

Make Mission Part of Your Small Group

Don't miss this key part of discipleship.

Alan Danielson

Many people think the primary purpose of small groups is to help people get connected so they won't leave the church. After all, it's by being connected to the church that people become disciples, right? Wrong! I could not disagree with that philosophy more. Small groups are much more than just a tool to keep people from leaving church. Being connected to a church can provide strong Christian relationships (which are necessary), but that's not enough.

Still others think that small groups exist to be Bible studies. Many churches put a premium on Bible study and Bible teaching, and these have historically produced believers who are very biblically literate. After all, knowing the Bible transforms people. Right? Not necessarily. There are plenty of people who know the Bible well but still live and behave like pagans. In 1 Corinthians 8:1 Paul wrote, "While knowledge may make us feel important, it is love that really builds up the church" (NLT). Bible studies can provide strong Christian knowledge (which is necessary), but that's not enough.

Remember, Jesus' parting words in Matthew 28:19 were to "go and make disciples of all nations." Discipleship is so much more than Christian relationships and Christian knowledge. Those are two ingredients, but without a third ingredient, true discipleship doesn't happen.

So what's that third ingredient? Christian action. "Christian" means imitating Christ, and Jesus' method for making disciples looked a lot different than the methods we find in most of our churches. How did Jesus promote Christian relationships, knowledge, and action? By living on mission.

Mark and Amy's Group

Mark and Amy had a small group of six people and they decided to participate in a one-day mission event coordinated by their church. The mission was to take backpacks filled with school supplies to the poorest elementary school in the area and give them to every student enrolled.

Something happened to Mark and Amy's group that day that they didn't expect. They saw more than just happy kids getting free stuff—they saw kids who needed role models, single moms who needed love and ongoing support, and one fourth grade teacher in particular who really grabbed their hearts. When the event was over, they asked the teacher if she would let them adopt her class for the entire school year. She didn't really know what they meant, but she said yes.

Every time that class had a party, Mark and Amy's group was there with cupcakes. Every time there was a school play, the group was there to cheer on the kids. Every time there was a field trip, the group was there to chaperone. Every time there was a need in the class, the group was there to meet it.

Before long Mark and Amy's group started inviting the kids to church with them; sure enough, the kids came. Every weekend the group would walk into church with three or four extra kids. Soon one of the kid's mothers came to church, too. And one weekend, that mom gave her life to Christ! Eternity was changed because a group handed out school supplies and then went all out in love.

Misplaced Priorities

Our small groups need to quit worrying about whether or not a lesson is prepared every week. We need to stop being so obsessed with how everyone feels about our groups. We certainly need to quit focusing so much attention on who is bringing enchiladas to group next week. Enchiladas! What we need to do is become more like Mark and Amy's group. We need to focus more of our attention on reaching a world that desperately needs Jesus.

No greater learning comes than what we learn on mission. No greater fellowship is experienced than what we experience on mission. No greater disciples are produced than those produced on mission. When we get off the couch with our small groups and live together on mission, we'll learn a ton, love each other more, and truly be Jesus' disciples.

It's time for your group to get up. Go out. Look with Jesus' eyes. Find a cause. Meet needs. Share the gospel. Change the world!

The Band of Brothers Effect

Veterans who return from war describe a connection to the other men in their units that is unlike anything else. During basic training these men came from all over the country. They had different religious backgrounds, different accents, different family traditions, and different political views. Often these men don't like each other upon their initial meeting. It wasn't uncommon in such environments for men in the same unit to get into arguments that ultimately came to blows.

Then a day came when these men who didn't even like each other were forced to fight alongside one another. They saw fellow soldiers getting wounded and killed, and suddenly everything changed. Religion, politics, family background, and accents didn't mean anything anymore. Those barriers were broken down to the point that men who didn't like each other two days before would now risk their lives for one another. Years later, war veterans gather for annual reunions. Each year they seem to be able to pick up right where they left off. These men who didn't like each other wound up being friends for life.

What made the difference? *They had a shared mission.*

Along a similar line, what those soldiers learned in their training was good to a point, but it was combat that became their best teacher. Suddenly all the drills they'd been through made more sense. Suddenly the countless hours spent cleaning guns and preparing gear were worth it. Suddenly that mean drill sergeant back home didn't look so bad. Before combat they had

knowledge, but afterward they had experience. What made the difference? Again, it was the mission.

Discipleship Comes from Mission

Make no mistake, you and the members of your small group are in a war. It's a spiritual war, and the cost is human souls. Eternity is at stake and church leaders have been given the sobering task of equipping God's army for this war. So we must take careful aim!

Consider the three ingredients for discipleship: relationships, knowledge, and action. When we aim our small-group discipleship methods at relationships and knowledge, we don't get action. Not to any great degree, anyway. Yet when we aim our small-group discipleship methods at mission, we get all three.

How did Jesus make disciples? He invited them to be a part of the mission. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men" (Mark 1:17). He didn't invite them first to the upper room for a Bible study. He invited them to the mission! Jesus paints a word picture of the church in Matthew 16:18: "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." He didn't picture the church holed up in Sunday school rooms studying Scripture so we could keep Satan at bay. He painted a picture of the church on mission—the mission of storming Hell's gates and liberating the souls of people who are damned without Christ.

When we are on Christ's mission together, we have fellowship that can't be explained. When we are on Christ's mission together, the things we've learned from his Word become more meaningful. When we are on Christ's mission together, our actions make a difference.

Do you want your small group to create true disciples? Then your strategy must include mission.

—Alan Danielson is a speaker and consultant; copyright 2010 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. When have you been part of a group that was missional or served together? What was it like?
2. How does focusing on mission help your group members grow as disciples?
3. How might engaging in mission actually result in close relationships and knowledge of God?