

What Makes Small Groups and Small Group Systems Grow?

By Jim Egli

A gnawing feeling was churning in side me. It kept saying: “We don’t know what we are doing!”

Of course as pastors, we often feel like we don’t know what we are doing. But at that time I wasn’t a pastor, I was a consultant helping other churches. I was paid to know what I was doing.

For eight years my full-time job was “small group expert” as I led training, wrote curriculum and did consulting for churches across the United States and Canada. But about a year into that job I went to my boss and said, “I feel like we don’t know what we are doing. Some of the churches we are helping have thriving small group ministries but so many are struggling. I feel like we need to do some serious research to find out what really works and what doesn’t.” My uneasiness, my blunt questions and the encouragement of my boss led me to do a Ph.D. in Communication focusing on the statistical analysis of small groups and small group ministries to discover the key factors that create small group growth.

I didn’t get far into the research when I discovered that Dwight Marable, Director of Missions International, was doing almost identical research. We joined forces in our quest to discover the key elements for churches like yours to have a thriving small group ministry.

To date we have surveyed over 3000 small group leaders in more than 200 churches. Our statistical analysis has focused on two simple questions. What key factors differentiate growing small groups from struggling small groups? And, what makes the difference between churches with thriving small group ministries and those with stagnate small group ministries?

Clear answers have emerged to both of these questions.

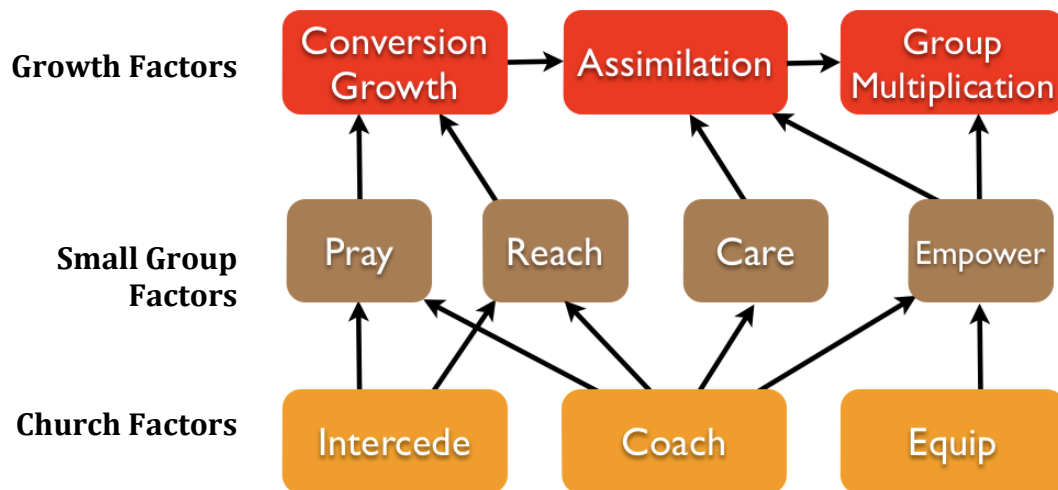
How Small Groups Grow—3 Distinct Growth Factors

Our research revealed three distinct growth dynamics in small groups—evangelistic growth, assimilation and group multiplication. In order for a small group to consistently grow and multiply all three of these dynamics must be present. People must be brought to the group and to Christ, they must be assimilated into the life of the group, and new leaders must be developed to launch new groups.

Interestingly, the research revealed that different dynamics in the small groups contribute to the three different growth factors. In other words the small group dynamics that bring people to the group and into relationship with Christ are not the same dynamics that make them want to actually join the group. And a different set of dynamics is at work to develop leaders and create new groups.

What Makes Small Groups Grow?

The questions “What makes a small group grow?” and “What makes a church’s small group ministry grow?” can best be answered by a path diagram that shows the causal relationship of church factors to group factors to growth factors.



Small Group Health Factors

Four small group health factors impact a group’s growth. We have labeled these factors with four action verbs—*Pray*, *Reach*, *Care* and *Empower*. New people come to a group and to Christ when small group leaders *Pray* and the group has an outward focus—*Reach*. These people will only stay in the group when they find caring body life, *Care*—a group that feels like family, a group where people genuinely love each other and pray for each other, and where people enjoy taking time with one another outside of their weekly small group meeting. Assimilation to the group is also stronger when a small group leader involves group members in meaningful ministry within the group.

A growing group that is attracting new people and incorporating them into the life of the group will not automatically give birth to new leaders and new groups, however. Group multiplication is fostered by other dynamics. In order to successfully raise up new leaders and give birth to new groups a group leader must *Empower* others in ministry. They must give away small and large responsibilities, be on the look out for new leaders, send potential leaders to training, and increasingly involve group apprentices in leadership.

Church Factors Impacting Small Groups

Because many churches have had short-term but not long-term success in growing and multiplying groups, we also analyzed factors within a church that impact the success of their small groups. Our research revealed three critical factors to small group system health, with one factor particularly important. We also labeled these

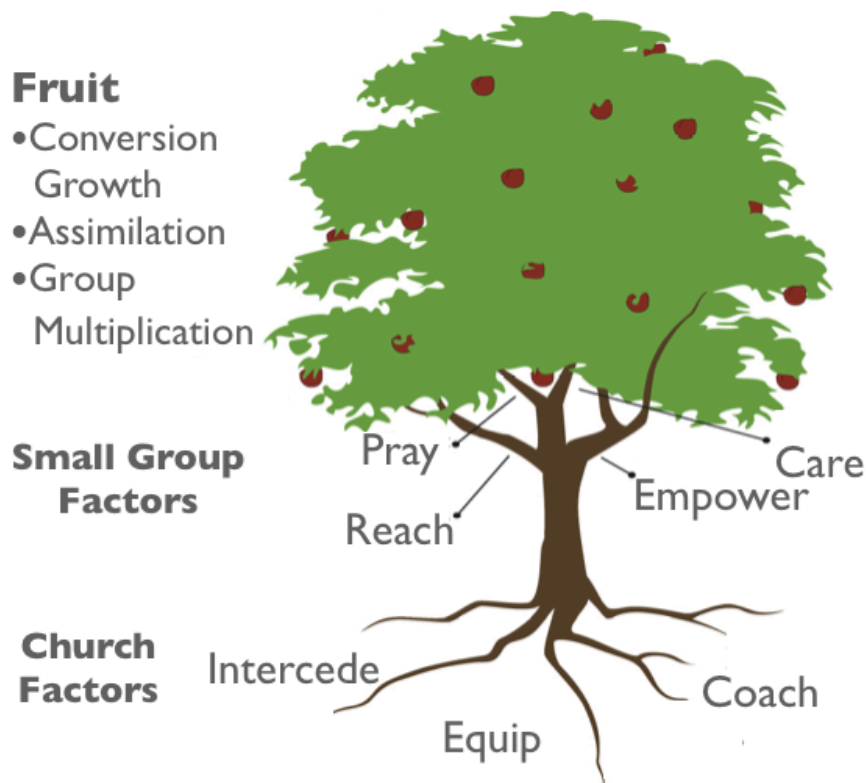
factors with three active verbs—because they involve lived priorities rather than mere stated values. Those factors are *Intercede*, *Equip*, and *Coach*.

Small group leaders grow in their relationship with God and their groups grow in outreach when their church *Intercedes*—when there is an emphasis on prayer in the church’s sermons, testimonies, and schedule. The church’s groups empower others and release new leaders when the church *Equips*—meaning that it has a strong emphasis and practical systems to move people from immaturity to maturity to leadership.

The most important question, however, is, “Does the church actively *Coach* its leaders?” When group leaders are overseen by coaches who are meeting with them, encouraging them, praying for them, and occasionally visiting their groups, small groups perform better in all four small group leadership health measures. The leaders pray and empower others more and the group members reach out and care more actively.

How it All Fits Together

The Bible describes the church as a living organism. Understanding small group growth is about organic not mechanical principles. For that reason the church dynamics illustrated above are perhaps best put in an organic picture that shows roots and fruits. One way to picture this is using the image of a tree.



How Are *Your* Small Groups Doing?

We have developed an online assessment to help each of your small groups see how they are doing on the four small group health measures. When most of your leaders take the assessment, it also gives you a read on all ten measures for your church's overall small group ministry—the three growth outcomes, the four group health measures and the three church factors. This helps you see precisely where your small groups and small group ministry are at and exactly what you need to focus on for greater small group health and growth. Churches that took the assessment in the research and pilot phases have told us that it was very helpful.

I'm a pastor and a group leader now. Some days I still feel like I don't know what I am doing. But I do know the four keys to small group growth and the three pivotal elements to creating a thriving small group ministry and that makes my job and my priorities a LOT clearer. I think our research discoveries and assessment will also be invaluable to you and your small group ministry.

Jim Egli is the Leadership Pastor of the Vineyard Church in Urbana, IL. He has a Ph.D. in Communication from Regent University. Jim and his co-researcher Dwight Marable, Director of Missions International, have surveyed over 3000 small group leaders in over 200 churches to discover the key elements for small group and small group system health and growth. They share their discoveries in their book *Small Groups, Big Impact* (www.churchsmart.com). Their findings also resulted in the creation of a comprehensive small group ministry assessment. For more information about the assessment, visit www.smallgroupsbigimpact.com.