

EXTERNALLY FOCUSED SMALL GROUPS

How churches are re-engineering their small groups for community service

by Krista Petty

Article Summary

How do churches effectively increase the level of community service without detracting from the internal strength of the church or competing with other programs? Re-engineering small groups to serve as well as study together is one of the more popular answers to this dilemma of staying internally strong while being externally focused.

Further Reading

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[Strategies for Investing in Your Community: How Externally Focused Churches are Leveraging Their Impact](#)

By Krista Petty

Externally focused churches are those which engage people in serving outside the walls of the church to do good works, create good will and share the good news. For many of these churches, community involvement is not simply an additional ministry department they wish to add to the menu of existing programs. Rather, serving others outside the walls of the church is a core value they wish to strengthen in all areas of church ministry and a mandate of Scripture they wish to follow. 1 John 3:18 says, “Let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.” How do churches effectively increase the level of community service and heighten this spiritual value without detracting from the internal strength of the church or competing with other programs? Re-engineering their existing small group ministry is one of the more popular answers to this dilemma of staying internally strong while being externally focused.



For many churches, spiritual maturity and strong friendships thrive in small group communities.

Small group ministry has become a vital part of church life—helping a congregation to grow in spiritual maturity and Christian friendship. Very few people would debate the personal value of the small group learning experience. Beyond the personal value, churches are discovering the power small groups add to the health of their organization and the church’s credibility in the community when they serve together. As the following churches illustrate, adding an expectation of missions, outreach and service to an existing small group ministry is an effective way to infuse service into the culture of the church. In this model of community involvement, different ministry areas work together, instead of competing—synergizing for maximum Kingdom

impact. When small groups serve together, it allows church leaders to take advantage of what is working well—relationship-building and spiritual growth—and add a new dimension to this existing, well-proven model of ministry. Churches that set a high expectation of groups and clearly present opportunities for serving together are mobilizing large numbers of people for long-term and even cost-effective community service. Additionally, the groups themselves find community service beneficial. Personal relationships between group members deepen and their Bible study comes to life in new ways as they bless their cities together.

A CHURCH WITH A STRONG SMALL GROUP SYSTEM HAS A KEY ASSET IN PLACE FOR ORGANIZING MEMBERS FOR VOLUNTEER MINISTRY.

Small Groups and Church Today

In many churches, small group ministry has become as essential as meeting for worship, prayer and Bible study because it not only gives people relational connection; it connects them to the work going on to build the body of Christ. “A church with a strong small group system has a key asset in place for organizing members for volunteer ministry,” write authors Ronald Sider, Philip Olson and Heidi Unruh in *Churches that Make a Difference*.¹ So how does a church with a strong small group culture add the community service component in a way that compliments, not competes?



Small group members at Fellowship Bible Church North serve together.

At **Fellowship Bible Church North**, Plano, TX, (<http://www.fbcnorth.org>) small groups are an integral part of church life. Out of the 4,000 in attendance each weekend, over 1,800 are also involved in a small group during the week. “Our small groups, called LifeGroups, are the primary

place where life happens at Fellowship. It is where three of the five core functions of our church take place: connect, grow, and share,” says Glen Brechner, adult ministries pastor. The church had a strong small group ministry for a number of years, so when leadership decided to greatly expand serving in the community, the discussion eventually came around to integrating the small group ministry with community service—but not at first.

Internally Strong and Externally Focused Groups

According to Glen, the church actually tried a number of strategies first, not seeing the synergy between service and the small group dynamic. Fellowship Bible planned and participated in all-church community service events—where hundreds of members served schools and community agencies on a weekend. They also

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preached an on-going externally focused vision from the pulpit, but the church’s leadership admits they repeatedly lost traction when it came to living into the vision for long-term success until they looked at their small groups. “While we thought our groups were healthy, we soon realized that truly healthy groups have a purpose beyond themselves.

Making a group healthy means getting groups to look out instead of in; to serve instead of consume. While most of our groups had the heart to make a difference, few did,” says Glen.

The church developed a strategy for each of their groups to be internally healthy and externally focused. Glen explained this concept to each new LifeGroup leader in a revision of their small group training manual. He wrote:

“When we talk about being internally healthy, we are referring to people developing relationships which are life-giving to each person—relationships where people are there for one another in order to help in traveling life’s journey. These relationships develop in an environment of

authenticity and grace, and it is our desire for that environment to be found in a LifeGroup.... An externally focused group means that as you experience life together you build bridges to others so they can journey with you. Being externally focused means that as you travel together with your group, you will not have tunnel vision but will be looking for others to bring on the journey.”

The new concept of LifeGroups serving in the community was well received. Along with the re-writing of the training manual, Glen and his team produced a DVD where they personally explained this concept as well as encouraged groups to take this leap into serving others with an open mind and prepared heart. They reminded groups of the biblical mandate to serve and emphasized the positive results to come for the relationships within the groups themselves. “Outreach is always the hardest rock to push up the hill for any church, but we’ve learned that if you get your small groups involved it will not only make a difference in the community, it will develop deeper community within the small groups at your church,” says Glen.



GLEN BRECHNER

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The positive results coming from Fellowship Bible’s commitment to small group ministry and community service are powerful examples of a person’s need to connect both spiritually and in community with others. In 2002, Princeton sociologist and author Robert Wuthnow was interviewed by Religion and Ethics Newsweekly about small groups and spirituality in America today. According to Wuthnow, the small group dynamic permeates society and is a major force of people’s spiritual journey. Wuthnow says, “Small groups are an amazing phenomenon. Something between 35 and 40 percent of the public is involved in some kind of small group. Two thirds of those people are involved in a group that’s connected to a church or synagogue. We’re talking about Bible study groups, prayer fellowships, self-help groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, men’s groups, women’s groups. They’re enormously important. They give people a

sense of community. They give people a way to talk about their spiritual life. People come together, pray together, study the Bible together. And they also learn how to be better people.”²

Small groups come in all shapes and sizes—from intimate accountability groups of four friends to larger groups with 20 people sharing life together. Being involved in a group for connection and spiritual growth is not just essential for people “learning how to be better people,” as Wuthnow explains. Many churches find that small group ministry is foundational to the success of their organization. It is a common belief that in a typical church body 20% of the people do 80% of the work. An effective small group ministry, like Fellowship Bible’s, can actually help congregations flip that percentage around so that each person in the church finds a way to connect, build and grow the church as Paul wrote about in Ephesians 4:16: “From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” In their book, *Building a Church of Small Groups*, Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson write, “[effective church leaders] know that working the small group pattern into their fabric of church life is the only way they can become a true body as each part does its work.”³

Setting Group Expectations

In addition to explaining internal group health for external service, the leaders at Fellowship Bible Church North found they had to be clear about their expectations of each group. Staff asked each group to choose one of three bridges to build over the course of a year. Glen explains, “One bridge is a relational bridge of connection to someone in their circle of influence that needs Jesus Christ. The second option is to build a community bridge by adopting an agency or school that their group can serve. Finally, they can choose to build a global bridge by connecting with a missionary, people group, culture or country.”

Once a group has chosen which bridge they want to build together, they are expected to actively pursue it one out of every four or five time the groups meets. “Instead of spending an evening in a living room, they’re spending that time in a food pantry or teen shelter serving the community

together,” says Glen. Each group is asked to serve with one of 20-30 community partners or develop their own service opportunities. With 1,800 people in small groups, that makes for a significant service force for Plano, Texas and the surrounding communities.

Like Fellowship, **North Coast Church**, Vista, CA (<http://www.northcoastchurch.com>) has a strong small group culture. “Once a person visits the church, the main message they hear after the gospel is to join a growth group,” says Casey Yorman, community ministry pastor. And people at North Coast have gotten that message. Since 1985, North Coast has seen weekly attendance in their small groups equal eighty percent of the weekend attendance. Casey has also found that setting clear goals and expectations of group leaders is a great way to get them involved in serving. North Coast has an ambitious goal of performing well over one service project every day, on average, in their community; and small groups are key to reaching it. “We ask each small group to do two service projects during the year,” says Casey. If every group does that, they will easily attain that goal. They first communicated this “project-a-day” idea to small group leaders at their kick-off meeting in the fall of 2006. So far they have seen good response and are exceeding their goal. Small groups and individuals completed 120 community service projects in only 100 days during the fall of 2006.



The small groups of North Coast flood their community with service.

Providing Opportunities for Groups to Serve

Beyond setting a goal for each small group to serve together, both churches have found it necessary to present clear opportunities for engagement. Simply lobbying in an expectation for

small groups to serve together wasn't enough. Casey explains that at North Coast, they try to make it easy for small groups to do a project together. "Wednesday and Thursday nights are the most popular nights for small groups to meet. So we try to keep projects centered around those days," he says.

Glen Brechner agrees that presenting clear opportunities has been a key factor to Fellowship's success. "Hands down what has worked best for us is connecting groups with our community partnerships," admits Glen. Each year, small groups are given a one page description on each community partner and what it takes to help them for the year. "As groups have gotten more experienced, we've also seen them get more creative, bringing ideas to us that they could do," he says.

To continually feed service opportunities to small groups, both Fellowship and North Coast actively pursue connections with local agencies and have a volunteer structure that supports the small groups and the community agencies. Glen explains the Fellowship model: "Our small groups are set up by geographic regions, so people living in a particular area are in a small group together. We have area outreach coordinators that network within an area and identify key bridge building opportunities for LifeGroups."

North Coast takes a slightly different approach to engaging their small groups, not by geographic region, but by stage of life. "Our small group

easily connect to a project by visiting the church web site or by looking through the community service flier produced quarterly. "We made it easy for them to do a project and we've seen a few groups adopt an agency," shares Casey.



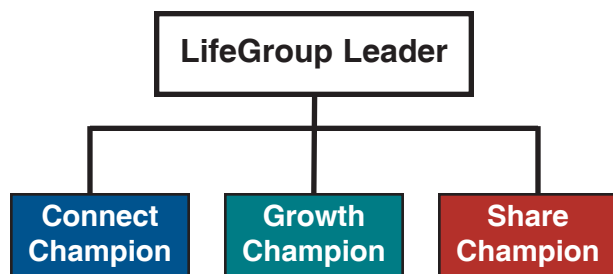
CASEY YORMAN

When communicating service opportunities Casey has the following advice, "Make it easy for them to be very specific. Small groups can log on to the web site and see the opportunities and sign up. It's as clear as can be with location, date and short description." Once a small group has signed up, the North Coast volunteer in charge of that agency partnership connects with the group leader about specifics.

Establishing a Group Structure that Supports Service

Fellowship Bible asked each of their small groups to structure for success as well as to build a bridge. While the typical small group has a Bible study leader and maybe a host, Fellowship has created more roles within a group. "Having passionate and skilled people leading the LifeGroup in a specific area is a huge factor to success," says Glen. Each group is to have not only a leader, but three champions. "The champion is the person who 'champions' a core value (connect, grow and share) to the group. They make sure that the group is experiencing this element as a key part of group life," he says. The job of the leader is then to lead these champions as they lead the entire group.

Small Group Structure of Fellowship Bible Church North



WE ASK GROUPS TO CONSIDER TWO THINGS: WHAT CAN WE DO? WHAT DO WE CARE ABOUT?

studies are sermon-based and put together by station in life, such as young married couples, people over 50, college students, etc. Some are targeted to specific groups, like women's, men's or life issues, such as divorce care or recovery," says Casey. Almost all of these groups are encouraged to serve together with a partnering organization. "We ask groups to consider two things: What can we do? What do we care about? Do we care about foster care, a rehab center, homelessness, AIDS, military wives, or a ministry to Mexico?" he asks. Once a group decides what they care about, the group can

The Fellowship Bible Church North LifeGroup Leaders guide outlines the following job descriptions for the role of each champion:

Connect Champions are responsible for keeping their pulse on the health of the group. Their responsibility is not to meet all the needs of a LifeGroup, but to lead the group in meeting each other's needs. They also help make new people feel welcomed and connected.

Growth Champions are responsible for the overall spiritual growth of the group. They are the ones asking the questions about how people are growing in their relationship with God. The Growth Champion is aware of the resources available to the group and usually is one who enjoys and shares some of the teaching element of the LifeGroup.

Share Champions are people who desire to lead the LifeGroup in making a difference in the community. They are primarily responsible for coordinating the bridge of each LifeGroup and connecting with the area outreach coordinator on geographic opportunities.

Fellowship has found this model to be very effective. "When a group has all three champions in place it helps make sure the group has a healthy, well-balanced focus on the things we are all called to do together," reads the Leaders Guide. They found this model to be especially good at engaging small groups with local schools and agencies, as well as meeting immediate needs during a crisis. Fellowship Bible Church North was one of the first responders to the Hurricane Katrina crisis. They were able to wrap care and support around 70 displaced families by pairing them with their 70 small groups.

Creating Synergy Between Ministry Areas

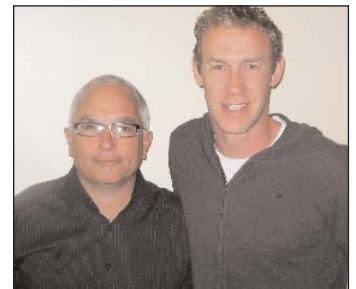
In most churches, the small group ministry and the outreach ministry sit in two different places on the organizational chart. They may cheer each other on in their pursuits, but not necessarily cooperate or collaborate. **RockHarbor Church**, Costa Mesa, CA (<http://www.rockharbor.org>) has made it a priority to synergize the efforts of

multiple initiatives and present unity as a small group and outreach staff. It's one of the reasons that Doug Barry, small group pastor, wanted to join the staff at RockHarbor. The idea of aligning with other departments to leverage resources wasn't a foreign concept to him. Doug spent a lot of time out in the workplace before entering full-time ministry. He admits, "I was green in ministry world, but seasoned in the work world. I was surprised to find that there wasn't much synergy between ministries at some churches."

The RockHarbor culture is one where they encourage staff members to express who they are individually, but recognize more can be accomplished together than apart. Mike Kenyon, reach ministries pastor, explains, "In ministry, there is a huge flywheel that we are all trying to spin together to create momentum in ministry. We were not created to make our own wheel to spin ourselves. You have to die to the personal stuff you want to accomplish. It's easy for us to do that at RockHarbor because we all get it. It's like a beautiful mess! It can seem inefficient to do so much together, but ultimately, it is more efficient because there is more inertia to the bigger cause."

This 'spinning' together is very evident in the way Mike works closely with Doug in many of the outreach endeavors of the church. The pair admits that when they first started talking about small groups serving, it wasn't necessarily synergistic. Doug's team was appreciative of the ideas that Mike's reach ministry team came up with for small groups to serve together, but didn't necessarily facilitate it. Doug says, "At first we punted to Reach to make it all happen, then we realized that as a LifeGroup ministry, we need to feel the burden of training leaders of their responsibilities—including serving as a group."

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Doug Berry and Mike Kenyon from Rock Harbor Church

To better communicate and actually facilitate small group serving, together they train small group leaders, but Doug's small group ministry team takes on the brunt of that role, training leaders on the value of serving together as a group and living a missional lifestyle. The reach ministry creates healthy community partnerships and clear paths to service opportunities. "Doug and I eagerly promote one another's ministries and write our budgets together. We meet every week and care for one another beyond work life. If all we did was get people to check off the service box as a small group, then we haven't fulfilled the vision. We actually want them to be identifying reach opportunities on their own, in the context of where they live, who they know and what their passions are," says Mike. While the church may always have a handful of global and local activities, Mike sees the goal is to work himself out of a job because the people at RockHarbor are simply living it out through their small groups and daily lifestyle. "We eventually want the whole body equipped to find their own missional opportunities," says Mike.

At RockHarbor, small groups and their leaders are highly valued. "LifeGroups are ahead of every movement and they lead the charge on every endeavor we do as a church," says Doug. When a new initiative or change is coming from the church leadership, staff and key volunteers find out first, and the very next group to communicate with are the LifeGroup leaders. LifeGroup leaders are very important to the overall health of the church and are called to a high standard of commitment and leadership; this has proven helpful as they moved service activity of the church into the life-cycle of small groups.



Small groups from RockHarbor Church serve their community together.

The synergy and alignment of ministry together doesn't just happen within Small Groups and the Reach Ministries at RockHarbor. The staff also come together to plan message series' and curriculum for small groups in a concept they call "Lecture and Lab." The lecture learning takes place on Sunday morning during sermons, but the real application of that message

comes in the lab—which is in the context of the small group environment. All small groups utilize the curriculum created by the entire staff. Mike explains, "Small groups and every ministry area are represented in developing the lab and weekly there is a challenge to be externally focused."

Setting the Bar High for Group Leaders

Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, co-authors of *The Externally Focused Church*, agree that churches should set the bar high and determine that every Christian in the church will have a personal or group ministry in some capacity. "Present ministry to others as part and parcel of normal Christian life," they write.⁴

RockHarbor seems to do this well. To become a group leader, church members go through four months of training that has three start times each year. It's a very aggressive approach compared to many churches. "We have found that raising the bar has actually helped because when people become a leader they stay a leader. We are not replacing leaders, but constantly adding. It has helped us weed out people who go up like a rocket but down like a rock in their enthusiasm for seriously leading a group," says Mike.

While the training takes quite a bit of time, Doug advises that slower is faster. Their method of winning with leadership training is to employ a tortoise strategy rather than racing like the hare and burning out. While it may seem counter-intuitive that harder is better, Doug and Mike agree that it is working. "Raise the bar and it attracts more people," says Mike. And the proof is in their numbers: RockHarbor has 330 leaders and 150 small groups.

Having longer training time is not the only key to success, though. In their training they have found power in discussion and discovery over lecture and mere listening. "Three years ago, when we trained group leaders, we were pretty facilitator-focused during our training. The power is in discussion, not telling people what to do, but letting them discover it," says Doug. A large part of their discovery process is helping new leaders understand how important serving together can be for a group. "We envision a day when our LifeGroup leaders will sit together by city and find needs they can meet," says Doug.

Doug not only facilitates an externally focused mindset with his group leaders, he takes serving others personally and encourages his small group staff as well. He often takes his staff out for prayer walks in the city, looking for ways small groups can engage in ministry—even though Reach is responsible for creating the service opportunities. “We each need to expand Kingdom eyes for what needy is, so I take my digital camera with me and take pictures of opportunities,” he says. He recently took a photo of a going-out-of-business sign and asked his staff “Where is there Kingdom opportunity with this?”

LifeGroups on the Go

RockHarbor is preparing to move that service bar one step higher for small groups during the summer of 2007 during their Go Campaign. Just as Jesus drastically called his disciples to drop their nets and follow him, this church is making some bold requests of their entire church body. “We are putting the fleece out to see what kind of church we will become. We’re putting the bar high,” says Mike.

During the campaign, leaders are challenging 2,500 people to go on a three- to five-day missional adventure. Above and beyond that call, they are asking all LifeGroups to plan their own mission trips, either locally, nationally, or globally. “LifeGroups are usually the first to respond and we don’t want them to fill up all of the opportunities. So, we are asking them to find their own service opportunities in addition to the



Life Group members at RockHarbor catch the vision and get creative with service opportunities.

2,500 spots for church members,” says Mike. Their goal is to have 1,000 people from LifeGroups take the Go Campaign challenge. “They (LifeGroups) are super excited about it. They get what we are trying to do and are being creative in their adventure planning,” says Mike.

Eric Wayman, associate life groups pastor shares some of the ideas for missional adventures flowing from the RockHarbor LifeGroups:

“In Catalina, skateboarding is prohibited on the main streets. The city created a skate-park for the kids, but as it is outdoors, the ramps have rotted and the park is now used for drug dealing, not skateboarding. One group has spoken with the city’s recreational director and she’s given the go-ahead to partner with a local youth group to revamp the park as an outreach to the community.

Another group, which is comprised of the deaf community at RockHarbor, would like to create an opportunity that would help the deaf community beyond the church walls so there would be no language barrier. They’re still wrestling with what that experience could look like, but committed to overcoming obstacles and finding innovative ways to connect.

The Costa Mesa LifeGroups want to put together a back-to-school festival for their neighbors with their target demographic being the Hispanic community. They want to have a day-long festival of music, entertaining booths (reptile petting zoo, face painting), and meeting their tangible needs (new clothes for school, backpacks with school supplies).”

The campaign has three stages of involvement for the groups: preparation, experience and re-entry. Mike explains, “Through curriculum provided in the spring of 2007, we are preparing small groups spiritually and emotionally with curriculum and messages. Then, we want them to journal their experiences that will happen this summer. Finally, this fall we will help people re-enter and spend months unpacking the missional adventures and translate what they learned.” The goal of this campaign is to call LifeGroups to participate in an event that becomes a life-transformational experience. Doug explains, “It’s the difference between a wedding and a

marriage. A wedding rallies people to a big event. A marriage is something more...it becomes a part of our daily lives. That's what we want small groups and the Go Campaign to be about—a wedding that launches a marriage of service."

Benefits of Small Groups Serving Together

While there is a benefit to the church body of small groups being agents of God's grace to the community, are their benefits to the individual group members themselves? Externally focused churches find that there are at least three benefits to small groups serving together: (1) spiritual growth, (2) greater relational connection and (3) ability to really bless a city beyond what they could do alone.

1. Spiritual Growth

Fellowship Bible Church North believes serving the community in the context of a small group encourages greater spiritual maturity. In their LifeGroup Starter Kit, staff members encourage groups to participate in building bridges to the community because growth is not limited to accountability and Bible studies. The kit explains, "In many cases, serving together produces better opportunities to grow because our character and attitudes are exposed and tested."

How does hands-on ministry enrich discipleship? In *Churches that Make a Difference*, authors Sider, Olson and Unruh outline multiple connections between holistic outreach and personal spiritual growth.⁵

- *It allows people to mourn over sin and brokenness as God does. "We realize in greater depth the deadly power of evil and the even mightier power of the cross."*
- *It confronts people with areas in their own lives—like materialism, prejudice, or laziness.*
- *It yields new insights into Scripture, as they see it brought to life in the course of ministry. "We can study about God's compassion and love, but until we encounter the man wounded on the road to Jericho, bathe his wounds, and pay for*

his care, we can't know fully what it means to be a good neighbor."

- *It brings people closer to God's passion for justice. "When we minister to people who lack access to quality, affordable healthcare, housing, or education, we join with Jesus and the prophets in the cry to release the oppressed (Luke 4:18)."*
- *It strengthens faith by giving evidence of God at work, leads to greater dependence on God's grace and wisdom, and a greater appreciation for salvation.*
- *It helps people discover and develop spiritual gifts.*

Glen Brechner concludes that Fellowship's small group service engagements have helped the Scriptures come alive as the writer of Hebrews 10:23-24 says: "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds."

2. Relational connection

"Many people will shine while serving in the community who would never shine in a small group setting like dinner and a study," says Glen. This can be especially true for men involved in small groups. Casey from North Coast has found this to be valid within his own small group. He says, "The guys in our group especially enjoy the service projects. We get to know each other shoulder to shoulder and participate in a common



Men from Fellowship Bible North serve together, shoulder to shoulder.

experience we can build on.” While North Coast has always encouraged their groups to develop friendship through social activities Casey notes, “Groups like a service project over their social time any day.”

In their book *Men Are Like Waffles, Women are Like Spaghetti*, authors Bill and Pam Farrell describe why men might find it easier to connect during a service project than over coffee and Bible study. “Because men tend to be good with mechanical and spatial activities, they get emotionally attached to building, fixing, and chasing things. Yard projects become expressions of his personality. The car becomes his signature.... The bottom line with men is: they feel best about themselves when they are solving problems.”⁶

That may be the very reason **New Commandment Men’s Ministries**, Broomfield, CO (<http://www.newcommandment.org>) has experienced so much success in helping churches establish quality men’s small groups. According to New Commandment’s President Herb Reese, “Since January of 2003, we have helped churches develop men’s team ministries to the widowed and single parents. Over the past four years, we have worked with 65 churches in 18 states to develop this ministry. There are now over 1,400 men donating 28,000 hours of service annually to over 500 widows, single parents and children.”



HERB REESE

In small groups of four men, these service teams meet at the church for prayer and Bible study from 7-8 a.m. Then, they break up into pre-assigned teams and go out and work in the home of their care receiver from 8-10 a.m. The men do basic chores around the home such as fix leaky faucets, clean windows, haul trash, etc. At the end of their time, the men gather around their care receiver and pray with him or her. By encouraging men to serve together, New Commandment Men’s Ministries typically sees ten to thirty percent of all the men in a church become involved in this ministry.

3. Blessing the City

Moses isn’t the only person to have questioned, “Who am I that I should go?” (Exodus 3:11). Just as delivering the Israelites from Pharaoh’s reign was intimidating, serving in the harder places of modern society can cause people to question their abilities and lose courage. North Coast Church saw this firsthand as they advertised the opportunity for individuals to go and serve at the local AIDS house and homeless shelter with very little success. But just as Aaron became Moses’ companion in service to God and the Israelite nation, a small group will stand and serve together where an individual may not. “Some of the more socially intimidating projects are actually flourishing now because people will go places with others that they won’t go to alone. The AIDS house or homeless shelter is much easier to visit with friends. Now, some people have volunteered more frequently and passionately, like taking AIDS residents out to a movie,” says Casey.

To effectively bless a city and transform a community, churches must be able to tackle the more challenging areas of society and as Ecclesiastes advises, two are better than one.

*Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for
their work:*

*If one falls down,
his friend can help him up.
But pity the man who falls
and has no one to help him up!*

*Also, if two lie down together, they will
keep warm.
But how can one keep warm alone?*

*Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.
A cord of three strands is not quickly
broken.
(Ecclesiastes 4:11-12)*

Measuring the Effectiveness of Small Groups Serving

As a part of their 2006-2007 community service strategic plan, **Rolling Hills Community Church**, Tualatin, OR (<http://www.rollinghills.org>) set an objective for the service component of their small groups (which they call community groups). Faith Carter, equip ministry director, says that it seemed as though not much activity was happening, but in reality, groups were serving. The church just had no formal way of tracking and measuring success. "We had to set up a system for every group to have a community service leader and then we set up a support team that calls the leaders to share stories and get feedback," says

Faith. They currently have 108 groups serving and some groups have taken it one step further. "We have 30 groups that have actually committed to serving an agency exclusively throughout the year," she says.



FAITH CARTER

Other than recording the number of groups and individuals that have served, most churches admit that it is hard to measure effectiveness because the results are not always numeric. Measuring life transformation in members of a small group can be difficult. Rolling Hills is attempting to capture life transformation stories through their Reflection Reports. After a group has served, individuals are asked to fill out a short form to evaluate and share about their service experience so that the leaders can see how the group was affected by the service.

Faith shares that effectiveness is not always seen in the large masses, but by looking at one group's transformation over time. She says, "One of our small groups was serving consistently with Kinship House, a foster care home. From that group's service, one man served consistently for the house. He has now been asked to be on the board of directors." Sometimes, as this group found, the small group service can lead an individual's passion and purpose to connect.

Overcoming Challenges to Small Groups Serving

It's not all roses when it comes to small groups serving together, though. Faith admits, "Time keeps people from serving together in a group and it can also be hard to find opportunities for an entire group to serve together successfully."

North Coast has found that they meet that challenge through building relational capital with partnering organizations as well as an ounce or two of creativity. When Casey approaches a potential community partner, he tries to stay in a learning mode. "When we are learning together, I don't promise them the world. As a large church, sometimes the agencies get stars in their eyes," laughs Casey. Some of his rules on engagement with partnering agencies include:

- **Have leadership in place.** "Don't start an official partnership without volunteer team leaders that serve as the point person and facilitate the relationship between the nonprofit and the church."
- **Look for consistency.** "For us, an official partnership is working with an agency at least three times in nine months."
- **Be honest about resources.** "I impress on them we want to share our most valuable resource: our people."
- **Dream together.** "Many agency directors have never even thought about what they could possibly do with 14 people for two hours. Once our partner agencies started to dream a little bit, a lot of them really like our small groups coming to serve. We have one small group that takes AIDS patients to the movies and another that cooks and serves a meal at the homeless shelter."

Casey admits that not every agency is a good fit. "We have found that some partnerships may not come to fruition, and that's ok. We move on to the next one," he says. It isn't all about the nonprofit meeting the church's needs for small groups to serve, either. North Coast small groups would like to see more variety of projects to choose from sometimes. They currently have 10-12 partnerships with agencies. "If we took on more

IF WE TOOK ON MORE PARTNERS, THE SMALL GROUPS WOULD LIKE THE VARIETY BUT THE PARTNERS WOULD NOT RECEIVE THE ATTENTION THEY NEED. IT'S A BALANCING ACT.

partners, the small groups would like the variety but the partners would not receive the attention they need. It's a balancing act," Casey says.

No Budget Barrier Here

The annual church budget for community ministry (not including salaries) at North Coast is a mere \$1,200. "That goes to printing materials, volunteer appreciation and maybe a conference," says Casey. But the financial impact to their partnering organizations far exceeds the church budget. North Coast growth groups are responsible for contributing supplies and materials for the projects they work on. "Through supplies, donations, meals and more, our groups contributed \$50,000-\$60,000 for their projects and well over \$1,000,000 worth of goods and services was provided for the community during North Coast's Weekend of Service (a weekend in which all services were canceled and the congregation was sent out to work at 50 plus sites." Casey states. That figure doesn't include the amount of dollars an agency saved in support and labor due to North Coast's involvement.

Connecting Scripture to Service

The small group ministries profiled here are primarily sermon-based groups, meaning the leadership teams at the various churches develop curriculum for the groups based on the weekend messages. Most churches, however, provide a special curriculum or orientation for new groups starting up and include teaching on service. Some churches launched this initiative by utilizing an all-church campaign, like 40 Days of Community offered through Purpose Driven Resources.⁷



SOME SMALL GROUPS ARE PRIMARILY SERMON BASED.

The River Church, San Jose, CA (<http://www.the-river.org>) has traditional small groups that they encourage to serve together. Jim Martin, compassion ministries pastor, has a philosophy that by himself, he can not engage in ministry to change the city, "but I will try to inspire people to do that," he says. To equip small groups in this vision, The River created a Compassion Kit. The kit is story-driven, scriptural, action-oriented and based on Matthew 25:35-36:

"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

Each section deals with one of the needs outlined in the verse and how members of The River can personally engage. Each section follows this outline:

- *Two stories that connect readers with details of the problem.*
- *A poem or quotes that expose the problem further.*
- *A facts box with links to learning more about the topic.*
- *A list of 10 ways to practically and personally help right away (see sidebar example of 10 Ways to Feed the Hungry).*
- *A Challenge and Response (see sidebar example from The Compassion Kit: What do you do?)*
- *A list of local organizations feeding the hungry with phone numbers.*

In the opening statements of the kit, Jim writes, "Please read this as a manual. Look to it as a toolkit but please don't just read it. Try It! Discover how you can use some of the very practical ideas in your life." This practical tool was used to connect small groups to information that ties to the word of God. It took quite a bit of time to put the kit together. Was it worth it? "Yes," says Jim, "It was totally worth it. The work was done largely by volunteers—one writer in particular, Callie Grant. Doing the work was formative for us.

The Compassion Kit

excerpts from the Compassion Kit, The River Church Community, Cupertino, CA

10 Ways to Feed the Hungry

1. Carry fast food coupons or grocery store certificates in your wallet to give to those you encounter asking for help.
2. Order an extra bagel or hamburger so you can share it on your way out.
3. Encourage people in need to call the Food Connection and find a nearby agency that will serve them healthy food with dignity.
4. To truly understand the challenges of the hungry, organize your small group for an extended fast.
5. Sign up for an afternoon to sort, deliver or serve food with one of the many organizations that serve the hungry.
6. Help Second Harvest Food Bank with Operation Brown Bag, a food distribution program for seniors that also draws you into a regularly visit and serve.
7. Sign on to <http://www.fh.org> for the international Christian-based organization Food for the Hungry.
8. Donate local meals on line at <http://www.donatefood.org>. Just \$5 will sponsor 15 breakfasts.
9. Encourage your company or business to join Second Helping, a Food Bank program that dispatches trucks to retrieve food at cafeterias.
10. Add extra nutritional staples to your shopping list and make a weekly donation.

What do you do?

Challenge

You walk out of the supermarket with a full cart of groceries bagged and paid for, and a man is camped out by the door. His homemade sign tells you he is a war veteran and needs money for food. He needs counseling too, you're sure. What do you do?

Response

Conventional wisdom tells you not to donate money. One service provider, Another Way, based in Palo Alto, said people begging for money often would be the first to admit they'll use it for drugs or alcohol. The organization Another Way provides canisters so you can collect your pocket change and turn it in to the organization. You also could give coupons for a local fast food restaurant or offer to take the person to a nearby café and buy the meal.

It was well received and has had good impact. Our people seem to most appreciate very concrete suggestions for engagement."



JIM MARTIN

Because they took time in developing this tool, Jim spends much of his time mentoring and teaching people to serve the city, rather than coming up with all the service opportunities himself. He offers to visit small groups and lead them through an even deeper study on compassion and serving the community. "I encourage groups to at least take one risk in serving where they would not have before," he says. In this model of small group engagement, Jim serves

in an equipping and empowering pastoral role, rather than a program or project manager. By not planning all of the service engagements, it requires Jim to give up control and let small groups and individuals to step out on their own to serve, but this philosophy of empowerment has served the church well. "A number of non-profit initiatives have been formed by people in our church, like Silicon Valley Christian Health Alliance

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(<http://www.svcha.org>, which provides free healthcare to homeless adults seeded by The River and run by members of The River and other local churches,” says Jim.

Connecting Good Deeds and Good News

Every church has a desire to grow and follow the great commission: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20) How can small groups serving in the community ultimately lead others to know God’s love and grace? In their book *Living a Life on Loan*, Rusaw and Swanson share about a men’s small group in Colorado Springs that connected simple acts of good will to the good news of Jesus Christ. Following Hurricane Katrina, this small group canvassed neighborhoods with re-sealable bags, asking neighbors to fill them with necessities for the victims. Most of the men were busy businessmen who have studied together and this was the first time they were connecting service to their study of Scripture.

When the men returned to pick up the bags, they were well received. Rusaw and Swanson write,

“One lady came to the door with several bags filled to the brim. She had taken the initial bag and filled it, then added several more of her own. She admitted that when one of the men knocked on her door the week before and told his story, she was somewhat taken back because, for various reasons, she had not had a very positive impression of churches. But after reviewing the instruction sheet within the bag, she concluded that any church that supported the Katrina victims with this kind of effort could not be all bad. As a result, she started asking questions about the church.”⁸

While most small groups are typically formed around the basis of Bible study, serving is the key to life application and connecting good deeds and the good news. Rusaw and Swanson write, “When we serve we have the opportunity to extend grace in many small ways. We are living out the eternal truths found in the Bible. You never know how an act of service might touch another person, how you might help someone

else find grace at the intersections...No matter what plan you have to get into God’s Word, it’s not about how much you know, but how you live as a result of what you are learning. It’s better to be ankle-deep in application than neck-deep in knowledge.”⁹

Fellowship Church small group leaders Peter and Judy Archbold have found this to be true. After 20 years of involvement in small groups, building a bridge of service to someone outside their group has had a ripple effect no one in their group could have anticipated and they believe only God could be orchestrating. “We chose to build a bridge of service to a senior citizens’ group. We go and sing songs and have root beer floats with residents at a home,” says Peter. While this bridge of service was a step in the right direction, it actually served as a primer for where God was taking their hearts next. “At Christmas time, our church provides individuals the opportunity to connect with a family in need through the Plano Assistance Center. I chose an ‘angel’ from the tree—specifically looking for a single mom I could help,” shares Judy.

Instead of simply buying and delivering the gifts, Judy chose to call the family before she went shopping for them. What she found was that Tricia, the young single mom of three boys, had needs beyond Christmas-time. “She was surprised someone even called her, much less picked them from the tree to buy presents for. Judy invited her to go to church and Tricia got to meet other people in our small group,” shares Peter. The rest of the group decided to come alongside Judy and her desire to serve this young mom. Through this connection, the entire group has developed a greater sense of compassion and understanding for the real lives of the working poor. “Tricia needed tires for her car so she could pass

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KNOWLEDGE.



Building a bridge of service to people outside of their community lead to things that only God could have orchestrated for a Fellowship Church small group.

inspection and get new registration and insurance. She couldn't afford them on her low-paying, part-time job. When she got stopped by the police in traffic, she actually ended up being put in jail overnight because she didn't have any of the proper papers with her," shares Peter. Who did Tricia call from jail? Her new-found friends in the Archbold's small group.

The group rallied around her, taking care of the boys overnight, helping her get a new car, and connecting her with a better paying job with benefits. "She's also getting her GED and we connected her with a math tutor. She's very worth the effort!" says Judy. Through another church, the group is even helping Tricia receive a scholarship for more quality child care. Peter commends Tricia as a mother, having spent a lot of time with her boys, who are respectful and polite. "She's doing something right and she needs to hear that. She just needed someone to build into her life," says Peter.

What's this adventure in serving Tricia done for their small group? "Anytime you join together you get a feeling of satisfaction and blessing," says

Judy. Additionally, the group's care for this mom has extended as a witness beyond the small group. "My sister, who is not a church-goer, has become involved and made Easter a very nice time for the boys. She has seen how this lifegroup works and it's been outreach to her as well," says Judy.

As a couple, Peter and Judy had participated in gift-giving programs before. What made this one so different and so lasting? "Judy made personal contact and Tricia was willing for us to stay involved. Sometimes people aren't grateful, but we have learned you keep doing it and come alongside the Tricia's—it's been the difference between giving gifts and giving relationships." Alone, the Archbold's may not have been able to support Tricia with so much assistance, but with others, their pastor Glen Brechner says, "This group changed the trajectory of this single mom's life!" As a small group, they come together to learn about the Bible. Through serving together, they have come to know the heart of God in a new way. Jeremiah 22:16 "He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know Me?" declares the Lord."

APPENDIX

RECOMMENDED SMALL GROUP RESOURCES

Not every church develops their own resources for connecting small groups to serving in the community. Below is a list of recommended curriculum for small groups interested in studying the Bible on the topic of serving others.

Life on Loan—church experience kit

<http://www.standardpub.com>

Life on Loan is a six-week, church-wide experience that leads children, students, and adults through a study of what it means to live a life that is on loan from God—a life serving others, building relationships, and earning the right to share your faith. Life on Loan provides the curriculum and tools to plan, promote, and implement a program throughout the church. Life on Loan was developed by Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, authors of *The Externally Focused Church*, in conjunction with Standard Publishing.

40 Days of Community

<http://www.purposedriven.com>

Similar to the 40 Days of Purpose launched by Saddleback Church and Rick Warren, 40 Days of Community is small-group curriculum driven and supported by weekend messages. This campaign can be used to deepen a church's understanding of how God uses other people for good and growth. One primary component of the campaign is getting the entire church and small groups into the community to serve.

Faith in Action

<http://putyourfaithinaction.org>

Faith in Action starts with a four-week series of sermons and educational activities to involve church members and culminates with a weekend when members invite the community to join them in a day of service projects focusing on local, national and global needs. On this weekend, churches are asked to consider holding the service projects in place of regular worship services. This material is available through a cooperative effort between World Vision, Zondervan and Outreach Marketing (available May 2007).

Outflow

<http://www.group.com>

Outflow is a 5-week small group curriculum based on the book *Outflow* by Steve Sjogren and Dave Ping, pioneers of the term Servant Evangelism. The curriculum focuses on not reaching, but letting God's love fill participants with joy that flows to family, friends, neighbors, and the world.

Bible Sense—Book of James

<http://www.group.com>

This 8-lesson Bible study on the book of James includes specific coordinator descriptions for group members, including an outreach coordinator that helps the small group plan community service opportunities.



KRISTA PETTY



ERIC SWANSON

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* Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is taken from the NIV translation.

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