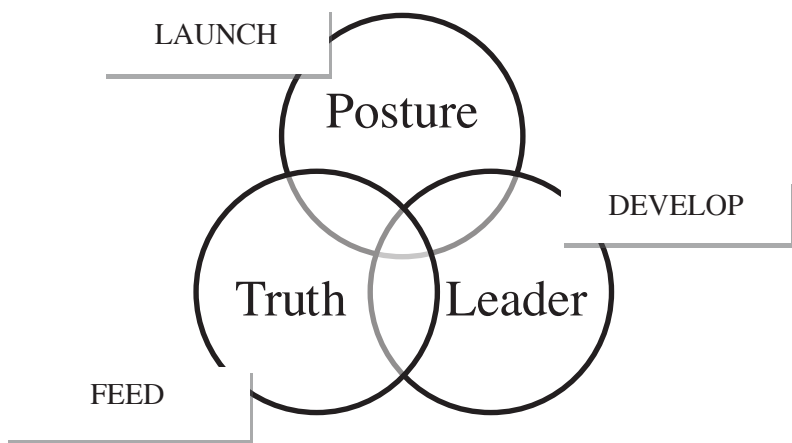
Small and New

We believe any church's system of groups will grow in the coming years proportionally to the degree it embraces, advances, and insists upon groups that are *small* and *new*. New groups reach more people than established groups. Small accelerates the process of transformation.

The TSS, the Groups Matter Movement, and Small New Groups

The research findings reported in *Transformational Groups* (TG) was summarized in the “Transformational Sweet Spot” (TSS). The TSS is where three essential factors converge. The Groups Matter movement is built on three essential processes that activate these factors.

Table 2 The <i>Groups Matter</i> Movement & the “Transformational Sweet Spot”	
3 Factors of <i>Transformational Discipleship</i> that converge at the “Sweet Spot”	3 Processes of the Groups Matter movement that parallel the factors in TD
Leader who is godly and growing, applies...	Develop leaders.
Truth to the heart of a person while that person is in a...	Feed your people.
Posture of being teachable, or even vulnerable because of life situations.	Launch new groups so more people can experience a teachable posture.



The most important point is this: A person who is in a group that is both small and new is already in a more teachable posture than he or she could experience in a larger established group. Does that mean that established larger groups are bad? No. It just means that

- groups that are small and new grow faster numerically,
- that people in a group that is small and new grow faster spiritually, and
- a system of groups that launches new small groups and develops a culture that celebrates when existing groups launch new and small groups—grows faster in both ways. And develops more leaders.

IF...the other two elements are also present:

- a growing and godly **leader** who skillfully facilitates the discovery of
- **Truth**—which ultimately must come from one source.

Small. New. The destiny of your system of groups depends on the passionate, obsessive adoption of everything these two words mean. The eternal destiny of a million people depends on it—the million people who will be in 100,000 new groups you are going to help launch!

Small matters. New matters. Leaders matter. Truth matters. Groups matter.

1 ESSENTIAL BOOK

For Guiding Group Conversations

Bible Study: The Non-negotiable Essential

The essential textbook for what Rick calls *Christian micro-communities* is the Bible. The essential practice of biblical community is Bible study. The essential element of measurable spiritual growth is Bible study. The essential discipline of sustained growth—for individuals and groups—is Bible study. In phone interviews with a thousand Protestant pastors, 97% listed Bible study as a purpose of groups—clearly number one. The selection of the materials used to guide Bible study is one of the most important decisions a group guide or system leader can make.

A Huge Big Choice: Who Chooses What we Study?

Research validates what we have observed about how a group ends up with the Bible study materials it is using at any given time. The decision falls somewhere on this continuum, at or between three major options:



Option A: Meander

Groups are Given No Direction

LifeWay's research for *Transformational Groups* found that most often the decision about what a group will study lies with the individual group leader/guide. Ideally, this option is supported by intensive theological and philosophical training provided by the group system pastor/director so group guides are equipped to make wise choices. Frankly, that is rare. We are deeply concerned about this. Our concern is that many group guides receive no direction at all, and few system leaders provide theological and pedagogical training. The results can be haphazard discipleship, misaligned groups, and theological schizophrenia. Groups operating with this option tend to meander through content. Synonyms for meander help illustrate: get sidetracked, roam, drift, ramble, stray, rove, snake,

twist, wind, wander, zigzag. Meander doesn't always mean "no map." It can mean "be all over the map." Unless ministry leaders are going to continually train those who guide groups both theologically and in discipleship philosophy, we can't recommend this approach. Good news! Most group leaders don't want that much responsibility, anyway.

Group Leaders Want Direction

In the research reported in *Transformational Groups*, 75% of group leaders indicated that they would appreciate more guidance from pastors, staff, and/or ministry directors in the selection of study materials. Given no direction, leaders tend to spend too much time in studies related to their topical, textual, or theological "pets" and/or avoid studies they deem too difficult—to understand or to obey. Groups need a plan for Bible study that ensures people are being fed well—over time—with a comprehensive diet of trustworthy biblical material.

Trustworthy Content

A very real challenge for small group pastors, ministers of education, discipleship directors and others who lead the groups systems in churches is the selection or approval of Bible study curriculum. Few can read every word of every potential study, review it theologically, and determine if it is appropriate developmentally. Some can. But most of us need to rely on authors and brands with a track record for providing trustworthy content. One question to explore is whether the publisher has values that are in sync with your own. LifeWay, where we work, has a very clear set of stated curriculum values:

Table 1.1. LifeWay's Curriculum Values	
Rooted in scripture	<i>The text is sacred and true.</i>
Focused on Christ	<i>Only Jesus transforms.</i>
Flexible for groups	<i>Each group is unique.</i>
Empowering for leaders	<i>Simple tools help.</i>
Crafted with purpose	<i>Every age group learns differently.</i>

What values are important to you? What values must be apparent before you will endorse a study, place it in a resource center, or put it inside a campaign bag? What deficiencies would cause you to reject a study? How do you communicate with group leaders what studies have the "seal of approval"? That is, what's on the menu?

Option B: Menu

Groups Choose from a List of Approved Resources

A wise and helpful way churches communicate curriculum guardrails for groups is what we'll call *the approved list*. It is like a menu. There are options—perhaps many. The major upside to this approach matches the value of flexibility, affirming that each group is unique. Administering this pre-approved menu is one of the major roles of the pastor/director responsible for oversight of the groups system. The list might simply be posted on a website and/or distributed periodically as a printed document. Groups can confidently select any resource on the list without additional approval. The menu may include specifics such as those on this sample menu. What other columns might you include?

Table 1.2 Approved list template (Annotated Menu)

Concept area	Publisher/ Series	Title/ Author	# Sessions	Video	Leader materials

Concept(s). Some churches allow group leaders to choose material but encourage them to cover each of several concept areas over a set time period. All groups might be asked to choose an approved study from the same concept area—freedom within boundaries. (See the example below.) Might you use different terms? How might a discipleship plan that requires groups to select from a concept help achieve balance?

Table 1.3 Examples of Concepts

Preschoolers up:	Older Children add:	Students and Adults add:
God	Holy Spirit	Bible engagement
Jesus	Salvation	Obedying God & denying self
Bible		Serving God and others
Creation		Sharing Christ
Self		Exercising faith
Family		Seeking God
Church		Building relationships
Community & World		Unashamed

Publisher/series. Our hope would be that you would consider resources from LifeWay so trustworthy, any study with that brand would be approved! Or an ongoing series brand, like *Explore the Bible*, *The Gospel Project*, or *Bible Studies for Life* (all three available in both 13-session and 6-session small group formats). Or the *Disciples Path* series for new disciples or the *Growing Disciples* series of six 6-session studies built around the Disciple's Cross in *MasterLife*.

Title/author. You might have an author that is universally acceptable or a specific title—like *MasterLife*. Or specific authors, like Henry Blackaby or Claude King, whose classic *Experiencing God* is one of two resources Nelson Searcy encourages every group to study at some point (ACT 90). Such choices will shorten your list but broaden the choices. Additional resources, series, and/or publishers are added individually.

Number of sessions. Knowing the number of sessions in the study helps with planning. If you encourage an introductory gathering or a wrap-up session, communicate that elsewhere. If the study exceeds six sessions, consider dividing it into two parts. Like *Experiencing God 1* and *Experiencing God 2*.

Video. If there is video, use words like *Driven* (study is dependent on the video), *Enhanced* (video optional), and *Prep* (video is primarily intended to help the leader or others prepare for the group).

Leader materials. Indicate what is available to help the group leader guide the group experience. “Included in member book” is probably the minimum. Other entries might include Separate Leader Guide, Leader Pack or Kit, CD-ROM or DVD-ROM, Commentary, Visual pack, etc.

From List to Library

A list of approved resources is good. A resource library or curriculum center is even better. Ideally, you'll include actual samples of the approved materials (with “do not remove” stickers!). If an entire brand or series is approved, a catalog might be displayed instead of or in addition to the sample copies. The best way to get copies of new LifeWay short-term studies is *BibleStudyInsider.com*. The black box is a huge value, and includes a voucher that makes it virtually free.

Lots of Work!

Sounds like a lot of work, doesn't it? It is! But it is absolutely essential work. If I (David) was asked to oversee the groups ministry in your church, it is probably the option I am going to take—for D-groups (gray in chart 1.4). For the LIFE groups (placeholder name; reversed type in chart), the second step I want everyone to take in the discipleship process, the open ongoing groups that

are key to assimilation, central to caring ministry, and foundational to biblical literacy and theological understanding, I am going to strive to persuade all of us to adopt a uniform plan—a map.

Chart 1.4 Example of different options for different steps/groups				
Step		1	2	3
Sample labels		Gather*	Grow*	Go*
Program	Track 1	Corporate Worship <i>(weekly service)</i>	Option C. LIFE Group* <i>(open ongoing)</i>	Ministry Team <i>(internal)</i>
	Track 2	Personal Worship <i>(devotions/or homework)</i>	Option B. D-Group* <i>(closed short-term)</i>	Missions Team <i>(external)</i>

*Examples

Option C: Map

Groups Follow a Wise Discipleship Plan

I want everybody in ongoing groups to have some uniformity. Am I just stubborn? No. I am accountable! So are you. It is a wise leader who discovers a well-designed discipleship plan, embraces it, and sticks with it. It takes wisdom to know how best to implement such a plan. It may require a phase-in period. Something between options B and C initially.

The Freedom of Not Having to Choose

Our experience suggests that group guides eventually grow weary of the burden of curriculum selection—even if they can see approved samples. Further, as they themselves mature, they are more likely to say something like, “It’s all God’s Word...just tell me what topic, text, or theme is next!” There is actually great freedom in that declaration.

The Key Elements Already Built in

A wise discipleship plan includes the elements described below. All are embedded in LifeWay’s ongoing curriculum. Visit LifeWay.com/GO to explore the options. The key elements are:

a. A balanced multi-year Bible study plan. LifeWay develops and publishes study plans up to 3 years in advance.

b. A discipleship framework. All major curriculum lines are built on a carefully developed framework. The concepts in Table 1.3, for example, are part of the framework for the *Bible Studies for Life* resources. The 10 kids concepts,

which carry over through adults, are captured in an impressive document called “Levels of Biblical Learning.” Every parent should have a copy, whatever curriculum plan is used. The student and adult concepts are the 8 attributes from *Transformational Discipleship*.

c. Session plans that are theologically sound, developmentally appropriate, educationally engaging, and family friendly. Bible study should never be boring and always be appropriate for the lifestage of the group members. Materials for kids should equip parents to have a follow-up discussion with their kids. They have primary responsibility for discipling them; their teachers are just partners.

d. Starting point. You were introduced to starting points at #4 in our countdown. Whatever your starting point, you’ll find among LifeWay’s ongoing curriculum series one that starts there, too.

Table 1.5 Starting Points & LifeWay ongoing curriculum

Starting Point	Series	Distinctive
LIFE	<i>Bible Studies for Life (BSFL)</i>	Topics that get people <i>talking</i> where the Bible meets real life, everyday issues
TEXT	<i>Explore the Bible (ETB)</i>	Texts that help people explore biblical <i>truths</i> through a book-by-book approach
THEOLOGY	<i>The Gospel Project (TGP)</i>	Themes that help people connect all scripture to the Gospel of Jesus
YOUR CHURCH	Discipleship in Context	Customized curriculum, especially for sermon-based groups.

No wise plan is absolutely rigid. In addition to these four series are specialized resources for the specific needs of specific people groups: urban, special needs kids and adult, pre-teens, etc. That’s wise discipleship, too.

Does your Curriculum Support your Purposes?

One old-fashioned idea that is worthy of a comeback is “literature distribution.” The idea is simple. Secure enough copies of the Personal Study Guide for everyone on the class roll or group ministry list, plus prospective members. Then deliver them! You’ll have wonderful conversations. People will be involved. The group will be on mission. Do you have enough books to give to guests? Take to prospects? Are you proud of the quality of the resource as you hand it to someone? If so, that is a curriculum that is supporting your purposes.

One More Big Choice: Show up or Study up?

In a fine secular book, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*, professors Brookfield and Preskill argue convincingly that “having participants do a serious, crucial prereading of materials to prepare themselves for discussion increases enormously the chance that you will have good conversation” (DT 17). Waggoner’s research found that people perceived spiritual growth more if they did “homework” (SFC 273).

Table 1.6 Activity & perceived spiritual growth	Percent of	
	Entire Sample	High Growth
Read a spiritual growth book	44	60
Read a book about the Bible	43	60
Participated in a class with homework	27	47

If reading the Bible and other biblical material is the number one indicator of year-over-year spiritual growth, shouldn’t we expect more of group members than just showing up? And nothing at all if they can’t show up? Providing materials has a cost, of course. Thus the discussion above. It’s a trade off. A big choice. More than attendance is at stake. Spiritual transformation is at stake.

Choosing Curriculum that Fits the Group

As general rules:

- Short-term groups can expect members to prepare for the group gathering. Ongoing groups can encourage it.
- Short-term closed groups can expect regular attendance with generally the same people present each and every session. Ongoing open groups can expect irregular attendance with a different mix of people each session—some prepared, some not.
- Closed groups can use any content. Open groups need protection to support expecting new people at every gathering.

The best choice for an ongoing open group is a curriculum where each session stands on its own—even if it is part of a unit of study. It is a complete Bible study experience—even if I missed last week or will miss next week. Short-term closed groups can use this material successfully, too—especially at their inception. Bible study matters. You matter! Thanks for discipling people through groups. They really do matter!

REFERENCES (Sorted Alpha-numerically by code)			
Ref Code	Author(s)	Book/Article	Publisher & Year
3D	David Francis	<i>The 3D Sunday School: A Three Dimensional Strategy</i> (Invite, Discover, Connect)	LifeWay Press (Nashville, 2006)
3ROLES	Ken Braddy & David Francis	<i>3 Roles for Guiding Groups: Teacher, Shepherd, Leader</i>	LifeWay Press (Nashville, 2013)
5-STEP	David Francis	<i>The Five-Step Formula to Sunday School Growth</i>	LifeWay Press (Nashville, 2005)
ACT	Nelson Searcy & Kerrick Thomas	<i>Activate: An Entirely New Approach to Small Groups</i>	Regal (Ventura, CA, 2008)
BELONG	Joseph R. Myers	<i>The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups</i>	Zondervan (Grand Rapids, 2003)
C ³	David Francis	<i>Connect³</i> (Class, Community, Commission)	LifeWay Press (Nashville, 2008)
DWAY	Stephen D. Brookfield & Stephen Preskill	<i>Discussion as a Way of Teaching</i>	Josey-Bass (San Francisco, 1999)
DT	David Francis	<i>Discover Triad: Three Facets of a Dynamic Class</i> (Scripture, Stories, Shepherding)	LifeWay Press (Nashville, 2008)
ESSC	Bruce Raley & David Francis	<i>Extreme Sunday School Challenge: Engaging Our World Through Groups</i>	LifeWay Press (Nashville, 2012)
FG	Sam O'Neal	<i>Field Guide for Small Group Leaders</i>	Intervarsity (Downer's Grove, IL, 2012)
GE	David Francis	<i>Great Expectations</i>	LifeWay Press (Nashville, 2009)
HE	Thom S. Rainer	<i>High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church</i>	B&H (Nashville, 2014)
I6	David Francis	<i>I6: A Six-Lane Strategy</i> (Invigorate, Incorporate, Intercede, Invest, Invite, Involve)	LifeWay Press (Nashville, 2007)
MSS	David Francis	<i>Missionary Sunday School: One Mission, His Story, Every Person</i>	LifeWay Press (Nashville, 2011)
ONCE	Don Everts and Doug Schaupp	<i>I Once Was Lost</i>	InterVarsity (Downers Grove, IL, 2008)
SC	Thom S. Rainer & Eric Geiger	<i>Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples</i>	B&H (Nashville, 2014)
SFC	Brad J. Waggoner	<i>Shape of Faith to Come: Spiritual Formation and the Future of Discipleship</i>	B&H (Nashville, 2014)
SGBI	Jim Egli & Dwight Marable	<i>Small Groups., Big Impact</i>	ChurchSmart (St. Charles, IL, 2011)
SSG	Bill Search	<i>Simple Small Groups</i> (3 Cs: Connecting, Changing, Cultivating)	Baker (Grand Rapids, 2008)
TC	Ed Stetzer & Thom S. Rainer	<i>Transformational Church: Creating a New Scorecard for Congregations</i> (7 Elements)	B&H (Nashville, 2014)
TCSS	David Francis	<i>Transformational Class: Transformational Church Goes to Sunday School</i>	LifeWay Press (Nashville, 2011)
TD	Eric Geiger, Michael Kelley, Philip Nation	<i>Transformational Discipleship: How People Really Grow</i>	B&H (Nashville, 2014)
TG	Ed Stetzer & Eric Geiger	<i>Transformational Groups: Creating a New Scorecard for Groups</i>	B&H (Nashville, 2014)
TRIBE	Rick Howerton	<i>A Different Kind of Tribe: Embracing the New Small-Group Dynamic</i>	Navpress (Colorado Springs, 2012)

Other LifeWay Resources by David Francis

- *Spiritual Gifts: A Practical Guide to How God Works Through You*
- *The 5-Step Formula for Sunday School Growth*
- *The 3D Sunday School: A Three Dimensional Strategy to Help Members and Leaders Fulfill the Great Commission*
- *1-6: The Six-Lane Strategy Toward an Inviting Sunday School*
- *The Discover Triad: Three Facets of a Dynamic Sunday School*
- *Connect3: The Power of One Sunday School Class*
- *Great Expectations: Planting Seeds for Sunday School Growth*
- *Transformational Class: Transformational Church Goes to Sunday School*
- *Missionary Sunday School: One Mission. His Story. Every Person.*
- *Extreme Sunday School Challenge (with Bruce Raley)*
- *3 Roles for Guiding Groups: Teacher, Shepherd, Leader (with Ken Braddy)*

Available from *LifeWay.com/DavidFrancis*

David Francis and Rick Howerton

have worked hard at being group-ologists and have discovered there is not a single one-size-fits-all best way to do groups with every approach having tradeoffs. David and Rick present 10 mission critical decisions every group and group ministry must address. You will learn to appreciate the design of the groups ministry in your church, help make and support decisions to re-launch, enter into conversations about how to build your group or ministry, and be challenged to launch new groups as an intentional part of your group's mission.

This 64-page booklet gives a pastor, minister of education, the person responsible for Bible study groups, and group leaders a foundation for launching and leading transformational groups.

Additional helps for leading a conference or for informal discussion can be found at *LifeWay.com/DavidFrancis*.

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