

“Prepare to be challenged in every area of thinking and practice. Instead of fixating on superficial structural issues, Neighbour penetrates to the underlying spiritual qualities needed for authentic change in the church.”

— *Dennis McCallum, author and Founder/Lead Pastor of Xenos Christian Fellowship, Columbus, OH*

“ ‘Please allow me to be blunt (again).’ That’s one of my favorite lines from this book, and I hope you will honor Randall’s request and allow him to speak truthfully—even bluntly—into your experiences with small group ministry. Like any good doctor, Randall’s words will prod areas of weakness and poor judgment, but in the end he offers good medicine.”

— *Sam O’Neal, Managing Editor, www.smallgroups.com, Christianity Today International*

“Every movement loses her way. Then God brings someone along to redirect that movement back to her roots. This book not only reminds the small group world who she must become again but also gives practical advice on how to return there. If your small group ministry is struggling, you are considering starting a small group ministry, or you’ve tried small groups before and come up lacking, this book was written for you!”

— *Rick Howerton, author and National Director of Events and Training, Serendipity by Lifeway*

“Through the last 12 years of working very closely with Randall, I know one thing for sure: I’ll always get an honest answer from him. And this is exactly what you’ll find in *The Naked Truth about Small Groups*. Randall reveals what has gone wrong with small groups in North America. But he doesn’t stop there. He offers biblical solutions that will help transform you, your church, and your small groups.”

— *Joel Comiskey, author, Lead Pastor of Wellspring Church, Moreno Valley, CA and President, Joel Comiskey Group*

“Randall exposes the raw facts about small group ministry while revealing God’s original designs for both living out the great commandment and carrying out the great commission. *The Naked Truth About Small Group Ministry* is chock-full of practical wisdom, problem-solving paradigms, and a genuine passion for missional communities of faith, love, and hope.”

—*Dave Auda, Small Groups Pastor, Mosaic, Los Angeles, CA*

“The first step towards healing is admitting that you have a problem. And if we aren’t willing to admit the problem, Randall Neighbour is bold enough to do it for us. Standing on years of experience, Neighbour shoots straight with pictures, stories, and raw reflections on the state of community and discipleship in our churches, and offers straightforward and time-tested advice for getting back to Biblical basics. Like a good athletic trainer, he breaks us down in order to build us up to greater strength.”

—*Heather Zempel, Discipleship Pastor, National Community Church, Washington, D.C.*

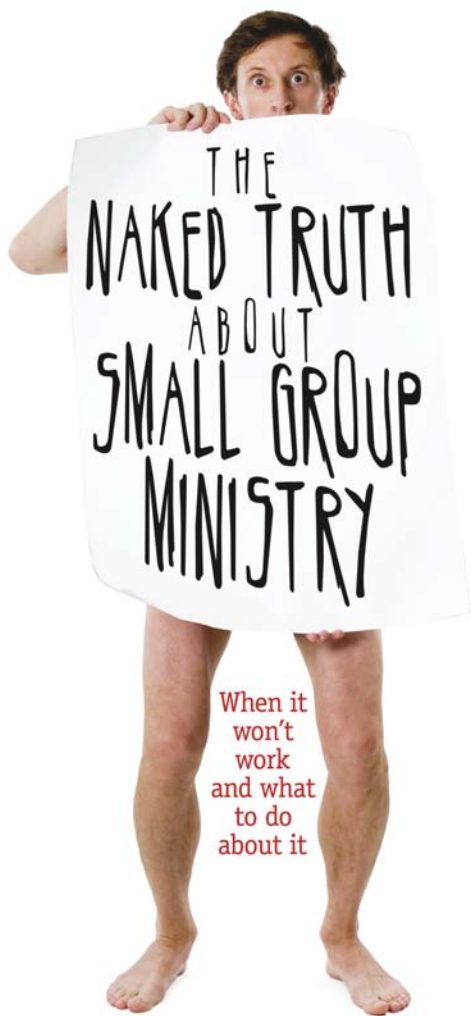
“I love Randall Neighbour, but he irritates me. It must be his spiritual gift. He exposes why some of our cherished methods and practices fail: they’re unsatisfactory, unrealistic, and sometimes unbiblical—but we keep doing them anyway! We’d go right on doing them, too, without this discerning and gifted practitioner screaming: *The emperor has no clothes!* Well known within the cell-church community, Randall’s insights are informed by years of experience and a love of Christ and his Church. His ministry framework may not precisely overlap your own, but his insights apply to anyone who wants to facilitate the formation of true Biblical community. If your small group ministry is thriving, on life-support or even left for dead, this book can show you why, and what to do next.”

—*Dave Treat, Group Life Speaker, Trainer, and Writer, thinkingsmall.net*

“If you are looking for nice platitudes or easy advice about small groups, you won’t get them here. Randall has been around the ‘small group block’ too many times to ignore the fact that groups are about real people and messy relationships in the real world. If you want sound counsel on how to deal with the realities of these kinds of people and their relationships, then find the time to devour this book.”

—*Scott Boren, pastor, consultant, and author of
The Relational Way and Missional Small Groups*

THE
NAKED TRUTH
ABOUT
SMALL GROUP
MINISTRY



When it
won't
work
and what
to do
about it

Randall Neighbour

TOUCH
Publications
Houston, Texas

TOUCH® Publications
P.O. Box 7847
Houston, Texas, 77270, U.S.A.
800-735-5865 • www.touchusa.org

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Cover design by Neubauer Design Group

International Standard Book Number: 978-0-9788779-6-5

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TOUCH® Publications is the book-publishing division of TOUCH Outreach Ministries, a resource and consulting ministry for churches with a vision for a holistic small group-based church structure.

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DEDICATION

To Mom and Dad

Thank you for the inheritance of a passion for Christ.

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I oversee a ministry that was founded to help churches implement holistic small groups with consulting, training, and printed resources. Today, TOUCH Outreach has ministry partners in South Korea, Brazil, Hong Kong, South Africa, Australia, and Eastern Europe. In each of these areas of the world, my counterparts report that small-group-based churches are growing rapidly with new believers and new leaders, validating my own observations about a global shift away from buildings and programs.

The members of these churches are very active believers who—in small group families—pray fervently, serve sacrificially, and worship boldly. These small groups grow and multiply regularly through mentoring new Christians and new leaders, causing all sorts of wonderful challenges for the pastoral staff, especially in the areas of discipleship and leadership training.

Here in America, reports from pastors with whom I visit are in stark contrast to the rest of the world. While many American churches are growing numerically when counting noses on Sunday morning, I consistently hear comments such as, “No one wants to lead a group because they’re too busy” or “We can’t seem to get our cell groups to focus on reaching unchurched people for Christ” or “Our small group ministry just isn’t growing like other churches we read about.”

One might think this malady is only found in smaller, struggling churches. Not so! America's largest churches are not seeing their small groups multiply naturally through relationships. Most increase the number of groups with hastily formed collections of interested strangers.

As a nation of church leaders desiring true biblical community, we've got a big problem with small groups.

The relational counterculture

The typical American pastor struggles to make small groups work. Each small gain made in small group life is a hard-fought battle. The traditional church culture still holds back many lay leaders who are heavily invested in antiquated programs. There is simply no room to belong to or lead a small group into Christ's presence, power, and purposes for their lives.

Those who have broken out of the traditional church roles to lead small groups remain so busy with career and family that they do not have time to devote to relationships with group members between meetings. Moreover, small group members, who are fully capable of leading a group, have no desire to lead because of greater priorities. Little League baseball games and working a high-stress job to serve a growing debt load are far more important than living and ministering to others in biblical community.

The two conflicting cultures in which we live—found inside and outside the walls of church buildings—work against the formation of a third *relational* counterculture, where Christ's presence births personal transformation in the midst of a small group family. Attempting to move one's congregation out of one unresolved cultural clash into a strange new way of life is no easy task. The road to outward-

focused biblical community will no doubt be awash with the blood, sweat, and tears of many hard-working pastors.

We're not good at doing small groups, but we value small groups.

Aside from the stark global comparison and cultural concerns mentioned, I remain confident that a sizeable percentage of American church leaders would say they value small groups. Each is sacrificially working to make small groups thrive in the western world.

A few have given up, but most pastors keep trying, and for good reason: “doing church” in small groups is biblical. Small groups can easily achieve both the Great Commandment (Mark 12:30) and Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). Small groups and weekend services also mirror the balance we find in the early church, as described in Acts 2 where the early Christians met from house to house (the small group) and in the temple courts (the weekend service). The quest to pastor a church of healthy, Christ-centered, mission-driven small groups is indeed a holy pursuit.

I grew up in a small-group-based church. My father pioneered “cell groups” here in America in the early 1970s when I was in grade school. I cut my teeth on leadership when I became a cell group leader as a teen. The first year I led a group, seven of my buddies came to Christ, four led groups the next year, and one went on to seminary after college. I value small groups so much that I’ve devoted my life to helping churches launch and transition to small-group-based expressions of the body of Christ.

In the last ten years, I have read everything I can get my hands on that is related to small groups or small group ministry. If a book can teach me one new thing or give me a single “aha!” moment about doing church through biblical community, it is worth buying and

reading. I also fly around the country to attend conferences when the focus is on small-group-based ministry. While this is time-consuming and often expensive, I value small groups enough to pursue answers to my hard questions. Why are American Christians so weak at living and serving in biblical community? And more importantly, what should be done to change it?

If you are as militant as I in this quest, we are kindred spirits. Together, we must clearly see the problems, fix what's broken, and retire what no longer works. At the end of the day, we may have to simply scrap everything and start over with new small groups that grow and expand naturally. I don't relish the idea of starting over, but we've got to get this right.

How and why I define “small groups”

On page 18, you will read my definition of a small group. This book is written with this kind of group in mind. If you want more (or better) Bible study groups, DVD-curriculum-based groups, Sunday school classes, or task-based groups (parking lot attendants groups, usher's groups, bus ministry worker's groups, and so on), you are reading the *wrong* book.

The small group I am passionate about operates as *Christ's bride*. When the members of these groups look in a mirror, they see a minister with a ministry. They know without a doubt that God has placed them in a small group of believers to live out their spiritual purpose. They look to their pastor and church leaders to equip and assist them in doing what Christ has directed them to do: extend the kingdom of God. This book is written to help church leaders create healthy, spiritual organisms ... small groups of believers who know they are the church in action and are eager to work hard in the harvest fields.

Is this what you're looking for in your small groups? If so, then you're reading the right book. If you're highly frustrated with small group ministry, it's also the right *time* to read this book. People don't make radical changes until they become emotional about their current situation.

The end is near!

Guys like the one in the cartoon above are ignored because people think they're crazy. This guy doesn't work for the county civil engineering department, and he's certainly not out by the side of the road in an official, respected capacity.

I am just like that unkempt man on the side of the road communicating a simple, yet important message to anyone who passes. This book is my cardboard sign for the road you are traveling, admonishing you to move forward cautiously and consider a new road that does not end abruptly. Detours always take more time and are both frustrating and unexpected. However, the new route has been designed to move the drivers around the obstacles and get them on their way toward their original destination. Unlike the guy in the cartoon, I also provide a few practical ways to detour the road on which your church may be traveling.

Many churches have found these ideas helpful. If you can use

them, great! If they spark ideas for your own innovative ways to avoid the bridge failures in small group ministry you are experiencing, that's even better. The goal is to achieve God's desired destination: personal transformation through the power of Christ-centered community. ♦

The author's definition of a holistic small group with the potential for organic growth and multiplication is as follows:

A healthy small group is comprised of 3-12 persons who have chosen to live together in biblical community for the purposes of Christ-centered worship, edification, relational evangelism, and discipleship.

The *ministry* between group members is found both inside and outside the meetings as they serve, pray, care for, and edify one another. Small group meetings are often a "discovery time" for ministry in the six days and twenty-two hours between gatherings.

The *mission* of a healthy small group takes place when two or more of the members befriend unchurched individuals to show them the love of Christ through friendship, servanthood, and community involvement.

The *goal* of a healthy small group is to help each member find personal transformation in Christ. When transformation takes place in the life of a believer, he or she discovers a new self-perception in being a minister and a missionary.

The *results* of a healthy small group are found in its fruits: members who walk in spiritual freedom and are mission-driven; the

addition of new believers who have trusted Christ as a result of the group's relational nature; and new leaders who desire to first serve as new group leaders, then go on to lead in every capacity God desires.

In healthy small groups, the leader's overarching goal for each member is similar to a parent. His or her desire is to see the members mature to the point of moving out of the leader's "house" to form a spiritual family of their own. Healthy small group leaders work toward and expect a legacy from their efforts and dedication. In turn, the members desire to exercise their spiritual maturity and lead a group when they are ready.

Small groups may meet in any location and at any time. The important factor is for the group to meet regularly for worship, edification, application of the Word, and planning for effective outreach to the lost. Healthy small groups are compelled to change the location, frequency, or time of meetings if they see any of these purposes suffering.

Healthy small groups, as defined here, are called by many names. Some churches call them life groups, cell groups, small groups, care groups, or home groups ... just to name a few. The accomplishments of a healthy small group of believers are what is important. Therefore, you will read accounts of small groups using many names in this book. ♦

*There's a house on a hill and it hasn't been lived in for a long, long time.
And the windows are all broken, and the paint has lost its shine.
And there's nothing ever heard there, for there's nothing ever said.
For the life of the house left a long time ago and the heart of the house is dead.*

*O House of the Lord, can't you feel it? How our heart is growing cold.
For when the Spirit comes He quickens, but when the Spirit leaves, life goes.*

*There's a room at the top and the door has been locked and it will never open up.
For no matter who will knock there, well it always stays tight shut.
And there's no-one ever answered, so now there's no-one ever goes.
For the room in the house shut a long time ago, and the mind of the house is closed.*

*There's a room in the house where the fire used to burn and the children used to play.
And the family would gather, to hear the words the Father would say.
But now the room is cold and empty, and the embers glow faint red,
For the fire of the house failed a long time ago, and the heart of the house is dead.*

"House Of The Lord"
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The naked truth about the American church: the heart of the house is dead

Why do small groups so frequently not work in the West? The answer is rather obvious: the members of the groups are consumers. They do not currently possess a passion for God or for those for whom his Son died. Therefore, small groups aren't a structure that the members value. It requires them to produce.

This is compounded by the typical way these small groups were formed by church leadership. Members were herded into the new small group program and instructed to study the Bible, care for one another, worship, or reach out to the unchurched world with little consideration for their current spiritual condition.

When one stops to ponder the viability of the herding approach, it's not hard to see why so many churches fail to implement healthy groups. "Corralling" church members into small groups so they will then live out their faith together in community is not only unrealistic, it's absurd. It maintains the same pretzel logic I followed years ago when I joined a gym. I paid my dues, received my laminated card, and carved out the time to go to that gym three times a week. My hope was to lose all the weight I gained during my first ten years of marriage. With my membership and renewed self-discipline, each Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday I soaked in the whirlpool and sat

in the sauna. What a great place to get away from it all and relax!

Just because a guy goes to the gym regularly does not mean he's pumping iron and working hard to develop muscles. The same could be said of many a small group member. He's been asked to join a group and become a completely different person overnight, abandoning one set of values he's lived his entire life for another set he knows only intellectually. When church leaders assimilate consumer-members of the congregation into small groups, they form small groups that do nothing but consume.

It gets worse. Consumer small groups also take a toll on the leaders involved. The staff pastor over these small groups will always feel like a mother bird feeding helpless baby chicks in the nest with life support, commonly called curriculum. He or she will toil to keep each small group alive and each leader supported to prevent burnout, which usually produces stomach ulcers, not genuine growth. The lead pastor constantly demands that more groups be launched for the visitors who show up on Sunday morning.

It stinks to be a small group pastor in this kind of situation, and rightfully so. Being forced to expand a stagnant small group ministry carries its own stench.

It's equally unpleasant inside consumer-filled small groups. The members consider the small group pastor as a "gentle pest" who is constantly badgering them to edify, serve, and reach out. They know it's the right thing to do, but they're too busy with their individual lives to make the sacrifice. While mandates and pleas from staff members don't fall on deaf ears, people who have crippled themselves living out the world's values cannot walk out their faith when they hear this directive. They just feel guilty.

Tozer doesn't mince words on this issue:

I think we are going to have to restudy this whole teaching of the place of the Holy Spirit in the Church, so the Body can operate again. If the life goes out of a man's body, he is said to be a corpse. He is what they call "the remains." It is sad, but humorously sad, that a strong, fine man with shining eyes and vibrant voice, a living man, dies, and we say, "the remains" can be seen at a funeral home. All the remains of the man, and the least part about him, is what you can see there in the funeral home. The living man is gone. You have only the body. The body is "the remains."

So it is in the Church of Christ. It is literally true that some churches are dead. The Holy Spirit has gone out of them and all you have left are "the remains." You have the potential of the church but you do not have the church, just as you have in a dead man the potential of a living man but you do not have a living man. He can't talk, he can't taste, he can't touch, he can't feel, he can't smell, he can't see, he can't hear—because he is dead! The soul has gone out of the man, and when the Holy Spirit is not present in the Church, you have to get along after the methods of business or politics or psychology or human effort.¹

The smell of success overwhelms one's common senses

One lazy Saturday, a pastor took his time to walk through an epicurean grocery store. As soon as he walked through the front door, he was immediately drawn to the expansive coffee section. The smell of freshly brewed coffee was stronger than a Klingon starship's

tractor beam. He simply had to taste that which produced such an intoxicating aroma. The smiling lady operating the sample table gave him a sample cup of gourmet coffee made from fancy Kona beans just delivered from Hawaii. After he took his first sip, he was a goner. The taste was as powerful as the smell; he had no choice but to grab the bag of beans and throw it in his basket without another thought.

After poking around the cheese section and repeatedly visiting another smiling lady giving away garlic-stuffed olives on a toothpick, he went to the checkout counter. That's when the reality of his buying decision hit him in the face ... or better stated, his wallet. He had indiscriminately tossed into his basket a one-pound bag of coffee beans valued at \$29. However, he didn't have cash in the budget for this kind of purchase and would bounce a check if he bought the coffee. It was embarrassing, but he asked the cashier to remove the coffee from the bill and offered to bring it back to the smiling lady in the coffee section.

The smell of another church's success with small groups can also cloud one's mind. The dream of what his church could be motivates him to write a check that will surely be returned to him stamped "insufficient funds."

Larry Stockstill, Pastor of Bethany World Prayer Center in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, launched groups in 1993. He started 54 cell groups, whose mission was to reach unchurched people for Christ and assimilate visitors from the weekend services. Within six months, the 54 groups had multiplied into 108 groups, adding 600 new families to the church that year and bringing hundreds of baptisms of first-time converts.²

Word of this church's success with small groups spread like wildfire. Pastors from every corner of the nation flocked to Baton Rouge

for this church's cell group conferences. I attended the first two events, savoring each minute of Stockstill's presentations. America finally had a model church where small groups were growing naturally with new Christians and members who hungered to lead new groups!

A few months after the first conference, I received disheartening phone calls from pastors I met in Baton Rouge. Each lamented that the small groups they launched after attending Bethany's conference were stagnant and unproductive. The leaders were burned out. The members showed up for meetings, but refused to share transparently. Between meetings, fellowship among the members was nonexistent. When I asked about outreach and relational evangelism, one pastor responded with cynical laughter. After a brief chuckle, he replied, "Our members are so nominal that if I don't laugh, I'll start crying . . . again. I had no idea my church was dead until I launched cell groups."

These pastors did not realize—or were unwilling to admit—their churches were filled with dead members. After all, this reflects poorly on a pastor's ability to lead. Yet every pastor I spoke with desired to know why their groups were not growing like Bethany's groups. While their failure made common sense to me, they remained baffled.

In both conferences I attended, Stockstill was quite clear about how he began his first groups. In 1998, he wrote the following, which is nearly verbatim from what I heard him say at Bethany's conferences:

I called together the group of 500 intercessors we had trained throughout the years and dubbed the "Gideon's Army." For years the "Gideon's Army" had been meeting every Saturday morning from 9:00 to 10:00 a.m. to pray for the pastors, church services, ministries, missionaries and the breaking of spiritual strongholds in Baton Rouge. I knew this group was

to be the “core” — anyone who would come on a Saturday morning to pray had to be open to the new direction the Holy Spirit was showing us!”³

In my estimation, thousands of churches have failed with small groups after learning about them at a mega church’s cell group or small group conference. The model churches and their pastors are not at fault. At Bethany’s events, Stockstill plainly described those he chose for the first groups and, most importantly, *why* he chose them. The blame for failure lies squarely on the shoulders of the visiting pastors who made wild assumptions about their churches’ health.

A shiny apple with a rotten core

The most obvious of these pastors’ inaccurate assumptions was that the members and leaders of their first groups—the “cream of the crop” in their churches—were fruitful Christians like the members of Gideon’s Army. Some of the pastors I counseled stated they were stunned by the spiritual bankruptcy of their lay leaders, which was only discovered after months of hard work training them to lead new small groups. Looking back, they said they would have aborted their transition to small group-based ministry if they had known so many of their core talked a good talk on Sunday morning, but had no measurable level of spirituality the other six days of the week.

Traditional church life, with all its ingrown facilities-based programs, has produced believers who firmly believe that their Christian ideals are synonymous with their lived-out values. This is where many pastors go wrong. They assume they have a Gideon’s Army, or at the very least, a handful of committed believers who are prayer warriors and soul winners as they form groups.

In 1999, I had an illuminating conversation with Pastor Stockstill.⁴ When I asked about Gideon’s Army, he said choosing these men and women to launch groups was obvious. These believers were far more committed to Christ and Bethany’s mission than just praying for an hour on Saturday mornings. The people possessed a deep devotional life. Many committed an hour each day to prayer and were the church’s core intercessors. As a whole, the members of Gideon’s Army were constantly sharing their faith and reaching the lost for Christ *before* the groups were formed. Pastor Stockstill made his decision based on the current lifestyle and activities of a group of committed believers in his congregation.

Assuming one’s church is healthy—or that a healthy core exists through idealistic discussions with leaders—guides a church down the primrose path to small group stagnation. Lay leaders and members may wax lyrical about how they love the Lord and ache to see the lost saved, but their words don’t produce fruit. The proof is in their actions.

“If I build it, they will come”

Not all pastors are deceived by member’s words, yet many still fail to create healthy small groups due to wishful thinking. They know their members have an excellent set of ideals and solid biblical training but lack the lifestyle of a healthy believer. The pastor envisions these members in action, creating his own field of dreams like Kevin Costner, who portrayed a farmer with a dream to transform a cornfield into a baseball field where all the great players would show up to play ball. In this scenario, the pastor’s mindset is, “Once they get into a group and see what it’s like, they’ll rise to the occasion and live out what they know.” The “if we build it, they will come” approach may

assimilate large numbers of people into groups, but it rarely provides personal transformation and a new lifestyle for the members.

Small groups will not revive a dead church.

Dead churches need confession and repentance.

Churches with consumer-minded members must experience some God-given hardship to bring them to a point of confession. The members need to make drastic changes in their lifestyle, indicating repentance has taken place. When this has occurred, a new structure like small groups can be implemented successfully.

Solomon thought he was on the right path when he built the temple. However, God wanted more than a structure. He wanted intimacy with his people, and he demanded that they turn away from idolatry and worship him only:

When Solomon had finished the temple of the Lord and the royal palace, and had succeeded in carrying out all he had in mind to do in the temple of the Lord and in his own palace, the Lord appeared to him at night and said: "I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a temple for sacrifices."

"When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land. Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this

place. I have chosen and consecrated this temple so that my Name may be there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there.”

“As for you, if you walk before me as David your father did, and do all I command, and observe my decrees and laws, I will establish your royal throne, as I covenanted with David your father when I said, ‘You shall never fail to have a man to rule over Israel.’ “

“But if you turn away and forsake the decrees and commands I have given you and go off to serve other gods and worship them, then I will uproot Israel from my land, which I have given them, and will reject this temple I have consecrated for my Name. I will make it a byword and an object of ridicule among all peoples. And though this temple is now so imposing, all who pass by will be appalled and say, ‘Why has the Lord done such a thing to this land and to this temple?’ People will answer, ‘Because they have forsaken the Lord, the God of their fathers, who brought them out of Egypt, and have embraced other gods, worshiping and serving them—that is why he brought all this disaster on them.’ ”

(2 Chronicles 7:11-22)

In this passage, God wedges a promise for Israel between two stern warnings. It’s as if God is saying to Solomon, “Thanks for the temple. It’s way cool and I’m glad to see you completed construction. You’ve thrown the full weight of your authority in the land behind making it a magnificent place for worship and sacrifices, but this isn’t enough. I want you to put a greater amount of energy into bringing my people into a repentant lifestyle. Let them know that I’m as

serious as a heart attack about this. If they don't stop worshipping their idols and start worshipping me fully, I'll turn this beautiful place into dust. If you don't want the world around you to point and laugh at Israel's disobedience, challenge my people to change their values and return to a God-centered lifestyle."

God stated all this to Solomon in a highly systematic way. Solomon must have been all ears when he heard the "When-If-Then-But" discourse. It left no wiggle room for interpretation.

Today's church is filled with consumer Christians who need the same stern warning. God's bottom line remains: "Set your new structures (small groups) aside to address the existing lifestyle of my people." By examining each part of the warning—or promise, depending on how you choose to view it—a pastor can easily see how to proceed with his flock. Here's a breakdown of each section, which reveals the step-by-step process:

"When I . . ."

After a brief acknowledgement that God heard Solomon's prayers and accepted the temple for sacrifices, God reminded Solomon of the pestilence he inflicted on Egypt when Pharaoh showed his self-centeredness. His mere mention of plagues, introduced with the words "When I" indicates that he is planning to fight stubborn self-centeredness within Israel with the same intensity and fervor.

Consumer-driven members of dead churches need to know that the God of Solomon is the same God we serve today. It's plain to see that many Christians today worship their children, their possessions, their credit score, their careers, the home in which they live (or wish to live), and their personal dreams and ambitions more than God. God didn't like it when the Israelites put other things before him in

Solomon's day, and he's just as upset today! God will surely discipline the church that panders to a consumer mindset.

The first step toward correcting consumerism is to help self-centered Christians develop a healthy fear of the Lord. In Philippians 2:12, Paul urges the church in Phillipi to maintain a correct understanding of the Lord's position in the life of a Christian: *"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling"* (New King James Version). Commentator William Hendriksen renders fear and trembling as "reverence and awe; being afraid to offend God in any way."⁵ Working out one's salvation with others in biblical community cannot be accomplished without a passionate desire to please God, which requires great sacrifice.

"If my people"

God begins his promise with a big "if" that seemingly grows bigger with each additional phrase in the promise. He's put the burden of responsibility on his people to do what is right. The dead church of today has two choices: Remain as a consumer-driven, watered down form of Christianity that has limited relationship with God and each other, or confess consumerism as an idolatrous offense to God, and repent by living completely differently to restore favor with God and his people.

"which are called by my name"

This powerful, yet often-overlooked phrase is typically viewed as a modifier for the first three words of this passage. One might think this is just a point of clarification. It is actually the first part of the process God requires of those with whom he intimately relates.

Regardless of all God had done for Israel and the beautiful temple, the Israelites still embraced old patterns of idol worship. These idols were considered a prize possession. By adding this phrase in the beginning of the promise, God required them to acknowledge they had taken God's name only, rejecting all lesser gods.

A pew-warming consumer may consider himself a Christian or a follower of Christ. Yet, he still loves his prized possessions more than the causes of Christ or the lifestyle of a true believer. So, the second step for a church consumer is to confess the idolatrous nature of the world in which he lives, and then seek to think and live differently.

“shall humble themselves and pray”

Humility is the fruit of surrender. God desperately needed to see that the people of Israel had abandoned all thoughts of being self-sufficient or making sacrifices to false gods. Prayer to God Almighty alone was what he wanted. This would show the beginnings of a contrite heart.

The dead church must seek personal brokenness to find humility, where God is free to work in and through them. For pastors who have attempted to heal their churches through new programs, this must be surrendered as their own effort to create change. For individual members, they must permanently abandon the lifestyle of focusing on their own needs for what the Master desires.

When I was a little boy, I distinctly recall my father preaching a sermon called “Pierce my ear, O Lord.” His text began with Romans 1:1, where Paul described himself as a bond slave. In this verse, he used the Greek word *doulos*, which is defined as a slave who has voluntarily given himself over to another for life, permanently relinquishing his rights to freedom. His *doulos* status was easily

identified in public. He had given his life-master permission to pierce his ear with a nail, creating a scarred hole.

The piercing was permanently humbling for the slave, knowing he would never serve his own desires again. It was a burden for the master as well. By piercing the ear of another person, he agreed to protect and care for that person's needs for the rest of his or her life.

My father ended that sermon with a phrase he uses to this day: "It is the task of the servant to obey the master; it is the task of the master to supply the needs of the servant." This is the intensity of a relationship with God that brings revival to a dead church.

Confession vs. Repentance

Relational intimacy with God requires repentance. Sadly, many consumer Christians believe that confession and repentance are synonymous. I have often heard Christian brothers and sisters say, "I repented of that sin a while back, but I always seem to be going back to God for forgiveness in this area of my life." In reality, the person didn't repent of anything. They just felt remorse and confessed it as sin. Repentance requires adopting godly action to replace the sinful way of living.

Confessing sin takes a lot out of a person. Acknowledging the fact that one has sinned against God and then sharing that confession aloud to a brother or sister in Christ tops the list of spiritual achievements for a typical Christian consumer. No wonder no one wants to add the all-important repentance action to complete the process and show freedom from sin.

I must admit I am the chief of sinners in this area. Over a month ago, I blogged that I was overweight, stating I needed to watch my diet and begin a rigorous exercise regime. The confession was made

just about as publicly as one could make it. I also created a personal reward for losing thirty pounds and keeping it off for three months, which I included in the same blog entry. The deal I made with myself was fun. If I lost my goal weight and kept it off for a season, I would then reward myself with an Apple iPhone. If I did not lose the weight, I would force myself to keep my old cell phone and not give in to my desire for a cool new gadget.

As I write these words, I weigh two pounds more than I did last month. Public confession and a very nice reward did not motivate me to eat less and exercise more in repentance. In fact, ever since I blogged about the deal I made with myself, I've done the exact opposite. My keyboard is orange from all the Cheetos I just inhaled.

If a doctor had diagnosed my condition as diabetes a month ago, I can say with some certainty that the goal of losing weight would have turned out very differently. In this scenario, the penalties of overeating far outweigh any reward (no pun intended): I could lose a foot or my eyesight to poor circulation. Now, that's motivation!

Herein lies the truth of the matter. Repentance does not follow confession when there is no fear of losing something of great value. Consumer Christians have all but lost their fear of God, and do not consider themselves bond slaves of Christ. They confess sin when things go bad in order to get back what they lost, not out of reverence for God or fear of losing everything and a communion with their Creator.

While it might seem appropriate to quote Kierkegaard here, a modern-day pollster's assessment of our society is far more germane. George Barna, who directed the study of religious beliefs and practices, has noted that the relationship between people's perception of their religious commitment and their reticence to make faith their top priority points to a significant disconnect:

Spirituality is in vogue in our society today. It is popular to claim to be part of a “faith community” or to have a spiritual commitment. But what do Americans mean when they claim to be “spiritual?” The recent Grammy awards were perhaps indicative of this breakdown between self-perception and reality. The members of the group that won the award for best song thanked God for the victory then immediately followed with profanities that had to be bleeped from the broadcast. It seems as if God is in, but living for God is not. Many Americans are living a dual life — one filled with good feelings about God and faith, corroborated by some simple religious practices, and another in which they believe they are in control of their own destiny and operate apart from Him.

The survey also noted that among those who say their faith has “greatly transformed” their life, just one out of four positioned their faith practices and pursuits as their highest life priority. It certainly seems that millions of Americans are fooling themselves into thinking that they have found the appropriate balance between God and lifestyle.⁶

Just 25 percent of those surveyed by Barna’s organization said their faith practices and pursuits are their highest life priority. My guess is that the true percentage is even lower than one in four. Most people answer surveys by a standard of ideals, not using true values or real life practices. In 2004, I created a brief online survey for lead pastors. Among the questions posed, I asked, “Do your church members truly understand the difference between remorse and repentance as indicated by their lifestyle?” Sixty-seven percent of the pastors who

answered the question stated, “No, my members don’t really know the difference.” Without a healthy fear of God, repentance will always be confused with remorse.

One might think there is no hope for a church filled with people who do not possess a healthy fear of God. I don’t subscribe to this opinion. I firmly believe that God wants to transform consumers into spiritually productive members of the body of Christ. The challenge is how to lead church members into making this radical, 180-degree shift in values.

Spiritual zombies and the resurrection power of prayer

From the flood of calls I receive from pastors who can’t figure out why their small groups are failing, it’s apparent that a sizeable percentage of American churches are wholly or partially filled with consumer Christians. In *The Organic Church*, Neil Cole writes about a vision concerning the church:

The vision was of a bride lying down on a couch, so weak she couldn’t even sit up. She was so sick that she looked dead, but she was still animated, barely. It was as if she were being supernaturally kept alive against all the rules of the natural world, like something from a B movie about zombies. Her skin was pale green and practically falling from her face. Her gown was unraveling and gray with dust. Her hair was thinning and unkempt. But the amazing thing was that her face had a smile on it as though she were waiting to meet her groom at any moment.

I didn’t really need any interpretation. I just knew that this was a picture of the church in America today: sick, kept alive

by a supernatural force, but believing she was quite healthy and ready to meet Jesus.⁷

The first thing a pastor must come to grips with is the fact that he leads a church with some percentage of zombies (the walking dead). One would hope they would only be members on the periphery, but this may not be the case. These members may serve as deacons or elders, teach a Sunday School class, tithe regularly, and possibly serve as a small group leader. One can easily maintain status as a spiritual zombie in the subculture of the American church, traditional or contemporary.

Recognizing one has a problem is the first step in any change process. Therefore, a pastor must determine two things to see the zombies in his church resurrected from their stagnant spiritual condition.

1. *What percentage of the church membership are zombies?* Look past their involvement in current programs (especially small groups) and look at their lifestyle. Do they really pray? Do they spend time with unchurched people each week as friends? Would those unchurched people consider the members in question close friends? How much contact do they have with other members of the church or their small group between congregational and smaller gatherings? Are they living in accountability, growing spiritually, and hating sin with an increasing passion?
2. *Is the pastor himself a zombie?* He too must look in the mirror. If he possesses a lackluster prayer life, if he spends no time with unchurched people, and if he has no accountability for his actions and thoughts, then he has set the bar low for his leaders and members. A senior or lead pastor should not expect anyone to change

until he himself is actively modeling the lifestyle God wants for the active Christian.

The answers to these two questions will help form a point of origination. Without a clear assessment of where the pastor and his church membership lie in the zombie-“kingdom activist”⁸ continuum, he cannot move forward toward health and vitality where small groups are required for continued growth.

What to do about it

God’s stern warning to Solomon (2 Chronicles 7:11-22) is easily adapted to any church plagued with spiritual zombies. “If your zombies, who call themselves followers of Jesus Christ, will humble themselves and pray, God will forgive their sins and heal your church.”

I won’t school you on just how transformational prayer can change hearts and motivate Christians to sacrificially serve God. What you do need is a strategy to get people praying so this kind of transformation can take place. Let’s get intensely practical. Here is one organized way to engage your church members to pray.

Prayer Groups *(for those who have yet to join a small group)*

Prayer groups are a practical way to give zombies an opportunity to find personal transformation. To ensure these groups remain a support system to the overall direction of a church’s small-group-based ministry and not compete with it, they must maintain a short lifespan and without an appointed leader. Here’s how they work:

At a glance

- Each session runs five to eight weeks.
- Eight to ten persons participate in each group.
- Groups meet for one hour per week in homes.
- Meetings begin and end promptly.
- Each weekly hour of prayer has six topics that are prayed through for ten minutes.
- Everyone prays aloud at the same time.
- The host moves the group from topic to topic at ten-minute intervals.
- A two-week break between prayer group sessions provides time for new groups to form.
- To help create new friendships, no more than one family or two individuals from the first prayer group should be in subsequent prayer groups (if possible).

Goals

- Increases the level of prayer for each individual.
- Encourages church members to open their homes to others.
- Provides personal transformation through the power of prayer.
- Prepares church members for the active pursuit of ministry with others in a small group.

Duration: One hour per week commitment.

Prayer groups should run for no more than eight weeks to keep the commitment viable. Some churches have experimented with four weeks and others six depending on the willingness of the church members. The consensus is that for personal transformation to take place, the prayer group must be sustained for at least five weeks.

In addition, praying for one hour per week with others is more than enough time for an individual to experience a radical new understanding of his or her spiritual purpose in life.

Everyone leads, yet no one is the leader.

The person who is hosting the group in his or her home facilitates. Facilitating is not difficult, and requires little or no preparation beyond picking up in the room where the prayer group will meet. Handing out the prayer sheets that the church supplies and announcing that it's time to move from one area to another is all that is required during the prayer group time itself.

Everyone prays aloud simultaneously.

While it may be odd to your church members to pray aloud simultaneously in their native tongue, this is the norm for corporate prayer in most other countries.⁹ Participants are encouraged to ignore others around them and pray in first person whenever possible. Of course, if an individual prays too loudly, a simple tap on the shoulder will help him remember to pray with less volume. The wonderful thing about “concert prayer” is that it eliminates the ability for individuals to dominate the prayer time or remain silent.

Expand the groups by mixing it up.

Prayer groups should be encouraged to re-form after a two-week break and repeat the five to eight weekly prayer group meetings. The strategy behind this is twofold. First, a couple of weeks without prayer creates a relational and corporate prayer vacuum. This break will increase the desire to re-engage in a new prayer group, even if it means inviting new friends into one's home. Second, the break and re-forming

of new groups keeps the individuals involved from becoming exclusive in relationship.

Re-formed groups remain fresh when the original prayer group members are in new homes with new people. If there is a flood of new interest as the first round of groups is completed, this will not be a problem if the participants understand that increased involvement is a primary goal. If there is little interest, existing prayer group participants simply sign up to pray with a different group of people. With either outcome, existing prayer group participants must help build participation by inviting at least one other family unit to join their second prayer group experience.

During the break

Between prayer group sessions, new prayer topics can be created from suggestions offered by first-round participants. The break also gives the prayer group implementation team (described below in tips for success) the time they need to assess the general health of the congregation through the first cycle. Finally, the two-week break gives volunteers time to rest.

How a prayer group looks in action

Bob and Susan are hosting a prayer group this week, so they pick up their copies of the prayer schedule at the back of the auditorium at the prayer group table. Before they leave, they look over the content and visit with the table worker to clarify anything that they don't understand.

Before the meeting begins, Bob and Susan clean the room where they will be meeting and find extra pillows so folks can kneel comfortably. Since this group only meets for an hour and does not begin

with refreshments, a pitcher of water and disposable cups are placed on the coffee table in the room where they meet.

Everyone in this prayer group is aware that prayer begins at 6 p.m. and ends promptly at 7 p.m., so most of the people arrive a few minutes early. Just before they begin, Bob puts a note on the front door indicating that prayer has begun and to simply slip in, grab a prayer schedule, find a place to pray, and start praying. Susan watches for people who arrive late and points to the section where they are currently praying and returns to her time of prayer.

Every ten minutes, the topic of prayer changes. Bob or Susan informs the group when it's time to move to the next topic, which they read to the group. There's always a brief time of silence, but Bob and Susan start praying aloud right away and this gives everyone permission to begin praying aloud too.

The six areas of prayer tonight are different from previous topics, but always follow the same pattern of moving from macro to micro. Tonight, the group begins with prayers of thanksgiving for various aspects of God's character, which are listed on the prayer schedule. Next, the group prays for government officials in Washington, D.C., specifically asking God to grant them supernatural wisdom in their decision making. Then, the group prays for one of the church's staff members, spouse, and children by name. This is followed by each person praying for his or her own spouse, children, and parents. Next, the members are challenged to pray for themselves in the area of tithing their time for kingdom pursuits. Finally, tonight the group is asked to devote the last ten minutes praying for lost and unchurched friends by name.

At 7 p.m., Bob thanks everyone for coming over to pray, and reviews where the prayer group will meet the next week. If anyone

has experienced a breakthrough in prayer, they are encouraged to share a sentence or two and keep it brief.

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