

Why I Still Believe in Small Groups

by Craig Groeschell

Several of my pastor friends have recently spoken out against the effectiveness of small groups. Although I respect these men, I disagree with their opinion. I still love small groups because:

- They follow the early church model of meeting in homes.
- They are a tremendous tool for discipleship. I prefer small groups to Wednesday night large group teaching because it gives people a chance to interact. I prefer small groups to Sunday School because you don't have to build the expensive extra classroom space.
- They get more people involved using their gifts of hospitality, teaching, exhortation, etc.
- They engage the body of Christ in pastoral care. Instead of the pastors being the only ones who care for believers, small groups spread the load and utilize gifted lay people.
- They build leaders.
- Done well, they become a tremendous tool of retention. People want to be needed and known. Small groups make both possible.
- They have unlimited meeting space. You can't run out of homes, restaurants, apartments, or coffee shops in which to meet.
- They have unlimited meeting times. In today's busy world, a once-a-week discipleship class will not work for most of your church. Small groups offer unlimited times to meet.
- They have changed my life. My family's small group is like our extended family. God has used them to bless us in untold ways.

Elements of a Successful Small Group

Over the years, my wife Amy and I have participated in several small groups. Some were much more successful than others. Here are the elements we've found essential for a great group:

1. **A great group needs a leader.** When everyone is always voting on what we do next, we never do much. A good leader makes for a good group.
2. **A great group is built on God's word.** Too often, small groups become all about fellowship. While fellowship is essential, doing life around God's word is what makes the difference.
3. **A great group is a safe group.** If people can't discuss openly without fear of judgment, rejection, or gossip, the group is doomed to fail.
4. **A great group looks outward.** Serving together is life-changing.
5. **A great group births new groups.** If a group stays together for too long, they usually grow stale. Healthy groups produce new groups.

6. **A great group takes breaks.** We often take the summer off from consistent meetings. We're all busy. The break makes us long to be together more.

7. **A great group hurts together.** I just got off the phone after talking to a young woman with four children who just lost her 39-year-old husband. Even though she is devastated, she told me confidently that her Life Group would be there for her. God is glorified through such a group.

How to Make Sure Your Small Group Ministry Fails

Tons of churches have attempted small groups only to abort shortly after takeoff. I'll share the top 10 ways to ensure the failure of your group.

1. **Make sure the pastor isn't in a group.** If small groups aren't modeled by the pastor, they won't have much chance of success. (My wife and I host two groups in our home.)

2. **Make sure the spastor doesn't talk about small groups.** If small groups don't ever find their way into a sermon, it will help reduce the likelihood of success.

3. **Make sure small groups are not resourced properly.** To guarantee your groups fail, don't staff them, buy them materials, promote them, or get your best people involved.

4. **Make sure small group leaders aren't trained.** When you do get some small group leaders, don't train them. Let them figure it out on their own.

5. **Make sure the church doesn't address childcare needs.** Pretend that small groups don't have any child care needs. Don't open the church one or two nights a week to provide child care. Don't pay for childcare. Ignore childcare needs completely.

6. **Make sure the church doesn't have a small group vision or philosophy.** Let people do whatever they want without any direction or oversight.

7. **Make sure your groups become inward-focused and never multiply.** Don't ever encourage your groups to give life to new groups. Allow them to grow inward-looking. Better yet, hope they become filled with negative and critical church members.

8. **Make sure your congregants don't have time to be in small groups.** Ask them to go to church on Sunday nights and Wednesday nights, Sunday school classes, committee meetings, etc. Keep them so busy they won't participate in small groups.

9. **Make sure not to require staff members to be involved.** If your staff (or key leaders) aren't in groups, that will help keep others from being in groups.

10. **Make sure you never make small groups a membership or partnership requirement.** Be a low-expectation church. While you're at it, don't ask people to serve, pray, witness, or give sacrificially either.

Think for a minute on the following questions: *Have you been part of a successful small group? What do you think made that group successful? What made it unsuccessful?*