

UNDERSTANDING **SMALL GROUP GROWTH**

CHAPTER

1



My Hardest Job as a Small Group Pastor

In 1998 I (Jim) began an assignment as the Small Group Pastor of a large church in Houston, Texas. For some time the church had lacked a Small Group Pastor and when I began my assignment the church's home groups were thankful for the much needed support and encouragement that I offered.

Immediately upon starting my new role, a leader named Robert asked to meet with me. I had heard of Robert and Sue's group already. They led a dynamic group that had been very successful in bringing new people to Christ and enfolding them into the life of the church. Members of the group had glowingly told me how God had used this group to bring new joy, love, and belonging to their lives.

But what Robert told me when I met him and his wife at their home shocked me. I can still clearly remember his words, "Jim, we are so glad that the church brought you on the pastoral team. But I need to tell you we are quitting as leaders." He told me that their growing group was taking more and more of their time and attention, and that they were burnt out. We tried to discover a way that the group might continue under other leadership, but no one was prepared to carry on where Robert and Sue had left off.

Later that month I met with their small group—about thirty people

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crowded into a member's living room—to celebrate the group's life and to close it down. The disappointment of the small group members far exceeded my own. This group had been their lifeblood and the high point of their week. Now it was ending. But as Robert had rightly perceived, no one was ready to step in and lead.

I learned that day what Dwight and I were to discover even more clearly in our extensive statistical analysis of small groups—small group growth actually involves several different dynamics. Even if

a group seems healthy and growing, it must achieve success in all of the dynamics for long-term success.

The Three Different Dynamics of Group Growth

When we began our research we were studying small group “growth.” We knew that this involved both bringing people to Christ and launching new groups out of current groups. But we assumed that evangelism and group multiplication would be so closely related that they could be practically and statistically considered one outcome.

However, we discovered that there are, in fact, three distinct small group growth dynamics. We have labeled these dynamics *Conversion Growth*, *Assimilation* and *Group Multiplication*. The surprising discovery wasn't so much that these three distinct dynamics existed, but that they did not correlate as highly with one another as we expected. That is, groups like Robert and Sue's can be extremely successful in one or two of the dynamics, yet fail miserably in another.

In other words, some groups are very good at bringing others to Christ, but they are not necessarily effective in enfolded these people into group life. Other groups, like Robert's, succeed at winning people to Christ

and assimilating them into the life of the church, but they fail when it comes to reproducing new leaders and groups.

Obviously, if a group is to be successful long-term, it must draw people to Christ, successfully assimilate those people into group life *and* launch or create new groups.

The three dynamics of *Conversion Growth*, *Assimilation* and *Group Multiplication*, can flow together quite naturally, but too often they don't. Small groups and small group systems that emphasize one or two of these outcomes but omit the others fail to achieve their full potential. Instead of experiencing and extending Christ's good news, these groups stagnate, or their leaders, like Robert and Sue, burnout when the group's needs exceed their limited time and resources.

Guess What Makes Small Groups Grow

Once we discovered the three distinct growth outcomes, we could then analyze the small groups' internal dynamics to see precisely what leadership and group characteristics contributed to small group growth. We looked at many different factors. It was fascinating to discover what does and what does not make groups grow. Interestingly, the research revealed that the very same factors contribute to group health and growth no matter what country or setting you are looking at. It doesn't matter if a group is in New York City or the Amazon jungle, in rural Arkansas, Moscow, or Bangalore, India. The same factors promote group growth whether the people involved are in advanced or developing countries, in large cities, suburbs, small towns or rural areas.

Which of the factors below do you think contribute to one or more of the growth dynamics — *Conversion Growth*, *Assimilation* and *Group Multiplication*? Guess the characteristics of group leaders that you think make a difference in helping groups grow.

Small Group Leaders whose groups grow most rapidly are...	Matters	Does Not Matter
Married		
Younger		
Well-educated		
Outgoing		
Gifted in Evangelism		
Gifted Teachers		
Spending more time with God		
Praying consistently for their group members		
Spending more time praying for their group meetings		
Spending more time preparing the lesson for their meetings		
Praying consistently for non-Christian friends		
Modeling and encouraging friendship evangelism		
Encouraging caring relationships and fun activities		
Spending time with members outside their meetings		
Noticing and encouraging others' gifts and abilities		
Identifying and utilizing potential leaders		

After you have guessed the answers in the form above, you can turn to Appendix A in the back of this book to learn the correct answers.