



HOW TO CREATE SMALL GROUPS THAT WORK



PARTNERS IN MINISTRY
Fulfilling the Great Commission. Together.

A PARTNERS IN MINISTRY RESOURCE

INTRODUCTION

Thanks for downloading this guide! Almost all of the strategies you'll read about in the next few pages are proven to work by in-depth research. The rest are based on my 40+ years of front-line ministry experience and that of my friends in leadership. I didn't want to give you guesswork—I wanted this guide to provide real solutions for your small groups.

Here's exactly what I want to help you accomplish:

Section I: Make Your Meetings Better. The nine tips in this section are proven to work and you'll see immediate results when you use them.

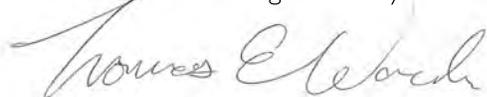
Section II: Make Your Meeting Structure Better. This section is about how to structure group time. You'll learn the 6 Ingredients to a successful small group meeting.

Section III: Make Everyone's Meetings Better. Here we'll talk about coaching. The goal is to improve every small group associated with your church by properly training group leaders.

You can have small groups that work! And it's important you do: Small groups are the number one factor in church growth.*¹ If your groups are growing, your church is growing, and so is the Kingdom.

So read the next pages, and start using the tips. If you're a ministry leader, share the tips with those you lead.

Thanks for reading and may God bless your small groups,



Tom Ward, President and Founder
Partners In Ministry

***Small Groups are
the number one
factor in church
growth.*¹***

**see page 20 for the source of our research*



SECTION

I

9

THINGS

EVERY SMALL GROUP

SHOULD DO

1

MEET WEEKLY

Research shows that groups that meet weekly experience much greater growth and group health than groups that meet less often.²

Why this is true we don't know for sure. But the common sense answer is that groups that meet weekly bond more. We all miss a meeting from time to time, and if you're only meeting every other week that can be a real problem.

A month or more could pass before members see each other again.

So meet every week. Group members see each other more frequently and create stronger connections.

2

ICEBREAKER

Start every session with an icebreaker. Research proves that groups that do this experience more laughter and community than other groups.³

The icebreaker should be simple and not too deep. It could tie into your study or be completely unrelated. Something like: *What was your favorite Christmas gift as a kid?* You can find tons of these with a quick Google search.

3

START/END ON TIME

If you start and end on time the group will appreciate that you value their schedules. An added bonus: ending on time gives the group a chance to casually interact before they leave, which increases bonding and group health.

“Rather than showcasing their own abilities, empowering leaders activate the gifts of others.”

4

GET ‘EM INVOLVED

This one’s important. The research shows that group involvement leads to a healthier group, a group that’s more likely to grow so much it’ll become multiple groups, and overall church growth. ⁴

What’s group involvement look like? Get volunteers to pray, read Scripture, and bring snacks/drinks. That’s a basic level of involvement and it creates an active rather than passive group.

On a deeper level, you’re trying to become the type of empowering leader authors Jim Egli and Dwight Marable write about: “Rather than showcasing their own abilities, empowering leaders activate the gifts of others.”⁵ To become an empowering leader, move from asking someone to pray to asking them to lead a portion of the meeting or even the whole meeting. It’s okay if you eventually have almost nothing to do yourself during the meeting. That means you’ve got a group that’s involved and active, and you’re successfully raising up new leaders.

5

THE 5-7 RULE

To get the most out of your Bible Study time follow this rule: whatever your source material is for the week (Scripture, chapter of a book, etc.), ask 5-7 questions about that material, and spend 5-7 minutes on each question.⁶

If you ask more questions than that and/or you only spend 1-2 minutes on each question, you'll tend to have the same few people answering (the brave ones who don't mind speaking first).

But if you linger on a question for 5 minutes, you'll draw out the quieter people. The discussion will get deeper and richer and more rewarding.

6

MANAGE THE EGRs

It's likely you'll have people in your group who are EGR's (Extra Grace Required). They'll tend to jump in on every question with, for example, lengthy personal stories. It's certainly okay for people to take several minutes to share something. What you're watching out for is the person who's doing this all the time.

Love them and handle them tenderly, but you cannot let them dominate group time. Gently move the discussion away from them. It's important for the sake of your group's morale.

7

MIND THE INTROVERTS

Introverts aren't necessarily shy, but they do like to ease their way into social groups. So don't call on people directly to pray, read, or answer questions.

Instead, let them volunteer.

Always be mindful that some people are shy and others have trouble reading aloud. You don't want to embarrass anyone.

If you've got a really quiet group, give everyone a chance to answer by going around in a circle. But let them know they can pass if they'd like. Over time, once they feel comfortable, even the introverts and the shy will open up.

8

SHUT IT DOWN

Don't let the Bible Study time go longer than 30 minutes.⁷ Even if the group is on a roll, shut it down. It's okay. Stopping while there's still a ton of energy leaves them hungry for more next week.

Going out with a bang is much better than fizzling out. And it's a win-win situation: Your group feels alive and energetic, and individual members can continue to talk about the topic if they want, which forms more community.

9

PRAY

Last, but absolutely not least, pray for your group. Research shows the best way you can positively impact your group is to be a leader who prays.⁸

Did we need research to tell us to pray? No, absolutely not. But isn't it amazing that the research so clearly reinforces the power of prayer? In fact, if you forget all the other tips, please remember this one. There is power in prayer. And it will change your group.

Most leaders spend far more time preparing for their group than they do praying for it. But preparation has no impact on group growth.⁹ Prayer does. The best gift you can give your group is to stay in tune with God and be a leader who prays for group members by name.



SECTION

II



6

INGREDIENTS

TO MAKE YOUR MEETING

STRUCTURE BETTER

6 MEETING INGREDIENTS

Ingredients. It's an odd word to use, but let me explain. The healthiest small groups tend to divide their meeting time into six parts: Icebreaker, Prayer for Friends, Bible Study, Worship, Ministry, and Fellowship.¹⁰ I like to think of these as ingredients because you need each one of them to get a good meeting, but you can adjust the recipe here and there to fit your preferences.

Some groups spend 5 minutes on Worship, some spend 25. Some groups put Bible Study in the middle, some put it at the end.

The important point is that successful groups include all of these ingredients in one way or another. But the exact order and time duration aren't set in stone. You can put your own spin on it. Groups, just like people, are different. So find what works for you.

Also, don't feel the need to work all these in at your next meeting. Go at your own pace. You're probably doing Bible Study already, so start by adding Icebreaker and Prayer for Friends. A couple weeks later, add Worship, and so on.

Here's our suggested format for a healthy group meeting:

Icebreaker	10 minutes
Prayer for Friends	10 minutes
Bible Study	30 minutes
Worship	10 minutes
Ministry	15 minutes
Fellowship	15 minutes

1

ICEBREAKER 10 minutes

We covered Icebreakers earlier in the guide, so we'll say pretty much what we said before: Start every session with an icebreaker. Groups that do this experience more laughter and community than other groups.¹¹

The icebreaker should be simple and not too deep. It could tie into your study or be completely unrelated. Something like: *Describe your past week using weather terminology: sunny, partly cloudy, stormy, or foggy.*

You can find tons of these with a quick Google search. Just remember to let the shy among you pass if they don't feel comfortable contributing.

2

PRAYER FOR FRIENDS 10 minutes

In this part of the meeting you split up into groups of two or three, and you pray for friends who need God or are far from God.

You're praying for a chance to witness, to invite them to church and/or your small group, and for God to soften their hearts so they'll be receptive to His voice.

Your group will be collectively blessed when God begins to move in the lives of the people for whom you've prayed. This is a powerful part of your meeting time.

3

BIBLE STUDY 30 minutes

During Bible Study, you'll generally read a passage of Scripture, part of a book or curriculum, and discuss it.

Three tips from earlier in the guide are meant specifically for Bible Study time: *The 5-7 Rule (#5)*, *Mind the Introverts (#7)*, and *Shut It Down (#8)*. Re-read them and keep them in mind as you prepare for this portion of the meeting.

It's important to recognize your role here: You're not a lecturer; you're a facilitator. Get everyone involved and engaged. Spend a few minutes on each question, drawing out more answers and deeper discussion.

Remember, not every answer given will be correct. Gently point people in the right direction by saying, for instance, "Thank you, that's good input but let's look at it a little closer."

4

WORSHIP 10 minutes

Including worship in a small group setting might seem awkward. And it might very well be awkward if you don't tailor it to your group.

My small group is a bunch of guys. Would we feel awkward singing songs together? Yes we would. But worship doesn't have to involve singing. Worship can be praising God for answers to prayer, reading Psalms, or expressing

gratitude for God's blessings over the past week.

The fact is “groups who include worship in their meetings grow more rapidly than those who do not.”¹²

Worship also allows your group members to more fully use their gifts. If you've got an amazing singer or guitar player, let them lead worship. If not, and your group wants to sing, pop in a CD or DVD. Make it work for your group.

5

MINISTRY 15 minutes

The Ministry portion of your meeting is what you might think of as taking prayer requests. But we'd ask you to take it a little bit deeper than that, and we'll discuss this below.

If you do decide to simply take prayer requests, split into groups of three or four, preferably dividing into men and women (certain struggles might be gender specific). And share your personal requests with each other and pray.

If you want to take this a little deeper, take a moment of silence as a group. Ask God's Spirit to move, bringing to mind any strong impressions—whether Bible verses or concerns or phrases. Let group members share these impressions, seeing if they resonate with anyone else. Then discuss them and pray together

You may find that God's Spirit reveals more this way than the conventional way of taking prayer requests.

This could be uncomfortable, but that's to be expected. Our culture is wary

of silence and mystery. Yet, silence is hugely beneficial for us physically.¹³ And spiritually, silence is an ancient Christian practice that most of us have lost.

Once you get past the initial discomfort, you'll be in a place where you're quietly allowing God to speak to your group.

6

FELLOWSHIP 15 minutes

Give your group some time after the meeting to casually interact. Before you wrap up you could say, "Stick around for the Final Fifteen—where we hang out and talk." Making it an extension of your meeting encourages people to participate. They'll enjoy the chance to bond while they talk about sports, work, family, or whatever else.

Be sure to end the meeting on time so everyone has the chance to interact. Group members may have babysitters waiting or other obligations, and you don't want them to rush out before fellowshipping.

SECTION

III

4

COACHING TIPS

TO MAKE EVERYONE'S

MEETINGS BETTER

4 COACHING TIPS



Okay, so let's say you've implemented the *9 Things Every Small Group Should Do* and the *6 Meeting Ingredients*. Now your small group is healthy and growing. Your job is done if you're strictly a small group leader. But if you're a pastor or a small group ministry leader, it's time to replicate that success.

How do you do that? Coaching.

When a church coaches its small group leaders, those groups experience more conversions, growth, community, and group multiplication than groups that aren't coached.¹⁴ In other words, they are literally healthier in every way.

Healthy groups grow, and growing groups, remember, are the number one factor in church growth.¹⁵

So here's a quick way to start coaching.



SHARE

Share this guide with all your group leaders. Email it. Add it as a link to your church website. Print it, staple it, and hand it out. Whatever works for you.

Partners In Ministry will not hunt you down for copyright infringement. We encourage you to share this guide. We created it to help you and help others.

2

MEET

Start by meeting with your group leaders one-on-one to go over this guide and answer any questions. You should also continue to meet one-on-one with leaders once a month (more on that in the Bonus section). And get all the group leaders together at least twice a year, preferably a little more often than that.

3

VISIT

Visit group meetings from time to time to see how they're running. This is the best way to evaluate how your leaders are doing. It also gives you an opportunity to, first, praise them for all the good work they're doing, and, second, offer gentle correction if it's needed.

4

PRAY

Pray for group leaders by name. If your leaders are also praying for their group members, you've got a chain of prayer covering your entire small group ministry. And, as you learned earlier in this guide, prayer is the best way to positively influence your groups.

Unfortunately, many churches coach their leaders and still have ineffective small group ministries. There are two ways to avoid this:

A

COACH WITH THE RIGHT ADVICE

First, coach with the right advice. That's what this guide is for. You have on your screen (or in your hands) research-based solutions to help your small groups. There's no need for you to wonder how to coach or what your strategy should be. It's right in front of you. If you'd like to dig even deeper into small group ministry, consider the book *Small Groups Big Impact*.

B

COACH ACTIVELY

Second, coach actively. Get involved and stay involved. In their research, Jim Egli and Dwight Marable found:

Of all the questions on the survey, one emerged as most important. That question asks small group leaders: "My coach or pastor meets with me to personally encourage me as a leader." Leaders who respond with "often" or "very often," have groups that are stronger in every health and growth measure!¹⁶

Yes, coaching actively might be a lot of work. But what's at stake here? Church growth? Sure. But that's not the main thing. This is about people's lives. They need to be part of a healthy small group—it's where they form intimate bonds, share their struggles, grow in Christ, and become true disciples. That eternal impact makes it worth the extra time.

by Jacob Ward

In his book *Revenge of the Analog*, David Sax makes the case that good old-fashioned, analog products aren't going anywhere. And it isn't just because hipsters are buying vinyl records and Polaroid cameras. It's far more complex than that. What's clear is digital isn't taking over quite like many predicted. Especially in the realm of books.

Publishers should rejoice at this statistic: 18-29 year-olds are more likely to have read a book in the last year than those 65 and older (80% vs. 67%). But, here's the interesting part, they're also more likely than seniors to have read a *print* book (72% vs. 61%).¹⁷

So the generation coming up is reading more than their grandparents. And, contrary to what most of us would assume, they want to read on paper.

How does this relate to your small groups and your church? Well, sales of e-books have flatlined in the last few years while sales of print books are going up. It isn't just millennials that prefer print. It's everyone.

Sales of e-books have flatlined in the last few years while sales of print books are going up.

So if you're going to purchase small group curriculum, buy print copies. And encourage those with iPads and e-readers to buy the print copy too. And not just because they're outnumbered. There are really good reasons to read on paper.

Research shows that we retain abstract concepts much better when we read on paper versus reading on screens. And even more importantly, we're actually able to process that info and grapple with it in a more sophisticated way when it's on paper.

The bottom line: we learn better when we read paper books.

Why? Well, there are plenty of theories. I won't get into all of them. To sum them up in a common sense way: humans prefer physical things. People want to take notes, feel the pages, highlight, flip back and forth—all of it adds up to a much more immersive experience than a screen could ever offer.

Continued...

If you want to optimize your church members' ability to learn, buy print. Let them write, underline, highlight, and dog-ear the pages. Encourage them to put their electronic devices away—not because you're old-fashioned, quite the opposite actually: you're so up-to-date on the latest research, you'd hate to rob them of all the benefits of an analog world.

Partners In Ministry offers several small group studies that are 100% analog, which means they'll provide the most immersive and best learning experience for your group. The short answer formats of the following Bible studies get your group members diving into Scripture for answers.

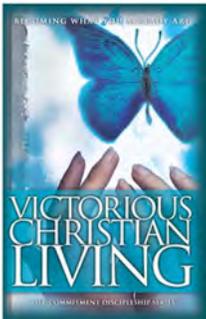


Seven Steps to Joy

The practical and straightforward approach of this 30-page booklet has made it our most popular discipleship resource. *Seven Steps to Joy* will give members of your group a solid biblical perspective on Assurance, Baptism, Church Attendance, Prayer, Bible Study, Giving, and Disciple-Making.

www.partnersinministry.org/7Steps

[Check It Out](#)

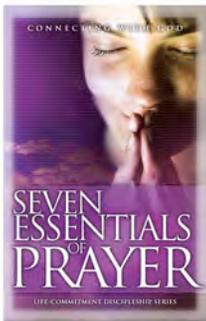


Victorious Christian Living

In an approachable, understandable way this 32-page booklet explains deep theological truths every Christian should know. This study helps your group develop a biblical worldview by covering topics such as spiritual warfare, our flesh versus our spirit, and the true nature of our relationship with God.

www.partnersinministry.org/VCL

[Check It Out](#)



Seven Essentials of Prayer

If you long for your group to enjoy the blessings of a prayer-filled life but aren't sure where to begin, this 32-page booklet offers seven insights to get them started. Based on the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6, *Seven Essentials of Prayer* will help your small group discover and practice the prayer principles of Jesus.

www.partnersinministry.org/7E

[Check It Out](#)



THE ASTERISKS

We want to give full credit to Jim Egli and Dwight Marable. We based much of this guide on their extensive research of 3,000 small group leaders from 200 churches in 21 countries.

You can browse and buy their book *Small Groups Big Impact* here:
www.partnersinministry.org/smallgroup



REFERENCES

¹ Egli, Jim and Dwight Marable. *Small Groups Big Impact*. ChurchSmart Resources, 2011. Page 87. Print.

² Ibid, page 65

³ Ibid, page 68

⁴ Ibid, page 56

⁵ Ibid, page 57

⁶ Ibid, page 68

⁷ Ibid, page 70

⁸ Ibid, page 23

⁹ Ibid, page 67

¹⁰ Ibid, page 68

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid, page 71

¹³ Gregoire, Carolyn. "Why Silence Is So Good For Your Brain." Huffington Post. January 2017. huffingtonpost.com May 2, 2017.

¹⁴ Egli, Jim and Dwight Marable. *Small Groups Big Impact*. ChurchSmart Resources, 2011. Page 86. Print.

¹⁵ Ibid, page 87

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ "Book Reading 2016" Perrin, Andrew. Pew Research Center. September 1, 2016. Accessed August 11, 2017. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/09/01/book-reading-2016/>