

How Should We Connect People into Small Groups?

Three connection methods that could work in your church.

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If you're new to small-group ministry you might be surprised to find that different churches handle something as core as connecting people into groups very differently. Some churches ask group leaders to find their own group members, while other churches have people sign up for small groups and then assign them to groups. Neither is better, but each has their pros and cons.

It got me thinking, *What was Jesus' primary method of connection?* In Luke 15, Jesus tells stories about important connections. In the story of the lost sheep, Jesus illustrates leaving the 99 to find the 1. The story highlights the importance of *seeking* others. In the story of the prodigal son, however, we see a father whose primary characteristic is his steadiness and receptivity. When the son makes the decision to come back, the father is prepared and responsive. This story highlights the importance of *receiving* others. Jesus was equally focused on going out to the lost and allowing the lost to come to him. Our ministries can adopt either mindset or try to hold both together.

Seeking: Leaders fill their own groups.

Receiving: A connection person assigns someone into groups.

Combining: Your team splits focus and integrates both strategies.

We all engage in both forms of connection casually and formally. With the finite resources we have, however, we will all *focus* on one of these three methods. Your church will benefit from thinking deeply on this topic to determine which method will work best for you. Hopefully, this stirs up the right questions for you and your ministry team to answer together.

1. Leaders Fill Their Groups

Why Choose This Model

Jesus' mission was not just to save the lost. His mission was to “seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10). And Jesus didn't just tell stories about seeking lost sheep—he lived it. While common practice of the day was to avoid the sick and indigent, Jesus went right to them. While most students sought out the most prominent teachers and pleaded to be their students, Jesus sought out his disciples. He found them and called them to follow him. Church staff will always focus on outreach, but it is absolutely valid for our small-group leaders to do the same. If you want to develop missional communities, you will encourage leaders to take 1 John 2:6 to heart when it says, “Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.” It can be powerful when small-group pastors encourage leaders to actively ask God who might be their next group member.

The Benefits

The benefits of groups filling themselves are threefold. First, when leaders and groups take the task of finding new people seriously, it stretches them. When a leader asks God who the next member of their small group should be, they depend more on their faith and less on the church staff. Steven Furtick has famously said, “Extraordinary moves of God begin with ordinary acts of obedience.” When groups own the connection process, they get to see God at work.

Second, your small groups have fantastic networks. Any group knows a multitude of people that might be open to an invite. When groups are tasked with filling themselves, they lean on networks to which the church does not have access.

Third, when a group leader invites people into their group personally, there's a better chance of them sticking. When a group member invites a friend, there's already relational equity, and there's a higher chance of new people attending. Organic connections like this are fantastic. If a pastor assigns people randomly to a group, however, the people start from scratch—relationships may form, or they may not.

The Challenges

There are some difficulties with this method. First, pushing a leader out of their comfort zone and into an invite-mindset requires frequent vision casting from leadership. Some group leaders will take it and run with it, but finding a leader who facilitates well *and* has an invite mindset is challenging.

Second, many of your leaders will need support and equipping to do this well. The more ownership and autonomy you give leaders, the more you need to train and develop them. This is not a bad thing, but it can present a challenge for churches with fewer resources earmarked for group life.

2. Group Members Are Assigned to Groups

Why Choose This Model

In the story of the prodigal son, the father does not seek out or go after his son. Instead, the father immediately *received* the son. People walk into our churches every single Sunday with needs just like the son. This model shines in receiving people who come into the church looking to connect. It's especially great for connecting people new to your church.

Churches who use this model generally have a dedicated person who makes connections and makes sure these connections happen [quickly](#). This is great because new members of your church know exactly what they need to do to get into a small group, and they don't have to wait long. Being fast matters. Consider: How many Sundays is the average church attender going to come to your services without knowing anyone? Will they stick around long enough for someone in an existing group to befriend and invite them? A connection person can quickly connect them into a group that fits their geography, affinity, and stage of life.

The Benefits

The major benefit of a central connection process is control: You determine who gets new group members, how many, and when. You and your ministry team will need to determine how important this value is to you.

This leads to a second benefit. When a staff-led connection process exists, your team gets to see the development of your communities firsthand. If leaders own this process, your team will only get to see the *results* of connections. If we make the connect, we have an opportunity to shepherd everyone involved. We get to see the big picture more clearly.

Central connection is far more practical, efficient, and fast. The ROI of having a connection person is huge. If we believe that community is key in the life of the church, then facilitating it with a specific process will yield great returns. Community can be messy, so whenever we can set up an easy-to-understand process, we can develop great wins.

The Challenges

Assigning someone into a group can feel mechanical. Even if you have the warmest person at church serving as your connection person, these assignments can feel a little forced. After all, you're being sent to a group of strangers.

Additionally, this model requires us to have a smooth process. Process-development might not be a strength in your ministry. The best people to do connection are generally the worst people to develop the operations side of connections. Connection people are warm and inviting, and they love relationship. On the other hand, they often hate paperwork. Does your church have the support to provide them so they can do what God has designed them to do? To do it well, you need a system of tracking and relationship management with both group leaders and prospective group members.

Central connection is actually high risk. If a connection doesn't work out and the staff made the connection, the person might attribute the mismatch to the church. Without fantastic follow up, this can lead to major challenges, and people may not want to try getting connected in the future.

3. Combine Both Methods

As with anything in ministry there is *always* a middle ground. This does not mean that the middle ground is best for you. Sometimes if we try to do everything well, we end up sacrificing too much in all areas.

That said, there are many ways to combine these strategies. Some churches do central connection year-round, but host connection events where leaders and prospective members can interact face-to-face (often called GroupLink, a term introduced by North Point Community Church). Other churches use the [HOST model](#) to launch groups. They lower the bar of small-group leadership and invite people to host people in their homes. These churches then come behind the hosts who have stepped up and do more of the intensive training on the back end. Still other churches primarily depend on leaders to fill their own groups, but still allow new people to sign up online or through a form at church, assigning them to groups as they sign up.

Regardless of *how* you integrate these models there are still benefits and drawbacks of bringing them together.

The Benefits

If your ministry is pretty new, you might not yet know if either model is “right” for you. Combining both models or running them at the same time can be a great way to see what works best for your staff, volunteers, and culture.

Combining both strategies also allows you to be flexible. This allows you to pivot quickly in the case of changing vision, staff, or weekend messaging. It also means you can empower a variety of types of group leaders. For instance, if leaders love evangelism, they may enjoy filling the group with people they meet. Others who are more focused on shepherding can depend more heavily on the church assigning people into their group.

The Challenges

Have you heard the phrase, “Jack of all trades, master of none”? When you use *every* strategy, you can find yourself without any clear strategy. Clarity is key when we’re challenging people to step up in their faith. When we have two different connection strategies it can be confusing.

The combination of strategies can also put stress on our team. If you are in a context where you have a sizeable team, this is less of a burden. You can have different people who handle different things. If you have a smaller team, it may be unnecessarily burdensome.

Choosing Your Best Connection Strategy

There is no right choice for everyone, but there *is* a right choice for you. Any of these strategies can thrive and produce spiritual fruit—but not in every context. Each church is different and every small-group ministry exists in a series of larger cultures. Trust God, lean into your team, and be intentional in choosing your connection vision—and don’t be afraid to try something new if your current strategy isn’t working.

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