

PROCESS

MULTIPLYING LIFE-GIVING GROUPS

The first community group I ever led was a struggle.

We had multiplied out from another group that was not entirely healthy. The multiplication process was a bit rushed, and our members didn't feel like the previous leaders had cared well for them. As brand-new leaders, only twenty-three years old, we over-corrected to the previous error by over-promising our group longevity without multiplication.

I remember telling the group at our first gathering, "You don't have to worry about multiplying. We'll build and maintain strong relationships here." Everyone smiled and nodded in approval. However, after about nine months, our group had grown to the capacity of our little living room, and I knew it was time to bring up the topic of multiplication again.

When I told our group very gently that we should consider multiplying to create space for new people, they revolted. I hadn't expected them to remember my early words about not multiplying. I said, "Well, of course, we need to multiply: There's no space here!" But they responded, "Why

do we need more space? We should just close the group to outsiders. They can go to other groups!”

I suddenly realized my mistakes. I had not started the group with an expectation of multiplication, nor had I regularly reminded the members of the need to stay open to outsiders.

These errors were not minor. We then faced an uphill battle trying to shepherd the group through the conversation, and it took close to a year to get the group ready to multiply. I figured that once it was time to multiply or send out members to start a new group, we could take a few weeks to talk through it, and everything would work out. I was wrong.

As the years have passed, I have been able to lead or oversee dozens of healthy multiplications. Some were easy,

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and some were still slow and challenging. But I’ve discovered, through trial and error, a five-step process to cultivate a healthy group for multiplication. I truly believe that growth and multiplication are the results of a healthy group, and

multiplication itself can be a healthy, life-giving process. Multiplying a group or sending members out to start a new one are never painless or simplistic endeavors. But this process has enabled dozens of fruitful multiplications and new groups.

The Language of Multiplication

When you’re talking with your community group or your leaders about multiplication, you’ll want to choose your words carefully. Here’s what I mean: Although multiplication is a straightforward concept, some will have negative preconceived notions about it.

I’ve often found that younger members and new churches — those who haven’t been in community groups for many years — find multiplication life-giving and exciting for the first few years. If they experience some version of these five-steps for healthy multiplication, they’re likely to have a positive experience.

But when a member has been in community groups long enough to have multiplied several times, it’s common to feel an amount of “change fatigue.” In a few years, they could have been in three groups, adapted to the styles of three different leaders, and built dozens of new relationships. Introverts like me will especially struggle with this. As group leaders and pastors, we need to respect people’s desire for stability in community and not suppress these normal feelings.

In these cases, when your members are saying they’re weary from recent multiplications, you may want to change your plan and your language. For instance, maybe instead of directly multiplying a group of sixteen adults into two groups of eight, consider empowering a strong couple to lead and open the door to anyone who wants to form a new group.

There is no one-size-fits-all plan for starting new groups.

Perhaps only five or six adults will “plant” the new group, but you’ve still accomplished the formation of a new group to reach more people. And you’ve allowed deep relationships to remain intact within the “sending” group.

Please understand that multiplication will always need to be a case-by-case basis. There is no one-size-fits-all plan for starting new groups. My best advice is to use a handful of strategies like regular multiplication, one group “sending” out another new group, and starting new groups from all new members. Especially if your church is in a season of numerical growth, you’ll almost certainly need several paths to create new groups.

Your community group must understand that the goal of community is the Christ-shaped spiritual maturity of its members, not mere fellowship, fun, or friendship. The New Testament does not allow us to define fruitfulness simply by fellowship; we are called to make disciples (Matthew 28:19). And yet, at the same time, fellowship is an essential component of community group and deep relationships must be encouraged between our members.

So for community groups to be healthy, *multiplication must be done in a way the promotes member health*, not in a way that neglects it.

Here are five steps for healthy group multiplication:

Step 1: Discovering a Biblical Vision of Healthy Multiplication.

Step 2: Setting Expectations for Healthy Multiplication.

Step 3: Preparing for Healthy Multiplication.

Step 4: Practicing Healthy Multiplication.

Step 5: Maintaining Health After Multiplication.

Remember what we’ve covered so far. Our groups will be life-giving places of spiritual formation when centered on Jesus’s way of discipleship (chapter one) and practicing the three rhythms of discipleship (chapter two).

Step 1: Discovering a Biblical Vision for Healthy Multiplication

Most of the scriptures come to us in the form of stories.

Everyone loves a good story. Think of a good story you’ve heard recently — maybe the birth of a child, the way an elderly married couple met many years ago, or something from a movie or book. Think of how the story drew you in: the characters, the scenes, the conflict, the movement of action, the plot rising to a surprising outcome, and some sort of resolution. The elements of a good story are often similar.

We are all, by nature, story-lovers, and story-tellers.

How did you respond to that story? Did you feel the impulse to go out and tell it to someone else? Did you find yourself re-living scenes or moments from the story?

There are two essential marks of a great story: *A great story draws you in* — into the character and the plot. And *a great story sends you out* — you immediately want to retell it.

We are all, by nature, story-lovers, and story-tellers. It’s simply human nature to want to tell everyone when a close

friend has a baby, when you've gotten a new job, or when you've seen a great movie. Stories are powerful because they tap into the richness of our human experience. When something *noteworthy* happens, our joy isn't complete until we "note" it to one another.

In other words, we are hard-wired to be "sent out" and to "speak out" when something truly amazing happens.

But it's not just human nature to be "drawn in" to a deeply significant experience and then to be "sent out" to tell others about it. This is a beautiful pattern woven into the fabric of the great biblical story of God making a new people.

Foundation 1: The Pattern of Mission

In Genesis 12, God speaks to Abram, draws him into an experience of his presence, and promises to make him a blessing to all the nations. The moment after God draws Abram in, God sends Abram out, "*Go, leave your country and your people and go to the land I will show you*" (Genesis 12:1).

In Exodus 3, Moses is a murderer running for his life when God appears to him in a burning bush. Moses falls on his face in worship. The Lord tells him, "I have heard the cry of my people... Now *go*: I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:10).

In Acts 13, as the church in Antioch is praying, fasting, and worshiping one evening, God gives them a powerful experience of his presence. He draws them in and speaks by his Spirit: "Set apart Paul and Barnabas for me to *go* to where I have called you" (Acts 13:2).

This is God's pattern for mission: *He draws us in and sends us out*. He draws us in to *know* him, and he sends us out to

make him known. The gospel comes to us in order to go through us.

In the call of Abram, the pattern is clear: *We are blessed to be a blessing*. Why does God reveal himself to us? Why does he draw us into his presence and move us to worship? Why does he surround us with loving community — as in Acts 13? God always blesses us so that we might be a blessing to others.

Now think of your own story: How has God revealed himself to you over your Christian life? How has he invited you into a deeper life with him through this church? How has this community group provided life-giving friendships in Christ? Certainly, we are a blessed people.

Too often in our community groups, we want the blessing to reach us but not move through us. Our members want to each be the last ones to join a group. No one wants to exclude others from a group, but once we are in, sometimes we want to close it off. As a result, we as community group leaders need to put the biblical vision of multiplication before our people regularly.

Too often, we want the blessing to reach us but not move through us.

Foundation 2: Creating Space for Outsiders

Multiplication is a pattern throughout the Story of the Bible, but the apostle Paul gives us a second foundation for motivation: Christian hospitality — creating space for others — will naturally lead to multiplication.

Paul writes in Romans 12:9–13:

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Remember the rhythm of hospitality. If our groups are regularly creating space for outsiders, growth will happen naturally, and new groups will be needed. The apostle Paul recognized the importance of hospitality for true community and sincere witness. What is hospitality? It's *the distinctly Christian practice of creating space for outsiders*.

Put yourself in the shoes of a visitor to your church: You don't know more than a person or two, but you want to get involved. Imagine if you were told that community groups were the way to get involved in the church, but unfortunately each group was currently closed. What message would that send?

Imagine instead showing up to church and immediately being invited to someone's community group. Imagine showing up to that group for the first time and seeing several smiling faces and plenty of open seats.

My experience suggests that first-time visitors community group will decide to join that group long-term within fifteen minutes of arriving. The decision, typically, is not based on curriculum or the demographics of other members in the group. First-time visitors join groups that are immediately hospitable to them.

Foundation 3: The Great Commission

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:19–20).

Just as Jesus spoke these words to his own twelve disciples, so he is still speaking this commission to us today. Here in this important charge, we discover the third and final foundation for healthy group multiplication: *As Christ sends us, he also goes with us*.

The Great Commission sends us to our neighborhoods, our cities, our enemies, and the nations to make disciples. What a huge task and responsibility! But Jesus doesn't send us out to make him known until he has first drawn us in to know him (the first foundation), and he doesn't send us out ill-equipped.

In fact, Jesus doesn't even send us out alone; he promises to go with us, "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." And according to Acts 1–2, Jesus is with us by giving of the Holy Spirit. See, this is the full pattern: God first draws us into his presence to dwell with him deeply, and then he sends us out through Christ to make him known, but he also goes *with* us by his Holy Spirit. From the first movement to the last, God is with us — indeed, his name is "Immanuel" (Matthew 1:28).

Launching a new group is no small task. Even sending some of your closest friends out to another group can be a difficult change. But we have to remember that, in starting a new community group to reach more people, we are both participating in and fulfilling Jesus's Great Commission!

Step 2: Setting Expectations for Healthy Multiplication

After establishing a biblical vision for open, multiplying groups, how do we ensure the ensuing multiplication process is healthy? How do we set proper expectations for multiplication?

I recommend explicitly setting expectations for a community group's multiplication.

1. Prioritize the Spiritual and Relational Health of the Members

Remember, our overall goal of community life is not the total number of groups we can launch and sustain over a period of time. The goal is the formation of disciples in the image of Christ.

Thus, if we neglect our members' spiritual and relational health during multiplication — which we have been investing in for months or years prior to multiplication — we can sour our members towards ever multiplying again and lose trust with our members on where our "real priorities" lie.

2. Remember that Multiplication Furthers Our Members' Spiritual and Relational Health

Teaching the three biblical foundations for multiplication is a great place to start. My "Creating Space: A Guide to Healthy Group Multiplication" appendix is a three-week discussion guide based on these foundations and includes discussion questions, guided prayers, and worksheets for your group. We must convince our members that multiplication is not an extra, but the biblical outflow of healthy life-giving groups.

3. Set a Multiplication Expectation at the First Gathering

Community group leaders must explicitly teach multiplication from the beginning of the group — not just before a needed multiplication. For example, when launching your first group, or as soon as a new group begins, the leaders need to give a vision for multiplication and a general timeline.

The leaders could say something like, "As we start this group, we want to remember that we are seeking not only our spiritual growth but also the spiritual growth of others. This is why we invite people into our group. When our group reaches about sixteen adults, and when new leaders are ready, we'll slowly multiply into two groups. We expect this will happen in about 12–24 months." You may even want to do this weekly or monthly when you review the rules of your community group (see appendix "The Five Rules of Community Group").

I remember when one of our groups at Sojourn had been together for three or four years without multiplying. There

were more than twenty adult members and maybe a dozen kids, and more groups were needed across the congregation. But the leader had never brought up multiplication before this, and when he brought it up for the first time, fear and confusion and many tears rippled across the room. It took more than a year for this group to become ready — spiritually and relationally — to multiply.

4. Keep the Mission before the People

Group leaders should be continually reminding the members of our missionary identity in Christ. We should often see new people join our group — both from church and through relationships in the community. Experiencing growth firsthand will then help members grasp the need for creating space and multiplying.

5. Multiply When Leaders are Ready, Not When You Have Too Many People

I'm frequently asked, "At what number of people should we multiply?" But it's not the best metric to use for a multiplication timeline. A number of factors will determine how many adults and kids a group can have while remaining healthy and open to visitors. Some of our members' houses can accommodate twelve adults; others can handle thirty adults. Some of our groups will need to multiply once when about eight kids come regularly; others can have twenty or more kids and not run into too much trouble.

But still, the number of people should not be *the* determining factor in when you multiply. Nothing is more important than your leaders' readiness.

A group can be too big or too small, but with the right leaders, it will remain healthy and growing. As soon as new leaders are identified, trained, and ready, a new group can be deployed. Typically, six adults are enough to start a new group — a leading couple and four other adults.

Step 3: Preparing for Healthy Multiplication

Multiply into Different Neighborhoods When Possible

There should be an expectation that we are on mission to our neighbors, and thus multiplication will occur in a way where two new groups can more effectively reach their neighbors.

A couple of years ago, the community group my wife and I were leading reached about twenty adults. We had already identified another couple who would lead the second group and had communicated openly with our members. They felt the pressure of trying to gather in our small home, understood that we existed to invite others in, and were ready to multiply. So how did we decide which individuals and families would go to which group?

In our case, a major road ran through the area where our members were living. We realized that almost exactly half of our members lived west of the road, and the rest lived east of it. We pitched the idea to the group of splitting along this geographical line to focus more specifically on our neighborhoods. We gave each member the option to ask to go to a different group, but each member liked the plan, and it was so.

Set a Balanced, Realistic Multiplication Timeline

As a group leader who has experienced numerous group multiplications, I tend to want to multiply more quickly than others. Once new leaders are ready and there are six adults to form the group, I could say a prayer and send them off with a blessing. But most members will experience this as a rushed group “split.” Most of our members will need to move more slowly and have explanations discussed openly.

When it comes to the “multiplication timeline,” this is my general rule of thumb: it should seem a bit too slow for the leaders and a bit too quick for the members. In this way, it stretches the leaders to be patient and do the hard work of preparing people to multiply well. But it also stretches the members to multiply before they’re 100 percent ready, thus having to trust God for the process.

The “multiplication timeline” should seem a bit too slow for leaders and a bit too quick for members.

Let Members Choose Their Group

In the past, one of the mistakes I’ve made as a leader is to try to figure out which people should go with which group, and try to steer people in those directions. Instead, I think it’s a much better practice to set two options in front of your members and let them choose. Do they want to go with the new group or stay with the sending group? The church is a voluntary organization, and we should be quick to empower our people to make their own decisions — especially

regarding where they’ll spend this important discipleship time each week.

Step 4: Practicing Healthy Multiplication

Throw a Multiplication Party

When it’s finally time to multiply, gather everyone from the original group to throw a party. It should feel more like a graduation than a funeral. Gather in the backyard, cook a meal together, or host a movie night for the kids. Do something that celebrates the successful multiplication of one community of believers into two. You may even want to take time for members to share how the group was instrumental in their spiritual journey. Or you can just party.

Commission the New Leaders Publicly

This is one of the best ways to honor and bless community group leaders, and it also generates excitement and exposure for groups in general. Bring your new leaders up front at a Sunday worship service, and commission them to their new ministry. You may bring up the sending leaders as well, or have all the elders up front to lay hands on them. You can give the new leaders a gift — a Bible and a journal or a bunch of pasta and sauce to make together as a group that week — and encourage the congregation to applaud the leaders’ sacrificial service to the church. This communication of authority and value will be powerful in your church.

Set Ground Rules for the New Group

See the appendix: "The Five Rules of Community Group." For the first few weeks, you may want to read these rules out loud, a la Fight Club. Once your group understands the rules, you won't have to revisit them every week, but your members will be able to remind one another of simple rules like, "Hey, remember we 'Put Others First,' so let's give her a chance to speak."

Start the New Group with a Renewed Vision

Once your new group starts — and both groups may want to do this — you may want to start a short series together to gain a renewed vision. A short study discussing the four discipleship rhythms would help set a vision and direction for the group. Maybe you want to spend six weeks on the six chapters of Ephesians and discuss how your group will seek to grow together and reach others.

Whatever your vision of group life is, it's ideal to revisit that vision with each new group multiplication. If your groups are multiplying every one or two years, it becomes a helpful reminder for all leaders and members. You don't want multiplications to feel like high school breakups. Each new group is a celebration to remind both the new and the sending group of the biblical foundations for multiplication.

Jump Quickly into Mission as a New Group

Especially for a group meeting in a new location, there is no better time to start evangelistic efforts as a group. If the new group is meeting in an apartment or home for the first

time, the group can spend one of the first gatherings going out and inviting people from the neighborhood. Consider setting a fun, family-style gathering about a month or two into the new group, and specifically invite neighbors to that low-pressure gathering.

Your neighbors' first experience of your community group shouldn't be the parking issues created! As soon as you start your group, reach out to them, share your vision for community with them, and invite them to join you!

So once you've started your new group, how do you maintain health over the long haul?

Step 5: Maintaining Health After Multiplication

I've found a few final things to be helpful in maintaining health after group multiplication.

Gather Two or Three More Times with Both Groups

About a month after the multiplication, then maybe again in 3–6 months, gather both groups together for a meal or outdoor party. This is a great way to reconnect with one another, meet new visitors that have joined since the multiplication, and hear stories from the new groups. These post-multiplication gatherings help remind us that multiplication can be done well, relationships don't fall apart overnight, and new groups can create space for new people to experience Christ and community.

Form a Coaching Region Where Groups Still Share a Common Mission

In an ideal situation, establish a geographically based coaching region for groups that have recently multiplied. For example, if you have a group meeting on the south side of town, and it multiplies into southwest and southeast neighborhoods, you can have one elder or coach oversee the region.

When you reach 12–15 groups, it's ideal to have three or four regions of groups, each with its own pastoral or coaching oversight. At that point, three or four groups in the same region can gather for missional events and fellowship, helping the church to feel smaller while growing larger. This is also a strategic step in getting pastors and members working together to reach a very particular part of the city.

Give Multiplication Testimonies at New Group Leader Training

Once a church has more than a dozen groups, you'll likely need to add a formal group leader training component (if not sooner). During these trainings, make sure to give examples of healthy multiplication. These testimonies can come from the leaders or even the group members. Let group leaders ask questions like: "What has worked best? What was your timeline? What would you do differently?"

The long-term health of your community group ministry depends significantly on the health of each group's multiplications. And healthy multiplication is possible by setting a robust vision, reasonable expectations, with proper

preparations for each new group, and continuing to care for the people in and through the multiplication process. When these elements are in place, you will likely see a slow, steady increase of new groups.

CULTIVATE LIFE-GIVING, CHRIST-CENTERED COMMUNITIES.

After many years of leading small groups and coaching hundreds of small group leaders, pastor and writer Jeremy Linneman has come to a bold conviction: Community groups are the best place for us — as relational beings — to become mature followers of Christ.

Whether you are new to community groups or tired from years of challenging ministry, *Life-Giving Groups* is a fresh, practical invitation to life together in Christ.

Life-Giving Groups is a biblically-based field manual for developing spiritually healthy multiplying small groups in your church.

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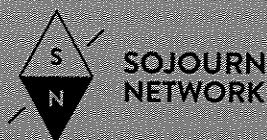
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Anybody who is interested in developing healthy, multiplying, gospel-centered group life will benefit from this new book.

JT ENGLISH, Pastor of The Village Institute, The Village Church, Flower Mound, TX

During Jeremy's time as our Pastor of Community Life, our community groups not only doubled in size, but they grew in depth, health, and sustainability.

KEVIN JAMISON, Lead Pastor, Sojourn Community Church East, Louisville, KY



'HOW-TO' GROW HEALTHY,
MULTIPLYING COMMUNITY GROUPS

LIFE- *Giving* GROUPS

BY JEREMY LINNEMAN

Series Editor: Dave Harvey

"This is a great resource to put in your leaders' hands to make the promise of life-giving community more attainable."

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