

Masterclass: 15 mistakes pastors make with small groups

Hi folks, John Finkelde here with this masterclass on 15 mistakes pastors make with small groups.

Small groups are central to discipleship in our churches, and there's been a massive emphasis in the last ten years on making disciples. I don't think you can make disciples without putting people in circles where they can engage, and connect, and discuss, and pray, and worship together, and do life together, as the cliché goes. It's so vital for that. But here's some of the mistakes that pastors make with small groups and small group programs.

1. No assistant leaders

There's a leader in charge of the group, but there's no culture, no habit of having assistant leaders, pastoral care workers, people doing a job.

I have this philosophy that in small group everyone should have some task, or activity, or job to kind of take a responsibility for. But at the very least, have assistant leaders, have pastoral care workers within the system with them as well. It's vital to have a healthy small group structure.

2. Lack of Bible

Interest groups are good for socialisation, friendship, connection, and so on, relationally, but when there's no Bible, I'm not convinced discipleship is really going on at the level that it should. Involve the Bible, study the Bible, use the Bible in your small groups if you're going to do effective discipleship.

3. The dearth of stories

Mark Howell, and if you know me, I'm a huge fan of Mark Howell. MarkHowelllive.com is his website. A plethora of brilliant material on small groups and their ministry and their part in the local church.

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He says that one of the most important reasons that Saddleback and North Point, two great churches in America, have success at connecting high percentages of their adult attendance to small groups is that they never stopped talking about small groups.

And so there's stories about small groups woven into Sunday services. There's stories in the preaching, there's mention of it even during offering talks or communion talks. And you can have those stories that are told by a pastor or a leader. You can get people up to interview them to get their story out there. You can have small group leaders, you can have small group attendees, but you have these stories coming through.

You can put them on video and kind of edit them up and have four or five people telling a bit of a story about how much small groups have helped them grow in their faith in Christ. So, a lack of stories, I think, does damage to the culture of a church that's trying to make small groups vital, in their disciple endeavours.

So, think about it. When was the last time that there was a story told to the congregation about your small group and small group ministry? Factor it into your planning, into your reviewing and previewing of services. Where are we putting in the emphasis on small groups? Because I think you need to be mentioning them almost every week in different ways.

4. Boring training

Training that is boring. Training that is just like, oh my goodness, please let me go home. My wife Dianne recently, end of last year, went to a special training event. It was put on by professional people, but people who obviously had not been trained in how to impart information and knowledge. It was a special event that involved instruction and information. And it was so boring. The setup of the room was bad, the chairs, the whole layout, and just parts of it were just boring. Dianne said it was just a day that you kind of wanted to end.

Don't let your small group leader training be boring. Let it have a life, energy, vibrancy. Let it be helpful. So, I think there's a few aspects of training that will keep you away from being boring.

Induction training

One is induction training. Set up your induction training so that small group leaders go through a process before they actually lead a group. And record that, record it on audio, record it on a phone so that you've got it on video and also on audio. So then you can give it to them as a follow up, re-listening to it. People listen to podcasts, they watch Webinars today. They can

listen to that like a Webinar, like a podcast, watch it like a Webinar. So, record that training, induction training.

In time training

Then also, have what I call just in time training. Most training is not boring, it's very effective, when people need it. It's just there when they need it. So, record a few videos on your phone, and again, strip the audio off, set up a little podcast thing that can have topics about how to a handle unruly members, how to follow up someone, how to get prayer going in a small group, how to lead healthy discussions, how to visit a member who hasn't been for a while, how to visit a sick person, how to be praying for your group.

All little topics that are covered in about three or five minutes, pretty well quick wins if you like. And then, just put them up on YouTube, keep them private or unlisted, so that they're not available to the public, and then just send them.

When a leader says to you, I'm really struggling with this member, give some ideas and then send them a link. Hey, I've got a little three minute video I think will help. Watch this. Check this out or have a look at this podcast episode. You may have people who prefer to read, so get it transcribed and create little pdfs. Little "just in time" training segments that you can develop and you can just sit and record them on your phone. It's not a huge amount of work related to that. Sure, a bit of work, I know that, but it'll pay off for you.

Post observation training

And then, what I call post observation training, when you as the pastor go to the group, have a coffee with the leader afterwards, and give them some training about things that they could improve on. Make sure your training is not boring.

5. Lack of coaching

Help your leaders by putting them in connection with a coach. And you think, I don't have any small group coaches. What do you mean small group coaches? Well, look at your small groups that are flourishing and consider the leader there and talk to the leader where you have flourishing small groups and ask them, would they mind sharing what they do with other small group leaders?

If I had a small group leader who was really flourishing a group and a leader who was struggling, I'd tell the guy who was struggling, go along to the small group that's flourishing, observe,

watch, take notes, take it all in, look at everything. And then, within a few days, have a coffee with the leader and get the leader to answer your questions to help you.

That's coaching. It's pretty simple really. It's basically connecting struggling leaders with leaders who are doing well.

Maybe even to have the coach, if you like, the coaching leader go along to the struggling small group leaders group and be a part of it for the night, and then give feedback as well. So, it's a matter of connecting with people who are doing things well. You can call them a coach, you can just call them a help, an assistant, a mentor, whatever works. But connecting people to some coaching will help, and it's a lack, I think, in churches.

6. Incorrect metrics

The sixth thing that pastors don't do well in small groups is having incorrect metrics.

It's fascinating the number of leaders I talk to who can't tell you how many small groups they have in their church. You should know the exact number of small groups in your church. You should know the percentage of people in your church who are in small groups. You should know those numbers. You should be tracking those numbers. At least 50% of your adult church should be in a small group, preferably 60 - 65%. You should know the attendance trends.

Keep a handle on the metrics just so you can tell when something's really diving off or something is really flourishing, what groups are not working, what groups are working. Look at the metrics, even if it's only every couple of months.

But a few times a year you need to be over those metrics and be able to just go, hey, we've got nine groups and we have three of them really flourishing at the moment. We have 63% of our adults in small groups. Those things, they're little stats you can throw out to your church that, again, tell a story about your small groups.

7. Under resourced leaders

Help your leaders with video series for their studies so they're not having to come up with their own material. Give them notes, help them, in terms of resources in regards to what they have to deliver in discussion, and in teaching, and so on.

And if you do the discussion of a Sunday, make sure the notes for the Sunday or out to them early, even before the service, so they can have them as they listen to the preaching. If you

have to go through this again with your group, it's kind of good to resource them with your notes, PowerPoint slides if you have them, and so on, and make the podcast available for them as well.

Resource them with encouragement, as well. Phone calls, have you visited a group? Always make sure you follow through of appreciation, encouragement, and some feedback. Send them to MarkHowelllive.com. Plenty of great articles, flick some of those articles around to your leaders so they're kind of reading them and kind of fuelling in them their passion as well.

8. Minimal Sunday exposure

We've talked a little bit about this in regards to story. But here's the key thing, the pastor of the church, the lead pastor, the senior pastor must be the number one champion of small groups. So, lead pastor, you must be, I think, if you're not part of a small group, then you need to be visiting the small groups. You need to be involved in the small groups in some way.

If you're out of the small group structure, you won't talk about it, you won't preach about it, you won't tell stories, you won't champion leaders. But if you're visiting a group every second week, it gives you a chance to see what's going on, and then you talk about it on Sunday.

Hey, I was in Joel's and Anna's connect group last Wednesday night, and they're doing a wonderful job with that. Met some new people in the group as well. It was great. We had a great night, and prayed with some people, and you can talk about it. You can weave those things into your stories. But the pastor of the church, I think, must be the number one champion of small group ministry and give it lots of Sunday exposure.

9. Prayer deficit

There's not enough prayer going on from the pastor, from leaders, for small group leaders, and certainly not enough public prayer. Praying publicly for your small group leaders, I think, is a great way to emphasise prayer for that area of the church.

10. Hidden doorway

Number ten is that the doorway into small groups is a hidden doorway. It's like the doorway on the screen there that's dark and there's a little bit of light, you're not sure what's on the other side of it, compared to this bright yellow doorway that is kind of saying, hey, come through me.

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This doorway is standing out and you can see it clearly against the black and white house and the fence and that's fantastic sort of doorway that's beckoning people, welcoming people.

The doorway into your small groups must be obvious and attractive. It should be easily found on your website. It should be easily found on a Sunday morning. There should be a brochure or some mechanism on a Sunday morning that people can point, hey, that's the doorway into small groups. Connect there. That's how you'll get into a small group.

How hard is it? Go ahead and measure it one to ten. How hard is it for someone to find small group info in your church or join a small group? Is it a hidden doorway or is it ultra obvious? A really good audit to do.

11. Not prioritising new groups

I like what Mark Howell writes about this. He says, putting your energy and effort into identifying new leaders and launching new groups will quickly make a big difference in the total number of adults connected. Spending too much energy helping existing groups add another couple or two will make even maintaining the same percentage connected a struggle. Interesting.

He talks about the fact that if you've got five or six new people coming in to your church, look at starting a new group with them rather than assimilating them into other groups. And you might think, hang on John, we've only got four groups. How will that work?

Maybe you as the pastor need to launch the new group, train someone, put them in there. Maybe someone even amongst those new people is someone that you know that comes recommended, you can put them as a leader. Sure, higher level of risk, but sometimes it's better to take that risk, jump in, maybe you go along to that group every few weeks for a few months, make sure it's on track and so on.

But sometimes it's harder to kind of wedge in a new couple into an older group that's well established, well connected and already bursting at the seams, than actually looking at ways to start a new group.

I think Mark Howell has got some good thoughts about that. He said, if you change direction by creating new groups, and I think it's easier in medium and bigger sized churches, I understand that. But if you put some energy into that, you actually may have a new strategy in approaching new people in your church as well.

12. Allowing key leaders to not be in a small group

To allow board members, staff members, key leaders, key people in the life of the church, stakeholders to be in a small group. By kind of ignoring the fact they're not going to a small group rather than discipling them into a small group.

Your board members, any staff members you've got, leaders of departments, key leaders, people who have a platform ministry, stakeholders, disciple them into a small group. And part of raising the whole culture of a small group emphasis of that Sunday and that training and stories and weaving it into your preaching and visiting the small groups as a pastor, part of that heating up the culture is then saying to the board member, I noticed you're not in a small group. What is that about? What's the reason for that? And then finding that out, and then saying, well, I want you to be in a small group. It's part of what we model. We sit in rows and we sit in circles in our church, and have the strength and the courage to expect key leaders to be in a small group.

13. The pastor never visits the group

Number 13, this is a big mistake and I see this in churches, the pastor never visits the group. And I don't understand that. If you're not running a group as a pastor, and if you're running a group I understand, you don't need to visit other groups. I get that. You might have other people doing that for you. But if you're not in a group, I think you have to visit the small groups.

There's multiple benefits to that. Everyone's encouraged by the pastor turning up. Sure, they're a bit kind of, oh, the pastor is here. How will I go? I'll give the pastor the message. Oh no, don't do that. Visit, observe, watch, check out the level of the small group, find out the level of spirituality there, the level of relationships, the level of prayer, and you go in there and you find that out and everyone will be encouraged by the fact that you'd turn up.

I think also a pastoral visit of a small group gives you an opportunity to follow up with coaching and encouragement after your visit. Make sure you do that all the time.

I think a third benefit is you get to see the home of members of your church, and that tells you a huge amount about people's lifestyles, and priorities, and how they're tracking, and how they're going. You can get huge information just from being in someone's home for an hour or two.

And fourthly, I think you can answer questions that people have about the church. You have a bit of a Q and A time. People will ask about a new program, or why that's changed or what's going on here. It gives you a great opportunity here.

14. Not using video based curriculum

I think using video based curriculum is a smart way to go with small groups. Because video based curriculum means you're controlling the quality of the teaching that's going into the group.

Recently I was visiting some small groups in a church and one group had a video they watched, then they had a book full of questions that they followed. The other group had a leader sharing, and they basically talked for over 30 minutes, they talked. And they were okay, but comparative to listening to Rick Warren on a video and following Rick Warren's Q and A discussion book, the quality was way lower than the Rick Warren video series.

Now you don't have to use them all the time, but I definitely would utilise them in the life of your church. It really does help, I think leaders as well, with the quality. And also, it helps them with the quality of the questions they're asking.

Now, in a small church, one thing I would encourage is to do a bit of a barter system with other small churches. Why don't you get together with small churches in your denomination, or movement, or in your area, and say, hey, why don't we buy together, four small churches, full video based curriculums. We'll buy one each, and we'll just pass them around. We'll lend them out.

I'm not sure if you can do that with copyright, but I think that's a smart idea to buy them as a collective and use it as a library that you utilise in that. And you may want to check on the copyright of that, but I think that'd be a smart idea with limited resources of small churches.

15. Small groups are just another option

So, out of all the opportunities, there's a million things you can do in our church, menus of things you can do. You can kind of go, whoa, Hallelujah, here we go. We've got that, that, that, that, that, that, and down the bottom of the list at number 17 is small groups. No. Get rid of the menu. Circles and rows, put people in small groups, put them in Sunday services.



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They're the two primary powerful methods that you can utilise to disciple people. Don't make them an option in your church, make them one of the two key planks of how people gather in your church.

Well, there you go. 15 mistakes pastors make with small groups. I hope you can avoid them all. Hope you've enjoyed this master class. God bless you.