

 GUIDELINES

small group ministries

*Where Two
or Three
Are Gathered*

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General Board of Discipleship

SMALL GROUP MINISTRIES

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Some paragraph numbers for and language in the Book of Discipline may have changed in the 2008 revision, which was published after these Guidelines were printed. We regret any inconvenience.

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Contents

Welcome	4
Small Group Ministries	6
What is Small Group Ministry?	
What Is a Small Group? (And What Is Not?)	
Why Are Small Groups Important?	
Small Groups as Part of a Spiritual Formation/Disciple-Making System	
The Biblical and Theological Roots of Small Groups	
The Small Group Ministries Leader	10
Getting started	
What Is the Job of the Small Group Ministries Leader?	
The Small Group Ministries Process	22
Clarify What a Group Is and What a Group Is For	
The Lifespan of a Small Group	
Resources	32
General Agency Contacts	Inside Back Cover

Welcome

You are so important to the life of the Christian church! You have consented to join with other people of faith who, through the millennia, have sustained the church by extending God's love to others. You have been called and have committed your unique passions, gifts, and abilities to a position of leadership. This Guideline will help you understand the basic elements of that ministry within your own church and within The United Methodist Church.

Called to Spiritual Leadership

Each person is called to ministry by virtue of his or her baptism, and that ministry takes place in all aspects of daily life, in and outside the church. As a pastoral leader or leader among the laity, your ministry is not just a "job," but a spiritual endeavor. You *are* a spiritual leader now, and others will look to you for spiritual leadership. What does this mean?

First, *all* persons who follow Jesus are called to grow spiritually through the practice of various Christian habits (or "means of grace") such as prayer, Bible study, private and corporate worship, acts of service, Christian conferencing, and so on. Jesus taught his disciples practices of spiritual growth and leadership that you, as a disciple, are to share with others as they look to you to be a model and guide.

Second, it means that you always keep your eye on the main reasons for any ministry—to help others grow to a mature faith in God that moves them to action on behalf of others, especially "the least" (see Matthew 25:31-46). This is an aspect of "disciple making," which is the ultimate goal of all that we do in the church.

CULTIVATING VISION AND MISSION

As a spiritual leader, a primary function you carry is to help those you lead to see as clearly as possible what God is calling your church to be and to do. Ideally, your church council first forms this vision and then forms plans and goals for how to fulfill that vision. As a leader, you will help your team remain focused and accountable to honor the vision and goals to which the church is committed. You will help your team create and evaluate suggestions, plans, and activities against the measure: *Does this move us closer to our church's vision to bring others to God in this place and time?*

CHRISTIAN CONFERENCING

While there are appropriate and useful business-like practices that apply to church life, Christian practices distinguish the church as the church. In the United Methodist tradition, how we meet and work together is important. “Christian Conferencing” involves listening not only to each other, but also listening intently for the will of God in any given task or conversation. This makes prayer essential in the midst of “business as usual.” As Christians, we are called to “speak the truth in love.” This is a special way to speak in which we treat one another as if each of us were Christ among us. As a spiritual leader in your ministry area, you have the privilege and opportunity to teach and model these practices. By remembering that each of us is beloved of God and discerning the presence of God in all that the church does, every task becomes worshipful work.

THE MISSION OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

The United Methodist Church is a connectional church, which means in part that every local church is interrelated through the structure and organization of districts, conferences, jurisdictions, and central conferences in the larger “family” of the denomination. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* describes, among other things, the ministry of all United Methodist Christians, the essence of servant ministry and leadership, how to organize and accomplish that ministry, and how our connectional structure works (see especially ¶¶125–138).

Our Church is more than a structure; it is a living organism. The *Discipline* describes our mission to proclaim the gospel and to welcome people into the body of Christ, to lead people to a commitment to God through Jesus Christ, to nurture them in Christian living by various means of grace, and to send persons into the world as agents of Jesus Christ (¶122). Thus, through you—and many other Christians—this very relational mission continues.

(For help in addition to this Guideline and the *Book of Discipline*, see “Resources” at the end of your Guideline, www.umc.org, and the other websites listed on the inside back cover.)

Small Group Ministries

What Is Small Group Ministry?

The very simplest definition of small group ministry is congregational ministry organized and implemented in a wide variety of small groups. This definition, while true, isn't very helpful. All churches have groups of many sizes, serving many functions, some lasting weeks while others endure for decades. What makes a small group ministry different from the current situation where we have committees, councils, boards, teams, task forces, classes, study groups, work teams, youth groups, and a host of other "small groups?"

Basically, what makes a small group ministry different is a very clear belief that small groups in The United Methodist Church provide an excellent way for every congregation to fulfill the mission of the church—to make disciples of Jesus Christ. This is the first important lesson of small group ministries: small groups are a means to an end; the best way to accomplish the goals and priorities of the congregation. Having lots of active small groups is never our purpose. Our purpose is to offer a structure and process that makes spiritual formation and disciple making simple, effective, lasting, and meaningful. Carefully designed, well supported, and regularly evaluated small groups have proven to be one of the very best ways to strengthen the Christian faith, train people in the work of Christian discipleship, and mobilize people to live and serve as the body of Christ.

What Is a Small Group? (And What Is Not?)

A good place to begin understanding small group ministry is to define "small group." This isn't as easy or clear as it may seem. Depending on the source, small groups have been described as:

- groups of anywhere between 2 and 250 people
- any gathering of people for a purpose, such as learning, decision making, fellowship, entertainment, projects, and so forth
- a small number of people with common goals working together to achieve them
- a gathering of a small number of people for purposes other than work.

This sample of descriptions indicates that there isn't a strong consensus about what makes a small group a small group. One specific definition is not important. There is no right answer to the question, "What size is a small group?" It really doesn't matter whether people gather to work, to study, to plan, or to discuss a topic.

For the purposes of this Guideline, there are three qualities that are essential to any small group experience.

1. The people involved clearly understand the purpose of the group.
2. It is of an appropriate size that every participant may reasonably stay fully engaged.
3. It connects participants with the larger mission of the church and the spiritual formation of a Christian disciple.

Any group that passes these three tests qualifies as a small group and is the focus of a healthy and effective small group ministry. Even a board of trustees or a choral group could be a small group ministry if it helps people grow in their faith and discipleship.

On the other hand, just because a small number of people gather in a church on a regular basis doesn't mean they are part of a small group ministry. Even some long standing Sunday school classes may fail to qualify, because their main purpose is social rather than spiritual, and they don't equip people to live their faith in the world.

Why Are Small Groups Important?

A large body of research supports the theory that people learn best in intimate, interactive, clearly-focused settings that invite deep personal reflection; open, honest conversation; and that speak to the issues most relevant to the participant's lives. Spiritual formation and development as Christian disciples requires that we address some of the most fundamental questions of faith, life, meaning, and purpose. Small groups provide the ideal setting to wrestle with such important issues.

Small group settings also create opportunities to form lasting relationships and friendships. The journey of faith is an awesome expedition best shared with other travelers asking similar questions, seeking comparable meaning, and looking to deepen their understanding of the life of the Christian disciple.

Participants in small groups are more likely to practice regularly the spiritual disciplines of prayer, scriptural study, fasting, and acts of service to others, due in large part to the sense of responsibility and the network of accountability that exists between members of the group. Research into group effectiveness strongly indicates that participants in groups learn and retain new information, encounter new ideas and concepts, and engage in newly learned behaviors at a much higher rate than individuals on their own.

Small groups provide a valuable safeguard for developing Christian disciples. Individuals tend to form very strong opinions about God, the Bible, Christian faith and practice, and the church. So when they don't have connections with a group to explore and question these opinions, growth may be greatly impeded. To grow in the Christian faith, we need to have our attitudes, opinions, and ideas challenged on a regular basis. In small groups such creative and essential challenge is guaranteed.

Small Groups as Part of a Spiritual Formation/Disciple-Making System

During the twentieth-century, Sunday morning worship became the cornerstone of church participation and practice in The United Methodist Church. If people attend Sunday worship, they are generally considered as “active members” of the church. However, worship is just one aspect of faith formation and Christian growth. At the very least, growing Christians need to be engaged in regular prayer, Bible study and reflection, worship, and service to others. In addition, most of us would benefit from exploring traditional disciplines of fasting, contemplation, accountable discipleship (holding one another accountable to our spiritual practices and formational goals), and theological reflection. It is easy to see how well designed and supported small groups could facilitate many of these activities.

John Wesley promoted the practices of both personal piety and the means of grace. Personal piety included prayer and devotional reading, scriptural study, and fasting. These were activities that every individual Christian needed. But every bit as important to the people called Methodist were shared practices—prayer with and for one another, Bible study and exploration of scriptural and theological concepts, sharing in the Lord's Supper, and working side-by-side in works of compassion, kindness, and caring in the community and world. It is impossible to practice the means of grace apart from small groups.

The Biblical and Theological Roots of Small Groups

God created us to be in relationship (Genesis 1:26; 2:18-23). We affirm the presence of Christ among us when we gather together (Matthew 18:20). Our Hebrew and Christian history is ripe with images of small groups—councils, tribes, teams, circles, households, churches (most first-century churches were household churches of a dozen or so members). In our gospels, the twelve named disciples—as well as the men and women, named and unnamed, that traveled in Jesus' inner circle—provide a powerful metaphor

for the importance of small groups. The intimacy and proximity of the original disciples reinforce how small groups promote learning, growing, changing, and serving. The description of the early churches in the Book of Acts (particularly Acts 2:43-47) are descriptions of small groups—gatherings of people who listened to the teachings of the apostles, reflected on those teachings together, shared their resources, sang and prayed, fasted, fed, worshiped, and grew together in unity around Christ.

The churches of the first few centuries didn't look much like our churches today. Many gathered in a home or civic center and were comprised of a single household. It was expected of every member of the household—parents, children, elders, servants, workers, and anyone else who qualified—that they would pray together; fast; give; share; and study the teachings of the apostles, prophets, and teachers (one reason why the letters of Paul were so important—they raised new issues and ideas for small groups in households to study in order to grow in their faith). This model existed in various shapes and forms even as the movement known as the Way became the state religion in Rome and was institutionalized in grand central gathering cathedrals and sanctuaries.

John and Charles Wesley, Anglican priests, founded a small group at Oxford University dedicated to spiritual practices that was mocked as the Holy Club, the Bible Moths, and—among other things—the Methodists. Young John Wesley (along with his brother Charles and their unorthodox friend, George Whitefield) was convinced that spiritual formation could not truly occur without the validation of a close circle of friends and fellow Christian followers. This led to the development of the Classes, Bands, and Societies—a formal structure to ensure that all Christians engaged in small groups dedicated to the practice of the means of grace.

This commitment to spiritual growth in small groups spread across America as Methodist pioneers like Francis Asbury, Barbara Heck, Phoebe Palmer, and others instituted forms of small group ministry in the forms of clergy accountability groups, Sunday school classes, mission societies, and prayer circles. As churches grew larger and larger, and congregations numbered in the hundreds, then thousands, small groups became “little churches within the church”—a trend that is reemerging today.

The Small Group Ministries Leader

Regardless of the historical era—Old Testament, New Testament, Early Church, Wesleyan era, or present day—the value and effectiveness of small groups has always depended in great measure on good, faithful, and well-trained leadership. In a very real sense, the small group ministries leader is a shepherd of shepherds—guiding, strengthening, supporting, and coaching others who will guide, strengthen, support, and coach others.

The small group ministries leader is also like the conductor of an orchestra—watching over the various sections, keeping all pieces of the musical score in sight, and bringing together the best that everyone in the orchestra has to give so that what results is greater than the sum of the parts.

Research into small group effectiveness indicates that the best coordinators of small group ministries act as a small group leader to the leaders of other groups. Not only through instruction, training, and support, but also through modeling and active participation, small group ministries coordinators equip others to be successful.

The small group ministries leader serves a vitally important function—to connect the learning and development processes within a congregation to the mission of The United Methodist Church and the vision for ministry of the local congregation. The content or focus of small groups may change from church to church, but the basic structural format is consistent.

Getting Started

You have been selected and have agreed to lead the small group ministries for your congregation. Great! Now what?

Here are six “first steps” to help you prepare to coordinate and lead the small group ministries:

1. **Talk to key leaders—individually and in groups.** Find out what the priorities, hopes, and vision are for the church. Discuss expectations for small groups in helping the church reach its goals and fulfill its mission. Begin to envision ways to use small groups to strengthen both the community of believers and the individuals involved.
2. **Talk to small group leaders and/or participants.** Find out what makes small groups meaningful, interesting, and effective for participants. Listen for strengths and areas for improvement and growth. Find out firsthand what people like about small groups.

3. **Look at other churches in your area that are doing small groups well.** Make contact with other small group ministries leaders. Visit churches with strong small groups ministries. Listen to their story—how they developed and strengthened small groups in the church.
4. **Read up on the subject of small groups.** Spend time reading the books listed at the end of the Guidelines. Browse your favorite bookstore’s religion, business, and education sections.
5. **Browse the subjects** “small groups,” “small group ministries,” “group dynamics,” “spiritual formation,” and “teams,” online. The Internet provides a vast (and somewhat scary) number of websites dedicated to small groups and group dynamics, especially focusing on spiritual formation and ministry.
6. **Pray and spend time discovering your own vision for small groups.** Pay attention to your own commitment to the community of faith and small group ministry. Let your heart and mind run wild. Share your thinking and dreaming with other leaders in the church.

This is but a brief beginning to help you get started organizing and developing a small group ministry.

What Is the Job of the Small Group Ministries Leader?

As recently as a decade ago, it was standard belief that effective small groups depended on talented leaders with a good grasp of subject matter or group process who had at their command a variety of teaching techniques, skills, and experience. More recent research indicates that the most effective small groups—whether focused on personal formation, projects, study, research, or decision making—are dependent on three things.

1. **The quality of relationship:** While it is possible to get a diverse and disconnected group of people to organize around a shared vision or task, it is much easier to get a close-knit and deeply connected group of people to get excited about almost any task. Where the emphasis is on developing strong, respectful, caring, and healthy relationships, then strong, respectful, caring, and healthy small groups emerge. Small groups ministries leaders who focus on communication skills, interpersonal relationships, and social development skills offer a strong foundation for building a lasting and stable small group ministry.

- 2. The quality of the environment:** How much of an impact does our meeting space have on the value and impact of why we meet? Apparently, much more than most people believe. Many church rooms are set up as lecture style classrooms or meeting rooms around tables or parlors with mismatched furniture and painted cinder-block walls. These may not be ideal settings for spiritual formation, innovative dreaming, and visionary decision making. Formal settings work best for formal functions (meeting rooms are great for meetings), but for Bible study or discussion, they may not work well at all. Note that there is a powerful trend of spiritual formation groups to move out of church buildings altogether and into coffee shops, diners, break rooms, and people's living rooms. It may well be that the small group ministries leader may offer greater benefit to the ministry of spiritual formation by working to identify and develop a variety of settings than to recommend curriculum, tools, and techniques.
- 3. The standards and metrics by which growth, development, and effectiveness can be evaluated in small groups.** Most small groups are launched and left to fend for themselves. Effective small groups are organized for a purpose, so that purpose must be clear, relevant, and widely understood. Each participant should be able to explain how the group is meeting, exceeding, or failing to meet its goals and objectives.

In addition, each participant in a small group—whether the group is for spiritual formation, feeding the hungry, or a Board of Trustees—should have clear goals and objectives for his or her role and participation in a group. Too often, people participate in small groups for a long period of time only to discover that they feel dissatisfied and unfulfilled, but that they don't know why. Small groups offer the greatest benefit to participants who can measure their progress toward specific goals.

An important role specific to the leader of small group ministries is to evaluate and assess how well the whole ministry supports, promotes, and fulfills the mission of the denomination and the vision of the local church. Each congregation's leadership with responsibility for small groups should determine appropriate standards and metrics for evaluation.

UNDERSTANDING GROUP DYNAMICS

The emotional environment of a group is as important as its physical environment. Books, courses, workshops, and articles abound on the subject of group dynamics (see Resources), but the most valuable instruction any of them provide is that someone needs to stand outside each group to focus on

emotional, relational, behavioral, and energy levels of small groups. A primary responsibility of the small group ministries leader is to understand group dynamics in order to identify problems, dysfunctions, pinch points, and constraints to effective performance. This does not mean that the small group ministries leader must be an expert in group dynamics, but must understand enough of the basic general principles to pinpoint causes and know where to look for solutions.

UNDERSTANDING SIZE DYNAMICS

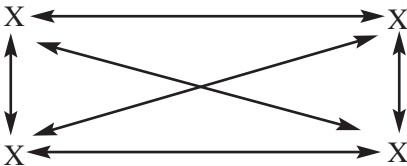
There is no ideal size for any given group, but different sizes result in different groups. More important than the number of participants in a group is the number of relationships in a group. Two participants create one relationship; four people create six relationships; seven people create twenty-one relationships; and twelve people create sixty-six unique relationships.

MANAGING RELATIONSHIPS

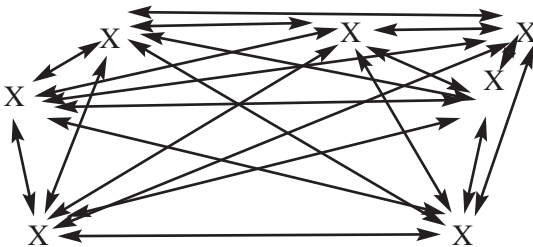
X = People \longleftrightarrow **= Relationships**



2 People, 1 Relationship



4 People, 6 Relationships



7 People, 21 Relationships

Highly effective group leaders—the best of the best—do well to manage a maximum of twenty-eight relationships (a group of eight people). As the picture illustrates, groups begin to get extremely complex and messy once they exceed five to seven members.

When a group exceeds twenty-one relationships—or seven members—the result is less engagement, (with some members disengaging completely), more conflict, poorer communication, a decrease in comprehension and retention of information, and the deterioration of interaction, with domination of the group by one or two members greatly increased.

The most effective group leaders can manage with ease fifteen to twenty-eight relationships. This means that in most church situations, the ideal size for groups focusing on spiritual formation, planning, decision making, Bible study, or theological reflection is five to seven members. This surprises some people in the church, especially since the default standard follows the earliest Christian formation group, the twelve. There is nothing wrong with a group of twelve in these settings, but current research supports that a group of twelve people is better treated as two groups of six. This allows a higher level of engagement, participation, communication, and understanding for all participants.

Many churches launch new ministry efforts and attract groups of forty, fifty, or sixty participants. In such situations, tables or circles of five to seven people allow a “small groups within larger groups” model to emerge. Evaluative measures of effective groups indicate that the highest levels of interaction, intimacy, and engagement make for the most successful results.

It is true of committees, Sunday school classes, boards, Bible studies, task forces, accountable discipleship groups, and project teams that when participant numbers exceed nine, there tends to be a drop-out rate that results in the active group of five to seven members anyway. Committees find that elected representatives don't attend meetings and Bible studies are dominated by a segment of the group. On task forces of a dozen members those who report a positive feeling about results are approximately fifty percent (or five to seven of the members). While not a magic number, the five to seven range seems to maximize the potential of a small group, while minimizing the factors that lead to dysfunction. Envisioning ways to maximize the “five to seven member” standard in groups of all sizes may increase their effectiveness and impact.

DEVELOPING A VISION FOR SMALL GROUP MINISTRIES

What do you want small groups to do? This is a simple question on the surface, but surprisingly, very few small group ministries leaders have a clear answer. Small groups became popular when a few mega-churches showed great success in attracting new members to the church through small group ministries. Small groups became a tool or technique for church growth.

But successful small group ministries found their success not merely in form, but in function—churches that developed a vision for deep and lasting spiritual growth, widespread and engaged participation from a large number of people, and efficient and successful leadership development and decision-making processes realized that small groups were an ideal way to achieve these goals.

Small groups are a means to an end and not an end in themselves. Having lots of active small groups may feel good, but the best small groups enable and equip participants to do new and exciting things. In the church, there are essentially six categories of small groups: formation, study, task performance, decision making, fellowship, and project. There may be quite a bit of overlap between groups. For example, many long-time Sunday school classes are fellowship groups that spend time in Biblical or theological study, and engage in different types of spiritual formation exercises. Another example is a Christian education team (task performance) who meet regularly for prayer and study (formation and study) in preparation for a Vacation Bible School (project group). It is not so important to be able to fit every existing group into a “slot” as it is to realize that different groups meet for different purposes, and that a comprehensive vision for small group ministry will include as many as possible.

Discussion groups, accountable discipleship groups, prayer groups, and a variety of topical classes focus on Christian spiritual formation, and the types of resources, settings, and leadership that will be most effective in these situations is different from the other types of groups.

Bible Study, scripturally based Sunday school classes, exploration of theology, church history, church practice, and current issues demand a different kind of focus and leadership.

Task performance groups—ongoing small groups like committees, boards, teams, councils, and task forces—oversee a wide variety of functions in the church, but still offer excellent opportunities for spiritual growth and development as Christian disciples. A vision for worshipful work can have a transformative effect of groups that attend to the “busyness” of the

church, reminding them of the true business of the church—the transformation of the world.

The same is true of decision-making groups. The leaders in a congregation that make the key decisions about mission, program, allocation of resources, training, and staffing are often so focused on the critical work they do, that spiritual focus becomes secondary. Helping to see the work of decision making groups as both ministry and administration has enormous transformational potential.

Short-term project groups have great potential as well. A mission team, a VBS team, a special service project team, and so forth, while perhaps only working together for a matter of weeks or months, can use their time together to accomplish their project and grow in their discipleship. This sometimes happens by accident, but when it is a part of the vision and design, each work opportunity becomes a spiritual experience as well.

Fellowship groups sometimes don't meet the "small group ministry" definition shared earlier (page 6) because there is no intentional focus on spiritual development or growth as Christian disciples. However, all fellowship groups—those groups of Christians gathering for recreation, renewal, or just plain fun—have the potential to be experiences of personal formation. To be clear, there is nothing wrong with people gathering for recreation and entertainment. While fun isn't the purpose of a small group ministry, it certainly can be a highly enjoyable by-product. In almost every setting, a few people stay committed to a group solely because of the personal relationships and the pleasure of the company. This is fine, but it shouldn't guide the decisions about the form, shape, structure, content, and purpose of the ministry.

The largest percentage of adults who come to the Christian faith come through personal invitation by a friend, colleague, or acquaintance. Fellowship is an excellent entrée into a community of faith and the journey of Christian discipleship. When fellowship groups are intentionally designed to be invitational, formational, and relational, they become transformational.

ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CURRENT GROUPS

As an exercise, make a list of all the existing groups and gatherings in your church—from two people all the way up to the worshipping congregation. Highlight all the groups that could be a base for small group ministry (keeping in mind that larger groups can be divided into smaller, more intimate segments). Sunday morning worship might not provide a very good opportunity, but regular meetings, classes, and groups like UMYF or the United Methodist Women might.

Enter the list into a simple matrix and determine how well each existing groups meets these criteria.

1. The people involved clearly understand the purpose of the group.
2. The group is of an appropriate size that every participant may reasonably stay fully engaged.
3. It connects participants with the larger mission of the church and the spiritual formation of a Christian disciple.

MATRIX FOR ASSESSING CURRENT SMALL GROUPS

Group	Clear purpose	Sized for Strong Engagement	Connects to mission
UMYF	X		
UMW	X		X
Trustees		X	X
DISCIPLE Bible Study	X	X	X
Older Adult Sunday School		X	
Companions in Christ Group	X	X	
Worship Committee	X		
Other			
Other			

This assessment is both a look at what is currently happening and the potential for improvement as part of a small group ministry. Each box in the matrix offers important information on what exists and where to focus attention for improvement.

It is important to note that not all small groups will fit nicely into a small group ministry plan for spiritual formation and growth as Christian disciples. It is very important for the leader of small group ministries to stay focused on the vision, the desired outcomes, and the potential results of faith formation in small group settings. Too often, directors of small group ministries report that they are expected to care for all small groups in a congregation, regardless of their purpose, function, or place in the larger mission and vision of the church. Such “baby-sitting” is a sure recipe for a poor overall small group ministry.

DETERMINING NEED FOR NEW GROUPS

Very few churches have the luxury of launching a brand new small group ministry. Many groups already exist, and they often do not want to change their form and function to align with a new vision for small groups. Some may already function well and align easily with the vision for small groups in the congregation.

However, successful small group ministries share a common characteristic—they succeed on the strength of strategically developed new groups. When clear congregational outcomes for spiritual growth, faith formation, and development as Christian disciples are identified, then appropriate, effective, and successful groups can be designed that help all participants achieve them. The very best small groups—whether organized for formation, task performance, projects, training, or service—follow a simple path: they are designed to reach specific, measurable, shared, and agreed upon objectives.

Four important questions guide the development of new groups.

1. Whose spiritual formation needs are currently being met?
2. Whose spiritual formation needs are currently not being met?
3. Where can we most improve our offerings for spiritual formation in small groups?
4. What opportunities for spiritual formation are we not currently supporting that might be worth developing?

One of the trickiest parts of launching new groups is when they are perceived as competing with existing groups. Long-standing Sunday school classes often become important social settings where long-time friends gather for simple fellowship. New groups that seek to fill the spiritual formation void created by existing groups can cause hard feelings, resentment, and sometime open hostility.

It is crucial to be very clear that while small group ministries have a purpose and focus and other “small” groups may continue to exist in the congregation, every effort will be made to create spiritual formation and disciple-making environments for all participants in the life of the congregation. The launch of a new seniors’ class does not have to threaten the survival of the existing seniors’ class. All small group ministries opportunities should be offered to all, but never mandated. Too often, small group ministries efforts fail because they are designed to replace all existing groups, instead of complementing and supplementing what already exists.

RECRUITING, TRAINING, AND SUPPORTING SMALL GROUP LEADERS

Make a star or check mark beside this section. Nothing is more important to the success of vital, vibrant, and healthy small groups than leadership. How

small groups are led—and how small group leaders are led—makes all the difference in the world.

A major shift occurred during the late 1990s into the early twenty-first century concerning group leadership. It happened in three stages. Early small group literature focused on the importance of “content experts,” people who knew a lot about the subject matter. In churches, that meant biblical scholars, spiritual practice masters, committee chairs with years of experience, and so on. Over time, small groups became less grounded in information as they became more grounded in process—how to run a group, organize a curriculum, invite conversation, appeal to multiple intelligences, and similar subjects. Currently, the emphasis in small group theory is on creating a productive environment, managing relationships, fostering engagement, and generating authentic communication.

The implication of this evolution is very helpful—look for people who are good with people; everything else can be taught. Many individuals who are approached to be leaders of small groups are reluctant—for a variety of reasons. These reasons include not feeling smart enough, not having time to prepare, not being “more advanced” than many others in the group, not having experience, or a general sense of inadequacy.

Small group leaders selected for their interpersonal skills—listening, sensitivity, authenticity, navigating prickly personalities, and the like—consistently score highest in effectiveness, impact, and positive evaluation from group members.

This does not mean that content and process knowledge is not important. Once the leadership of a congregation sets priorities and objectives that align with the mission and vision of the church, then the leaders of the small group ministries or church council determine what content, topics, and information are important to cover. This decision making may extend to curriculum, but it must include a plan and process for equipping group leaders, regardless of their task. The small group ministries leader acts as a “shepherd to shepherds”—making sure that good leaders are given whatever tools, support, and training they might need to be effective.

Annual planning and training sessions are very helpful, as well as monthly or periodic check-in sessions. Often, small group leaders form a small group themselves, allowing them to “learn as they lead and lead as they learn.” In some cases, having a mix of group leaders—formational group teachers, spiritual accountability facilitators, committee chairs, team leaders, project managers, and others—is extremely beneficial. It reminds everyone that

each is engaged in the mission and ministry of the church, whether they are a member of the Youth Fellowship, the chair of the finance committee, a Sunday school teacher, or an accountable discipleship leader. Small groups evolve from a program of the church into a way of life.

Many of the effective small group ministries in The United Methodist Church involve mentoring and coaching—participants in small groups graduate to lead small groups while former small group leaders coach the newer leaders. Over time, the leadership, facilitation, and support of small groups becomes second nature to a large number of people in the congregation. This creates a self-feeding system where new trainers, coaches, and mentors are developed as part of the vision for an integrated small group ministry focus.

EVALUATING THE PROGRESS AND DEVELOPMENT OF SMALL GROUPS

There is no “right” or “best” way to evaluate the effectiveness of small groups, but some form of evaluation is essential. For too many years, church groups—Bible studies, committees and council, Sunday school classes, and others—were birthed then left to fend for themselves. No one asked, “Are these experiences effectively forming faith and transforming lives?” Few churches talked in terms of a developmental model or progression toward learning goals. The idea that Sunday school classes, Bible studies, and even the ongoing administrative working groups in the congregation served a larger purpose is foreign to many pastors and laity leaders.

Each congregation would benefit from the answer to one simple question—“Why do we need small groups?” What do we want small groups to accomplish? What specific (and concrete) benefits do we see to having small groups—for the individual participant, for the group, for the congregation, for the outside community, and for the world?

Other important questions are:

- What does it mean to be a Christian disciple?
- By what measurements do we determine growth as a Christian disciple?
- What are the absolute basics of the faith that we believe everyone should encounter, discuss, and understand (but, not necessarily agree on)?
- What are the practices and activities that help people grow in their faith and discipleship?
- How can we help people create a learning agenda with goals that will help them become more spiritually grounded and faithfully active?

Any questions of this sort help to frame the vision and purpose of small group ministries. As specific, concrete, and measurable characteristics, practices, and

qualities emerge, they offer a way to assess and evaluate progress. Setting such standards is not intended to limit or constrain anyone, but to provide a framework for building a broad-based and inclusive small group ministries plan.

A common guideline is to think in terms of a three- or four-tiered learning model. The first tier is the “basics,” the second tier is “intermediate,” the third tier is “advanced,” and the fourth tier is “mastery.” What this allows is an entry level for everyone; a deeper experience for people ready for more intense exploration; a focused immersion experience into weightier issues, concepts, and activities; and specialized focus work in areas of spiritual growth, use of spiritual gifts, equipping and training for Christian service. This type of model encourages participation from all people, regardless of where they are in their journey of faith and spiritual maturing, and it promotes the development of learning plans and agendas around specific goals and objectives. It also helps the leadership of small group ministries to clarify strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for new groups and to pursue an evolving vision for the future.

WORKING TO IMPROVE THE SMALL GROUP MINISTRIES

The very best small group ministries are a reflection of the vision, passions, and values of the whole congregation. This relationship is reciprocal, however. As people grow in their faith and discipleship, they shape the values, passions, and vision of the congregation. There is a wonderful dynamic energy in congregations with strong small group ministries.

But, just like the human body, small groups (and the larger small group ministry) will not improve without care, feeding, and exercise. What this means is that congregational leaders must be engaged in small group activities and experiences as well as leading them. Leaders need to set learning goals and objectives for themselves as well as for the congregation. One important decision of congregational leaders wishing to have a strong small group ministry is, “What are the standards of accountability for leadership?”

Do leaders need to be involved in a small group? Are there spiritual practices we want all our congregational leaders to engage in? How will we make sure that we never get too busy to practice what we preach?

It isn't enough to set quantitative goals like:

- We will increase the number of small groups each year, or
- We will connect every church member to a small group in the next twelve months.

Instead of (or, in addition to) such goals, it is essential to also set qualitative goals, such as,

- How can we deepen the experience of participants in our small group offerings?
- Where is there evidence of the greatest growth and development through our small group ministries efforts? How do we maximize the potential in these areas?

Once again, there is no hard and fast rule about working toward improvement except one: if you do not intentionally seek ways to improve, you will not improve (and over time, some small groups will deteriorate and die). Thriving small group ministries constantly infuse their structures and processes with new ideas, new people, and opportunities for development and spiritual growth.

The Small Group Ministries Process

There is strong evidence that effective small group ministries are systemic. They must be supported, endorsed, and promoted by congregational participants at all levels; starting with the pastor and key laity leaders, moving throughout the staff and elected congregational leaders, to the members and visitors who comprise the congregation.

The process for launching a new, or improving an existing small group ministry is not difficult (though it can become a full time job!), though it impacts the entire congregational system. Here is a simple checklist of steps in a launch or improvement process for small group ministries:

- Clarify the congregation's mission and vision for ministry.
- Clarify goals and objectives for small groups that align with the congregational mission and vision.
- Assess current groups—how well are they helping people grow spiritually and develop as Christian disciples? How well are their group experiences aligned with the congregation's mission and vision?
- Assess “gaps”—where are opportunities to launch new groups or improve existing groups?
- Develop a small group ministries vision that includes a clear explanation how the format, structure, and design will align existing and new groups with the larger vision of the church and congregation, and equip people to grow spiritually and develop as Christian disciples.
- Recruit leaders for new groups and work with existing leaders to set some goals and objectives for small group ministries. This may require

some training (and retraining) to help people understand the nature of small group ministries as separate from simply having small numbers of people meet; to realize that boards, committees, councils, and teams have small group ministry potential, and that small group ministries—in order to be successful—must be systemic. Specialized training in content areas and group process may need to be developed.

- ❑ Invite people into the small group ministries journey. How we invite people, how we receive people, and how we integrate them into the life and flow of the group is very important.
- ❑ Monitor and evaluate small groups as they evolve. Make adjustments as necessary. Regularly review the goals and objectives of the various small groups, and work collaboratively to improve and strengthen them.

Clarify What a Group Is and What a Group Is For

At the risk of being redundant, help people understand the special nature of small groups as they comprise a small group ministry. Using these criteria, or some of your own design, clarify what small group ministries are, and what they are for.

1. The people involved clearly understand the purpose of the group.
2. The group is of an appropriate size that every participant may reasonably stay fully engaged.
3. The group connects participants with the larger mission of the church and the spiritual formation of Christian disciples.

Ultimately, a small group is not an end in itself, but a means to an end—to live as a Christian disciple in the world. I will never forget sitting with a young man who shook his head, and said, “I have been a part of a small group at my church for almost six years, and I don’t know God—or myself—any better now than I did when I joined the church.” This is a problem with many small group ministries—they think having small groups is the point.

Small group ministries create lasting value when they provide a structure and process that receive and welcome people, connect them to God and community in Christ, nurture and strengthen them in their spiritual formation, and equip and support them to live their Christian discipleship each and every day of their lives. Any purpose less than this is inadequate to justify a small group ministry.

The Lifespan of a Small Group

If a small group has a clearly defined purpose and participants have clearly set goals and objectives, then it makes sense that each group would have a beginning, a life together, and a time to end and move on. This is not the case in practice, however. Our current tendency is to launch groups that exist

- productively for a long time or
- die a sad and dismal death over time as people lose interest or
- dwindle out, limping along, waiting for someone to put it out of its misery or
- obliviously go on day after day, year after year, for a purpose no one seems to remember.

Rarely do we take time to assess existing groups to see whether they have fulfilled their purpose and outlived their usefulness, nor do we create new groups with a “termination” date built in.

There is strong evidence that project groups are among the most effective, and that participants report the highest satisfaction with the group experience in these settings. What makes project groups unique? Simply that they have a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Bible studies usually have this benefit over Sunday school classes. Project teams, task forces, and boards have this advantage over committees and councils. Mission teams have this advantage over ongoing outreach efforts. In our current culture where people struggle to make long-term time commitments, this preference for “term limit” groups is growing.

Each new small group should determine what it wants to accomplish (set goals), how it will approach its objectives, and how long it should take to do so successfully. This creates an environment where groups serve a larger purpose and do not become a purpose unto themselves.

PHASES OF SMALL GROUP DEVELOPMENT

One great learning of group dynamics is that—either by default or design—all groups have a natural life span. Groups form and develop traits and practices that make them unique. Then, preferences and practices emerge that shape the group’s identity. Groups tend to enter a “golden age,” a time where they are characterized by energy, spirit, productivity, high engagement, and impressive results. Finally, this all gives way to a flattening out—generally in a slightly negative direction where inertia sets in, unless acted on by some change or new influence (like a renewed purpose, infusion of new members, a new leader, and so forth—which, for all intents and purposes, creates a new group anyway).

Many groups dissolve early in the formation period for any of a number of reasons—poor chemistry between members, conflict, dispute over values or vision—while others move quickly to high productivity. Highly engaging and productive groups are rare, but they also define for most people what they would like a group experience to be. Many groups that stay together long past their time of vitality, harken back to early “glory days.” This image of an exciting, meaningful, and effective group is very compelling. In reality, however, the effective phase of most groups—whether they are for discussion, formation, fellowship, decision making, planning, or study—is relatively brief. There is virtually no evidence that supports the idea that groups continue to grow in strength and value over time, though most groups in the church setting have life spans measured not in months or years, but in decades.

The best rule to follow is this: Let the desired outcomes determine how long the group needs to be together. (Remembering that we operate by grace—it is always okay for a group to last longer than intended. What is not okay, helpful, or healthy is for a group to go on indefinitely when it is not fulfilling its vision, mission, or purpose.)

BIRTHING A SMALL GROUP

The most delicate and challenging phase of group life is its birth. This is especially true in groups for formation, development, study, and discussion—where the subject matter is life issues, beliefs, values, and a sense of meaning and purpose. People need time to get to know one another, build trust, find common ground, develop respect and consideration, share feelings and thoughts, and take risks. Rushing too quickly into content, task, or curriculum can be deadly to a fledgling group.

Many people (approximately seventy-one percent in one survey) report that they dislike “touchy-feely” group building, get-to-know-you exercises. Yet, the evidence is overwhelming that such experiences contribute greatly to bonding group members together. Laughter, silliness, and fun also lay a powerful foundation for group development. A compassionate appeal—help for a community cause or special need—has a galvanizing effect on a group of strangers. The most important role of a small group leader early in the launch of a new group is to act as midwife to the birth—to pay attention to the emotional climate and the less tangible indicators of developing relationships. Here is a short list of factors to watch while a group is forming:

- Is everyone engaged and participating?
- Is anyone dominating?
- How is the body language?
- Are there signs of discomfort?

- How easily do people laugh?
- Can people speak without being challenged?
- Is there consensus on why we are here?
- What is my own intuition telling me? Where do I feel most hopeful? most cautious? most concerned?

THE CARE AND FEEDING OF THE INFANT SMALL GROUP

It will not take long to determine how well or how poorly a group will mesh, where “pinch points” (potential problems) may occur, the level of engagement of various participants, and its overall spirit and climate. There are, however, some incredibly helpful tools and techniques to promote a healthy group environment.

Ground rules: a list of rules, behaviors, practices that everyone can agree on that define both the way people prefer to be treated, as well as naming those things the group will not tolerate.

Operating covenant: a statement of promises made by the group about how they will behave, hold one another accountable, support one another, and collaboratively work together to achieve the goals and purpose of the group. This can be a powerful reminder of the guiding and governing values of a group.

Designated roles (that can rotate from person to person): gatekeepers, greeters, timekeepers, snack providers, chaplains, fun promoters, and so forth—are excellent ways to get and keep people involved in caring for one another and the group as a whole.

Reflection time: a time to step back objectively and ask a few pointed questions: How did we do as a group? What have we learned? What felt good? What felt not-so-good? What went right/wrong? Where could we improve? When the success of the group is everyone’s responsibility, it changes the dynamic of the group and can bring people together.

As a small group leader, it is important during the infancy stage for people to feel they can share one-on-one. Listening to individual group members has a good positive effect on the group as a whole. Many people, especially in new group settings, are reluctant to say in front of everyone something they nonetheless need and want to say. The small group leader plays an essential role in weaving together the separate individuals that make up a group.

COMMON PROBLEMS IN SMALL GROUP MINISTRIES

This is in no way an exhaustive list, but a variety of considerations for leaders in small group ministries.

Lack of clear purpose: Just getting people together in small groups isn't worth much. Small groups need to be designed for a purpose, and lacking that purpose it is almost impossible to sustain a vital small groups ministry. Often, church councils decide they want to "do" small groups because they have heard that other churches have been successful with them. This is not an acceptable reason to do small groups. In addition, small groups have been used as an evangelism gimmick to get new people to join the church. This is only acceptable if the invitation to join a small group is linked to a developmental vision that results in equipping people to live their faithful discipleship in the world.

Inertia: Inertia is another word for two common church maladies—"We've never done it that way before," and "We've always done it this way." Most people who are in a group of approximately twelve people believe that they are in a "small group ministry." They often see no reason to change what they do, and the imposition of standards for small group ministry cause resistance, conflict, and other forms of inappropriate behavior.

Any time changes are made there is a natural period of resistance and adjustment. Just about every church that is serious about small groups ministries will tell stories of difficulties they encountered, particularly with pre-existing groups. One of the important jobs of the small group ministries leader is to share the vision for small groups that helps people understand why the changes are important. When people see value in change, they resist less and it becomes easier to break free from inertia.

Attrition: Many small groups start out with energy, excitement, and commitment then dwindle away over time. Once the early enthusiasm begins to wane, groups find it difficult to stay together. Smaller groups, those of five to seven members, tend to stay together better than larger groups. Groups of twelve to twenty tend to lose approximately 40 percent of their participants, unless strong commitments and covenants are made early and returned to regularly. Larger groups tend to dwindle to about 50 percent their intended size over time.

Larger groups that do their work in smaller groupings have a higher success rate and greater longevity than those that try to include everyone at the same time. One rule to remember is this: The greater the intimacy, the greater the

engagement. People stay connected to small, intimate groups of people with clear priorities and goals.

Small groups as ends in themselves: Some churches set goals like—“We want to connect every person to a small group,” or “We want to launch ten new small groups a year” or “Every new member will be assigned to a small group.” These goals tend to yield very poor results. The reason is that they confuse means with ends.

Small groups are one way to enable people to grow in their spirituality and Christian discipleship. They provide a wonderful, rich framework for interaction, learning, decision making, planning, and exploring new ideas. However, not every small group is right for every person, and a generic “small group” offers value to no one. There is little benefit in forcing people to fit into a group. The most effective groups are designed to meet specific needs. Sometimes, people coalesce around an idea, need, or project and they form a small group. Sometimes small groups are designed around a specific purpose, and people join the group to meet a need. Just getting together for fellowship or to figure out something to do or to follow a set curriculum or agenda for all groups doesn’t qualify as an effective small group ministry. Indeed, most people find such structures to be an unsustainable waste of time.

Dominators and Misbehavers: Ask small group leaders the number one problem they deal with and usually they will answer, “There’s this one person . . .” Small groups — whether for Bible study, Sunday school classes, worship committees, youth groups, or mission project teams—regularly find themselves derailed by one or two dominating voices or individuals with their own needs and agenda. Confronting bad behavior may be the most important skill a small group leader can develop. Supporting small group leaders who deal with problem people may be one of the most important jobs of the leader of small group ministries.

Behavioral covenants and group ground rules are two of the most effective tools to deal with poor group behavior. When everyone shares responsibility to hold group members accountable to agreed upon rules of conduct, domination and misbehavior are much less likely.

Isolationist Mentality: “I don’t go to church anymore—my small group is my church.” Believe it or not, this is not an unusual response from people who love their small group, but have no sense of how groups fit the larger identity of the community of faith. Small groups must be shepherded and

monitored regularly so that they don't splinter off and do their own thing. A small group that is not integrated into the larger community of faith is not a part of a small group ministry. It is a problem.

Groups that fall in love with themselves: The only thing worse than a bad group experience is . . . a great group experience. Many groups enjoy their time together so much that they decide they want to stay together always. Finishing a Bible study or work project, they begin trying to preserve the wonderful feeling by coming up with something else to do.

This is normal, and makes sense, but research shows that these groups have a terrible success rate. What seems like a good idea at the time soon shows signs of wear. Drop-out rates increase, engagement declines, and most people end up feeling bad about the group experience instead of looking back with joy. End on the highest note possible, and resist the temptation to allow groups to continue simply because they had one great experience together.

EVALUATION STANDARDS

There are two fundamental measurement criteria used to evaluate any process, project, or performance: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative metrics measure in numbers and amounts. For example, a worship service is successful if more than 100 people attend, a children's vacation Bible school sets a goal of 50 children a day, or a church sets a membership goal of five new members a month. Quantitative measures are easy—just count. Qualitative measures are a bit more difficult. Following the earlier examples, how well did worship connect the 100 people to a sense of God's presence? What did the 50 children learn about God, faith, and their Christian behavior each day they attended VBS? How well do the five new monthly members grow in their Christian discipleship, and how are they living their faith in the world? These are qualitative measures.

It is never enough to determine the success or failure of small group ministries in terms of the number of small groups, the number of people involved, how often they meet, or how many new groups get launched. Beyond these measures, it is important to understand how people's lives are being changed, how they are growing in their faith in, and understanding of, God, and how they integrate their faith into practice.

Remember, a group of 10 people who reorient their lives to be full-time disciples is much more impressive than 500 people who sit in circles in small groups talking about what fun activities they would like to do together.

One simple, periodic process to follow is to answer the following questions with the whole leadership of the congregation:

1. What is our mission and purpose as a congregation?
2. What roles do small groups play in helping us fulfill our mission and reach our goals as a congregation?
3. What do we want small groups to provide for participants?
4. How well are our existing small groups meeting these needs?
5. How might we improve existing groups to offer more to participants?
6. What other groups could we offer to enable more people to grow in their relationship to God and help this community of faith fulfill its mission and purpose?

These questions cannot be answered quantitatively. Assessing the role of small groups in spiritual formation and helping the congregation fulfill its mission are only possible when we include qualitative metrics in our evaluation.

ENDING A SMALL GROUP

One word: party. Make the ending of each small group experience a celebration. End each Sunday school class with a party and a thank-you to the leaders and participants. End each Bible study with a worship celebration. End each term of a board, council, team, or committee with a barbecue or a picnic or dinner out. Don't let small groups fizzle or fade—make sure each goes out with a bang. Honor how valuable it was to begin with by making a big deal to end with.

This is true even with small groups that fail. Once it is determined that a group needs to end before its intended time, send it off positively. This lays a wonderful foundation for future small group experiences.

Remember, the very best small group experiences have a clear beginning, middle, and end. When people know a party is coming, they get excited. When people feel honored for their involvement, they stay engaged. When leaders feel deeply appreciated for their efforts, they want to lead again—and those who have not yet had the chance look forward to it.

Occasionally, an event or experience ends painfully, and celebration must be replaced with space for grief and solace. Pay attention to what is most appropriate, but in every situation help small groups come to a clear and definitive conclusion.

SEEING THE BIG PICTURE

A strong and effective small group ministry lays a great foundation for the congregation to grow and thrive. Small groups offer fertile soil for formation that leads to transformation. It creates an environment for dialogue, discussion, deep exploration, reflection, and discovery. It connects people together in meaningful ways—moving people from an individualized faith journey into a radical community of faith. It establishes a network of relationships that bridge generations, gender, culture, race, and lifestyle. It reframes faith from a deeply private experience to an incredibly powerful shared experience.

Small group ministries equip people to:

- strengthen their relationship with God and neighbor
- align behaviors with beliefs
- live their faith in the world
- create lasting relationships grounded in spiritual growth and development
- become leaders within the congregation, the community, and the world
- share their faith as both teachers and students together
- become the body of Christ in each and every congregation.

Resources

** Indicates our top picks

- *A Perfect Love: Understanding John Wesley's "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,"* by Steven W. Manskar (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2004. ISBN 978-0-88177-426-9). An updated language version with study guide by Diana L. Hynson.
- ***The Christian Small-Group Leader*, by Thomas R. Hawkins (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2001. ISBN 978-0-88177-328-6). Helps group leaders form and transform a people of God.
- ***Cultivating Christian Community*, by Thomas R. Hawkins (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2001. ISBN 978-0-88177-327-9). Describes the marks of Christian community in small groups, accountability groups, service groups, support groups, and administrative groups. Also available for Lay Speaking training.
- ***Facilitating With Ease*, by Ingrid Bens (Jossey-Bass, 2000. ISBN 978-0-78795-194-3). Description of facilitation for small group leaders.
- *Growing People Through Small Groups*, by David Stark and Betty Veldman Wieland (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2004. ISBN 978-0-76422-912-1).
- ***Group Dynamics* (third edition), by Donelson R. Forsyth (Wadsworth Publishing, 1998. ISBN 0534-261-485).
- *The Heart's Journey: Christian Spiritual Formation in the Life of a Small Group*, by Barb Nardi Kurtz (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2001. ISBN 978-0-88177-326-2). Weaving the means of grace in the life of your small group.
- *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples*, by Thom S. Ranier and Eric Geiger (B&H Publishing: Nashville, 2006. ISBN 978-0-80544-390-5).
- *The Wesleyan Tradition: A Paradigm for Renewal*, edited by Paul W. Chilcote (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002. ISBN 987-0-687-09563-6). A collection of essays that describe the basic theology and practices of Christian formation in the Wesleyan tradition.
- ***The Wisdom of Teams*, by Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas S. Smith (HarperCollins, 2006. ISBN 978-0-06052-200-1). An excellent explanation of the power and potential of teams and small groups. More practical and simple information than any other book on teams.
- www.gbod.org/small_group
- *Cokesbury small group resources*—Cokesbury offers a wide range of materials for small groups in different settings. From Sunday school to mid-week Bible study, Cokesbury offers print, video, and electronic resources for study of the Bible and life issues. Contact Cokesbury for a copy of the most recent Adult Small Group Resource catalog (800-672-1789).