

missiorelate

m. scott boren



becoming a church of
missional small groups



missiorelate

*An experience with others and God
that makes a difference in the world*

the four stories
of group life

Reflecting on my experience as a group leader, pastor, trainer, and consultant, I realized that different churches might adopt the same model of group structures—using the same training, the same oversight system, the same language, the same materials to give the groups, and the same level of priority in the church—but the lived experience within those churches would vary.

While reading the last chapter of Craig Van Gelder's book, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, I had an epiphany. In a matter of minutes, my imagination about groups—whether called a cell group, house church, task group, missional community, or by any other name—shifted so dramatically that I had to rethink almost everything I believed and taught about groups. I'm not saying that I had to throw out all that I had previously known about groups. Instead, this shift changed everything about how I perceived what I knew.

In his book, Van Gelder identifies four different kinds of change people experience in life or in an organization. They are Improvement, Adjustment, Revision, and Re-creation. When I applied these four kinds of change to small group experiences, I discovered that groups tell four different stories with the way they live. These are not prescriptive patterns for group life given to those groups as labels. Instead, these are stories that describe the lived realities that groups experience. In my opinion, we have enough training and resources on the various ways to organize groups. We need resources that will help us navigate and lead people through the realities of life as they live these stories. The

first two stories depict normal group experience while the third and fourth stories describe missional life (MissioRelate).

Personal Improvement

This is the small group experience where individuals participate because it is personally beneficial. The people involved are either drawn to a topic or to a group of people like themselves, and participation is high until it becomes inconvenient. Nothing in their personal life is required to change to participate in this kind of group. Quite the opposite is true: They expect their personal lives to be enriched from the “goods and services” provided by the small group experience. In *Missional Small Groups*, I illustrated how these stories might play out as a testimony. I’ve included them here as well to illustrate my explanations. Here’s the first for Personal Improvement:

We get together because life is tough in this world and we need a few friends. It is not always convenient for us to meet every week, but we do meet when we can. Usually we meet in short six- or seven-week periods or we meet a couple times a month. We get together, talk a bit about God or study the Bible, and share what is going on at work and in our family. I am not sure that we are close, but it is good to have a place where we can share a little about what is going on in our lives. Being in my small group has improved my life.¹

Lifestyle Adjustment

This story is a continuation of the first. The group is viewed as beneficial, and therefore the group members are willing to adjust their life schedules to prioritize the attendance of a weekly or biweekly meeting. There is usually a longer-term commitment to group membership, but not much more than that. In fact, this story usually plays out in such a way that small group members attend meetings until they hit a time of conflict or struggle in the relationships within the group. While they adjust their lifestyle to prioritize a regularly scheduled small group meeting, they typically do not adjust their lives to make room

to work through relational issues unearthed within a group. As a result, they either stop attending; attend meetings but in a way that is disengaged; or look for another similar group comprised of people with more compatible views and personalities. Here's how the description might sound in a much more lived way:

This group has become a priority to us. We have adjusted our schedules to meet together at least every other week, but usually we meet weekly. In our meetings, we either study the sermon preached by our pastor or use a Bible study guide that we all find personally beneficial. We truly enjoy each other's presence, and we put a high priority on the group and the members in the group. We even do something social once each month. We rise to the occasion when someone has a need, and there is a sense that we are friends.²

Relational Revision

While the move from the first story to the second was a continuous progression, the move to this third is discontinuous. This story requires intentional practice. The facts are clear: the habits of the average person in North America are so contrary to a life of mutual love and self-sacrifice that if a group does not choose to practice a distinctively Christian way of life, nothing radical or kingdom-like will be experienced. The Relational Revision story is only told as a group develops a new set of rhythms, like a person might do when first learning to play the guitar. Hours of intentional practice are required. Here is where a group discovers distinctively Christian practices such as:

- Worship
- Encountering the presence of God together
- Communion
- Hospitality
- Mutual generosity
- Making time for each other
- Entering the neighborhood

I presented this information to 60 people at a Lutheran church where 40% of the crowd was over 55 years of age. I have never been able to communicate well with that demographic, but when I presented the four stories to them and explained the importance of Relational Revision in depth and how it prepares a group for mission, they expressed a keen sense of interest. When people clearly understand the reality that they have to learn how to practice the rhythms of missional life *together*, something within them resonates with this story. Most people inherently know that gathering for a small group meeting will not automatically result in a radical missional life. Something within us compels us to learn how to do this. A person might relate their Relational Revision story in this way:

Our group has a weekly meeting, but I am not sure that you would call it a *meeting* in the formal sense of the word. When we get together, it is the culmination of the rest of the week when we have been *in* one another's lives. It is a time of sharing what God has been doing, praying for each other, and talking about how God is using us in our everyday lives. Yes, we do have a weekly lesson, but the leader usually only asks one or two questions from it.

The most important part of our group, however, is not the meeting; it is how we are connected the other six days of the week. I have never been part of a group in which people are so willing to sacrifice time and energy for one another. And this connectedness actually spills out into our neighborhood. It seems like we are always interacting with, praying for, and serving people who live near us. And in some ways, they are just as much a part of our group as those of us who call ourselves *Christians*.

I am not sure how I was able to do life before having this group. This might sound a bit utopian, but it is far from it. Sometimes it is hard. Recently, we have had to wrestle with some relational conflict and hurt feelings. In the past I would have run away from such encounters, but not this time. It was not easy,

but we pressed through. We are still learning what it means to be God's family.³

Missional Re-creation

As groups begin to practice these rhythms and gain proficiency—much like a novice guitar player will begin to expand her horizons beyond the notes on the page—a group will explore new ways of creative existence. They will engage the neighborhood and determine needs, meet those needs, and as a result, that experience will change how they exist as a group. Some will develop into house churches of 50. Others meet in groups of five meeting at a coffee shop. Others will adopt a home for mentally challenged individuals. And still others will gather around a family that lives in a mindset of poverty and walk with them into a new way of thinking and living. The key is not the form that it takes, but the maturity of living out the practices that are introduced in Relational Revision. Missional Re-creation flows out of a set of practices into an unpredictable structural future. Here is how it might be described:

We have developed a way of connecting with each other and God that has resulted in some rather unpredictable developments. Two couples and a single person in our group live within walking distance of each other. As a group, we decided to adopt their neighborhood. We started with a block party. At first it was hard because no one knew us, but after that first party, we created a small presence in the community. Then one person started a summer children's Bible study. As she got to know the neighbors and their needs, we began to pray. Now we have come around a single mom who has three kids, and we include her as much as we can in the life of the group. She has yet to fully understand who Jesus is, but we feel led to embrace her and the kids and see what God does in her life.⁴

the radical differences between the stories

The stories of Relational Revision and Missional Re-creation speak to what it means to be missional small groups that are trying to make a difference in this world. But let me be quite clear: there is no missional small group strategy or structure. The last two are illustrative of a missional *story*. They are so because when we live according to this story we are learning to live out ways of the kingdom of God. We are also recognizing the broader culture is a lived story and that it is not shaped by the kingdom of God. To be a community on mission means that a group of people are living a distinctive kingdom story in the midst of people who don't live that way.

By contrast, when we live out the stories of Personal Improvement and Lifestyle Adjustment we fail to recognize the difference between the story of the kingdom and our part in that story and the story of the world around us. As a result, the story of the broader culture sneaks into our lives as the people of God and we settle for less than what God has for us. This might sound judgmental, but if there is the chance that the primary ways that we think about small groups in North American don't measure up to what God has for us, then don't you think that we need to at least consider the possibility of something else? (Please stick with me through the end of this chapter on this thought. I do think that God moves through and uses the first two stories in the church today.) The chart below can be used to demonstrate the differences between the four stories.

The Story	Personal Improvement	Lifestyle Adjustment	Relational Revision	Missional Recreation
Lived Experience	Better Self	Surface-level Friendship	Contrast Society	Organic Mission
Focus	Me	Church	We	Neighborhood
Connection to Larger Church	Individual	Assimilation	Equipping	Creating & Involving
Cost	Easy in/ Easy Out	Meeting Attendance	Accountability	Radical Sacrifice
Goal	Connections	Close Back Door	Establish ways of Mission	Engagement with the Neighborhood
Discipleship	Event-centered	Curriculum Driven	Intentional Practices	Life-on-Life Mentoring
Evangelism	Invite to Church Events	Group Meeting	Relationships	In Neighborhood
Common Form of Groups	Short-term	Semester Groups Ongoing Groups	Groups Doing Practices	Organic Groups that take many forms

(Note: The following paragraphs are stated rather bluntly for the sake of clarity. Please forgive me if what I'm about to share seems judgmental. I just find that providing the following information is helpful to make a clear distinction between the stories.)

In the first two stories, community is squarely attractational. If the group is made up of the right people; or the leader does a good job leading the study; or the people one meets in these groups are friendly, then participation will be strong. From these stories' motivational perspective, getting the group meetings "right" is foundational for success. And, making these groups work is rooted in a desire to meet people's spiritual needs.

Churches that promote the *Personal Improvement* story emphasize groups in which people naturally desire to participate. For busy people, they create once-a-month groups. For people who fear commitment, short-term groups are the answer. For independent types, they are invited to start any kind of group they want. The focus lies on what the individuals in a church desire.

Lifestyle Adjustment groups focus on moving people into a meeting structure or closing the back door. It is an enfolding system. The focus lies on how the church can gather and keep people connected. Usually this story is heavily dependent upon a recruitment strategy so that there are enough groups for people to join. One might say that it is programmatic in nature.

Before you assume that I am deeming the first two stories as irrelevant, worthless, or even carnal, I am not. I clearly see a role for these two stories in most church situations in the West. I am thankful for and have learned much from those who have taught and written books and curriculum to help groups live out these two stories. In chapter 18, I will demonstrate a process that takes advantage of these two stories that helps people move beyond the "me" or even the "church" focus and into an organic way of being a missional "light" right where they live.

we are called to be a "light to the nations"

We usually apply the mandate found in Isaiah to taking the message of the gospel to unreached people groups in far-flung places. This is indeed part of

the meaning. When God called Israel to be a “light,” he was not challenging them to send missionaries throughout the world to plant churches. He called them to a mission as his people into his world to live in his way. They were his chosen people who were called to live his way, to be a sign to the rest of the world of what it means to live in relationship with God.

The focus of *Relational Revision* is about learning how to be this light and how to live rhythms that fit God’s mission in this world. These groups form communities where people learn to be God’s light in the midst of the darkness. They are not just groups set up for Bible study or for retention in a growing congregation. They are groups that empower people to discover God’s ways and live out God’s story.

When these groups move into the *Missional Re-creation* story, we discover people who have embodied these new rhythms. Mission has become a rooted value or deeply motivational part of their life. As a result, the forms that their groups take and the structures that develop will often be creative and unique. Rather than following some predetermined pattern handed to them by leadership or what they find in a popular book on small groups, they have learned to play missional music and that music forms a creative and unique rhythm.

As I have taught these four stories to people from all kinds of church traditions, most readily state that their group experiences have more in common with the Lifestyle Adjustment story than any other. Most were like me when I first saw the four stories: I did not know what to do to help people change this reality. But admitting that we don’t know is the first step to learning something that might change everything.

On the next page, take time to reflect and pray through what you read. Look back over the chapter and identify things that stood out to you. Find the things with which you agree and those with which you don’t. Mark them. Slowly re-read anything that seemed to challenge you or encourage you. Then pray over those words. Write down what you sense the Spirit is speaking to you. Pray what you sense. Write down those prayers in the space provided on the next page.

end notes

1. M. Scott Boren, *Missional Small Groups* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010). p. 39.
2. Boren, p. 40
3. Boren, p. 41
4. Boren, p. 43

Would you enjoy reading the rest of this book?
Follow this link to the publisher's web site:

<http://www.touchusa.org/resources/missiorelate.asp>

Copyright © 2012 by M. Scott Boren

This chapter of MissioRelate by M. Scott Boren is copyrighted material. Feel free to distribute this chapter. However, the author and publisher request that you do not alter the content or republish it without the copyright holder's written permission.

Author's blog: www.mscottboren.blogspot.com

Brought to you by

TOUCH Publications, Inc.

P.O. Box 7847 • Houston, Texas 77270

1-800-735-5865 • www.touchusa.org