

# Praise for *How Do We Get There From Here?*

"Scott Boren has done an excellent job of laying out the principles that will guide churches along each stage of their transition to holistic small group-based ministry. The cutting-edge research contained in this book will help both those churches starting the journey and those needing mid-course corrections. I highly recommend it."

**JOEL COMISKEY**  
Author, Professor, and Director of the Joel Comiskey Group

"A traveler on the path to holistic small group ministry needs a clear map, simple directions, and a working compass. This book helps each traveler design an itinerary that is appropriate for his or her geography, mode of travel, and desired destination. If you are a small group or cell church 'traveler,' don't leave without your map and compass: *How Do We Get There From Here?*"

**BILL BECKHAM**  
Director, TOUCH Global

"All the new creative small group-based church models that have evolved over the past 10 years have created the need for a book that brings comparison and clarity. *How Do We Get There From Here?* is a compilation of the best thoughts about the small group-based church with fresh ideas that link everything together. Re-learn how it works and glean from Scott's 8-Stage process for success."

**BILLY HORNSBY**  
Director of the Association of Related Churches

"Most churches implementing a small group vision have experienced short-term success and long-term disappointment. Finally, we have a practical and comprehensive book that identifies the critical factors and shows the path to success. Scott Boren gives us a road map that shows us the potholes and points the way to establishing a vibrant small group system. I strongly recommend this book to all pastors and leaders who want long-term success with groups."

**JIM EGLI, PH.D.**  
Author and Small Group Pastor, The Vineyard Church, Champaign, IL

"Wow! In *How Do We Get There From Here?*, Scott Boren has developed the most comprehensive resource for today's small group church that I have yet seen. He provides an excellent outline of the values, practices, and strategies that have resulted in strong small group systems around our world, then suggests processes and steps that provide workable guidelines for your church, too!"

**KAREN HURSTON**  
Author, Consultant, Director of Hurston Ministries

"The hope for the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not in buildings, programs, or showmanship but rather deeply meaningful connections with others centered on Christ. If this is your belief and a part of your calling, then *How Do We Get There From Here?* by Scott Boren is a must read. It is filled with thick meat to chew on, a balanced diet of approaches and practical recipes for successful implementation. Bon Appetite!"

**RANDY FRAZEE**  
Teaching Pastor, Willow Creek Community Church

"I wish I had had this book when we began our transition to small groups. This thorough work, especially in the American context, will help pastors avoid serious mistakes and equip them with tools for wise implementation. This is one of the few books on small groups that moves beyond the vision and values of small groups to the nuts and bolts of transition and implementation. It is a 'must read' for every pastor considering holistic small groups."

LANCE WITT  
Pastor of Discipleship, Saddleback Church

"Both thorough and creative, *How Do We Get There From Here?* is a masterpiece on relationships. Relationships are not the priority of God's Kingdom; they are the Kingdom. For those who looking to begin their small group journey, Scott Boren is the explorer you need to follow. For those looking to take their existing small group ministries to the next level, he is a coach you can trust. This is a must read for every pastor and small group leader in America."

SCOTT HAGAN  
Pastor, Mars Hill Church, Sacramento, CA

"*How Do We Get There From Here?* guides pastors through the maze of the various models of small group ministry available today to find the best fit for their church cultures and God-given visions. I strongly recommend this book to anyone really serious about small group ministry in his or her local church."

LARRY KREIDER  
Director, DOVE Christian Fellowship International

"Small groups remain at the center of the missional transformation that must happen in and through the churches of North America. This book is an important and helpful guide to envisioning, cultivating and embedding effective, vital small groups in a congregation. The wisdom of this practical book will provide leaders with a tool to form small groups that are witnessing agents of the kingdom and effective disciples of Christ."

DR. ALAN ROXBURGH  
Allelon International - Canada

"*How Do We Get There From Here?* is the most practical, understandable, and meaningful book on small groups, I have ever seen. A 'must read' for anyone interested in starting a small group ministry, it reveals both the joys and the challenges of small group ministry. I highly recommend it."

DAWSON McALLISTER  
Author, Youth Pastor and National Talk-Show Host

"I wish that *How Do We Get There From Here?* had been in print when I first attempted to transition to the holistic small group-based approach to ministry. The wisdom found in these pages would have saved our leadership team, our congregation, and myself some unnecessary traumas. The systematic description of the current models of holistic small group-based ministry would alone make the book worth purchasing."

DR. PHILLIP W. SELL  
Associate Professor, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

HOW DO WE GET  
**THERE** *from* **HERE?**



# HOW DO WE GET THERE *from* HERE?

Navigating the Transformation to Holistic Small Groups

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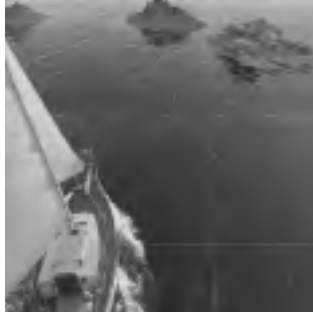
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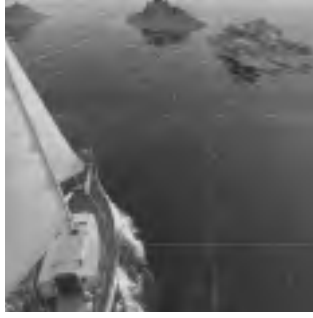
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# Foreword

According to Webster's Dictionary, to navigate is "to plan or compute the course of a vessel or vehicle." *How Do We Get There From Here?* is intended to help your church sail through unfamiliar waters, moving from a traditional or innovative lifestyle to a New Testament structure. The journey can be fraught with unseen obstacles. Navigation is particularly difficult when there is no map to follow.

A couple of years ago, only a few churches had successfully made the journey to holistic small group-based ministry. Observers flocked to visit them. They witnessed the basic Christian communities in action. Upon returning to their traditional church cultures, they had a desire to restructure, to transform, to experience what they had seen elsewhere. But many found that getting from "here" to "there" was not an easy task. One church sailed too fast and lost numerous members. These people left to join a traditional church that had no intention of changing anything. The receiving church had to build a balcony to house the newcomers and jokingly called it, "the space built for us by the church down the road."

The larger the ship, the slower it must turn to head in a new destination. The author of this book has gleaned information from many different sources to provide you and your church with the proper

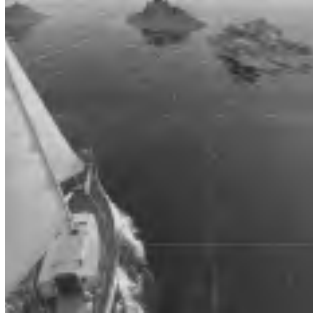
navigational tools. Scott seeks to answer the question, “How does a church go from a traditional program-based structure to healthy, holistic small groups at the heart of the church?” The eight stages defined in this book will guide you. They will also help churches with small groups become churches driven and comprised of holistic small groups.

In 1990, I wrote a book with a similar name. It was a “first generation” book that expressed all I knew about cell groups (holistic small groups) and how they worked. But I could not include what I did not know. The book you hold in your hands is not written by an old man, but a brilliant younger man who has been in the small group movement long enough to be able to blend all the learning he has received from others into a comprehensive and understandable process. He has also inserted his own life experiences and the experiences of countless others who have crossed over from “churchianity” to New Testament basic Christian community. He has done a splendid job!

The term “Bible” is now bandied about, particularly by those who write instructional manuals. Bookstores sell “The Macintosh Bible,” “The Screenwriter’s Bible,” even “The Airbrush Bible!” I have a suspicion that, before you are halfway through with it, you will designate this book, “The Holistic Small Group Bible.” That’s not really so profane. You see, this is one of the first books you can get your hands on that is going to explain the church as it was intended to be by Christ, who formed it to be inhabited by His presence. Of course, it does not have the inspiration of the Books of the Canon, but you will certainly find it inspiring!

So raise the anchor, hoist the sails, and let’s head for the open sea!

Dr. Ralph W. Neighbour, Jr.  
Houston, Texas



# Acknowledgments

The writing of a book is never a solo effort. This project started with long conversations with Jim Egli. Don Tillman joined the TOUCH® staff, and we had deep, insightful discussions over coffee developing many of the ideas found on these pages. Then Don and I tested this material by consulting with numerous churches and teaching at TOUCH® conferences.

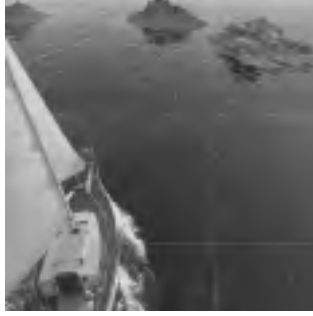
Without the detailed editorial eye of Brandy Egli, reader comprehension would be immediately halved. The excellent editorial feedback by Michael Mack provided clear direction from the mind of a writer, editor, and pastor. My pastor, James Bell, gave insight from the point of a view of a pastor in the trenches. The gracious input of Karen Hurston helped to take parts of this book to new levels.

This book would have been impossible without the pastors across North America who volunteered hours to share their stories about how they developed small groups. Their names are too many to list, but what they shared forms the backbone of this book.

Next I want to thank my patient wife, Shawna, who put up with my long hours of sitting behind a computer while I sought to make sense of the whirlwind of ideas and words. She continues to teach me how

relational ministry through small groups works, as her life is about relationships. To her I dedicate this book.

Finally, there are no words to express the impact God has had upon my life and the writing of this book. He has taken me on a journey in small group community that is beyond description. I can only say that I am glad to be on this journey.



# Introduction

When I read the stories of the church of the first century recorded in Acts, I have two responses. First my heart is stirred with hope and fresh vision. I see what the church can be because it was once that way. The stories of community, passionate prayer, miracles and risky lives instill new fever to seek God all the more as an individual as a church.

The other response is not as positive. When I read about the experiences of the churches of Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus and others I also see what the church of this century lacks. Don't get me wrong; I am not seeking a return to the first century nor do I think that Luke's account of the early church prescribes a uniform model for all future generations that will magically open the door to such experiences. However, the early churches experienced something that most churches I encounter lack.

When I read those stories, I am inspired not because I see a plan for doing church nor a deep theological foundation. Rather, the radical life that the early Christians experienced—God's presence was manifest, his people shared life together, individuals voluntarily sacrificed for one another and growth spontaneously occurred—both gives me hope for the church and frustrates me as I see how far most churches are from this

experience. We have great church strategies, and we are not lacking in sound theology—for the most part. Strategies and theology do not stimulate new passion. Fresh experiences with God like those found in the New Testament do.

For almost fifteen years, I have been talking with church leaders who are seeking for such experiences. They don't necessarily use this language. They say that want to become a small group church, a Groups of 12 church, a church of small groups or even a New Testament church. However, when you ask them what spurred them to begin this search for a new way of being the people of God, almost all of them express a longing to lead a church that provides a fresh God experience that might generate a modern-day New Testament story.

## The Experience of Relationships

In the Spring of 1999, Jim Egli, (a close friend and former Director of Training at TOUCH® Outreach) and I held a walking meeting. As we wandered around the field of an old dairy farm that had been purchased by a church, one question dominated our discussion: why do so many churches struggle with developing effective small group structures? Many church leaders came to our conferences or went to conferences hosted by churches, but few were seeing the success with groups that they had been promised.

The church on whose grounds we were walking was a typical example. The senior pastor had a clear vision providing dynamic life experience through small groups as he saw in the New Testament. The church members had received training from some of the leading experts in the field. The senior pastor started with one prototype group to model group life, exactly as the books and the experts said, but the church was stuck. The church tried and tried but could not get over the hump and take the few groups it had started and develop the kind of experience that was envisioned.

George Barna reports that seventy percent of the senior pastors his organization surveyed stated that small-group ministry is “central to the overall success” of the church’s ministry. Barna argues, “Since tens of thousands of Protestant churches have staked their future on the success of small groups to deliver effective ministry to their adherents...the triple

zero decade will be a make-it-or-break-it period for small groups.”<sup>1</sup> If Barna is right on these counts, and churches are struggling, then these pastors need more than a hope for a different church experience. They need more than a small group structure developed at the mega-church in a growing suburb in a major metropolitan area. They need answers to questions that have rarely been asked. On that day, Jim and I asked a foundational question: “Why do some churches succeed in making small groups work and produce relational church life while others do not?” This question spawned a series of subsequent questions that consumed me for over three years. It sent me on a journey to ask different questions of pastors. I sought out churches that were experiencing a taste of this dynamic life through small groups. And I sought out churches that had struggled to make the life work. The responses of the leaders of these churches formed the seedbed for the book that lies in your hands.

## Small Groups or Relationships

One of the primary results of my interviews has caused me to rethink the premise of small group ministry. I have found that while most pastors seek desire the experience of the first century church, they shift their focus on a strategy or structure. Small groups are crucial, they conclude; therefore, hope is placed in developing an effective small groups structure. However, the experience that Luke reported were not the result of a small group structure. While they met in small groups, this form of meeting no more produced those experiences any more than a red apple peeling makes an apple taste delicious. The form of small groups is crucial, but if the more fundamental core is not present, then the form is powerless.

At the core of groups that experience a life that resembles experience recounted in Acts is relationships. All successful small group models are built on a foundation of relationships. A few years ago, a leader I coached shared that the relationships in her group were going very well. She explained the concern that she might confuse her leadership task with her relationships, because she enjoys the relationships so much. She saw ministry as a task and therefore made it much harder than it really is. I told her, “You are leading through your friendships, not apart from them. God uses friendships to bring people into maturity.”

Dr. Phillip Sell, professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and

former pastor of a small group church, explains how he had to label the vision as a relationship-based church. This model of church life contrasts with the program-based church, where a church creates programs to meet needs, the entertainment-based church where people come to catch a spiritual high every week, and the content-based church, where the church is a “teaching center” for people to attend every Sunday. Sadly, small groups will be forced to fit into the model of programs, entertainment or content, unless the core experience of the relational church is understood.

Therefore the goal of the small group system is to develop a model for people to be connected to God, to be connected to one another, and to raise up disciples in a relational manner. This is the heart of the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Some pastors have placed all their focus on the structure and made the change in structure the final goal. Some churches call themselves churches of small groups, small group churches, or G-12 churches, believing that they have found the ideal model and that other models don't measure up. Such churches take great pride in the fact that they are returning to a truly biblical model of church organization.

But in the end, labels matter very little. Experiencing the relational life of God with one another is what counts. Floyd Schwanz, a former small groups pastor with Dale Galloway at one of the pioneering small group churches in North America, puts it this way, “Don't talk about being cell-based because it sounds like another program (and we have too many of those already). Focus instead on being more relational through small groups.” I consulted with one group of church elders a few years ago and explained the different ways to set up small group structures. I shared with them how they could become a “pure” small group church. One elder piped up, “I have no interest in being a ‘pure’ small group church.” The elders stated that they wanted to develop a structure that promoted the values of biblical relationships. They were not interested in labels, categories, or comparisons. At first, I thought the two were synonymous, but since then I have concluded that I missed the point.

Pastors and church leaders must seek to understand the different structures and determine what will work best for them. But the vision ultimately is about relationships, not about fitting into the proper category or developing an ideal structure. The ways in which churches organize their small group efforts will be different for almost every church.



## Why a Relational Church?

In my book, *The Relational Way*, I challenge the myths that hinder churches from experiencing the relational life and propose a vision for equipping people to enter this life. Yet my message in that book is not that new. Many others have said similar things in different ways. For instance, after surveying over 1000 churches around the world, Christian Schwarz found eight church health factors, one of which is holistic small groups. He concludes, “If we were to identify any one principle as the ‘most important’—even though our research shows the interplay of all basic elements is important—then without a doubt it would be the multiplication of small groups...”<sup>2</sup> Pollster George Gallup said, “Nothing is more important for ministry today than small groups.”<sup>3</sup> George Barna predicts the trend in the church that, “Tens of thousands of Sunday Schools will close down in favor of small group and Net-based ministry.”<sup>4</sup>

Popular Christian commentator Chuck Colson wrote, “No Christian can grow strong and stand the pressures of this life unless he is surrounded by a small group of people who minister to him and build him up in the faith.”<sup>5</sup> My former professor, J.I. Packer, has stated, “How can God’s one family, locally and denominationally separated, be enabled to look like one family?...by wisdom in structuring house-churches and small groups within congregations.”<sup>6</sup>

Other theologians have made a similar point. Howard Snyder wrote, “It is my conviction that the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit is most likely to be experienced when Christians meet together informally in small-group fellowships.”<sup>7</sup> Deitrich Bonhoeffer understood the importance of life together in the church when he wrote, “But if there is so much blessing and joy even in a single encounter of brother with brother, how inexhaustible are the riches that open up for those who by God’s will are privileged to live in the daily fellowship of life with other Christians.”<sup>8</sup>

These arguments for life in Christian small groups seem to line up with life in the early church. The early Christians:

...devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer...every day they

continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:42-47).

The early church leaders were following Jesus' ministry model. Jesus focused most of His ministry on small group leadership, spending the majority of His time with the twelve apostles while never neglecting the crowds and other disciples. In fact, 51% of Jesus' words in Mark are addressed to the twelve apostles.<sup>9</sup> The Apostle Paul followed a similar model of ministry when he said, "You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house" (Acts 20:20). Even Moses used a similar model of ministry when he organized the children of Israel into groups of 1000s, 100s, 50s, and small groups of 10s because he was being worn out trying to minister to the entire nation by himself.

Dr. Ralph Neighbour has been a pioneering voice for holistic small groups since the 1970s, stating, "We must recognize the activity of the Holy Spirit in the small group movement and seek to use it for the harvest of precious souls. No other form of church life promises to harvest at the same rate the population is growing."<sup>10</sup> The church cannot continue to accomplish its God-ordained mission with traditional methods in a world population that is multiplying exponentially.

## Do Relationships Work Today?

Alister McGrath, Anglican theologian and professor of theology at Oxford University, estimates in his book *The Future of Christianity* that as many as 75 million people are part of churches that base their lives on small groups. Small groups, when done well, produce great results. Churches around the globe are proving this. Some of these churches number over 100,000 with tens of thousands of small groups.

Most of the churches that are seeing phenomenal small group success are located outside the West. This has led some to conclude that Western cultures are not conducive to small group development and churches should adopt other approaches. While the churches in Europe and North

America do not boast of such astronomical numbers, it is hard to argue against the impact that relational small group life is having upon the church in these individualistic cultures. Over the last twenty years, there has developed an underground movement of relationship-based churches that are growing small groups in a consistent but non-spectacular fashion. In addition, the primary church models that sponsor conferences all promote small groups as a crucial part of their strategies.

One of the reasons these churches in the West are seeing success with small groups is because the individualists within these cultures are dying for community. People look for community in anonymous chat-rooms, discussing ideas with faceless people who cannot judge them. Others look for it at work, helping the United States become one of the most over-worked nations in the world. They use money to gain acceptance from others through fancy cars or oversized, empty houses and endless parties. Millions of other people sit in front of the television watching reruns of sitcoms like “Friends,” “Seinfeld,” “Cheers,” “M.A.S.H.,” and “I Love Lucy.” They try to live vicariously through the television characters, hoping to get a taste of close friendship, to go to a place where “everybody knows your name,” to understand what it feels like when people really know one another—all the troubles and victories, the attractive features and the warts—and they still accept and love one another.

The Apostle John wrote, “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also might have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). The church must provide a context where lonely, searching people can find friends who not only know their names but also know their hearts. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a relational message. Truth without fellowship is a lie. The church no longer needs stories like this:

A faithful Christian man led a sales clerk to Christ while out buying clothes. He told his pastor about this experience, but when the pastor asked him what the man’s name was, the Christian responded, “I have no idea.” The pastor asked if he was going to visit the man in the store again. The Christian responded, “I never thought about that.”

Sermons about Christ preached at people who lack life together are

“sounding gongs” and “clanging symbols.” The church has the opportunity to share the content of the gospel while at the same time providing a place for people to truly experience the love of God. Whether or not churches in the West ever produce small group growth like that seen in other cultures matters little. Groups work because they change lives.

## Which Small Group Model Is Best?

Small group models abound: the small group church, the meta-church, the 5x5, the pure Jethro, the Groups of 12, the J-12, the G-12.3, the D-4, the interest group model, the hybrid model, and others currently in development. Up until a few years ago, the focus lay upon the 5x5 model, which has been used to describe the model developed by Yonggi Cho in Seoul, South Korea. Most have started with that model and then have developed new models from it. Many are asking if they have the right or best group model.

Michael Green performed research on the Anglican cell group churches found in Southeast Asia. In his book, he does not talk so much about models as he does about the life he observed in these churches. He describes these churches as:<sup>11</sup>

- Groups of vibrant and multiplying communities of believers.
- Places where every cell group is seen as a church, set in its neighborhood to impact it. (This does not mean that these groups are separated from the authority and direction of a local church and large group celebration).
- Places where every cell group leader is a pastor, who always has an assistant.
- Churches where growing groups launch new groups with trained leaders.
- Places where many different kinds of groups can be launched including family cells, children’s cells, youth cells, business people cells, coffee-shop cells, and of course home cells.

Evidence does not reveal the existence of an ideal model. Different churches use different tactics to make small groups work. But in every

working small group model are Green's five elements. With the diversity of models that have arisen over the last few years, it has become quite clear that the key is not found in one model but in the values and principles that support all of these models.

It is tempting for people looking at these spectacular models to fall prey to the "magic model" theory. They attend conferences and go home thinking that the answer is found in copying the model. Many churches have tried to force their members into a certain model and the people found small groups artificial and controlling. Models help people visualize how small groups work, but God did not design His church to be a clone of an ideal church, just as He did not design human beings to be clones of an ideal human.

In addition, naturally we associate specific language with specific models. For instance, many small group churches call their groups "cells" and some of the churches have been labeled as "cell churches." These labels have been used by some to judge others and to promote an exclusive vision. In fact, the first edition of this book was called *Making Cell Groups Work*. I retitled the second edition because many are missing the point of the relational nature of the small group church because they are hung up on certain words.

## How Does a Church Go from No Groups to Experiencing the Relational Church Life?

*This question summarizes the purpose of this book.* When pastors and church leaders travel to model churches and observe what they are doing with small group, they leave with a sense of excitement and vision. They often leave with something else: a sense of being overwhelmed because the vision is so different and the methods are so radical. They often feel like they have been looking at a watermelon and must eat it whole.

Yet model churches did not develop overnight. They didn't try to eat the watermelon in one bite. They took a journey from no small groups to a relational life that results in expanding groups. It is not enough to understand what the final watermelon looks like. Pastors and church leaders need to understand the journeys of these model churches just as much as they need to grasp the end result. They need to hear how these

churches began, the lessons they learned, the mistakes they made along the way, and the surprising successes they found. These model churches have pioneered the journey of developing a relational way of being the church. By hearing these journey stories, others can avoid many mistakes and quickly develop a working small group base. When they only see the watermelon, they feel pressured to leapfrog over the journey and immediately force a small group system into existence.

This book aims to cut the watermelon into eight stages so that other churches will be able to eat it one bite at a time. It provides an 8-stage process for leading a church from no small groups to effective, expanding small groups. This process aims to do four things:

**Provide a chronological process to help a church get started.** These eight stages identify where to begin and provide steps for moving forward. They reveal the order in which watermelon should be eaten so that church leaders do not try to change everything at once.

**Answer eight questions that pastors commonly ask when they are trying to understand small groups.**

<b>Question</b>	<b>Answer</b>
1. What is my first step?	Discover the Mission (Stage 1)
2. How do I get people on board with the vision?	Develop Vision and Strategy as a Team (Stage 2)
3. Will small groups work in my church?	Assess Your Church’s Current Reality (Stage 3)
4. How do we prepare the church for small group success?	Prepare the Church Through Transformation (Stage 4)
5. How do we start the first groups?	Launch the First Group(s) with Kingdom-Seekers (Stage 5)
6. How do we experience dynamic small group community?	Generate Small Group Momentum (Stage 6)
7. How do we establish small groups as the base of the church?	Establish the Hidden Systems that Support the Small Groups (Stage 7)
8. How do we mobilize groups to reach people?	Expand the Small Groups to Reach the Unreached (Stage 8)

This process will serve as a navigational guide for the journey toward becoming a relational church through small groups that work. This journey is similar to that of a ship sailing to a new destination. Much goes into a sea-going voyage, including pre-sailing preparation, gathering information, charting a course, recruiting crew members, navigating around islands and continents that impede the path to the port of call. The eight stages will serve as a travel guide for leading people into life-transforming, God-filled, adventure-loving, risk-taking, people-caring, lost-seeking, leader-developing small groups.

**Help you practically implement the vision that I wrote about in *The Relational Way*.** While this book will prove helpful to you by itself, if you first work through my other resource, you will see how they work together.

**Help a church that already has small groups move beyond structures and develop a relational system.** I recently talked with an experienced small group pastor who confessed, “I have to go back and address some key factors that I skipped in Stages 2 and 3.” When pastors describe what is going on in their groups, they often express that small groups are not yet expanding; they are more like “holding” cells. Many have implemented groups and inadvertently skipped key steps in the 8-stage process. When reading through each stage, pastors and leaders will be able to assess steps that they skipped and then make plans for addressing them.

**Provide practical levers.** Levers are “small, well-focused actions that can sometimes produce significant, enduring improvements, if they’re in the right place.”<sup>12</sup> It is not enough to do things right; leaders must do the right things right. At the end of each stage is a list of levers that will help propel a church through that stage and on toward the destination of becoming a relational church. They point to other books, training resources, tools, and activities that will help a church on its journey.

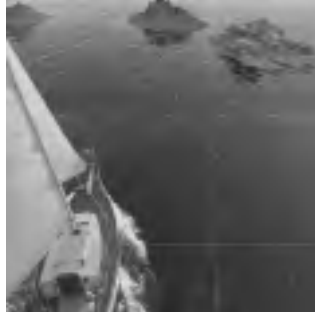
## What is the Basis for the 8-stage Process?

After Jim and I walked and talked that day, I spent more time listening to pastors. I asked questions to determine why groups work in some churches and fail in others. Pastors have shared their successes and

their failures. They told me what they did right and what they wished they had done differently. These stories have revealed much about small groups that has worked and much that has not. This book synthesizes the information from the stories.

These interviews led me to inquire about the ways leaders guide organizations through change. The eight stages presented in this book loosely correspond with the eight stages that John Kotter, a Harvard Business School professor, presents in his book, *Leading Change*. Principles from other key thinkers on leadership and change have been inserted throughout the eight stages. While this book draws from the best learning of the business world, the process is firmly based on experience in small group leadership and interviews with pastors across North America, and is rooted in the theology of the Word of God.





# Navigational Hazards

With the explosion of the first modern small group church during the 1970s—the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Korea—a wave of church leaders traveled to Korea and returned with a vision to emulate Dr. Cho’s pattern. Some, like Dale Galloway and the New Hope Community Church in Portland, Oregon, succeeded. Many others started home groups but never saw the same growth. Instead, they watched their groups become in-grown cliques. In other churches, the groups stalled out and church leaders shut them down.

In 1990, a new wave of small group experiments burst forth. Much of this experimentation rose from the unexpected stir caused by Dr. Ralph W. Neighbour Jr.’s book *Where Do We Go From Here?*. In it, Dr. Neighbour recorded personal insights that rose from his frustration with the American church. After twenty-one of the pastors he had helped develop small groups were forced to resign, Dr. Neighbour stated that there was little hope for the traditional church to live out the values of holistic small groups.<sup>1</sup>

Instead of listening to Dr. Neighbour’s caution about the traditional church, many church leaders were incited and challenged by his negative assessment. One pastor wrote: “I was frankly outraged at how easily

Dr. Neighbour disposed of the traditional American church and described a new paradigm of church structure called the ‘cell group church.’”<sup>2</sup> During the 1990s, churches from every denomination—Baptist to Episcopal, Pentecostal to Presbyterian, Methodist to Church of God, Mennonite to Vineyard—experimented with holistic small groups. These churches were like ships taking a voyage into uncharted territory. They ventured into places where most had not dared to go 20 years before. On these voyages, these ships encountered almost every imaginable navigational hazard. As I listened to their stories, I kept hearing the same hazards being described. Churches that follow can learn from these experiences and avoid these hazards.<sup>3</sup>

## Hazard #1: Misunderstanding the Destination

When a ship captain prepares for a sea-going journey, he takes the time to plan well. He studies ocean charts, determines destinations, plots courses, consults weather reports, purchases and stores provisions. No sailor dares a sea venture without a proper knowledge of his destination and what it will take to get there.

Many times pastors fail to thoroughly consider the destination toward which they travel. They call a small group expert and ask for help in starting ten groups within three months. While they come with a desire for biblical community, they do not know what it really looks like. They often have only read one book or heard about a big church that is doing small groups. They have not done enough research to understand where they are going or how they can really get there.

Too many pastors have experienced the hazardous nature of this approach. Reading one book or attending one conference is not enough to attain a clear vision for small groups. Most pastors spend years in seminary learning how to follow patterns of traditional church ministry. It might not take three years to learn how to run a small group ministry, but it will take considerably more than reading one book.

I can state this fact with a great deal of confidence because the churches that have done the best job of developing a relational way of doing small groups have this in common: they do their homework, and

they do it before they make plans to start groups or announce those plans to the church congregation. They also hear God's call to small group ministry very clearly. They do not make the transition because it has made the church down the road grow large or because it seems like a good idea. They do it because they sense God calling their church to do it. *Stage 1: Discover the Mission of the Relational Church* will deepen your understanding of holistic small groups and how churches organize themselves to facilitate relational life.

## Hazard #2: Failing to Practice Team Leadership

Pastoral leaders cannot force small groups to work through strength of will, knowledge, or diligent effort. Leading a small group initiative will fail if it is a solo project. Groups work because people work together in relationships. Shouldering the transitional burden alone seems to be a common hazard in many churches. The senior pastor goes to his study, reads all of the available literature on small groups, attends conferences, and develops a plan, often using fancy charts and illustrations. Then he announces the plan to the leadership.

When one person announces his small group strategy to a group of people as if it is a foregone conclusion, he is asking for trouble. People do not adopt new ideas blindly. They need understanding, time, and much discussion. This means the senior pastor will need help in disseminating the idea to other members of the church. Seminars and sermons will not work in the early stages. To overcome this hazard, the senior pastor must gather a team of key people who will help him discover how God is calling the church to navigate the waters of change. *Stage 2: Develop Vision and Strategy as a Team*, will guide you through this process.

## Hazard #3: Not Identifying the Starting Point

It is not enough for a ship captain to know his destination point when determining the proper course to steer at sea. Two vessels may have the same destination, but vastly different starting points. The

issues and challenges each ship will face will be unique because of its unique starting point. The same is true for the church. Two churches embarking from two starting points will take different courses to arrive at the same location. The journey toward becoming a relational church through small groups will be very different for a 100-year-old Baptist church in rural east Texas than it will be for a 5-year-old non-denominational church in metropolitan Cleveland. Imagine the difference between the journey of a church who has had three pastors in the last 8 years and that of a church who has had the same pastor for the last 20 years.

When churches fail to understand their starting points, they steer blindly into waters replete with hidden dangers and unseen hazards. *Stage 3: Assess Your Church's Current Reality*, will guide you in your quest to understanding your church's starting point so that you will be able to prepare your members and lead them in the God-directed steps toward the vision of small group ministry.

## Hazard #4: Putting Old Wine into New Wineskins

Many churches have embraced the new wineskin of small groups, but the people of the church have not allowed their personal lives to be challenged, changed, and remade by the work of the Holy Spirit. Some have carried with them old patterns of ministry that stand in the way of what God is doing. Others have transported unbiblical ideas of what the church is. Most entering small groups struggle with simple things like becoming transparent, relating to nonbelievers, and mentoring future leaders.

One west coast denominational pastor caught the vision for small groups. He received training on small group ministry, brought in experts for consultation, and hosted seminars for his church members. The church started groups and the level of excitement rose. The church began reaching nonbelievers, and new Christians not only came to the groups but also started attending the worship services. The church disciplined these new believers and even began reaching their friends. Everything was working well until the old guard started looking across the isle of the church and realized that they were losing control. The deacons started questioning the small group strategy (one

which they had endorsed and approved two years before) and then they began to pull in the reins on the pastor, telling him that he needed to get back to pastoring and caring for the people. This pastor did most things right, but there was no change of heart on the part of his church's leadership.

I have yet to find a church that made small groups work but did not develop a deep hunger for God. Each successful church sought to change not only the wineskin of small groups, but also to change the wine that flows into the hearts of the people. In order to enter into what God is doing in our world today, you must go beyond a transition of structures; you must embrace God Himself and allow Him to transform you through repentance. *Stage 4: Prepare the Church Through Transformation*, provides practical ways to prepare people for successful small group experiences.

## Hazard #5: Starting Too Abruptly

The average tenure of senior pastors in the United States is about five years. Therefore, when pastors feel they have a God-given idea, they do not have much time enact it and often encounter great resistance when doing so. While pastors feel like they do not have a lot of time to do what God is calling them to do, small groups begun too abruptly rarely work. Church after church over the last twenty years has tried to jump from Stage 1 to Stage 5, skipping Stages 2, 3, and 4. They dive into the deep end without considering whether or not they can swim.

Instead of launching groups recklessly, churches that succeed launch them intentionally. Pastors do not intend to be reckless; their motives are usually pure. But when leaders try to begin groups too quickly, they often find themselves picking up the pieces. Intentional start-ups are based on the realization that leaders must be prepared and the small group members must be committed to the values that make small groups work. Without such a commitment, small group members will be distracted from the vision and purpose of the groups.

I imagine that some readers will struggle as they read this section. They might believe that their church is unique, that they can start more quickly than others, that they will not encounter the hazards and the struggles of a quick start-up. Before your church decides to begin small

groups quickly, please consider the ramifications if you are wrong. Read through the information on the first five stages. These chapters will help you chart a course of action and determine how quickly you can begin.

As I have talked with pastors, I have discovered that the churches who loaded the front end of their start-up efforts with as much thought, preparation, and training as possible were more likely to launch effective start-up groups. *Stage 5: Launch the First Group(s) with Kingdom Seekers*, will give you the confidence to know that when your church does start its small groups, it will start them with great potential for success.

## Hazard #6: Viewing Small Groups as a Program

Small groups are not a panacea that will solve the ills of a church. The small group ministry strategy is not a program that a church can purchase and put on auto pilot. Small groups work because pastors and coaches are ministering to, mentoring, and releasing others into ministry.

Sadly, many churches have treated small groups as a program that will run itself. Pastors promote small groups from the pulpit, put charts on the walls, and hire a “small group pastor.” An effective small group ministry is not like an effective Sunday school program or home Bible study groups where the church can purchase curriculum and pass it out to teachers who have been teaching for 15 years. Small groups on auto pilot always crash.

In the early 1990s, one early adopter of the small group strategy had a goal posted on the walls of his worship facility. It read: “2,000 groups by 2000.” I looked around his church and thought, “How?” The church was doing small groups according to the proper structure, but the groups had not developed any momentum. The pastor had heard a small group pioneer state that a vision should be an impossible vision. This vision was so impossible that they didn’t even come within shouting distance of it.

Small groups do not grow and multiply just because they are meeting together. Small group growth is a result of momentum generated by Christ-centered and Christ-empowered relationships. Momentum must be developed through small group wins in three areas: personal victories, new Christians, and new small groups. When Christ moves through the small group relationships in these three ways, the small group system is

propelled forward, creating more and more momentum. *Stage 6: Generate small group Momentum*, will explain how to develop new leaders relationally and thereby create new groups.

## Hazard #7: No Support Systems

An associate pastor took me out to lunch after a conference to pick my brain for ways he could turn around his 20 stagnating groups. I asked him how his small group members were disciplined. They were not. I asked him how he was coaching the small group leaders. There were no coaches. I asked him how much energy he, as the small group pastor, spent ministering to the groups and leaders. He told me about the other administrative responsibilities he had in the church and how he had no time to invest in the leaders. Then I asked him how the senior pastor fit into the vision of the small groups. He confessed that the senior pastor gave little to no attention to the small group vision.

Small groups are not designed to work autonomously. When left alone, small group leaders must do all of the work of setting direction, discipling members, training apprentices, and evangelizing the world. This leads to burnout and failed groups. Group members and group leaders need oversight, support, accountability, and direction. This is the biblical role of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. *Stage 7: Establish the Hidden Systems that Support Small Groups*, will help your church provide the needed support that comes in the form of training, pastoral staff oversight, organization, teaching, evangelistic harvest events, children's small group ministry, youth small group ministry, and much more.

## Hazard #8: Failing To Maintain Focus and Expand the Ministry

A church leadership team recently asked me, "What percentage of our members should be participating in our small groups? 70%? 80%? 100%?" I thought afterward, "That is not the right question." The mission of the church is not about getting current Christians into small groups. The mission of the church is to transform the world by the power

of the Holy Spirit flowing through us. Small group ministry is one of the best ways to accomplish this mission.

Some churches have shifted the focus of the church after 75% or more of the membership has joined a small group. They assume that the job is done. There is nothing further from the truth. Groups are like roses in a garden. Weeds will invade and insects will destroy, leaving the rose bushes distorted or dying unless the gardener tends to the garden. Without the focus of church leadership, groups lose energy, people focus on other things, and Satan invades what is left unprotected.

In order to avoid this hazard, it is important for a pastor to understand that initiating change and then leaving the congregation for another ministry position is a recipe for small group demise. Without the guidance of the leader who initiated the groups, the church members are pulled back toward the old ways of ministry. This is what they know, and without the leader, they will feel safer with the old style.

Small groups do not work as a maintenance strategy. They only work when they exist to change the world. Small groups are either growing or dying, just like a rose garden. Therefore the focus should lie on expanding the groups, starting new churches, training new pastors, and impacting the world. Churches that have a vision to impact their Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) have exciting small groups full of people who are called to minister and see the hand of God transforming society. *Stage 8: Expand the Small Groups to Reach the Unreached*, will provide practical ways to increase the impact of the small groups to transform more than just your church and neighborhood.

Navigation is foundational to a successful sea-going voyage. Without a good navigator, a ship is likely to end up in trouble or even destroyed. Churches face a similar situation when trying to move God's people from no small groups to expanding small groups. Haphazard navigation will almost always lead a church into a head-on collision with a debilitating hazard. The eight stages found on the following pages provide the necessary tools for navigating around these eight hazards. The journey to making small groups work will look differently in every church. These eight stages will provide broad parameters for navigating that stage, while at the same time allowing room for God to guide the church forward. So prepare yourself for the adventure of a lifetime. Your ministry will never be the same as God leads you and your church into the new territory of a relational church through holistic small groups.