

## YOUR FIRST THREE STEPS

*by Joel Comiskey*

It doesn't take a lot of planning to ask a few key leaders to open their homes, teach the Bible, and do their best. That's what many churches do to launch a small-groups ministry, and some of the resulting groups may last a long time. Normally, however, groups launched this way don't last more than six months due to discouragement and other unforeseen obstacles.

Successful small-group ministries, on the other hand, are well-planned and follow a sequence of necessary steps. They train and nurture their leaders over the long-haul. As you consider implementing a small-group ministry, follow these three key steps and you'll build a strong foundation for your groups that will stand the test of time.

### **The Church's Key Leaders Must Be Involved**

Successful small-group ministries have support systems that begin with the church's leadership. When I say leadership, I'm referring to those in charge of church decisions—whether this is a lone senior pastor, pastor and board, or pastor, staff, and board working together. When those in top leadership agree on the importance of small-group ministry and commit themselves to support it, there's a far greater chance of longevity and fruit.

The most important commitment is the vision commitment. The pastor and leadership team should individually answer these questions:

- Am I willing to be involved in our small-group ministry?
- Am I willing to promote it from the pulpit?
- Am I willing to visit small groups?
- Am I willing to attend or lead a small group?

The lead pastor's involvement is exceptionally important because it shows small-group leaders and members that the ministry is central to the church, rather than one program among many. After all, small-group leaders are in effect mini-shepherds, and they should be nurtured and trained to play a critical role of caring for the people in the church.

The pastor can show his support by visiting small groups, preparing the group lessons (or overseeing the one who prepares it), promoting small groups through sermons, and even leading and multiplying a small group to show his vision for this type of ministry—although I always suggest that pastors have a strong co-leader to take over the group when they are visiting other groups or occupied with other things.

If the church has staff, it's essential that each staff-person is involved in a group. In the beginning, this might mean being part of the first pilot group that the senior pastor leads. As time progresses, this will mean leading a small group and eventually coaching small-group leaders.

The elder/church board's commitment to small-group ministry will help ensure that the ministry doesn't get sidetracked or diminished when a new, more exciting program comes along. I encourage elders and board members to attend small groups, and it's even better if they lead one.

Again, if a small-group ministry is going to make it in the long run, it needs a strong, foundational framework.

### **Focus on the Details**

After the key leaders have counted the cost and are in agreement, it's important to work out details before officially starting a small-groups ministry.

First, dedicating people and resources toward coaching small-group leaders is a key factor in launching a successful ministry. It's critical that the pastoral team decides how they are going to coach the group leaders in order to ensure that they remain healthy over the long haul.

Training future leaders (and ongoing training of the current ones) is also essential for long-term success. There are a lot of equipping tracks for small-group leaders. Most churches begin by using an equipping series developed by an outside publisher, and then eventually adapt the material to their own church's framework.

Here are some more key questions that need to be answered when it comes to working out the details:

- How often will you bring the leaders together for coaching? (I recommend once per month.)
- Who will coach the leaders? (I recommend the lead pastor becomes the head coach.)
- What kind of training will be required of future leaders? (Many great equipping series exist; I've developed my own, as have others.)
- What materials will be used within the small groups? (I recommend using the pastor's sermon as the lesson plan for groups, while allowing liberty in individual cases.)
- How will the first groups start? (I recommend starting a pilot group, led by the senior pastor.)
- Who will lead the first groups? (I recommend the lead pastor starts the first group and the other groups flow from this group.)
- What is the definition of a small group? (I recommend: a group of 3–15 people that meet weekly outside the church building for the purpose of evangelism, community, and spiritual growth with the goal of multiplication.)
- Will the groups meet weekly? (I recommend weekly.)
- Will they meet in homes? (I recommend "outside the church building," whether this is a home, restaurant, park, and so on.)

These are questions that the leadership team will need to define and set in writing. A lot of prayer and study needs to go into answering these questions. Yes, we learn from our mistakes, but it's better to prepare and avoid the problems before hand, if at all possible.

### **Launch a Pilot Group**

There are various ways to start a small-group ministry, but I believe the best way is when the lead pastor begins the first pilot group.

The lead pastor should hand-pick the pilot group members, and some of them might be staff members, elders, or board members (it's best to pick the influential decision makers, if possible). One key requirement is that those attending the first pilot group should be ready and willing to eventually start their own small group (or pair up with another person to start a small group).

In the pilot group, the lead pastor exemplifies to the first leaders what he or she expects of small-group leadership. As the lead pastor facilitates the group, the future leaders who are part of the pilot group will do likewise in their own groups. The pastor should lead this group like a normal small group, rather than converting it into a "how to" time or a training session. Training sessions should be held before, after, or at another time. The main point of the pilot group is to exemplify what future leaders should do.

Most pilot groups last between four months to one year. During the pilot group stage, members of the pilot group can start praying, dreaming, and even inviting people to become core members of their own future small groups.

As the pilot group gets closer to giving birth to multiple groups, it's a good idea to have an evangelism event, since outreach should be part of the future small groups. The fruit of evangelism would go into the future small groups, rather than inviting these new people to the pilot group. Again, the key is modeling. What the pastor wants the future leaders to do, he or she has to model.

The day will come when those in the pilot group will start their own small groups. At that time, the pastor becomes the coach of the new small-group leaders (and some pastors choose to continue leading an open small group to exemplify the importance of the ministry and to stay in the battle).

When the pilot group gives birth, the pastor and leadership team can start giving announcements to the church about the future small-group ministry. After hearing the announcements, members will want to join one of the new small groups. However, I do think it's important that each small group limits the number of church members attending so that there is always room for the "empty chair" (unchurched or pre-Christian people). I suggest that eight people maximum come from the celebration service and the rest from outside the church context.

As groups multiply, more coaching structure is needed as well as a fine-tuning of the equipping track and other details.

Even when small groups are functioning in the church, there is a lot of work that must continually take place for them to remain strong and to prosper. The church must keep the small groups at the center of their attention and vision. For this reason, these three steps are critical for long-term success in small group ministry.

—JOEL COMISKEY is founder of the [Joel Comiskey Group](#) and author of numerous books, including [The Relational Disciple](#).

**Discuss**

1. Are we confident that our church's key leaders will be involved in the small-groups ministry?
2. Have you overlooked any of the details mentioned in the second section of this article?
3. What steps do we need to take in order to launch a pilot group?

**A MEASURE OF GROUP HEALTH**

*by Len Woods*

*A Measure of Group Health*

*How close does your group come to matching the profile of a healthy, thriving ministry?*

*Ephesians 2:21–22*

Prayerfully ponder each of the following categories and descriptions and plot your group experience somewhere on the range between the two choices offered. Place a slash mark on the line to reflect the status of your group.

**Plot your group experience**

A group of acquaintances that meets weekly	<b>Sharing of life</b> -----	A family of friends whose lives are intertwined
Sharing and prayer requests tend to be superficial	<b>Safety/ intimacy</b> -----	Members feel freedom to risk sharing deep struggles
Opinions and personal feelings dominate	<b>Dependence on truth</b> -----	God's Word is considered the final authority
Leader ministers; members mostly observe/ receive	<b>"Every member" ministry</b> -----	Each person encouraged to use gift(s) to care for others
Little evidence that folks are progressing spiritually	<b>Life change</b> -----	Tangible signs that individuals are growing
Monologues (dominated by one or two members)	<b>Group discussions</b> -----	Dialogues (involving the entire group)
The same people attend week after week	<b>Outreach</b> -----	Group fills the "empty chair" by inviting visitors

Members routinely skip meetings and gatherings	<b>Participation</b>	Members make group functions a top priority
Leader is practicing and developing his own skills	<b>Leadership development</b>	Leader is identifying and training new leaders
Little outside interaction or involvement	<b>“One another” care</b>	Group members show active, ongoing concern
Group is limping along out of a sense of obligation	<b>Overall sense</b>	We are excited because of all that God is doing!

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**Discuss**

1. Consider all the measurements above as a whole. What would be the total health measurement of your group?
2. Which of the categories above are the most important, and why?
3. How does small-group ministry leadership come alongside a group that is floundering and help it recover its bearings?