

## What I am up to with Small Groups

In late 2008 after 15 years of helping churches develop small group structures, I began to see small groups through a totally different lens. Actually it is a similar lens, but it looks totally different because of the clarity with which I see the experience of small group life in the church. It is like I put on the right prescription of glasses for the first time and the entire small group thing makes sense to me.

This brief introduction to my thinking on small groups includes the following:

- A brief statement of what I am not doing
- An overview of the new view that I am espousing
- Definitions of the four stories of small group life
- An explanation of the resources that I have developed over the years and how they work with this view
- An explanation of the resources that are needed to support this view
- A proposal of what I would like to do to promote this view

This is the foundation of the book *Missional Small Groups* that will be released in June of 2010.

### What I Am NOT Doing

Since I got involved with small groups in the early 1990s there has been much paper wasted on conversations about various small group models. To this point, I have identified over 12 major working small group models in the US alone. Some include:

- Cell Church
- Groups of 12
- Holistic Small Groups (Upward, Inward, Outward, Forward)
- Church of Small Groups
- Meta-Model
- Free Market Cells
- Small Group Campaigns (Purpose-Driven Groups)
- Semester Groups (The Sticky Church by Larry Osbourne, Activate by Nelson Searcy)
- Many more could be listed

Now some are identifying a model called *Missional Small Groups*, which often gets applied as simply groups that do some form of outreach or community service. Let me state very clearly that this is NOT what I am up to. I am not trying to add to the list of ways to organize and do groups. I am not advocating a structure or a method for group life. There is enough out there on that.

Admittedly, this is a shift in my thinking. I have been an advocate of a specific way of organizing and defining groups, one that would be labeled as *Holistic Small Groups* (in

the list above). You can see this in my book *How Do We Get There From Here*. In that book I explain the differences between the various small group models.

## **A New View**

Instead of a new model, I am espousing a new view, one that looks at the life experienced within the various groups, however they are structured. In reflecting on my pasturing, leading, and consulting, I realized that four different churches might adopt the same model of group structures—using the same training, the same oversight system, the same language, the same materials and give the groups the same level of priority in the church—but they experiences within those four churches would vary. In fact, I found that churches usually have one of four different experiences. I saw this while reading the last chapter of Craig Van Gelder’s book *The Ministry of the Missional Church*. There he labels four different kinds of change: Improvement, Adjustment, Re-vision, Re-creation, which is part of *Introducing Missional Church*. These correspond to the kinds of change that Alan writes about, which are Reactive, Developmental, Transition, and Transformational.

When I applied these four kinds of change to small group experiences, I realized that groups tell four different kinds of stories with the way they live. When reading Van Gelder’s book, something clicked in my brain that applied these four kinds of change not to the organization but to personal experiences of life within groups.

## **Defining the Stories**

It is an impossible thing to define stories. One can only live them and tell them, but for the sake of simplicity I will seek to do what cannot be done and explain what I mean by each of the four stories.

The titles for each of the stories have been adapted slightly to emphasize the experiential nature of what I am trying to say.

### **Personal Improvement**

This is the small group experience where individuals participate because it is beneficial to them as persons. They are either drawn to the topic or to the group of people and they participate as long as it is convenient to them. There is nothing about their personal life that is required to change as a result of group participation. Instead the opposite is true: They expect their personal lives to benefit from the “goods and services” provided by the small group experience and as long as that expectation is met, they will continue to participate.

### **Lifestyle Adjustment**

This story is a continuation of the last. The group is viewed as beneficial and therefore group members are willing to adjust their life schedules to prioritize the attendance of a weekly or bi-weekly meeting. There is usually a bit more of a long-term commitment to group membership, but not much more than that. In fact, this story usually plays out in

such a way that small group members attend meetings until they hit a time of conflict or struggle in the relationships within the group. While they adjust their lifestyle to prioritize a meeting they typically do not adjust their lives to make room to work through relational issues within a group. As a result they either quit attending, attend meeting but in a way that is disengaged, or they look for another group that meets their needs better.

Note: Most of the resources on small groups that have been released over the last 25 years have spoken into these two stories. There is nothing distinctively Christian about these storied experiences. They could be lived out in the Elk's Club or the YMCA just as easily as in the church.

### **Relational Re-vision**

While the move from the first story to the second was a continuous progression, the move to this third is discontinuous. This story requires intentional practice to live. The fact is the habits of the average person in North America are so contrary to a life of mutual love and self-sacrifice that if a group does not choose to practice a distinctively Christian way of life that nothing radical and Kingdom-like will be experienced. This story is only told as a group develops a new set of rhythms, like a person does when first learning to play the guitar. Lots and lots of intentional practice is required. Here is where a group discovers distinctively Christian practices like:

- Worship
- Encountering the Presence of God Together
- Communion
- Hospitality
- Mutual Generosity
- Making Time for Each Other
- Entering the Neighborhood

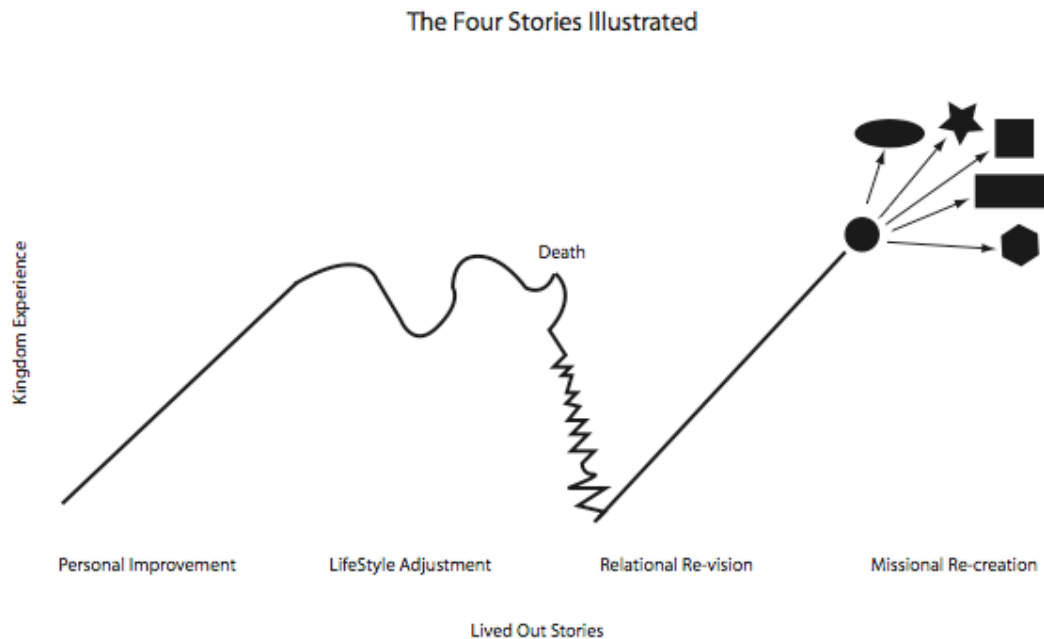
I presented this to 60 people at a Lutheran church, where 40% of the crowd was over 55. I have never been able to communicate well with that demographic, but when I presented the four stories to them and explained in depth the importance of Relational Re-Vision, they expressed a keen sense of interest. The pastor at the end of the day told me, "I need that tool in order for me to do to what you are talking about." His comment propelled me on a writing spree that has resulted in the practical part of *Missional Small Groups*.

### **Missional Re-creation**

As groups begin to practice these rhythms and gain proficiency in them, much like a novice guitar player will begin to expand her horizons beyond the notes on the page, a group will explore new ways of creative existence. They will engage the neighborhood and determine needs, meet them and as a result, that experience will change how they exist as a group. Some will develop into house churches of 50. Others into groups of 5 meeting at a coffee shop. Others will adopt a home for mentally challenged individuals. And still others will come around a family that lives in a mindset of poverty and walk with them into a new way of being.

The key is not the form that it takes, but the maturity of living the practices that are introduced in Relational Re-Vision. Missional Re-creation flows out of a set of practices into an unpredictable structural future.

These four stories can be illustrated experientially in the following diagram:



Subsequently I have come to realize that the variations between group experiences do not lie simply from one church to the next but all four stories actually will exist within any one church. Most of the time this fact is missed because the leaders are so focused on one way of doing groups. Therefore, radical church leaders will focus on the right side of the dark line (see chart on next page), but miss the fact that most of their people are actually living on the left side. And churches that are focused on small groups as a program will work hard at assimilating people into “normal” groups and fail to see how some people are experimenting on the edges; and then when they see them experiments, they don’t know what do to with them.

As a result, unless a church is a new church that is primarily focused on the right side of the dark line and they are clear about that, a church will have all four stories going on at the same time. This has proven to be the case at Woodland Hills Church. And because we did not see these four stories we simply classified groups according to structures, not according to their lived experience.

Therefore, while the right side of the dark line might be classified as a “missional” experience, most churches need resources that are going to help people move through all four stories. We cannot just simply focus on what is “missional” and leave the “attractual” people within churches to fend for themselves. We must understand that we

must lead people into a movement through the stories. We have to learn the skills to draw in individualists who are primarily spiritual consumers looking to get their spiritual needs met through a church program and help them understand how to take steps from the left side into the right. Another way to compare these four stories is with the chart below”

#### 4 Group Experiences

Label	Personal Improvement	Lifestyle Adjustment	Relational Revision	Missional Re-creation
<b>Experience</b>	Improvement	Adjustment	Revision	Re-creation
<b>Focus</b>	Groups	Groups	Regional Community	Regional Community
<b>Story</b>	Better Self	American Friendship	Contrast Society	Organic Mission
<b>Focus</b>	Me	Church	We	Neighborhood
<b>Church Relationships</b>	Involvement	Assimilation	Equipping	Creating
<b>Cost</b>	Easy In/Easy Out	Meeting Attendance	Accountability	Radical Sacrifice
<b>Relational Commitment</b>	Agreement	Agreement	Covenant	Covenant
<b>Goal</b>	Connections	Close Back Door	Establishment	Engagement
<b>Discipleship</b>	Event-centered	Curriculum Driven	Practices	Life-on-life
<b>Evangelism</b>	Weekend Show	Group Meeting	Relationships	In Neighborhood
<b>Form of Groups</b>	Short-term	Semester Groups Ongoing Groups	Groups Doing Practices	Organic Groups
<b>Strategies</b>	40-Day Adventures	16-week Eye-opening Exp.	Regional Comm of Groups	Reg. Comm of Churches

## My Resources

Over the last 10 years I have developed various small group resources. Now that I am in the middle of the missional conversation and have completed the writing of *Introducing Missional Church* with Alan Roxburgh, I have been struggling with how to see what I have done in the past fits with these four stories.

The following chart is mean to illustrate how the resources it into these four stories.

Tools				
Label	Personal Improvement	Lifestyle Adjustment	Relational Revision	Missional Re-creation
<b>Group/Personal Tools</b>	<b>40-Day Campaigns</b> ✓ Beautiful Life ✓ Beautiful Mess ✓ Revolting Beauty ✓ Life Beyond Belief ✓ The Great Reversal			✓ IMC Field Guide
<b>Church Leader Tools</b>		✓ How Do We Get There From Here?	✓ The Relational Way	✓ Intro to Miss Church
<b>Group Leader Tools</b>	✓ Short-term Leader Training	Cell Group Leader Training	✓ Missional Small Groups	

Although *Introducing Missional Church* is not about small groups, I place it under Missional Re-creation to demonstrate that the point is not small groups but about a larger imagination of mission within God's Kingdom.

My book *The Relational Way*, speaks to the primary patterns required to set up a missional small group system. And *How Do We Get There From Here* addresses some of the ways to change a system from no groups to missional groups.