

# SMALL GROUPS THAT HAVE THE DNA OF A DISCIPLE-MAKING MOVEMENT



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### A GROUP EXERCISE

David Watson put an image up on the screen. “I want you to take a look at this image.” After a few seconds, he blanked the screen. “Now, describe the image.”

People called out various things they remembered. David allowed them to continue, just until they started repeating things that others said already. He put the picture back on the screen. “Could any one of you remember everything in this image?” A collective, “No” swept through the audience. “Yet, together, you manage to remember most of the details in this painting. Now that you’ve heard everyone list what they remembered, I’ll bet that you remember more of the image than you did before we talked about it.”

David looked around the room, “Group memory is better than individual memory. And, as groups recall what they remember, their collective memory becomes the memory of the individual. This is one of the many reasons groups, and the group process, are essential to starting discipleship movements.”

### BENEFITS OF GROUPS

Groups, and the group process, are a strategic element of our strategy to plant the gospel all over the world. When I say “strategic element” I mean, “our strategy would fail miserably if groups, and the group process, were not part of it.” Underestimating the power of groups, and the importance of group process, is one of the biggest mistakes a gospel planter can make.

There are several reasons groups are so powerful:

*Groups remember more than individuals.* As David demonstrated with his picture exercise, a group of people can remember more, and more accurately, than an individual. As groups recall things together, group memory becomes the memory of each individual in the group.

*Groups learn faster than individuals.* Groups require less repetition of facts and principles before they can recall them collectively. As we’ve said before, the group recollection process causes group memory to become individual memory. Consequently, the learning process is greatly accelerated in groups when you allow the group process to happen.

*Groups replicate faster than individuals.* Because groups remember more and learn faster, individuals within a group rapidly reach a point at which they can pass on what they know to others. Since that individual was disciplined within the group process, they naturally use the same process to disciple new groups: within their own “silo” or in a “neighboring silo.”

As more people join a space (like a city, university, Twitter and Facebook), like-minded people gather and naturally form groups within that space that eventually become large enough to be obvious to outsiders. These segments have distinctive boundaries, but

are open to input and output. These segments are often called “silos.” Think of these silos as the collection of communities within a city.

*Groups replicate more often than individuals.* Since members of a properly led group get to a point of replication very quickly, they can replicate more often. They know how to plant what they know into groups within their silo, or in neighboring silos, so individual group members replicate themselves within other groups. This allows group members to replicate with more people than if they focused on individuals.

*Groups are a protection against bad leadership and heresy.* When the authority of Scripture and the Holy Spirit is part of group DNA and group process, groups can protect themselves against bad leadership. Groups that measure what leaders say against Scripture can easily stop the actions of leaders who try to implement extra-biblical, or even un-biblical, policies and procedures. Consequently, the effects of bad leadership are reduced, bad leaders are removed, and heresy is avoided.

*Groups self-correct.* This is the reason well-disciplined groups protect against bad leadership and heresy. Group members understand the Scripture they read and correct each other when someone introduces an interpretation or application of Scripture that isn't apparent in the passage.

*Groups keep individuals accountable.* If you plant the gospel in established silos and groups, group members see each other enough to hold each other accountable. If a group member disobeys Scripture, the group can become aware of their disobedience rather quickly. Properly disciplined groups address this disobedience and help in the repentance and restoration of their disobedient member.

## DISCIPLING GROUPS

When you engage existing groups within silos, you reduce many cultural barriers that slow down (or stop) the group process. Families have existing authority structures. Well-established affinity groups already have leaders and followers. That being said, groups still need to be disciplined. In other words, they need to be taught how to study the Bible together, how to discover what God says through His Word, how to change their lives to obey God's Word, and how to share Bible passages with friends and family. Groups don't do these things naturally; they have to be disciplined into them so that they become as natural as breathing.

*Use existing groupings.* I've already discussed, at length, the benefits of engaging existing groupings within their silos rather than starting groups that are a composite of people from different silos.

*Establish DNA early.* Groups establish the habits and DNA for meetings very quickly—by the third or fourth meeting. Groups are very resistant to change once they've established their pattern for meeting. Consequently, group DNA must be established during your first meeting with the group.

*Establish DNA through action.* You cannot tell people what DNA they need to have. You have to get them to do things, or think about things in a way, that leads them to build habits. These habits become DNA. If you establish DNA well—through action, not instruction—then groups will replicate that DNA naturally within their silos and in overlapping silos. We will talk about this more in the Group Process section.

*Establish DNA through repetition.* Group DNA is the product of what you do, and do often. You cannot do something once or twice and expect it to become DNA. Let's see what this looks like.

## WHAT DNA DO YOU NEED FOR GROUPS THAT MULTIPLY?

In December of 2009, David Watson and I traveled to Honduras. A missionary attended a few of our trainings and worked hard to implement them in Honduras. But after a year of trying, this missionary was about to declare that Disciple-Making Movement methodologies wouldn't work in Honduras. After a week with his team—almost all Hondurans—we realized that the missionary adapted the Discovery Bible Study meeting. Consequently, groups they started left out several elements of the study—important DNA elements for multiplication—and were not replicating.

Several members of the missionary's team did not want to make the necessary changes. He lost all but six members of his team. We also told the missionary that his team members needed to work in pairs, instead of going to villages individually. Instead of 14 individuals traveling to 14 places, this missionary now had three teams of two. They could only work in three areas at a time. The missionary thought we were crazy, but he and his remaining team members were thoroughly committed to the process.

In the year after that trip, they started 300 Discovery Bible Study groups. Many were third generation groups—a group that started a group that started a group (third generation).

There is a minimum DNA required for groups to replicate past the first generation. Let's take a look at each element.

**PRAYER.** Just as prayer is an essential element of movements, prayer is also a critical element of



groups. From the first meeting, we embed prayer in the group process. Remember, we never ask lost people to bow their heads and pray. We don't explain what prayer is. We don't have a lecture about this being an important part of group DNA. Instead, we introduce a simple question, "What are you thankful for today?" Each person in the group shares. Later, after they choose to follow Christ, we say, "You remember how we open each meeting with the question, "What are you thankful for?" Now, as followers of Christ, we talk with God the same way. Let's tell Him what we are thankful for?"

**INTERCESSION.** All intercession is prayer, but not all prayer is intercession. That is why we separated intercession and prayer as parts of the DNA of groups that replicate. Intercession involves sharing personal concerns and stresses as well as the concerns and stresses of others. A simple question, "What things have stressed you out this week?" introduces this DNA element to groups of lost people. Again, each person shares. After the group becomes a baptized group of believers we say, "In the same way that you shared things that stressed you out with each other, now you can share those same things with God. Let's do that now."

**MINISTRY.** David Watson defines ministry as, "God using His people to answer the prayers of the lost and of the saved." As any group—lost or saved—shares needs, there is going to be a group desire to make a difference. All the group needs is a little nudge. Ask the question, "As we shared things that stressed us out, is there any way we could help each other during the coming week?" Follow it up with, "Do you know anyone in your community that needs our help?" Embed this DNA from the beginning and you won't have to worry about motivating the group to transform their community when they become Christian.

**EVANGELISM/REPLICATION.** Did you know that lost people can evangelize? Well, they can if you keep it simple enough. Evangelism, at its core, is sharing the gospel with someone else. When working with lost people, they don't know the whole gospel. That is totally ok. We just want them to share the story they just heard with someone who wasn't in the group. We get them to think this way with a simple question, "Who do you know that needs to hear this story this week?"

If that person is interested, rather than bringing them into the existing group, we have the first lost person start a group with them, their friends, and their family. So the first lost person experiences the study in their original group and then replicates the same study in the group they started with their friend.

We have had groups that started four other groups before the first group ever became a group of baptized believers. Within a few weeks after the first group was baptized, the other groups came to a place where they chose to follow Christ and were baptized as well.

I know this sounds crazy. Stick with me and some of the questions I know you have right now will be answered in a bit.

**OBEDIENCE.** Like I said before, obedience is a critical element of Disciple-Making Movements. Obedience has to be present even at the small group level, even with groups of lost people. Now, we don't look at groups of lost people, shake our finger, and say, "You must obey this passage." Instead, we ask, "If you believed this passage is from God, what would you have to change in your life?" Remember, they don't believe in God yet, so "if" is totally acceptable.

When they choose to follow Christ, you adjust the question, very slightly, "Since you believe this is from God, what are you going to change in your life?" Because they've asked this question all along, new believers don't struggle with the idea that they need to obey God's Word; that God's Word requires something of them; that God's Word requires them to change.

**ACCOUNTABILITY.** Building accountability into the group DNA starts in the second meeting. Look at the group and ask, "You guys said that you were going to help (fill in the blank) this week. How did it go?" Also ask, "Several of you identified things that needed to change in your life. Did you make those changes? How did it go?" If they didn't do anything, encourage them to give it a try this time and be ready to share what happened the next time you get together. Emphasize that it is important for the group to celebrate everyone's accomplishments.

Initially, this will surprise everyone. They won't expect it. The second meeting, however, several will be ready. After the third meeting, everyone will know what is coming and will be prepared. Obviously, this practice continues after everyone is baptized.

**WORSHIP.** You can't ask lost people to worship a God they don't believe in. You shouldn't force them to lie by singing songs they don't believe. But, that being said, planting the seeds of worship into the group DNA is possible.

When they talk about things they are thankful for, it will become worship. When they talk about the changes they made in their lives as they respond to Scripture, it will become worship. When they celebrate the difference they made in their community, it will become worship.



Worship songs are not the heart of worship any more than a flower is the same as its seed. Worship is the product of a relationship with God. Singing praise songs is one expression of the joy our relationship with God brings.

Yes, eventually they will sing praises. The DNA for worship, however, is embedded long before they start to sing.

**SCRIPTURE.** Scripture is central to the meeting. The group reads Scripture, discusses Scripture, practices recalling Scripture with each other, and is encouraged to obey Scripture. Scripture does not take second chair to any teacher. Scripture is the teacher. We'll discuss this more in the next Group DNA element.

**DISCOVERY.** When working with lost people, we have to avoid falling into the role of explaining Scripture. If we do, we become the authority rather than allowing Scripture to be the authority. If we are the authority, replication is limited by our leadership capacity and the time we have to teach every group. Consequently, shifting from Scripture being the authority to the teacher being the authority, will keep groups from replicating like they should.

This is a hard shift to make. We love teaching. It makes us feel good. We know the answers and want to share that knowledge with others. But, if we want to disciple people who look to Scripture and the Holy Spirit for answers to their questions, we can't be the answer-person. We have to help them discover what God says to them in His Word.

To reinforce this idea, we call the outsiders who start groups "facilitators." They facilitate discovery rather than teach. Their job is to ask questions that get lost people to examine Scripture. After they read a passage, they ask, "What does this passage say about God?" and, "What does this passage tell us about humanity (or mankind)?" and, "If you believed this was from God, what would you have to change about the way you live?"

The discovery process is essential to replication. If groups do not learn to go to Scripture and rely on the Holy Spirit to answer their questions, they will not grow like they should and they will not replicate much, if at all.

**GROUP-CORRECTION.** A vast majority of our group leaders and church leaders have no institutional biblical training. When people hear this, they ask, "What about heresy? How do you keep your groups from going crazy?" This is a great question. As leaders, we should ask this question.

First of all, all groups have the tendency to be heretical in the beginning. They don't know everything about God's Word. They are in a process of discovering God which moves them from disobedience to obedience, but it is impossible for them to know everything from the beginning. As the

group reads more together, as they discover more about how God wants them to relate to them, they become less heretical. That is part of discipleship.

If we see them going too far away from Scripture, we'll immediately introduce a new passage and lead them through a Discovery Bible Study on that passage. (Notice that I didn't say "teach" or "correct." The Holy Spirit will use Scripture to correct their behavior. They just need to be directed to the right passage.) After they go through the additional study, they recognize what they need to do. More importantly, they actually do it.

Secondly, we need to realize that heresy usually begins with a highly charismatic (I'm referring to charisma, not the denomination!) leader, with some education, who teaches the group what the Bible says and what they must do to obey it. In this case, groups accept what the leader says and never examine it in the context of Scripture.

We teach groups to read the passage and examine how each group member responds to the passage. Groups are taught to ask a simple question, "Where do you see that in this passage?" When someone makes a weird obedience statement, the group asks this question. When someone adds in a detail when they retell the passage, the group asks this question. This question forces all group members to focus on the passage at hand and explain their insights and obedience.

The facilitator models group-correction. They also model focusing on the passage at hand.

**PRIESTHOOD OF THE BELIEVER.** New Believers and Not-Yet Believers need to realize there are no intermediaries standing between them and Christ. We have to embed DNA that removes the barriers and perceived intermediaries. That is why Scripture must be central. That is why outsiders facilitate rather than teach. That is why the group is taught to self-correct based on what Scripture says.

Yes, leaders will emerge. They have to emerge. It is natural. But leadership is identified by functions that define a role. Leaders are not a different class of spiritual or a special status. If anything, leaders are held to a higher level of accountability, but their accountability doesn't give them special status.

If the DNA for the Priesthood of Believers is not present, you will never have a church. The discipleship process must establish this DNA.

By using these essential practices in group meetings we have seen non-believers become obedient disciples of Jesus that go on to make more disciples and start new groups that become churches. 