

Disconnect?

Warning Signs that Small Group is Wandering Away from the Church

There is a big difference between managing committees and nurturing small groups. I find that this misunderstanding in an established church often leads to mistakes in small group management.

Committee oversight is like training dogs. Dogs have a collar and leash. That's code for "mandate" and "job description". The church tells the dog to "fetch" and "roll over", and if the dog doesn't do what it's told to do the board jerks the leash and says "Bad dog!" When it comes to committees, the last thing a church wants is a creative dog. Dogs and committees don't easily wander away from the church because they are always meeting with the supervisor, writing reports, and asking permission before doing anything risky. On the other hand, because committees primarily relate to boards, nobody may notice that committee members are infrequent at worship, reluctant in evangelism, or lackadaisical about training opportunities.

Small group management, however, is like raising rabbits. We all know what happens when two rabbits get together! Rabbits are incredibly inquisitive creatures, and they tend to get into everything and wander anywhere. Look in some obscure corner of the back yard, and there's a rabbit! Look in the most unlikely places of a mission field, or imagine almost any topic of conversation, or stumble across the smallest micro-culture, and there's a rabbit! You can't put a leash on a rabbit ... but you can build a fence. You can establish boundaries within which rabbits can wander anywhere, but beyond which they cannot stray. Don't expect small groups to write reports, ask permission, and attend board meetings. Do define expectations and establish boundaries.

Of course the primary "fence" that surrounds a church in the business of raising small groups is the congregational consensus of core values, beliefs, vision, or mission. The pastor may receive feedback that a small group (or small group leader) has acted in such a way as to undermine values, contradict beliefs, swerve from vision, or distort mission. Clearly that is a warning sign that the pastor urgently needs to talk with the small group leader to explain or correct behaviour.

For example, one pastor learned that a small group of young adults was reading vampire novels and discussing theological dualism, and the church expected small groups to read scripture and teach that Jesus was Lord. Or for example, a small group staff leader discovered through ecumenical partners that a group had distorted the church's mission to *preach Good News to all nations* into a militant program to block a minority religion from acquiring property in the neighbourhood. In the first case, the pastor coached the small group leader. The group corrected its spiritual focus, and one member of the group left. In the second case, the staff person confronted the group, but the whole group left to join another church.

The truth is that if you wait to receive feedback that a "rabbit" has gotten over "the fence", it may be too late to do much about it. Fortunately, there are warning signs that can precipitate an intervention before anything so drastic might occur.

The first warning sign is that small group members, and particularly the small group leader, are not attending worship regularly. We are familiar with counting worship attendance, but we don't often intentionally name who is there. Churches that are in the business of "raising rabbits" always look for the small group leader in worship. They track his or her attendance through the year. They also expect the leader to track the worship attendance of small group participants. Indeed, every small group meeting ends with the words: *See you in worship!*

The more small groups you have, the more intentionally you have to track worship attendance. Rabbits always return to the place where they are fed. If any rabbit fails to show up, that indicates they are getting food somewhere else! Small group leaders should at least attend worship an average of three weeks out of four. There may be fluctuations due to illness, work, and family holidays, but they are very consistent. Small group participants may not all be members (or Christians), but as a rule of thumb at least 2/3 of a small group should be tracked in worship once a month. As groups mature in faith, they may set even higher expectations for worship.

The point is that small groups connect to worship, not board meetings. A mere report about what a small group is doing is insufficient to ensure that a small group doesn't wander from the church. Spirituality, not bureaucracy, is the bond that keeps a group with a church.

The second warning sign that a group might wander from the church is that the small group leader fails to attend regular training or coaching sessions. We are familiar with annual training sessions for Sunday school teachers or weekly rehearsals for musicians, but many churches are undisciplined about intentional coaching for small group leaders. Churches that are in the business of "raising rabbits" are always upgrading the training of small group leaders ... perhaps with an intentional training session once every quarter.

These "upgrade" sessions help small group leaders stay aligned with the mission of the church. They help leaders solve emerging problems (e.g. personality conflicts, theological questions, ethical dilemmas); and overcome plateaus in building relationships or faith (e.g. boredom, anxiety, frustration). More importantly, these upgrade sessions build the relationship of trust among small group leaders themselves, and reinforce the basic values, convictions, mission and vision of the church in their personal lives.

Churches that multiply small groups nurture a kind of *esprit de corps* that honours the shared values and interest of a group. That is why group leaders are sometimes called "shepherds" or "lay pastors". Quarterly training sessions grow expertise and loyalty, making it far less likely that a small group will wander away from the church.

The third warning sign is that a small group leader is becoming critical of *the credibility* of the pastor. This is very different from criticism about *the expertise* of a pastor. Pastors are often vulnerable to criticism about skills, and wise pastors know that in this age of change we are often incompetent again within a month of getting more training. Pastors are always on a steep learning curve (as are all professionals today), and criticism from a small group leader about *skills* usually just means they are on a quest for quality. An issue over skills rarely causes a small group to wander.

The issue of *credibility* is far more serious. If a small group leader is becoming vocal criticizing a pastor's integrity, spirituality, or calling, then that is a sign that a small group might be contemplating a departure from the church. The small group leader might see themselves competitive with the pastor, and imagine themselves as the pastor to a new church. Their self-perception may be encouraged by the small group participants, and this makes the small group leader bolder in their criticisms.

This is not how new churches are planted ... but it is how established churches split. Church plants always start in the context of *respect* for the credibility of the home pastor, and *cooperation* to start a new church recognizing the calling of a small group leader. Church splits always start in the context of *competition* with the home pastor, and the new church is founded more on antagonism rather than cooperation.

The pastor embodies the very core values, beliefs, vision, and mission that make up the "fence" that keeps the rabbits enclosed. If the pastor for some reason will not, or cannot, model and mentor those fundamentals of trust, then more than one rabbit will escape. Fortunately, the pastor is not alone. Healthy churches also have a board of spiritual leaders that help the pastor embody the essence of the church. Their combined unity helps prevent a small group from wandering. Personal mentoring between a spiritual leader (board member) and a critical small group leader can de-fuse competition, restore humility, and define the true calling of a small group leader.

The best news of all is that churches that heed these warning signs always multiply more rabbits. Church members, and seekers beyond the church, see the intentional care given to support small group leaders. That gives them confidence to take a risk, share themselves, and join a small group. It also encourages potential small group leaders to step up. Even the most faithful people fear that they are being presumptuous to ever imagine being a small group leader. When they experience the connection with worship, receive ongoing training, and respect the integrity of the pastor, they will happily explore the mission field, but never go over the fence.

Tom Bandy

www.ThrivingChurch.com

See Tom's blog through his website