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Every Small Group Needs a Vision

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Your small group is destined to die a slow, complacent, even cordial death without direction. Good food and casual conversation might be staples of normal small group life, but they cannot be the substance. Too many groups meet week after week, month after month without any clear mandate, and therefore without any clarity whether or not they're fulfilling their purpose or really accomplishing anything.

Chances are your small group isn't even called a small group. You might be in a community group, city group, mission group, shepherd group, discipleship group, life group, or [fill in the blank] group. Regardless of what you *call* the group, you should be asking what defines that fellowship. Why is it worth spending all this time together? How do we know that we're not wasting our Wednesday or Thursday evenings? Small groups need a vision.

For our purposes in this article, *A vision is a statement of the functional purpose of your small group.* Why do you have

a small group? What specifically do you hope to accomplish? How are you carrying out the church's mission? How will you know if your little community is making progress and bearing fruit? I have found that developing a vision has unified and inspired our group in really life-giving ways.

An Example Vision Statement

Before we look at the value of having a vision for life together or ask how to develop a vision for small group, let's briefly look at an example vision statement. This might help make later points more concrete and understandable.

As a small group, our shared life and ministry will be marked by these six aims. I have added brief descriptions with each point to give you a better idea of what we mean.

1. Know and serve one another persistently. (1 Thessalonians 2:7–8; Hebrews 3:12–13)

Week-in and week-out, we will work to know each other more and more deeply — sharing our hearts and lives, praying for one another, asking questions, and bearing each other's burdens. We will be persistent learners of one another. And with everything we learn — good, bad, or otherwise — we will strive to love and serve one another — meeting each other's needs, encouraging growth, and helping one another thrive.

2. Depend on the Lord prayerfully. (Philippians 4:6–7; Hebrews 4:14–16)

Prayer will be the regular, visible engine of our community. We need God every hour, every minute of every hour, so prayer will be our means to everything. We will look to God for everything we need, never taking his provision for granted. When we're alone and when we're together, we will be a people of prayer — always adoring, always confessing, always thanking, always asking.

3. Meet God through his word faithfully and expectantly. (Psalm 19:9–11; 2 Peter 1:3–4)

The Bible will play a central role in our community because it holds the words of life. We need those pages more than we need food, and there are always more riches to be seen, enjoyed, and applied in our lives. We read faithfully — meaning regularly *and* with the eyes of faith — and we read expectantly — anticipating God to speak and move each time we open his book.

4. Pursue disciples for Jesus boldly and globally. (Matthew 28:19–20; Acts 1:8)

Our commission from Jesus is clear: Go, and make disciples. God saved us in order to send us. We are lights in a world of darkness that is desperately in need. We are God's chosen means of spreading good news and winning worship for himself in every corner of this earth. Therefore, we are to be bold where we are, and we are to be behind what God is doing among the nations. We will witness for Jesus where we are, and send and support witnesses where we are not.

5. Rest in the gospel confidently and humbly. (Romans 8:1, 32, 37–39; 1 Corinthians 15:1–4)

Everything we think, say, and do as a small group stands on the firm foundation of the gospel. We have been saved by grace through faith, wholly apart from anything we have done or earned. We do not deserve God's love, but in Christ we have it. We want our relationships, our meetings, and our ministry together to be shaped by and soaked with the gospel. This message should produce the boldest confidence and courage, and it should produce the most tender and compassionate humility.

6. Work out our salvation soberly and joyfully. (Philippians 2:11–13; Galatians 5:1, 13, 25)

Lastly, we are committed to living more and more like Christ. It is the joyful privilege of God's people to be conformed to the image of his Son. It is not pretty or easy, but it is undeniably good and important. Year-by-year, week-by-week, even day-by-day, we will be identifying areas of weakness or failure, receiving forgiveness because of the finished work of Christ, and then working together for change.

That's an example vision statement — six things we hope to experience together as we invest ourselves into one another. Yours might be the same, similar, or completely different. The point is that it offers a few objective points that bring the purpose of a small group into focus and help you assess its health and progress.

The Value of Vision

Developing a vision *can* be hard work (it doesn't have to be). It will take some careful thought and prayer, and probably some focused attention and interaction with others in the group. So is it worth it? Here are three reasons to go ahead and invest your time, energy, and prayer into a vision statement for your small group.

1. Vision breeds commitment and investment.

If the purpose of your small group is vague and mostly social, then your members won't even know how to be committed and invested. It's not all that hard to commit to having dinner every other week or once a month, but anything with low-level commitment comes with low-level expectation, and therefore very often low-level fruit.

Instead, develop a clear and actionable vision. When you identify things you want to see happen in your time together, everyone has the opportunity at the outset to buy into those things, and then afterward to work together toward those things. From the beginning, everyone will know that there's more to do here than to eat and chat.

2. Vision makes decision-making more objective.

Over the life of a small group — whether you meet for a year or for ten years — you will make hundreds of decisions, some small and some larger.

How often will we meet? Will we meet year-round?

Where will we meet?

What will we do when we meet?

Will we celebrate holidays? How will we celebrate holidays?

Will we add new members?

Will we do anything together to serve our community?

Will we study the Bible together?

Will we read a book together that's not the Bible? Which one?

Will we do anything outside of our regular meetings?

One way to make the questions more objective is to create a grid for making decisions (e.g. a vision statement). If there are specific things you're striving to accomplish together, you will know better how to answer any number of questions with your group. Articulated objectives and priorities will even answer lots of the questions for you.

3. Vision mobilizes your people inside and outside of your meetings.

A vision statement will set expectations, breed commitment, and clarify decision-making. It also mobilizes your members into ministry. They will have more tangible, actionable ways to use their gifts to serve the group or the group's goals. Even beyond your regular meetings, a vision statement can envision your members for ministry at their workplace or in their neighborhoods.

How to Develop a Vision for Your Group

If you are persuaded that your group needs a vision statement, how would you go about developing one? It might sound overwhelming to some. Here are three simple steps to get you started.

1. Begin with your church's mission statement.

Many churches have taken the time to develop a mission statement that articulates its central message and priorities. It's supposed to help set the church's trajectory, distinguish it from other churches, and guide all of its ministries (including small groups).

The mission statement of [Bethlehem Baptist Church](#) (and of [desiringGod.org](#)), for example, is:

We exist to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ.

That is the aim and standard for all of our ministries at Bethlehem. We are always asking if and how any particular group or event or initiative is fulfilling those twenty-three words. It's painted high and large in our sanctuaries for all to see and remember.

Your church's mission will be a great overarching banner for your small group. If you can't explain how your group is fulfilling that statement, then it would be good to think and pray about what it would look like to live and serve together better under that banner.

If your church doesn't have a mission, you could use the Great Commission:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” ([Matthew 28:19–20](#))

2. Search the Bible for components of healthy Christian community.

A church's mission statement is often too broad to guide a small group practically. For sure, you will want your group to be in line with the message and priorities of your church, but you'll very likely be able to identify some more specific goals for small group ministry (just like you would with corporate worship, neighborhood outreach, or children's ministry).

The example above highlights fellowship, prayer, God's word, disciple-making, the gospel, and sanctification. You might be able to condense these to two or three, or you might add or replace some. This is just one effort to let the Bible define a small group. As we keep reading and studying the Bible, we very well may find these points are inadequate or need to be updated. We don't need to be paralyzed by the fact that it could be said or organized better.

This step does not have to be exhaustive. You do not have to read the whole Bible cover-to-cover again to discern every biblical principle for small groups. The point is to base your small group priorities and objectives on actual words from God. If we're not careful, we will tend to lean on our own understanding and follow our own dreams and ambitions. God has said far too much about doing life together for us to come up with our own ideas. Don't feel like you have to summarize the whole Bible, but look for specific passages that will guide your particular group.

3. Study the people in your group to determine how to apply the vision.

Once you've identified some biblical principles for your group, take some time to study your group. This vision won't apply to everyone in the same way. What are the demographics of your people? Are they married? Do they have kids? Newborns, infants, or teenagers? What unique challenges are you facing in your group? How will that affect how you pray or what you'll read together in the Bible or how you'll hold one another accountable?

It will take wisdom, discernment, and love to apply what you've learned from Scripture to your unique situation with the unique people God's put in your life. We should not assume that one approach to small group will serve everyone everywhere as effectively.

A Vision for More

The point in all of this is to encourage small groups to think carefully and prayerfully about making the most of your group. I believe a few biblical, practical principles will inspire and unleash you and your people to take significant, noticeable steps forward in being made like Jesus and making much of him. A clarified, articulated, agreed upon vision might be the key to experiencing more of God's grace than you've ever tasted together before in your small group.

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