

How to keep your small groups involved in discipleship

by Steve Gladen

Today, all around the world, people will join with other people in homes or restaurants or workplaces to study God's Word and grow in Christ together in a small group. In many cases, however, the results may be less than what Jesus desires.

Jesus said, "Go into all of the world and make disciples." But as Dallas Willard's book, [The Great Omission](#), points out, the Church doesn't always have a plan for doing that. It's as if the Great Commission had read, "Go into all of the world and make church members." That's certainly a worthy goal, but it stops far short of what our Savior commanded.

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Steve Gladen, pastor of small groups
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Community is belonging together, joining as part of the Body of Christ for the biblical purposes that Jesus charged us with keeping. And since small groups are also chartered with keeping the purposes, how do we turn them into small groups centered around God's purposes? And as a part of that, how do we ensure they're growing in discipleship?

Clearly, there are some things to be mindful of.

Don't let groups become fellowship-only groups. Even though fellowship may be the single greatest benefit cited by many people for why they get in a small group. "I want to have friends." "I want to make close friends." "I'd like to be able to count on people, just like family." Almost everyone wants those things. But left at just fellowship, people will just hang out together. While fellowship is critical for true discipleship to happen, when we just eat and fellowship together, the only growth we get is in our waist. Bringing in discipleship while maintaining fellowship is all part of balancing the purposes in group life.

Help them get regular spiritual checkups. Unlike physical checkups that are done by medical professionals, each member of your group can check his or her own spiritual vital signs with a quick assessment. In fact, you can get [tools](#) for your group members to use to see how they are doing in trying to live a purpose driven life.

Make sure your groups have something to chew on. If your ministry doesn't have a suggested small group curriculum pathway, your groups could wander away from the discipleship purpose. Help them know what to study next, based on where they are now spiritually. A great help for groups is for you to review the different curriculum-study resources that are available for small groups and simply make a list. Put studies in the order you think will work best.

A little structure goes a long way. Shape your groups' expectations for not only the length of group meetings but also for how to set up discipleship properly. Just like a worship service, great small group meetings have a certain rhythm. They start with fellowship to bond people together. Then, there is a time to focus hearts and minds on God. Next, there might be the time to get into discipleship, now that people are settled down and ready for the Word. Then, wrap up with praise and petitions in prayer, to remind all in attendance of our daily, minute-by-minute

dependence on God. The order can change somewhat, and groups can add in other things, but you can see how this meeting flow naturally sets up discipleship.

Keep it interesting. Jesus certainly wasn't boring and your small group discipleship elements shouldn't induce sleep, either. Regularly check with your groups to see which studies they're enjoying, growing with, and being excited by. A simple small group evaluation is what our groups do to track what's working, what's not, and what's next.

Help groups understand their role in discipleship. Train your hosts/leaders to remember that their small groups are the best place for discipleship. Remind them that members of their groups are able to apply what they're learning to real-life situations immediately as they discuss what they're learning in the group. As they see the applications of the group studies to their lives, the lessons take on greater value and thus are even more memorable to members. Being able to be with real people who live real lives that model how to live the Christian life further embeds the life application. Of course, the occasional groups that are filled with dysfunctional people don't have good models in them, but that's the subject of a different article.

Avoid lopsided leadership. Without a system and a structure to balance the five purposes (holistic discipleship), your small group will overemphasize the purpose that expresses the gifts and passions of its host/leader. So what do you do? What you don't do is make the leader change his or her giftedness. What you do is play to the strengths of the leader and *develop the other purposes* that aren't the strengths of the leader by getting the other members of the group involved. This way discipleship won't be left out.

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