

When Your Group Has Plateaued Spiritually

How to infuse new life into your group

By Michael C. Mack

As a small-group minister and consultant, I've noticed a disheartening fact: many groups in America have plateaued. They're not growing or reproducing, and group members aren't becoming more Christlike.

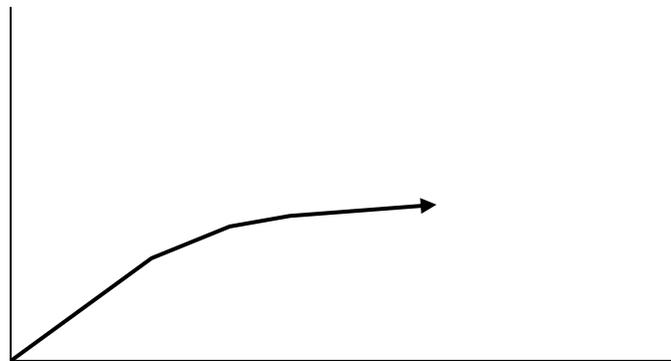
Why do small groups settle for *average*? Why do we settle for good-enough meetings led by ordinary leaders who have okay spiritual lives? Why do so many groups simply have basic Bible studies, engaging in surface-level conversations while sitting on their comfy couches? So many have drifted into mediocrity, becoming "nice little groups."

I believe small-group community is the environment where spiritual growth happens best. That's why plateaued groups exasperate me so much. Your neighbors won't want to join a group like this. These groups will never have an impact on the community. They will not transform lives. Worst of all, these stagnant, plateaued, narcissistic groups dishonor God

See, *good* small groups are the enemy of *great* small groups. Jim Collins opens *Good to Great* with these wise words: "Good is the enemy of great. And that is one of the key reasons why we have so little that becomes great." God promises to make us into something great (Genesis 12:2). Yet countless small groups settle for *good*. They acquiesce to ordinary and adequate rather than strive for transformational ministry.

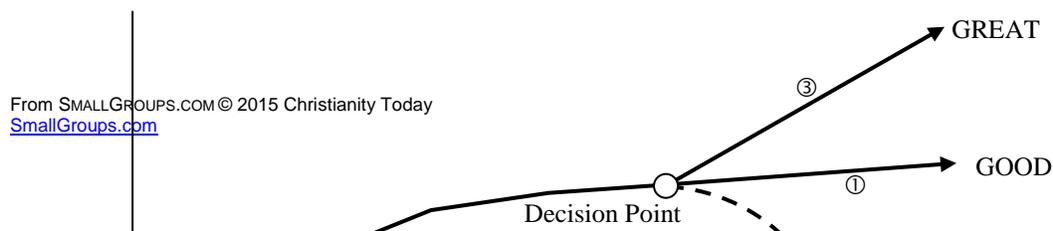
In his book, *The Relational Way*, Scott Boren discusses the fact that we've settled for "a life of spiritual mediocrity and below average small groups." In these groups, he says, "people gather every week to help each other feel better about their lives, but there is no call to war, no call to enter into the spiritual battle to lead men and women from captivity. Instead, small groups become enclaves for what Eugene Peterson calls the spirituality of narcissism." Do Scott's observations infuriate you as much as they do me?

Small groups generally don't start off with plateauing as their goal. I think most groups want to accomplish something great for God. Along the way, however, they lose their focus and begin to stagnate. Their growth curve looks like this:



Groups come to a decision point along their journey where they must choose one of these three options:

- continue settling for the comfort of *good*
- fall into a death spiral and eventually be *gone*
- get out of their comfort zones and pursue *great*



A good group can remain in this plateaued state for years. They simply drift along being lukewarm without ever making much of a difference. This is sad. Jesus says about such people, "I never knew you" (Matthew 7:21–23) and "I spit you out of my mouth" (Revelation 3:16). I don't think we want to settle for *good*!

At least a group that is declining does not continue to perpetuate this unhealthy position. Some groups just need to die and allow members to join new groups that launch with healthier values.

Reclaim God's Mission

Missional is a popular word in the vocabulary of Christian writers and speakers. The way I like to define it is simply, "God's mission is our mission." A great group is focused on God's mission rather than group members' agendas.

The fact is, many small groups in America are not mission-minded. They are good at caring for one another and studying the Bible That *is* good—but it's not great! In *Good to Great*, Collins discusses the need to "confront the brutal facts." You and your group members need to honestly and diligently confront the brutal facts of how your current reality compares to the truth of God's Word. This examination may lead you to a major decision point in your life together: to move off your comfy couches to do something God-sized, or to remain where you are and maintain the status quo.

Getting out of your comfort zone to do ministry together places you in a position where you must depend more on God than yourselves. This stimulates growth. It also takes the focus off yourselves and your troubles and turns you instead to think of others first.

One of my favorite movies is *Groundhog Day*. Phil, the main character played by Bill Murray, keeps reliving the same day, Groundhog Day, over and over. He wakes up to the same song, goes through the same motions, and meets the same people every day. That would be pretty boring if it weren't for some intriguing character development. Over time, instead of turning bitter because of his circumstances, Phil begins using the unique opportunities he has to serve others. His heart begins to change, which finally changes his circumstances. The movie is a good illustration of this basic truth: serving others develops our character and changes our heart.

The Difference Between Good and Great

What do great groups do that good groups miss? Here are five activities I've noticed as I've consulted various churches:

Great groups change things up.

Plateaued groups are stagnant groups. Usually the group has become predictable—same old study in the same old place at the same old time with the same old people. Your group may also be so tied to your same old agenda that the Holy Spirit feels like an uninvited guest. So shake things up! It may be as simple as switching your agenda around from meeting to meeting, or you may need to completely throw it out. Before you do anything, though, prayerfully evaluate your focus. Be sure you are pursuing God's agenda for the group.

Great groups invite new people.

Groups must be intentional about inviting new people or they will become closed cliques. It's not enough, though, simply to invite new people. Make sure you're open and welcoming when they attend. Make them feel like part of the group. Talk about this often as a group. The "empty chair" is an old standby to help group members remember that the group is open to new people. Simply leave at least one chair empty at every meeting and remind everyone that you still have space to invite others.

Great groups share their faith.

This seems so painfully obvious to me that I hate to even spend much time on it, but the problem is that many small groups are plateaued simply because they are ignoring the very first word of Christ's commission for us: "Go." Instead, too many groups stay in huddles. We stay in our closed meetings, our comfy living rooms, and our comfort zones—and we wonder why we've plateaued. Our unarguable call is to "Go and make disciples of all nations." We don't need another Bible study about it. It's time to pray and just do it.

Great groups serve others.

When you notice that your group has plateaued, one of the easiest ways to step out of your holy huddle is to serve people outside the group. Change the focus of your group from "us" to "them." As I mentioned earlier, serving others changes your hearts as well.

Great groups have God-sized plans.

I challenge small groups to do something so big that if God isn't in it, it's destined to fail. I call these "God-Sized Plans" or GSPs. In Acts 5:38–39, one of the Pharisees described the ministry of the apostles in God-sized terms: "If their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God." A GSP is always focused outside the group, making an impact on the community and world. Pursuing a God-Sized Plan purposely moves a group out of safety and security and into taking great risks with great faith. I encourage groups to ask God what he would want them to do. I think you'll find that God will do immeasurably more than we could ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

Jim Collins closes his book by encouraging readers, "Get involved in something that you care so much about that you want to make it the greatest it can possibly be, not because of what you will get out of it, but because it can be done." And not just because it can be done, but because God can do it. He will accomplish great things through great, growing groups like yours.

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Discuss

1. When have you been part of a plateaued group? How did you know it had plateaued?
2. How missional is your small group? Are you more focused on caring and sharing or on serving those outside the group?

Which of the five practices are most appealing to you? Which are scariest? Why?