

LEADING MISSIONAL SMALL GROUPS: BEYOND NORMAL TO MAKING A DIFFERENCE

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Being Missional

Some groups feel a call to be more than a gathering of people who meet for Bible study and prayer. They want to go deeper with one another and move out to make a difference in the world around them. This urge for more is commonly referred to as a call to mission.

This call to mission might start out with a vision to reach the unchurched for Jesus and do some kind of ministry projects for the under-resourced. The focus lies on doing something. But lasting impact upon our world occurs when we move beyond doing and consider how we are being. While doing something missional is good, being “missional” is transforming. A missional small group is about being something different that makes a difference in the world, not just doing outreach, externally-focused activities for those not in the church. While the chart below overemphasizes the contrast, it illustrates the centrality of being over doing:

| | Being | Doing |
|----------------------|---------------|---------------------|
| Focus of Mission | Group life | Outreach |
| Source of Mission | Overflow | Effort |
| Goal of Mission | Be a Blessing | Add people to group |
| Power of Mission | Love | Action |
| Key Trait of Mission | Conversations | Presentations |

Of course being missional will include the doing, but if we start with doing, the being often gets overlooked. Doing outreach will not make us missional. But when we examine how we are being a group, it will lead to loving people who need Jesus. Being missional is about developing a set of rhythms of love that stand in contrast to the world around us so that the love of God might flow through the community. This life of mission empowers the group for conversations instead of going out with only presentations and actions.

Leading Beyond Normal

So how does a leader invite people into these different rhythms? Normal group leadership will result in normal groups. The opposite of normal leadership is not extraordinary leadership. You need not be an exceptional leader to guide a missional community. You just need to take into account a few basic leadership rhythms or patterns that are slightly different than what we find in our normal small groups. These are leadership practices that might feel foreign when you first start doing them but when they become habits, they result in groups that stand against the norm.

1. Learn the basics of group dynamics.

Just because a missional group moves beyond the normal group, there is no need to throw out the sound principles that decades of experience has taught us regarding healthy small group dynamics. Find a good book or training seminar on leading small groups and learn the basics. Develop skills in facilitating conversations, leading people to share in a safe environment and how to organize a group meeting. You may start out by following a printed curriculum in a litigious way, but it is important to develop skills in how to follow the leading of the Spirit in a group conversation so that you move beyond answering Bible study questions and deal with what God is saying in the midst of the group.

2. Challenge the status quo of “normal” group life.

Normal groups often provide enough community to lull us into thinking that normal is all we need. And in most cases normal is better than nothing. However, if you want to change what people expect from the group, someone must present a compelling alternative. Change requires a sense of urgency, a feeling of dissatisfaction with current reality. If that does not occur then normal will rule the day.

3. *Lead as a team.*

Instead of viewing group leadership as a solo job, think teams of two or three. Throughout the Bible, ministry happens in twos and threes. The myth of the superstar solo leader who pulls the group into a mystical missional experience is rarely fulfilled. There might find one or two who can carry that weight, but for the most part, that is a burden not worth picking up in the first place. To get started, pray that God will show you who might be called to participate on the team. Start connecting with some potential people over meals—without mentioning leadership possibilities. Begin to listen to what God is doing in them and then invite them to contribute to the group in greater ways. After they do that for a few weeks, seek the Lord's leading about when to invite them to lead as a part of a team.

4. *Seek the support of a coach or experienced leader.*

To be more than a normal community, you will need the support and direction—or at least the prayer support—of someone outside the group. This person can provide insight as an outsider that we often cannot see when we are caught up in all the relationships of the group.

5. *Practice missional rhythms as a group.*

These are basically spiritual disciplines applied to community life, the unseen practices that a group does together that gives it the strength to make a difference in the world. I break these rhythms into three categories which makes for the bulk of my book *Missional Small Groups*.

- **Missional Communion—Practices of the Presence**
Groups that make a difference for God ground their life in the reality of God's presence. It is God's mission and God's presence in and through a group is what makes it missional. The Apostle Peter exhorted the early church, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15). If groups don't cultivate practices of God's presence, then they will not live in a way that gives evidence of this hope.
- **Missional Relating—Practices of *Agape***
I've seen lots of groups that have no business trying to be missional. They don't know how to love each other, so how could we expect them to love their neighbors? Jesus told the disciples, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). Missional life is a direct result of our ability to practice love for one another. Do we as a group practice listening to one another, working through conflict and sharing a meal with each other? This will require the group to become a bit more important than what we see in groups that just focus on a regular meeting. But these are the things that make a difference.

- **Missional Engagement—the Practices of Connecting in the Neighborhood**

I know that the word "engagement" is a bit different, but I needed another term than evangelism or outreach. Those words have become so loaded with lots of different experiences that I have found them distracting. Missional engagement is about connecting with neighbors, friends, co-workers or family members in a way that allows them to see the love of God in the group. This is about the practices of having meaningful conversations, being present with people around us, making time for our neighbors, listening to what's going on in their lives, and hospitality. Being missional means demonstrating a different way of life so that people can see how we live and how God lives through us.

6. *Work with two or three other like-minded groups.*

In many cases, being missional is better demonstrated when like-minded groups work together toward engaging a specific group of people or neighborhood. When 20-50 people offer their gifts to a neighborhood as they listen to the needs and share in conversations with people, the gift diversity can generate more impact and take the pressure off an individual small group.

7. *Listen to the Spirit's leading.*

Missional small groups come in all kinds of forms. Some promote a formula, but one form or way of doing group life cannot fit every context. As a group practices the rhythms of missional life, you will find that the community will naturally discover creative ways that match the needs of a context. Some might become house churches made up of smaller groups. Others might network with other small groups and celebrate together in a community. Some groups might meet at odd times because that is the need of the community. The forms will vary just as people do. The constant is found in listening to the Spirit and playing those rhythms.

Conclusion

Missional small groups are not missional for the sake of the church or to grow the group. They are not missional because it is a good thing to minister to the poor or to take up a cause. Nor are they missional to "get people saved" or get people out of desperate situations. Missional community is about *being* love and usually this comes in small acts that might not seem significant. But when we love over time, the small things add together to make a huge difference.

(This article builds upon the foundation of *Missional Small Groups*, Baker Books, 2010. It will be included in a forthcoming resource published by www.smallgroups.com.)