

# TOGETHER

THE POWER OF GROUPS



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## CHAPTER 1: ALONE AND YET IN FELLOWSHIP

In *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, J.R.R. Tolkien's final book describes the quest to destroy the one ring that was more powerful than all the others. It was a burden one hobbit had to bear alone. Virtually no one else could resist the selfishness that overtook them when they got near the powerful ring. Yet the parallel theme throughout the entire trilogy was the need for fellowship.

Frodo would never have had the chance to do what only he could do if the fellowship of the ring (the other hobbits, the elf, the wizard, the dwarf, and the two men from different cultures) had not joined forces for the mission. The trust and friendship they built along the way allowed them to persevere and to bring out the best in each other.

A similar theme emerged in another science fiction series. The *Star Wars* movies repeated these balancing themes as they shared heroic stories of members of the resistance. While most of the movies demonstrated this thread, none is more evident than in the final movie, *The Rise of Skywalker*. The leading character, Rey, was the only one who could face the emperor. Yet her friends would not let her go alone. While she battled the demons from within, she neither wanted to acknowledge the need for help nor was willing to completely open-up to her friends and mentor about what she was facing. Yet, her friends helped her battle the First Order and Sith forces to get her to that final showdown.

A local church is not set in a mythical world, yet the people in and around a church are each facing their own battles. Each is facing difficulties such as relationships, their past, stress, debt, work, loneliness, shortcomings, anxiety, and other obstacles.

What is the church's role? How is the church designed to help in this real world?

First the local church must help each person understand their purpose—to glorify their Creator. However, each of us was born relationally separated from God through sin. Restoring this relationship was not possible for any human. But God in His love and mercy paid the penalty for our sin through Jesus' death on the cross in our place. He offers this payment as a gift to each person. Acceptance of this gift is something that each person must do alone. No one else can do it for us.

Considering none of us were born seeking God and His redemption, this first task for the church can sometimes take a long time. It is not that the information is hard to understand, but people are not born able to see, hear, or understand it. Until the Holy Spirit turns on the light, they remain in darkness. Building relationships with non-believers allows us to share the reason for our hope in Christ. While we pray for them and share of God's compassion, He may move in grace to draw them to repentance.

Once an individual accepts the gift of salvation, they know God in a way they never could before. And they begin the journey of walking with Him. God not only defined their purpose—to glorify Him—He also designed how they would survive and thrive on this journey.

The second role of the local church is to walk with these disciples in relationship. As a believer walks with Him, they are capable for the first time of accomplishing their mission in life of bringing Him glory through their obedience. This journey is not a three-week course or a season long confirmation class or even a once a week worship service. It is a difficult, lifelong journey of obedience.

What was God's design for how we would grow in obedience? Friendship with other believers. Our transformation and our worship occur best together with other believers.

Notice the parallel track of helping individuals both approach God alone and in fellowship. The local church cannot do or emphasize

one without the other. We must foster these relationships among followers of Christ and call people to personally invest in them.

The apostle John illustrates God's design with great emphasis in his first letter.

In 1 John 4, John's focus is on Christians loving one another. He points out both the individual nature of our relationship with God and the friendships with other believers that are also intrinsic to being a follower of Jesus Christ. John wrote, "Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God—God remains in him and he in God" (1 John 4:15).

Verse 15 emphasizes that each of us must become in relationship with God personally and individually. John's choice of the pronouns "him" and "he" were not to say this relationship was only for men—far from it. Just as it is in the English language, John did not have personal pronouns available for him in Greek that encompass both sexes. If John isn't emphasizing gender what is he emphasizing? His use of singular pronouns emphasizes that our relationship (or lack of relationship) with God is personal and individual. We come to know Him personally through Jesus Christ.

But the context of this description of salvation is within a larger discussion of friendships among followers of Christ. Granted the word "friendship" sounds a little trite, because it is so much more, our relationship as believers involves sharing the profound experience of salvation that unites us. Our relationship also includes our shared purpose of glorifying God together. But John's point in emphasizing our love for each other is that these should also be genuine friendships full of trust, honor, and granting each other the benefit of the doubt.

Something greater is possible because of these relationships. Our life's purpose and mission are even enhanced by these relationships.

John further wrote, "If we love one another, God remains in us and his love is made complete in us" (1 John 4:12).

John has switched from individuals to referring to believers together; we who invest in our relationships with other believers and put them ahead of ourselves; we, who love one another, will see God remaining in us and His love being made complete in us. Only when we follow God in fellowship, in relationships, in friendships, in love with other Christ-followers, will our love relationship with God be complete.

In case there is any doubt that taking this journey alone is still an option, notice what John wrote previously in verse 8: “The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love.”

Our purpose in life—bringing glory to God by knowing, loving, and enjoying Him—cannot be accomplished without living in loving friendships with other followers of Christ.

J. R. R. Tolkien and J.J. Abrams, the director of the final Star Wars film, did not invent the fellowship or friendship around life’s greatest quest. They simply mirrored what God had designed.

## CHAPTER TWO: OUR LACK OF STRONG TIES IS STUNTING OUR GROWTH

Between 1994 and 1996, a game appeared among movie lovers entitled Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon. One player would mention an actor or actress and the other(s) would try to connect that individual to Kevin Bacon with the fewest connections. The links connecting them were the movies in which two actors both appeared. As the name implies, the assumption is that any actor or actress could be connected to Kevin Bacon in six people or less.

While the Albright college students credited with inventing the game likely had read the Kevin Bacon quote that he had worked with everyone in Hollywood, there is more to the game than the large number of movies in which Bacon appeared. That fact definitely helps the game, but the principle is that the movie world is a small world.

Similarly, sociologists have estimated that any two people in our small world are six acquaintances or less apart from any other person. Yes, even on the other side of the globe! While that is impossible to actually prove, the long-distance connections people now have through social media, travel, and technology are reducing the distance between you and anyone else in this world.

A sociologist by the name of Mark Granovetter first posed his famous theory that all of us have strong ties (close, significant friends who we trust, give the benefit of the doubt, and are influenced by) and weak ties (acquaintances who we interact with less, are less invested in, and are less influenced by).

Granovetter is the author of the #1 and #3 most cited sociology articles. In the world of academic writing that is huge. His theory is the linchpin holding together what many sociologists think about the structure of society today.

His book, *The Strength of Weak Ties*, emphasized the weak ties in our lives. He said that if we were to map all of the relationships in a society, these weak ties actually create structural strength because they travel longer distances and create shortcuts. It is these weak ties that is making our world smaller and creating connections in ways that previously were not possible.

Malcolm Gladwell amplified this theory in his book, *The Tipping Point*. He said, "I'm convinced that ideas and behaviors and new products move through a population very much like a disease does. This isn't just a metaphor, in other words. I'm talking about a literal analogy... Ideas can be contagious in exactly the same way that a virus is."<sup>1</sup>

Weak ties continue to multiply in our world particularly through social media. Strong ties are steadily disappearing as people increasingly distrust or devalue the institutions where they used to build relationships such as civic organizations, town hall meetings, unions, and churches. Isolation and loneliness have become much more common. Today the majority of Americans believe worshipping alone or with one's family is a valid replacement for regularly attending church.<sup>2</sup> This is not just true among young adults. It is true across all ages.

While Gladwell's book was a bestseller, most of us would admit we don't hang around sociologists much. Yet our lives have been greatly impacted by these explanations of trends in our society. Marketers and politicians have picked up on this principle and have been following the roadmap to benefiting from these weak ties in our society.

Think of the last major world event that occurred. How did you hear about it? Chances are that the news travelled through a network of weak ties before you heard it. You may have heard it from a weak tie you follow on social media or a strong tie (friend or family member of yours) heard it in that way and then shared it with you.

Information travels very fast. Television shows that were once integral in our society, like the evening news or ESPN's Sports Center, have become optional even for those most enthusiastic about news and sports. The fact is you can get the information faster through your network of weak ties.

Many churches have responded to these realities by intentionally engaging on social media. Staff members actively read and respond to life events among their congregation. Church events are chronicled on Facebook and Instagram. Ministry ideas are collected and shared on Pinterest and Twitter.

Yet, with all this momentum following these weak ties in our lives, there is something that this theory misses. Recently Damon Centola's book, *How Behavior Spreads*, challenged one of the assumptions in the theory. He contends that many behaviors do not spread like ideas and information. Yes, the knowledge that a behavior exists can travel fast through weak ties, but he says there is an important distinction between knowing a behavior exists and actually adopting it.

In the book, he seeks to prove (which in the sciences is a quest that is never complete) strong ties are actually necessary to spread behavioral change. When you hear about a potential behavior, huge questions must be answered before you adopt that behavior.

Is it credible? Is it legitimate? Are there enough other relevant users who have also adopted it to make it worthwhile?

Whether consciously or unconsciously, you are making these evaluations. Your context helps you answer these questions. Both the people in your context and the habits and behaviors already present in your context help you decide. You wouldn't trust just anyone to help you decide your behaviors in life. It is those with whom you have strong ties you are willing to influence you.

Considering again the map of relationships in a society, the clusters of relationships are like neighborhoods in society. Relationships bridge these neighborhoods. Bridges of long-distance (weak ties) help spread information more quickly. But bridges that are wider—meaning that there are multiple ties between a group of friends—are what the spread of behavior depends on.

Wide bridges are essentially mutual friends. If you are considering a new behavior and two or three of your friends who are also friends with each other encourage you to do it, it is very likely you will. People who have one or fewer friends, and those whose friends don't know each other, are less likely to be participating in passing along a new behavior. Wide bridges have built-in reinforcement of influence through connected relationships.

History gives many examples of behavior change spreading through groups of people who have these wide bridge relationships. The women's suffrage movement spread through relationships established in reading groups. Support for the Nazi party spread through tightly connected towns in Germany. While news of plans for Freedom Summer during the Civil Rights movement travelled widely, the people who actually participated in the movement were connected by existing social ties. Research on smoking cessation has shown that the best predictor of someone stopping smoking is that they have relationship with others who have quit smoking.

Changes in our behavior (for good or for bad) are greatly influenced by those you trust the most. Relationships matter.

The problem is that it takes work to develop relationships in churches or anywhere else. Almost eight in ten churchgoers agree they have developed significant relationships with people at their church. However, only 43 percent strongly agree they have. If your church is like the typical church, these relationships are being built but the majority of your adults would admit it could be happening a lot more than it is for them personally.

Our behavior matters. This includes our heart, our words, and our actions. It's not that we can earn any favor with God. It's not that our walk with Him depends on any works of ours. But our walk with Christ includes serious behavioral change. Repentance is a 180-degree turn. Putting off the old and putting on the new includes some elements that are done once at conversion but also many little changes each and every day.

In the same way, we could not turn to Christ for salvation without God's help; we cannot glorify Him with obedience without His grace each day. Personal discipleship growth cannot occur in our own strength, and God didn't intend for it to take place in isolation.

Each change is either reinforced or resisted by those around us. As churches, our role is to be developing communities of close relationships that reinforce the changes God is prompting in our lives.

Hebrews 10:24-25 says, "And let us watch out for one another to provoke love and good works, not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching."

As church leaders, we can best encourage discipleship by encouraging people to invest in each other spiritually and relationally. Less than half of churchgoers agree that they intentionally spend time with other believers to help them grow in their faith. Less than one in five strongly agree they do this.

We must raise the priority of investing in relationships with each other. We must do a better job of explaining why. Today two-thirds of churchgoers believe they can walk with God without other believers.<sup>3</sup> They are missing the fact that we know God better together. Because of the gospel, we can be honest with one another. Because of the gospel, we can engage in healthy conflict with one another. Because of the gospel, we have nothing to fear, because perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18).

## “I can walk with God without other believers”

From online survey for SWBTS Center for Revitalization of 2,500 churchgoers Jan. 2019



The low priority of relationships within our churches is stunting our growth spiritually. Too often we talk about the right behaviors—going to church or Sunday School or Bible study—but we don’t mention one of the main reasons why. It is easy for a churchgoer to conclude that checking the box of “going to church” is the end. It is easy for them to say I don’t need another lesson or sermon this week if they have already listened to several on the radio, TV, or online.

We know God better when we experience Him together as a community. (See 1 John 4.) The behavior changes necessary to honor God each day require other believers in our lives whom we love and trust through real relationships.

Relationships, fellowship, and worshiping together are ends that matter. Yes, they require meeting in the same place, but neither the meeting nor the place are what is significant.

Sociologists are discovering the power of God’s design. They see the consistent pattern of behavior change depending on the influence of our friendships. Christ’s followers will look more like Christ when we are together.

## CHAPTER THREE: WHY PEOPLE ATTEND GROUPS

Two-thirds of churchgoers are in a small class or group of adults (65 percent). This is an environment where transformation is fostered. This is one of the best places within a church where relationships are created and nurtured.

LifeWay Research conducted a study among Protestants who attend church once a month or more to understand more about their participation in groups and their views on small classes and groups. The study revealed that the driving force behind their participation in groups is that churchgoers enjoy the group and expect to learn something.

Among churchgoers who currently participate in a small class or group, 80 percent attend because they enjoy it, and 65 percent attend because they think they will learn something.

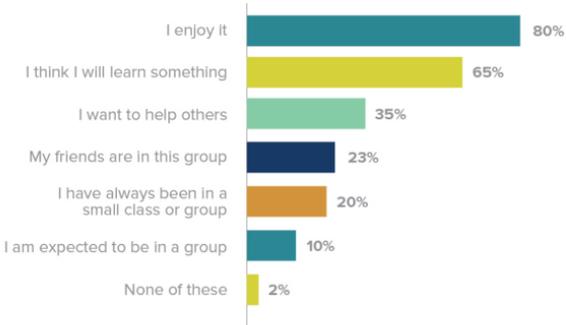
The primary reasons for involvement hinge on the reinforcing nature of relationships and relevance of God's Word that applies to everyday life.

Lamentations 3:22-23 says, "Because of the LORD's faithful love we do not perish, for his mercies never end. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness!"

God's truth continues to be fresh. There is more to learn and experience.

But the fellowship of the believers in the group is also powerful. Groups have both a learning component and a relational component. That relational component also provides people with purpose. More than a third of churchgoers who attend groups (35 percent) do so because they want to help others, and 23 percent attend because their friends are in this group.

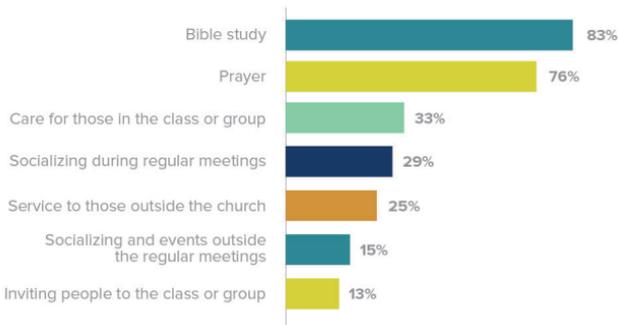
## Why current participants attend a small class or group



The activities groups find important correspond to why people attend. Most participants say Bible study (83 percent) and prayer (76 percent) are important activities in their group. Because they were limited to three priorities for their group, there is less agreement on the third priority. One third say care for those in the class or group, 29 percent say socializing during regular meetings, and 25 percent say service to those outside the church are important.

The reality is that if a group has more than three priorities, they likely aren't doing more than two or three of them well. Other priorities for some groups include socializing and events outside the regular meetings (15 percent) and inviting people to the class or group (13 percent).

## 3 activities important to those currently in groups



Seven in ten churchgoers say their church communicates it is important for every adult to be involved in a small group or class. This includes one-third of attendees who strongly agree their church communicates this.

Most churches are on the right track but two thirds could do a better job of articulating the value of groups and why the church wants everyone to experience it.

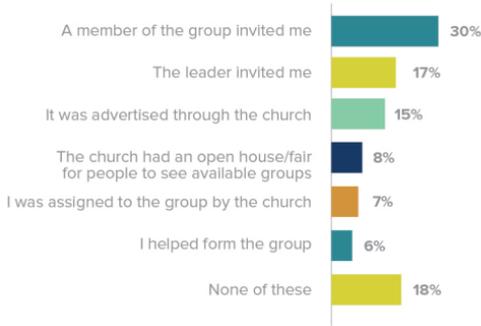
What triggered these group members to join?

Almost half of churchgoers who participate in a small group or class joined that group because the leader (17 percent) or member of the group (30 percent) invited them. This fact alone reinforces the value of relationships in encouraging behavior change. Joining a group is a change in practice. Relationships are the most effective way to get others to join.

However, not everyone in church already has relationships with others at the church. So, for the other half of group attendees we see intentional efforts by church leadership to help make the connection. Fifteen percent joined a group because it was advertised through the church. Eight percent joined when the church had an open house/fair for people to see available groups.

Seven percent were actually assigned to a group by the church and six percent helped form the group they are a part of.

## 47% joined a group because the leader or a member of the group invited them



When believers get involved in a group, they are making an investment in one of Christ's priorities for us. In fact, when Jesus was praying shortly before He was betrayed, He prayed, "I pray not only for these, but also for those who believe in me through their word. May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me. I have given them the glory you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me, so that they may be made completely one, that the world may know you have sent me and have loved them as you have loved me" (John 17:20-23).

Three times in these verses Jesus specifically prays that believers would be one. This clearly is a priority He has for us. Twice in these verses He gives a reason: so that the world would believe. Our unity is essential to our witness. God wants believers to live life together.

## **EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION ABOUT GROUPS**

- State the importance of being involved in a small group, Bible study, or Sunday School class every week
- Teach the value of groups (and church)
- You are needed
- You need others
- Foster a posture of humility
- I don't know it all
- I can't do what I need to do on my own
- I can't be who I need to be alone
- Create a future expectation of group participation without assuming people already have this habit

## CHAPTER FOUR: WHY PEOPLE DON'T PARTICIPATE IN GROUPS

From the same study of churchgoers, we learn that among the 35 percent who are not currently in a group, 59 percent have participated in the past. The remainder either visited but never got involved (11 percent) or had never tried any small classes or groups (29 percent).

The majority (56 percent) of the non-attendees who have participated in the past say they enjoyed the experience. Four in ten say they regularly learned something new from their past group (41 percent). A quarter (24 percent) had friends in the group (a similar percentage as those currently in a group).

Fewer past attendees than current attendees say they were in a group because they wanted to help others (16 percent versus 35 percent). It is possible that our communication about groups spends too much time telling people to just do it or join because of what you will get. Joining a group needs to equally be about what you can give to others in your group.

There are also past attendees who were in a group because it was an expectation (14 percent) or because they had always been in small group or class (10 percent).

We would hope that every church attendee would understand that there is an expectation for that person to be in a small group, Bible study, or Sunday School class. However, our greater hope is that that is not the only reason someone joins.

## Why those not in a group attended the last small class or group they were a part of



### Why did they stop attending?

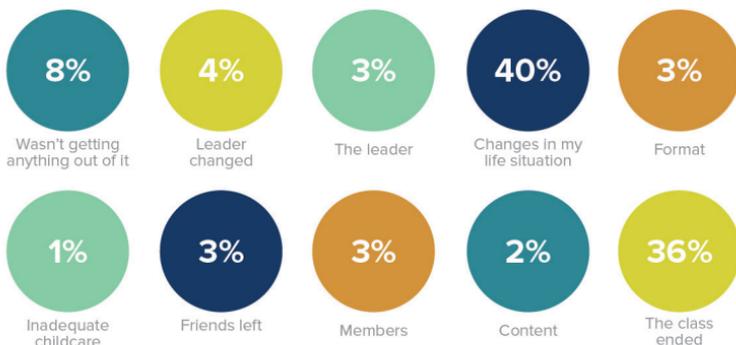
Churchgoers who used to be in a group but are not currently are fairly unlikely to point to the quality of the group as the reason they stopped attending. Few indicated that they were not getting anything out of it (eight percent), they stopped because of the format (three percent), because of the members (three percent), because of the leader (three percent), and because of the content (two percent).

Given how hard we work within our churches to find the perfect leaders for groups, one has to wonder if we are actually being too selective. Are there more leaders ready to lead or start groups that we have been unwilling to encourage? With only three percent having a bad experience with a leader, there is likely room for highly selective churches to release more people into group leadership.

Other logistics related to groups are also rarely the reason participants leave. Four percent stopped because the leader changed, three percent stopped because friends left, and one percent because of inadequate childcare.

So, which are the bigger causes for people leaving groups? Changes in their life situation (40 percent) and the class ended (36 percent) are the most common reasons.

### What caused non-attendees to stop attending?



As a church leader, one of those is outside your control (their life situation) and the other is completely in your control. If your small groups or Sunday School classes for adults are only offered during specific seasons or if you ask participants to find a new group each quarter or semester, you are providing them with an off-ramp from groups. When someone exits, they will not automatically resume participating when your new groups resume.

If you believe in the power of groups, you will want as many people as possible to participate. Creating off-ramps from these experiences is counterproductive. In fact, for 36 percent of those not in a group, the reason is there was an off-ramp.

If the end of the group was not intentional, step in and work to help that group continue. Far fewer stop attending because of a leader change than because a class stopped.

Why are non-attendees not participating in a group today?

The reasons churchgoers are not in a group today are varied. In fact, none of the reasons explain even a third of non-attende actions.

The two most common reasons churchgoers are not in a group relate to time. Twenty-eight percent are not in a group because they are busy with personal responsibilities when the groups are offered, and 19 percent say the groups meet at an inconvenient time. There is an opportunity to help these people participate by offering groups at additional days and times during the week.

About one in eight non-attendees can't attend a group because their church doesn't offer them. If your church does not offer groups, consider the value they provide to disciples in your church to help them in their walk with God. These relational settings that incorporate the truth of God's Word reflect a local body of believers fostering a culture of loving one another. This has many benefits that we will highlight in the final section of this book.

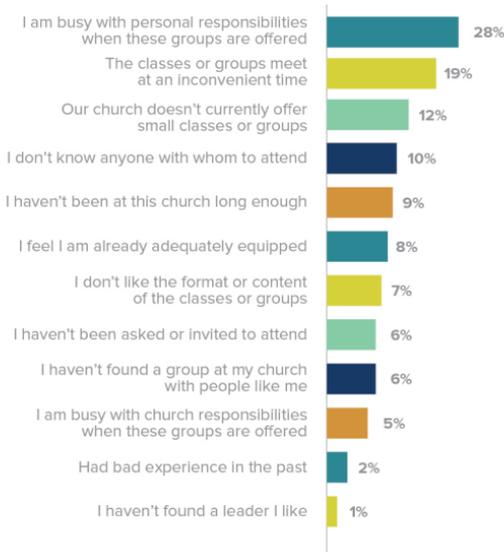
Some of the reasons for not attending are tied to relationships: One in ten aren't in a group because they don't know anyone with whom to attend, six percent because nobody has asked or invited them to attend, and six percent have not found a group with people like them.

While none of these reasons keep more than one in ten away, it is ironic that the need for relationships actually keeps some people away from building relationships in a group. Breaking through this barrier of not knowing anyone in a group requires some creativity. Opportunities in a church lobby or at a casual social event to meet members or leaders from different small groups or Sunday School classes can help break the ice for those standing on the outside.

Other reasons non-attendees don't participate in a group include not being at their church long enough (nine percent), feeling that they are already adequately equipped (eight percent), not liking the format or content of the classes or groups (seven percent), being busy with

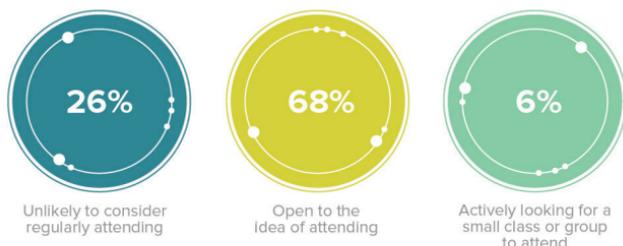
church responsibilities when groups are offered (five percent), having had a bad experience in the past (two percent), and not finding a leader they like (one percent).

### Why those not in groups don't participate



Most of those who are not in a group have not ruled it out completely. More than two-thirds of churchgoers who are not in a group are open to the idea of attending in the future (68 percent) and an additional six percent are actively looking for a group to attend currently. That leaves 26 percent who are unlikely to consider regularly attending a group.

## Attitude of those not in groups toward attending a small class or group through their church in the future



Similarly, as you look across your church, you have three types of adults:

- Those already in a group
- Those not in a group but open to it
- Those who have shut the door on the idea

Our encouragement to each type needs to meet them where they are. It is possible for the same message to do this, but we need to keep in mind each type to ensure it does. The common denominator is Bible study. Almost three in four non-attendees who are open to attending say Bible study is one of the three most important activities for a group (74 percent). More than half (54 percent) indicate prayer is important. Non-attendees are more likely than attendees to say service to those outside the church (33 percent versus 25 percent) and socializing and events outside the regular meetings (25 percent versus 15 percent) are important. Non-attendees are much less likely to find care for those in the class/group as important (17 percent versus 33 percent).

Each church must set their own priorities for their groups. Groups cannot do everything. As you reinforce these priorities from the pulpit, in print, and through social media different messages will resonate with different people.

- Celebrating when one of your groups cares for a member of their group going through a hard time will primarily connect with those already in a group.
- Celebrating when one of your groups serves someone outside your church will resonate more with those not in a group but open to it.
- Emphasizing the value of group Bible study will connect with both those in a group and those open to it.
- Sharing God's design and priority for loving one another within the church will be new for some but important for all.

A 2017 study by LifeWay Research asked churchgoers in which ways they would like their church to improve the help they provide related to their spiritual growth.<sup>4</sup> The six most common reasons are either about groups or are things groups directly address:

- 27 percent want help understanding more about God and His Word
- 20 percent want help finding ways to serve that fit their abilities
- 19 percent want their church to provide more Bible study groups to choose from
- 18 percent want their church to provide Bible studies at different times
- 16 percent want their church to help them get to know more people in the church

- 14 percent want the church to provide a forum to answer their spiritual questions

In the typical church, there are attendees desiring more options of groups to attend. Not everyone has a five-day work week. Not everyone wants to get up early on a Sunday morning. One in five attendees don't see themselves fitting in any of your existing groups but haven't given up. They want your church to start a new group.

Churchgoers who don't mention groups say they want their church to do a better job of helping them serve, build relationships, and explore answers to spiritual questions. All of these take place in a healthy group. The value of groups is not assumed by your congregation. The power of groups must be taught and reinforced with Bible study materials that foster interaction with the truths of God's Word and its application to the real questions in life.

## **EFFECTIVE PRACTICES FOR GROUPS**

- Every church should offer groups
- Start one or more new groups each year
- Classes/groups should be offered at multiple times throughout the week
- Your church's primary groups should be ongoing and meet year-round
- Anchor your groups in Bible study
- Classes/groups should have regular social events as a group outside their regular meetings to invest in relationships

## **CREATING ONRAMPS FOR GROUPS**

- Encourage group participants to invite others
- Encourage participation through multiple methods:
  - A group fair to meet leaders and learn about different groups
  - Announcements
  - Emphasis in sermons
  - Social media
  - One-on-one encouragement to try a specific group
- Invite those outside groups to join groups in serving and helping others
- Overemphasize three groups with onramps:
  - Young adults
  - New to your church
  - Attend less often (less engaged)

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE POWER OF GROUPS

If small group Bible studies have an impact, then attendees should look different than non-attendees. If groups are a method for fostering the relationships described by John in which we as believers love one another, then those relationships should help us walk with Christ more closely.

If an airplane's wing follows the design in which the air it meets travels faster across the top than the bottom, then the air will provide the lift the airplane needs. If a boat has any power as it travels through the water, it will create a wake that can travel great distances.

Do we see this lift and this wake among those who participate in a small class or group? Are they any different than people who are not in this transformative setting?

LifeWay Research conducted additional analysis on the Discipleship Pathway Study of Protestant churchgoers to determine this impact. Let's look at these characteristics in which we want to grow more like Christ.

### **MOBILIZED**

#### **Individuals that are currently involved serving people in the community but not affiliated with your church**

Twice as many churchgoers who attend a group one to three times a month are more likely to serve others compared to those who don't attend a group (38 percent versus 19 percent). Among those who attend a group four or more times a month, almost half are serving outside their church (48 percent). *Being in small classes or groups of*

*adults from church corresponds with more service in the community.*

### **Individuals that currently have regular responsibilities at your church**

Almost twice as many churchgoers who attend a group one to three times a month have responsibilities at church than among those who don't attend a group (49 percent versus 25 percent). Among those who attend a group four or more times a month even more have church responsibilities (57 percent). *Being in small classes or groups of adults from church corresponds with more volunteering within church.*

One of the fruits that should be evident in a believer's life is serving others in tangible ways. Groups facilitate this. Sometimes it is because the group is serving together. Other times they assist by making known ways to serve. And others in the group also provide reinforcing examples that influences participants to volunteer. Those in groups benefit in their walk with Christ by being more mobilized to serve others.

## **DISCIPLINED**

### **Personally reading the Bible a few times a week or more**

Forty-two percent of those who are not part of a class or group read the Bible on their own at least a few times a week. That proportion jumps to 61 percent among those who are in a group but attend less than once a week. Three-fourths of those who attend their small group or class every week are reading their Bible a few times a week or more. *Being in small classes or groups of adults from church corresponds with reading the Bible more frequently.*

### **Set aside time for private worship, praise, or thanksgiving to God every day**

Taking time daily to praise God is something about a third of those not in a group (32 percent) and those who attend a group less than once a week (36 percent) do. However, 47 percent of those who attend a small class or group each week take time daily to praise and worship God. *Participating in small classes or groups of adults four times a month or more corresponds with having private worship more frequently.*

### **Reading and/or listening to teaching about the Bible outside of a worship service a few times a week or more**

Almost four in ten churchgoers who are not in a group (38 percent) consume additional Bible teaching several times each week. That proportion jumps to 56 percent among those who are in a group but attend less than weekly, and 68 percent among those who attend a group four or more times a month. Being in a small class or group of adults from church corresponds with taking in Bible teaching more frequently.

### **Give at least six percent of their annual income to their local church**

Almost half of churchgoers who are not in a group give six percent or more of their income to church (48 percent). Two-thirds of those attending a group one to three times a month give at least six percent to church (66 percent). More than three-fourths of those attending a group every week give at least six percent of their income to church (77 percent). *Being in small classes or groups of adults from church corresponds with giving a higher percentage of income to church.*

## **Think about biblical truths throughout the day**

Less than a quarter of churchgoers who are not in a group (23 percent) strongly agree they think about biblical truths throughout the day. A third of those who are in a group but attend less than weekly strongly agree. Four in ten who attend groups four or more times a month strongly agree. *Being in small classes or groups of adults from church corresponds with walking in truth.*

## **Praying at the spur-of-the-moment throughout the day**

Less than four in ten churchgoers who are not in a group (37 percent) strongly agree they pray at the spur-of-the-moment throughout the day. More than four in ten of those in a group but attend less than weekly strongly agree (42 percent), and more than half of those who attend groups four or more times a month strongly agree (52 percent). *Being in small classes or groups of adults from church corresponds with praying spontaneously during the day.*

Spiritual disciplines are habits. These habits are moments of intentionally walking with Christ encountering His truth and presence. The Holy Spirit uses these truths both in those moments and throughout the day to encourage our obedience. The word “discipline” is not meant to imply we can will ourselves to be more like Christ. Yet Paul encouraged us to discipline ourselves like a runner running a race (see 1 Cor. 9:24-27) to receive an imperishable reward. Disciplines are a way for us to respond to God’s love by investing in the relationship ourselves. Other believers encourage these disciplines in our lives when we are in groups together.

## **EVANGELIZING**

### **Praying for opportunities to tell others about Jesus Christ a few times a week or more**

Less than a third of churchgoers who are not in a group (31 percent) pray several times a week for opportunities to share Christ with others. Among those in a group, the percentage praying multiple times a week jumps to 49 percent of those attending one to three times a month, and 56 percent of those attending four or more times a month. *Being in a small class or group of adults from church corresponds with praying for opportunities to share Christ.*

### **Shared with someone how to become a Christian in the last six months**

Less than one in three churchgoers who are not in a group (29 percent) have shared with someone how to become a Christian in the last six months. In contrast, 55 percent of those in a group have shared with someone how to become a Christian in the last half year. *Being in a small class or group of adults from church corresponds with more evangelistic activity.*

### **Invited an unchurched person to attend church in the last six months**

Almost four in ten churchgoers who are not in a group have invited someone to attend a church event or worship service in the last six months (39 percent). The proportion jumps to six in ten who are in a group but attend less than weekly (61 percent) and 68 percent among those attending four or more times a month. *Being in a small class or group of adults from church corresponds with extending more personal invitations to church.*

### **Eagerly talk about Jesus with people who are not like me**

One in five churchgoers who are not in a group strongly agree they are eager to talk about Jesus with people who differ from them. More than a quarter of those in a group but attending less than weekly (28 percent) strongly agree, as do more than a third of those who attend groups four or more times a month (35 percent). *Being in small*

*classes or groups of adults from church corresponds with sharing Christ with diverse people.*

Opportunities to share Christ with those who do not know Him are a gift from God. But being faithful with these opportunities requires intentionality. When Jesus instructed His followers to keep asking, keep seeking, and keep knocking, His desire was for our prayers to be kingdom focused. Those who are in a group desire to participate in this mission and are more likely to have done so recently

## **CONNECTED**

### **I have several Christian friends who keep me accountable**

About one in six churchgoers who are not in groups strongly agree they have Christian friends who keep them accountable. More than twice as many who attend groups four or more times a month strongly agree (35 percent), and 29 percent of those in a group but attend less than weekly strongly agree. *Being in small classes or groups of adults from church corresponds with being accountable.*

### **Have developed significant relationships with people at my church**

Less than three in ten churchgoers who are not in a group (28 percent) strongly agree they have developed significant relationships at church. More than twice as many who attend groups four or more times a month strongly agree (58 percent), and 44 percent of those in a group but attend less than weekly strongly agree. *Being in small classes or groups of adults from church corresponds with having significant relationships at church.*

### **Intentionally try to be a peacemaker at church**

Only 14 percent of churchgoers who are not in a group strongly agree they try to be a peacemaker at church. More than twice as many who

attend groups four or more times a month strongly agree (31 percent), and 27 percent of those in a group but attend less than weekly strongly agree. *Being in small classes or groups of adults from church corresponds with being a peacemaker.*

### **Intentionally spend time with other believers to help them grow in their faith**

Less than one in ten churchgoers who are not in a group (9 percent) strongly agree they are intentionally spending time with other believers to help them grow in their faith. More than twice as many of those in a group, but attending less than weekly, strongly agree (21 percent), and three in ten who attend groups four or more times a month strongly agree. *Being in small classes or groups of adults from church corresponds with investing time to help the faith of other believers grow.*

Relational connections take time and effort to create and maintain. Groups are a great environment to do this, but they also reinforce the value of doing so in other settings where participants may be serving or socializing.

As we think about our personal walk with Christ, this journey is one of fellowship with Him and becoming more like Him. As we travel this discipleship pathway, there are signposts along this journey that should indicate that we are in fact growing in our walk with Christ. As these statistics have shown, participating in a small class or group corresponds with higher levels on specific elements of Engaging the Bible, Sharing Christ, Building Relationships, Seeking God, and Serving God & Others.

The power of groups is seen in higher levels of evangelism, service, giving, disciplines, and relationships among those who regularly participate.

With this kind of impact already occurring in your church and with the potential groups have for helping more disciples in their walk with Christ, few church priorities should exceed the value and the practice of drawing disciples into groups where they can grow together.

## THE RESEARCH

1. Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Back Bay Books: New York), 216.
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3. Need for Other Believers Study, LifeWay Research sponsored by Center for Church Revitalization at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, August 2019. <https://lifewayresearch.com/2019/08/05/churchgoers-hold-conflicting-views-on-the-need-for-other-christians/>
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