

The power of new

GROUPS



By Bruce Raley

New. Groups. Both of those words are powerful. Both have incredible impact on churches today.

New. There's something special about new things. A new car. New clothes. New job. New year. The new often creates a sense of excitement and enthusiasm. The *new* factor also can have a powerful impact in churches. New churches often grow faster than established ones. New worship services can reach more people. New groups have great potential for connecting more people and challenging them to mature in their faith.

Groups. *Transformational Groups*, a new book by Eric Geiger and Ed Stetzer provides insight into the power of groups within the ministry of the church. Research shows discipleship takes place best in the context of relationships. And relationships are more likely to be developed in smaller groups. In fact, groups are essential to effective discipleship.



New groups give great hope for church leaders. Therefore, every church leader should be intentional about starting new groups. New groups not only have the potential to reach more people for Bible study and life transformation, but they also have other incredible benefits.

New groups maintain more of an outward focus, rather than an inward focus.

It is often difficult for new people to break into groups that have been together for a couple of years. In a group, members get to know and love each other. That can inadvertently lead to the group becoming closed to newcomers.

New people often find it easier to connect with a new group, where everyone is forming new relationships. New groups are actively seeking to include new people in the group.

New groups are more likely to be evangelistically effective.

Churches are now surrounded with second- and third-generation unchurched neighbors. These second- and third-generation unchurched are not anti-church; they are simply apathetic-church. They simply don't know much about church or the Bible.

It wasn't too many years ago that a church had the ability to attract unchurched people through events, programming, and other attractional methods of evangelism. If a certain type of music was sung, technology

embraced, functional facilities built, some of the unchurched would be attracted.

Today, it's less common for the unchurched to be drawn to a church's come and see invitation. Instead, credibility and relationships are becoming more important.

New groups have great potential for connecting more people and challenging them to mature in their faith.

When people who don't know God are welcomed into a small group of people with the Bible at the center of the group's life, it creates a great environment for evangelism. Romans 10:17 says: "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the message about Christ." The principle is simple. When Christians develop relationships with people, it provides the credibility to share the Word of God. And when the gospel is shared, many of those people enter into a relationship with Jesus.

New groups provide opportunities for more people to be engaged in ministry.

Paul explained in 1 Corinthians 12:7 that every believer receives some

type of spiritual gift to be used for the benefit of the kingdom. He also reminded the believers in Ephesus that God calls different leaders to fulfill different roles so the local church body can be built up (see Ephesians 4:11).

Both passages imply that all Christians are called to be engaged in ministry. The Lord blesses every Christian with some spiritual gift for ministry and places them within a church with leaders to equip them for that ministry.

Clearly, a variety of gifts and people are needed to fulfill the diverse needs within a church. There must also be a place for those gifts to be exercised within the church. Where can a person with the gift of teaching exercise that gift? What about a person with the gift of service?

While other ministries can benefit from people with these gifts, the Bible study group is a great place for people to engage in ministry through their giftedness while doing so in community with other believers.

Each new group provides additional opportunities for people to be engaged in ministry.

Yes, there is power in *new*. And yes, *groups* are essential to the effectiveness of churches. But there can be even more power and effectiveness in *new groups*. ■

Bruce Raley is director of church education ministry at LifeWay.



Reaching your neighbors through groups

Groups are at the core of the mission of the church. Small groups, done right, are simply communities on mission together. However, a common struggle of groups comes in participating together as a disciple-making, evangelistic community. One of the easiest ways to use your group as a catalyst for evangelism is to invite your neighbors to your group.

Some people would not think of attending a church service, but would gladly go to a small group meeting where you were either hosting or attending. If they are already active in a local church, affirm them. If they are not, those are the neighbors you can pursue spiritually.

In addition to inviting neighbors to weekly group meetings, here are some practical ways members of a group can work together to reach out to neighbors. With a little forethought and planning, your Bible study group could host an event in your neighborhood with the intent of being on mission together. The members of your group can assist you. And along the way, they'll discover what it means to live on mission in a community.

I hope these ideas will serve as a jumping off point for many others that work best in your community. Use your own creativity to make welcoming environments where people can connect.

1. Fireworks

We hosted a neighborhood fireworks display for several years. Our neighbors gathered together and watched the fireworks. It was a great opportunity to meet people we didn't know. (If your community doesn't allow private fireworks displays, go with your small

group to the public one in your town. Invite your neighbors to go with you. Get out where the people are.)

2. Pool Party

If you have a pool, you can host a pool party for the people in the neighborhood. If you have a neighborhood pool (as we do), you can host it there.

Grill some meat and invite some of the neighbors you don't know. Be sure to provide sunscreen, towels, and lots of water.

3. Block Party

A church planter recently tweeted a picture of his neighborhood block party on the upper west side of Manhattan. I was encouraged to see this because if it can be done in Manhattan, it can be done anywhere. A block party is a fun event where all of the neighbors are invited. Throughout the year, your group can help facilitate one for every member of your group that lives in a neighborhood.

In some cities, a citywide push on a specific night acts as a "night out against crime." You could use this civic push to be the host of your block party. In fact, if you register your National Night Out block party online, they will send you

an NNO Organizational Kit filled with "how to" materials.

Consider having your block party on a holiday, such as Labor Day, Memorial Day, or the Fourth of July. Ask your neighbors to bring food or beverages. Your group could provide inflatable bounce houses or carnival type games. Kids will love it, and you'll make key connections with many of your neighbors.

These kinds of activities are a great opportunity to get to know your neighbors, but can be a challenge to pull off

alone. Groups can make the difference.

Groups are the most likely place where people are going to learn to think outwardly and live external-

"Groups are the most likely place where people are going to learn to think outwardly and live externally focused lives."

— Ed Stetzer

ly focused lives. Once you have five to 10 families living intentionally in their neighborhoods, your group will evangelize and disciple people you thought could never be reached. A community on mission together can make a significant impact.

A transformational group is a group that connects with God, with members of the group, and with those who are disconnected—in the church and in our neighborhoods. It starts with disciples who are following Jesus in community. ■

Ed Stetzer is president of LifeWay Research Division.



LAUNCH

New groups in 5 easy steps

By Rick Howerton

In the beginning of Acts, we see the early church growing by leaps and bounds. Paul writes that people were becoming followers of Christ every single day.

Isn't this the dream of every pastor? We long to work in tandem with God to see multitudes of lives redeemed by the gospel and to make mature disciples of them. But how does this happen? We just need to back up a few verses to find out.

In Acts 2, we see those gathered in the early church learning and obeying God's Word, living in deep and intimate fellowship with one another, and breaking bread in each other's homes while praying for God to do the things only He can do. They lived in such close community that when someone had a need others stepped in to help meet it.

We can see many come to Christ when the people in our churches devote themselves to those same things. But they happen best and most frequently in a small group, which is why it's vital we start new groups. Here are some keys to launching new groups you'll want to keep in mind.



“And every day the Lord added to them those who were being saved.”

(Acts 2:47b)

1. Find the appropriate location.

Sometimes new groups never get started because church leaders believe they can only meet in someone's home or the church building. But that's not the case. In fact, some of the most transformational groups meet in places where those who are far from Christ are most comfortable.

Some often overlooked locations are: coffee shops, work sites, restaurants, hospitals, convalescent centers, parks, workout centers, shopping malls, and college campuses. Each of those locations can meet the needs of a specific demographic. And the more demographics your church connects with, the more possibility there is of getting the gospel to various people groups.

2. Discover the right leaders.

Finding them may not be as difficult as you think. Potential group leaders are all around us. You can find them almost anywhere. They could be in established small groups or Sunday school classes, on the church staff, or serving on your hospitality team. You simply need to be open to whomever it is God is calling to lead your new group.

3. Recruit small group members who will stick.

Once you've established meeting locations and have commitments from group leaders, the most important ingredient in group life is still missing—group members.

Pray for God to place the right people in your group. Jesus spent meaningful time in prayer before inviting His apostles to join Him. God can use any number of ways to get people to consider joining a group. You should continually be in prayer for God to do what only He can do—place the right people in the right group.

4. Answer questions that may come up.

Clearly communicate to possible group members what the group will be about. Group members who are hes-

itant will probably be among the first to ask questions. You need to be prepared to respond to questions like these:

- How much time is this going to take?
- What are we going to do with our children during group meetings?
- Will there be homework? If so, how much?
- Am I going to have to talk or can I sit and listen during meetings?
- Who else is going to be in the group?
- How many weeks or months is the group going to last?
- If I don't like it, can I leave without people being angry with me? And can I join a different group?
- What are we going to do during meetings?

Being able to provide answers may be the key to people connecting with a group.

5. Invite possible group members to the first meeting.

A personal invitation will be the best way to gain a new group member. Try to make them as comfortable as possible. Remind them that everyone in the group will be new and getting to know one another for the first time. Assure nervous attendees they won't be asked to read or pray aloud until they are ready to so.

If you want to start a revolution in your church, start groups that start other groups. Like the first century church, we can change the world. Imagine the impact if we establish a biblical small group within walking distance of every person on the planet. ■

Rick Howerton (@RickHowerton) is discipleship and small groups specialist at LifeWay. Read more from Rick about starting new groups at Groups.Matter.com.



HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT BIBLE STUDY FOR YOUR CHURCH

By Ken Braddy

Curriculum comes from the Latin word *currere*, which means to *run*. The word curriculum was used during the Roman Empire to refer to the course used for races; the curriculum was the racetrack with its starting and finishing points.

Today, Bible study curriculum provides starting and ending points of a different kind. It also provides a lane in which the group leader and group members race toward the finish line of Christian maturity and spiritual transformation.

With all the Bible study choices available today, it's not always easy to find the right study (or studies) for your church or group.

There are also some common myths about curriculum that get in the way.

Myth #1: I need to find the perfect curriculum. There is no such thing. Some Bible studies will meet the needs of your people and the mission of your church better than others but none is perfect. No matter how good a particular curriculum is, group leaders will almost always have to adjust it to fit the needs of their group members.

Myth #2: The newest curriculum is best for my church. Maybe, maybe not. If you constantly change curriculum from one series to another, your group members will never complete a scope and sequence (the full range of topics covered and the order in which they are studied). It can also appear like you don't have a plan for people's spiritual growth. Find the type of Bible study that fits the culture of your church and stick with it.

Myth #3: Group leaders teach curriculum. Actually, group leaders teach people. Curriculum simply guides group leaders in what they should say and do in each session, and it provides a group plan including procedures and ideas for maximizing the participation in the Bible study. The most effective teaching requires a relationship with the group members.

Remember the adage, "Telling isn't teaching. Listening isn't learning."

Myth #4: Group leaders don't need curriculum.

They can simply teach the Bible. It makes sense on the surface, doesn't it? Why not allow the group leader to open the Bible, teach his or her favorite passages, and save the expense of buying curriculum? Because it tends to be a poor plan for teaching the entire counsel of God in age-appropriate ways and in a scope and sequence that takes into account the life-long developmental and spiritual needs of group members.

Selecting the Right Bible Study

There are several ways a church might go about choosing its curriculum. First, groups may decide on their own what they are going to study, with no input from a pastor or other church leaders. While this approach may have the appearance of empowering groups, it can lead to a "Judges 21:25" philosophy where everyone does what is right in their own eyes, which often leads to chaos.

The research in *Transformational Groups* by Ed Stetzer and Eric Geiger revealed that many pastors and church leaders don't know what their church's small groups are studying. That's troubling, said Stetzer and Geiger. "The reason great pastors are involved in resource choices is so nothing heretical is taught and no false teachings are espoused," they say.

A second and better approach is for pastors and church leaders to set guidelines for what Bible study (or Bible studies) are best for use in groups. A small task force including the pastor or other staff members could be formed to help select resources approved for use in the church based on cost, publisher, doctrine, leader resources, ease of use and other factors. The goal

is to make sure the curriculum fits the congregation's theology and approach to ministry. It's also a great way to facilitate communication, so everyone knows what's going on in the groups.

Pay attention to the starting point

We spent a lot of time at LifeWay thinking about starting points when working on Bible study curriculum.

We've identified four major starting points that help us match a group's preferred way of studying with a curriculum line. When those two things line up, the result is often a very satisfied group. When there is a bad match, a group will likely be unhappy with the curriculum.

Starting Point 1: Life. Some groups prefer topical Bible studies. The group members place a high value on knowing God's Word so they can apply it to their lives. *Bible Studies For Life* has a life starting point that guides the creation of those studies. Sessions are carefully crafted to address life issues group members regularly face. *Bible Studies For Life* uses five key discussion questions to guide the group experience and to create conversations among group members.

Starting Point 2: Text. Other groups prefer to study the text in its context so they can properly interpret it and apply it in their context today. *Explore The Bible* is a line of ongoing and short-term Bible studies with text as the starting point. The studies take a group through entire books of the Bible, and focus on major themes and application. In book after book and passage after passage, men, women, boys and girls, systematically explore their way through the books of the Bible.

Starting Point 3: Theology. Then there are groups that love studying theology so they understand a particular doctrine in light of the whole coun-



sel of Scripture. *The Gospel Project* has theology as its starting point. It helps group members understand how a particular doctrine is threaded through the hundreds of stories in the Bible, and how the Bible is one big story of God's redemption of humanity through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

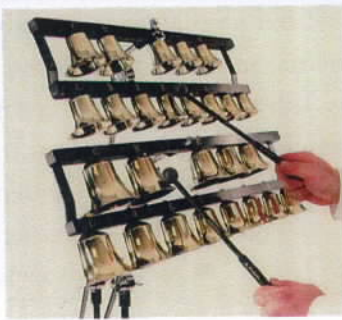
Starting Point 4: Your Church. An increasing number of churches desire to create sermon-based studies or unique Bible studies for their members. LifeWay has responded to this by helping them develop customized curriculum based on a church's needs, culture, and mission. A church can receive customized curriculum in about 30 days from LifeWay, created by experts who learn about the church, understand its needs, and design curriculum that creates great group dynamics.

The key is to select the right starting point for your church. If you choose a life curriculum and give it to a

group that prefers a text approach to Bible study, they won't be happy—and more important, they won't engage well with God's Word. Normally, the problem isn't with the curriculum itself; it's a matter of misalignment.

Choosing curriculum doesn't have to be difficult, but neither should it be taken lightly. Curriculum is a wonderful tool in the hands of group leaders, a tool that can lead people to faith in Christ. It disciplines them through God's Word, aids group leaders in their ministry to those under their care, and ultimately supports the church in its mission of making disciples. That's a course worth running. ■

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