



FINDING A SMALL GROUP MODEL THAT WORKS

By Tim Brown

Atkins, South Beach, Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, Nutrisystem, Fast Food Diet, 3 Day Diet, 3-Hour Diet, The Zone, Martha's Vineyard Diet Detox ... the list of diets seems endless and new ones appear almost daily. "Follow our diet and you will lose weight, look and feel better," they claim. Each promises desired results *if* you follow their plan, but I have always wondered how each could always be right?

The diet industry and small group ministry seem to have a lot in common. Like the plethora of diets, small group models are in abundance. We have Open Groups, Closed Groups, Cell Groups, "Free Market" Groups, Neighborhood-based Groups, Purpose Driven Groups, Sermon-based Groups, Semester-Based Small Groups, Affinity-Based Small Groups, Meta-church Groups, Recovery Driven Groups ... the list goes on and new types of groups appear frequently. "Follow our model and you will experience higher levels of participation, deeper levels of discipleship, easier ways for people to connect in your church, and a greater overall sense of satisfaction for your people." Like diets, however, I've often wondered, "how can they all be right?" How do we know which small group model will work best to create health and vitality in our churches and people? Here are some things to consider that we have

found helpful at First Baptist Clovis (mostly after many failed attempts at small groups).

First, define the purpose of your small group ministry. Why we do what we do will determine what we do and don't do. So, it's very important to clarify what your purpose of small group ministry is and how small groups fit into the overall discipleship process of your church. Are your groups the primary way that people will connect to others relationally? Are your groups where people will be challenged spiritually? Will your groups be more about connection and fellowship, or more about accountability, care, and discipleship, or a combination of all of the above? I highly recommend the book, *The Seven Deadly Sins of Small Group Ministry*, by Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson. They give an excellent description of the purpose of small group models on pages 22–26.

Second, explore different models of small group ministry, then choose and *adapt* one to fit your unique setting and culture, and then stick with it for a defined period of time. We struggled with small group schizophrenia at First Baptist for many years. Why? We would go to a conference, or read another book on small groups and quit doing what we were doing and start something else. The staff was confused, people were con-

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fused, and hardly anyone knew what we were doing. Finally, we defined why *we* were doing small groups, and then we settled on a plan that fit not only our church family, but also the culture of our community that we are trying to reach for Jesus Christ. Ask yourself, “What small group model best fits us as a church and the culture we are trying to reach?” Ask, “Are small groups an *end* to our discipleship plan or are they a *means* in our discipleship plan?” These questions will help you think through your discipleship process and clarify what model works best for you.

Finally, develop a system of measuring the effectiveness of your small groups. Once you know why you are doing small groups, what model best fits your church and community, then you have to measure

the effectiveness of your groups. You will need to refer back to the purpose of your small groups and ask, “How will we know when our small groups are fulfilling the purpose for which they were created?” Then you can establish objective and measurable goals to determine your growth, health and overall effectiveness of your small groups.

A lot of small group systems and models have proven to be successful, but understanding what best fits your church’s unique vision is crucial to becoming the church God wants you to be. Small group ministry is difficult, and as many have said, “it’s messy.” But, groups are essential to the life and health of growing churches. 

