

FACTORS THAT FUEL SMALL GROUP GROWTH



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Abstract: In order to improve congregational growth, thousands of churches in the United States have implemented small group ministries over the last several decades, but almost no statistical research has been done to determine what factors in small groups and churches foster group growth. This study involved surveying 1,140 small group leaders in 47 churches using factor analysis and multiple regression analysis to determine the factors that drive small group growth. Four small group factors showed a causal relationship to group growth: the prayer life of the group leader, an outreach focus, caring relationships between group members, and the empowering of group members in leadership and ministry. On the church level, three factors—an atmosphere of intercession, the active coaching of group leaders, and the equipping of members and leaders—promoted group growth by improving the four small group factors.

Key Words: small groups, small group leaders, variables, factors, small group training

Introduction

The Research Need

As recently as 1960 very few American churches had significant small group ministries, but in the past several decades many churches across the country have launched group ministries and rearranged their program and staffing to make these ministries a vital part of their church life.

At the same time, there is a great deal of confusion about how to best structure and support small group ministries. A plethora of books have been written on small group ministries, but almost none of them have been based on careful, scientific research. Instead, they tend to be model-based books calling churches to emulate the small group structure, methods, and materials of different mega churches. This can be very confusing for the average pastor and small group leader because the various books' models and principles

often contradict one another, confidently declaring the superiority of their model while criticizing the inadequacy of others.

The goal of this research has been to identify the principles and practices that create thriving small groups and small group ministries regardless of churches' backgrounds, sizes, or the small group models that they have employed.

The need for practical research on small group growth is further accentuated by the fact that extensive church growth research has identified "holistic small groups" as the most pivotal factor both in churches' qualitative health and their quantitative growth (Schwarz, 1996, p. 33). If small groups are central to our congregations' vitality and growth, it is pivotal that we better understand the factors within the groups and within our churches that fuel healthy group growth.

Initial Research

In 1997, I (Jim Egli) began research to identify the factors within small groups and their churches that contribute to small group growth. At the time I was a Ph.D. student at Regent University and the training director for TOUCH Outreach Ministries, a parachurch organization based in Houston, TX, focused on offering small group resources and training to churches in the United States and other countries. At about the same time Dwight Marable, the director of Missions International, a church consulting and training ministry based in Nashville, TN, had begun doing very similar research. Both of us were creating and testing different survey tools, which we were giving to hundreds of small group leaders. I was primarily surveying leaders in the United States, and Marable was surveying leaders in a variety of countries in Europe, Asia, and South America. When we learned in 1999 that we were doing very similar research with identical goals, we decided to collaborate on our work.

Following trends in organizational communication theory that emphasize the impact of organizational culture upon its component parts (Schein, 1994) and systems theory that recognizes how organizational inputs can affect small group process and outputs (Ellis & Fisher, 1994; Farace, Monge, & Russell, 1977), we wanted to look not only at the factors within small groups themselves but also at the factors in their churches to see what dynamics and practices within churches create a culture for small group growth.

Creating a joint tool and taking it through several more iterations of testing and statistical analysis, our first substantial findings came about in 2002. That survey involved 253 small group leaders from 32 churches primarily in the United States. Its results were reported in my Ph.D. dissertation, *Successful Cell Groups: Critical Factors in Small Group Growth* (Regent University, 2002).

For the first time, we got factors with good Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients that enabled us to look at the internal dynamics of small groups and churches in a penetrating way, assessing their impact on small group growth using multiple regression analysis that enabled us to go beyond simple correlations to discern the factors that were most likely causal in relationship to the small group growth dependent variables. At the same time, some theorized factors did not have enough items so as to create valid factors, so more research and testing was necessary.

In the following 4 years, we surveyed over 2,000 more small group leaders in 21 countries, creating a strong survey tool and substantial practical findings that were reported in our book *Small Groups, Big Impact: Connecting People to God and One Another in Thriving Groups*, written in 2006 but not published until 2011.

In 2008, the GroupLife ministry of the Willow Creek Association (WCA) of churches joined in the project and provided valuable input and funding to improve the assessment and the online software that we were running it on. WCA, however, had to pull out of the project at the end of 2009 after the economic downturn occurred and they eliminated their GroupLife staff. WCA involvement in 2008 and 2009 gave a huge boost to the project, however, enabling us to test new revisions to the assessment with a new group of American churches. I was joined in this latest round of research by the co-author of this article Dr. Wei Wang whose expertise in statistics and psychometric measurement were invaluable in analyzing and evaluating the results of this round of data.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 1,140 small group leaders from 47 different churches. The churches represented a wide diversity of denominations and backgrounds from different parts of the United States. A variety of small group models were represented. Participants were obtained through the advertising of three resource organizations: the GroupLife ministry of the Willow Creek Association of churches, Churchteams, which is a church database software company, and ChurchSmart Resources, a publication and training ministry. The small group leaders took the survey online between November 6, 2008, and April 24, 2013. Leaders could not take the survey unless their church had signed up for it. Some churches took a free version of the survey during the interface-testing phase and others paid to take the assessment.

When small group leaders took the survey online, a conditional report was generated for them as a PDF file immediately upon their completion, giving them their scores on their four small group factors called *group health measures*, and offering suggestions on how to improve their group leadership and group life. Later, the church could get a report on each of their individual small group leaders' four health measures, as well as all three levels of measures in their church profile (small group growth outcomes, small group health factors, and church factors).

The overwhelming majority (88.8%) of the participating small group leaders were married, 5.5% were single, 4.0% divorced, and 1.8% widowed. Almost exactly one-third (33.5%) said that they had been small group leaders for more than 5 years, 19.6% said that they had been leaders from 3 to 5 years, 21.8% had been leaders 1 to 2 years, 10.4% said 6 to 11 months, and 14.7% said that they had been leaders less than 6 months. Leaders reported the highest educational levels that they had achieved. Those reporting that they had completed a graduate degree were 29.7%, 42.3% had a four-year college degree, 27.1% had completed high school, and 9% reported simply having an elementary school education.

We also gleaned valuable information about their groups and group members. Just 2.3% said that a normal meeting of their group lasts less than 60 minutes, 34.4% said that their meetings go 60–90 minutes, almost half (45.8%) said that their meetings are 91–120 minutes, 14.2% had meetings 121–150 minutes, and 3.2% said that their meetings are more than 150 minutes or two and one-half hours long. When asked the average age of their group members, 1.3% said 13–18, 4.0% said 19–25, 38.8% said 26–40, 43.5% said 41–55, and 12.5% said more than 56 years old. Most small group leaders (61.5%) said that they do not have an intern or apprentice group leader, 20.8% said that they have one, 10.4% said that they have two, 2.2% said they have three, and 5.0% said that they have four or more. Almost one half (48.3%) reported that their current group began meeting more than one and one half years ago, 13.2% said that their group began meeting one to one and one half years ago, 11.7% from seven to eleven months ago, 14.4% from four to six months ago, and 12.4% from zero to three months ago.

Instrument

The 85-question small group survey probed three areas: small group growth, small group factors, and church factors. The four small group growth measures were the dependent variables; three of them were single item (manifest) variables, and one of them was a factor (latent variable) consisting of three items.

Dependent variables. Since the goal of the research was to discern the factors contributing to small group growth, the four dependent variables were all measures related to small group outcomes. The four variables and their related questions were as follows:

1. Conversions to Christ

- a. In our group, we have the following average number of conversions to Christ:
 - i. Less than one person per year
 - ii. One person every year
 - iii. One person every 7–11 months
 - iv. One person every 4–6 months
 - v. One or more every 3 months

2. Number of visitors to the group

- a. During the past month, the average number of visitors to our meetings was approximately:
 - i. None
 - ii. 1–2
 - iii. 3–4
 - iv. 5–6
 - v. 7 or more

3. Number of new group members

- a. We have had the following number of new people join our group since it started:
 - i. None
 - ii. 1–3
 - iii. 4–7
 - iv. 8–11
 - v. 12 or more

4. Small group and group leader multiplication. This three-item factor had an acceptable ($0.7 \leq \alpha < 0.8$) Cronbach alpha coefficient of .780. Its three items were the following:

- a. How many times has your small group multiplied or sent people out to begin new groups?
 - i. None yet
 - ii. Once or twice
 - iii. 3–5 times
 - iv. 6–9 times
 - v. 10 or more times
- b. If your group has multiplied in the past, on the average how often has it multiplied?

- i. I have not multiplied my group yet.
 - ii. Less than every 20 months
 - iii. Every 13–20 months
 - iv. Every 6–12 months
 - v. Every 1–5 months
- c. How many individuals or couples have left your group to serve as leaders of a new group?
- i. None
 - ii. 1–2
 - iii. 3–5
 - iv. 6–9
 - v. 10 or more

These four dependent variables basically covered the three areas of evangelism, assimilation (which involved two dependent variables: new people visiting the group and then people joining the ongoing life of the group), and leader/group multiplication. Different churches have different goals for their small groups. Even different types of groups within the same church might have different goals, which might include one or two but not necessarily all three of these goals. For example, some churches do not emphasize the evangelistic potential of groups. Most churches emphasize the importance of group growth and want to see their groups continue to assimilate church visitors and members, but other churches use a “closed” group model that steers people into newly forming groups but discourages leaders from reaching out to new people after a group has formed. Almost all churches, however, no matter what model they are following, want their groups to produce new leaders who can form new groups. Churches considering the assessment were consistently told that the survey results would be of value to their leaders and the small group ministry of their church if the groups had one or more of the objectives of evangelism, assimilation, or leader/group multiplication. If, however, their groups or some of their groups did not include any of these three objectives and were simply seen as a context for something else such as in-depth Bible study, they were told that those groups would not benefit from participating in the survey.

Small group variables. The survey measured four small group factors. Almost all questions were to be answered on a five-point (Likert) scale indicating the frequency of the action or condition in question as occurring rarely, seldom, sometimes, often, or very often. Unless otherwise noted below, all small group and church items invited this response. The four small group factors and their respective items were as follows:

1. **The prayer life of the leader.** This five-item factor had a very strong ($\alpha \geq 0.9$) Cronbach alpha coefficient of .915. The items making up this factor were the following:
 - a. I consistently pray for our small group meetings in the days leading up to it.
 - b. I daily pray for the members of my small group between our meetings.
 - c. I pray daily by name for the salvation of my unbelieving friends and family members.
 - d. I take at least 30 minutes each day to pray and study the Bible.
 - e. On a typical day, I spend the following amount of devotional time with the Lord:
 - i. 0–5 minutes
 - ii. 6–15 minutes
 - iii. 16–30 minutes
 - iv. 31–60 minutes
 - v. More than 1 hour
2. **Outreach focus.** This 10-item factor had a strong ($0.8 \leq \alpha < 0.9$) Cronbach alpha coefficient of .851. Its items were the following:
 - a. Members of my group intentionally spend time with unbelievers in order to build friendships and win others to Christ.
 - b. I encourage members to invite family and friends to our small group meetings.
 - c. People in my small group are strongly reminded that we exist to reach out to those that do not yet know Christ.
 - d. I spend at least an hour a week with unbelievers to build relationships and share Christ with them.
 - e. I encourage small group members to consistently pray for their non-Christian friends.
 - f. I remind members of my group to bring unbelieving friends to special church events.
 - g. In our small group meetings we take time to pray for the salvation of unbelievers.
 - h. Our group members have a clear goal: to bring unbelievers to Christ.
 - i. New people who visit our small group are followed up on with a personal visit or phone call.
 - j. At our church's worship services, I try to meet new people in order to invite them to our group.
3. **Caring relationships.** This 10-item factor had a strong ($0.8 \leq \alpha < 0.9$) Cronbach alpha coefficient of .815. Its items were the following:
 - a. People in our group are like family to one another.

- b. I feel very close to the members of my group.
 - c. Members of our group pray for each other throughout the week.
 - d. When someone in our group has a problem, he or she can be sure that others are praying for him or her.
 - e. There is much joy and laughter in our small group meetings.
 - f. Our group members feel responsible to help each other with personal needs and struggles.
 - g. Individuals in our group spend time with one another between our regular meetings.
 - h. I visit the homes of group members to encourage them and minister to them.
 - i. Members of my small group try to sit together at our church's worship service.
 - j. The members of my group eat meals with each other.
4. **Empowering leadership.** This 10-item factor had an acceptable ($0.7 \leq \alpha < 0.8$) Cronbach alpha coefficient of .743. Its items were the following:
- a. I talk to members of my group about their leadership potential.
 - b. When the church offers small group leader training, I seriously consider whom I should encourage to attend.
 - c. I encourage members to take risks and to try new things in ministry and group leadership.
 - d. I am constantly looking for small group leadership potential among the members of the group.
 - e. I meet every week or two with an intern or apprentice whom I am preparing to lead their own group some day.
 - f. I make a special effort to notice small group members' gifts and abilities so that I can involve them in ministry in our group.
 - g. At one of our typical small group meetings, several people may lead different parts of the meeting.
 - h. Other people besides me lead the Bible study portion of our small group meetings.
 - i. When I minister to a member in a time of need, I take an intern or apprentice with me in order to teach practical ministry skills.
 - j. I like to lead the entire small group meeting myself. (Reverse loading)

Church variables. The survey measured four church factors. These factors were variables in the overall church, but were measured by questions asked of the small group leaders. These factors and their items were as follows:

1. **An atmosphere of intercession.** This six-item factor had a strong ($0.8 \leq \alpha < 0.9$) Cronbach alpha coefficient of .815. Its items were the following:
 - a. Our pastor's example challenges others to live a life of prayer.
 - b. Stories about God's answering of prayer are shared in our church's Sunday worship services and sermons.
 - c. The leadership of our church strongly emphasizes prayer and fasting as a way to draw near to God.
 - d. In our church we see people miraculously healed when we pray for them.
 - e. Our church has special meetings focused on prayer.
 - f. Our pastor preaches on the importance of prayer.
2. **Active coaching of group leaders.** This factor in recent previous stages of our research had been a six-item factor, but because of the importance that the active coaching of leaders had shown in this earlier analysis, we tested nine new questions to explore the coaching dynamic further in light of new theory related to coaching effectiveness that emphasizes the importance of "non-directive coaching" (Downey, 2003). Eight of these new questions loaded with this factor resulting in a 14-item factor with a strong ($0.8 \leq \alpha < 0.9$) Cronbach alpha coefficient of .825. The items in this factor were the following:
 - a. I am encouraged by a coach or pastor to grow as a leader.
 - b. A coach or pastor asks me questions that help me plan for the future.
 - c. The person who oversees me as a leader takes time to listen to my concerns and problems.
 - d. I feel like a coach or pastor actively cares about my group and me.
 - e. My coach or pastor is aware of my needs as a leader.
 - f. My coach or pastor meets with me to encourage me as a leader.
 - g. A coach or pastor helps me identify and develop new leaders.
 - h. A coach or pastor challenges me to grow spiritually.
 - i. I am confident that a coach or pastor is praying for me personally.
 - j. A coach or pastor helps me solve my problems.
 - k. For support, I meet with a group including my coach and other small group leaders.
 - l. The person overseeing me as a leader exhibits a close relationship with Christ.
 - m. My small group is visited by a pastor or small group coach.
 - n. Our church holds regular meetings to encourage and minister to its small group leaders.
3. **Emphasis on groups.** This five-item factor gauged how important small group ministry was in a church's overall communication. It had

a strong ($0.8 \leq \alpha < 0.9$) Cronbach alpha coefficient of .895. Its items were the following:

- a. Our pastor emphasizes the importance of small groups.
 - b. Our church communicates the expectation that every member should be involved in a small group.
 - c. Our pastor makes it clear that small groups are central to our church's ministry.
 - d. The importance of small groups is emphasized in our church's announcements and printed materials.
 - e. Stories or testimonies that tell how God is working in our small groups are shared in our pastor's sermons.
4. **Equipping of members and leaders.** This eight-item factor measures the degree to which the church emphasizes the training of new Christians and the training and multiplication of new leaders. It had an acceptable ($0.7 \leq \alpha < 0.8$) Cronbach alpha coefficient of .799. Its items were the following:
- a. Helping new Christians grow is something emphasized in our church's teaching system.
 - b. There is a clear system of training or teaching in our church offered to new believers.
 - c. Our church encourages new Christians to enter into one-on-one discipleship relationships with more mature Christians.
 - d. My pastor or coach encourages me to identify potential leaders within my group.
 - e. Leadership multiplication is emphasized in our church's small group system.
 - f. Our church offers systematic training to new Christians.
 - g. As a small group leader I am strongly encouraged to send potential leaders to training events.
 - h. My church offers opportunities for me to learn and grow as a leader.

Results

To determine which factors were most likely causal in relationship to the dependent variables, multiple regression analysis was used to do path analysis. This allowed us to control for the impact of other independent variables when evaluating the impact of each individual factor. We looked at three types or levels of variables: the small group growth outcomes (the dependent variables), the small group factors, and the church factors. In the next four sections, we will look at the relationship of the variables in four steps: first,

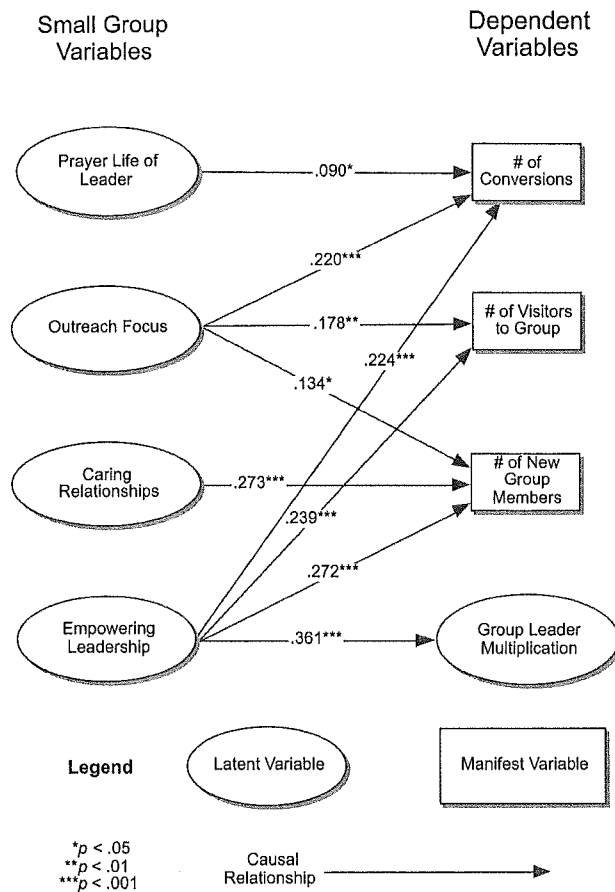


Figure 1. Causal model showing relationship of small group factors to dependent variables with unstandardized beta coefficients from regressions.

the impact of the small group factors on the dependent variables; second, the causal relationship of the church factors to the small group factors; third, the unmediated effects of the church factors on the dependent variables; and fourth, the construction of a simplified causal model.

1. **The impact of the small group factors on the small group growth outcomes.** Figure 1 shows the path model illustrating the relationship of the group factors to the group growth outcomes with standardized beta coefficients.

The regression shows the prayer life of the leader impacting one growth outcome: the number of conversions. Simply put, leaders who consistently take time with God and pray for others and their small group meetings will see more people come to Christ through the influence of their groups.

Likewise, caring relationships show a causal relationship to one dependent variable: the number of new group members. Perhaps it is not surpris-

Three of the church factors demonstrated positive coefficients to the small group factors: an atmosphere of intercession, the active coaching of group leaders, and the equipping of members and leaders.

An atmosphere of intercession in a church positively influenced the outward focus and caring relationships in that church's small groups. The active coaching of leaders positively impacted all four small group factors: prayer life of the leader, outward focus, caring relationships, and empowering leadership. This was consistent with all previous stages of our small group analyses over the past 11 years (Egli, 2011, p. 86). The equipping of members and leaders positively impacted three of the small group factors: prayer life of the leader, outward focus, and empowering leadership. It showed a particularly strong impact on outward focus and empowering leadership. Churches that have a culture strong in discipleship, training, and the mobilization of leadership will have small groups significantly more focused on outreach and the empowering of others in ministry and leadership.

One church factor—small group emphasis—did not show a positive coefficient to any of the small group factors. This is consistent with our earlier research and analyses (Egli, 2011, p.82). Initially it surprised us. We expected that the more a church emphasized small groups in sermons, membership classes, and other church communications, the more healthy their small groups would be and the more growth their groups would experience. But again this did not show a positive influence after controlling for the other factors.² In this round of the research, small group emphasis actually had a negative coefficient to empowering leadership. Perhaps in some churches that talk a lot about small groups, the group leaders expect new leaders to emerge automatically without their own active recruitment and engagement of their members.

3. The impact of the church factors on the dependent variables apart from their mediation via the small group factors. The final part of the statistical analysis was a stepwise regression to assess if the church factors impacted the dependent variables—the small group growth outcomes—apart from their mediation via the small group factors.

In the stepwise regression none of the church factors showed a positive relationship with the dependent variables. In other words, the only positive impact that the church factors showed on the dependent variables was as their effects were mediated via the small group factors. An atmosphere of intercession displayed an unexpected negative coefficient with group leader multiplication. Perhaps in some churches, prioritizing prayer activities and meetings pulls some people who would have been small group leaders into other areas of ministry instead, because these people have only so many evenings or time slots to give to church commitments. On the other hand, an

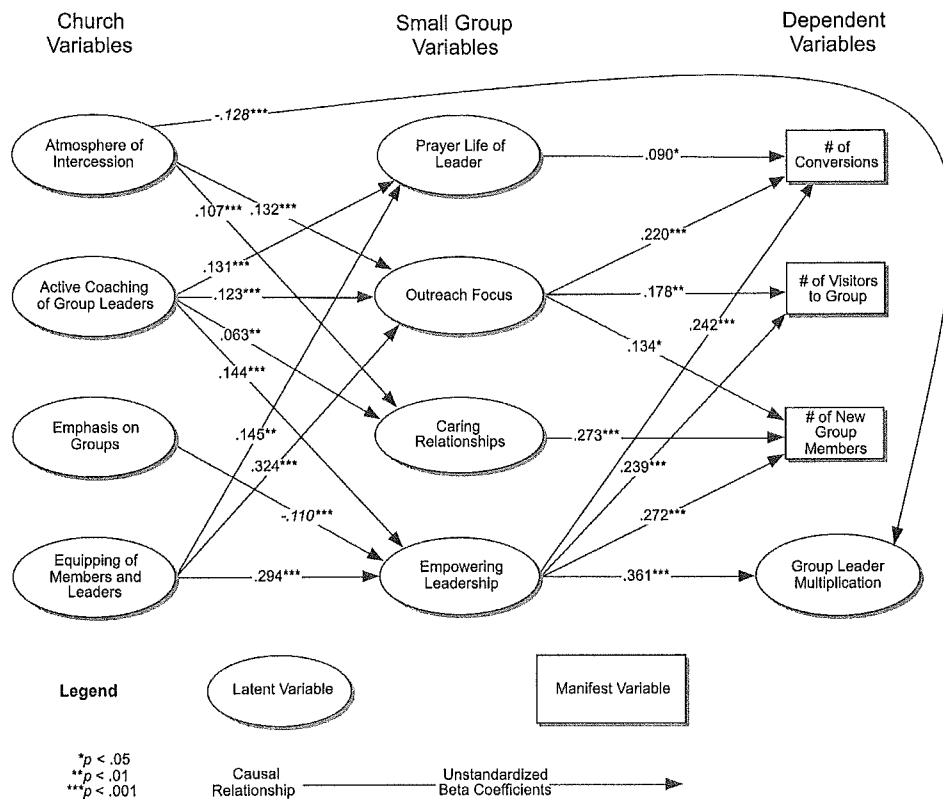


Figure 3. Final causal model with unstandardized beta coefficients from regressions.

atmosphere of prayer in the participating churches impacted all four of the dependent variables positively as mediated through two small group factors: outreach focus and caring relationships.

4. A simplified path diagram. Removing the results of the stepwise regression and the insignificant church factor, and rearranging the placement of church factors to reduce the number of crossed lines, we are left with this simplified path model in Figure 4. Removing a variable—the emphasis on groups factor—adjusted the regressions and the beta coefficients slightly, and now a causal relationship between the equipping of members and leaders and caring relationships can be seen.

Limitations. It should be noted that a limitation in all path analysis models is that correlations do not necessarily prove causation. It could be that correlations between variables are due to other elements. Multiple regression analysis helps overcome some erroneous attributions of causality that could be inferred by using only Pearson correlations because it takes the full scope

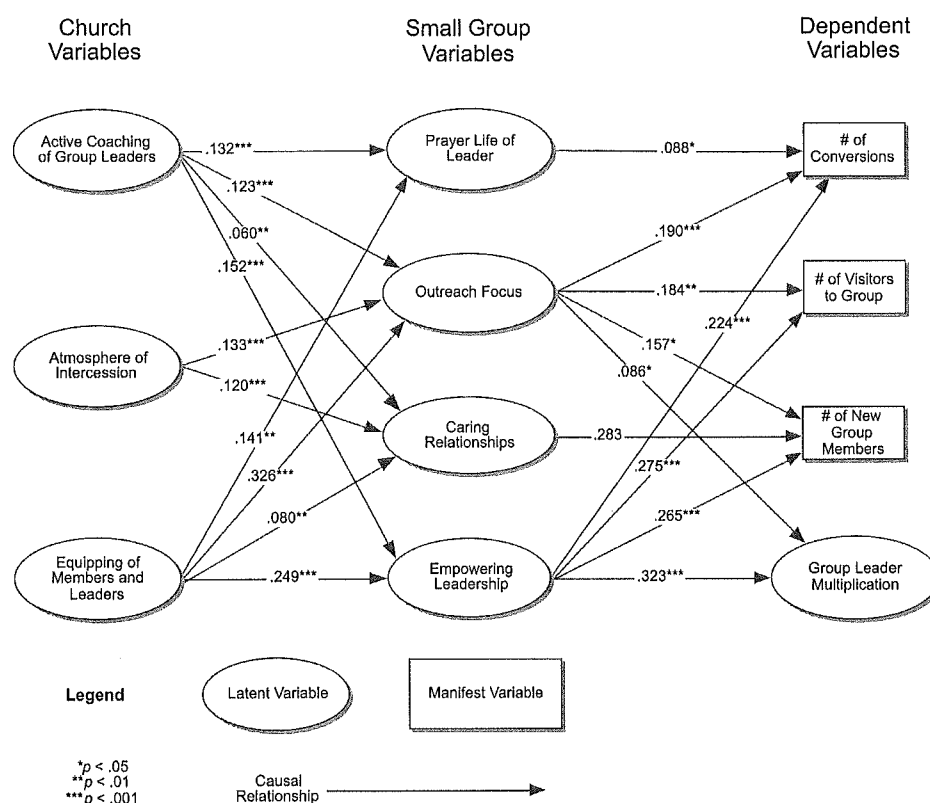


Figure 4. Simplified causal model with unstandardized beta coefficients from regressions.

of variables in an equation into consideration. While we believe—based on critical judgment and statistical analysis—that the causation in the paths is the best explanation of the relationships, it must be recognized that alternative explanations could be feasible.

Practical Implications

The goal of this research was to determine what factors in small groups and churches drive small group growth as measured by the number of conversions, the number of visitors, the number of new members joining groups, and group leader multiplication. This quantitative research yielded clear and practical results that will help guide churches wanting to establish thriving small groups and growing small group ministries.

Implications for Small Group Training

Small group growth is advanced by all four small group measures: the prayer life of the leader, outreach focus, caring relationships, and empowering leadership. Keeping groups outreach focused and emphasizing the empowering of group members in ministry and leadership in particular yield multiple growth results. Churches that want growing groups would be wise to focus on these elements in their training of new leaders and their ongoing equipping of current leaders. Previous rounds of this research project surprisingly revealed no correlation between the amount of time that group leaders spent in the preparation of their group lessons and any of the group growth outcomes (Egli, 2011, p. 26). The results were so conclusive that we dropped the question asking about time spent in lesson preparation from recent versions of the survey. Yet many churches spend a bulk of their group leader training focusing on how to prepare for teaching a lesson or leading a Bible discussion. Pastors and lay small group trainers who want growing groups can minimize this aspect of their group leader training and focus more attention on helping the leaders know how to deepen their prayer life, keep their group outward focused, build loving relationships within the group, and involve a growing number of people in leadership and group roles.

Implications for Church Priorities

Three church factors demonstrated importance to small group health and growth: an atmosphere of intercession, the active coaching of group leaders, and the equipping of members and leaders. One church factor—small group emphasis—showed itself to be insignificant. These results are very important for churches wanting long-term success with small group ministry. Too often churches have tried to create vibrant small group ministries by talking about them a lot without doing the hard work of putting the culture and system in place for ongoing growth. If their small group ministries faltered, some churches would then ratchet up their small group emphasis and communication even more.

The analysis clearly indicates that small group emphasis is not the answer to long-term small group ministry growth—at least not if it is unaccompanied by the other three factors. More productive is for churches to cultivate an atmosphere of intercession, to recruit, train and support people for the active coaching of group leaders, and to improve their discipleship and training by focusing on the equipping of members and leaders. These three elements take time to develop and improve, but they consistently produce ongoing small group growth. The analysis reveals that when or if a church wants ongoing

small group growth, it is more important to model effective small groups than simply to talk about them.

Conclusion

It is hoped that churches, pastors, small group ministry directors, and small group leaders will find these research results practical and encouraging. Small group growth is not really that complicated. Growing groups are groups that are marked by four things: a praying leader, an outward focus, loving relationships, and the empowering of group members. On the church level, just three factors showed importance. Churches wanting long-term group growth should be asking the following: Are we cultivating an atmosphere of prayer, the active coaching of group leaders, and the equipping of members and leaders?

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¹Some of the coefficients between the small group factors and the dependent variables changed slightly when the church factors were entered into the regressions. Of particular note, is that a line from outward focus to group leader multiplication appeared as its coefficient's p-value moved from .06 to < .05.

²Dwight Marable and I were in fact criticized by some small group authors for reporting these results in our book because it runs counter to what others have been saying and writing. It is actually not what we expected to find when we first began our research, and it caused us to change our own thinking and small group consulting, realizing that the other three factors are more important, par-

ticularly the active coaching of group leaders, and the equipping of members and leaders.

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