


Practical Ministry Skills: Making Small Groups Fun!

	Contents PAGE
	LEADER'S GUIDE 2
	Got Fun?
	AN OPEN LETTER TO SMALL-GROUP PASTORS <i>by Ben Reed</i> 3
	THE NECESSARY ELEMENT OF FUN <i>by Sam O'Neal</i> 5
	A JOY-FILLED SMALL GROUP <i>by Mike Mack</i> 7
	Adding Fun to Your Regular Group Activities
	FIVE TIMES THE FUN <i>by Peri Sandifer</i> 9
	MAKE YOUR DISCUSSIONS FUN <i>by Rick Howerton</i> 11
	FUN OPPORTUNITIES FOR SERVING AS A GROUP <i>by Alan Danielson</i> 14
CELEBRATE BEFORE THE LORD <i>by Trevor Lee</i> 17	
MORE THAN MELODIES <i>by Annie Michaels</i> 19	
SMALL GROUPS AND THE HOLIDAY SPIRIT <i>by Tom Bandy</i> 21	
Resources	
FURTHER EXPLORATION 23	



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By Sam O'Neal

When it comes to how the world and our modern culture views Christianity, there are a lot of unwarranted stereotypes out there. But I think the most unfortunate one is the idea that Christians don't like having fun—and especially don't like it when other people have fun around them.

I think that's an unfortunate pigeonhole because it's so far away from the truth of God and his Word. God is fun, after all, and we are all created in his image. And the Bible is filled with feasts, celebrations, parties, and even quite a bit of humor.

The other reason I think this stereotype is so unfortunate is that so many Christians seem to embrace it. There is an idea out there in many churches that spiritual growth is a "serious" endeavor. I hope the articles in this resource will help fight against that idea in the world of small groups, at least.

Got Fun?

The three articles in this section are broad commentaries on the necessity of fun in a small-group setting. They are a great way to introduce the topic to small-group leaders, coaches, and even pastors who may need a reminder about the benefits of having a good time.

Adding Fun to Regular Group Activities

The articles in this section are designed to help you inject elements of fun into your current small-group activities.

"Make Your Discussions Fun," for example, is a great piece from Rick Howerton that can help you—well, make your discussions more fun. "Fun Opportunities for Serving as a Group" and "Five Times the Fun" give some advice on combing fun with the more missional elements of a small group. And "Celebrate Before the Lord" and "More than Melodies" focus on helping worship become a truly joyful experience in your group.

—SAM O'NEAL; copyright 2011 by the author and Christianity Today International.

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An Open Letter to Small-Group Pastors

Why you need to focus on fun with your small groups, and how to actually do it

By Ben Reed

Dear Small-Group Pastors,

I just wanted to let you know that we're all proud of the way you've done your research and found the most biblical curriculum. You've trained your small-group leaders to have airtight, foolproof theology. They can move from a discussion on the Nephilim to ecclesiology, then weave in a bit of distinction between Calvinism, the resurrection, and eschatology.

You've taught your group leaders how to facilitate a discussion, minister to the EGRs, fill the empty chair, raise up apprentice leaders, and plant new groups. You've helped groups become more "missional" by consistently serving their neighborhoods and communities. Group members are working to baptize and make disciples of all nations, starting with their families and neighbors.

But one thing is missing. Small groups aren't fun. Sometimes they're boring, actually. Sometimes people only come because they feel like they are supposed to.

So here's my plea to you, small-group champion: incorporate fun, life, and humor into the small groups at your church.

Why to Focus on Fun

Before I get into the practical steps of "how" to make your group fun, here's why I think it's a big deal when fun and humor are missing from a small group:

1. **If it's not fun, people won't come back.** It's possible to get more information in a more convenient time in a more convenient way through many other means. Podcasts, books, blogs, and forums offer information and discussion environments at any time of the day, every day of the year. What separates small groups from each of these environments is the relationship, face-to-face aspect. Make sure you maximize this!
2. **If there's no fun, it's not reflective of real life.** If your group is intensely serious, it can drain the life right out of people. We're only wired to take so much seriousness. And often, our work environments give us plenty of seriousness.
3. **If there's no laughter, people are missing out on great medicine.** "A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones" (Proverbs 17:22). Maybe what hurting people need isn't more medicine, but a healthy small group. They need to laugh together so hard that they snort. They need to laugh at themselves. They need to laugh at a corny joke. Because God has wired us to receive healing through laughter. I'm not sure how it works, but after a difficult day at work—with the kids, with finances, with in-laws—laughing helps to melt away stress and anxiety, bringing healing to your aching bones.
4. **Have you ever belly-laughed?** Seriously, there's not much that's more redemptive than belly-laughing with someone in your small group. If you've laughed that way, from your gut, you know what I mean. If you haven't, then I sincerely weep for you. Join my small group, please—we'll show you how to do it.
5. **When we have fun together, we show others that we serve a good God.** Check this out: "Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them'" (Psalm 126:2). Did you catch that? When our mouths are filled with laughter, others are convinced that God has done great things among us. Could the flip-side

MAKING SMALL GROUPS FUN!

be true? If our mouths aren't filled with laughter, could people become convinced that the God we serve isn't good? That he doesn't take delight in loving is people? That the God we give witness to is ultimately boring, and the eternity with him that we say will be wonderful is painted as dull and lifeless?

6. **Laughter builds community.** Laughing together can help your group bond in a rich way very quickly. Don't neglect times of fun and laughing. Relish those times together. Jokes that carry from week to week, laughing at random things, and having fun together help set the stage for deep discussions, building trust among those in your group.

How to Focus on Fun

The next question is: How do you build enjoyment into your group? Because if you've ever been a part of a small group that's boring, you know that humor, laughter, and fun don't happen naturally. And what one person find amusing, another can find offensive.

Fortunately, although the presence of humor and fun can't be guaranteed, group leaders can help ensure there's freedom and space to pursue it.

1. **Don't plan to start on time.** If you start right off the bat with the study questions, you show quickly that you don't prioritize your group members as individuals. You only prioritize getting through the curriculum. Plan on a casual start to your group each week. My group builds in 30 minutes (at least) each week before we start the study.
2. **Include food!** There's something about food that seems to break down walls of resistance. Eating with your group around a table (or, if you prefer, standing up while eating snacks) helps to build a tight-knit community.
3. **End on time, but don't end on time.** When you finish with the study questions and close in prayer, make sure to be done in time for group members to hang around and enjoy each other's company each week.
4. **Plan for some fun.** Maybe your group needs to put down the book one night and just do a good old fashioned pot luck. Or game night. Or go bowling. Or go hang out at the park. Or grill out. Or have a chili cook-off. These events can lead to a much richer study time when you pick the books back up. Also, plan it during the time you normally gather for small group; this way, you can reasonably assume your group members have blocked off that time each week.
5. **Plan extra-group activities.** Pick a random Friday night and have a girls' night out. If you have children, have the dads gather to offer childcare for the night. Then switch for the next week. Or go on a camping trip. Or go to the lake. Or go out to eat on Sunday after church.

If you truly desire to build a community of people who love and care for each other, will go to bat for each other, and consistently encourage each other—*find a way to have some fun*. You'll find yourself eagerly anticipating your meeting time together each week. You'll be less likely to burn out. And your group will find a renewed energy each week.

They can thank me later.

—BEN REED is a regular blogger at www.benreed.net and pastor of community groups at Grace Community Church.



The Necessary Element of Fun

Why having a good time is essential for relationships and spiritual growth

By Sam O'Neal

When you hear the word *fellowship*, what kinds of images, thoughts, and memories come to mind?

For me, the word doesn't have a lot of positive associations. I think of the Fellowship Hall in the church where I grew up, of course—which leads me to potluck lunches, which leads me to green beans and potato salad. Oh, and the time I spilled some punch on the carpet in the hallway and got in trouble (we weren't supposed to take food out of the hall). I also think of funerals, for some reason, and the awkward gatherings that happen in somebody's house after the ceremony.

No, I'm not a big fan of the word *fellowship* at all—especially when it's applied to small groups. I much prefer to talk about fun.

Because fun is one of the most important elements for almost any small-group gathering.

The Case for Fun

There are two reasons why fun is crucial to a small-group meeting, and everybody understands the first one. Namely, it's fun to have fun. People like having fun. You, me, your group members, and anyone who might eventually become one of your group members—we all enjoy a good time.

Having fun in a small-group setting creates positive associations. It helps people open up and speeds up the process of building relationships. At the very least, it gives people a concrete reason to come back even if other parts of the group meeting don't go very well. (Of course, the opposite is true for boring or overly serious group meetings.)

But there's a second reason why having fun is important for small groups, and that one is a bit more surprising. Namely, fun is a key component of spiritual growth.

If you don't believe me, check out your Bible. How many feasts does God command the Israelites to celebrate throughout the Old Testament? How many parties did Jesus and his disciples attend? How many times are the members of the Early Church recorded as breaking bread together?

God himself is a community, and he created us in his image. He wired us to be our best selves when we are part of a network of believers who learn together and work to advance his kingdom together, yes—but he also wired us to enjoy each other (and enjoy him!) along the way.

Tips and Tricks

So, what does it take to make fun a key cog in your small-groups machine? Each group will be unique, of course, but there are a couple of things I feel comfortable recommending:

- **Bring food.** If there is any way that your small group can regularly share a meal together, I seriously suggest you work to make it happen. For whatever reason, relationships formed around a table are relationships that last. Otherwise, snacks are a necessity for most small-group gatherings. You don't have to go out of control with deep-fried Twinkies or anything (fruits and veggies are snacks, too), and you don't have to bear all the expense as a group leader. But food is probably the best catalyst for fun I can think of.
- **Plan some hang-out time.** I recommend making social time (instead of "fellowship time") an official part of your small-group meetings. It's one thing if group members that people will chat for a bit

MAKING SMALL GROUPS FUN!

before the "real" meeting gets started; it's another to make social interaction an honored piece of your small-group puzzle.

Note: Some groups like to be social at the beginning of a meeting, others like to save the fellowship until the end. But I say: Why not have both? This is just my opinion, but I think an ideal setup is to have 15–20 minutes of social interaction at the beginning of the gathering. Then have an official time when the group meeting officially ends, but make it known that everyone is welcome to stay and hang out for as long as they'd like (or as long as is reasonable for the hosts).

- **Don't compartmentalize.** Group leaders often get in the habit of thinking in segments. *We'll start with some fellowship, then we'll have the discussion, then we'll worship, then we'll pray, and then we'll fellowship again.* We need to move away from this kind of thinking because it causes exclusions. We start acting like we can't have a worshipful experience during prayer, or we can't have fun during a discussion.
- **Be intentional.** The best way to make sure your group members are having fun is to intentionally plan fun activities and moments. That includes icebreakers, learning activities, innovative forms of prayer and worship, and other things that you include during a group meeting. It also includes planned social events, service projects, camping trips, or anything else you can think of to help your group members interact in social situations.

Now, get out there and have some fun!

—SAM O'NEAL is managing editor of www.SmallGroups.com.



A Joy-Filled Small Group

Because the joy of the Lord is our strength

By Mike Mack

The walls around Jerusalem were broken and needed mending. The same could be said for the lives of God's people. Nehemiah was sent by God to repair both problems. When Ezra read the Law of the Lord to the people, their first response was open weeping and mourning as they realized how far they were from God's moral standards (Nehemiah 8:9–10). But Nehemiah instructed them that this was not a time for sorrow, but for joy and celebration.

On a day that was especially sacred to the Lord, they were to have joy!

Joy Is at the Heart of God

Joy and celebration are at the center of God's heart and character. Joy is a central theme throughout the Bible. There are some 448 references to the words *joy*, *joyous*, *joyful*, *rejoice*, and *enjoy* in the NIV. Many of those are connected to God's commandments that his people celebrate numerous feasts.

David instructed God's people 102 times in the psalms to "shout for joy," "sing for joy," "leap with joy," "call forth songs of joy," "rejoice in the Lord and be glad." At Jesus' birth announcement to the shepherds, the angel said, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10–11). Scripture tells us that we find joy in receiving the gospel (Mark 4:16), spreading the gospel (Luke 10:17), and being persecuted because of the gospel (Luke 6:23).

The Christian life—every part of it—is to be a joy-filled life. That joy is not contingent upon the circumstances we find ourselves in. In fact, Jesus told his followers that when people hated, excluded, insulted, and rejected them, they should "rejoice in that day and leap for joy" (Luke 6:22–23)! James began his letter to encourage Christians the same way: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds" (1:2).

The apostle Paul even tells us exactly how to live this way:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ...Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God... I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength (Philippians 4:4–13).

I have heard it said that happiness is a choice. In other words, regardless of circumstances beyond your control, you can choose to be happy or bitter. I believe that is true to a certain extent. But joy is not just something we put on like a shirt. It is a gift we must receive; it is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Jesus told his disciples that if they would obey his commands and remain in his love, then his joy would be in them and their joy would be complete (John 15:9–11). Jesus is our joy-giver, and no one can take it away (John 16:22).

Joy Can be the Heart of Our Groups

As a small-group leader, I want to be a man after God's own heart and have a joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart—down in my heart to stay. I want my small-group meetings to be celebrations of God's goodness. I believe joyous small groups are winsome small groups. Joy draws people to God's people, and therefore to God.

MAKING SMALL GROUPS FUN!

For example, laughter is one of the best medicines for a dull group. Humor can help people learn. It breaks down the defenses we can build up against some of the hard truths in Scripture. "A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down," right?

Humor is also a great attention getter. If your group members are nodding off, maybe they need an injection of laughter to wake them up and encourage them to participate. Laughter also helps to facilitate self-disclosure. When people can laugh together, they usually share more openly together, too. Laughter breaks down the walls we build around ourselves. It helps people who are burdened with life's demands release pent-up emotions in a positive way. A good belly laugh just feels good, especially when you can forget about yourself and your troubles for a while.

You don't have to be a comedian to bring humor into your group. But it helps when you show the rest of your group that laughter and joy are acceptable. Some folks, unfortunately, think the church is no place to laugh. They want to be "serious." Perhaps they need to read Ecclesiastes again: "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: ...a time to weep and a time to laugh" (3:1-4). Maybe you can study passages that reveal the humor of Jesus or the apostle Paul. Be willing to laugh at yourself and demonstrate a playful attitude when appropriate.

History-sharing icebreakers are another great way to bring joy into the group. For instance, ask everyone to bring a photo of him or herself in elementary or high school. Out-of-date clothing and hair styles might be enough to get them laughing, and stories about their childhood or teen years can keep them chuckling. Ask members to share the funniest thing that has ever happened to them. Ask couples how they met or what humorous things happened when they were dating. Ask the group to draw pictures from time to time or play a silly game together or do a skit of a Bible story. Use your imagination!

Groups that are becoming close friends with one another—sharing life together and learning to love one another—will be joyful. But joy will spill out of groups that are reaching out and inviting others into the joy-filled life that one can only experience in Jesus Christ. And seeing friends and neighbors and co-workers giving their lives to Jesus will bring real joy to the group!

—MIKE MACK; excerpted with permission from [Leading from the Heart](#) (Touch Publications, 2001).



Five Times the Fun

Here are five ideas for building relationships inside and outside of small groups

By Peri Sandifer

Fun is essential to any relationship—or group of relationships. And while activities like praying together as a small group are certainly important, so is laughing together.

The following ideas offer group members an opportunity to laugh and serve together while building lasting relationships that will impact others around them.

Themed Movie Nights

This is as simple as choosing a movie and building a theme around it. Invite the group to come over on a Friday or Saturday evening and have people dress as one of the characters from the movie (or just ask them to reflect one of its themes). You can also encourage people to bring food items centered on the theme of the evening.

For example, have a "Jail House Rocks" night where everyone dresses in black-and-white and brings black-and-white food (Oreos, dirt cake, black bean dip, etc.), then watch *Madea Goes to Jail*. Or you could have a "Green Out" where everyone brings something green to eat (enchiladas verde, olives, green cupcakes) and watches *Shrek*.

Such events help people get to know one another in a comfortable environment rather than at a restaurant (where people are often excluded in a large group simply due to seating arrangements). This type of evening is suitable not only for members of the small group, but also to those from the outside. It gives members a chance to invite others to a fun and lively event.

Game Night

Game Night brings out the teenager in all of us! I have had the privilege of watching grownups become teenagers while playing a round of spoons.

If you have never played spoons, you gather people into a circle on the floor. You have one less spoon than there are people in the middle of the circle. Then take a deck of cards (if you have a large group, you may need two decks) and pass out four cards to each person. The dealer begins the round by choosing a card—if it is something he needs, he places it in his hand and discards another card. If it is not something he needs, he passes the card. You can only have four cards in your hand. The first person to have four of a kind (as in four aces) grabs a spoon, and then everyone tries to grab a spoon as quickly as they can. The person without a spoon is out.

Other games such as Cranium, Apples to Apples, and Clue offer fun evenings full of laughter. Again, this activity provides an opportunity for group members to invite another person who may be un-churched or simply in need of encouragement from other godly men and women.

Far, Far Away

As a small group, you can choose to impact your community and laugh with one another in the process. One way to do so is through reading and dressing the part of a favorite children's work.

Most libraries offer a reading program for kids after school or during the summer. Contact your local library ask them what books are most popular for all ages. Then, as a small group, dress as the characters in the book and head to the library for a fun day of reading. Some great books to act out are *Oh, the Things You Can Think* by Dr. Seuss and *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* by Laura Numeroff. Books such as these allow for multiple people to be a part of the action and are easy to perform.

MAKING SMALL GROUPS FUN!

Of course, you could implement this same idea at elementary schools or children's hospitals in your area.

Winner Takes All

Playing cards is a failsafe for almost any crowd, but here is a twist to the usual poker night. The jackpot does consist of money, but not for the winner. The money goes toward a serving opportunity in your community.

Choose a game of Hearts, Slap Jack, or Poker. Have people put money in the middle. If you have a large group, you can have people play in teams. You can play three to five rounds of the chosen card game and whoever wins the overall game chooses to whom or where the money will go. You can even have the last round be the deciding round for the serving opportunity.

Again, this type of activity encourages laughter and fun while impacting the community at the same time.

A Night Out

Everyone loves a progressive dinner. But what about a meal that offers adventure and fun not only for your group, but also for complete strangers?

To try this, meet at a person's home and have everyone pile into one or two vehicles. Begin at your favorite restaurant or dining establishment for an appetizer, but don't simply order food for your table. Buy an appetizer for the table behind, beside, or in front of you as well.

Once you have completed your appetizer, head to your favorite fast food place. Each of you get a meal, and then collectively or individually choose a person to buy for or purchase a gift card to leave at the counter for unsuspecting consumers. You can each pitch in a dollar or two for the gift card and tell the cashier to use the card to pay for people's meals until the card has no money left.

After you have completed your tantalizing meal, drive to your favorite place for dessert. Again, you can collectively or individually choose to buy for the person behind you, or choose to purchase a gift card to leave at the register.

At their core, small groups are designed to build spiritual growth and lasting relationships for people within the group, but also outside of the group. By offering fun events where guests can enjoy an amusing evening to serving together in fun ways to impact a community, small groups have the potential to shine the love of Christ in new and creative ways.

—PERI SANDIFER is the Small-Group Coordinator at The Simple Church in Bossier City, LA.



Make Your Discussions Fun

It goes beyond avoiding boredom.

By Rick Howerton

Would you like to see the number of attendees at your small-group meetings dwindle into oblivion? Then make sure your discussions are boring and that fun is ousted any time it happens to show up. That's because fun and laughter are a necessity for life transformation and essential if you want a healthy small group.

I know you may be thinking, *Howerton has lost his mind*. But when a group is laughing together, a few amazing things are happening:

1. They are becoming a community by creating memories;
2. A healthy environment is being established since any healthy community experiences all emotions together; and
3. Each heart is being pried open, making it possible for God to do a work in each individual in attendance.

But how do we do this? How does a non-comedian create a fun environment? It's really not that difficult, and I have listed a few ideas below.

Host Experiences, not Meetings

Many of us see our small group gatherings as "meetings." The term in and of itself connects with something most people hate: "another boring meeting." Just changing this concept in your own mind will help you as a leader begin to plan an experience that is more emotive—and it may help if you change the term, as well.

Make Laughter Welcome

Group leaders need to create an environment that lets attendees know laughter is welcomed. Do this early in the gathering. Every great communicator knows that if they want the audience to laugh throughout their talk, they must first let the audience know laughter is welcomed. They do this by creating laughter in the first few minutes of their talk.

We must embrace this principle in our small groups also. Many group leaders use effective icebreakers to accomplish this goal. Some groups eat a meal together before diving into the Bible study. If you eat together, bring up something during the meal that happened to you or you saw on television that was funny. In most instances, others will follow your story with stories of their own and the environment you're looking for will be established.

Remember the Spice of Life

(That would be variety.) Many groups do the same old, same old every week. But you can relieve a lot of boredom simply by keeping your group members on the edge of their seats. If you typically have snacks at the beginning of the gathering, for example, have them later—just before you start the biblical conversation. Surprise attendees upon arrival by giving them something they can hold that will tie to the Bible study later. Meet in the local park sometime. The list of ideas is as far reaching as your imagination and your courage. Some will balk, but no one will be bored if you vary the way you do group.

MAKING SMALL GROUPS FUN!

Go Beyond Talking

Do more than just have discussions where people talk back and forth; inject activities into the experience. For instance, when discussing the "full armor of God," give attendees aluminum foil and have them clothe one group member in "full armor."

I promise there will be laughter if you do, and no one will forget that experience.

Take Advantage of Special Days

Use holidays and special events as excuses to enhance the group experience and build communal memories. If your belief system allows it, ask group members to dress up for Halloween as someone who has greatly affected their story.

Or, if the Super Bowl is coming up, take a poll concerning who will win and what the score will be. Have a prize for the person who chooses the winner and gets closest to the final score. (By the way, those who balk about guessing often win.) Again, the options are as open as your imagination.

Use Outside Sources

Most of us are not comedians. We watch others who are captivating teachers or humorists, and wish we could be like them. The truth is, we don't have to be. All around us are images, statements, jokes, and stories that we can use to create fun in our group meetings.

Here is a quick list of things that you can find that may create laughter and fun during your group gathering:

- **YouTube videos.** If you see a funny video or scene on television, it's almost guaranteed to pop up later on YouTube, which means you can show it to your group for free. But there's so much more there than just what you see on television. You can type in almost any topic and find a hilarious video content. Just to give you some examples of what's out there, go to www.youtube.com and type in "small groups funny."
- **Bumper stickers.** When you see a hilarious or thought-provoking bumper sticker, pull over and write down that statement. For some reason funny stuff on bumper stickers resonates with people.
- **Jokes.** When a group member tells you a funny joke, ask him or her to repeat it at the next group gathering. This encourages the group member as well as helping to create the free environment you want to establish. Keep this in mind, though: a joke is one of the most high-risk communications of all, since the listener knows it is suppose to make them laugh.
- **Stories.** Stories from childhood and youth will often evoke laughter and will almost always lead to others telling their own. If you can get this ball rolling as people are showing up for group or during a meal, you've got a winner almost every time.

Use the Bible

Many of the historical accounts in Scripture open the door to laughter. As a leader, be especially careful not to inhibit laughter when it happens in these situations, unless it gets to the point that the laughter keeps the group from understanding and embracing a truth God is unveiling.

Let laughter happen when it is natural, normal, and doesn't diminish the glory of God.

Keep It Natural

Remember, fun and laughter are normal and natural. In many instances the only thing keeping a group from experiencing the joy God offers is when someone (often the group leader) subtly stifles that joy.

Here are a few final things to keep in mind as you seek to maintain a natural environment for fun:

- **Laughter is contagious.** When someone laughs, allow yourself to join them in their laughter. Others are almost certain join the two of you.
- **Empower those who contribute laughter.** In most instances someone in the group is known as being "the comedian" or "funny." Silently empower that person to live out that role as long as they don't take

MAKING SMALL GROUPS FUN!

over the gathering. You can silently empower them by simply allowing them to be humorous without stifling them.

- **Have fun outside the group, too.** Remember this: the more fun and laughter group members experience together away from meetings, the more fun and laughter they will experience during group meetings.
- **Enjoy yourself!** Enjoy life, laugh with your group members, don't take yourself too seriously, and remember that a healthy follower of Christ is joyful. Leaders model and others follow; if you laugh, others will laugh with you.

Small-group leader, one of the marks of a community that is closely bonded is that they laugh together. Utilizing some of these ideas will aid you in creating a healthy community and will make your group a place others want to join.

So laugh, linger in it, and enjoy the outcomes!

—RICK HOWERTON is the Global Groups Environmentalist for NavPress Publishers and [a regular blogger](#).



Fun Opportunities for Serving as a Group

That's right: "fun" and "service" can be mixed.

By Alan Danielson

There are plenty of fun activities that can be done together as a small group, but we seldom include "serving" in that list. I think that's unfortunate, because serving together can be one of the most fun experiences a group can share.

Serving is primarily about sacrificing for others, but that certainly doesn't mean it has to be boring! Here are a few thoughts about serving together that I've lumped into three broad categories.

Serving Within Your Group

There are plenty of "one another" statements in the New Testament that we're called to obey, and small groups are a great place to live them out. These "one another" commands say things like: love one another, pray for one another, bear one another's burdens, forgive one another, and so on. This may be oversimplifying things, but I believe you can sum all of them all up by saying, "Serve one another."

So, here are some fun ways to serve the members of your small group:

- **Work day.** Maybe someone in your group has a home-improvement project planned, or maybe you just know that a group member's home is in need of improving. Your group can provide the labor and maybe even some materials to help build a deck, add on a room, repaint after a fire, repair broken drywall, fix the kitchen counters, or whatever else needs to be done. Do it together and then plan a cookout afterwards to celebrate.
- **Bedroom makeover.** If your group includes families with kids, this is a great way to minister to one or more of these children. Kids often go through difficult times, and any emotional support they receive from a small group can go a long way in helping them. Surprise a child by painting a mural on their bedroom wall. If a little girl in your group loves princesses, make her room into a castle. If a boy loves science fiction, make his room look like outer space. You can theme a room after favorite movies, TV shows, video games, sports teams, books, or whatever the child loves.

This doesn't have to be expensive—just a coat of fresh paint and some posters will do. But the goal is to do something really special for a child in your group.

- **Surprise party.** When someone in your group gets good news, throw a surprise celebration. Help people in your group feel valued and loved by making a big deal about their promotions, little league tournament wins, new babies, new homes, cancer remission, or any other good news. Celebrating these times with your group members is a great service to them because it shows that your small group truly cares about what's happening in one another's lives. Never underestimate the power of this kind of positive reinforcement.

Serving at Your Local Church

The second broad category for serving as a group involves your local church. This can be a really fun and rewarding. There are countless ways to serve, but here are a few of my favorites:

- **Lock in.** Why should kids and youth be the only ones to get all night lock-in parties at the church? Your small group could plan a lock-in event where you make repairs around the facility, clean the building, play some games, and then sleep on the floor.

MAKING SMALL GROUPS FUN!

This may sound a little hokey and your back may regret it in the morning, but imagine the stories you'll have to tell and the memories you'll create together. You can even bring the kids and make a family event out of it. The experience will be memorable, fun, and ultimately beneficial to your entire congregation.

- **Greeter takeover.** Plan for your entire group to serve as greeters during weekend worship experiences. Wear matching T-shirts and make everyone feel welcome to your church. Arm each group member with a few invite cards and encourage them to invite people to your group. This is a fun way to meet a very practical need at your church while at the same time modeling group unity and offering people the chance to find a small group.
- **The kids' room.** Commit to serve as a group in the same children's class every week at your church. It's tough for kids when they routinely have different volunteers in their classrooms; they need consistency to feel safe and connected. Also, it can be a nightmare for children's pastors or ministry coordinators to find volunteers for every class every week.

You and your group can help alleviate both of those problems by making the decision to serve in the same class every week. You'll fall in love with the children you serve and they'll fall in love with you. You'll have the opportunity to share Christ's love with future generations and make a lasting difference in their lives. Not to mention, your kid's pastor and/or ministry coordinator will love you! This is even a great opportunity to evangelize. Children are more likely to come to faith in Jesus than adults, and your group can play a part in the development of their faith. What a privilege!

- **Special event decorating.** Ask your church staff if your small group can come in and decorate the building for seasons or special events. Your group can hang the Christmas lights on the building, deck the halls with greenery, and place pine scented air fresheners in the facility. You can decorate for Independence Day, Easter, and fall or summer break. Make this a special time where you and your group really go the extra mile to make things special. Don't just slap up a Christmas tree, but do the little things that make it nice.

Serving in Your Local Community

My favorite way to serve as a small group is serving the community. It's my favorite because this kind of serving has mission at its heart. Mission requires sacrifice, and sacrifice can be both rewarding and fun.

Here are some ideas for fun mission projects:

- **Christmas gifts.** Find a family in your community who could use some help during the holiday season and purchase some Christmas gifts for them. Make it fun by going shopping together as a group and then delivering the gifts together, as well. Or you could buy shopping cards, go pick up the family in need, and take them on a Christmas shopping spree! Let them pick out gifts for one another that they will exchange on Christmas. Seeing the excitement on their faces will make this a fun and memorable mission project.
- **Surprise windfall.** Families in need can always use money. Some people are skeptical of giving money because you never know how people will spend it. Others don't worry about it. They feel that once they've done their part by helping, God and the other party are responsible for the rest. Regardless of how you feel, this can be a fun group activity. Take up a collection in your group and give the funds to a family in need. Showing up with cash will blow their minds!

Alternatively you could buy a series of gift cards for gas and groceries, or offer to leave a check made out to their landlord or mortgage company. Be sure to deliver this windfall gift together so the entire group can experience this project as one.

- **Light bulb giveaway.** Have your group buy as many light bulbs as they can and bring them to your group meeting. Split up into groups of two or three and take the light bulbs to every home in your neighborhood. Be sure to ring the door bell and say something like this: "Hi, we're in the neighborhood doing something kind for the community. We're giving away free light bulbs. How many do you need?" Don't start off by saying "We're from church" because some people will shut the

MAKING SMALL GROUPS FUN!

door. If pressed, tell people you're from a prayer group in the neighborhood. Once they tell you how many bulbs they need, give them the items with an invite card to your church.

This may sound like a crazy idea, but I did this with a group in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and a homosexual man came to our church after being given free light bulbs. Three weeks later he prayed to accept Christ and God radically changed his life! I can't think of anything more fun than that.

- **Food and clothing scavenger hunt.** Instead of having your normal group study and prayer one week, get together for a scavenger hunt. Split your group into subgroups of two or three and go door-to-door in your neighborhood to collect goods on the list below. Once you've collected everything on the list, take it to an organization in your community that can distribute them to families in need.

1 men's T-shirt (any size)	3 cans of soup
1 pair of men's pants (any size)	3 cans of vegetables
1 pair of men's shoes (any size)	4 canned goods (any kind)
1 lady's blouse (any size)	3 cans of tuna or chicken
1 pair of lady's pants (any size)	2 boxes of macaroni and cheese.
1 pair of lady's shoes (any size)	2 packages of rice
1 boy's shirt (any size)	2 packages of pasta
1 pair of boy's pants (any size)	2 containers of spaghetti sauce
1 pair of boys shoes (any size)	2 boxes of crackers
1 girl's shirt (any size)	2 jars of peanut butter
1 pair of girl's pants or skirt (any size)	2 jars of jelly
1 pair of girl's shoes (any size)	2 packages of cookies
3 infant's outfits (any size)	Add your own ideas
1 package of diapers (any size)	_____
3 boxes of cereal	

—ALAN DANIELSON is Senior Pastor of New Life Bible Church in Norman, Oklahoma. You can read more from Alan at www.3Threat.net.



Celebrate Before the Lord

Practical advice for injecting fun into your small-group worship

By Trevor Lee

Your small-group gathering has been going great. The group enjoyed a wonderful dinner together with lots of laughter, conversation, and play. You gathered together in the living room, plopped down on the soft couches, and gave updates on your week and the things God's been doing. But now it's time for you to pray and worship God together, so the guy with the gritty voice whips out his guitar and everyone puts on their serious face. After all, worship is no laughing matter.

In one sense it's true that worship is serious. Through worship we honor the Almighty God who created us and is beyond complete understanding. He is worthy of being worshipped in awe and reverence. At the same time, it is this God who made us to be creative, to find joy in life, and even to crack jokes.

Celebrating our God creatively—and having fun doing it—can help us see that we are valued by God and made to be used for his glory. Scripture supports the idea of enjoying worship. Psalm 100 instructs us to worship the Lord with *gladness* and come before him with *joyful* songs; to enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise.

Understanding Worship

But what does creative and fun worship look like? Before getting into some specific ideas, here are three things to keep in mind as you explore ways to make worship fun.

1. **Worship is about celebration.** There is something powerful about really celebrating what God has done. One of the celebrations God set up for the Israelites was called the "Feast of Tabernacles," which you can read about in Deuteronomy 16. There are two things about this celebration that are instructive for this discussion.

First, God tells his people to celebrate for seven days. When is the last time you celebrated what God has done in your life and the life of your church for a whole week? I never have. Second, God tells the people to be joyful at the Feast. In other words—they are commanded to have fun! Enjoying worship is pleasing to God.
2. **Worship is more than singing.** In church it has become common for worship to equal singing. While singing is a wonderful way to worship God, we severely limit our expressions of gratitude to him if we don't view worship as more than that. Romans 12:1 says worship means offering our bodies as living sacrifices. I'll grant that doesn't sound like much fun on first hearing, but Paul is basically saying we worship God by living every moment of our lives in accordance with what God wants. When we speak a kind word to someone, share our possessions, or refuse to join in gossip, we are worshiping. And when we worship with our lives in this way, we will experience better relationships, closeness with God, and a clear conscience—all things that lead to great joy.
3. **It's okay to look silly worshipping God.** In fact, looking silly because you're caught up in worshipping God is pleasing to him! Second Samuel 6 tells the story of the ark of the Lord, an important religious symbol for the Israelites, being returned to Jerusalem. David is so excited about this occasion that he begins to dance like a crazy man before the Lord. He is so eccentric in his worship and praise that his wife Michal confronts him for his behavior. David responds, "I will celebrate before the Lord—I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes." David worshipped without a thought for his pride or image. True worship and celebration will challenge us to do the same.

MAKING SMALL GROUPS FUN!

Tips for Worship

As you take these ideas and consider what joyful celebration and worship can look like in your small group, here are some ideas to get you going.

1. **Participate in a Feast to the Lord.** In one of our small groups we prepared a feast to enjoy together. Before the meal began I spent a few minutes talking about Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and how joyful we should be that God had made a way for us to receive forgiveness and salvation. Then we talked about how Communion can be a whole meal instead of just a piece of bread and tiny cup of juice. We enjoyed our feast as a celebration of Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf. It was a truly fun evening, and it was worship.
2. **Dance!** If you're like me, your dancing skills are limited to a slow sway, but dancing can be a great way to express joy in worship—especially if you have kids in your small group. Just tell the kids they can dance *as a part of their worship*, do it with them, and watch their faces. Their joy will be contagious.

One twist on this we tried was having a time of prayer and praise and inviting people to dance as they prayed. The kids asked to do this over and over.

3. **Get artsy.** There are so many things in our lives that we should praise God for, but much of the time we completely forget to do that. Creating a picture, poem, or collage can be a great way to intentionally focus on all the reasons we have to praise God.

Our group recently made a collage of all the things we wanted to praise God for. We got out a bunch of magazines, scissors, paper, and glue and looked for pictures that represented the things we wanted to offer to God as praise. It was a powerful way to express our thanks and worship, and it helped people articulate to others in the group some things they didn't think about very often.

4. **Celebrate.** Celebration is a common theme in Scripture—even the angels celebrate when one sinner repents. I'm not sure celebration is something we're very good at, though. One reason for this may be that we have large meals, games, and outings on a regular basis—so it doesn't seem special to have a feast, games, or group outings. Another reason might be that we don't want to go "over the top" with our faith. Thanking God solemnly for his blessings to us is good, but if we shout, dance, and beat a tambourine before the Lord for these things we come off a little weird.

It's unfortunate that we're not better at celebration because we make our faith and God's work seem tame and relatively boring. When a birthday is more exciting than the resurrection of the Son of God that gives us hope of new life both now and for eternity, there is something wrong. So try getting serious about celebration. When someone put their faith in Jesus, a group member is reconciled to an estranged friend, someone is baptized, or there's a healing, plan a serious (as in big, not somber!) celebration. Go crazy! Celebrate these things with the passion and vigor David showed when he danced before the Lord.

5. **Laugh.** This is a general suggestion, but too often we have such strict boundaries between the times to be serious and the times to laugh. There is no doubt that there are times that are very serious and reverent and we should keep them that way. At the same time, there is nothing wrong with laughing during a time when you're singing, praying, or discussing Scripture. Repressing joy and laughter isn't something we need to do for God's sake.

As you worship together, share your discoveries of what works with others. Other people can use an infusion of fun in their worship too!

—TREVOR LEE is a freelance author, pastor, and small-group leader based in Colorado.



More than Melodies

Rethinking worship in small groups

By Annie Michaels

Building a worship component into small-group gatherings can be challenging for leaders who feel limited by their own musical abilities or those of the group. In a small-group context, musical worship can even feel contrived or distracting when there is not a leader who is comfortable or capable in that role. Music is certainly one of the most expressive and moving art forms God gave us to play with. However, when we cannot conceive of any other way to let him know how great he is, we can find ourselves in a worship rut.

Contemplating creation is another way we can ascribe worth to God and recognize his constant provision—two things that in our hurried existence we can neglect to notice. The ideas that follow are not a call to abandon music as an expression of praise; rather, they suggest supplements that are suited to small groups. Most accurately, they are ways to join with the voice of all creation that is already praising his name around the clock. As one of the very first worship artists said: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge" (Psalm 19:1–2).

To get you started, here are a few things you can do, watch, and discover together that in the end might even lead you into singing songs to God with deeper conviction.

Summer and Winter and Springtime and Harvest

I have a friend who says that plants are the surest way he knows that God loves us. Year after year, God takes care of us by giving us plants that provide food to eat, oxygen to breathe, roots to hold the soil in place, and branches that give protection from the elements.

Noticing God's handiwork requires some intentionality on our part, since we easily become blind to our surroundings. I was looking at a pine cone recently and it occurred to me that I didn't know what purpose it served. After a little research, I have a deeper appreciation for how God came up with the perfect concoction for spreading seeds and continuing the propagation of these evergreens.

God loves us. He is showing us in a million ways. So how can we take note of God's provision and cultivate gratitude during the change of seasons?

- **Bring the outside in.** If your group can't venture outside as the seasons change, reflect on how each season speaks of the faithfulness of God. For example, in the summer set a bouquet of flowers or a potted plant in the middle of the circle and give everyone a few minutes just to observe. Ask each person to share something they had never noticed before about how creative or intricate the plant's design is.

In the winter, plop some ice cubes into a glass of water and talk about what would happen if ice didn't expand when it froze, but instead got smaller and more dense, sinking to the bottom. Pull out a laptop at the beginning of your gathering and do a quick search on water to discover how its unusual chemical properties sustain life on our planet. God is glorified in these moments of research and discovery.

- **Eat together.** Discover the strange looking produce at your grocery store. Have an evening where everyone brings an interesting fruit or vegetable to try. Dragon fruit, star fruit, Champaign grapes, and kohlrabi are all produce you can find in almost any supermarket. Enjoy tasting the diversity of God's menu and marveling at his creativity.

MAKING SMALL GROUPS FUN!

Sun, Moon, and Stars in their Courses Above

- **Go to space (in two minutes or less!).** Start your worship time together by watching a video clip about the universe. There are a number of short videos on YouTube. Here is a [fascinating story](#) about a father and son who sent an iPhone to space and were able to record the curvature of the earth! Isn't it amazing that a weather balloon can escape the only known strata of air known in the universe in less than an hour? How perfectly God has crafted the place for us and our lungs to survive!
- **Go out and feel small together.** Make some hot chocolate and switch up your normal meeting time to catch a meteor shower. Bundle up, bring blankets, and find a star chart. Does anyone in your group have a telescope? Even if you don't see many shooting stars or distant planets, such an adventure will make for a memorable night with a great atmosphere for conversation. It would also be a great time to read Psalm 19 together by flashlight. (This website gives more information about when to watch for shooting stars: [http://www.theskyscrapers.org/meteors/.](http://www.theskyscrapers.org/meteors/))

Join With All Nature in Manifold Witness

- **Be bookworms.** Before your group gathers, make a trip to the library and grab some kids' science books. For starters, I recommend the worshipful activity of learning about the olfactory systems of Pacific Northwest salmon, the contributions of horseshoe crabs to modern medicine, and the navigation abilities of bees. As a group, spend a few minutes flipping through the colorful pictures and facts.

As adults, we have different questions about the science subjects we learned about in third grade. Follow your curiosities!
- **Play with animals.** Use your imagination about how you can appreciate God's handiwork in the animal kingdom. For example, you could start your time together by sending people off in pairs for ten minutes to discover how many squirrels they can find and chase to the nearest tree. I am of the persuasion that such a competition is just the type of team-building exercise that can create the camaraderie that leads to hearty Bible study discussion. Similarly, you could invite group members that have interesting pets to bring them to your meeting one night (being sensitive to allergies, of course). Or take a trip to a zoo, estuary, or a heronry together. Psalm 104:26 says that God formed the leviathan to frolic. Reflect together on what that verse teaches us about God and his creative intent.

To Thy Great Faithfulness, Mercy, and Love

God is worthy of our worship. His great attention to detail and his unending care for all he has made are evidenced in the world around us. Prompted by this evidence, you can be a worship leader in your small group without knowing how to read sheet music! Initiate conversation and activities that spur your group members towards loving God more fully with their minds.

It might also be helpful to ask your group members what it would mean to broaden your collective understanding of worship and engage more than your ears and vocal chords. Perhaps they have ideas to consider that they never thought to share.

—ANNIE MICHAELS helps coordinate the small-groups ministry at Wheaton College in Wheaton, IL.



Small Groups and the Holiday Spirit

Because Christians have more to celebrate than anyone else!

By Tom Bandy

There are two reasons why small-group leaders might want to do something fun for specific holidays and holy days of the year. First, extra joy and laughter can deepen relationships and bond group members more closely together. Second, these especially festive group meetings open the door even wider for timid newcomers to join for the first time.

Fun for the Holidays

Remember that the most important spiritual moments in North American culture include (in chronological order) New Year's Eve, Valentine's Day, Easter, Mother's Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. Different regions may also have special "sacred" days, ranging from the local fair to the homecoming parade. Canadian small groups may want to observe Victoria Day, Canada Day, and the August "Long Weekend." These are all occasions when the daily routine becomes more transparent to the in-breaking of Spirit. Why not take advantage of the opportunity to celebrate life and hope?

Each small group needs to observe the holiday (or holy day) in a manner that fits their affinity as a group. For example, a recovery group will celebrate New Year's Eve with an extravagant dance *without* alcohol, drugs, or tobacco. A singles group may celebrate Valentine's Day with a romantic, catered dinner, but modeling extraordinary respect for human rights. For Christmas, small groups can carol together, share presents, or just party in a member's home. You can also have fun and bless strangers with grace. The group can host a worship service for seniors, visit hospitals, host a children's party, or raise money for mission. (In my opinion, it is usually more meaningful to bless folks beyond the church than within the church.)

In a sense, the public holiday gives the Christian small group a golden opportunity to demonstrate how to have fun *and* preserve Christian values at the same time. You can be cultural and counter-cultural at the same time—and that captures the attention of a lot of seekers.

I am reminded of a small group that decided to do something special for Halloween. In many regions, Halloween now rivals all other holidays as the most significant community celebration. The affinity of this particular group was "single parents with young children." It made some practical sense to get together at one parent's home for a combined celebration. They went all out to decorate the front yard with scary images, play eerie music, and distribute great treats. However, a large, illuminated, white cross towered in the center of the yard. Group members deliberately dressed up in non-scary costumes to project positive images. They provided free coffee, purchased from the best coffee shop, to all the adults shivering in the cold while they escorted their kids house to house. The positive vibe and sensitive hospitality was remembered long after the event.

Also, there is a difference between *real* holidays and *obligatory* holidays. A small group should celebrate the former, but resist the latter. Let me be plain. Church institutions often want you to celebrate dates of the Christian year like Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, Pentecost, and other traditional Christendom observances—but these are not really heartfelt celebrations for many people (even Christians). Small groups should *not* celebrate a holiday that they do not really celebrate in their hearts. A forced holiday is really drudgery, and will actually discourage small-group members, undermine group unity, and deter participation. People pretend to be happy, but may just be feeling guilty.

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Tips to Keep in Mind

Even in the midst of fun, always maintain the basic structure of the small-group meeting. You will still take time for prayer, still refer to Scripture, and still encourage intimate sharing of your daily intersections with God. This may be simpler and more creative than the usual routine, but it is important to still observe the routine. It is the thread that maintains the integrity of your small group as a Christian community even in the midst of holiday celebrations.

Below are a few more guidelines to follow whenever a small group breaks their normal routine to have fun for a holiday:

- **Be home grown.** The celebration must emerge from the prayers of the group, not be imposed by the pastor or church. Small groups are always "self-determining," and they should be trusted to design a celebration that is consistent with group life. If they include outreach in their activity, it should be their own collective heartburst and not a response to an ecclesiastical request.
- **Stay on mission.** The celebration must intentionally reflect the core values, beliefs, vision, and mission of the congregation to which the small group belongs. This is their connection with the larger community of faith. Their behavior and witness should reflect the values and beliefs of the whole congregation; their fun and outreach should be aligned with the overall purpose of the congregation.
- **Plan it well in advance, and do it right!** Let the celebration be a memory that will be cherished for a long time. Small groups shouldn't do anything half-heartedly, and the same applies to fun. Go all out. Have a *really* great time. Make yourself an advertisement of how Christians have a good time.
- **Be especially sensitive to others.** People in our culture often associate "fun" with "selfishness." We tend to indulge ourselves and neglect others. We tend to play with our immediate friends and ignore outsiders. Prepare the group in advance to resist these temptations. These special holiday celebrations can be hard for introverts, visitors, and strangers. So go out of your way to include people you don't know well, and encourage people with less social confidence.
- **Connect your fun with some strategy to bless others during or after the event.** The joy you share in the small group should be too big for its container. It should spill over to bring joy to someone else. I recall a Bible Study group of empty-nesters who celebrated Mother's Day with husbands presenting their wives with elaborate corsages, escorting them in a limousine, paying for a lavish dinner, and dancing at a great restaurant. The next day the entire small group bought infant toys for every mother currently in both hospital maternity wards in the city.

Some of the best conversations start when you are having fun. Even the most intimate relationships deepen when you are having fun. Many of the best friendships are formed when you are having fun. Yet despite all the parties and boisterous laughter happening around us, I think very few people are really and truly having fun. They yearn to be with people who know how to *party well*.

Since Christians have more to celebrate than anyone else, we can show them the way.

—TOM BANDY is the founder of www.ThrivingChurch.com.



Further Exploration

Books and resources to help make your small groups fun

Smallgroups.com. We specialize in equipping small-group leadership to make disciples and strengthen community.

- [Plan a One-Day Retreat for Your Small Group](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Staying Connected Through the Summer](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Creating Community](#) (Training Theme)

LeadershipJournal.net. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

Creating Community: Five Keys to Building a Small Group Culture by *Andy Stanley and Bill Willits*. The authors describe how they established a small-group culture at North Point Community Church (Multnomah, 2004; ISBN 978-1590523964).

Let's Get Started: How to begin your small-groups ministry by *Dan Lentz*. A Help-Guide for churches who want to start, or re-start, a small-groups ministry (Standard Publishing, 2007; ISBN 978-0784720738).

Making Small Groups Work by *Henry Cloud and John Townsend*. 'This is a one-stop small-group leader's guide for gatherings of all sorts (Zondervan, 2003; ISBN 978-0310250289).

Successful Small Groups by *Teena M. Stewart*. Explore the process of building and maintaining a growing community from concept to practice (Beacon Hill Press, 2007; ISBN 978-0-8341-2337-3).