

Breaking the 50% Barrier

How to Increase Small Group Participation in Your Church

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Overview:

Article Summary

Leadership Network invited several innovative small groups pastors to explain how they have broken the mythical—and for some churches, seemingly impenetrable— 50% participation barrier. Case studies of these leaders and their ministries address many important issues from different angles, primarily the church's culture, selection and training of new group leaders, coaching, and curriculum.

Further Reading

Developing Leaders in a Postmodern World: Current Principles and Practices in Selecting and Equipping Leaders. www.leadnet.org/papers
By Pat Springle



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Breaking the 50% Barrier:

How to Increase Small Group Participation in Your Church

“Small groups are central to our church’s culture,”

observes Dave Enns, small groups pastor for North Coast Church in Vista, CA (www.northcoastchurch.com). “The leadership of our church has made participation in groups the single most important activity for people. Everything we do revolves around this priority.”



The leadership at North Coast Church in Vista, CA has made participation in small groups the single most important activity for their people.

Leadership Network invited several innovative small groups pastors to explain how they have broken the mythical—and for some churches,

seemingly impenetrable—50% participation barrier. Interviews with three of these pastors provide insights and practices that promise to help other churches break this barrier. Case studies of these leaders and their ministries address many important issues from different angles, primarily the church’s culture, selection and training of new group leaders, coaching, and curriculum. All three are quick to point out, though,

small group strategies only serve to accomplish a single purpose: changed lives.

As one small group leader commented, “A single mother has been attending a group in our church for about two years. She began when her 17 year-old son was drinking heavily and addicted to painkillers. She recently told her group, ‘I can’t tell you how much you have meant to me. Because of this group, I’ve learned how to love my son, but to love him in a way that doesn’t condone his destructive behavior. I’ve learned from you about the blend of unconditional love and letting him make his own choices. When I started coming here, I was a mess. I’d lost hope

in God and in my son’s future. Today, I have a better relationship with both God and my son than I ever dreamed possible. When I stopped nagging him, he grew up. Amazing, huh? I couldn’t have done it without you.’ I love stories like hers. It’s the reason I’m passionate about getting as many people into groups as we possibly can.



A single mother shares with her small group how much they have taught her.

North Coast’s Culture

Participation in small groups at North Coast Church is consistent at 80%, and it has spiked as high as 93%. The value of small groups in the life of the church is woven into virtually every communication. The pastors’ messages

often refer to the importance of people processing God's word in groups, and events are planned around the impact they will have on groups. "One of the most significant aspects of how this culture plays out," Dave Enns explains, "is that we work very hard to cut down the competition. One example would be when we decided to focus our energy on the children's program during the weekend services. To keep it from conflicting with small groups, we no longer offered it during the middle of the week. We even stopped having our worship team practice during the week so they could be involved in groups. Instead they come a couple of hours early to practice before the service. They may not be as polished as they could be if they had a longer session at midweek, but that's a price we're willing to pay for them to be in groups."

Another one of North Coast's distinctive is their weekly sermon-based curriculum for small groups. It's a lecture / lab model. When talking to teaching pastors from other churches, Dave asks them to imagine what their church would be like if the majority of the people in their congregation

went home and actually took some time to study the sermon and then met with a group of people to apply it to their lives. That's the purpose of the sermon-based model. During the weekend services, North Coast distributes an outline of the sermon that includes questions to dig deeper into the passage. When people get home, they can study it and then discuss it with their small group later that week. Dave meets on Tuesdays with the teaching pastor to brainstorm ideas for the sermon and the questions. By Thursday the handouts go to the printer, so it's a challenge to make this all happen in such a short time. The final step in producing these questions is creating the leaders guide, including suggestions for additional questions to ask, scriptural cross-references, and suggestions for handling any difficult issues that may come up. The leaders can pick up this guide at the weekend services or get it online in written or audio form. Leaders often tell Dave that these resources are what makes all the difference for them staying in the game to lead their groups.

North Coast's groups run for three quarters, with the summers off. Their leadership selection process is "referral based." They ask existing leaders to recommend people in their groups as candidates to become new leaders. Dave compiles these names and takes the list to the church staff for a "flag check." Anyone who has a question or doubt about a prospective leader can flag that person, and then the small group team can explore the situation to resolve the issue immediately or provide a path for the person to become qualified in the future. A staff member meets with the new group leaders one-on-one, and then they go through a half-day of training before they launch their groups.

For many years North Coast has tried a coaching model of shepherding group leaders, but church leaders dropped coaching because they found it simply didn't work for them. Dave observes, "All leaders are of equal value, but not all need equal attention." What Dave and his team have found is that many group leaders have multiple mentors in their lives already. They don't necessarily need another one to help

Right: The small groups at North Coast Church give people a place to study the weekly with a group of people and then apply it to their lives.

Far Right: At North Coast Church, a staff member meets with the new small group leaders one-on-one before they launch their groups.



them lead their groups. Instead, North Coast conducts four training meetings for their existing leaders each year to inspire them and equip them. These have proven to be very effective. Dave and his team keep in touch with group leaders on a weekly basis when they turn in their weekly online attendance reports. When they notice that someone needs help assistance is offered.

In the past few years, Dave and his team have implemented a plan to cut down on dropouts from their group system. Each quarter, people sign up for groups, if someone who previously has been a part of a group doesn't sign up again, someone from Dave's team calls them. "It's not to twist anybody's arm," he explains. "There may be many good reasons why they drop out for a season. We just want to make sure we stay connected, answer any questions, and maybe direct people to another group if the last one didn't work for them." With this system in place, dropouts have fallen to about 15%.

North Coast makes a big push to sign people up for groups at the beginning of each quarter. They offer opportunities to sign up online, call the church office or in person in their plaza. In the digital age, Dave assumed that most people would sign up online, but that hasn't been the case. "People like the face to face contact," he observes. "About 60% still prefer to stop by and sign up in person."

Dave is quick to point out that the particulars in their practices aren't as important as the overarching value church leaders have placed on small group participation. Culture trumps strategy at North Coast, as Larry Osborne elaborates in much more detail in his book *Sticky Church*.

Alignment at Seacoast

At Seacoast Church in Mt. Pleasant, SC (www.seacoast.org), leadership development pastor Mac Lake has seen steady participation at 45-60% across the church's 13 campuses. The most important factor that has helped them maintain enthusiasm for small groups is a yearly "church wide study." Most of the year, groups can choose any topic they want to discuss, but yearly in September, they all study the topic of the pastor's weekend message series. "We make this a big deal," Mac explains. "Nobody wants to be left out. We start a lot of new groups at this time, and we have high participation in all of our groups. It's a shot in the arm for our church." At Seacoast, people have many other options for involvement. Their church's culture, then, is more diverse than North Coast's single-minded focus on groups.

The selection of new group leaders is similar to North Coast's process. Existing leaders refer a potential leader to complete a leadership application that

will be reviewed by a campus pastor to determine if the prospective leader is ready. Once completed and approved, the apprentice is mentored by the leader who referred them for training.

Mac and his team have posted their leadership training material online. The training consists of five sessions, and people can take as long as they want to complete the training. "This has made our training much more flexible and effective than it used to be," Mac explains. "People can be trained anytime, at any pace, and any place." Some complete it in a few days or a week, but others have taken months to complete it because they travel extensively. A weekly classroom approach didn't work well for Mac and Seacoast. People sometimes missed too many sessions to be qualified to become leaders, or others decided to become leaders in the middle of a training series, so they had to wait a long time to begin training and leading a group. Momentum was lost, and the ministry missed an opportunity for new leaders to step up.

Mentors, who are often the apprentice's small group leader, meet regularly with them and provide opportunities to use the skills they are learning within the group setting. "This system has proven to work really well for us," Mac observes. "It provides a blend of flexibility, personal connection and support, and on-the-job training."



Left: Seacoast Church offers small group leader training online which made the training much more flexible and effective than it used to be.

Mac has found that a traditional coaching structure works very well at Seacoast's campuses. They have pastors who oversee ten coaches, and each coach works with three to five group leaders. About a year and a half ago, Mac realized that they needed to make a major adjustment in the role of coaches. In a meeting of 90 coaches, he told them, "We looked at the 10,000 people who attend our church, and we found the people who love Jesus, love the church, and love leaders. We asked you to be coaches, and then we gave you a role of being administrators—turning in reports, counting people, forwarding emails. We owe you an apology. From today on, things will be different. Your new job description is to care for the souls of three to five leaders. We don't want you to be administrators any more." Mac explained that at any time, a significant number of group leaders faced discouragement and burn out, and it is time to encourage everybody to keep doing the hard, rewarding work of caring for people in their groups.

Video Extra



In a video-interview posted online, Mac discusses some of the key questions Seacoast is asking as they wrestle with how to increase the level of participation in the church's small group ministry. To see "Questions We're Asking About Small Groups," go to: www.youtube.com/leadershipnetwork

Define the Win at NorthRidge

Todd Mielke, small groups pastor at NorthRidge Church in Plymouth, MI (www.northridgechurch.com), identifies two distinct types of groups in their church: community groups are highly relational and ongoing, and missional groups, which may target a particular curriculum for a season or come together to participate in a service project. "In all our groups," Todd observes, "it's important for us to define the win. Participation is important, but we're looking for life transformation, not just bodies sitting in a room." The church, which has 45-55% participation in groups, sees its ministry in three forms: rows in worship on Sunday morning, circles in groups, and one-on-one in mentoring and friendships. The goal is to maximize life change in all three forms.

The church's commitment to groups has come from the top. For groups to be a higher priority, the pastor decided a few years ago to eliminate some of the competition. He announced that he was disbanding the midweek worship service so that more people could participate in groups. To communicate the win, Todd makes sure stories of God using groups to change lives are shared in many ways: in the sermons, online, at events, and everywhere people are listening. These stories pique the interest of people who may be considering joining a group for the first time, and they remind those who are currently in groups that God wants to work in them and through them more than they ever dreamed before.

The coaches at NorthRidge don't exist to control leaders but to support them. Like Seacoast, they want their coaches

to care for their leaders instead of wielding a heavy administrative hand.

To funnel interested people into small groups, Todd and his team organize "Get Small" events several times a year. They invite people in different regions of the community to come on specific nights when they are available, and they form new groups at these events. The church provides the initial curriculum, a leader for the group, and a home where they will meet the following weeks. This strategy has proven to be very successful, but they aren't locked into a single way of connecting people in groups. "We want to provide a wide range of opportunities for people to join a group," Todd explains. "What works for one may not work for another."

Below: North Ridge makes sure that stories of God using groups to change lives are shared in many ways: in the sermons, online, at events, and everywhere people are listening.



Like all good leaders, Todd is always learning. He remembers that he and his team planned a massive push to get people into groups, but they chose a curriculum on financial management that wasn't attractive to many people in groups, and they didn't do enough to create a strong infrastructure to provide competent leaders. They lost in both ways, but they learned important lessons from this experience. More than ever, Todd realized he had to

clearly define the win for small groups, communicate the win through stories of life change, and provide a wide range of opportunities for people to connect.

Clear Values, Effective Strategies

In these three churches, the success of the small groups ministry is a direct result of the top leadership establishing group participation as a core value. With groups at the center of the culture, small groups pastors can tailor their strategies of leadership selection, development, placement, and coaching to their church's environment. It all starts, though, at the top. Breaking the 50% barriers doesn't need to remain elusive any longer. Clear, shared values and proven strategies can help any church make significant progress in developing a growing small group ministry God uses to transform lives.



Right: Small groups at North Ridge form several times a year out of "get small" events. They provide the groups with curriculum, leaders and a place to meet.



About Leadership Network:

Leadership Network welcomes your response. The primary writer is **Pat Springle**. Editorial advisors were **Sherry Surratt**, Director of Radical-Future Labs for Leadership Network and Warren Bird, Director of Research and Intellectual Capital Support for Leadership Network. Contact them via julia.burk@leadnet.org

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



This report was compiled by Patrick Springle, the president of Baxter Press in Friendswood, TX. He served on the staff of Campus Crusade for Christ for 18 years, 11 as the Texas state director. He was Senior Vice President of Rapha for three years before starting his publishing business.

Additional Resources:

BOOKS: *In Sticky Church*, author and pastor Larry Osborne makes the case that closing the back door of your church is even more important than opening the front door wider. He offers a time-tested strategy for doing so: sermon-based small groups that dig deeper into the weekend message and tightly velcro members to the ministry. It’s a strategy that enabled Osborne’s congregation to grow from a handful of people to one of the larger churches in the nation—without any marketing or special programming. www.leadnet.org/books

VIDEO: *Questions We’re Asking About Small Groups* Mac Lake, leadership development pastor at Seacoast Church in Mt. Pleasant, SC, discusses some of the key questions they are asking as they wrestle with how to increase the level of participation in the church’s small group ministry. *TIME* 2:33.

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