

Successful Discipleship in Small Groups

Proven ways to develop mature disciples

Interview with Ed Stetzer and Eric Geiger

SmallGroups.com recently caught up with Ed Stetzer and Eric Geiger, authors of *Transformational Groups* to learn what small groups are accomplishing and how small-group ministries can improve.

SmallGroups.com: Small-group ministry leaders often talk about the connection between relationships and spiritual growth. How does your research support or disprove that?

Stetzer and Geiger: Our research certainly agrees with this, especially with regards to one of the clearest markers of spiritual growth: spiritual disciplines. Specifically, people who are involved in a spiritual community exhibit a much higher commitment to practicing spiritual disciplines than those who are not.

A person actively involved in a group or spiritual community is 2.5 times more likely to read the Bible versus someone who isn't, and more than 4 times more likely to study Scripture than someone who is not in a group. And it's not just reading and studying the Bible. Our research also shows that those in groups pray, give, serve, and fellowship more than people who are not.

In short, the connection between meaningful relationships and spiritual growth is clear.

A huge goal of small-group ministries is to connect people—to successfully integrate people into groups where they can form relationships. Is it enough to simply connect people into relationships, though? Is that enough to lead to discipleship?

Forming relationships is a great first step on the path of discipleship, but it's not enough. True discipleship involves a process of spiritual maturation that simply cannot take place without the Word and other spiritual disciplines like prayer, confession, and encouragement.

One of the best ways to encourage spiritual growth in the context of relationships is to empower leadership within those groups. Having men and/or women within the community called and committed to guiding discussion, encouraging people biblically, and showing sensitivity to needs in the group goes a long way to helping people move beyond forming relationships to true discipleship.

How can small groups develop mature disciples?

This is a big question, but it begins simply through our relationships. One of the primary reasons Christians and even non-Christians find small groups to be inviting and safe is because they are relational in a way that larger church activities cannot be. And because discipleship is inherently relational, small groups provide a natural environment for discipleship. As I mentioned earlier, our research backs this up, showing that people who are actively involved in a small group exhibit the markers of discipleship and spiritual growth.

That being said, there are some specific things group leaders can do to encourage deeper levels of discipleship:

First, be attentive. Actively work to identify the natural and spiritual gifts of other people in the group. Maybe a person is a prayer warrior, or has the gift of hospitality. Maybe you have someone whose communication skills indicate he or she would make a great second teacher in the group. Encourage these people to take on responsibility and walk with them to answer their questions and lovingly critique and support their growth.

Second, small-group leaders should encourage gatherings of smaller groups within the larger group. Depending on group size and make-up, the leader could split men and women or divide people up into groupings of four or so. These smaller groups can meet at the end of group time or at a different time during the week to provide specific accountability, encouragement, and support on a deeper level than what is possible during regular group time.

Finally, choose the right Bible study to guide your group time so that the Word is carefully presented, examined, and discussed. Get to know the needs of your group members and the way they learn best, and then find a resource that supports and encourages that.

Earlier this year, Michael Mack [interviewed Lyman Coleman](#) for SmallGroups.com. Coleman stated that groups today are too inward focused. Many group leaders, though, think that focusing inward is the way to focus on discipleship. What do you think? Does a missional focus take us away from discipleship or further our discipleship efforts?

I (Ed) think the key here is balance. For spiritual growth and discipleship to take place, the people in the group need the sacred, authentic relationships that we've discussed, and that requires consistency. At the same time, every small group has a mission because every Christian is called to mission. While that mission may vary based on when and where the group meets, there are three specific ways that every group can be on mission:

First, engage new people. Every person has a network of unchurched or disconnected people they interact with every day, and a small group is a great, safe place to invite them.

Second, serve together. Find a local ministry, cause, or need that you can rally around. Serving together is essential to developing the shared-life experiences that are so important to people in groups. But even more so, it's an act of obedience to Jesus Christ to join his mission.

And third, start new groups. As your group grows and matures, multiply it in your community by starting a new group. If the leader is being intentional about the group's mission, he or she should be developing new leaders who can step up and lead a group of their own. People sitting on the fence of small-group life find new groups to be less intimidating than existing groups and are more likely to get involved. By choosing to hold loosely to your own group and, in turn, launch new groups, a small group can focus on both discipleship and mission at the same time.

Your research shows that people who are interested in attending small groups are looking for "meaningful, shared-life relationships." How should this inform small-group leaders?

Small-group leaders have to move beyond just being teachers and facilitators to encouraging genuine friendships within their group. This isn't rocket science. We know how to make friends, and have relationships, and this is what group leaders need to work toward. We need to move out of rows into circles. In other words, we need to learn to know, love, and become friends with each other.

It also means the small-group leader should be looking to utilize the strengths and gifts of other people in the group. For instance, a leader may invite someone from within the group to take the lead in encouraging each other to pray. By inviting other people into the "leadership roles," you can eliminate the perception of a gap, and people in the group will feel more invested, become more open, and genuine friendships will occur more naturally.

How can small-group pastors assess the discipleship happening in their small groups?

The first thing small-group pastors can do is look to see if groups are growing and multiplying. At the end of your study season, do you have more people in groups than when you started? Numbers aren't everything, but on mission small groups are contagious and growth will naturally occur.

Second, the pastor can look at participation in the church. Are more people volunteering to serve in the church? Are more people giving their time and resources to serve outside the church? Because there is a direct correlation between small groups and spiritual growth, there should be a correlation between group health and the expression of spiritual gifts, service, and giving in, through, and beyond the church.

Finally, you can use a formal assessment tool to help evaluate your group and discipleship efforts. There are lots of different options, but at our churches we use the [Transformational Discipleship Assessment](#). Whatever you use, you want something that helps people look at their individual spiritual growth, and then allows you to see the state of the group and the church as the numbers roll up to the whole. Though you don't get to see individual results, a good assessment lets you see how individual groups—and the church—are doing with their spiritual progress.

—Ed Stetzer and Eric Geiger are the authors of [Transformational Groups](#). Read our review of the book [here](#). You can read more from Ed Stetzer on [The Exchange](#). Copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.