

## LEADING SMALL GROUPS TO BE EVANGELISTIC

By Chuck Lawless

As a pastor, I learned early that small groups are essential to a church. They provide opportunities for growth that we could not offer in a large group setting. Members cared for each other when I could not possibly be there to meet every need in the church. More specifically, small groups became a central player in our church's evangelistic strategy.

Most healthy churches have both *open* groups and *closed* groups. Open groups use an on-going curriculum that allows guests to enter the study at any point; do not have a set calendar limit (e.g., the number of weeks meeting); emphasize evangelism, with the goal of becoming an entry point for guests; and strive to grow enough to multiply at least annually. Closed groups use a set curriculum that limits entrance once a study has started; typically meet for a set number of weeks; emphasize discipleship, with the goal of strengthening a believer's walk; and strive to grow believers who then reach out to others.

The problem in most churches is this: open groups essentially become closed groups when steps are not taken to avoid this direction. Because evangelism is difficult, many open groups see few unbelievers attending their group. The default position is to focus more on believers. The evangelistic focus thus quietly disappears as the group slowly becomes closed.

How does a church make sure that open groups remain evangelistic?

*Be aware of indicators that an open group is losing its evangelistic focus.*

I know of no open group that intentionally decides to be inwardly focused. Nor have I ever heard a small group leader proclaim, "I really don't want our group to reach outsiders." I have, though, seen many open groups lose their evangelistic focus. Watch for these indicators that an open group is moving in the wrong direction:

- a failure to reproduce another group at least every two years
- a leader who refuses to raise up an apprentice to lead another group
- a steady decline in the number of guests who attend the small group
- group members who complain that "the curriculum is not deep enough for us"—thus showing they believe the group is more for them than for others
- no new group members within the last six months
- no planned fellowship/outreach events within the last six months.

*Choose the right small group leaders.*

Most, if not all, problems in small groups can be fixed by selecting the right leaders. A strong small group leader will teach anywhere, reach out to anybody, and make any curriculum work. Likewise, the right small group leader will help the group keep its focus on evangelism.

## Lawless

If your groups are intended to be evangelistic, seek these characteristics in leaders:

- good teaching skills so that believers and non-believers alike will want to attend and learn. A boring small group leader will lull a group into irrelevance.
- a stated willingness to reproduce the class – that is, to reach people, train them, and send the strongest out to begin another class. A small group leader who is unwilling to send out “class missionaries” will not lead his class to be evangelistic.
- a lifestyle of personal evangelism. Few small group leaders suddenly focus on evangelism when they start to lead a group.

*Continually challenge small group members to think about non-believers.*

This practical step sounds almost too basic, but it is critical. The longer people are in a church, and the higher they rise in church leadership, the more likely is that they will be disconnected from non-believers. Without realizing it, most of us get cocooned in the church world. We get comfortable in our world and almost dare outsiders to disrupt it.

Good small group leaders push hard against this tendency. They ask group members to share names of non-believers for whom they are praying. They hold members accountable for intentionally developing relationships with unbelievers. They model evangelism by telling stories of persons for whom they are praying. They lead the small group to plan fellowship activities that unbelievers might attend.

They may even employ an old-fashioned means of focusing on evangelism: an empty seat in the room to remind group members that others are yet to be reached. What seems silly to some is still a visual reminder for the group – and the best small group leaders can use even this strategy effectively.

*Celebrate when group members become believers.*

What better way to rejoice than to throw a party when a non-believer chooses to follow Christ? The small group that has prayed for that person, reached out to her, invited her to fellowships, and welcomed her into the group surely is ready to celebrate when God changes her heart. Bake a cake, buy some ice cream, and give some presents!

In fact, the gift options are numerous – a Bible, Christian music, a devotional guide, a journal, Christian books, and a family magazine subscription are all possibilities. The gift need not be elaborate to let the new believer know that you celebrate what God has done.

Here’s the point: God-honoring, Christ-centered celebrations will help your small group’s evangelistic outreach. Clearly and intentionally praise the Lord every time He uses your group as a means to change a life – and then ask Him to use your group again. Evangelistic small groups are actually quite fun when evangelism takes place and lives are transformed.