

Small Groups Bigger Kingdom

Pathways to faith in today's world





Other titles in this series:

Empowering People—the place of small groups

Help! I am leading part of my Small Group

Small Groups—an Introduction

Encounter—20 Interactive Bible Studies for Small Groups

Developing Leaders—Training for small group leaders

Small Groups—Bigger Kingdom

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Introduction

Our desire in writing this booklet is to encourage holistic small groups with a missional heartbeat. In many small groups it is the missional part that is the biggest challenge. We are often not sure what this looks like or how to include it in a way that is not threatening or off putting for our small group members. This lack of confidence and uncertainty means that many of our small groups like to think they are missional in some way but have little if any understanding of what that can look like on a meeting by meeting basis. This means that for most it is not a regular feature of their small group life.

If that sounds in any way like your group then our hope is that this booklet will help you.

We start by looking at some of the challenges we face as Christians in the UK as we share our faith and how we can think differently about this challenge and what this means for us. We then move to think through some of the practicalities and translate these concepts into actual things we can do in our small group to become missional. These insights and practices have been developed over the last 25 years as we have worked in a wide range of churches up and down the UK. We would like to acknowledge in this respect all those who have explored ideas and established good missional practices in the lives of their small groups over this period.

Section 1

The Big Picture

The current landscape

Putting the ‘go’ back into church

There has always been a challenge for the followers of Jesus to find ways of responding to the final command he gave to his disciples in Matthew 28 - to go into the entire world and make disciples. In the recent past the church turned the ‘go’ into something that specialised people did. Missionaries were sent out to various people groups, usually abroad and church leaders had the responsibility at home. However it seems to me that the Holy Spirit, through different ways and at different times, seeks to bring the ‘go’ back to the whole church, not only challenging leaders and special missionary and evangelist types, but seeking to make the ‘go’ relevant to everybody.

In the discipleship model that Jesus used with his own disciples, he sent them out in pairs to find people of ‘peace’ who were open to them and their message. He wanted all his disciples to be involved and gave them clear guide lines (Luke 10:1-12). They were to ‘go’ and look for people they could relate to, who were open to them and perhaps to their message. Having found these people Jesus instructed his disciples to stay with them, healing their sick – which we might describe as meeting their needs both practically and supernaturally. Then was the time for speaking, sharing the good news.

A picture that Jesus used when speaking to his disciples about the way he wanted them to live and be involved in the ‘go’ was about being

yeast in the flour when making bread (Luke 13:21). This was how he described the kingdom of God. We want people to encounter God. How can we be that yeast, making a difference, which enables people to hear and experience the gospel?

In the last few years the Holy Spirit seems to have been leading us to this new (at least new to us) understanding that everybody needs to be involved in the 'go'. In our time, the most relevant way of doing this seems to be for us to build relationships with a network of friends, developing communities and taking the love of Christ with us. We seek to be involved with people, loving them unconditionally, regardless of whether they respond or not and yet to seek their spiritual welfare.

This challenge for us to 'go' is also relevant in the places where we work. Every Christian is to consider themselves as one who brings 'salt and light' (Matthew 5:13-15) to their workplace. We are to take Christian values to work and live them out year in, year out, in a way which challenges the culture of the day. This is to be a lifestyle which can be extremely costly and sacrificial and yet fantastically beneficial.

Jesus called his disciples his friends, not his servants (John 15:15). As friends of God we have the privilege of knowing the father's business. We can also be the relational link between God and others. We can be in a place to hear from God and then act on what he is saying, both as individuals and as communities. The challenge for us is to hear and then to 'go' to create transformational communities that will impact our society and culture in such a way that we can say 'the kingdom of God is near'.

Confidence in the message

Before we go any further, we need to remind ourselves that we hold the most important message that our world has ever and will ever know. The gospel truly is good news for every family member, friend, neighbour and workmate whom we know.

In our experience we have seen, among Christians, an erosion of confidence in the gospel. We have seen our society move away from one which was largely based on Christian morality, where the Church was an accepted part of the fabric of our communities. We have watched the Church decline in numbers and in influence. We have seen that it has become more acceptable to hold to almost any other set of beliefs than those held by Christians. We realise now that we cannot expect our friends and family to have even a basic knowledge of who God and Jesus are. We have been through a time when many of us have almost lost hope that we will see our friends become Christians. Do we still believe that the gospel is the powerful message which has the ability to save?

. . . an epidemic of selfishness

Harry Conn, an evangelist of many years ago, said, “You will never get people saved until you get them lost.” It has been hard in our materialistic world to identify what ‘lost’ means. Words such as sin mean very little. But now we are beginning to see what ‘lost’ actually means. It is a society that is turning away from its base of Christian values. It is individuals who are both the victims and the perpetrators of selfishness. As our moral fabric disappears and people’s behaviour becomes increasingly out of control, whether it’s a hooligan on the street corner or a well-educated city trader who thinks he can do it his or her way, the government has no real solution. In the past ten years, more laws have been written and changed than in any previous period

of history and yet our society becomes more fragmented and increasingly out of control – all signs of an increasing ‘lostness’.

What is the answer? 2 Corinthians 5:15 says that Christ died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. This verse shows us that the real power of the gospel is to set us free from ourselves, from the principle of self-rule, from the power of selfishness, because the truth is this: not only are we the victims of selfishness, but also we are selfish.

We can detect that there is a rising recognition in the media and among our friends that we are in trouble, in our community, our nation and even our planet. Here, then is the best opportunity the Church is going to have for years to come. Only Jesus can change people’s hearts. The gospel message not only changes hearts, but also gives us a new set of values to live by. Because of God’s values, and our respect for people, we live differently. We are no longer promiscuous, we begin to love sacrificially, we have integrity and personal respect.

Sometimes, as we visit churches, we find Christians who love Jesus and would never change from being Christians. This is their personal experience and their story, but deep in their hearts, they are not convinced that their friend or their neighbour needs the gospel or needs Jesus. Reflect on this for a moment. Our society is involved in an epidemic of selfishness. Our whole post-modern way of thinking that says we decide what is right and wrong for ourselves out of our own experience. It says that we, as consumers, are the ultimate answer to what is right and wrong, in this way it is a manifesto for rampant selfishness. Is there one of your friends who has not been damaged by someone else's selfishness? Are not marriages breaking down and children being abused because of selfishness? Are not nations at war because of selfishness? What is the answer to this epidemic?

The power of self-centredness will always be difficult to break, but now that our society gives us permission to be selfish, we are making choices dependent on what feels good to ‘me’ and the whole of our culture is encouraging us to do so. ‘If it feels good then do it, or have it... and don't think too much about anyone else’. Now we can see that our friends may have everything they want and live for comfort and pleasure, but the results of selfishness are becoming evident. Only opening themselves up to a life lived in obedience to Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is going to break the rule of self and cause a change in the values that motivate behaviour. In doing so we become those who ‘no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.’ We live for something and someone bigger than ourselves, Jesus.

We can have confidence in the gospel because it has an answer for the deepest sickness in our society. Let us not rely on the gospel of comfort where we promise that Jesus will meet all our needs and rescue us from every situation. While this is true in one sense, this message plays straight into our post-modern view that our comfort and ease should be the central concern. Let us instead preach the gospel of power to break selfishness as we decide to put Jesus first and to make him Lord of our lives. Let us work together to enable our friends to hear the good news that through Jesus there is a way to break free from the selfishness that can now be seen to be the curse of our families, communities workplaces and nations.

Relational evangelism explained

Evangelism today has to be driven by relational truth

Change our thinking

Our culture has gone through and is going through profound change. As a result, our evangelistic methods need to reflect these changes if we are to make relevant connections with those around us. In much of the Western world we are experiencing a new way of thinking, which requires a new way of going about evangelism. We do not want to criticise what has been done in the past, but just to say that our world is different and we need to approach people in a different way.

A new way of thinking about evangelism:

Old Thinking	New Thinking
1 Truth	Relational truth
2 Decision	Process
3 Winning	Keeping
4 Few	Many
5 Evangelist	Small group

Let's look at each one of these in turn and see what they mean for us in our small groups

1 Truth to relational truth

Historically, evangelism has been about a truth encounter. "I have the truth, you don't, and you are about to receive it." Either from an evangelist at a meeting, a friend speaking to you, or as you are approached in the street or at your door. It has been about how much of the truth can be conveyed to you. In recent years we have seen that this methodology has become less and less successful. We need to go from truth-based evangelism to relational truth-based evangelism.

Modernity to post-modernity

Our society is going through a huge transition from what we call modernity to post-modernity. At the heart of this there is no longer any overriding truth. There is no one 'story' out there for us to live our lives by. In today's world our own experience rules. Much of the truth-based law that was in our society has been repealed. Now you tend to just behave in any way that feels good to you.

What does this mean to the preaching of the gospel?

The New Testament gives us a picture of a relational God who is not only telling us the truth, but who also can now be touched, seen and experienced. Hebrews 1:1 says "God has spoken through his son." John writes "The Word became flesh and lived for a while amongst us." (John 1:14). John also writes in 1 John 1:1 "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life." His proclamation was linked to his relationship.

We could say that Jesus was a very post-modern evangelist. He came to a pagan world and demonstrated the gospel by His life as well as

speaking about it, we can see that in our increasingly pagan culture we also must live in a way that demonstrates the good news before we can talk about what we know to be the truth. In other words, evangelising in a pagan culture where there is no strong Christian presence requires the gospel to make an impact relationally as well as by content. People around us need to see the effects of the gospel in our lives. They want to see that it makes a difference and they want to experience that difference in us before they will hear our message. With this in mind it should come as no surprise that those who are most open to our faith are those who are closest to us and see the reality of our faith at work in our lives.

The talking Jesus research highlights the following statistics relating to how people came to faith:

- Growing up in a Christian family - 41%
- Having conversations with a Christian - 36%
- Attending a standard church service - 28%
- Reading the Bible - 27%
- Having an experience of the love of Jesus - 24%
- An unexplained spiritual experience - 17%

We can see that top of the list is the relational context of family, followed by another relational experience of having conversations with a friend. So one of the things our Small group can do is to help empower us Christians to make relationships with non-believers. We will see how this can happen in practice later in this booklet.

2 Decision to process

Understanding evangelism as a process rather than a decision, means that we will be able to effectively engage with non-believers where they are within that process. It liberates us from an old way of thinking where we judged our success by counting the number of heads who

had made a decision based on the information we had given them. Another way of thinking about this is to change evangelism from a crisis decision to the idea of a journey.

With this in mind evangelism becomes:

- Identifying where your friend is in the process.
- Through love, words and action, helping them to move up through the process to a decision and on to maturity.

Fruitful evangelism will look like:

- Being in relationship with many people.
- Trusting that the Holy Spirit is working in us and through us in this process.
- Believing that through our friendship and our words their minds and spirits are touched so that they begin to have a new understanding of who God is.

Jesus showed us in the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:1-23) that if we make a decision for Christ before we really understand (the rocky soil convert), we will most certainly fall away. The rocky and thorny soil converts have understood the content of the gospel but not the implications of the message. If we are to see real conversion an individual must go through the process of understanding these implications and be honest enough to see where they are personally with regard to this understanding. (See *Sowing Reaping Keeping* for more explanation of this.)

In real terms, if we ask someone to give their lives to Christ without understanding and relationship, we are asking them to believe in a mad man, who could be responsible for all the suffering in the world. Then

to join the most boring people on the face of the earth, because that's how many of them see God and how they see us.

If we can build relationship with them and introduce them to a quality Christian community, we will help them to move through the stages on the scale below from a place of suspicion or prejudice against God and Christians, to what will often feel like a series of decisions to look more closely at Jesus and ultimately follow him. This will then lead on to a life motivated out of the same value system that Jesus demonstrated.

Alpha and similar introduction to faith courses

Let's take a moment to look at why Alpha has become an important component in our outreach. It gives people a relational, non-threatening way to understand the content of the gospel. The fact that there is a small group discussion component makes it ideal to connect with an ongoing small group after the course has finished for those who would like to. It engages with them experientially and also, at several points gives them an opportunity to give their life to Jesus and become his followers.

Alpha and other such courses are used in all sorts of ways within churches. Here is one story that demonstrates how effective it can be to enable multiplication and growth in our small groups.

“Following an evening discussing how the group was going to move forward, it became obvious that roughly half of the group had people in their networks that they could invite to Alpha. The other half of the group, while keen on the group moving forward, did not have friendships with not-yet Christians sufficiently developed to offer invitations to an Alpha course. It was agreed that the group could multiply around the need to do Alpha with those bringing friends being directly involved and the rest of the group serving in the evangelism process by meeting to pray and cook meals in the opening weeks.”

“The course duly kicked off with a supper party and introduction to the material with the invited friends sat around in the lounge; it all seemed very encouraging. Two married couples, a young lad in his early 20s, another man slightly older, and a young mum, made up the guests on that first evening. The group met in different members’ homes over the following weeks and meals duly arrived from the other half of the group. The teaching discussion was all done together as the group was small enough not to need to split up. An interactive teaching style was used that encouraged questions and discussion through the evening. This often involved the group members sharing their own experiences and not always the speaker giving the answers. The evening always started with a meal, followed by coffee and an ice-breaker which was linked to the topic for the evening.”

“It was great to see the community form over the opening weeks. On week five one of the couples on the course suggested meeting at their house and the other couple offered to bring the meal. This showed the level of ownership in the group.”

“We had planned to go away for the Holy Spirit weekend but this proved a real challenge with various commitments and children to be looked after. So we spent Saturday together doing the sessions at one of the couple’s homes and got pizza and watched football that evening. We gathered again for Sunday morning and for the final ‘How can I be filled?’ session and shared a very special time where those present made commitments to God.”

“To encourage the development of relationships in the group and discipleship of those who had come to faith they were paired up with group members to begin the one-on-one discipleship material.”

“The group finished the Alpha sessions over the ensuing weeks and were so excited by the experience that they wanted to invite friends, relatives and work colleagues. Following a short break of around three weeks a second course was started. To allow the initial group to continue, Alpha was run fortnightly and met as an original group on alternate weeks. For this second course the leaders and existing Christians in the group were encouraged to do some of the talks. They were well

prepared and supported during the evenings and afterwards, if required. Following the second Alpha course the new people were added in and the group has continued.”

3 Winning to keeping

In the days when local church was seen as a normal part of everyone's experience, the emphasis was on winning people to Christ. They could become Christians and find their place in church life. Today we need to think about not just winning them but also keeping them. If we want to see them become disciples who live the Jesus lifestyle in our pagan world, we need to build our strategies around getting them to stay and connecting them into the life of the church so they can be discipled. We probably need to ask some questions about ourselves and ask if anybody would like to join us. Are we easy people to be friends with, do we really care, do we really love? We may have to re-adjust accordingly, learn some new relational skills and be prepared to be flexible in the way we go about our lives together to accommodate those we want to reach.

4 Few to many

In the old way of thinking, evangelism was something that was done by the few, the special evangelist who spoke at a meeting or the church leader who offered an alter call. Now in small groups everyone gets involved in evangelism. We will never reach everyone through the anointed ministry of a few people. Loving everyone is something we all get to do. We are all needed in this ministry of building quality relationships in this culture where relationship is so important. Whether we are five years old or 85, we can have not-yet Christian friends and we trust that the dynamics of our life and our behaviour will make an impact on them. We can ask the Holy Spirit to influence them and help them to change their minds about God.

5 Evangelist to small group

The old paradigm was held up by the evangelist. Church strategies were built around an evangelists and missions. They came and equipped us for these events. We worked to bring friends to hear their message. The small group now holds up the new paradigm where evangelism and loving people is all the same thing, and we are being empowered by our group to build true community and encouraged by them to live authentic Christian lives that demonstrate Jesus to our friends. On a week-to-week basis we are challenging each other to reach out, to be connected, recognising the dangerous time is when we as Christians become insular and isolated. We could become the most holy and spiritual group of people around and be no threat to the powers of darkness, providing the only people we know are Christians and we stay locked up in our buildings, our meetings and even our homes.

The challenge for small groups

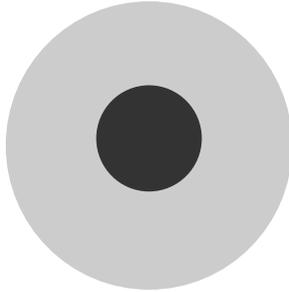
The challenge that we want to give ourselves is to each have three local friends. These are people we are reaching out to because God has put love in our hearts and we want to express this love to them.

The real small group community is made up of the Christians and their not-yet Christian friends.

Even though these not-yet Christians might not come to our small group meeting, they need to be seen as part of the extended Christian community by those who do come to the meeting. Small group based evangelism is NOT bringing not-yet Christians to the group, but rather empowering Christians into relationships. However our friends come to faith, through Alpha or other church-based activities, they will have already experienced being part of the community, which will enable them to then come into the small group meeting.

It is 'GO' rather than 'COME' evangelism.

The inner circle:
The small group members meeting together on a regular basis



The outer ring:
The group members' network of not-yet Christian relationships

Starting an epidemic

The pressure on Christians is to know only Christians and to be so busy in our church programmes that we have no capacity for more relationships. We are no threat to Satan's kingdom in this way as we are not in contact with not-yet Christians, they are never going to see something of the love of Christ through us.

It is the purpose of small group based evangelism to start a mighty epidemic for Jesus. In your small group you are affected by the love of Christ and you are empowered to share that love with as many people as possible. Loving people is going to be tough. On occasion it will require us to love others enough to lay down our own desires for their sake. I don't know about you, but I need all the love and encouragement and accountability I can get to keep going with this, and my small group is the place I need to be to receive it.

Questions:

- What gives you your confidence in the gospel?

- Why is speaking the truth not as effective as it once was?
- How are relationships important in conveying the gospel?
- Describe the process that a friend may have to go through before they can fully understand what it means to be a Christian.
- What do you think they need to understand?
- What hinders your friends from giving their lives to Christ?
- Do you have a contagious dose of faith in the first place?
- If our not-yet Christian friends spend time with us, what chance do they have of catching Christianity?

Section 2

The Practicalities

What will all this mean for your small group?

For what we have described to become a reality in our small groups we will need to have some intentionality. The default is to all too easily focus on who is currently in the group rather than those who are part of the extended community through relationships outside of it. To enable this focus to be there on a regular basis and create a group with a truly missional heartbeat we will need to establish some beliefs and values in the group itself.

This next section is designed to take some of the areas we have highlighted in the first section and look at ways that our small group can work together and support each other in their missional activities. Each section includes practical things you can do together in your group and follows a natural development of ideas that will build on each other week by week. Often our small groups don't have a sense of intentional development as part of their mandate so to do this may feel a little different and it will be good to take some time to explain why this is happening. Putting a missional or outreach component in a small groups can be a new concept for many as they have traditionally be more inward focused and seen as bible study groups or care groups for Christians. There is nothing wrong with this but we are now looking at bringing that missional dimension into the group as a natural outworking of what we already have.

The areas covered are as follows:

1. Changing our values
2. The centrality of Prayer
3. Helping each other move forward
4. Supporting each other on our frontlines
5. Building an extended community
6. Connecting with the gospel
7. Creating opportunities for our friends to follow Jesus

1 Changing our values

Goal: to approach evangelism, not motivated by guilt or legalism, but by a true understanding of Christ's love for the lost and his commitment to them. From this understanding grows a desire to be obedient to Jesus and to love our 'neighbours' as he did, consistently and sacrificially, not counting the cost.

Let's start by looking at some verses:

We start by recognising that God loves people. They are made in his image, '*So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*' (Genesis 1:27)

His heart is broken by them. We see this just a few chapters later in Genesis 6:6. '*...The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.*' God, through Christ, wants to reach out to everyone and enable them to come back to a wholeness of relationship with him.

Where do we start? With our motivation.

Luke 19:10	Jesus said that he came to seek and save the lost.
2 Corinthians 5:14	Christ died for all.
John 3:16	God so loved the world.

Why do we reach out to people in the first place? Is it because we want more people in our church? More bottoms on the seats? The answer to this should be 'no'.

If we are disciples of Jesus we will be motivated to reach out to people as Jesus did. Our motivation will stem not from 'ought' – a legalistic bind over us – but from a desire to love people as Jesus did. Our friends, neighbours, family and work colleagues need to know that they have value. They need to know that they are not whole without a restored relationship with God their Father and a life motivated not for themselves, but in living for Christ.

The reality is that many of us who have been Christians for some time come to Jesus' command to love the lost carrying our own baggage from past experiences. Often we have painful memories of rejection, or being told to do things that have not sat easily with us. We have possibly been discouraged by a lack of response from those who we have tried to share our faith with.

In our small group we can create opportunities to work through these issues, pray for healing and create a new understanding about relational evangelism and our need to be obedient in loving our neighbour. This is a foundational process and should take as long as the group needs, undoing wrong thinking, sharing together and praying through hurtful past experiences. When we as Christians have the value of loving the lost as Jesus does, we will be prepared to try again. We will understand what we have to offer, how we can demonstrate love. We will start to see the need for some lifestyle changes in order to free some time to build relationships with people outside the Church.

So you will need to set time aside in your meeting to help each other make these value changes. Some groups already divide their time into sections and what follows could be used in what many groups call the witness or outreach section of the group. If your group does not do this currently then you will need to create space to work through suggested steps. They are a starter, so do adapt them so they fit well in your particular situation and work in the best way they can for your group.

Week 1

Read Jesus' mission statements in Luke 4:18-19 and Luke 19:10.

Go around the group and ask each member to say how they have benefited as a result of Jesus' mission. They can share how they became Christians or how they have been healed or set free.

End with a prayer thanking Jesus for his work in our lives and asking him to use us to reach others.

Week 2

Ask the questions:

When you look at people who don't know Jesus, what do you see? You are looking for answers such as: they seem fine without God; they have everything they want – more than I do; it seems impossible that they would ever show any interest in God; I feel threatened by them as they seem so 'all together'; they are lost and don't know it; they need to be loved.

Record these answers on a large sheet of paper laid out on the floor in the centre of the group. Divide the sheet into two columns recording these answers on one half. Then ask:

How do you think Jesus sees them? (Unbelievers are called sheep without a shepherd, lost, poor, prisoners, blind.)

Record these answers on the other half so that the group can see where there is a difference in the way they see those without Christian faith and how Jesus sees them.

Pray for one another to see others as Jesus does and for him to show you something of the love that he has for people, that you may be motivated out of that love.

Week 3

We are asked (implied) by Jesus to be workers in the harvest field (Luke 10:2) and to go and make disciples (Matt 28:18-20). Read these verses and ask the group: What motivates you to reach out to the lost (guilt or love)? Give a few minutes of silence for reflection before each person answers. Encourage honesty by answering first and including your own struggles.

Pray for each other for healing of past hurts and rejection from others or from past church situations where they have felt uncomfortable when it has come to previous evangelistic endeavours.

This may take more than one meeting. The important thing is to persevere in ministry until there is a sense of individuals experiencing release.

Week 4

Earlier we described relational evangelism.

Ask your group to define relational-based evangelism. Create a definition on a sheet of paper to prevent this discussion becoming too open ended.

Discuss together how can truth be carried in the context of a relationships?

Pray for God to inspire and anoint the relational skills and opportunities of all the group members.

Week 5

Remind the group of the definition of relational evangelism which you created together last time.

How does hospitality become a key in this new evangelism?

Ask the group to share accounts of their experiences of using their homes in building relationships with those they would like to see come to faith.

Pray for one another in this area of hospitality. Where are the difficulties that need to be overcome? Pray for the Lord to bless the plans you have in place already and to use your homes to build relationships.

Week 6

Ask the group:

How has our motivation to become witnesses changed over these past few weeks?

We should be motivated out of love and compassion for those who are described as lost. We should also be motivated by our love for Jesus which works itself out in obedience (John 14:15).

If there are still problems, ask for honesty and pray for these individuals. Be prepared to work with individuals outside the meeting to help them prepare to become part of the team.

2 The centrality of Prayer

Goal: to develop a lifestyle of prayer for the world around us on two levels: for individuals and for our country and community. Through prayer we learn to share responsibility for each others' friends.

Part of the process of changing our values is to agree with God that His view of our neighbourhood and our friends is the correct view. As we pray we begin to take on godly values and mind-set – we are changed. We need to pray personally and corporately to this end.

This prayer will need to be persistent, particularly with the spiritual climate in which we live where few people seem to be seeking our God and where knowledge of him is increasingly limited. In the battle to develop a consistent prayer life it is helpful to be accountable to others in our groups. If we set prayer targets which are specific then we are more likely to get on with the task of praying for our friends and contacts. We can also set aside time each week to pray in our group meetings for the communities around us and the individuals with whom we are in contact.

An important aspect of small group evangelism is working together as a team. It is essential that we learn to take some responsibility for each others' friends and family. This responsibility develops as we pray for each others' friends, even before we have met them. Having prayed consistently for them, when we do meet them we feel a different bond with them. They experience our love and concern without really knowing us. It can completely amaze them!

Although this section is entitled Prayer, praying for individuals and activities needs to be a regular and ongoing part of our small group life. Some groups will call a half-night of prayer for their outreach

every two or three months. This can be a special time of fellowship over a shared meal and then a longer period of grappling in prayer for friends and family.

Here are some ideas for how we can pray together around this area:

Praying for our communities: Pray big-picture prayers

Declaration

- Declare over our town and over our friends, that each individual is important and loved by God.

Intercession

- Ask God for the fullness of everybody's potential to be released, for his blessing on our communities.
- Ask that people would begin to see God for who he really is and to see that his church and his people are okay.
- Ask God to establish his kingdom on our patch, our neighbourhood or workplace. Ask him to overcome Satan's activity in our sphere of influence.

Think

What is it that keeps my friends in this village, town, or city from knowing Christ? We could pray to break the power of these things so that they would not hold back our friends. For example:

- Materialism and hedonism. The wonder of things, the pursuing of pleasure and the avoidance of pain is the number one occupation of most people in our culture. This insulates them from pain and difficulty and from having a sense of being lost.

- Apathy. A sense that life is only important in the present and a lack of interest in bigger things and finer things.
- A negative picture of the Church. There is no doubt that most people have either subconsciously or consciously felt the impact of a certain picture of us as Christians and of the message of the gospel. It might be through television dramas where Christians have been portrayed as hypocrites. Or they may have had, for whatever reason, a genuinely difficult or unhappy experience with a church or a Christian.
- Fear. All sorts of fears hold people back; fear of commitment, of change, of their circumstances, fear of looking foolish.

Praying for workers in the harvest

Action: Walk around your neighbourhood and pray for God's kingdom to come.

Jesus didn't ask the disciples to pray for the harvest. He said that was already there. What he wanted was more workers to go into the harvest (Luke 10:2). We need to pray specifically and consistently for ourselves as we commit to working in the harvest. Pray regularly for group members as they meet with friends, family and colleagues so that they become effective workers.

Praying FOR individuals: Pray small-picture prayers

It seems extraordinary that God has chosen us to be fellow workers with him in seeing our friends become Christians. We can be a part of seeing those whom we care about having the opportunity to choose a relationship with Jesus through the prayers that we pray for them.

We can pray for:

- God to bless our friends. We need to know them well enough to know their immediate needs. He loves to answer our prayers for them because he loves them and wants them to come to know him.
- Specific friends to become Christians. Take up the challenge of developing friendships with three people who don't yet know Jesus, pray for them and watch what happens.
- God to bless our relationships with friends and for wisdom to know how to develop these friendships.
- Opportunities to speak about our beliefs.
- Opportunities to ask questions about our friends' beliefs.
- Opportunities to introduce our friends to our small group community.

Praying WITH not-yet Christians

It is a constant challenge to build relationships with friends to the point where they are sharing their needs. It can be an even greater challenge to dare to offer to pray with them, there and then, when they are sharing their difficulties. It is an exciting adventure to pray with them if they will let you. People are generally very open to this. It enables God to show them how much he loves them and when he does answer prayers for them there can be no denying that something has happened as a result of prayer. This can be such a significant moment for someone who may not even be seeking God.

Learn how to offer to pray for a friend in a way that will not cause them embarrassment, by discussing how to do this in your group. You could even role play these situations so the group gains confidence. Follow up on how you are doing with this and check with each other to see what opportunities may have been taken.

Pray for God's blessing on your outreach activities as a group.

As the group begins to work together in outreach, every step needs to be covered in prayer. We would go so far as to say that unless the group is praying there will be little if any fruit from their endeavours.

Let's take Paul's advice and before anything else make sure that we pray.

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone... (1 Timothy 2:1)

3 Helping each other move forward

Goal: Being responsible to and for one another, so we can become effective ‘workers in the harvest’ (Luke 10:2).

Bill Beckham through his many years of working with small groups developed a little phrase which I think is really helpful when we come to look at how we can support each other to do the things we want to do but don’t always get round to. He says when he looks at the early church he sees them ‘being responsible to and for one another’.

Why do we need support from each other? If we are honest, we all know that we believe certain things but we never actually get around to doing anything about those beliefs in reality. For example, we can believe that we love Jesus and want to be obedient to him, but we get involved in the reality of everyday life only to discover that our best intentions get lost along the way. We know certain things are true, but for all sorts of reasons we don’t follow that belief into action. To believe the right things is easy. To do the right things can be more challenging. We all need help to obey the commands of Christ. It is a real challenge for us to love others as Jesus has asked us to in a practical and effective way. Jesus simply says; ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ (Matt 22:39). We need encouragement from others to keep going. It is helpful if we recognise our tendency to put things off or not get around to doing what we said or thought we would do.

It will come as a great relief to see that Paul had the same problem which he describes like this:

‘For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that

good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.’ (Romans 7:15-20)

He recognised that he didn’t naturally do what he wanted to do. We are the same and need each other to help us and hold us accountable. Perhaps it is in this area of loving others that we need the most encouragement from each other.

Some areas to look at:

Week 1

As a group, give each other permission to be responsible to and for one another .

Do we really see people the way God sees them?

Question: Jesus was the friend of sinners. Am I? What have I done which demonstrates that I am loving the lost?

Be gentle with your group members, but encourage them to be honest about how they are really doing. Pray for each other to make the next move forward. Their next steps can be small and need to be achievable so that they are encouraged to keep going. It is good to celebrate these steps as we move forward together.

Week 2

As a group, talk openly and honestly about how you are building relationships with others. Some relationships will already exist and just need identifying others will have been thought about but not followed

through on, some will be as yet unexplored and might be revealed as you share and discuss together.

Question: How am I building a network of friendships?

All friendships are made in the context of something else. Ask your group members to develop their own strategy for building their network.

- What am I doing or would like to do in my local area?
- How am I or can I be involved in my area?
- Which club or activity do I belong to or could I join?
- How am I using my home to develop my network of friends?
- How am I developing my relationships with my work colleagues?

Use these questions to stimulate conversations and support each other in a time of prayer together for the areas you have discussed.

Week 3

As a group, give each other permission to be responsible to and for one another to use your gifts to reach out.

Make a list together of all the things that your group members enjoy doing and have the gifts to do. Include the spiritual as well as the practical gifts in the group. Begin to get people thinking as to how they can use these gifts to see people move closer to God.

It is helpful at this point to see if there is something you can plan to do together or get involved in that one of the group members is already doing.

4 Supporting each other on our frontlines

Goal: To become more familiar with each other's mission fields.

This is about our individual connections with the world around us. This may be our workplace, the school gates, clubs that we belong to, family connections etc. It is often surprising how little we know about each other and these other more specific areas of our lives.

The passage mentioned earlier from Luke 10 encourages prayer for the workers who go out into the harvest. These workers are the members of our small group. One way we can do this is to have one person each week share about their lives on the front line where they work and live, so that we can pray for them.

You can use three simple questions to help, built around three Ps:

- **Presence:** How or where do you sense God's presence?
- **Pressure:** Where are you feeling pressured?
- **Purpose:** What do you feel is your purpose?

Give time for the individual to share around these areas and then simply pray for them. As it is often towards the end of the meeting time it is good to pull a chair into the middle of the room and stand around the individual as you pray for them. This re-energises the group and shifts the focus onto the individual you are praying for. Encourage the group to listen to God as they pray, and share any words or pictures that they receive.

You can work around the group over a number of weeks, ensuring that everyone has an opportunity to share and be prayed for. This helps the group in a number of ways.

- It builds the community of the group as we get to know each other better through engaging in the other areas of our lives.
- It gives us an opportunity to pray in a very focused way for each other and the challenges and joys we face. This often creates opportunity for us to use our gifts as we pray, we may have a scripture to bring or a word of encouragement or prophecy.
- We often see ways that we can support each other through sharing wisdom and understanding either from our own situation or as a direct revelation from God as we pray.
- We are reminded as a group that our mandate is bigger than just having a meeting together we are about seeing the kingdom of God come in every area of our lives and have a role to play in this bigger picture as we share together.

In some of the situations where we pray for people particularly around their workplace we will probably never meet their work colleagues as they will work in other towns and commute in. In these situations we are preparing ground that others will potentially cultivate and harvest in different locations. In this way we are spreading the net really wide and reminding ourselves that we are part of God's kingdom.

5 Building an extended community

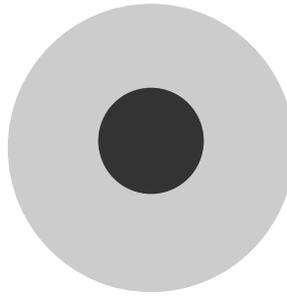
Goal: to develop an extended community which includes your group's network of friendships.

Check the bible. John 13:34-35 says, *“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*

It has been observed that nearly every spiritual awakening in history, every revival, has broken out in communities with two sociological factors: people work where they live, and everybody knows everybody. This is because as we said earlier our faith travels through relationship we need the connectivity. In our nation today a good number of people travel for work, so it is often true that the first of these is no longer the case. Although in some areas this will still be true. There was a time when you would have known most of the people in your block of flats or in your street. Once again this may be the case in your street but is often not the case. So our task is to think about how we can rebuild

If we are going to touch our nation, and see a new spiritual awakening then we as the Church will need to set about rebuilding community. The vision behind the small group idea is to rebuild community so that every group is like two circles, one inside the other. The inner circle is the group meeting and the relationships between the Christians, and the outer circle is the relationships those Christians have within their area. As per the diagram overleaf (previously shown on page 18).

The inner circle:
The small group members meeting together on a regular basis



The outer ring:
The group members' network of not-yet Christian relationships

This is, if you like, the real group. Some members of your real group, in fact most members, may not be Christians and never come to the meeting, but you have embraced them into your community. As a result you are not just reaching these people on your own, fishing as it were with a rod, but you are loving them as a group, creating, as it were, a net. So through social events, through practical help, fun, and parties, you are getting to know each other's friends.

In reality the more that group members have in common, the more they will be able to create this community. If your group is made up of men who like football, the outreach strategy becomes obvious and the focus of the community is around its main interest. When groups are made up of a broad mix of people as many are it can be more difficult to create this wider group community. In some situations a subgroup of the group can work together to reach out to a particular set of friends that they are connected to. For example, two couples in the group can run a marriage course for friends, supported by the rest of the group, who might offer to baby-sit, provide food and pray for the course.

This phase of the outreach strategy of a group can take a few months of patiently building the community, especially if group members begin with very few real relationships with friends in their neighbourhoods. It is a very important phase and worth giving time and effort to.

The result can be that you have permission to talk about the gospel with many non-believers who would otherwise have been closed to your message. It needs to be a fun time and can be very exciting as you see friends warm up to the first Christian community they have come across and spent some time with.

An honest moment

While building the wider community, an opportunity is created to help those group members who struggle with their inter-personal skills. Not all of us as Christians are a good advertisement for Jesus. Their past experiences may have left them unable to relate to others well. They might be unable to reach out to others, or perhaps have quirky mannerisms that do not encourage outsiders to want to stick around. The challenge for the group is to become honest enough with each other that it is possible to talk about these difficult things. It is for the sake of those we are reaching out to, but it could also revolutionise the lives of these individuals who might have been secretly longing to be able to make better relationships.

Here are some ideas that will help you move forward with the things we have just looked at:

Week 1

For fun, offer a prize in your group for whichever member knows the Christian names and surnames of the most people in their street or block of flats.

Question: What could we do as a group that would help build this community? Plan with your group how you can start to build this extended community.

Week 2

What contributions can your group members make to building this extended community?

Many people can be daunted by the prospect of evangelism, but can arrange a social event, send out invitations, prepare the venue, cook food, chat to people as they arrive, pray for the event, and so on. All these tasks are very valid and essential in creating this extended community. Ask your group members which gifts they have which will enable them to contribute towards an event, so that everyone can be involved and enjoy making their contribution.

Week 3

As you plan a social event, pray that the love of God would permeate all that you do. People often reflect that although they couldn't put their finger on it at the time they found their early experiences of meeting a group of Christians and experiencing the acceptance welcome and warmth very attractive. We need to remind ourselves that what we have in our groups and often take for granted in terms of open relationships and trust are not common currency amongst those who may be joining us. We can then be more confident that they will experience the God who dwells in each of us and is evidenced through our relationships.

Week 4

Situations may arise in people's lives where they have some kind of practical need. Take this as an opportunity to reach out and plan how the group could meet their need. If a more profound need arises, some kind of illness, financial difficulty, some kind of challenge, then you and your group can reach out and care. Pray for God to use this as a time when these friends will become more open to see God at work.

Week 5

Discuss how each group member can increase their contact time with each of their non-believing friends. What would be a realistic goal for each relationship? How could this goal be reached – or what do we each have to plan in order to spend more quality time with our friends? Commit your plans to the Lord and remind each other of what you have agreed.

- Celebrate birthdays and invite your friends as well as your small group members to the party.
- Using your inner and outer community, organise a charitable event which gets everybody doing something together.
- Get the group working together to help a friend in a practical way – move house, decorate, do some gardening.
- Arrange social events to which you can invite both the inner and outer communities.

6 Connecting with the gospel

Goal: To look at how we talk about God with our friends.

Perhaps the hardest challenge for us at this time is seeing people moving from being open to the messenger to being open to the message. Our faith challenge is believing that people will become open to wanting to know more about Christianity. Once they are asking questions or open to learning more we are generally more confident to explain what it means to be a Christian. Remember that most people need to hear the gospel several times in several different ways before they are ready to make any decision about accepting it and following Jesus.

There are generally three situations in which people can hear the message and we need to be ready to create and use these different options.

- Individuals can be equipped to share the gospel in one-to-one situations.
- Groups can work together to create opportunities for explaining the gospel this may be by running Alpha or something similar for instance.
- There are still occasions when taking someone or a group to hear someone present the gospel is a helpful step on an individual's journey.

Here are some ideas to help you explore this in your group

Week 1

Look at the most frequently asked questions about Christianity and

make sure the whole group has some idea of how to respond by working together as a group to create helpful responses. You could even produce a typed sheet of the answers you come up with together if it would help your members to have confidence, should the situation arise.

For example:

If God is a God of love, why is there suffering in the world?

Is the Bible true and authentic?

What happens to people of other faiths?

Why is church so boring?

What does it mean to be a Christian?

Suggested sources for these answers:

Letters from a Sceptic, by Gregory and Edward Boyd

Material from Alpha, by Nicky Gumbel

Week 2

As we pray for people, the Holy Spirit will be seeking to bring them to a place of openness to the content of the gospel. Make a list of all the people in the community who do not know Jesus but whom you sense are nearing the point where they could hear the message. Ask the Holy Spirit to work in their lives so that they will become open to hearing about Jesus.

Week 3

Get into pairs and practice telling your story, in three minutes or so, of how you came to faith and what has happened since.

Pray for opportunities to tell your story.

Week 4

Discuss ideas for other ways of sharing the content of the gospel with your friends and pray for opportunities to do so.

For example, look for opportunities to give people a book to read with some Christian content, e.g. *The Testament*, by John Grisham, in which the hero becomes a Christian; and Jonathan Aitkin's autobiography, which describes his fall from cabinet minister and how he became a Christian.

Week 5

Think of opportunities which your church as a whole could organise which would be of help to your friends on their spiritual journey. For example: Christmas and Easter events, social occasions to hear others giving their testimony, bible weeks where you can go as a wider community with your not-yet believing friends who are ready for the content. You could ask your church leadership to organise one such event if several of your friends are ready to hear the message.

7 Creating opportunities for our friends to follow Jesus

Goal: To find a way that we can encourage our friends to follow Jesus.

At the beginning of this booklet we gave a challenge for us to have confidence that the gospel is the best thing for our friends. To know Jesus is to have real life. If it is, then at the right point and the right time, we need to give our friends an opportunity to respond. Currently, because of the success of the Alpha course, this is a great deal easier than it has been in the past.

Planning an Alpha course

Small group-based Alpha

An Alpha course will not happen unless the small group team is working well. There will be those who have the relationships with friends who are ready for an Alpha course. Others will be radically praying. Others will have a home big enough to hold the course. Yet others will be needed to cook and teach and be there for relationship once the course gets going. The Alpha videos can be used, but it is also good to encourage small group members to do some teaching. This enables interactive questions throughout the whole session and has produced great results.

It is a fantastic tool for small groups. When Alpha is run by a group the whole group owns the evangelism process and as a result this is our preferred setting for the course. The seekers are welcomed into an existing Christian community in order to do the course. They will then find the transition into the group an achievable next step for them

beyond the course. There is very little post-Alpha fall out as people who have appreciated the course find it easy to continue in that community. It overcomes the challenge of how Alpha graduates go on to relate to the Church.

In a group setting the Welcome questions can relate to the topic which is going to be discussed. The talk can even be given in the informal atmosphere around the meal table.

It is helpful to set the date for the Alpha course well in advance which provides an opportunity for group members to focus on the relationships with those who may be ready to do the course. This will also provide a focus for the group and help it to move forward towards this goal.

Church-based Alpha

In other settings all the small group members with friends who are ready for Alpha can invite them to a centrally-run Alpha course. The work of preparing the meal is shared throughout the church in some churches a different small group is asked to prepare and serve the meal each week. This connects all the groups with Alpha even if they don't have any one going who is connected to their group. The teaching can be done by experienced speakers, or using the videos.

It is helpful if a group picks up the challenge of hosting a table for the meal and leading a small discussion group so that once again the seeker is already involved in a small group community that will continue to run after the course.

Whether the Alpha is run centrally or in a home, the Holy Spirit day or weekend is often the time when people make a commitment to Christ. It is helpful if the group can go away for this as it creates a good atmosphere for people to encounter God.

Other courses and opportunities

There are other courses available to use in a small group. For example the Emmaus course or the more creative course called Essence written by Rob Frost.

Some ideas to help your group in this area

Week 1

Spend time together discussing when it would be appropriate to run something that will give people an opportunity to hear the gospel such as an Alpha course. Pray for faith to believe that the group will have enough people for such a course and then make plans to run it. This needs to be far enough in advance for the group members to spend time socially with their friends and be in a place where they feel comfortable to invite them. The goal is that relationships will be sufficiently deep with these friends that the risk of inviting them will not risk breaking the relationship. The bridge has to be strong enough to carry the invite.

Arranging an Alpha course is always a risk and will require faith. It will focus the group's efforts. If the date is not booked, the course will not happen! It is not helpful to wait till enough people are ready. Take a faith challenge, decide on a date and then plan what has to happen to get people ready for such an opportunity. Encourage the group to go for it!

Week 2

Make plans for the course or event. Hand out the jobs. Pray for each other and the friends who are invited. Keep each other on track to do what is necessary to make it happen.

Think ahead

Often there are opportunities to include people in your group who have attended a course of some sort and enjoyed both the content and the relationships that have been built over the course. Make sure you think about how you can include these people beyond the course if they are looking to continue exploring. I think of this like creating stepping stones to form a pathway beyond the course. Some examples might include the following:

- Offering to set up a what's app group so those that want to can keep in touch.
- Offer to run any sessions that people missed or particularly would like to look at again and meet up to do this with the group.
- Organising a reunion in the couple of weeks following the end of the course.
- Think about what you can run in your small group to invite people to.
- Look at starting a new group with those people on the course and add others in as appropriate.

Conclusion

So we have looked at the big picture and thought about the current landscape that we find ourselves in and how our culture has changed and what that means for us. We have reflected on how we can have confidence in the message of the gospel and its power to change and transform lives. This message of transformation and hope finds its outworking in our villages, towns and Cities. The message is carried by us as believers through our relationships with those around us and we have looked at how we can build and strengthen these relationships through our small groups.

From here we moved to the practicalities of what this would involve for us and how we can see our small groups growing in their desire to have a missional heartbeat. Walking through these practical steps of changing our values, praying together and supporting each other as we share our faith and introduce people to Jesus is such an exciting journey. We pray that you have been inspired to set out on this adventure with your group and that you and your friends will encounter the God who loves them.

Other Resources



Sowing Reaping Keeping *Laurence Singlehurst*

This book will help us explore what it really means to love people and fulfil our responsibility to share what we believe. It is not full of technical terms and complicated methods but simply explores what it means to sow the seeds of faith, to reap the harvest and to nurture the fruit as it grows. Sow. Reap. Keep.

Study guide for groups also available on our website



The Gospel Message today *Laurence Singlehurst*

In a postmodern, unchurched, multi-faith and multi-racial society, it is more important than ever to articulate the enduring message of the gospel in language that can be understood by the culture around us. In this booklet Laurence Singlehurst makes the case for the adoption of contextually appropriate language in order to communicate the truths at the heart of the gospel.



40 Missional Ideas for Small Groups

How can each one of us live out Christ in the context of where we work, where we live and in our families? We have brought together 40 fantastic ideas for use in small groups. Each idea takes about fifteen minutes and gives practical ways to encourage and empower each other as we week to week to love those around us and share Jesus with them. Printed on attractive postcards and presented in a high quality durable tin, these ideas break down into eight themes each taking you small group on a journey, renewing minds and creating new rhythms for life.

Other Resources



Small Groups—an Introduction *Laurence Singlehurst*

This booklet seeks to give some biblical background and framework along with a practical understanding of what it might be like to part of a small group. Suitable for those joining or starting a group, or for those already in one to refresh your understanding of what it means to be in a small group.



Developing Leaders *Laurence Singlehurst and Trevor Withers*

This brand new booklet has been a collaborative project between Trevor Withers and Laurence Singlehurst, who have been running successful and popular small groups training across denominations and church streams for over 20 years. This booklet enables both theoretical understanding and practical application in a real small group with other potential group leaders from your church. Grounded in biblical beliefs and values, this booklet includes reading matter for people to learn on their own, questions for discussion in a group, and material to be used in an actual small group setting.

To purchase our books and resources and for information about our training days and courses visit our website at:

www.celluk.org.uk

Or phone: 07715 069939

Email: resources@celluk.org.uk

About the authors



Laurence Singlehurst

Laurence is the Director of Cell UK and was its founder over twenty years ago.

He has a passion for equipping churches to reach their communities, with an emphasis on friendship evangelism. He has a heart to see holistic small groups with a missional heartbeat established in churches up and down our nation.

He is also on the board and leadership team of HOPE, chairman of Westminster Theological College and board member of several other charities.

He is a regular conference and church speaker.

Laurence is the author of several books including: the best seller Sowing Reaping Keeping, Loving the Lost, Beyond the Clouds, and The Gospel Message Today.



Trevor Withers

Trevor helps to lead Cell UK and has been involved since its creation over 20 years ago. He is passionate about small groups and how they support us to live for Jesus in every part of our lives.

He has worked with numerous churches from across the denominations and streams, has run training for small group leaders, and has created many small group and discipleship resources including Walking Together, Help I'm leading my Small Group, Encounter Bible Studies, Equipped to Lead and Equipping future cell leaders.

Trevor is also team leader of Network Church in St. Albans and Harpenden which is part of the Pioneer group of Churches.

He has a heart for creativity and the arts and runs a pottery studio with a friend.