

In *MissioRelate*, we finally have a book on small groups that moves beyond pragmatics. Scott understands small groups is about Christian discipleship and there is no discipleship apart from mission. In order to get here, however, we must deal honestly with the underlying changes necessary to lead the church into mission via small groups. In *MissioRelate* Scott Boren gives us such a way. He proves himself that rare practitioner who knows both theology and culture sufficient enough to guide us well.

—David Fitch, *BR Lindner Chair of Evangelical Theology, Northern Seminary and Author of The End of Evangelicalism?*

In the missional context that now lies before us, existing styles of small groups based on affinity where people are shaped by an assumed ‘church-language’ are increasingly irrelevant and archaic. Scott has been wrestling with the question of how to form groups that engage with our new missional context. He shows us how to enter our stories and form groups that make a difference.

—Alan Roxburgh, *President, The Missional Network and author of Missional*

When I read *Missional Small Groups*, Scott Boren reminded me that small groups done well can produce revolutionary change in the lives of individuals, in communities, and even across the world. Now, after reading *MissioRelate*, Scott has convinced me that such groups can develop and thrive in any church . . . even my own.

—Sam O’Neal, *Managing Editor, smallgroups.com*

MissioRelate is a thoughtful treatment of the place where small groups intersect with missional ministry. Boren takes small groups out of the peripheral role they play in most churches and moves them into the grassroots organizing principle for ministry. If you’re ready to create new church leadership rhythms, *MissioRelate* will be extremely helpful in your search.

—Dr. Bob Logan, *founder of Logan Leadership and Journey Together Now*

I am convinced that every small groups pastor should read *MissioRelate*. Scott has unearthed what may be the new guide for doing groups in this era. Many books challenge our perspective of doing groups. This one will change your perspective, demand a new way of thinking, and set you free to let God do what only God can do through your groups.

—Rick Howerton, *Global Small Group Environmentalist for NavPress, and author of Destination Community*

Small group ministry continues to be a crucial dimension of vibrant church life. In *MissioRelate*, Scott Boren provides the reader with deep insight into why this is the case while offering substantive guidance for the development of small group ministry. He especially makes the critical connection between congregation and context that this ministry provides when approached from a missional perspective. This book is a must-read for anyone who takes seriously the importance of cultivating small groups as a primary aspect of congregational ministry.

—Craig Van Gelder, *Pb.D., Professor of Congregational Mission, Luther Seminary*

If you are ready for a powerful mental and spiritual adjustment regarding small groups, *MissioRelate* is for you! This book should be read by anyone wanting to reach their culture for Christ while making growing disciples.

— Alan Danielson, Author and Pastor of New Life Bible Church, in Norman, OK

If you're looking for a way to move your small group ministry from "connecting in community" to "impacting communities," *MissioRelate* is a must read. If you're like me, you will be challenged by Part 2. Trust me . . . it's worth a very careful read. With that foundation, Part 3 will get a lot of use as all of us move in the missional direction.

— Mark Howell, Community Life Pastor, Parkview Christian Church,
Consultant, and owner of smallgroupresources.net

If you want to move beyond the next missional formula for small groups and equip people to cultivate a way of life where they join with others and God to make a difference in the world, then you need to read this book. In *MissioRelate*, Scott Boren asks questions which have the power to move the church from shallow definitions of success to deep missional engagement in the world for the sake of the world. This book is a gift to the church, for it will help us live lives that are faithful to the God of Mission.

— JR Woodward, Co-founder of Kairos LA and the Ecclesia Network,
Activist, Blogger (jrwoodward.net) and Author of *ViralHope*

I own more than a hundred books on small groups, and I am not overstating my case when I say this book is different than all of them! *MissioRelate* is a game changer and a page turner. It will challenge your normal small group paradigm while encouraging you with what God can do in your church by living in the natural rhythms of a missional way of life.

— Michael Mack, Small Groups Pastor, Northeast Christian Church, Louisville, KY,
and author of *Small Group Vital Signs*.

The word "missional" seems to be abuzz across the landscape of the American church. It's "hip" to be missional! What I love about *MissioRelate* is that Scott plainly lays out the foundations of what it takes for small groups to be truly missional, both theologically and practically. This book will change the way you think about small groups . . . In a good way!

— Ben Reed, Director of Community Groups, Grace Community Church, Clarksville, TN.

Scott's four "stories" drove the nail all the way into the board for me. These are anointed insights by a man who has been gifted with both wisdom and the skill to write clearly. I was greatly impacted by Scott's presentation in *MissioRelate*. This is going to become a classic in the field of small group literature. Join me in thanking the Lord for his stewardship and contribution to the Kingdom.

— Dr. Ralph W. Neighbour, Jr., Founder, TOUCH Outreach Ministries
and author of *Christ's Basic Bodies*

missiorelate

missiorelate

m. scott boren



becoming a church of
missional small groups

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Connect with the author through his web site:
www.mscottboren.com

acknowledgements/dedication

When I first started writing, a friend told me, “Writers write.” Those words have stuck with me as I cannot seem to *not* write. Writing is something that eats up a lot of alone time, but it is never done in isolation. Penned words might come through an individual, but no book is written on an island. Ideas arise in community and this is definitely the case here. Mentors like Alan Roxburgh, Gordon Fee, Jim Egli, Ralph Neighbour, Bill Beckham, and James Bell have shaped my thinking and ministry. Friends like Randall Neighbour, Joel Comiskey, Greg Boyd, Paul Eddy, Janice Rohling, Kevin Callaghan, and many others have shared parts of my ministry journey and have shaped my life and thinking. Thinkers both historical and contemporary like Deitrich Bonhoeffer, Lesslie Newbigin, N. T. Wright, Colin Greene, Martin Robinson, Craig Van Gelder, David Fitch and Stanley Hauerwas have served as towers of input. Such people stand behind my words, and to them I owe the best parts. I’ll claim all of the weaknesses as my own. I could go on and on, but the time keeper is telling me that the time is up.

My beautiful bride, Shawna shapes my immediate earthly community, along with our four kids. To them I dedicate these words, hoping that they contribute to the shaping of new ways of being God’s people in the days to come.

Preface: The accidental writing of this book.....	11
Introduction: A brief history of small group ministry	13
Part I a vision that changes everything	
1 “Normal” groups or MissioRelate?.....	25
2 The four stories of group life.....	35
3 Why do we need these stories?.....	45
4 How the four stories change everything	57
Part II what we can do to change everything	
5 Ask different questions	73
6 Gather around the presence	85
7 Focus on kingdom formation	99
8 Leverage reality	113
9 Help people answer life questions	129
10 Encourage experiments	143
11 Equip people in relational intelligence.....	159
12 Empower elders	173
13 Practice your way into mission	185
14 Embrace the mystery	197
Part III a process for changing everything	
15 Aim the journey at MissioRelate.....	211
16 Aim worship services at MissioRelate	223
17 Aim connecting experiences at MissioRelate.....	231
18 Create a clear path to MissioRelate	241
Appendix A: Practicing MissioRelate as leaders.....	255
Appendix B: Going deeper with additional resources.....	261
Appendix C: Going deeper with <i>The Relational Way</i>	265
Appendix D: Community practices.....	271
Appendix E: Curriculum, Tools, and Resources for MissioRelate	275
Notes	277

I enjoy reading the back-story of how a book is developed, so I thought I would try my hand at it. Let me first state that this book is an accident, at least as much as it is possible for something that takes so much work to be called an accident. I never intended to write it. In fact, after completing my last book, I told a friend I did not want to write another book on groups for a while. So how did this accident happen?

First, there were three chapters that I could not include in *Missional Small Groups* because the intended audience was group leaders. These three chapters were written for church leaders and pastors. While consulting with pastors on the phone, I would send them these chapters and their feedback revealed that the information was helpful.

So I called up my friend Randall Neighbour and asked him if his ministry would publish a revision of my earlier book *The Relational Way* by inserting these new chapters. He liked the idea, so I prepared the chapters and sent them to him. Oddly enough, the layout file was corrupt and could not be recovered. The only solution was to scan or rekey the original text.

At this point, I suggested a completely new book. My idea was to put these three chapters with some other material I had written or taught through the last couple of years. I remember telling Randall I thought I had enough to create a 100-page booklet. To my surprise, I found more than 100 pages. Far more!

Believe it or not, this book came together over a period of weeks. As soon as Randall and I agreed on a new title, something snapped inside my mind and I churned out words faster than Carl Lewis running on a six pack of Red Bull. For this reason, this may very well be my best book yet. I find that when words flow quickly, I speak from my heart. Conversely, it might be my worst book to date. I have put myself “out there” in this book by speaking from my experience and without providing lots of supporting evidence, footnotes, quotes, or statistics. It’s raw, and it lacks nuance. Some readers will love this. Others will read the book and wish I’d been more balanced. With all this in mind, please indulge me. I’m a brash Texan living in Minnesota where nice is very important. *Missional Small Groups* is my *nice* book. This one is less so, even though I still attempt to keep the feather ruffling to a minimum. The reality is that what I’m writing about in this book has changed everything for me.

One final thought: After completing the manuscript, I realized that this resource works hand-in-glove with *The Relational Way*. The ten chapters in that book provide a theological nuance and justification to the ten chapters in part two of this book, helping a leadership team of a church lead their groups into MissioRelate. And taking it one step further, these resources, coupled with the resources for group leaders (*Missional Small Groups* and the companion study guide), provide a foundation for something that has changed almost everything I have thought about small groups.

— M. Scott Boren

By the way, I’d love to know what you think about the content and where it takes you and your church via Twitter: @mscottboren or on my website: www.mscottboren.com. I look forward to learning your thoughts and entering into a deeper dialog.

I literally grew up in the church. We lived less than a mile from the building where we worshipped. My dad was a deacon and my mom was the only member who played the piano. She was also the church treasurer. My paternal grandfather and maternal grandmother as well as my aunt Pat and Uncle Wimpy — yes that was his name — were faithful members. Three church services a week plus Sunday school and quite a few other activities filled my days and nights. When combined with annual week long revival meetings, summer church camp, Christian concerts, and retreats, the traditional church formed the rhythms of my life.

Just before my senior year of high school, I felt God's leading to devote my life to full-time church leadership. After my first sermon, an 80-year old deacon told me, "I just heard the best sermon of my life!" (I think he just liked me.) I then went off to college and quickly found my way into leadership of a youth group. During the summer months, I worked as an intern in a church's youth ministry and then went to Germany to be a summer youth minister.

Because of the environment in which I was raised, I knew how church worked. It was a part of my life story. I knew its language, its patterns, and what I call its rhythms. I also knew how to make church work, but not because I had read books about church leadership or attended seminars on how to run

a church. I knew how to do church naturally because its rhythms were a part of me.

During my last year of undergraduate studies, I made plans to go to seminary. I wanted to be a preacher, following in the footsteps of role models like Chuck Swindoll, Joel Gregory, and Louie Giglio. My well-laid plans were abruptly interrupted when I investigated how the early church was organized to form people into organic community and how God was moving through churches throughout the world through small groups. After just a few months of exploration, I clearly saw that the way we use the pulpit in the modern church actually requires an overemphasis of the skills and charisma of uniquely gifted people. Plenty of my friends felt called to that kind of ministry. I, on the other hand, found a different calling: helping others form patterns of church life that facilitated organic or “bottom-up” life through small groups.

When I first wrestled with this shift in calling, I was taking a senior level class on leading organizational change. For one of the assignments, I interviewed someone who had grown up in an experimental church while his pastor/father tried to figure out what organic or missional small groups might look like in the 1970s. After he answered my questions, I told him of my plans to go to seminary. His response was not what I expected. He said, “Why would you do that if God is calling you to do this?”

I ignored his challenge and went to seminary as planned, which lasted all of one semester. Within a few weeks of classes and interaction with professors, I realized I was being trained to lead the kind of church that most people who had little or no church background cared about! During those seminary months, I was asking different questions and no one there had the answers I needed. I found others who had these same questions about the church. The labels for what they talked about came in many different forms: a small group church; a cell church; a church of small groups; meta church; and Groups of 12 (just to name a few of many). Before I knew any of these terms or titles, I simply caught a vision for missional life lived out through relational connections in small groups. While grateful for the church that I knew so well, I saw

a fresh way of being the church that seemed to hold greater promise. Knowing this created a challenge: *I had a new vision, but the old church rhythms dominated my imagination. I had to learn to play new music that fit this new vision.*

finding new leadership rhythms

The search for new rhythms generated two important paths. The first was the school of hard knocks. I was immersed in small group life when I left seminary and joined an experimental church in Houston. This led to roles of small group leadership, pastoring small groups in two different cities, and eventually overseeing a team of small group pastors in still another city.

The second path has come through my unquenchable curiosity. I love to research and I've learned a great deal about new leadership rhythms through my work for a small group training and consulting organization. For a number of years, I worked with churches in this venture before it became a popular trend in the West. I started out by answering phones and addressing basic questions posed by pastors. This developed into a role where I helped small group authors develop their message, which led me to a three-year research project and my first book. For the last 18 years, I have immersed myself in the world of small groups to find the rhythms of leadership that develop small groups that are missional, relational, and transformational. As I look back on this journey, I find that it parallels the trends that have shaped the imaginations of pastors and leaders over the last 20 years. To illustrate this clearly, let me break down this journey into five stages.

Stage one: The call to something radical

From the 1950s through the late 1980s, talk about small groups was characterized by a radical and costly call to Christian community that appealed to a minority of church leaders and their churches. The focus did not lie so much on growth and numbers, but the quality of life that stood in stark contrast to traditional ways of being the church. This can be seen in the rather

controversial writings of Ralph W. Neighbour, Jr.; Thom Wolf, the former pastor of the church now called Mosiac; the training that came out of The Church of the Savior in Washington D.C.; and the more theological work of Elton Trueblood and Howard Snyder.

Stage two: The focus on structures

In the early 1990s, there was a subtle shift from the radical call of a life lived in community to a strong emphasis on church structures. This time was characterized by a heavy confrontation of traditional church forms and a clear articulation of new, small-group-centered church structures. While the first stage was focused on the life or the “wine” that a church might experience, this second stage was focused on the “wineskins” and an urgent need for new ones. In some circles, the old wineskins were castigated and even labeled as demonic while the new wineskin that was being presented was a revelation for the church. As one might imagine, this stage weeded out a number of potentially interested pastors and churches due to its dogmatic tone.

Stage three: The popularization of small groups

By 1995, small groups and small group principles were promoted by more mainstream church leaders and consultants. Carl George, Peter Wagner, Thom Rainer, and others highlighted the importance of small groups to bring balance to church life. This emphasis—coming from these respected voices—created a paradigm shift. Small groups changed from being something radical (embraced only by innovators) to something that middle-of-the-road churches could successfully embrace. In other words, small groups became a credible church growth mechanism. By the end of the decade, Willow Creek Community Church trumpeted the importance of small groups publicly and two of their staff pastors released a book entitled, *Building a Church of Small Groups*. This stage brought a fresh new wave of small groups that washed across the American church.

The emphasis on structures in stages two and three did not address my need for a new set of rhythms for leading the church, so I formed a completely

new set of questions in my quest. After all, one could set up the right organization and develop all of the right materials to support it, but still miss the development of the rhythms so fundamental to missional group life. Structures alone were not enough for me. In fact, I discovered that there are a lot of growing, sound church structures, but the life produced within their small groups was far from the vision God gave me of missional life lived out relationally. These churches are simply “enfolding” people into groups who continue to live like most other people in our western culture.

Stage four: A focus on understanding change

The small group organization I worked for in the 1990s focused on helping churches make a transition from traditional church life to missional community lived out through small groups. To be frank, our failure rate was alarming. Pastors and core leaders of churches with whom we were working *hoped* their groups of members would take off and reach the lost, but the reality was that most barely got off the ground. They clearly understood how to implement the structures and strategies. What they did not understand was how to lead their people into these new supportive structures and strategies with radical changes in lifestyle.

Through an intensive three-year research project, I analyzed over 50 churches to determine the differences between how successful churches transitioned compared to those who failed. The research gave me enough solid information to develop an 8-stage transition process, resulting in a book called *How Do We Get There From Here?* In this book, I propose a change process for changing a traditional church structure to a small group based church structure, with the goal of developing missional life in those small groups.

By the time this resource was published, there were quite a few books and training seminars on leading change in the church. While most of it was sound information and went deeper than the focus on structures found in stages 2 and 3, ultimately the focus lay on changing structures, not personal and community transformation.

Stage five: A look at how we live

To move beyond nominal group life and small group ministry, I looked beyond new structures. The work of Randy Frazee influenced me as much as anyone at the time. While pastoring in the Dallas/Fort Worth area, he found that the way people operate in normal life directly impacts the way a church experiences missional community. He brought to light that working a sixty-hour work week, commuting an hour or more each day, and enrolling one's children in multiple extra-curricular activities cannot be ignored when developing a strategy to implement or expand a church's small groups. The church, like our own bodies, needs a skeletal system or a structure for support. However, if we *only* have a skeletal system, our bodies do not have life. The other systems are required to bring the bones to life. When these others systems are in place, small group structures of many different kinds can actually produce dynamic missional life that is highly relational.¹

the parallel stage of normalization

Running alongside these five stages I found yet another pattern of doing small groups I call *normalization*. All along, there have been those who embraced the small group strategy simply for helping people do church just a little better. Groups were formed to close the back door, enfold people into formal membership, and provide off-campus Bible study and/or fellowship in homes between weekend services.

Normalization is not new for the church. It has been performed for decades through various means. Groups have been used to support average Christians living average lives that fit squarely into the average culture outside the four walls of the church building. While I don't think this is necessarily evil, it does create confusion. In this parallel stage, the goal of small group involvement is significantly different than the original vision. Instead of groups being a crucible for community, discipleship, life transformation, and evangelism, normalized small groups in America are nothing more than nice little groups

of traditional Christians who gather because it's fun to hang out with other traditional Christians.

What saddens me is not the existence of normalized small groups: I celebrate such groups because they help people take baby steps toward and move some people into new realities with Christ. I am, however, deeply saddened by those who normalize this watered-down experience and promote it as the main goal of group life. Simple involvement or group attendance is the key and the focus in normalization and 80% or 100% participation in groups is the mark of celebration. Instead of pastors generating a completely new way of life through groups, the focus lies on simply connecting people to groups. By confession, I've heard pastors of some of the most "successful" small group systems freely admit that they have no idea what really goes on in their groups. Over the last ten years, there have been many different books that have promoted this experience, some penned by these very pastors.

where are we now?

In some ways, I feel like we are at a crossroads when it comes to the experience of community through small groups. We have choices to make as church leaders:

Option #1: Programmatic

We can choose to continue to focus on structures and look for the latest program to be promoted, one that promises a new small group panacea. These programs might come in the form of new curriculum, a church-wide campaign, or semester groups. The options are abundant. This option will be offered for a long time to come because—for some odd reason—we continue to fall for their hollow promises! Now don't get me wrong. I want to learn from others and I use many of these programs to help pastor my people. But I cannot be satisfied with a programmatic way of doing groups. Such will only produce more of the same and I want something completely different.

Option #2: Organic church

Over the last few years, the organic church has become quite popular. Usually this organic route resembles some of what was experienced by many in Stage 1. There is a call to radical community coupled with a castigation of traditional church life. The form of organic churches usually takes that of a house church, some of which are totally independent while others are regionally connected. There are many writers who have developed some very helpful resources for this option. However, contrary to their belief that the traditional church must be cast aside like a dirty, torn shirt, this is not the *only, most likely*, nor the *primary* option God has for the future of the church.

I've been down the road of trashing the traditional church to elevate my current and "correct" biblical vision for what the church should be. In the end, it only served to produce the same kind of unsatisfactory life in our small groups that we experienced in the traditional church. Birthing a house church that is free of programs and buildings does not automatically result in a transformational body of Christ that is on mission in this world. I am committed to experiencing organic, missional life together, but the either/or foundational attitude on which this option is built gives me pause. I have become very leery of those who claim that they have found the secret insight into the future of the church. I'm sure that they have found one of the ways that God will manifest his life through his people, but we need much more than new structures.²

Option #3: Missional small groups

Of course, I'm going to present what I believe to be the best option at this point. If I did not believe this, I would not be writing this book. Last year I wrote a book entitled *Missional Small Groups*. There I wrote to group leaders and group members about small group rhythms that results in world-changing missional community. I seek to move beyond the categories of either/or, either programmatic groups or organic groups. I introduced the idea of missional life being a rhythm that we learn to play as a group. The crux of the book was: if we are going to play such rhythms, we must embrace both good structures and seek to live out the organic life together in community.

Let me state this up front: When I write “Missional Small Groups,” I am not referring to a specific number of people or a gathering place. In the chapters to come, I emphasize a way of life and the form that missional life can take in a community in various forms. In some contexts, small groups of 8-15 can be quite missional. In others, small groups might network with three to five other small groups to practice missional life. In yet other situations, the context might call for a missional community of 20-50 people where sub-groups form from within.

please indulge my repetition

I want to be clear: I am not prescribing a specific form called *MissioRelate*. Anyone that says that they have found a missional form gives me cause for caution. I am far more interested in discovering a way of life together by encouraging the leaders within a specific situation to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit to discover and embrace the most productive missional form.

Now don't come to the conclusion that I feel we should toss out structures or traditions and go totally organic. As soon as we discard our heritage, we lose our bearings. I once thought that we should take this option, but after seeing how God has been at work in the church for the last 2000 years—even with all the weaknesses of the traditional church—I can no longer move in that direction. At the same time, the way ahead for the experience of missional life cannot be orchestrated through a program. When we do this we assume that we can give easy answers to difficult questions. It's more than finding a programmatic system or structure that enfolds 80%, 100%, or even 120% of our weekend attendance into groups. It's more than simply being geographic or developing neighborhood groups. It's so much more than instituting some kind of house church structure that is bigger than a small group but smaller than a small church. And it's far more than aiming to go organic and trying to get back to some kind predetermined idea of what the church did in the New Testament. Church leaders want a plan or a pattern to copy, but I cannot

in good conscience point people in this direction. It just doesn't consistently produce missional groups.

This book will point you toward the church leadership rhythms that create a church-wide environment where groups can learn to play the music found in missional small groups. I call this MissioRelate. The pages that follow seek to answer the question: What are the shifts in mindsets and practices required of pastors, leaders, small group champions, and overseers of groups in order to develop groups that live out MissioRelate? (The shorthand question would be: How do we become a church of missional groups?)

Join me and let's see what kind of music we can create.

part one

**a vision that
changes everything**



missiorelate

*An experience with others and God
that makes a difference in the world*

“normal” groups or missiorelate?

I love books. I must confess that I like to read, research, learn from, and accumulate books. My wife does not completely understand my unusual passion for them, even though she has a similar pension for other products, of which I won't mention. Frankly, I am not sure I understand my love of books either, but it has been a life-long affair. As a child, I recall my father taking me to a used bookstore and selecting just one book. He told me I could have more, but I said one was enough. That night, I remember crying myself to sleep because I did not take him up on his offer.

When you combine my passion for books and the fact that I have been working in the small group arena for almost 20 years, I have more than my fair share of dead trees pressed into white sheets and covered with lots of black ink lining my shelves. As I survey my collection of small group resources, it's obvious that the number of books published on the topic has skyrocketed over the last decade. In the mid-1990s, an author could write something on small groups and church leaders would jump on it as if it was a rare diamond. Today, if you search Amazon.com for “small groups” you will discover nearly six thousand choices of books to read on the topic.

Some of these books are written by well-known pastors and make audacious claims. They pronounce that by adopting their strategy, you will realize a small group “miracle moment” that will suddenly cause your groups to soar with

success. These authors act as if they have found a “magic bullet” that none of the other small group thinkers or writers have thought about over the last 50 years. One promises that their strategy will get 100% of your Sunday attendees into groups. Another pastor claims 120% can be procured. The promotional material of yet a third book states, “The greatest challenge facing most churches today isn’t getting people through the front door—it’s keeping them from leaving through the back door.” When I read this, I wanted to scream, “Really? What about the 80% of American churches that are under 100 people?” For the most part, these small churches are comprised of faithful people led by faithful pastors, but they are not seeing droves of first-time visitors each week.

To say the least, all these books with all their claims left me frustrated. So I picked up some old, out-of-print books written by those I call “small-group prophets” from the 1950s-1970s. These include: *Call to Commitment* by Elizabeth O’Connor; *The Seven Last Words of the Church* by Ralph W. Neighbour, Jr.; *Company of the Committed* by Elton Trueblood; and the writings like those of Thom Wolf (the predecessor and former mentor of Erwin McManus at Church on Brady in L.A., now called Mosaic). These voices speak of prophetic test cases or creative experiments that are roots of what we see in small groups today.

When I compared these prophetic books to the new and frustrating books I’ve read of late, I realized that the fundamental imaginations behind them were quite different. The new voices pointed to structures and small group programs that churches could adopt quite easily, but the lived-out experience of the groups that these books described was quite “normal.” What I mean by this is that the groups were designed in such a way to fit quite nicely into the flow of normal life in America. But the imagination of those prophets was shaped by a vision that was anything but normal. While they did not use the word *missional*, they talked of groups of people that were making a difference in the world. It was radical for its time and truthfully, it is still radical for today’s church.

Too often, we settle for *normal* groups and we don’t even realize it. *Normal* has become so much a part of who we are that when we develop a good program that produces normal groups, we think we have something to brag

about. We fail to see that there is more. Far more. This more is *so much more* than something called “small groups” or even “missional small groups.” It is a life experienced together that I call MissioRelate.

MissioRelate

An experience with others and God
that makes a difference in the world.

stepping back to see God’s bigger picture

The development of small groups and their broadly accepted popularity today is something for which our forerunners have fought hard and long. These pioneers sacrificed security, reputation, and success to experience it first-hand. They experimented in a day when they knew that they would experience more failure than success, yet they were compelled to learn a new way of being God’s people. Today we stand on their shoulders and we are part of something much larger than the creative ideas we implement. God has been at work in the church for a long time, and he continues to do his work in shaping a bride that will be prepared for his return.

However, in our need to accomplish goals, maintain busy schedules, and survive as pastors, we get caught up in the now. We have failed to see that we are a part of a larger historical move of God that has both a rich history and a powerful future. In our short-sightedness, we want everyone in groups and we want it *now*. We run to those who promise quick results, usually pitched or delivered as “small groups in a box.” It’s purchased, unwrapped, and then in a great hurry we implement some other church’s program. When it does not produce results, we search for and buy into the next program to come along and the insanity deepens.

What we need is a strong dose of God-shaped perspective. Our short-term thinking blinds us to see God’s vision for the kingdom, a movement that cannot be created by adopting the latest and greatest ideas developed in

California, Texas, or New York. God is shaping a movement of people relating together on mission, which will not be promoted by a mega church or charismatic personality hawking one big programmatic push for missional living through small groups.

In the book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins writes about companies that stand out and what they do that is different than those who are average. He and his team of researchers discovered that great companies practice patterns that result in the “flywheel effect.” Imagine a huge flywheel, one three stories high and weighing over 5000 pounds. The goal is to push the flywheel so that it rotates by simply leveraging your strength against it. By pushing once, it moves slightly. You realize that it will require multiple, consistent pushes to get it moving. After some pushing, it turns once. Then you keep pushing, and it turns again and again and again. Collins writes:

Then, at some point—breakthrough! The momentum of the thing kicks in your favor, hurling the flywheel forward, turn after turn ... whoosh! ... its own heavy weight working for you. You’re pushing no harder than during the first rotation, but the flywheel goes faster and faster. Each turn of the flywheel builds upon the work done earlier, compounding your investment of effort. A thousand times faster, then ten thousand, then a hundred thousand. The huge heavy disk flies forward, with almost unstoppable momentum.

Now suppose someone came along and asked, “What was the one big push that caused this thing to go so fast?”

You wouldn’t be able to answer; it’s just a nonsensical question. Was it the first push? The second? The fifth? The hundredth? No! It was all of them added together in an overall accumulation of effort applied in a consistent direction. Some pushes may have been bigger than others, but any single heave—no matter how large—reflected a small fraction of the entire cumulative effective upon the flywheel.¹

The same is true in churches that have produced small groups that are currently experiencing MissioRelate. They don't stand up and announce that they will change the church by mobilizing everyone in a new small group program. Instead, leaders invest their energy in the right places to produce tangible results that reveals the power of being a part of a community on mission. They recognize that moving the MissioRelate flywheel will take time (in some cases a few years). They keep at it, pushing forward in little ways that only produces small results at first . . . and they celebrate those small results and even the turtle-slow pace of the process. They have learned something very valuable: this is God's way of building MissioRelate momentum.

After nearly 20 years of working with churches and small groups, I've observed that normal groups are often found in churches looking for the magical small group strategy that will make everything fall into place at once, within a budget cycle, or a school year. But those whose groups are moving out in mission started slow, kept at it, and have learned that consistent leverage creates movement. In contrast to flywheel effect, Collins observed a contrasting pattern in companies that were not able to implement new ideas or lead people to align around a vision. He writes:

Instead of a quiet deliberate process of figuring out what needed to be done and then simply doing it, the comparison companies frequently launched new programs—often with great fanfare and hoopla aimed at “motivating the troops”—only to see the programs fail to produce sustained results. They sought the single defining action, the grand program, the one killer innovation, the miracle moment that would allow them to skip the arduous buildup stage and jump right to breakthrough. They would push the flywheel in one direction, then stop, change course, and throw it in a new direction—and then they would stop, change course, and throw it into yet another direction.²

To see a movement of missional group life develop in our churches, we must consider how to best apply a little leverage to the flywheel and then go about it quietly. We don't need any new programs, fanfare, or grand announcements about how small groups will change the life of our churches.

applying leverage to the right places

Our modern questions about success, group growth, ways to close the back door, and strategies to survive through the ups and downs of overseeing small groups leads us to put pressure on the wrong things. We end up running from one small flywheel to the next, thinking that we are generating movement when all we are doing is generating activity and extra work. Within the normal small group experience, people might believe everything about orthodox Christianity and mentally embrace the life of the church. Examine their lifestyle and you'll see it is formed more by the patterns of everyday church life than by the ways of God. Parker Palmer puts it this way:

Churches, for example, ask members to affirm certain religious beliefs and the mission those beliefs imply. But rarely are churches intentional about naming—let alone asking members to commit themselves to—the relational norms and practices that would support their beliefs and mission. As a result, the relationships within many churches are shaped more by the norms of secular culture than by those of the religious tradition.³

If we want to develop ways of relating in groups that results in mission, then we must look at what and how we are applying the pressure. While reading the works of the small group prophets I wrote about earlier, I realized that they applied pressure quite differently than we do today. Let me list five strong contrasts that stood out to me:

- Their primary concern was not on church growth, the number of groups, or what percentage of the church was in groups. “A church of groups” was not the end goal, but a means for accomplishing God’s greater mission. They had a vision for the redemption of creation and for empowering people to have a role in this redemption. Groups assisted them in this endeavor, and groups would often grow as a result of their focus. But there is little talk about how many groups, how people join groups, or other statistical issues.
- They maintained a keen focus on the quality of group life. They were looking for the kind of life that reflected the kingdom of God as represented by Jesus. These were not just study groups that met once per week or twice a month. They were groups that knew they had a call to be salt and light in the midst of the world. It was a radical call, one where Vice Presidents of large corporations were challenged to put feet to their faith by helping people dry out from long-term heroine use.
- These prophets were not afraid to “draw a line in the sand” and release those who would not enter the radical call to missional life. They did not water down the vision in order to pacify tithing members. They let the traditional churches in the neighborhood care for those who did not want to go deeper.
- They trained. And then they trained. And then they trained some more. They knew that such a vision for the church was radically different and it would not come naturally to their church members. They knew that if it was to be practiced, training was crucial. Their extensive member training processes raised the expectations of those involved. Then, they mentored people in the practical means of putting the training into practice. This produced powerful leaders who were anxious to lead.
- They experimented. They did not write about the need to find a structure or model for the next church, or one that could be packaged and sold to others. In their own way, each implied that the church should not go from one static form to the next static form called “small groups.” They were using small groups to experiment with different ideas of being God’s people out in front of a watching world.

To summarize, the leaders in these churches emphasized and focused on a different set of priorities. Most of the talk about small groups today focuses on finding the right strategy, which is a completely different animal. From my perspective, there are two places where we need to rethink how we apply this leverage. The first, obviously, is in small groups, house churches, cell groups, or whatever you call them. To this end, I wrote *Missional Small Groups* (Baker, 2010). This book is written for small group leaders, and even small group members, so that they can more clearly see the need and learn how to do it.

The second is not as obvious and often overlooked. It relates to how pastors, staff, small group champions and key unpaid supporters of group life leverage their energy. The following chapters will provide you with an imagination for and practical insights into what needs to be done and how to go about it in a simple, quiet way.

The chapters of Part 1 conclude with a reflective prayer exercise that is the same for each of these first four chapters. Most of the time we read to gain information. That is good. But I also want to encourage you to listen to the Spirit and your own responses to what you have read. I invite you to stop at the end of these chapters and go through this simple prayer guide and see what you discover that might be different.

On the next page, take time to reflect and journal about what you've just read. Look back over the chapter, identify things that stood out to you, and note them. Find the things with which you agree and those with which you don't. Mark them. Slowly review anything that challenges you or encourages you. Pray over those words. Write down what you sense the Spirit is speaking to you. Pray what you sense. Write down those prayers. Whatever you do, don't turn the page without pausing to ask God what he's saying to you right now.

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