

**Creating Community:
5 Keys to Building a Small Group Culture
By: Andy Stanley and Bill Willits
Multnomah, 2004**

Introduction:

In November 1995 Andy Stanley stood before a gathering of believers to cast a vision for a new church. "Atlanta does not need another church. What Atlanta does need is a safe environment where the unchurched can come and hear the life-changing truth that Jesus Christ cares for them and died for their sin." So began North Point Community Church. Nine years later they have +16,000 attending on three campuses. How do we explain this phenomenal ministry success?

Well, from one perspective it is just a God thing. God is ultimately the author of all true church growth, to Him be the glory. But, if we push too hard on that idea we end up saying that God is the problem when a church is not growing. I don't think we meant to say that. How else do we explain this?

Andy Stanley is betting the farm on doubling groups

Before [Northpoint](#) ever started, Andy started a group in his home. He met with a handful of other couples to encourage one another, study the Bible together, pray and fellowship. This accidental community group became the model for their exploding group ministry that exists today in every facet of their ministry.

Here are a few quotes from their web site and from some [Northpoint](#) small group training CDs that emphasize this passion for doubling groups:

- "We believe the small group is the best place for sustained life-change to occur. In a small group, people study God's Word together and are in a safe enough environment to discuss the issues and challenges of life. It's also where they pray, care for one another, and are missed if they don't show up."
- "Success at [Northpoint](#) is defined by how effectively our ministries move people from our large environments into small groups."
- "I believe I will have more kingdom impact with the 10 people that meet in my home on Monday night than I will with the thousands whom I preach before on Sundays." -Andy Stanley
- Andy has set the goal of having 100,000 people in community groups by the year 2010.

The most important way Andy Stanley has bet the farm on doubling groups is not through what he says but through what he does.

Every week, Andy meets with a group.

It may seem like no big deal, but Andy meets with a group. In fact, he has said publicly on many occasions that "he would do it anyway." That is, he would want to meet with his group even if he was not the pastor of [Northpoint](#). He doesn't meet with a group just to be a good example when asking other people to meet in groups. He meets with a group because he loves meeting with a group and he asks others to do so because he believes they will love it as well.

Closed groups at [Northpoint](#)

One interesting facet of the way they do groups at [Northpoint](#) is that their Community Groups are closed groups. They meet for twelve to eighteen months and then reproduce. Once they start, new people cannot attend, except for an occasional exception granted with the permission of the whole group. They do this is to provide a safe and *consistent* environment where people can share their lives together. It is easier to develop community and intimacy with a consistent group of the same faces each week. After about 18 months, the group divides in two, inviting a few friends to join them in each group.

Groups are strongly encouraged to sign a group covenant. Andy Stanley says nearly every problem in group life centers around misunderstandings that could have been cleared up with a group covenant.

Three Environments at [Northpoint](#)

[Northpoint](#) emphasizes three environments: the Foyer, the Living Room and the Kitchen. The Foyer is the weekly worship service for adults and larger events for groups, ie Singles, youth and kids. The Foyer is an entry point and is a big event.

From the Foyer, [Northpoint](#) seeks to move people into the Living Room. These are medium sized groups and include things like the following:

- Singles area fellowship
- Married adult live
- Inside out
- Xtreme
- Wambuland

From the foyer, people are directed toward the kitchen. These are small groups. This is the place where lasting friendships are made.

BOOK Summary:

1. A Culture Craving Relationship

We are in a culture craving relationship. In the midst of our crowded existence, many of us are living lonely lives. We live and work in a sea of humanity, but we end up missing out on the benefits of regular, *meaningful* relationships. When we aren't in meaningful relationships, we suffer natural consequences, whether we realize it or not. Some common examples:

1. Lost Perspective - We are in a battle. "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood" and that our enemy's most successful strategy is to isolate us so he can attack.
2. Fear of Intimacy - People who fear intimacy think that if others really get to know them, they won't like them, so they would rather stay disconnected than risk rejection.
3. Selfishness - Over time, a disconnected person becomes self-absorbed.
4. Poor Health - A person's ability to love and connect with others lays the foundation for both psychological and physical health.

2. Create Your Community

God has called the church to be about: creating environments where authentic community can take place. Building relational, transforming communities where people are experiencing oneness

with God and oneness with one another. Communities that are so satisfying, so unique, and so compelling that they create thirst in a watching world.

3. Clarify the Goal

What Do You Want People To Become?

Some churches could be classified as *skilled-based churches*. Their primary focus seems to be on people becoming proficient and effective in certain skills. Another group of churches could be called *Bible-knowledge churches*. Their core purpose is to help people become biblically literate.

Competence in areas like relational evangelism is key for people to become effective partners with God. Biblical literacy is important for people to become lifelong self-learners of the Scriptures and doers of the word. But in and of themselves, I would suggest they aren't the goal.

Clarifying what you want people to become will ultimately define your church's mission.

5. Define Spiritual Maturity

What do we want people to do? If answering the first question answered the *What?* For us, then answering this second question answered the *How?* How are people going to become what we want them to become? Clarify our understanding of spiritual maturity.

The activity and instruction of God for all time can be summed up in two things: loving Him and loving others. That's it. These two activities give evidence of a person's spiritual growth and maturity. So what do we want people to do? We say it this way:

We want people to grow in their intimacy with God, community with insiders, and influence with outsiders. Recognizing people's need for meaningful connections and the reality that *sustained* life change takes place best in the context of intentional relationships, we want people to be growing in community with other believers. We encourage people to *invest* in the lives of their unbelieving friends and then *invite* them at the appropriate time to one of our relevant environments, where these guests will be encouraged in their spiritual journey.

6. Decide Where People Go

Answering the question *Where do we want people to go?* Allows you to clarify the "win" for your organization. We're unanimous about where we want people to go: to a small group. So what do we want people to become? People growing in their relationship with Jesus Christ. What do we want people to do? Pursue three vital relationships. Where do we want people to go? Into a small group.

7. Find Your Word

If clarity around mission is the first step, then executing a strategy is the next. Finding your organization's word is a valuable step in arriving at an effective strategy. Be known for Something.

The word we hoped people would associate with us was *relational*. We want to do ministry in the context of relationship *in* communities, not *on* committees. What's most important is that you land *somewhere* because something *will* come to mind when the people in your community describe you. Fairly or unfairly, a word will come up. What do you want it to be?

8. Choose Your Strategy

A great strategy is simple to understand and easy to implement.

Our small-group approach supports, rather than competes with, our "invest and invite" evangelism strategy. We have also found that some unchurched people are more open to

connecting in a home than they are willing to visit a church. Some want to *belong* before they are willing to *believe*. *Why groups?*

- Groups Decentralize Church Leadership and Care
- Groups Enable More People to Serve
- Groups Help Develop Authentic Community.
- Groups don't only offer flexibility *when* they meet, but also *where* they meet.
- Groups Allow Us To Be Better Stewards. Requires fewer church-owned and maintained facilities.
- Groups Remove the Primary Limits to Growth. We will never run out of room or parking with our groups strategy, because people are meeting at homes in neighborhoods around the city.

9. Close the Door

A distinctive of our small-group strategy is that we close the door. That is we have *closed groups*. Purposefully so. We have given it a lot of thought, weighed the pros and cons, and have chosen to keep the participants in our groups as consistent as possible throughout an eighteen-to twenty-four-month covenant period. By "closed groups," I mean that we encourage no new additions to the group unless the entire group signs off on it. Our rationale for having closed groups is simple. If disruptions work against the effectiveness of a meeting, then disruption works against *any* meeting, small groups included. If interruptions compromise momentum by interfering with a person's focus, then interruptions will likewise compromise a small group and fulfillment of the group's promise. Our group promise is synonymous with the purpose statement for our community groups, which is "to provide a predictable small-group environment where participants experience authentic community and spiritual growth."

When I say predictable, I'm talking about *who* the participants can expect to be attending their group. When groups frequently change, they rip a plank right out of that relational foundation. When I say predictable, I'm also referring to *what* participants can expect from their group. That's why groups fill out covenants. A group that is not allowed to experience relational momentum becomes compromised and can lead to pseudo-community and a bad group experience. A bad group experience leads to an unfulfilled promise and dissatisfied group "customers." We define authentic community around the ABC's of group life: accountability, belonging, and care.

Accountability; which involves inviting other people into your life to challenge you in your priorities and relationships. A person who has a sense of *belonging* is someone who feels accepted, connected, and comfortable with a group of people. A by-product of people connecting well is that they *care* for each other. People care for people they know well. Groups that constantly change seldom experience authentic community. They are weakened in their ability to deliver accountability, belonging, and care because they are never able to build the relational capital to get to that depth of relationship. Closed groups also allow us to better experience spiritual growth. We define spiritual growth around the continual pursuit of three vital relationships- intimacy with God, community with insiders, and influences with outsiders. Closed groups allow us to monitor a member's growth in these relationships over time. A group that has history together knows each other's tendencies and how to keep one another moving in the right direction. Closed groups can better keep participants focused on the value of evangelism.

Our groups are challenged to multiply after their covenant period, usually in eighteen to twenty-four months.

10. Create Steps

Clarify the Win -We felt so strongly about it that the only numerical goal we have ever set as a church has been based on group participation. We call it our "Foyer to Kitchen" strategy. We believe church programs should not work in competition with each other, but work as steps to move people down a relational path to where we want them to go into a small group.

The Foyer

Our foyers at large environments designed to *change people's minds about church* and, therefore, God as well. Our worship service is our best-known foyer environment because it tends to be the most utilized entrance by the unchurched.

The Living Room

It is in the living room where guests begin to feel like *friends*. Our living rooms are medium-sized environments designed to *change people's minds about connecting*. We have built a "taste of community" into all of our living room environments.

The Kitchen Table

The kitchen table is where close friends begin to feel more like *family*. Our kitchen tables are our small-group environments. Our small groups have been designed to *change people's minds about their priorities* that throughout the activity of God and the influence of their group, their priorities and God's priorities will line up; hat over time, their lives will change. Starting Point is our starter track. It is a thirteen-week small-group environment that is targeted for seekers, starters, and returners. Primary small-group environment is a community group. About six couples or eight individuals who covenant to meet for eighteen to twenty-four months. It is in this environment that we hope participants will pursue and experience authentic community and spiritual growth. Guests, friends, family. Foyer, living room, kitchen table. Each environment is designed to be a place God can use to change lives.

11. Make Them Easy

For a step to be effective, it needs to be easy, obvious and strategic.

Strategies in linking or connecting people into groups:

GroupLink is a two hour event where people connect with others in their geographic area and stage of life to start a community group. Usually takes place four times a year. Additionally, Andy preaches at least one message on community each year, usually before a scheduled GroupLink. The goal of the evening to bring people together who want to connect and help them form a group. We present a helpful ten-minute video to clarify what they can realistically expect from a group. Then several people share their stories. Then group leaders are introduced by name, group location, and the day they can meet. Often attendees have already formed their new groups with the people sitting around them. Most connected groups start within two weeks of the GroupLink. There are only three ways attendees can connect into a community group. They can (1) connect through the relationships they make in a living room environment (2) through the relationships they make while attending Starting Point or (3) through GroupLink. Of all three, GroupLink is now the primary way we connect people into group life.

12. Try Before You Buy

Some people fear they will be trapped if they join a group that after a few weeks, the group will not be what they wanted or expected and *it will be too late*.

A starter group is a group that 'dates' for eight weeks. If the group gels, they continue on for the entire covenant period as a fully functioning community group. If it doesn't, no hard feelings. No questions asked. They simply go to the next GroupLink and try again. Over 90 percent of the groups connected at GroupLink continue on after eight-week starter period. We also take several steps to set our starter groups up for success:

Staff Coach - The role of the staff member is to monitor the group's progress and to shepherd the leader through the starter period.

Provide each new group *with a DVD* that we request they show during their first group meeting. Revisit the purpose and priorities of a North Point community group and setting clear expectations.

Leader Guide and Curriculum - Provides a “next steps” section and guides the leaders through the appropriate next steps, after the starter period has concluded.

13. Deal in Reality

Experience had taught us that the average volunteer has time to do no more than twenty things a year. If our groups are going to be effective, the processes we put in place have to be realistic. They have to be able to work with the average person in mind. People want to make a difference, but they also have other important responsibilities. We make a distinction between a person who leads a *group meeting* and a person who leads a *group*. We encourage our groups to rotate responsibility for leading the discussion.

Qualifications are meant to keep some people out of leadership, not all people out of leadership.

A person who leads or oversees a group:

First, leaders have to be *connected*. Second, they need to have *character*. They need to be known by others as people of integrity and solid reputation. Third, leaders must embrace our group’s *culture*. Fourth, they must have good *chemistry* with staff and other leaders. Fifth, leaders need to have a level of *competence*. The role of the leader is simply to serve as a shepherd in two ways: by facilitating the group and by monitoring the group. We mean facilitating the organization of the group. By *monitoring* the group, we mean checking the pulse or health of the group. We found that it was reasonable for a coach to monitor their groups, but not develop their leaders, and there is a big difference. We give the coaching responsibility directly to our staff group directors. Our group’s director’s (staff people) is to shepherd sixty leaders.

Reasonable qualifications, realistic expectations and occasional modifications - All three contribute to a groups system that deals in reality.

14. Train Less for More

People need to be trained around the core principles they need to know, not an endless amount of information that is nice for them to know.

“Train less for more” is ideal.

We believe these six essentials are critical to leading well:

- Keeping the life-change goal in front of leaders challenges them to keep their groups purposeful.
- Relationships require regular intentional deposits.
- Promote participation within the group
- Leaders to intentionally apprentice someone in their group for future leadership.
- Leaders need to understand the primary way we provide care to our attendees is through community groups. It equips the leaders on how to deal with challenging situations in their groups.
- Multiplying their groups.

At both of our annual training events, we take one essential and drill down designing an entire event around it. This allows leaders to be trained on all six essentials every three years.

15. Set up for Success

I believe there are five factors that position a small group’s ministry for success.

1. Keep your church’s strategy simple. We try to do a few things well. If a ministry isn’t a step toward community, we don’t do it. Simple systems are easier to understand, easier to communicate and easier to implement.

2. The more visible groups are, the more people get the message that they are important and a priority for our church. Andy speaks on community often. We promote GroupLink five times a

year, baptism with a brief video testimony. The majority of those baptized conclude by thanking the members of their small group for their influence and encouragement. Make these times relevant and creative.

3. What's valued is celebrated. Groups are constantly celebrated through our announcements, sketches, and sermon illustrations. It is part of the DNA

4. Without the appropriate resources, no groups system will ever get off the ground.

Personnel – provide specialized staff in areas like assimilation and leader development. Training – make events adequately funded to make them relevant and creative. Our goal is to do both with excellence, and, as a result, participation is high. Resource *childcare*. We chose to reimburse people at a predetermined rate for their childcare expenses so that parents can attend group meetings.

5. Modeled - Senior leaders who view small-group participation as a personal passion and not just a program. As in any church, the senior leader is the real point leader for groups. You cannot put enough value on seeing key leadership participate in-group life.