

Inviting People into Small Groups

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Ultimately, invitation is the key to creating small groups. When an invitational culture permeates a church, people are more likely to be connected—to belong. Think what it would be like if every person—whether longtime member or visitor—felt invited to be a part of church groups. And consider how that experience would differ from a place where it takes extra effort just to squeeze your way in. An invitation to join a small group is a good way to make people feel welcome.

Who offers this invitation? The answer is simple: "Anyone." How nice to hear, "We want you to join a small group" or "A new small group is forming and we would like you to join us to see if it will meet your needs."

Small groups thrive when they meet the needs of the members. People bring different needs to their participation in a small group, and the mix of needs results in every group being different; however, there are some pervasive human needs and characteristics every group can work to meet. So, what are the needs frequently associated with an effective small group?

- Belonging
- Having a sense of place
- Fun
- Learning
- Accomplishing tasks
- Providing support to others
- Getting support from others
- Personal growth
- Friendships

Once a group forms, it will continue to meet a changing mix of needs as the group matures.

Even when people would benefit from a support group, they are not likely to announce that they are looking for a small group of people with whom they can develop long-term interpersonal relationships. People joining a small group will more likely need to be found and asked than they will seek out and find a small group. Announcements, sign-up sheets, bulletin inserts, or any of the other forms churches use to distribute information are not likely to catch more than a few people willing to start or join a small group. That brings us back to the invitation.

I recently asked the 11 other people in the small group I attend why they came to the first meeting nearly 16 years ago. All of them talked about the invitation they had received from one of the two founding couples. When I asked how many of them came to the first meeting reluctantly, about half raised a hand. None of them would have put their name on a sign-up sheet indicating they were interested or willing to join a small group. So why did the group get started? And more important, why has it continued for 16 years? The reasons:

- The invitation was personal and direct.
- The projected schedule asked for a six-week commitment.
- The option to leave after six weeks was genuine.
- The initial purpose was clear.
- The leaders were effective.

- The first six weeks of lessons and activities were interesting to group members.
- The participants discovered something of value for themselves.

As well as that initial invitation worked 16 years ago, I offer this cautionary note about invitational groups: the danger or problem with inviting people to join groups is that someone may not get invited! As the church initiates its small group program, intentional inclusiveness is essential. People should be able to say "No," but no one should be denied the opportunity to say "Yes."

Your planning group, therefore, has a difficult choice to make—either develop a small group program so extensive that every person can be invited to join or develop a smaller start-up plan while clearly communicating that, as the program gets established, other people will have the opportunity to become participants. Be careful to avoid creating a start-up small group program that becomes or even appears to be elite, exclusionary, or selective.

Based on what your planning group knows and understands about your congregation, it can best determine how the initial invitations to join a group are most effectively made. The planning group may decide to invite people by neighborhood groupings, their age, identification as new members, marital status, or some indication of interest determined by a survey or questionnaire. Creating the lists of potential members offers a church the opportunity to develop multigenerational and heterogeneous groups that reflect the community demographics.

Your planning group, using the knowledge it has about your church, can design an effective system of inviting people to become members of a small group. The invitations should be made in a variety of ways and the groups will be organized to meet the presumed needs of persons in the congregation. The planning group also knows that effective groups need good leadership. Whether it comes from within the group or from outside, leadership is a key ingredient for the startup of a small group program.

When people come together in a setting that allows them to know one another better, to deepen their sense of spirituality, and to engage in activities that support each other, the effect will be noticeable in a congregation. It will be more difficult for an individual to stand in the midst of a group of worshipers on Sunday morning and still feel isolated and alone. People will be able to connect. The experience of invitation and connection could even become epidemic.

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