

Small Group Ministry Basics

Whether you have an active small group ministry or none at all, this page can help you build and strengthen your ministry to small groups in the context of building *BNEXT* in your church. We will consider:

- The Importance of Small Group Ministry
- The Climate of Your Congregation
- Your Small Group Ministry Team
- Launching Small Groups in Your Congregation
- Training Small Group Leaders

The Importance of Small Group Ministry

If Christ is the Head of His Church, then His pattern for ministry should be our guide. We read that Jesus “*appointed twelve ... that they might be with Him and that He might send them out...*” (Mark 3:14). This was spiritual boot camp. Christ met with them, mentored them, and ministered with them. The key was that He was truly *with* them. In the words of Robert E. Coleman:

Having called His men, Jesus made it a practice to be with them. This was the essence of His training program — just letting His disciples follow Him ... Jesus had no formal school, no seminaries, no outlined course of study, no periodic membership classes in which He enrolled His followers. None of these highly organized procedures considered so necessary today entered at all into His ministry. Amazing as it may seem, all Jesus did to teach these men His way was to draw them close to Himself. He was His own school and curriculum.¹

The twelve experienced radical change in their outlooks, ambitions, and lives with God. It was only natural that they would repeat the pattern modeled by Christ for the members of the early church. As a result, the very power and presence of Christ became an ongoing reality:

It was Jesus’ continued activity in the world that added to the ecclesia day by day. The gathering of persons into the temple courts and homes was the

¹ Quoted from Billie Hanks, Jr. and William A. Shell, eds., *Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 57.

result of Jesus' continued action in the world. Jesus was still calling people to be in community together. His resurrection and ascension removed his physical presence from the one group so that he could be present in multiple groups, simultaneously, by the power of the Spirit. And each new group was a new incarnation of Jesus' presence and character on earth.²

If the Church in our day is to experience the life-changing purpose of Christ, small groups should be part of the equation. Once a church itself is larger than a small group, the pastor to parishioner mentoring model is not sufficient for the spiritual growth of each church member. Through the give and take of a variety of believers, however, each participant in a small group can receive the benefits of Christ's life through the larger body.

No individual can fully disciple another, because no one has the full arsenal of spiritual gifts and wisdom to adequately bring another to maturity in Christ. That does not mean one-on-one discipling is invalid — but a master-pupil model is not enough for the church. The ministry that thinks of discipling in one-on-one terms falls short of what God intended of His people.³

No congregation should fall short. Christ stands ready to assist any church leadership team that agrees to build an effective small group ministry in keeping with God's timeless plan. The first step is to discern the climate of one's congregation.

The Climate of Your Congregation

There are a variety of ways to structure a Small Group Ministry, from highly controlled ... to virtually unstructured. Some congregations have small group ministries that are tightly controlled. The *Cell Church* movement from Korea and its close sister, the Meta-Church model, are examples. Other churches, on the other hand, offer very little guidance or governance to their small groups. Such churches typically have no small group ministry team to guide their groups, nor guidelines. The most common structure is a moderately controlled system. Examples of organizations and authors that promote this model include *Stephen Ministry*, the *Willow Creek Association*, Lyman Coleman, Neal McBride, and many others.

² Gareth W. Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry: An Integrational Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 250.

³ Bill Hull, *The Disciple Making Church* (Tarrytown, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1990), 35.

The amount of control that church leaders can provide for their small groups is generally predetermined by the nature of the existing church government and what style of governance the congregation is accustomed to. In an ideal world, small groups would flourish best in every church under a small group ministry team that provides **high control**. This model works well in South Korea in Paul Yonggi Cho's *Yoiddo Full Gospel Central Church*, the largest congregation in the world. In this highly controlled system, often called the *Cell Church*, all church members are required to be in small groups that require high standards of participation and spiritual growth. We do not live in South Korea, however, and this model has had only partial success in America. People who are not accustomed to being told what to do and how to do it may resist this leadership paradigm, hindering ministry and potentially dividing a church.

On the other end of the spectrum, small group ministries with **no control** whatsoever can suffer from disorganization, lack of vision, aimlessness, and attrition. Just as water seeks the lowest spot, the tendency for some if not most of the small groups in an environment that offers no resources or guidance toward growth and improvement is to go downhill spiritually. They can become disconnected from the larger vision of the church and from Christ's call to discipleship.

A **moderately controlled** small group ministry is most likely the ideal approach for your church. If you cannot become a church that **is** small groups (highly controlled model — in which every member must be involved in intentional discipleship through small group ministry), perhaps you can develop a church **of** small groups (mid-level control — in which most members are in small groups that have at least some guidelines), or at least a church **with** small groups (mid to low-level of control — often as few as two small groups existing). The most important step to developing or improving a small group ministry that fits well in your church environment and that helps your small groups grow and multiply, is to pull together a Small Group Ministry Team.

Your Small Group Ministry Team

The goal of a Small Group Ministry Team is to build and guide a small group ministry for your congregation that is strong and vibrant. It is important that you select people of influence from key sectors of your congregation to be part of this team. The pastor or a designated associate pastor should also serve on it. Because small group ministry touches every aspect of the life of the church, those who lead this ministry must have recognition and authority (whether direct or delegated)

connected to the broad spectrum of the congregation's ministries. Be sure to include enough worker bees on the ministry team so that it will be equipped to move from discussion and good ideas to action.

The Small Group Ministry Team will become its own small group, thus providing a model of fellowship, growth, and support for the other small groups in the church. To this end, it should meet at least once a month if not more often, and meetings should include time for prayer and worship — giving spiritual vitality to their important ministry of oversight to the small groups in the church.

The Small Group Ministry Team Should:

- **Pray** regularly over the small groups
- **Recruit** and support small group leaders
- **Work** with the new member class/process to form new groups
- **Facilitate** church-wide outreach to incorporate members into groups
- **Plan** training events for the congregation's new and on-going small group leaders
- **Problem-solve** on behalf of all of the church's small groups
- **Guide** groups that dissolve, helping floundering members to find their way into new groups
- **Discuss** resources needed for the groups

Launching Small Groups in Your Congregation

If new groups are not being formed regularly in your congregation, the small groups ministry of your church may become cliquish, diminished, and possibly even die. There are four primary methods for forming new groups; it is best to utilize the first three methods simultaneously and regularly if possible, and to use the fourth (turbo-group) method on special occasions as the Small Group Ministry Team deems it appropriate:

1. **The broad appeal:** Advertise small group ministry and the opportunity to join a group on at least a semi-regular basis to your whole congregation. This can be done through bulletin inserts and announcements, special retreats, the church newsletter, and other creative venues.
2. **Small group multiplication:** Small groups that have a heart and vision to invite others into their group become the most natural and effective means

for integrating new people into small groups. A group that is willing to give priority to outreach and thereby outgrow itself should consider the growth by division model, in which a co-leader is trained within the group and the vision is instilled for the group to eventually divide into two groups, thereby keeping the size of each group to fifteen or fewer active members. This model looks great on paper but is difficult to make effective without significant training and envisioning to this end with your small group leaders.

3. **The new member class:** People in a new member class who are new to the church will have a natural affinity toward each other and may be willing to become a new small group by continuing to meet together after the class ends. This approach is most effective if a trained small group leader steps in to guide the first several meetings until new leadership can be trained within the group to take over.
4. **The turbo-group strategy:** This method is accomplished through a pastor or experienced small group leader who forms a small group that intends from its inception to become a training ground for additional small group leaders. The leader of this group teaches the group members by modeling, and eventually by allowing each of the members opportunity to guide the group. Overall instruction about facilitating, delegating, vision building, outreach, and all the facets of small group leader's training are incorporated into the turbo-group. After at least six months and no more than two years, the turbo-group dissolves and all of its members form and lead or co-lead new small groups.

Training Small Group Leaders

Your small group ministry will only attain to the level of the leaders who run it. Conversely, small group leaders will likely not reach higher than the level to which they have been trained. *BNEXT* offers an extensive small group leaders' training process. We advise first bringing the Small Group Ministry Team through this training, and then providing this training to interested or selected members of your church every several years, or as often as the Small Group Ministry Team deems appropriate. Alternately, those who have been through the training and have proven themselves to be effective small group leaders, may conduct condensed and focused versions of this training at times when new small group leaders are needed but there are not enough people available to justify the full-blown version.

BNEXT Process	Date	Time
Pastors begin to explore the use of BNEXT with church leadership		
Pastors and leadership commit to use BNEXT		
Form “Small Group Ministry Team” for leadership and support of small group leaders		
Inventory existing small groups and solicit their participation		
Goal set for total number of small groups in the church		
Recruit leaders for new small groups (2 per group recommended)		
Train new small group leaders using BNEXT Small Group Leaders Training resources		
Announce BNEXT to entire congregation and begin recruiting small group members		
Small Group Ministry Team assigns people to small groups		
First meeting of small groups to covenant together and pray for the BNEXT series (as described in the Small Group Leader Training)		
BNEXT handed out on Sunday morning (generally, the morning that the related sermon will be preached; alternately, some churches prefer to offer the studies a week before the sermon)		
First BNEXT sermon		
First BNEXT small group study		