

# How to Launch New Groups with a Small Group Connection

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While there's no question that using a church-wide campaign is the most effective way to launch *new* small groups, there are other strategies that can add variety and connect a different group (or grab the interest of people at a time in the year when an alignment doesn't make as much sense). One of the most effective ways of launching new groups is a Small Group Connection.

A small group connection is a powerful strategy that does two very good things:

1. **First, it can help a large number of unconnected people to take the critical first step of trying a group.** Sometimes just taking a "test-drive" is all they need to do.
2. **Second, unlike any other strategy, a small group connection helps identify leaders when you didn't think you had any.** If you're like most of us, the toughest part of small group ministry is finding good leaders. A well planned and executed connection isn't rocket science, but it will find leaders (often better leaders than you already have). That is huge!

Pulling off a successful small group connection is a three step process that requires thorough preparation, skillful execution, and detailed follow-up. Each of the three steps of the process play an important role in the strategy. Missing an important step will often lead to a less effective event.

## Part One: Preparation

What are the keys to good preparation? Here they are:

1. **Promotion:** Be sure and begin promoting the connection 2 to 3 weeks in advance. Unconnected people are almost always infrequent attenders. If you want to get their attention, you'll need to promote the event 2 or 3 weeks in a row (in part because they'll only be there 1 or 2 or the 3 weeks). The best way to promote the connection is to use the sermon to talk about the power of being connected and then refer to the connection event as an action step. It's great to also give an announcement and feature it on the website and newsletter, but the key to great promotion is to do it in the message. **For supercharged promotion**, prepare a video of a testimony (or do it live) of someone who has been powerfully impacted by being in a small group.
2. **Taking sign-ups:** This is one of the rare times when I encourage the use of a sign-up form. Provide a simple bulletin insert for people to fill in their name, best phone, best email and the kind of group they're looking for (this last one is optional, but allowing them to check interest in couples, singles, men's or women's gives you a little info that can help you prepare).
3. **Getting Attendance at the Connection:** Although you've taken sign-ups for the connection, you'll get the best response when you send an initial "*thanks for taking this step*" email from your senior pastor commending their sign-up as well as providing specifics about the event (day and time, room it is in, childcare instructions, etc.). Following up the initial email with a *reminder email and phone call* the day before is not overkill. The phone call can be a quick 15 second voicemail reminder. Friendly persistence will help the largest number attend. My experience has always been that an initial email, plus a reminder email, followed by a phone call on the day before and a final announcement on the day of the connection leads to attendance equal to the sign-up ("Whether you've signed up for the connection today or not, you are invited!"). Walk-ins make a big difference.

4. **Day and time for a connection:** Part of ensuring the best attendance is choosing the best time for the connection. When is the best time for a connection? Right after (or during) a service. Make it convenient. Hold the connection when people are already there! Do it in an easy room to get to. Be sure and provide childcare. Train your childcare team to ask everyone, "Are you staying for the connection?" Use good, clear signage.
5. **Choose a small group study that is easy to use:** There are plenty of good, just-add-water small group studies. A DVD-driven study is best. 6 weeks is the right length. Choose a topic that normal people would like to know more about.
6. **Recruit and train plenty of help:** One key to a smooth process is to have plenty of people on hand to greet attenders, help them get started, and help them finish well. I've found it is a great advantage to have a monitor for each table. I'll be covering the specifics of what happens at the connection (including monitors) in part two of this article.

The idea of a small group connection may seem like way too much detail. Believe me, though, I've been using this strategy for over 15 years and I haven't found anything that does a better job of connecting the people who simply want to be in a small group and finding leaders when you didn't know you had any.

## Part Two: Execution

You've prepared for the small group connection and promoted it for two or three weeks. What do you actually do at a connection? In this section I'm going to fill in some blanks, but first, let's clarify one very important detail. What I'm going to lay out is how to do a *Saddleback* style Small Group Connection. This is different than *North Point's* GroupLink in a very significant way. While GroupLink is also designed to start new groups, it does it primarily with prequalified leaders. A Small Group Connection actually identifies new leaders during the event.

Ready to learn how to run an effective small group connection? Here goes.

### Step One: Set up the Connection to be a great experience.

**Get ready for the day by including your Children's Ministry team in the strategy.** The best connection events are held right after a weekend service and feature childcare at least through the 5th grade. In Part One of this article I talked about the importance of following up on the sign-ups for the Connection by sending an initial email AND a reminder email AND calling to remind on Saturday just before the event. The email reminds parents that there will be childcare and instructs them that when they check their children in to "let the volunteer know that they'll be staying for the connection." Why do that? One of the gaps we discovered was that requiring parents to pick up their kids after the service and then check them back into another room for Connection childcare frequently resulted in either a delay getting to the Connection or the decision to attend another time. We eliminated that issue by simply giving each child whose parents were staying for the Connection a different color tag and then transferring them to an extended childcare room at the end of their normal program.

**Announce the Connection TWICE during the service.** This may seem like overkill but if you talk about the Connection early in the service and then again at the end it will help your walk-in count. Simply saying, "If you haven't signed up for the Small Group Connection but you can make it today, we'd love to have you! There's childcare. It's a really good experience. Give us an hour, we'll help you get connected. Join us right after the service in room \_\_\_\_\_." If you promote it right, send the email, make the phone call, and invite walk-ins...your attendance will be about what your sign-up was.

**Be ready when the crowd arrives.** Simply being ready with the room arranged and the right people in place makes a big difference. The ideal arrangement includes chairs (in stacks) and open space. You'll need signage that clearly identifies the room. Pay attention to the RSVP count. Provide table space for that many. Position your friendly, outgoing greeters at check-in tables with name tags and medium point sharpies. Have greeters also work the room while the crowd arrives. These greeters can do double duty and become monitors near the tables as the connection proceeds. I'll give you more on this later.

You'll want to start as quickly as you can, but not too soon. Allow time for most of your attendees to arrive. When you're ready to begin, here's what to do:

## Step Two: Sort by Affinity

**I've often described this step as being somewhat like a quarterback at the line of scrimmage.** The diversity and size of your crowd will determine how you'll sort them out. Whether you sort them out by life-stage (young marrieds, empty-nesters, parents with teens, etc.), affinity (couples, singles, men's or women's), or geography (where they live), you'll want to end up with clumps of about 12 to 16 people. If you have a smaller group, you may not need to sort! If you have a larger group, you may end up with several clumps around the room. It's not an exact science. Make it fun. Keep it light-hearted.

**The first thing I do in this stage** is "test the room." I usually start by getting everyone's attention and asking for a quick show of hands. "Anyone looking for a men's group? How about a women's group?" These two questions will almost always surface a few. Note how many and then move on. "How many of you are looking for a couple's group? Anyone looking for a single's group?" The objective of testing the room is really just to see what you have. Once you've gotten a feel for the room you can quickly make some decisions. Only have a few people looking for a men's or women's group? Ask them if they'd be game to join a mixed group. Only have a few singles? Same thing. Eyeball the room. Make decisions about what you can do and move on. It's always ok to adjust by taking names and fitting people into other existing groups. Just make this stage move along and get into the actual connection process.

**The second thing to do is begin moving people to different parts of the room.** At this point, you're not seating them at different tables. You're simply moving them to the right area. "If you're looking for a couple's group, would you move over to this area." The objective here is to end up with clumps of 12 to 16 (6 to 8 for men's and women's). It's ok to be smaller. You'll simply adjust the way you do step 3. It's also ok to be larger than 16. You'll just adjust the way you handle step 3. Once you're finished sorting, you're ready to move to the next step.

## Step Three: The Connection Process

**The Connection Process is actually pretty simple.** You'll be helping your attendees have a conversation enabling them to get to know each other well enough to choose leaders from their circle they'd be willing to follow for a six-week test-drive group. It's important to note that every church will need to determine for themselves [who can lead](#) a connection group and then adjust the process accordingly.

What I'm about to explain assumes that every group can choose for themselves who they will be willing to follow for a six-week test-drive. For the record, I've found that most groups are extremely capable of making great choices even with only an hour together. They can easily pick out who the "relative shepherd" is at their circle. That being said, what happens next is the first of three rounds of instructions, each round accompanied by a question. The question rounds will be followed by a carefully monitored action step.

### Here are the three questions with instructions:

**First Question: Find another couple (or get in groups of four WITHIN your clump), introduce yourself, and tell how you came to our church the first time and what made you come back.** This is a short introduction. You may have to call an audible or two in order to get them moving. You may have to adjust depending on the number of people in certain clumps.

**Second Question: Now, take your group of four and connect with another group of four in your clump...and answer this question: Have you ever been in a group before of any kind (could be small group at church or Bible Study Fellowship or a support group, a home Bible study or Financial Peach. Even a group at work)...and what was your experience like?** Again, you may have to adjust to accommodate a clump that doesn't start with enough people, but the idea is to get them talking within the clump that you've sorted them into.

**Third Question: Now ask them to join the other group within their clump and have a seat at one of the tables. Ideally that will give them 12 to 16 people in each circle (or 6 to 8 for men's or women's). The next question is, "Briefly share where you are in your spiritual journey."** I like to debug this question by saying, "One of the great things about our church is that we know there are people here who have been walking with Christ for a long time...and there are some here today who are trying to figure out if Jesus is the real deal. We love that! Today, no matter if you're investigating Jesus for the first time or if you've known him since you were a little child, we want you to share where you are in your spiritual journey. Now the key word is 'briefly!' If someone at your table begins by saying, 'I remember when I woke up in the Christian preschool...', that's too much information! We're looking for brief today! I want you to take a few minutes and share where you are in your spiritual journey.

## A monitor for each circle

Question 3 is the point in the process where it is really important to have a *monitor* for each circle. Ideally, I like to have a small group coach serving as a monitor for each circle. Having coaches serve as monitors makes for as smooth an introduction to a new leader as you are ever going to have.

## What is the role of the monitor?

Table monitors serve in two critical aspects during the connection:

- They keep eyes and ears on the conversation. Although monitors are not in the circle (they stand near the circle) but try not to engage unnecessarily.
- They skillfully help every group at three important moments (when choosing leaders, when figuring out when to meet, and accompanying new leaders to a standup leader meeting at the end of the connection).

**Important Note:** I use small group coaches for table monitors. Using coaches as monitors allows them to get to know new leaders at the very beginning. This is a HUGE advantage.

The third question (above) is a key spot for monitors. You've asked attenders for an hour of their time. It is possible to do a connection in about an hour...but only if the participants follow instructions and if you are fairly directive. A coach near each table can help participants keep moving on this question. One person giving the 10 minute version of where they are in their spiritual journey can really set the whole process back. Additionally, since the monitor is often the person who will be serving as a kind of coach for the group that will begin, it gives them a chance to be known from the beginning.

**It all comes down to this.** You've promoted and prepared. You've pulled together a good group of unconnected people who are looking for a small group. You've sorted them out by affinity and they've spent about 45 to 50 minutes in a dialog that has brought them to the very edge of forming a group. What happens next is huge!

## Part Three: Choosing Leaders

You've done most of the hard work at this point. All the preparation and promotion has happened. You've pulled together a group of people wanting to be part of a small group. They've gone through the first 45 minutes or so of your connection. Now it is time to help each circle take four key steps:

## First, they need to choose a leader.

I like to say, “Now we’ve come to the ‘white-knuckle’ portion of our time together! Hopefully you’ve enjoyed getting to know a few folks today. In fact, you may know more about the folks at your table than almost anyone else! But now we’re at a point where we’re going to help you with a key step. Believe it or not, we’re going to help you choose a leader from amongst yourselves!”

Then I add: “The New Testament gives us at least two ways that leaders were chosen. First, at about the midpoint of Jesus’ 3 year ministry he went up on a mountain, prayed all night, and then chose 12 to be his disciples ([Mark 3:13-14](#)). Another time, the disciples were being overwhelmed by the needs of their growing church and needed to add additional help. So they instructed the congregation to ‘choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom ([Acts 6:3 NIV](#)).’”

“We don’t have 18 months...so we’re preferring method #2. But before we help you do that, let’s talk a little bit about what makes a good leader.

1. A good leader is not necessarily the person at your table who knows the most about the Bible. It could be, but that’s not always the case.
2. A good leader is not necessarily the person at your table who has the most experience leading a group. It could be, but that’s not always the case.
3. A good leader is usually the person that as they were sharing a few minutes ago you heard them say something like, ‘I’m not where I should be, but in the last 6 months I’ve been steadily moving in the right direction.’
4. Or they may have said, ‘I can see God is helping me become the kind of person I really long to be.’
5. As they shared, you may have sensed a real spirit of humility or the sense that God is doing something with them and that you’d be willing to call them if you needed to talk with someone.

“Now in a moment we’re going to choose a leader, but does that help you see what might make the best leader? Ok, now this is going to sound crazy...but here’s how we’re going to choose. I’m going to pray and ask God to remind all of us about the conversations at our tables. And then I’m going to count to three and we’re going to point to the person at your table that you’d be willing to follow for a six week test drive.”

It is a good idea to have all of the circles ready for this step **AT THE SAME TIME**. I’ve mentioned previously that it is a good idea to have a monitor for each circle. This is an important moment to have help. You’ll count to three (or say, “ready, set, point!”), have them point, and *have them keep pointing* at the person they’re willing to follow until the monitor tells them to put down their hands. A monitor can help a group clarify who they’ve chosen. It will almost always be more than one person. That’s actually a good thing. Once they’ve pointed and you’ve clarified you’ll want to move quickly to the next three important steps.

**Important Note for Monitors:** I have the monitors eyeball the circle and determine who looks like they are getting the most votes (How many of you are pointing at Bob? Okay, you can put your hands down. How many are pointing at Linda? Okay, you can put your hands down).

If you have time, have each group go back around and tell the person they’ve pointed to why they chose them. This is a huge step. Most people have never been affirmed this way. This step, all by itself, is worth the price of admission! Be sure and do it.

## Second, while the group is affirming those pointed to, have them begin circulating a roster.

I used to have the roster made in two-part paper. That way the new leader can have a copy and you could keep a copy for your records. These days I simply take a picture on my phone of the roster and give the hard copy to the leader. I upload the picture to Google Drive and our data team enters the group for tracking.

### **Third, have the group choose a day and time for their meeting.**

**Important Note for Monitors:** I've found it helpful to have the monitor available to help groups figure out when they will meet. You can often shorten things by asking the leader(s), "Is there a night you *cannot* meet?" Next, ask the members, "Is there a night any of you cannot meet?" By process of elimination, you have just figured out a time when most, if not all, can meet. It may take some work, but a little skill goes a long way to help the group quickly figure out when to meet.

### **Fourth, help the group figure out where they are going to meet.**

Sometimes this is an easy task. Other times it can be a little tough. It can be a home or apartment. It can also be a restaurant or coffee shop. The key is for them to find a place to meet the very first time. It is not a permanent choice. When they've found a place to meet, have them write it down on their roster.

### **Fifth, dismiss group members**

Once your circles have chosen leaders, figured out when and where they're going to meet, and completed their rosters, you can dismiss the members of the groups.

Newly connected group members will rarely leave right away. After all, many of them will tell you, "This is the MOST connected they've ever felt at your church."

Still, a key move right here is to help your new leaders get from the circle to the standup meeting for leaders (which should begin immediately).

**Important Note for Monitors:** Train your monitors to take each new leader by the elbow and escort them to the standup leaders meeting. They will almost always be in the middle of a conversation with a new member or two (or eight!). No matter. Train your monitors to say, "I'm so sorry. Bob and Linda will be right back. They just need to come over here for 5 minutes."

## Part Four: Standup Meeting for Leaders

You've just dismissed *the members* of the new connection groups. Now it's time to take just a few minutes (5 to 10) to affirm your new leaders, hand them a leader packet, and introduce them to their coach.

### **First, keep in mind that no one ever comes to the connection expecting to end up being the leader of a group!**

They don't! Actually, they came to the connection for a variety of reasons and those reasons don't include finding a group to lead. Consequently, their very natural reaction to being chosen is "what just happened!?" I always take a couple minutes to affirm them and help them rethink what just happened. Here's how I do it. I say something like this:

"You need to know that almost every leader in the Bible was chosen. They didn't volunteer. Old Testament or New Testament. Chosen. Moses. Gideon. Abraham. James and John. Peter. Paul. Chosen. There aren't any great stories where someone came up and said, "I'd like to volunteer to be a leader." All of the great stories are about God choosing a leader. And the best story is about how David was chosen. Remember how it goes?

Samuel is sent by God to anoint the next king of Israel and he goes to Jesse's house. When he gets there Jesse automatically brings out his oldest son. Naturally. He did what was expected. I believe that in that moment the Holy Spirit whispered to Samuel, "That's not him." So Jesse brought out the next son. "That's not him." This went on until there was only one left. David. And when Jesse brought out David, Samuel heard, "That's the one."

Interesting about Samuel, we learn about his ability to hear God much earlier, when he was a little boy living with Eli the priest. And so we know that Samuel can actually hear God speak. But I believe that as you were sharing your answers with the group today, they heard something deep in their heart about you. I don't know what it was. But I believe they heard it and that's why they pointed to you."

Telling this story to affirm their selection is the first step.

**The second thing I do is hand them a packet that includes a few basic things and then quickly show them what's in the packet.**

- A thumb drive with a few group leader videos and resources
- A copy of the DVD and study their group will be doing
- Name tags and a marker

Once I've pointed out what's in the packet I ask the monitors (who in our case are their coaches) to connect and set up a time to connect in the next 7 days. This can be in person or on the phone.

**The third thing that happens is every new leader spends a few minutes connecting with their coach.** They exchange contact information (phone numbers and email). They figure out when they will connect that week.

**And that's a wrap!**

This is the formula. You may need to adjust it for your setting. I can tell you this. I've personally used this strategy in groups as small as 20 to 30 and as large as 350 in a tent. I began using this strategy in 2000 and have used versions of it for over 15 years. Best I can figure, I've personally launched over 1500 groups myself and coached churches around the country to do the same.

I hope the small group connection strategy helps you connect large numbers of unconnected people and identify untold numbers of new leaders.

[Edit](#)

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