

# Fresh Insight

for holistic small group ministries

## Case Study: Traversing “the Hill” in a Transition

by Randall Neighbour

[This is the third and last observations made from a case study I did earlier this year. The first two parts can be found on the [Fresh Insight archive page](#) located here.]

At some point, every church who undergoes radical transition reaches a hill to climb that everyone realizes is pivotal and permanent. Those who anticipate it and plan for it move up the hill slowly and with great determination, even in the face of great discomfort. In the case study church I've written about before, they've reached this critical point: Are we going to become a church comprised of groups that are fulfilling our mission or will we back off and view groups as one key component of many in achieving our mission? Fully transitioned group-driven churches have made some big changes in three key areas:

- Lead Pastor and Staff job descriptions have been rewritten to reflect the small group missional thrust.
- Existing programs are reviewed and overhauled to become supportive of group life.
- Missional group life has become the main priority and is the primary activity and focus for everyone.

Before you read any further, it must be stated that timing is crucial to success. Implement these changes too early, and you'll find people will balk because it seems unnecessary. Implement these things too late in a transition, and your group leaders and members will have suffered needlessly. I'm of the opinion that you should watch for indicators and respond just in time with these changes. In other words, they can't be calendared.

### Transitioning the Staff

As a church moves a majority of its congregation in to healthy groups and all the new members are joining groups right off the bat (or they're coming from relationships formed in group life, which is important to achieve by mid-transition) it indicates that the job description for each staff member and the lead pastor should be reviewed and possibly changed. The children's pastor must begin to think about how to train parents to include their children in group life (servanthood, missions projects, and meetings). As the church moves deeper into transition, his or her responsibilities must be broadened beyond children's church. The youth pastor's responsibilities must shift as well, equipping teens (and their parents) to participate in adult groups or family groups, not just show up for youth activities at the church building. The education pastor's job description changes drastically as well. He or she is no longer just supportive of Sunday school or the opt-in discipleship classes. This person must start thinking about how to insure that every small group member is moving through a pathway to spiritual maturity, group leadership, and beyond.

The Lead or Senior Pastor must also make a *massive* shift in mind set from the pulpit each week. He must view weekend services as small groups of people gathering for encouragement and celebration for what God is doing among them, not a congregation of people who may or may not be in the church's small group opt-in *program*. He must also invest far more time in relational ministry and learning new lessons from living in a missional community (one of the groups in the church, not a leadership group!) When the pastor's job description is properly re-written, the pulpit and pastor is in place to support the work of the ministry and mission of the small groups and everyone understands this clearly.

## Transitioning the Programs

When a church is at a critical point in transition, the women's ministry leader (for example) must be brought into a new understanding that women's ministry going forward will be to support the women as they work in their groups, not *compete* with group life. Her role should be revised to insure every woman in a group has been to an Encounter God retreat and is moving through the discipleship pathway and mentoring a young woman in the process. Same thing goes for the guy over the Men's Ministry. If this is transition is handled right, the same people leading these programs will make the transition because they are already a part of a group and see the need for it.

Other programs that are found to be redundant will be phased out through benign neglect. More budget monies and calendar space will be allocated to discipleship, group life events, and leader training so less will be available for the old programs in the future. [Knowing *which* programs to modify or shut down and *when* to do this is not simple or painless. Feel free to download [this resource](#) to help you do this if your church is ready for it.]

## Prioritizing Missional Group Life

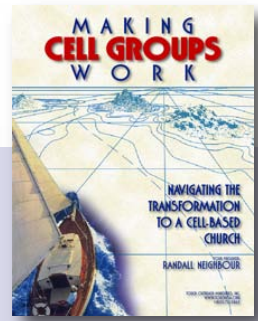
The last one is not as easy to conceptualize as the first two, but it's just as important. In a church with a half of its members in groups, taking the members of the groups into an understanding of mission is vital to any successful transition. Scott Boren has taught me a great deal about missional relationships in group life and the vitality that goes along with these groups vs. small groups that do sporadic missions projects for the church or community. The difference is clear: Missional small groups are filled with believers who love God—and out of that love, enjoy being with people who are not like themselves.

Most churches launch small groups to close the back door or provide a relational space that's missing from the big building weekend meeting. But to make the transition, your groups must be more than little collection cups to keep people happy or coming back to weekend services. Group life must take on a vibrant life of its own and everything else the church does must become highly supportive of the missional life found in the relationships formed in groups.

I hope these case study findings have been helpful. If there's anything I can do to help you or your church get over that hump in transition, feel free to call and visit with me!



*Randall Neighbour is an author and the President of TOUCH Outreach Ministries. In his role, he serves as a coach for churches who want to grow missionally through holistic small groups or cell groups. If you need a knowledgeable, outside source of encouragement to develop healthy groups in your church, give him a call at 800-735-5865 for a free church readiness assessment!*



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