

Eight key decisions you must make about groups in your church

by Thom S. Rainer

I spent many years in a church tradition that viewed Sunday school as the only legitimate group model. That tradition put significant efforts into maintaining the Sunday school organization. Most of their groups were ongoing (sometimes called “open”). All the classes met on Sunday morning at the church site. Their denomination provided the weekly curriculum.

Many of the members of these churches viewed “groups” or “small groups” as the off-campus, less-structured system. For the Sunday-school-based churches, you weren’t really involved in the church unless you were in a Sunday school class.

The Importance of Groups

Sunday school, however, is one form of groups. There are many other types of groups in churches. When we work with churches, we encourage the leaders to emphasize moving their members to groups. Why is that emphasis so important?

- Groups provide relational connectivity that is key to assimilation.
- Group members give significantly more to the church than those who attend worship services only.
- Group members tend to minister to one another. Moving members to groups is key to equipping them to do the work of ministry.
- Group members tend to attend church more than two times a month. We have noted on several occasions how the declining frequency of attendance is the number one reason for the overall decline in most churches.

- Group members tend to be more unified in the church since they are more likely to focus on the needs of others rather than their own preferences.

Do Something

Our initial encouragement to church leaders is thus to make groups a priority. They might not be as tightly organized as you would like. They might not all look alike. They might seem too messy for your comfort.

I get it. I prefer organization over chaos. But don't let your desire to organize your groups slow down your emphasis. In most cases, messy groups are better than no groups.

Eight Choices About Groups

Church leaders will make several decisions about groups, whether the decisions are intentional or not. The decisions might be for the overall group structure, or they could be made every time the church creates a new group.

1. **On-campus versus off-campus?** We know that on-campus groups tend to have higher participation rates, especially if they follow or precede a worship service. But, many churches do not have the classroom capacity for all on-campus groups. And some members prefer an off-campus setting to a classroom setting on campus.
2. **Short-term or long-term?** Typically, a group has to meet for more than six weeks for the members to develop relationships, but there are countless choices of lengths of groups. The Sunday school model was typically an ongoing weekly meeting time. Some groups take extended breaks. Some groups discontinue after a defined season.

3. **Curriculum directed or group choice?** Does the leadership of the church direct the curriculum (or studies with no formal curriculum) of the groups, or do they choose their own with no guidance? At the very least, we recommend that leadership approve the curriculum or studies.
4. **In-personal or virtual?** For a variety of reasons, a church may elect to have one or more of its groups meet virtually. But in-person groups tend to have much better assimilation rates. We believe in-person groups should be the default, and virtual groups should be the exception.
5. **Organized versus unorganized?** The group strategy in a church does not have to be meticulously organized, but some level of organization is necessary. We encourage church leaders to track attendance by group and individual attendees at the very least.
6. **Discipleship pathway versus standalone?** In many churches, groups stand alone as their own organization. In some churches, groups are part of an overall discipleship strategy, sometimes called a discipleship pathway. We have seen an increase in the latter and expect the discipleship pathway structure to grow.
7. **Large or small group size?** While there is no ideal group size, groups of more than 20 tend to lose their connectivity and effectiveness.
8. **Reproducing or not?** We encourage churches to organize groups toward an outward focus. This process can take place by intentionally starting new groups or by groups going through evangelistic emphases like The Hope Initiative.

Groups are vital to the health of a church. While leaders can use the questions above as a guide, they should, at the very least, make groups a priority in the church.