

How to Help Your Small Group Live on Mission

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Almost everyone agrees that community is central to being the church. But what does that look like? All too often community gets reduced to being part of a small group where the primary activities include socializing, Bible study, and prayer. Nothing is wrong with these activities, but a key ingredient is totally missing—joining God’s work in the world!

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When I started my first full time job as a Pastor of Community Life, I couldn't have been more excited.

I was thrilled to land a job where my primary focus would be the multiplication of small groups. I channeled all of my energy toward studying biblical community, small group theory, and leading groups myself.

The first couple years in my new position could be considered a success: I visited groups, trained new leaders, developed coaching structures, and the number of groups grew from 40 to over 80.

But looking back, I now realize that **something about small groups just wasn't working.**

Small groups got hijacked

Sure, some great stuff was happening in some of our groups, but the vast majority did not reflect biblical community. Countless speed bumps along the way suggested that something was off. Instead of ordinary people doing life together and joining God's work in the world, I noticed that:

- We talked more about politics than following Jesus.
- We preferred studying popular books more than the Bible.
- We prayed more for other people's problems than our own.
- We remained closed to outsiders rather than open and inclusive.
- We were defined by affinity and shared interests more than diversity.
- We consisted of people coming to *get* rather than to *give*.

Now, let me be clear, I'm not against small groups. The problem isn't with small groups. **The problem is that small groups have been hijacked by the subtle power of consumerism.**

Instead of using their collective time and energy to engage their communities, small groups focused on consuming the latest small group curriculums, often jumping from one 40-day study to the next. “Studies” became the point with videos of celebrity pastors replacing actual local leadership.

Of course, **the elephant in the room for most small groups is not only a lack of mission, but also a lack of discipleship.** *Studies* don’t produce disciples. *Disciples* produce disciples.

The format of socializing around appetizers, working through some study guide questions, and praying for other people effectively left discipleship out.

But again, I’m not down on small groups! The original passion I felt in seminary to catalyze biblical community still drives me today. My conviction is that true biblical community has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.

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But when it has been tried it almost always turns into a movement that revitalizes the church, mobilizes ordinary people to join God’s mission, and turns the world upside down.†

Putting missional discipleship at the center

If small groups have historically been a catalyst for church revival, what are we missing? How can small groups be reclaimed as effective vehicles for the equipping and mobilization of the church?

The short answer is that **we must find ways to put missional discipleship at the center of our shared life together.**

Community Missions Matrix

Notice that **Kingdom Communities** are different from a **Holy Huddle** (i.e., most small groups), which often focus exclusively on growing in relationship with Jesus and investing in each other, without any outward mission.

Kingdom communities are also different from a **Stale Sunday School** class, which typically focuses on studying God's Word with only a limited sense of community and no engagement in the local community.

Finally, kingdom communities are also different from an **Isolated Evangelist**, who may be growing spiritually and actively sharing his or her faith, but is doing so alone without community.

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Making mission a priority

The key shift for the majority of small groups will be identifying a *missional element* for their community, a kingdom focus that they can engage in alongside one another on a regular and consistent basis.

Note that this is not the same thing as being a small group while tacking on an occasional service project. Service projects are NOT mission!

Rather, this is a group of people who have *discerned* what God is up to in their neighborhood or community and have organized their life together around participating in God's activity.

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We once had a group of high school students decide to be consistently present at a group home for individuals with disabilities. On a regular basis they committed themselves to being present, befriending, and loving residents with special needs in the way of Jesus.

After several months of this, our church was approached by those leading the group home asking if we would be willing to host [A Night to Shine](#), a prom night experience centered on God's love for people with various special needs. Needless to say, this was an incredible opportunity to show God's love in a tangible way.

As this group of high school students exercised the courage to join in God's work, their faithful participation led to an even greater opportunity for our entire church. And it was largely the result of our students shifting from the typical Wednesday night small group format to a community living on mission alongside one another.

What I love most about this story is that it started with high school students. I couldn't have been more proud of this group and others in our church community that are making similar shifts to break out of the small group mold and join God in both surprising and risky ways.

Next steps to shifting small groups toward mission:

- **Start a conversation** with your existing small group about joining God's work in your community. If you are not currently part of a small group, prayerfully make a list of people you can invite in on the conversation.
- **Discern mission as a group** by making a list of areas in the community that God might be inviting you to step into. This could be a place like your neighborhood, a partnership like the group home story above, or a people group that you feel especially called to serve and love.
- **Develop some rhythms** to support your life together that includes regularly seeking God, connecting in community with one another, and engaging your shared mission together.
- **Join a group** that's already living on mission. We have a handful of groups that are living on mission called [Kingdom Communities](#) that you can be a part of.

As you step into mission as a community, think more than *presence* more than *projects*. How can you be intentional and consistent in being present among a group of people as a community? Then simply keep noticing where God is at work and join him there!

Questions for discussion:

- Have you ever seen a small group live on mission together?
- What did that look like? How would you describe their life together?
- Which of the four next steps most align with where you are right now?
- What can you do to take your next step toward living on mission with others?
- What obstacles might get in the way for you and others?