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How to add Small Groups to your Sunday School Church

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Whether you are transitioning away from Sunday School, or merely adding small groups to supplement your Sunday School system, be prepared for resistance. Most people are resistant to change, and in the case of Sunday School and small groups, that resistance can be very strong. Unfortunately, in recent years the two systems have been pitted against each other and church members often feel compelled to “defend” the current system while fighting against the introduction of the new system.

As in the case of any change, communication is the key. Use every avenue of communication, and use them often. If you are adding small groups with the intention of keeping Sunday School, be sure to let your people know small groups are just another option for spiritual health. If you are transitioning away from Sunday School, do so slowly. Very slowly. If you quickly pull the plug on Sunday School with little or no transition time, you could lose a large percentage of your congregation. Instead of seeing the Sunday School advocates as “enemies” of your new small group system, recognize them as the faithful servants who have attended those Sunday School classes week after week, perhaps for years.

I would suggest that you think of this transition time in three stages:

1. Patience – If you were going on a mission trip, you would want to know something about the culture of the people. While you may feel you know your church culture, when it comes to leading change, you will be shaking the very foundations of your church. It is imperative that you understand not only the current culture, but also your church’s history and any buried “trigger points” that may be stumbling blocks to progress.

1. Talk to key opinion leaders. These are not necessarily the ministry leaders of your church. Talk to the ministry leaders, but also look for “unofficial” leaders such as spouses of pastors, deacons, and elders. Talk to the people who work in the office. Interview that administrative assistant or children’s ministry volunteer who has been at the church for twenty years. Ask people in the church who they think are the key opinion leaders. Who has influence and a passion for the future of the church? Who are the strong Sunday School proponents? You will want them on your side. Write down all of these names and be especially aware of names that keep coming up. Then go to those people and listen, listen, listen.

2. Survey small group leaders past and current (if any). Find out what worked, what didn’t, and what they wish would have happened. If they were king or queen for a day, what would they have done

differently? Survey Sunday School leaders and ask them about their thoughts about small groups. What are their reservations? What has been their experience with small groups?

3. Honor the past, but progressively move into the future. Be sure to honor the people who developed Sunday school or small groups before you. They may have not done it the way you would have done it, but because of their hard work and sacrifice, you have the opportunity ahead of you. It is biblical, and helps you to live in the land of grace. Also, “grandfather in” any existing small groups. At the same time, however, focus on the new people who are adopting your paradigm (early adopters), not those who are waiting to see if you are around next year (late adopters). Remember, if you have existing small groups who have survived for awhile with little or no direction, they probably have a “maverick spirit.” They keep going with little or no encouragement. Their spirit was the one that conquered the Wild West. They are loyal, but the only way the new sheriff in town is going to win them over is through relationship.

2. Prayer – Begin praying for responsiveness from your church. Enlist a group of people to pray for your new ministry. Ask Sunday School leaders to pray for the small group ministry. Hold times of prayer and dedicate times for fasting. When you ask people to fast, you will find out who is dedicated to your ministry! As you are praying, ask God to answer these three questions:

1. The “Who” question. Who is responsive to your vision? Who is seeing and feeling your passion? Who agrees with your goals and direction for the small group ministry?

2. The “When” question. When should you implement? Pastor Rick has told me, time and time again, “Don’t let problem solving interfere with decision making.” When you do the reverse, God is factored out. If you need every problem figured out before you commit to the decision, faith is absent. If you want to do a God-sized ministry, you won’t have to have it all figured out. I like to think of the “three L’s” – Look, Learn, and Launch. Look to see who is with you. Learn all you can. Launch when God tells you...not a second before or after.

3. The “What” question. What do you want to do? Microsoft used to have a logo line that I loved. It was, “Where do you want to go today?” It asked a question that required action. Some churches have no idea where they want to go in a sermon, let alone in a week, month, or year. Make sure you have a plan for adding small groups. Don’t just add them to your church because it seems to be the trendy thing to do. Groups must either be seen as a way to supplement or replace your Sunday School system. Be honest about this up front and don’t ask your people to give time to something that is not strategic and intentional. Shepherds plan the next shepherd, not the sheep. Know what you want to do and where you want to go.

3. Planning – Failing to plan is the same as planning to fail. If you are going to add small groups to your church, you need to plan the actions steps to take during every stage. The Planning stage involves three components.

1. First there is the dream component. Without a dream, nothing will happen. Every great leader had a dream, had a vision of what they knew God wanted them to do. What is your dream? What are you seeking God to do? People don’t give their time to merely fill their schedule, they give their time to follow a vision they are passionate about. Get together with your team and dream!

2. Recognize the obstacles and barriers ahead of you. Brainstorm with your team to determine what those might be ahead of time. Then get together to come up with the answers to those questions before they are asked by church members. This is a great opportunity to get your team all on the same team. Don't get discouraged when you hit an obstacle. Recognize it as a moment for God to do His work.

3. Finally, you need to set the plan in motion. This is the action component. Once you commit to a measurable goal with a deadline, things begin to happen. This is also a great time to enlist new people to become involved in your dream. Let them be a part of the process. This will give them ownership and you sanity!

Above all, make sure God is in the process. Ask for His guidance. Spend extended time in prayer. Don't get so carried away with your own agenda that you fail to follow His.