



Navigational Hazards

With the explosion of the first modern small group church during the 1970s—the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Korea—a wave of church leaders traveled to Korea and returned with a vision to emulate Dr. Cho’s pattern. Some, like Dale Galloway and the New Hope Community Church in Portland, Oregon, succeeded. Many others started home groups but never saw the same growth. Instead, they watched their groups become in-grown cliques. In other churches, the groups stalled out and church leaders shut them down.

In 1990, a new wave of small group experiments burst forth. Much of this experimentation rose from the unexpected stir caused by Dr. Ralph W. Neighbour Jr.’s book *Where Do We Go From Here?*. In it, Dr. Neighbour recorded personal insights that rose from his frustration with the American church. After twenty-one of the pastors he had helped develop small groups were forced to resign, Dr. Neighbour stated that there was little hope for the traditional church to live out the values of holistic small groups.¹

Instead of listening to Dr. Neighbour’s caution about the traditional church, many church leaders were incited and challenged by his negative assessment. One pastor wrote: “I was frankly outraged at how easily

Dr. Neighbour disposed of the traditional American church and described a new paradigm of church structure called the ‘cell group church.’”² During the 1990s, churches from every denomination—Baptist to Episcopal, Pentecostal to Presbyterian, Methodist to Church of God, Mennonite to Vineyard—experimented with holistic small groups. These churches were like ships taking a voyage into uncharted territory. They ventured into places where most had not dared to go 20 years before. On these voyages, these ships encountered almost every imaginable navigational hazard. As I listened to their stories, I kept hearing the same hazards being described. Churches that follow can learn from these experiences and avoid these hazards.³

Hazard #1: Misunderstanding the Destination

When a ship captain prepares for a sea-going journey, he takes the time to plan well. He studies ocean charts, determines destinations, plots courses, consults weather reports, purchases and stores provisions. No sailor dares a sea venture without a proper knowledge of his destination and what it will take to get there.

Many times pastors fail to thoroughly consider the destination toward which they travel. They call a small group expert and ask for help in starting ten groups within three months. While they come with a desire for biblical community, they do not know what it really looks like. They often have only read one book or heard about a big church that is doing small groups. They have not done enough research to understand where they are going or how they can really get there.

Too many pastors have experienced the hazardous nature of this approach. Reading one book or attending one conference is not enough to attain a clear vision for small groups. Most pastors spend years in seminary learning how to follow patterns of traditional church ministry. It might not take three years to learn how to run a small group ministry, but it will take considerably more than reading one book.

I can state this fact with a great deal of confidence because the churches that have done the best job of developing a relational way of doing small groups have this in common: they do their homework, and

they do it before they make plans to start groups or announce those plans to the church congregation. They also hear God's call to small group ministry very clearly. They do not make the transition because it has made the church down the road grow large or because it seems like a good idea. They do it because they sense God calling their church to do it. *Stage 1: Discover the Mission of the Relational Church* will deepen your understanding of holistic small groups and how churches organize themselves to facilitate relational life.

Hazard #2: Failing to Practice Team Leadership

Pastoral leaders cannot force small groups to work through strength of will, knowledge, or diligent effort. Leading a small group initiative will fail if it is a solo project. Groups work because people work together in relationships. Shouldering the transitional burden alone seems to be a common hazard in many churches. The senior pastor goes to his study, reads all of the available literature on small groups, attends conferences, and develops a plan, often using fancy charts and illustrations. Then he announces the plan to the leadership.

When one person announces his small group strategy to a group of people as if it is a foregone conclusion, he is asking for trouble. People do not adopt new ideas blindly. They need understanding, time, and much discussion. This means the senior pastor will need help in disseminating the idea to other members of the church. Seminars and sermons will not work in the early stages. To overcome this hazard, the senior pastor must gather a team of key people who will help him discover how God is calling the church to navigate the waters of change. *Stage 2: Develop Vision and Strategy as a Team*, will guide you through this process.

Hazard #3: Not Identifying the Starting Point

It is not enough for a ship captain to know his destination point when determining the proper course to steer at sea. Two vessels may have the same destination, but vastly different starting points. The

issues and challenges each ship will face will be unique because of its unique starting point. The same is true for the church. Two churches embarking from two starting points will take different courses to arrive at the same location. The journey toward becoming a relational church through small groups will be very different for a 100-year-old Baptist church in rural east Texas than it will be for a 5-year-old non-denominational church in metropolitan Cleveland. Imagine the difference between the journey of a church who has had three pastors in the last 8 years and that of a church who has had the same pastor for the last 20 years.

When churches fail to understand their starting points, they steer blindly into waters replete with hidden dangers and unseen hazards. *Stage 3: Assess Your Church's Current Reality*, will guide you in your quest to understanding your church's starting point so that you will be able to prepare your members and lead them in the God-directed steps toward the vision of small group ministry.

Hazard #4: Putting Old Wine into New Wineskins

Many churches have embraced the new wineskin of small groups, but the people of the church have not allowed their personal lives to be challenged, changed, and remade by the work of the Holy Spirit. Some have carried with them old patterns of ministry that stand in the way of what God is doing. Others have transported unbiblical ideas of what the church is. Most entering small groups struggle with simple things like becoming transparent, relating to nonbelievers, and mentoring future leaders.

One west coast denominational pastor caught the vision for small groups. He received training on small group ministry, brought in experts for consultation, and hosted seminars for his church members. The church started groups and the level of excitement rose. The church began reaching nonbelievers, and new Christians not only came to the groups but also started attending the worship services. The church disciplined these new believers and even began reaching their friends. Everything was working well until the old guard started looking across the isle of the church and realized that they were losing control. The deacons started questioning the small group strategy (one

which they had endorsed and approved two years before) and then they began to pull in the reins on the pastor, telling him that he needed to get back to pastoring and caring for the people. This pastor did most things right, but there was no change of heart on the part of his church's leadership.

I have yet to find a church that made small groups work but did not develop a deep hunger for God. Each successful church sought to change not only the wineskin of small groups, but also to change the wine that flows into the hearts of the people. In order to enter into what God is doing in our world today, you must go beyond a transition of structures; you must embrace God Himself and allow Him to transform you through repentance. *Stage 4: Prepare the Church Through Transformation*, provides practical ways to prepare people for successful small group experiences.

Hazard #5: Starting Too Abruptly

The average tenure of senior pastors in the United States is about five years. Therefore, when pastors feel they have a God-given idea, they do not have much time enact it and often encounter great resistance when doing so. While pastors feel like they do not have a lot of time to do what God is calling them to do, small groups begun too abruptly rarely work. Church after church over the last twenty years has tried to jump from Stage 1 to Stage 5, skipping Stages 2, 3, and 4. They dive into the deep end without considering whether or not they can swim.

Instead of launching groups recklessly, churches that succeed launch them intentionally. Pastors do not intend to be reckless; their motives are usually pure. But when leaders try to begin groups too quickly, they often find themselves picking up the pieces. Intentional start-ups are based on the realization that leaders must be prepared and the small group members must be committed to the values that make small groups work. Without such a commitment, small group members will be distracted from the vision and purpose of the groups.

I imagine that some readers will struggle as they read this section. They might believe that their church is unique, that they can start more quickly than others, that they will not encounter the hazards and the struggles of a quick start-up. Before your church decides to begin small

groups quickly, please consider the ramifications if you are wrong. Read through the information on the first five stages. These chapters will help you chart a course of action and determine how quickly you can begin.

As I have talked with pastors, I have discovered that the churches who loaded the front end of their start-up efforts with as much thought, preparation, and training as possible were more likely to launch effective start-up groups. *Stage 5: Launch the First Group(s) with Kingdom Seekers*, will give you the confidence to know that when your church does start its small groups, it will start them with great potential for success.

Hazard #6: Viewing Small Groups as a Program

Small groups are not a panacea that will solve the ills of a church. The small group ministry strategy is not a program that a church can purchase and put on auto pilot. Small groups work because pastors and coaches are ministering to, mentoring, and releasing others into ministry.

Sadly, many churches have treated small groups as a program that will run itself. Pastors promote small groups from the pulpit, put charts on the walls, and hire a “small group pastor.” An effective small group ministry is not like an effective Sunday school program or home Bible study groups where the church can purchase curriculum and pass it out to teachers who have been teaching for 15 years. Small groups on auto pilot always crash.

In the early 1990s, one early adopter of the small group strategy had a goal posted on the walls of his worship facility. It read: “2,000 groups by 2000.” I looked around his church and thought, “How?” The church was doing small groups according to the proper structure, but the groups had not developed any momentum. The pastor had heard a small group pioneer state that a vision should be an impossible vision. This vision was so impossible that they didn’t even come within shouting distance of it.

Small groups do not grow and multiply just because they are meeting together. Small group growth is a result of momentum generated by Christ-centered and Christ-empowered relationships. Momentum must be developed through small group wins in three areas: personal victories, new Christians, and new small groups. When Christ moves through the small group relationships in these three ways, the small group system is

propelled forward, creating more and more momentum. *Stage 6: Generate small group Momentum*, will explain how to develop new leaders relationally and thereby create new groups.

Hazard #7: No Support Systems

An associate pastor took me out to lunch after a conference to pick my brain for ways he could turn around his 20 stagnating groups. I asked him how his small group members were disciplined. They were not. I asked him how he was coaching the small group leaders. There were no coaches. I asked him how much energy he, as the small group pastor, spent ministering to the groups and leaders. He told me about the other administrative responsibilities he had in the church and how he had no time to invest in the leaders. Then I asked him how the senior pastor fit into the vision of the small groups. He confessed that the senior pastor gave little to no attention to the small group vision.

Small groups are not designed to work autonomously. When left alone, small group leaders must do all of the work of setting direction, discipling members, training apprentices, and evangelizing the world. This leads to burnout and failed groups. Group members and group leaders need oversight, support, accountability, and direction. This is the biblical role of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. *Stage 7: Establish the Hidden Systems that Support Small Groups*, will help your church provide the needed support that comes in the form of training, pastoral staff oversight, organization, teaching, evangelistic harvest events, children's small group ministry, youth small group ministry, and much more.

Hazard #8: Failing To Maintain Focus and Expand the Ministry

A church leadership team recently asked me, "What percentage of our members should be participating in our small groups? 70%? 80%? 100%?" I thought afterward, "That is not the right question." The mission of the church is not about getting current Christians into small groups. The mission of the church is to transform the world by the power

of the Holy Spirit flowing through us. Small group ministry is one of the best ways to accomplish this mission.

Some churches have shifted the focus of the church after 75% or more of the membership has joined a small group. They assume that the job is done. There is nothing further from the truth. Groups are like roses in a garden. Weeds will invade and insects will destroy, leaving the rose bushes distorted or dying unless the gardener tends to the garden. Without the focus of church leadership, groups lose energy, people focus on other things, and Satan invades what is left unprotected.

In order to avoid this hazard, it is important for a pastor to understand that initiating change and then leaving the congregation for another ministry position is a recipe for small group demise. Without the guidance of the leader who initiated the groups, the church members are pulled back toward the old ways of ministry. This is what they know, and without the leader, they will feel safer with the old style.

Small groups do not work as a maintenance strategy. They only work when they exist to change the world. Small groups are either growing or dying, just like a rose garden. Therefore the focus should lie on expanding the groups, starting new churches, training new pastors, and impacting the world. Churches that have a vision to impact their Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) have exciting small groups full of people who are called to minister and see the hand of God transforming society. *Stage 8: Expand the Small Groups to Reach the Unreached*, will provide practical ways to increase the impact of the small groups to transform more than just your church and neighborhood.

Navigation is foundational to a successful sea-going voyage. Without a good navigator, a ship is likely to end up in trouble or even destroyed. Churches face a similar situation when trying to move God's people from no small groups to expanding small groups. Haphazard navigation will almost always lead a church into a head-on collision with a debilitating hazard. The eight stages found on the following pages provide the necessary tools for navigating around these eight hazards. The journey to making small groups work will look differently in every church. These eight stages will provide broad parameters for navigating that stage, while at the same time allowing room for God to guide the church forward. So prepare yourself for the adventure of a lifetime. Your ministry will never be the same as God leads you and your church into the new territory of a relational church through holistic small groups.