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Practical Ministry Skills:

Overcoming Growth Plateaus

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The goal of any ministry is to produce growth—spiritual growth first, of course, but there is nothing wrong with numerical growth, either. Increasing numbers are a good thing when a ministry is helping people grow more and more like Jesus.

In the same way, the goal of an individual small group is to produce an environment where more and more people can be formed spiritually in order to impact their communities and congregation for the Kingdom of God.

That is why small-group plateaus are such a frightening experience. When things become stale and stagnant, we begin to fear that growth may never come again. We wonder how to break out and experience more life. That is the goal of the articles in this resource—to help your ministry and your small group break out of a plateau and experience growth once more.

Plateaus in Single Small Groups
Rod Dempsey’s article "Running on Empty" is a good overview of the "plateau phenomenon." It will help you take a broad look at plateaus from the mindset of a group leader, a group, and an entire ministry. Of course, there are more than one kind of plateau, and that's why we’ve included the next two articles: "Relational and Spiritual Plateaus" and "The Plateau of Numerical Growth." Finally, Joel Comiskey will help you get a sense of whether your group has reached a plateau that can be overcome or an ending point with this article "Is Our Small Group Dying?"

Plateaus in Small-Group Ministries
"What Went Wrong?" by Jack Dyson, is a great overview of some of the problems that typically plague small-group ministries—often resulting in plateaus. And the following articles by Seth Widner and Alan Danielson provide some clues for recognizing and breaking out of a plateau on the ministry level.

The final two articles are both written by Dan Lentz. "Chronic Jump-Start Syndrome" details a bad habit that many churches pick up when they attempt to deal with a slow-down in their small groups. And "We Reproduce What We Recognize" offers an innovative solution for breaking a pattern of stagnation in your small-groups ministry.

—SAM O'NEAL is Managing Editor of SmallGroups.com.

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Back in the 70's Jackson Browne recorded a song entitled "Running on Empty." One of the lines from the song was, "I don't know where I'm running now, I'm just running on empty." You may feel that way sometimes about your small group. You may have also heard or uttered the following statements about group life: "I feel stuck." "We are not moving forward, but at least we are not going backward." "Our group meets every week and we usually have a great time together, but we're not growing."

If you look up the word plateau on www.dictionary.com, the primary definition is "a land area having a relatively level surface considerably raised above adjoining land on at least one side, and often cut by deep canyons." It also means "to reach a state or level of little or no growth or decline, especially to stop increasing or progressing; remain at a stable level of achievement; to level off."

Unfortunately, this happens many times in small-group ministry. And there are many reasons why individual groups level off and plateau. Here are a few of them (addressed in the order of their difficulty to overcome):

- The leader plateaus (he or she is not growing spiritually)
- The group plateaus (the group does not have a vision or plan for reaching new people)
- The church plateaus (the church is not reaching any new people and groups level off)

When a Leader Plateaus
Overcoming the plateau of personal growth is simple. (It may not feel simple to implement, but it is not that hard to understand.) If you are not growing spiritually, go back to some solid spiritual growth habits that have worked for you in the past and repeat them. It reminds me of the passage in Revelation 2:4: "I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first."

In my life there are times when I get so busy studying or preparing to teach a lesson that I neglect the simple discipline of reading God's Word. That's why for the last few years I have made a commitment to read through the entire Bible each year. The plan that I use is called the "One Year Bible," and it is available online. I find that when I am reading God's Word, I am much more aware of God's voice. In John 10:28 Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me." Did you know that if you read through the Bible in a year, you read about 22 chapters a week? Taking in 22 chapters a week of the "living and powerful" Word of God will change you from the inside out. Your mind will be renewed (Romans 12:2) and your spirit will be refreshed (Galatians 5:22).

When a Group Plateaus
The next challenge is that the group plateaus. You as the leader are still committed to practicing healthy spiritual disciplines and you feel confident in saying, "Follow me, as I follow Christ"—but for some reason the group has leveled off. This one is a little more difficult to address because you are not dealing with one individual.

To get a group of people to row at the same time and in the same direction requires a certain amount of leadership skills. Those leadership skills include having a vision of where to go, being able to communicate clearly the reasons why we need to go, communicating how we are going to get there, motivating the group to sacrifice for the cause of Christ, and also being able to motivate and train new leaders for new groups.

Groups plateau when the vision for the group plateaus. If your vision is just to have a friendly group for fellowship—also called "us four and no more"—then naturally you are going to have trouble motivating your group members to move onward and upward for the Kingdom. But if you are praying for laborers to work in the harvest fields and you see (have a vision) that the fields are "white and ready to harvested," then you will
**OVERCOMING GROWTH PLATEAUS**

be able to motivate others to join in that mission. We are not put on this earth to maintain the status quo; we are put on this earth to advance the cause of Christ and bring glory to God.

So, what is your vision for your group? Is it to reach new people in your community? Is it to develop new leaders to labor in the harvest? Is it to reproduce new groups and to increase your capacity to disciple an ever-increasing number of believers? If your to those questions is no, you need a fresh vision for the harvest fields (John 4:35). The world is growing at an exponential rate and only exponential strategies will keep up.

**When a Ministry Plateaus**
The next plateau is considerably more difficult to address because it does not deal with an individual. It does not even deal with a group. It deals with the entire church. To overcome the challenge of a church that has plateaued, you will need considerable skills and patience. The average church member or even group leader cannot address these issues, but you can be aware that sometimes the problems in group life and growth are not problems with the leader or even with the group. They are systemic problems that require systemic solutions.

Perhaps the biggest challenge in a church that has plateaued is the challenge of evangelism. The church is not reaching out with the gospel and new people are not being won to Christ. The baptism pools are not being stirred. The church that is not evangelizing is not growing. As a result, groups are often nothing more than holding cells for veteran believers. Talk about feeling "stuck."

But take courage: groups that are reaching out to their neighbors and serving their community can actually be an integral part of the overall evangelistic efforts of the church. The evangelistic philosophy of the group ministry should be similar to this: "We are in the community to win the community." Small groups can be team up in prayer for their friends and neighbors. Groups can be out in the community serving the people in need. They can be the hands and feet of Christ.

And small groups can do all of this even when they are part of an overall church that is stagnant. In fact, small groups that adopt this kind of attitude can often spark a renewal in those stagnant churches.

To accomplish this, however, you will need a fresh vision and a fresh commitment to obey the Great Commission. The Great Commission has one command, three participles, and one promise. The command is "to make disciples."

The participles are modal, meaning that they describe how we are to carry out the command. The first participle is "in your going." This suggests that to make disciples we must be going. I personally believe that you cannot be a disciple of Jesus without being committed to the mission of Christ. Groups that are on mission help to fully develop disciples. The second participle is that we should be "baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Let's intentionally help Christ followers to follow the Lord's example. The third participle from Jesus is that we would be "teaching them to observe everything that I have commanded."

Groups are a great place to not only hear about Jesus, but also to obey the teachings of Jesus.

The last part of the Great Commission is a promise from Jesus himself. If we make disciples, he has promised to be "with us." That is a promise of his presence and power. When disciples are being developed, Jesus is present—and groups don't experience an extended plateau. You will certainly not be "Running on Empty."

Instead, you and your group will be powerfully advancing the cause and kingdom of Christ.

—**ROD DEMPSEY** is Department Chair of Discipleship Ministries at Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary and the Discipleship Pastor for Thomas Road Baptist Church.
When I was a child I floated toy boats down the creek near our home. Sometimes the boat shot downstream, sometimes it got trapped in eddies and even seemed to go backwards, and sometimes it got stuck on some rock dam in the river. When it got stuck, sometimes the boat corrected itself. Sometimes it required gentle nudge with a stick, and sometimes I had to pick it up and move it along.

There is a similar dynamic at play when it comes to the "flow" of a small group. I use the word "flow" here because that is how we need to think of a group's growth and development—it's an organic movement rather than a step-by-step learning process.

Small groups grow in two basic ways: relationships and faith. The most common sign of a growth plateau is lackadaisical participation. If group members start arriving late, leaving early, or skipping meetings; or if they are distracted by cell phones or unusually quiet; or if it becomes harder and harder to move beyond friendly miscellany and refreshments toward eye contact and significant conversation—then the group is on a plateau. It's stuck on a rock dam.

There are many potential growth plateaus for individuals or the group as a whole. Some can be overcome by group cooperation, and others must be overcome by skilled leadership. I will discuss both below.

The Relationship-Building Flow
The relationship-building flow begins with the first conversations of the group—the chatter about families, careers, and common interests that starts any relationship. The first plateau is boredom. The special sign of boredom is idle speculation (as people try to add zest to the conversation by inventing stories, gossiping, and fictionalizing their experience to make it seem artificially dramatic). Groups usually correct themselves once this plateau is reached, and people move on to share information about whatever the affinity is that has brought them together. If not, the leader should begin feeding into the conversation new information, insight, data, or provocative statistics to capture attention.

Shared information often leads to competition. In a Bible study group, for example, people may compete to be more knowledgeable than others. The special sign of competition is one-on-one conversations (when two individuals seem to spend all their energy debating with each other and ignore the rest of the group). The solution is to share creative ideas and personal experiences with the whole group. If necessary, the leader should interrupt personal debates and test the interest of the whole group. If the group is interested in the topic, deliberately ask others for input to restart the conversation. If there is no interest from the rest of the group, firmly set the debate aside and move on.

This can lead the group into disagreements about principles and tactics. The Christian Gardening Group, for example, may quarrel about the best way to grow some plant. The special sign of that disagreement has become unhealthy is closed or unhappy body language (people cross their arms, shift chairs backwards, or look troubled without saying anything). Overcome this by inviting people to share their feelings of joy, anxiety, hurt, and hope. The leader may need to share their personal feelings first to create an environment of honesty. As a rule of thumb, the longer the group stays on a plateau of disagreement, the more honest (and vulnerable) the leader needs to become about their own feelings.
OVERCOMING GROWTH PLATEAUS

At this point personality conflicts may plateau group growth. The special sign of conflict is a spike in emotion (tension, tears, raised voices, and so on). These are not often resolved naturally, but require the skilled intervention of a leader. The leader may want to get the advice of the pastor or staff person who oversees small-group development. Personality inventory exercises, modeling acceptance of diversity, review of the biblical "Fruits of the Spirit," and reinforcement of the core values of the church can all help overcome this plateau. It is important to understand that conflict is actually a positive turning point in the life of a small group. It can be a dramatic leap in maturity and trust. Once overcome, group members are more tightly united and the "relational flow" accelerates.

Deeper acceptance unleashes the sharing of dreams for the future. Often the affinity itself is forgotten, and people speak eye to eye and heart to heart for the first time (perhaps in their lives). Individuals might be shocked by the yearnings and aspirations of people they thought they knew well, and this can halt momentum for growth. The special sign of shock is alarm (people preface replies with words like "I can't believe that you..." or "How dare you..." or exclamations of surprise). The leader can overcome this by using the mission of God to redeem the world as a greater purpose with which all Christian aspirations align, but which can embrace many different styles and tactics.

Acceptance and openness emboldens the group to do something to bless outsiders of the group. The Christian Gardening Group raises vegetables for the local food bank, or the Bible Study Group participates in a rehab project in New Orleans. If the service project lasts too long, or becomes too routine, the group may lose focus and burn out. The special sign of stagnation is sudden desire to form a committee (people want to transform the small group into a task group and recruit volunteers to do jobs). The leader now knows that this small group, as a single entity, is over. Some group members may want to form a new small group with an affinity for this particular mission; and other members may want to follow a different path for spiritual growth. The leader introduces the possibility of group multiplication, and then guides the grief felt when people move on to new relationships.

The Faith-Building Flow

This second current in the flow of maturation begins with the basic covenant for prayer, Bible reading, and mutual support consciously made by group members. It is anchored in the bedrock beliefs of the church, or the nearness of God that is the confidence and yearning of the group. The danger, of course, is that modern people (and particularly Baby Boomers!) are habitually afraid of accountability. They struggle with spiritual discipline both within, and in between, meetings. The desire of people to grow in faith may be sufficient to motivate people, but the leader may need to introduce specific tools for meditation, prayer, or Bible reading to help them on the way. Spend time brainstorming questions of faith (e.g. "I always wondered about..."). The promise of finding answers lures people to greater discipline.

Curiosity is the next step in faith-building. People may be curious about Bible history, theology, comparisons of Christianity to other religions, or the spiritual habits of historic or contemporary "saints." This can lead to consternation as people discover ambiguities and contradictions, or realize the hidden doubts of their heroes. The special sign of consternation is cynicism and sarcasm (people begin to make jokes, resort to stereotypes and satire, or dismiss out of hand particular scriptures, dogmas, or ancient beliefs without serious reflection). The leaders should not be hasty to move on. Challenge cynicism by pausing to explore and compare ancient and contemporary assumptions.

Deeper Bible study is usually the result, but it may also involve more extensive reading of Christian commentaries. Once again, group members may become competitive or judgmental. The special sign of competition is proof texting (people quote texts or authorities to contradict one another). The best antidote is to refer to the person and work of Jesus Christ as the center of faith. This brings clarity, but also allows mystery, and it shifts conversation from "proof" to "faith." You can also guide the group to reflect on the bedrock beliefs and motivating vision of the church. Sometimes this requires the intervention of a pastor. Deeper trust opens the door to allow different perspectives.
OVERCOMING GROWTH PLATEAUS

The downside of intervention is always dependency. Groups can plateau by simply obeying or accepting uncritically the faith interpretations of an authority. The special sign of dependency is blind obedience (people quote a sermon, appeal to an expert, or simply stop talking after the pastor has spoken). The leader should be honest to share their own questions about faith, and encourage others to do the same. As a rule of thumb, never let the pastor have the last word! The deeper the dependency the more daring the small-group leader must become to both declare their personal faith and raise their personal (and as yet unanswered) questions about faith. It is important to realize that just as overcoming personality conflict accelerated relational growth, so also overcoming blind obedience accelerates spiritual growth. Pastors should not be alarmed when they do not have the last word; but rather celebrate the accelerated spiritual quest of the small group.

The deeper honesty of the group provokes courage of conviction. However, it can also uncover the deep fear of meaningless evil that is embedded in real life. The special sign of fear is personal doubt. This is deeper than intellectual questioning, and reflects the deeper ambiguities of living. People stop talking, and start confessing feelings of emptiness, anger at fate, and anxiety about guilt. If the group dwells on this too long, it will become sidetracked by self-pity or revert to a support group. The best response to a plateau of fearfulness is not immersion in mission, but rather the accelerated spiritual quest of the small group.

Ironically, the principle mark of maturity is a kind of "holy discontent." People crave more of Jesus Christ. They want to go deeper than the present circumstance of the group may allow. This can be a time of insecurity for group members. The sign of self-doubt is false humility (people trivialize their gifts, artificially minimize their opportunities, and ask "Who, me?") It is at this point that the leader knows that this group, as a single entity, is over. The leader takes each member of the group aside (for coffee or lunch) and mentors each individual to discern their next step of faith. Guide them to the next small group, or to the next mentoring relationship, that can help them go deeper into the mystery of Christ, and/or go further in the mission of Christ.

The path to maturity is fluid, like the current of a stream. We constantly get stuck and unstuck. Remember that the stream is always and continuously running in the direction of God's great ocean of grace.

—TOM BANDY is the founder of www.ThrivingChurch.com and author of several books, including Christian Chaos.
It feels good when your group is growing. Whether it's the obvious work of the Holy Spirit in transforming people spiritually or new members being added to the group, growth gives everyone energy and life. On the flipside, it can suck the life from a group and hurt the quality of your time together when things become a bit stagnant. Understanding how to overcome spiritual stagnation is important, but in this article we're going to take a look at what to do when a group stops growing numerically.

Even approaching this topic assumes that your group wants to keep growing. If you are a part of a "closed" small group—one that has no intention of adding new members—then this isn't something you have to wrestle with. But assuming you do want to grow and add new members who can experience the spiritual growth and deep friendship you share with those in your group, here are some ideas for how you can overcome a growth plateau.

**Do a Self-Assessment**

When things get stagnant it is a good idea to take some time with the whole group and to talk about what's happening. Some of the questions you should consider are:

- **What is the current spirit of the group?** New people may not want to be a part of the group if they sense it is a negative environment. Are people feeling tired, discouraged, far from God, perhaps even displeased with other group members? If you identify some things that are bringing the group down, try and discover together how you've arrived where you are and how you can fix it.

- **Are you satisfied with the group as it currently exists?** Even groups that say they are open to new members can become functionally closed. If the thought of having new people come in is disappointing or upsetting to you, there's a good chance any new people that are around will feel that. You may need to remember why you wanted the group to grow in the first place.

- **What has changed from times when you were growing?** Because groups are composed of people, there are shifts and changes that take place over time. If you have experienced times of growth in the past, consider what is different now. This doesn't necessarily mean you should go back to doing things exactly as you have before, but if you are able to identify changes you can come up with a strategy for the best way to move forward from where you are now.

As you work on this self-assessment it is really important that the group members are honest in their responses. People will naturally struggle to voice things that might be negative about the group, so you need to set up an atmosphere of openness—make it clear that you are willing to hear people's thoughts. Remember that ultimately the best thing you can do for your group is not to pretend that everything is okay, but to identify ways to make your group the best it can possibly be.

**Solidify Your Purpose**

A few years ago I was in a small group that started out great. We met in a coffee shop, studied the Scriptures together, prayed, and talked about life. We had meaningful conversations that challenged me to grow spiritually. Yet over time the group devolved into just sharing random thoughts and allowing the stream of consciousness to run wild. We began with the purpose of studying, praying, and encouraging each other in faith and ended up with no purpose beyond drinking coffee and exercising our vocal chords.

There is a reason your small group has come together. You began with a purpose and a mission to accomplish through the group. Often when a group hits a growth plateau, one of the culprits is a loss or devaluation of that initial vision. Perhaps you started out with the goal of working together to reach your neighborhood with Jesus' love, but now you just sit in your house and talk about the neighborhood. Maybe you planned to grow in your depth of knowledge of the Scriptures but now you get through the night's passage as quickly as possible so you
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can run on to the latest gossip. Or maybe you began being passionate about prayer only to realize you now spend most of the time talking and only a couple minutes in prayer.

Whatever your initial vision was for the group, be intentional about reclaiming it. If the group has moved away from intentionally serving, praying, studying, or whatever else, be aware that it will take effort to go back the other way. You will have to agree together to be accountable for pursuing your purpose rather than doing what is easy. It is important that you reclaim this vision before you try practical things to get your group back on track to growth. You need to have a compelling purpose and vision with which to call people.

Get Practical

Once you've done a self-assessment and made sure you're clear on your purpose and committed to it, it's time to do some practical things to restart the growth process. You know your situation—the group's purpose, history, and location—far better than I do, so you need to take these suggestions and tailor them to your specific setting. I also encourage you to use these suggestions as a starting point for a brainstorming extravaganza where your group can work together on ways to grow.

- **Do a one-month trial.** Take one month of your group's meetings and plan to bring as many visitors along as possible to see what's happening. This gives you the benefit of being able to tell people that they're not committing to anything more than one month with the group. Some people might feel if they try your group and don't want to stay it will be awkward. When you do a one-month trial, tell people you're not expecting anything beyond a month. This gives them the freedom to check it out, and if they really get connected to what you're doing they may choose to stay. Just make sure you're okay with it if they don't!

- **Get out in the community.** Have a community workday and go around your neighborhood shoveling snow together. Choose a school and commit to praying for it, serving the people there, and building a relationship with the teachers as a group. This will give you a shared purpose but will also get you in touch with people. Many people are more likely to check your group out if they see you doing good things in the community (not to mention that it is something Jesus is pleased with).

- **Split.** Obviously this suggestion is a bit more drastic, but it's something you could at least discuss. Not every group should split, but sometimes if the group has become so close that new people struggle to fit in it is the best way to move back to a healthy, growing group. Also, when your group gets smaller you feel the need for growth much more acutely. If you had twelve people in your small group and split into two groups of six, you could intentionally invite six new people into each group. Like I said, splitting isn't for everyone, but at times it can be a wonderful way to kick-start growth.

As your group is faithful to growing spiritually, I believe God will lead you toward ways of growing numerically, as well. The point is not the numbers, but if the groups are helping people grow in their walk with Christ, then the more the better!

—TREVOR LEE is a freelance author, pastor, and small-group leader based in Colorado.
The best college football game ever played pitted one of my favorite teams, the Boise State Broncos, in the 2007 Fiesta Bowl against the winningest football program in the nation since World War II—the Oklahoma Sooners. It was touted as David versus Goliath.

The game was spectacular. It included an 18-point comeback by Oklahoma, trick plays, many dramatic, game-on-the-line moments, several unbelievable fourth-down conversions, and a spectacular overtime win by the underdog. Then, as if that wasn't enough, the star player for Boise State proposed marriage to his head-cheerleader girlfriend on national television.

As I watched the end of the game, I wished I could have been in the Boise State huddle as they gathered to call one last-ditch trick play after another. I can imagine the smiles of confidence on the player's faces, the nervous energy, the "we can do it" attitude.

The Purpose of the Small-Group Huddle
What does all this have to do with small groups? Plenty. I like the comparison of a small group to a football team. A football team huddles to plan, to encourage each other, and to rest for a few seconds before running the next play. Huddles can be exciting places, but nobody ever won a game while in the huddle.

In other words, the huddle has a vital purpose, but it would be silly to stay in the huddle when there is a game to be played. It is simply a means to an end.

Small groups sometimes place too much emphasis on the meeting time, as if it alone defines the group. In reality, it's just the huddle. It is a safe and comfortable place to encourage one another, build each other up, and minister to one another. It is a time to plan and prepare for the next play. But the real action happens when we break the huddle to make an impact.

Blessed to Be a Blessing
We are blessed to be a blessing to others, not to remain in a Christian comfort zone—a holy huddle. Abraham is a good personal example of this:

> The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people, and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:1–3).

Before Abram could be a blessing, he had to leave his comfort zone and go where God would show him. The apostle Peter had to get out of the comfort zone of his boat to walk on water. Jesus had to leave the ultimate comfort zone of heaven to save us. The apostles left "everything" in their comfort zones to follow Jesus.

How Groups Grow
Staying in the holy huddle obviously hurts the serving and outreach impact of the group and the church; it also displays a blatant disobedience to Jesus and his commission. But I want to focus on two other ways that remaining in our comfort zones will damage our small-group ministries: (1) Groups that settle for safe and comfortable do not grow, and (2) People within groups who settle for safe and comfortable do not grow.

Both individuals and groups stagnate when they are safe and comfortable—when they remain in their holy huddles and do not get out on the field to take some holy risks and run some dramatic, game-on-the-line plays. Look at the following graph:
OVERCOMING GROWTH PLATEAUS

Many groups that I’ve observed start in an up-and-to-the-right trajectory. Things seem good. Participants are excited, even if nervously so. New Christians often start their new life in a similar path—getting to know God through his Word, learning what it means to follow Christ, growing fast.

In time, however, that growth begins to slow down and plateau. The newness begins to wear off. Conflicts begin to arise. We settle into routines—often safe and comfortable routines. We coast.

I’ve seen this plateaued state have two potential negative impacts on individuals and groups: (1) They stay in this comfort zone for a long time—sometimes for the rest of their lives, unfortunately. This happens when they become satisfied and comfortable with being comfortable. (2) The individual’s faith or the group life begins to wane, and the line begins to drop. Often groups at this stage begin to turn downward—sometimes quickly.

The group comes to a decision point. They can continue to settle for comfort and not really grow, or they can decide to do something risky, maybe even dangerous, to get out of their comfort zones. This often means leaving their huddles and going into their communities—into the world—to make an impact. Actually, individuals and groups come to a number of these decision points during their lifetimes. Each time they must make a decision to leave their comfort zones if they want to grow.

Two Plans for Breaking the Huddle

Small groups that begin with a plan are ones that continue to grow and make an impact. At my church, we call this a Small-Group Master Plan. Perhaps you call it a small-group agreement or covenant. The most important parts of this plan are the vision and mission statements, which help provide a destination and a course to follow. The Master Plan helps our groups make wise choices at their decision points. When groups huddle, they develop or work on their Master Plan.

We use another tool that takes groups even further on their journeys. We call it a God-Sized Plan (GSP). At some time in the group's life, they work on a GSP, which is a plan that is so big that if God is not in it, it is destined to fail. I formed the GSP planning tool after reading about Jim Collins's BHAG (Big Hairy Audacious Goal).

Every group should have a Master Plan that includes getting out of their comfort zones to make an impact in the community and the world. These plans are designed to be God-given and God-empowered. Proverbs 19:21 provides a good context for the Master Plan: "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails."

God-Sized Plans are even bigger. They are plans that help groups move even further out of their comfort zones to depend more fully on God. Ephesians 3:20 is the context for a GSP. The group realizes that God "is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us."


Discuss:
1. Where does our group currently fit on the chart above?
2. Have we moved beyond our comfort zones when we reached recent decision points?
3. Does our group have a Master Plan? Does our group have a God-Sized Plan? If not, how can we develop them?
Kirk's dad passed away last night. I comforted him on the phone this morning and offered to help in any way possible. Kirk was obviously saddened, but not surprised. His dad's health had been deteriorating for a long time.

Small groups, like people, don't last forever. Some groups develop diseases and die, while others are able to ward off the sickness and live on. In my work with churches and small groups over a span of several years, I've noticed four diseases that often afflict groups. None of them are fatal. Yet, if a small group is characterized by most of them, the life of the community might be beyond recovery.

**Conflict**

Some group members talk too much, stay too late, and don't control their children—to the distraction of everyone else. I remember talking with one leader whose group had a family that lacked the cultural sensibility of controlling their kids during and after the meeting. The leader said to me, "I'm sorry, Joel, my wife just can't take it anymore. We're going to stop leading our small group."

Another person in my own group didn't like the worship time. He had a habit of injecting his own verbal comments while others were trying to sing worship songs.

Situations like these and countless others can be resolved—if you deal with them quickly. Buried problems, however, tend to become that "elephant in the room" that everyone knows about, but nobody is willing to discuss.

**Me-ism**

Sometimes conflict in a group might be more subtle. It can lurk below the surface and rear its head in the form of selfishness. Granted, selfishness is part of every small group to a certain extent. But it's possible for groups to be taken over by selfish people.

Sometimes these people mask their selfishness with such words as *fellowship* or *community*. I had one couple in a small group who openly resisted the idea of reaching out because they were only there for community—translation: their own needs. The thought of evangelism was anathema to this couple, and they showed their distaste for future multiplication by letting others know the division it might cause. Granted, they were a broken couple with many needs, but they were also sponges that sucked the life out of the group.

I agree 100 percent with our need for community, and with practicing the "one anothers" of Scripture. In fact, community might be the most important aspect of small-group ministry in Western culture. Small groups help mend fractured, broken lives, and that takes time. The goal, however, is for people to become sufficiently healed to then reach out to others. Some people never get beyond themselves and end up damaging the group by demanding more and more attention.

To remedy a situation like this, follow Jesus' advice in Matthew 18 about going to your brother (or sister) one-on-one. And if that doesn't work, take others with you. In the case above, I could have easily caved into this couple because of their strong personality. But knowing that their influence would have stagnated the entire group, I talked with them personally about our core values of evangelism and multiplication in order to keep the group healthy and fruitful. In effect, I served them notice that their values were not consistent with our values. I wanted to let them know I had my eye on them. They eventually left the group and the church, which I later learned was their normal ritual.
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Non-Commitment
You've heard the phrase that 20 percent of church people do 80 percent of the work? Put another way, 80 percent of the people do 20 percent of the work. But sometimes groups are wholly comprised of the 80 percent who don't share the work load. Even worse, a group can be taken captive by non-committal people. For example, when a group fluctuates weekly from 2 attenders to 15, the group is unstable and can easily capsize as the leaders grow weary with doing everything.

As a remedy for this, some groups make a covenant with group members, asking each member to actively participate in the life of the group—which includes regular attendance and showing up on time. Others emphasize the small-group core of faithful and committed members. One large church, for example, expects the core members of each group to meet separately on a different night from the small group in order to plan out the group meeting, visit members, and invite new people. This church discovered that strong core groups generated healthy small groups.

Eternal Members
Small groups are the perfect place to give people the opportunity to use their gifts and grow in leadership. They turn members into leaders—disciples who make other disciples. I get excited about small-group ministry every time I remember that it is the best way to fulfill Christ's mandate to make disciples who are equipped to make other disciples (Matthew 28:18–20).

Some small groups, however, never go beyond themselves. No one is willing to enter the prescribed training and lead a new group (or be part of a new-group leadership team). Eventually, the leader becomes overburdened and decides to quit.

Will the Group Live?
I led one group for a couple years and eventually had to close it. Three out of the above four problems overtook the group, and I felt it was best to abandon ship and start afresh. The group simply was not healthy. The best thing I could do was integrate the remaining members into other groups and start a new group from scratch.

On other occasions, I've been able to deal with a particular sickness and move on. When the group members and I discovered a remedy, the group moved into new life and health and continued reaching out.

Which will be true of your group? Simply put, you must try your best to resolve the problems you are facing. If your group is suffering from one or two of the illnesses above, you should be able to gather with your members and your coach and figure out a solution.

If your group's illness is more pronounced, however, it may be that your only option is to turn off the lights and start over.

— JOEL COMISKEY is a pastor, church planter, and founder of www.joelcomiskeygroup.com.

Discuss:
1. Is our group suffering from any of the illnesses above?
2. What illnesses has our group recovered from in the past, and how was that accomplished?
3. What steps can we take to identify a prescription that will get us to a better place? Who can help us make the proper diagnosis?
OVERCOMING GROWTH PLATEAUS

What Went Wrong?

Here are seven reasons why small-group ministries fail to soar.

By Jack Dyson

When done correctly, small groups serve two noble purposes: growth and community. Our ultimate purpose in joining and leading small groups is to glorify God by being transformed into the image of Jesus Christ and to do our part in being ambassadors in his reconciliation work. In such a God-reflected community, we experience significant and life-giving transformation. We grow.

So why doesn’t it always work? Why are small groups often so difficult to get off the ground? Why is it so hard to maintain momentum? Based on my experience, there are seven habits and poor choices that may short-circuit an effective small-group ministry.

1. We don’t know what we are aiming at.

Too often, churches fail to identify targets for the macro and micro views of their ministry. For the macro view, leaders need to identify what they want small groups to accomplish in regards to the overall community of the church. Many churches look at the small-group ministry as an entity unto itself—as just another program to build and maintain. But Jesus didn’t give us the mandate to build small groups; he gave us the mandate to love and serve one another.

Small groups are a vehicle for the church to grow as the family of God.

For the micro look, leaders need to identify what small groups will accomplish in the life of individual believers. What should people experience, achieve, and become when they encounter community in a small group? In all honesty, most churches don’t have a clue. Jesus and Paul talked a lot about fruit. Jesus said that, when we become good soil, we will produce an amazing amount of fruit—30, 60, or 100 fold. People get excited when they realize that these words are for them—not just for their pastor.

2. We don’t provide consistent basic leader training.

Your church needs leaders. As I’ve met with different churches across the country, I’ve encountered past small-group leaders who shared with me that they aren’t sure if they did a good job in their groups. Today, potential leaders ask me if I think they really can lead a group well. Remember this: to be long-term, effective leaders, your people need confidence and competency.

Many churches use two ineffective options to train their leaders and instill that confidence. First, they plug new leaders into existing training meetings and hope they catch the basics through osmosis. Second, they provide their leaders with a book or a tape and hope they get something out of it that will propel them to success. But without a good roadmap, new leaders often get frustrated, resulting in a tenure that is far too short.

A better option is to design or purchase a training regimen that can be offered to all new small-group leaders. This will help those leaders identify the foundational items, catch your church’s vision, learn important skills, and develop confidence to lead their groups effectively.

3. We don’t provide enough support for leaders.

Would you send your children out on their first bicycle without training wheels? Likewise, your small-group leaders, especially the new ones, require support, encouragement, and propping up. In general, small-group leaders have two foundational needs:

1. To be growing in Christ themselves. As with all Christians, the spiritual growth of small-group leaders is an unfolding odyssey, not a destination. Most growth falls under the responsibility of the individual. Yet ministry coaches and shepherds still need to encourage the spiritual growth of their leaders, just as those leaders are expected to encourage the growth of their members.
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2. To be caught doing the right things well. As stated earlier, many leaders live under a shadow of insecurity. When a coach or shepherd takes the time to visit small-group meetings, they can affirm the good things that were said and done.

4. Our practiced vision and values don't match the stated vision and values.
Vision and mission statements are really important. We all need them. They give us direction, conviction, and motivation—when we actually use them. But how aligned are our stated and practiced vision and values, really, when we speak, hire, and train? How and when do we assess whether what we say we believe matches what we are actually doing?

Many churches talk community; few foster it. But in order to have a successful small-groups ministry, it's necessary to do both.

5. We value busyness over production.
"Do I have room to do one more thing?" This is the unfortunate motto of many small-group members, leaders, and coaches. As a result, attending or leading a small group becomes one of many worthwhile ministries demanding our time, attention, and allegiance. Inevitably in this situation, the church evolves in to a great place to keep people busy, but not a great place to foster spiritual transformation.

Chances and small groups must ask themselves several important questions. Are people giving their time without experiencing authentic community? Are they serving faithfully without producing transformation in themselves or the ones they serve? Are the lives of small-group coaches and leaders more frantic and frenetic than the lives of the people they are trying to serve? Remember: busyness will not inspire anyone to follow Jesus.

6. We don't take time to celebrate.
All Christians want to hear Jesus say, "Well done good and faithful servant." And I hope we all do. But do we have to wait for heaven to hear those words? I certainly hope we don't.

Jesus has already identified us as the fruit of his labor, and the labor of those who went before us. Why not celebrate it now? Fortunately, God already provided us with an example to follow in the Hebrew holidays. These feasts were established as celebrations of God's total provision for the Israelites. And they always involved family, friends, and food as significant parts of the equation.

We, too, need to celebrate what God is doing in the lives of our small-group members, leaders, and the entire ministry. There are several different ways to set up these celebrations, but churches should always keep in mind that God is being glorified, that we are being transformed, and that we are doing this all in the context of community. We are part of a heavenly family.

7. We talk about prayer more than we pray.
Whether part of a small-group ministry or not, Christians know they are supposed to pray. We believe that prayer makes a difference in the lives of individuals and in the health of a church community.

So, are there people in your church who consistently, sacrificially pray for your small groups? Do individual coaches pray for the leaders in their care? Do leaders pray for the members they serve? I am fully convinced that the small-group ministry I oversaw grew way beyond my leadership ability because of the prayer people invested into that ministry—and into me.

As you and your church leadership find practical answers to these questions and issues, you will discover an effective small-group ministry that makes a difference in the lives of people—and in the community of God's kingdom.

—JACK DYSON; copyright © 2007 by the author and Christianity Today International.

Discuss

1. Do any of the seven habits describe a current situation in our church or small-group ministry?
2. How could these problems be corrected during the re-launch of a small-groups ministry?
3. What steps will need to be taken, and who will need to be consulted, before changes can be implemented in our church's small-groups ministry?
OVERCOMING GROWTH PLATEAUS

Handling Plateaus on a Ministry Level
Don't allow obstacles and setbacks to keep you down.
By Seth Widner

For the past four years I have served on staff with the Journey Church—a young church-plant in Fernandina Beach, Florida—where our small-group ministry began within our first 3 months as a congregation. We started with 5 small groups and experienced a rapid growth rate. Within two years, we had 24 groups and were caring for over 500 people through them! I felt like I was on top of the world (and looked like an expert in the eyes of our people).

But as we began our third year, the numerical growth suddenly came to a stop. Although new small groups were forming, some of our existing groups were dissolving. Our small-group ministry looked like a revolving door, and I began to ask myself some hard questions: How do we decide if this is a growth plateau? How do we overcome one? How can we survive a stagnant season of ministry?

Answering these questions led to some of the solutions and strategies that I have listed below. But first, there are two truths that I hope will encourage you and remove any fear from your heart:

1. **Growth plateaus are a normal season of life for any small-group ministry.** Ecclesiastes 3:1 says, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven." Small-group ministries will experience seasons of growth, plateau, and even decline.

2. **Growth plateaus occur in every small-group ministry.** If you say in ministry long enough, it is only a matter of time before you will experience a growth plateau. Whether you are a seasoned veteran or a rookie in ministry, it happens to all of us.

Having said that, here are some of the steps you can take to break out of a plateau in your church's small-group ministry.

**Start with the Vision**

Everything you've worked on with small groups will rise or fall based on the vision of your ministry. No matter how talented your small-group leaders may be, the vision is what sets us up for success or failure. So go back to the original vision for your church's small-group ministry and ask yourself the following questions:

- **Is the vision biblical?** Matthew 6:33 commands us to "seek first his kingdom and righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well." Before any ministry can experience God's hand of blessing, it must line up with God's desires. He has revealed his desires through Scripture. What is your vision for small groups? Does your vision line up with God's desires?

- **Is the vision realistic?** There are 101 great ways to do small groups. The key to success is to know the vision and your people. What do the demographics look like? Whether you live in the city or the country, your small-group ministry must connect with your people. If your method of doing small groups does not connect well with your people, you could do more damage than good. Remember that every technique will not work in all demographics, so find the one that best fits your people.

- **How well are your group leaders living out the vision?** In order for your ministry to be successful, it must be united. Each small-group leader must be on board with carrying out the vision. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul proclaims that the Church is the Body of Christ. Each one of us plays a crucial part. Look at verse 26: "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it."

**Examine Your Ministry Processes**

Now that you have examined the vision, take a look at the process your church uses for training new and veteran small-group leaders. Can you successfully answer the following questions?
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- What is your process for selecting leaders?
- What expectations do you hold for leaders?
- How do you communicate the vision to new leaders? How do you remind existing leaders of the vision?
- How do you provide initial training for leaders? What is involved with the training? What resources do you use?
- How do you provide ongoing training for existing leaders? What is involved with the training? What resources do you use?

If you don't have an answer to one or more of the questions (or if you don't like the answer that honestly comes to mind), you will need to make some changes.

Identify the Obstacles

Use your eyes and ears to identify any obstacles that your group leaders may be facing. Communication is crucial. We cannot overcome obstacles without discovering their existence. Interview each small-group leader and ask them what obstacles are getting in the way of spiritual growth and health.

These obstacles may include conflict, apathy, doctrinal confusion, or a situation they were never trained to deal with. Be sure to examine the health of your own small group, as well.

Make a Plan to Break Out

Ephesians 1:18–19 says: "I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead."

Did you catch that last part? Paul was praying for us to understand how powerful the Holy Spirit is in our lives. Christ has not given us a spirit of defeat. He has equipped us with his Spirit as a way to overcome our obstacles at hand.

Take some time to develop an action plan for overcoming the various obstacles faced by your ministry (including individual group leaders). Make it simple. Break it down into individual steps with a timeline for each one. Use the following questions to guide you:

- What is the first step for overcoming your obstacles?
- What resources will you need?
- Where will you gain these resources?
- When will you accomplish this step?

Set a Time to Evaluate Progress

Be sure to set a specific time to evaluate your progress. Place this appointed time on your calendar and guard it well. It would be wise to evaluate your progress every 30 days. This way, you can identify any adaptations you need to make before they grow into new obstacles. Use the following questions to help you:

- Where do you see spiritual or numerical growth?
- What seems to be working?
- What's not working?
- What adaptations need to be made?

Remember that growth plateaus happen to every small-group pastor and point person. They can create difficult obstacles and bring fear into our lives. But Christ has great plans for our ministries! "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Romans 8:37).

—SETH WIDNER is Family Pastor of the Journey Church in Fernandia Beach, Florida.
Small Groups and Church-Wide Plateaus

Key strategies for avoiding stagnation
By Alan Danielson

Churches go through seasons of growth, plateau, and even decline. When a church is growing, things are good. There is more unity, more excitement, more vision, more hope, and even more money for ministry. During plateaus, however, people start to murmur and wonder what's wrong. During declines, staff starts to turn over, people leave, there are power struggles, finances seem to dominate conversations, and the church is just not a fun place to be.

A church's small-groups ministry contributes to all of this, of course—it will be a factor in a church's success or stagnation. So, here are some important things to consider if you believe your group ministry may be contributing to a church-wide plateau.

Senior Pastor Buy-In
The most important element of a good small-group ministry is that it be supported 100 percent by the Senior Pastor. Is that happening in your church? Is your senior pastor in a group? Does your senior pastor talk about his own group experience positively, often, and from the stage? Is your senior pastor interested in the group ministry more often than twice per year? Does your senior pastor really believe in groups? If your answer to any of these questions is no, then your group ministry will have a difficult time flourishing.

That last paragraph may be discouraging for you. If so, take this article to your senior pastor and ask him to read it. You may be afraid for your job, but if the church moves from plateau to decline, you could lose your job anyway! Don't let fear keep you from taking an important step. Ask your senior pastor for 100 percent support. Acknowledge that the group ministry has not been "up to snuff" and ask your senior pastor for help. Who knows—maybe the reason he hasn't completely bought in is because he's wondering the same about you.

Mission, not Church Growth
Another reason group ministries stall is because they have the wrong focus. Jesus called us to a mission; he did not call us to church growth. Yet churches often view small groups as a church-growth tool. Small groups become the plug in the bottom of the church bathtub. "We'll get new people in on Sundays and keep them from leaving by getting them into groups." Sadly, this mentality is just plain wrong.

The purpose of the church is not to grow; it's to fulfill Jesus' mission. Jesus never asked us to build the church. In fact, he said that was his own responsibility (Matthew 16:18). Rather, Jesus commanded us to reach the world. In fact, he commanded this in all four gospels and the Book of Acts (Matthew 28:29; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47–48; John 20:21; Acts 1:8).

When church growth is the goal, the church is less likely to grow. Yet when mission is the goal, God blesses the efforts and the church grows. Never aim your small-group ministry at church growth or member retention. Instead focus it on Kingdom expansion!

Discipleship, not Connection
Our small-group ministry focus can also go off track if we find ourselves emphasizing connection over discipleship. Again, this comes back to Jesus' own words. He never commands us to "get connected" or to "make friends." He calls us to be his disciples.
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Ask yourself how you tend to "sell" the idea of groups to your church. Do you say things like, "Everyone needs a place to belong" or "Let us help you get connected"? If so, you're aim is off. These kinds of marketing slogans, while well intentioned, produce consumers. They send the message that "groups are about me and my needs." And when people ultimately don't have their needs met in groups, they will leave.

Thus, we should aim at discipleship. Sell groups from the standpoint that "groups help us become more like Jesus." When done right, small groups will teach people how to sacrifice, give, be accountable, and be on mission.

Discipleship and Mission Can't Be Separated

There is another unhealthy trend in our western church culture that causes plateau and decline—we tend to neatly separate and categorize mission and discipleship. This is unhealthy because it's not how Jesus saw mission and discipleship. To Jesus, they were two sides of the same coin. Jesus said, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). The call to discipleship was a call to mission.

Many churches assume that discipleship is about Bible study and prayer, and then we need to tack on mission projects as something extra. If that's the case in your church, your small-group ministry might be stagnant because you are failing to approach discipleship more holistically.

What if your groups were encouraged to meet in public—have everyone gather for prayer and study in the front yard, at Starbucks, in a diner, or at a park? This puts your discipleship on display and opens the door for mission. What if your groups were asked to make their neighborhoods their mission, rather than just asking them to participate in mission projects? Mission projects take an afternoon, but a neighborhood mission takes a lifetime. What if your groups were asked to study not only Scripture, but also the affects of their missional behaviors on the community and on themselves?

These steps and others can help your groups reflect a more biblical approach to discipleship and mission. And I firmly believe that being biblical helps fight stagnation and decline.

Collateral Damage

Any time church leaders make a significant change in their churches, there will be collateral damage—someone is going to get upset and possibly leave the church. And the bigger the change, the greater the potential for collateral damage. This applies to the small-group ministry, as well.

Collateral damage is the reason some leaders are afraid to change things in their churches at all. Because if people leave the church, they won't be there to give. If they aren't there to give, the church won't have the money to operate. If the church doesn't have the money to operate, the mission won't be accomplished. This kind of mental gymnastics is a cop out.

Collateral damage is also why some leaders make sweeping changes too quickly. They have a "growth by subtraction" mentality that says, "If people aren't going to back the vision, then they need to leave." While I believe that one of the best things for a church is for the complainers to leave, we must be careful of alienating potential allies. There's a difference between a complainer and someone who is slow to change.

Both of these kinds of leaders are counterproductive. The first puts satisfying the flock before the mission. The second is willing to divide the body of Christ for their own agenda. It's interesting that, in my experience, the first kind of leader tends to be older while the second kind tends to be younger. That's a very stereotypical statement, I know, but it is what I see in much of my consulting.

Regardless, the first kind of leader needs a stronger backbone, and the second kind of leader needs a softer heart.
OVERCOMING GROWTH PLATEAUS

So how do we leaders navigate change in our small-group ministries and minimize collateral damage?

- Communicate early and often with "opinion shapers" and lovingly try to win them over.
- Commit to love people, even when they don't agree with you.
- Publicly set a future date for the change to be implemented.
- Give people time to mourn the thing they are losing.
- Give people the opportunity to talk with you and share their concerns.
- *Continually* share how this change will help your church fulfill its mission (cast vision).
- Do not give in to any pressure to recall the coming change.
- Make the change on the set date and move forward.

Even after all of this, it's likely that someone won't be on board with the change. You might still lose someone from your congregation, so keep your mission in mind. We are in a spiritual war and there is far more at stake than disgruntled church members; people's souls are on the line. In a war there *will* be collateral damage. Don't be so afraid of it that you stop leading your church forward. On the other hand, don't be so comfortable with collateral damage that you are willing to leave a trail of bodies in your wake for the sake of your goal.

Be a leader with a strong back bone and a soft heart. In doing so, you'll be better equipped to navigate change in your church.

—ALAN DANIELSON is Senior Pastor of New Life Bible Church in Norman, Oklahoma. You can read more from Alan at [www.3Threat.net](http://www.3Threat.net).
Small-group ministries often go through a significant period of downturn or decline. Symptoms of this sickness may include declining participation, little motivation for outreach, a lack of equipped leaders, or the absence of a ministry point leader. Many times, church leaders prescribe a church-wide "jump-start" in order to get small groups revived and back on track.

**What Is a Small-Groups Jump-Start?**

These jump-starts may take the form of a churchwide campaign, a rally that continues for several weeks, or even a seasonal kickoff. When the jump-start works, small groups grow, new leaders emerge, and biblical community increases. For some churches, the momentum created by the jump-start is sustainable, and the small-group ministry thrives over many seasons.

In many churches, however, the ministry situation drifts back to the pre-jump-start level after the energy wears off. Many church leaders then conclude that what the ministry needs is another jump-start. This is planned and implemented, which again gives the overall ministry a little more energy and momentum. But then the situation drifts back to near pre-jump-start conditions and the cycle continues.

Too often, churches in this situation find themselves needing to perform jump-starts periodically in order to keep the ministry alive. In fact, if the church operates on a programmed ministry calendar, leaders may schedule these jump-starts into the church calendar every year—sometimes even two or three times per year.

**Diagnosing Chronic Jump-Start Syndrome**

There is nothing wrong with seasonal kickoffs. However, I think church leaders need to ask themselves what would happen to the health of the ministry without regular jump-start events. When a small-group ministry needs routine jump-starts to maintain any momentum or even to remain alive, I call that Chronic Jump-start Syndrome (CJS)!

Can a small-group ministry become sustainable and continue to grow without the aid of constant jump-starts? I confess that I don’t have a complete answer to that question. Each ministry situation has unique circumstances and reasons why a jump-start might be beneficial. However, I do believe that it’s necessary for churches to grapple with reality. If the ministry was sick prior to the jump-start and devolves back into sickness after the jump-start, then continuing to repeat that cycle will only enable a chronically unhealthy situation.

Our temptation is to accept the notion that activity creates better outcomes, or that continually doing jump-start events will create spiritual health. However, this may not be true. I believe that it is more important to step back and assess why the jump-starts are necessary in the first place, rather than launching into more activity-based efforts that are not yielding long-term spiritual health.

**Questions to Consider**

Based on conversations with several churches about their use of small-group ministry jump-starts, here are some questions to consider in your own evaluation of why a jump-start may or may not be needed:

- Is the jump-start more of a churchwide strategy for overall church revitalization, or is it targeted for small-group ministry?
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➢ If a jump-start were not done, what would happen to small groups over time?
➢ Are the condition or symptoms caused by a lack of biblical community values, lack of community vision, poorly equipped small-group leaders, unrepentant sin, lack of ministry leaders, or something else?
➢ Once you have identified a need that you think a jump-start could solve, keep asking the question: Would a jump-start really address this issue or only mask it?
➢ Always ask the question: Is there another course of action that can create a sustainable and more effective change in the ministry besides yet another jump-start? Examples may include better ongoing small-group leader coaching, better training, building a nurturing leadership community, a change in church leadership attitudes, more prayer, and so on.

—DAN LENTZ is an Editorial Advisor for SmallGroups.com and author of Let’s Get Started: How to begin your small-group ministry.

Discuss

1. How does our current small-groups ministry receive and sustain momentum for health and growth?
2. Is our small-groups ministry suffering from Chronic Jump-Start Syndrome?
3. Besides regular church-wide events, what are other options for increasing the momentum of our church's small-groups ministry?
Have you ever been discouraged by the lack of growth and maturity in people’s relationship with Christ? Have you ever felt like your small groups were becoming stale because individualism and consumerism were winning out over authentic Christian community? Have you ever wondered why people in your ministry aren’t aspiring to lead and reproduce more disciples?

There’s a question worth considering in these situations: "What are we publicly recognizing when it comes to Christian community and leadership development?” Because the fact is, we tend to reproduce what we recognize.

**What Are You Recognizing Publicly in Your Ministry Setting?**

Public recognition comes in many forms. It might be praise for a ministry act mentioned from the pulpit, a church-wide email from a ministry director including special recognition for a job well done, or a thank you written in the church newsletter. Whatever forms the communication takes, when we publicly acknowledge an act, it sends a very clear message: "This is important—do more of this.”

For example, say you have an event in your church that requires setting up a couple hundred chairs. The person in charge of setup, a volunteer named Jim, comes in two hours early and single-handedly sets up every chair. At the event, someone from the podium recognizes and praises Jim for his sacrificial service to the Lord in front of hundreds of participants. What value gets reinforced in this situation? An individual act of service—and a noble and sacrificial one, at that.

Now let’s change the situation slightly. What if Jim, as a volunteer, had recruited 10 other people to come in just 30 minutes early? Once they arrived, Jim spent 10 minutes explaining how the chairs needed to be set up, led the group in prayer, and then everyone spent 20 minutes setting up chairs and relating to one another as they served together.

Here’s the question: Would the person at the podium have recognized and praised Jim for what he did in the second scenario? Or would he have gotten more recognition for doing the whole job all by himself? If Jim is less likely to get recognized for his efforts in the second scenario (having recruited, trained, and served alongside 10 other people who wouldn't have otherwise been involved) than he is in the first scenario (solo service), then what value is getting recognized and reinforced to the congregation in this situation?

If vibrant Christian community, leadership development, team building, discipling relationships, and relational outreach are struggling to gain momentum in your church setting, then do an audit and see how many times those activities have been publicly recognized in the life of your people. If those values have not been publicly recognized, then your congregation is likely to instinctively assume they are not highly valued in church life.

You might say, "We don’t have a lot of these stories to recognize publicly.” Then the stories will need to start with church leaders. Church leaders will need to live, re-tell, and teach the values you want the congregation to embrace.

**A Few Examples**

Here are some examples to consider when doing a "recognition audit." Which of these situations are more likely to receive public recognition in your setting?
OVERCOMING GROWTH PLATEAUS

• 1) A stagnant small group has a few members who agree to set up the stage props for the Christmas musical seen by hundreds. Or, 2) A missional group who invites their neighbors to spend an evening singing Christmas songs at the local homeless shelter where just a few people live.

• 1) A small group updates their group information on the church website by stating the title and popular author of the next curriculum the group is studying. Or, 2) A small group updates their group information on the church website by stating the group's mission statement.

• 1) A group member prays aloud for the first time during a small-group gathering. Or, 2) A long-time leader does the closing benediction at the church's worship service.

• 1) An already large group adds several new members. Or, 2) An already large group multiplies into two groups.

• 1) A new Christian father leads his family in meal-time devotions every day for a week. Or, 2) The same new Christian does a devotional reading for the church pot-luck dinner.

In each scenario, the situation that would likely get more recognition in your church setting will also likely be what continues to happen in your ministry. Remember, what you recognize is what people perceive you value, and it’s also typically what you reproduce in your ministry.

So when we lament a lack of spiritual growth, an overflow of inward-focused groups, and a scarcity of quality leaders, we might be well served to consider an audit of our public praise. We might simply be reproducing what we recognize.

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Further Exploration
Websites and books to help groups and ministries break out of a plateau

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

- Improving Small-Group Accountability (Practical Ministry Skills)
- Grow the Number of Small Groups in Your Church (Practical Ministry Skills)
- Making Small Groups Fun! (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).

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).

Small Group Outreach: Turning Groups Inside Out by Jeff Arnold. Whether your small group is just getting started or has been together for a while, you'll find practical advice and ideas in this handbook for outreach and witness (InterVarsity Press, 1998; ISBN 978-0830811700).


The Connecting Church: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community by Randy Frazee. This book paints a beautiful portrait of biblical community and talks about the sacrifices we will have to make in order to experience life together (Zondervan, 2000; ISBN 978-0310233084).