

How to Launch New Groups with a Small Group Connection

By Mark Howell

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Backstory

A little more than 20 years ago I began leading the small group ministry at Fellowship of the Woodlands (now Woodlands Church). Fellowship was about 6 years old and growing like a weed; attendance was growing faster than volunteers and leaders could be identified.

I was a volunteer.

I had some previous staff experience leading small group ministries in a couple other churches, but never in a church growing like Fellowship.

Because of my previous experience, I was recruited to lead the small group ministry. As I said "yes" I was handed an 8" stack of completed small group sign up forms and told "good luck finding leaders for the new groups you launch."

I'm not making this up.

What happened next

I had heard about a strategy Saddleback was using called a Small Group Connection. Essentially, small group sign ups were invited to an event where they were sorted out by affinity (marital status, life stage, geography, day of the week preference, etc.) and led through a process that helped each group identify the person they determined was the best candidate to lead the group for a six week study.

Although I'd never seen a Small Group Connection, I had successfully used a similar strategy Willow Creek had experimented with about 2 years earlier.

They say desperate times call for desperate measures and I was given permission to test the Small Group Connection strategy with the stack of sign up forms.

We sent an email invite to the stack of sign ups and about 75 people showed up for our first Small Group Connection. We started 8 new groups (and identified 8 new leaders).

Over the course of the next 4 years we launched hundreds of new groups and connected thousands of unconnected people. At the time I left Fellowship of the Woodlands we had built a small group ministry of nearly 400 groups and over 3500 group members.

Since that time I have personally used the Small Group Connection strategy in the 5 churches where I served as small group pastor. I've also taught hundreds of churches to use this strategy across the country and around the world as a consultant and coach.

The Connection Strategy Evolves and Circle Up Emerges as the Perfect Study

Over the years we've used many different studies in the groups launched by a small group connection. Always video-driven (eliminates the need for the group to have a "teacher"). Almost always 6 sessions in length (6 weeks is short enough for unconnected people to commit to and long enough for real connection and belonging to begin to take hold).

When North Point introduced a study called Circle Up about 3 years ago, it became our go to study for launching new groups with a small group connection. The video content of Circle Up does a good job teaching the value of community and the essential qualities of an effective leader. In addition, Circle Up is designed to help each group member tell their story, knitting members together over the first 4 to 6 sessions.

Because of the effective design of Circle Up, it was the obvious candidate for the study of choice to be used in the groups we formed in small group connections.