

THE SMALL GROUP JOURNALS

A Two-Year Journey Towards
Community Transformation

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WELCOME TO A FRESH APPROACH TO SMALL GROUP MINISTRY!

Resurrection implemented this two-year program after a long season of planning. This program takes seriously both the barriers to healthy group ministry and the call to build communities of faith through intentional relationship. I, Pastor Justin, spent a great deal of time alongside the Adult Discipleship team to develop the resources that guide the program, and I now share this journey with you.

This guide is intended to help you understand two things: both the journals and the program of which they are a part. The journals without the program are incomplete. This guide will give you the guiding philosophies behind both the journals and the program, cast a vision for your unique community, and share the keys to success.

Of course, no two communities are the same. You may not find that every component of this program is right for your church. Tweak this journey as you see fit for your people. This guide is to show you Resurrection's heart for small groups, not to give you an exact blueprint.

You can see my heart for small groups if you place the two Small Group Journals next to each other. In the Year One journal, *Communities of Blessing*, you'll see a beam of light pointed out towards the unknown. In the Year Two journal, you'll see a similar beam of light (this time emanating from the Bible John Wesley holds) facing the opposite direction towards a city and a garden. This shift – from unknown to known, isolated to gathered, untethered to grounded – is the shift Resurrection hopes to facilitate by the grace of God.

Making this shift is not easy. You'll see that a critical component of this program is the psychology of group development. One of the core principles is that every person has social needs substantial enough that a small group alone is not enough to create social wholeness. Therefore, a small group program that has stellar curriculum but is not actively strengthening the fabric of the whole community will likely not get far. It's a different way of thinking that could not matter more, and it requires a new approach.

While this approach might feel new for the Church, our calling is not. The Church is called to point to God's New Creation. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, believed that group ministry was key to that calling. We have therefore designed this program with God's mission in mind, built on the conviction that a small group program aimed at anything less misses the point.

The last section of this guide is a nerdy discussion of the social-psychological tenets of this program. You may wish to get straight to the practical pieces, which is perfectly fine. If that's you, keep on reading from this point. If you'd like to engage the more heady concepts behind this program, read that last section before continuing.

I. COMMUNITY IS THE KEY: LIFE OUTSIDE THE GROUP

To summarize the social-psychological underpinnings of this program (which you can read about in the last section if you wish), small group programs that help people develop relationships both within and outside their small group are uniquely positioned to succeed because they effectively build scaffolding (personal social support systems). This scaffolding bridges people from a world marked by individualism and polarization to small gatherings where relationship-building skills undergird an intentional discipleship journey.

To begin our program overview, let's consider how you might structure a small group program for your unique community that tackles the need for relationships outside the individual group setting. There is not an exact blueprint here – only ideas that you might consider en route to fostering community-wide relationships.

1. SERVICE

Service is a critical key to success for this small group program. Service achieves several faith formation goals, which we will discuss more in the next section. But at a more practical level, it gets people active in their communities, thus building more relationships. If you want a healthy small group ministry, groups serving together is essential.

I suggest your church not try to reinvent the wheel when it comes to small groups engaging in service together. At Resurrection, we look at the opportunities our Missions team is *already* putting on and identify five serve opportunities planned throughout the year. We then clearly communicate those five things to our small groups. The sweet spot here is when small groups show up to an event and discover that lots of other small groups have also shown up to that same event. When members of a small group get to know members of other small groups, it's working exactly as intended.

But groups don't need a service project serve together. They can serve in the normal rhythms of the church, too. Far too many churches think of small group ministry as siloed from other "departments" – hospitality, missions, childcare. But small group participants should be the primary driver of those programs. Why not intentionally ask small group participants to serve as greeters? Or childcare volunteers? Should it not be the case that the people volunteering around your church are in a small group, and that that group is a part of why they are serving?

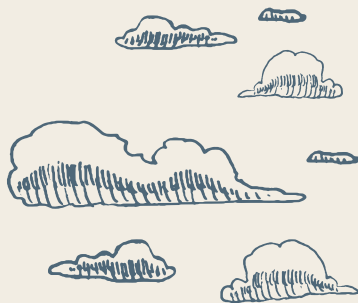
At Resurrection, we incentivize this service by making our executive leaders do silly things in public. We have an annual challenge for groups to get out and serve together, take group photos at the events, and then post those photos to social media. If they collectively hit a certain number of posts, one of our leaders has to do something ridiculous. The first time we did this, Pastor Adam Hamilton had to go indoor skydiving on camera.

2. ONSITE GATHERINGS

Many of us were taught that the correct small group approach is to have groups meet in homes. This strategy was pioneered in the early 2000's and was built upon the premise that the discipleship journey ought to push someone out of the church building into the community. But it is my belief that sending people to meet in homes for group time can prevent people from developing relationships outside of individual groups. It can be hard to sustain a group in a home when a small group can feel like a gathering of people isolated from the larger church.

Instead, consider hosting small groups at your church, perhaps even scheduling many group meetings on the same day and time of the week. The experience of walking into a facility full of people to get to a small group can be vastly better than walking into a stranger's home. Likewise, the benefit of scheduling many groups at the same time is that it prevents the similar experience of showing up to a quiet, dark building for small group, as is possible if that group is meeting when there's nothing else going on at the church. When a person attends a small group and has an experience of larger community, that group is much more likely to succeed.

You may be thinking, though, "That's great, but we don't have the facilities to host a bunch of groups!" I understand, and this may be a place where you get creative. You could, for example, have the groups meet at round tables in a fellowship hall or gym. Or, you might decide you can't host groups onsite weekly, and instead schedule all your small groups to meet onsite at the same time *twice a year* for a social dinner. It's a modified way of accomplishing the same goals, inviting groups two times a year to come meet the other small groups, share a meal, and have a felt sense of a larger community that they are a part of.



II. THE TWO-YEAR PROGRAM: BE KNOWN AND DO GOOD

Okay, now let's get to the Small Group Journals that have just purchased for use at your church. Let me comment on several things: the group-developmental strategy in each journal, the faith formation goals, and how to actually use them in session.

First, these journals are a collection of small group lessons aimed at relationship building rather than intense Bible study. In this sense, they stand in the tradition of John Wesley's group meeting strategy for class meetings. You may find that one of the biggest pushbacks from your church has to do with the lack of Bible study. This program is not a Bible study. But that does not mean it is trying to devalue Bible study. In fact, I hope that your church continues to offer excellent teaching opportunities *in addition* to small groups. Small groups help people grow through relationships and sharing, and specifically targeting that goal will bring clarity.

So how do these journals accomplish our goals for group ministry, *both* at a group-developmental level *and* at a faith formation level? You'll see that each section of the journals is targeting both group development and faith formation goals. Let's start with the former.

GROUP DEVELOPMENT

The main thing these journals do is ask intentional questions that, over the course of the material, progress in their level of involvement. Each lesson has a piece of content to discuss, but the content is meant to serve the relationship building that occurs in the discussion questions. Both the Year One and Year Two journals have the same threefold progression.

In the **Purpose** section, the questions are specifically intended to promote discussion over low-pressure topics. These questions lend themselves towards group participation skills. The topics in these opening sessions are meaningful, but without the tension that can come from being asked to share too much too soon. Likewise, the Purpose section creates social scaffolding by familiarizing participants with the core values of the large organization (for Resurrection, the Five Essential Practices), creating a sense of connection to the larger community. We want groups to activate their social muscles and connect to the larger community.

In the **Belonging** section of each journal, the discussion questions advance to the more involved goal of learning the stories of small group members and putting

those personal life stories in conversation with the story of God. These questions promote a deeper awareness of how our lives are the product of the stories we tell. If the Purpose section created social scaffolding through a felt connection to the whole community, this section is designed to create scaffolding within the small group itself. Again, telling and learning stories is critical to this step.

In the **Growth** section, the questions are intended to leverage the bonding that has occurred in previous sections and lead participants squarely into conversations over their personal relationships with God. These questions are, in essence, the bread and butter of small group ministry. But they cannot be posed until group trust has been earned, and until participants have firm enough scaffolding underneath them to engage this more intimate form of sharing.

This threefold progression is aimed at healthy group development that undergirds spiritual growth. It attempts to buffer awkwardness, humanize other people through storytelling, and then move to a place of spiritual sharing when the group can be trusted with deeper topics.

FAITH FORMATION

These journals are not just trying to foster a group that gets along, though. They are part of Resurrection's discipleship strategy to develop deeply committed Christians. Through this small group program, we want people to increase self-awareness, be known by others, and grow in love of God. And then, as a person is fully known by God and their group members, we want them to actively engage in God's mission for the world by bringing hope to their communities.

In this sense, the faith formation goals of these journals are built on the teachings of John Wesley. Wesley's genius was to hold social and personal religion in tension with one another. Wesley had unique insight into community engineering. He used small group gatherings as the building blocks of faithful communities, communities pointed at a specific goal.

What was that specific goal? I believe that Wesley successfully articulated the manner in which small group gatherings are situated within God's ultimate mission to bring the New Creation. He knew that churches that were not actively participating in God's mission to bring New Creation were missing the point. But in order for churches to do that, Wesley argued, the members of that church need to practice a religion that is both passionately personal and boldly social. That's where group ministry comes in: meeting in small group gatherings cultivates the kind of people equipped for communal mission.

We have summed these goals for small groups with our tagline: Be Known. Do Good. I think you'll see that this little tagline encapsulates our two-year vision.

Be Known: The Year One Journal, "Communities of Blessing"

In the Year One small group journal, Communities of Blessing, group participants will see that the Church is caught up in God's mission – a mission to be a community that blesses the world around them, per the call of Abraham.

In the **PURPOSE** section, groups will learn Resurrection's DNA, the Five Essential Practices. Your church may have its own mission statement verbiage, but I hope the practices will translate to your people. In each lesson, members will do an "inventory" of each practice, considering where they actually are with the practice vs. where they want to be. The hope is that members build trust with other members, learn Christian practices, and then honestly reflect on the universality of imperfection. This recognition – that no one is perfect, that all of us can do better, that we all rely on Christ for our identity – is the cornerstone of the next section.

In the **BELONGING** section, group members will take a dive into the story of God, the Bible. This story of God is divided up into three "acts" here, like a three-act play. The main theme of this section is "blessing," specifically God's promise to Abraham that his family will be "blessed to be a blessing" to others (Genesis 11). Importantly, as members follow this journey, they are asked to divide their own life stories up into three acts, and to learn the life stories of the other group members. This approach is built on narrative pastoral care, which suggests that we can find wholeness by coming to a deep understanding of our personal stories and how they relate to God's story. We all need to find our identity God's story – standing on our own will leave us feeling empty. From a faith formation perspective, this section helps people to see that they and their group members are characters in God's story, and therefore God's mission.

In the **GROWTH** section, the journal leads members through six of John Wesley's historic questions, using language updated by Resurrection staff member Chris Folmsbee. These lessons are light on structure and heavy on spiritual discussion. The spiritual formation goal in this last section is to encourage people to see God's work in the world and in our personal lives as a present-tense story, not just a past-tense exercise in biblical studies.

This journal's goal is summed up in the phrase "be known." We want people to be known by others, know themselves, and know God. Then we want them to be on mission.

Do Good: The Year Two Journal, “Communities of Hope”

In the Year Two journal, Communities of Hope, group members will confront the difficult realities of life. They will see that vibrant “communities of blessing” oftentimes fall victim the forces of cynicism. God’s people have always needed, at a communal level, to practice hope to develop the resiliency to pursue the mission even when it gets hard.

In the **PURPOSE** section, groups engage the story of Joseph in the Old Testament as they revisit the Five Essential Practices. In this section, Brandon Winstead (who co-authored Year Two with me) and I introduce the concept of “boundaries,” artificial divisions we construct to keep ourselves safe and happy. The goal is for members to discern how they might use the Five Essential Practices to intentionally cross the boundaries present in their communities.

In the **BELONGING** section, groups travel with John Wesley. This unique small group material specifically engages not just the theology of Wesley, but the events of his life. This section grapples with the forces in our world that steal hope and motivation from communities of faith. It suggests that Wesley engaged hope as a practice, not just a feeling, and that practicing hope is key to resilient communities. The promise of New Creation is central in this section. During this section, Year Two groups are asked to plan their own service project in a place that makes them uncomfortable.

Finally, in the **GROWTH** section, the journal introduces a small group format that can be used without the use of external materials. Its goal is to teach groups how to keep meeting beyond their second year, focused squarely on spiritual conversation. In this section, the discussion questions are the same each week.

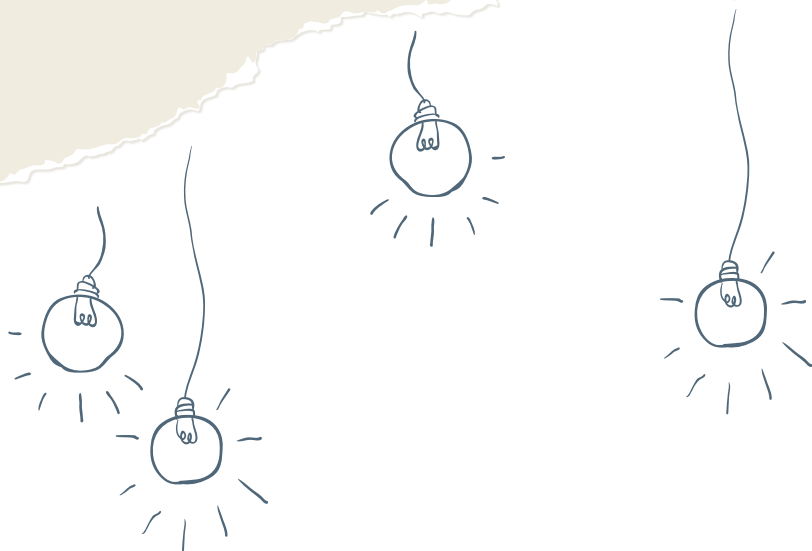
Year Two, then, moves a group outward, with the specific call to leverage spiritual discernment for the betterment of the world. Year Two is successful if groups serve together and know the people they are *servi*ng, not just the people they serve with.



USING THE JOURNALS IN SESSION

I would encourage you to read the opening pages of each journal to read more about the specific usage of the journals in session. In short:

- The journals are specifically designed for use without the need for prep work. There are “Focus Scriptures” that can be read ahead of time to enrich the experience.
- There is no separate leader version.
- Group lessons are intended to be read aloud in session, with each person reading a paragraph then passing to the next person. This prevents the need for pre reading.
- The goal of each lesson is group discussion. The content is important, but the goal is group discussion.
- Write in the journals! I hear often that people who write in their journals have a deeper recollection of their group's journey. Write down others' responses. It will be worth it.
- There are insight blurbs written by Resurrection staff in each lesson. Our congregants love these components. Our staff members are pretty cool, but I bet yours are, too. Consider gathering insights from your own lay people and staff, and share them with the people using the journal. You can read your insights even though they aren't printed in the book.



III. RESURRECTION'S STRATEGY FOR LAUNCHING NEW GROUPS

This section, more than any other, will need to be tweaked to meet the needs of your unique community. Nevertheless, I wanted to share with you what systems Resurrection uses to go from the desire to welcome people into small groups all the way to a group of strangers meeting for the first time. These are strategic tips to consider – take what you need and leave what isn't right for you.

CHILDCARE

There is perhaps nothing you could do to create a bigger jump in attendance than to offer midweek childcare at your church. It has already been mentioned that there are many benefits to hosting groups onsite, namely, a felt sense of a larger community. For that to happen, though, childcare is likely important. You likely know this already.

Not every church is able to provide childcare, though. I don't suggest childcare to make you feel bad if you can't do it. It's an expense, and it requires volunteers and/or staff. I get it. If you can provide childcare, great. If not, I reiterate what was said above about meeting in homes rather than onsite: groups can still have a great experience if the only option for groups (especially families with kids) is to meet in homes. It may just call for added intentionality to keep them engaged with the larger church.

LEADER RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

We start small groups twice a year at Resurrection: Fall and Winter. Each time we do this, we have worship service announcements that we are recruiting small group leaders. Those announcements are effective, but as you might guess, personal invitation works better.

If you can't find enough leaders, don't quit. Go ahead and invite people to a group and ask a staff person to lead that group for six sessions (the Purpose section). It's okay if there are tons of people in that "all call" group. From there, have the staff person divide people into breakout groups. Then, that staff person can verbally articulate as clearly as possible that the goal is for each breakout group to identify a leader from within at the end of six sessions.

To train leaders, we ask our leaders to read a resource I've written detailing best group leading principles, which is free for you to use at <https://resurrection.church/smallgroups/resources/> if you wish. Leaders are quizzed on the

packet. Far and away, though, the most important thing we do is 1:1 check ins with our leaders. In addition, I invite myself to every Year Two group once a year to get a feel for how things are going.

Finally, it's imperative that leaders communicate with staff if issues arise. There's a whole section dedicated to bad group dynamics in the packet mentioned above.

GETTING PEOPLE INTO GROUPS

Let's talk about our group launch process. We ask our leaders to write bio statements (which we write an outline for) and submit a photo of themselves. Those are used to create a profile for each leader with their photo, bio, day/time, and demographic preference. We then invite our people, over the course of three weeks, to look at those bios and choose their group. I have rarely seen success from church staff "matchmaking" people to group leaders. Letting people choose their own leader has a significantly higher success rate, but it comes with an important caveat: the leader must take it upon themselves to communicate with people who sign up for group. It all breaks down if signees get no communication from the group leader. Think long and hard about how to establish guidelines for communication between leader and signees as groups are forming.

From there, we invite all our groups to a kickoff party onsite (we do this for both Fall and Spring groups, a total of two kickoff parties a year). New groups meet their group members, returning groups meet new groups, and everyone has a good time. It's usually a packed house for us and a logistical nightmare, but the momentum of a kickoff event for small groups is worth it.

MEETING FREQUENCY

Every group is encouraged to be flexible with their own meeting schedule. The journal is intended to last about 9 months. This works out to roughly two weeks on, one week off. Many groups meet every other week, though. Whatever the pace, rigidity is killer. We want our groups to choose their meeting weeks. For some, that looks like coming up with a set rhythm. For most of the Resurrection groups, it looks like setting the next meeting date each time they meet. It's really up to the group.

BEYOND YEAR 2

Our hope, simply put, is that groups outgrow this program. After two years, we encourage people to lead. But we also encourage them to keep doing their thing. We want them to live into a desire to meet, and to have the foundation they need to meet without our materials. The Year Two journal ends with a section preparing them for next steps.

IV. NERDY BONUS SECTION: THE CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY FOR SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

There is a word from the field of psychology that I believe to be deeply important for small group ministry. That word is *scaffolding*. At its simplest, scaffolding refers to a person's temporary need for outside support in order to reach a goal that is just beyond their present reach. Scaffolding is most often used in relation to a child's development. For example, a shy child may be nervous about walking into his new classroom on the first day of school. His parent may choose to walk into the classroom one time with him and show him how to introduce himself to new friends, then let him go in by himself the next day. The parent has thus provided scaffolding for the child. But scaffolding is an important need across our whole lifespan. We constantly find ourselves wanting goals just outside our reach. In those times, we need someone to temporarily come alongside us, show us the ropes, and then step away to allow us to achieve growth.

One of the big risk factors for adulthood, though, is that we think we are independent and can figure everything out on our own. We resist the need for relationship and therefore miss out on the benefits of relationship. Good social relationships provide *scaffolding* that can help us, even as adults, grow in ways necessary to our flourishing: talking to new people, hosting others in our homes, speaking to groups, and pursuing passion projects and hobbies. All of those things are harder if we have no relational scaffolding as adults. We are not guaranteed to be socially whole just because we are adults.

My experience in ministry and my understanding of psychology has led me to firmly believe that many, if not most of the people in our churches, need some sort of social scaffolding in their lives, especially as it relates to engaging in community in a healthy way. After the devastating impacts of the pandemic, the political polarization of our society, the increasing pull towards individualism, and the isolating effects of technology, I believe we are less skilled in the realm of communal and social engagement than we used to be, and therefore less healthy. (See Robert Putnam's famous book, *Bowling Alone*, for more on this subject.) We all need some communal support.

Here's the problem for us to consider: in small group ministry, we are inviting a group of people (some of them strangers to one another) to develop

relationships built on listening, sharing, and working through conflict for the purpose of growth and Christian wholeness. Yet many of us do not actually live in a way that fosters an ability to do those things! We live with individualistic habits that point us away from the very traits we need for group engagement, and therefore, wholeness. We ask our people to take a giant leap from individualism and echo chambers to close relationships with new people, or deeper relationships with people they may know but not very well. This simply will not work. This approach provides no scaffolding for people that equips them to step out of isolation into deeper relationships. The results can be messy.

This is why one of the primary findings of the Adult Discipleship team at Resurrection when we studied this problem closely was that many new groups were falling apart, not because people weren't interested, but because their groups were just plain awkward and uncomfortable. I have heard this problem from countless church leaders. People across our churches simply do not have the social scaffolding to engage well in group ministry. It leads to groups in which sharing is labored, dynamics are strained, inappropriate comments are frequent, and more.

To complicate the issue further, many churches have defaulted exclusively to the use of book studies in their small groups. Book studies are not necessarily bad, but if a small group relies exclusively on book studies, that small group becomes a book study group. Again, these aren't bad. But a book study and a small group are not the same thing. Book studies – and the discussion guides that accompany them – do not necessarily have the cultivation of relationship and Christian character as their goal, as much as they do comprehension of the material. Yet many small groups use these studies, and it is my opinion that these groups can miss out on the gift of small group ministry, which is to be known, know others, and then respond to God's call to bless the world. Moreover, many people in these study groups, when asked to share at a deeper level, are unable to do so, even after knowing each other for years. They have not been shaped to share well, but to study.

All of those comments lead to the opportunity for group ministry. The unique opportunity for small group ministry is to create pathways that do not only lead people along a discipleship journey, but also create *social scaffolding within the larger community* so that people can engage in group ministry well.

More practically said, a small group program can do two things. First, it can pose questions to groups that are intentionally designed to promote healthy group development. These questions can build social IQ and allow people to grow in relationship within the group. The second thing that a program can do is help people form relationships **outside** the small group, which I suggest is the key to group ministry working. By focusing on the whole community, small groups **and** the

community become healthier. This community-wide approach for group ministry emphasizes shared service, volunteerism, and joint gatherings. As a result, people starting in a small group have relationships in the community. They are familiar with the larger church organization, making it easier for them to “step into” a more intimate group setting. The social needs of their lives are not solely dependent on one small group.

That is the journey we are on: a discipleship journey for small groups that takes group development seriously and fosters relationships outside the small group. This approach will address the needs of our current day.

NOTES





Resurrection

A UNITED METHODIST CHURCH