

# REPRIORITIZING FOR GROUP

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Four Ways to Point to Small Groups

KENNY CONLEY



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When I was growing up, the most significant spiritual influence in my life was my children's pastor, Mr. Randy. God used this godly man to point me in the right direction during critical moments throughout my childhood, and I'm pretty sure my calling into full-time ministry was the direct result of his influence. When I stepped into vocational ministry as a wide-eyed 19-year-old, I had a very specific goal in mind—to do for every kid in my ministry what Mr. Randy had done for me.

But *that* was where I went wrong.

Sure, my motives were noble. I wanted to make a difference in the lives of as many kids as possible. But I was misguided, and it would take me many years to understand why.

Please understand, the early years of my ministry experience were great. I was living the dream!

Kids were coming to faith in Jesus.  
Parents were telling me how much their kids loved coming to church.  
I had significant influence in the lives of dozens of kids.  
And I was doing what I loved most.

But I was missing something.

I had the right idea when I said I wanted to do for kids what Mr. Randy had done for me. But the scope of my vision was limited. I wasn't thinking big enough! I wanted to invest in every kid, but I needed to learn that it wasn't possible. I couldn't make a difference in the life of every kid—but I *could* dedicate my life to putting dozens, or even hundreds, of men and women like Mr. Randy in their lives who could make a difference. That's far more efficient—and significantly more impactful—than trying to do it all on my own!

My wake-up call happened almost ten years after I became a Children's Pastor. I had transitioned from a ministry of less than 100 kids to a ministry ten times that size. I quickly realized the ministry strategy that had worked for 50 kids couldn't work for 500. A single charismatic and engaging pastor wasn't enough to invest in every kid. I needed more people.

People who could relationally connect with kids.  
People who could spiritually lead them.  
People who could do for a few kids what I  
had wanted to do for every kid.

Leading in a larger ministry forced me to reprioritize for small groups. I didn't have a choice. I had to find people who could lead small or our ministry would have failed. But if I could do it all over again, I would have done it sooner. I would hop in a time machine to visit the late 1990's version of myself and say, "Sure, you seem to have this ministry thing under control, but you don't have to do this all by yourself. In fact, it's better if you don't. Just think of how much more you could do if you focused on raising up people *other than you* to invest in kids!"

No matter how large or small your ministry is, this is true: small groups are always better than crowds. Crowds are great for creating energy and attracting kids, but when it comes to helping kids or students apply faith and principles to everyday life, **the relationships built within a small group will trump the energy of a crowd every time.**

If you haven't moved in the direction of small groups already, reprioritizing for small groups is the game-changing move your ministry needs. Imagine looking at every aspect of your ministry as an arrow that points kids straight to small groups.

## REPRIORITIZE YOUR PROGRAMMING

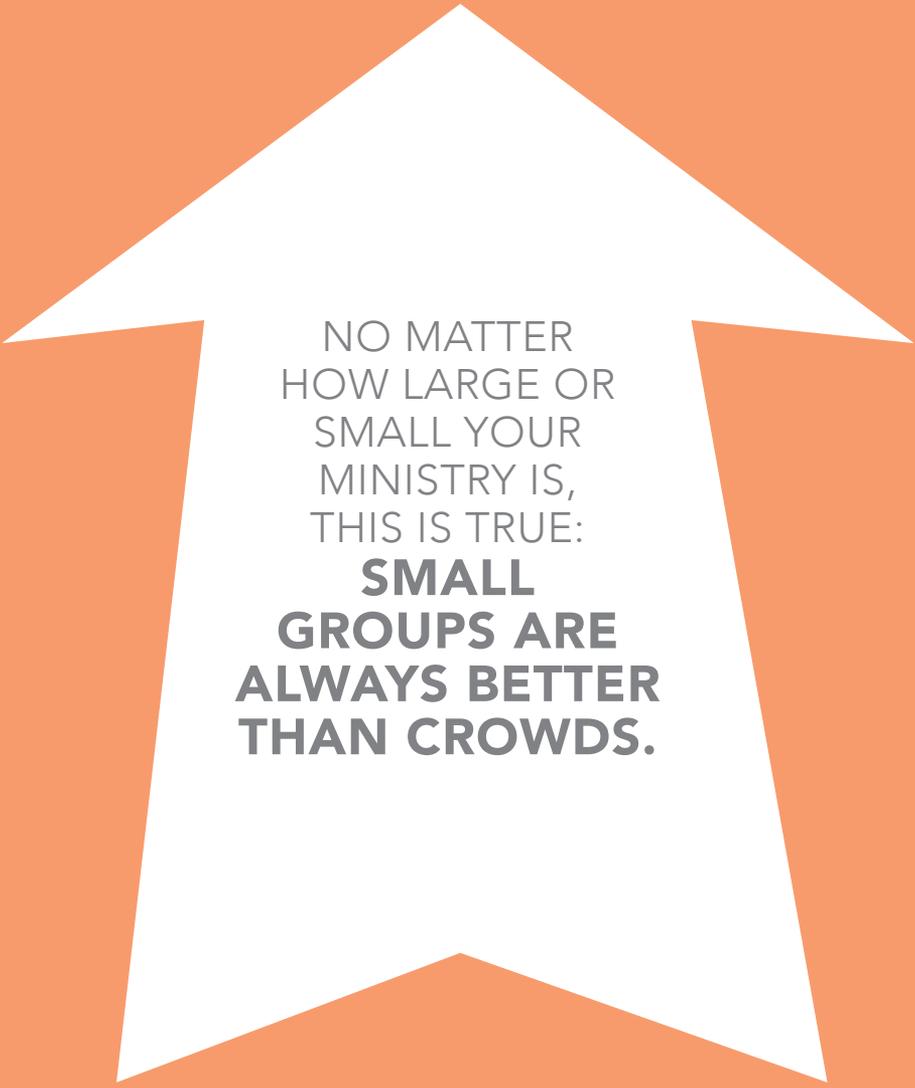
We probably spend more time than we'd like to admit crafting environments for kids and students every week. The biggest challenge to creating excellent programming is that it relentlessly requires our attention each and every week. Sunday is always just a few days away! Oh, and don't forget about the special events, camps, and activities on the calendar that require our time and attention as well.

So how do we adjust our programming to make small groups more of a priority? How can we make sure our programming is an arrow that points toward small groups? Yes, adjusting what you do to prioritize small groups may add a new layer of complexity and a few items to your to-do list, but over time you'll see that your weekly program will be far better with groups in mind than it ever was without.

## WEEKLY PROGRAMMING THAT PRIORITIZES GROUPS

When small groups are the priority, it changes the way you program every week. It causes you to view everything through the lens of groups. You start asking questions like:

- How does the talk during our large group time set up small groups for great conversations?



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- How many minutes might we need to cut from our songs, games, or teaching to make sure we have adequate time in groups?
- How do we make small group leaders the stars of what we do?

Several months ago, our church adjusted how we prepare our guest speakers in student ministry. We intentionally rely on guest communicators for a couple of reasons.

1. Guest communicators allow our staff to spend more time developing, recruiting, and caring for small group leaders instead of being tucked away preparing talks for large group.
2. Mixing up the communicators on stage actually helps small group leaders win because the small group leader becomes the consistent voice in students' lives—not a communicator. This can bring stability to your ministry even in difficult seasons. Think about it: If your student pastor or primary communicator leaves your church, the transition won't be cataclysmic because you've empowered consistent small group leaders to invest in kids' lives. Your student ministry may experience a bump in the road during the search for a new pastor, but kids will stick around because they're connected with their small group.

In the past, we'd give a title, an outline or even a teaching script to one of our communicators, but we always gave them freedom when they prepared. All we asked is that they would email us questions from their talk that we could forward to our small group leaders. What we found is that approach wasn't ideal for helping small groups win. Instead, a trusted ministry friend encouraged us to develop what his ministry calls a Speaker Box. The Speaker Box contains everything a guest communicator needs to prepare their talk. They still have freedom to make the message their own, but there is one document that *must* be followed. This document includes three things:

1. **THE BOTTOM LINE.** We ask all of our communicators to repeat that day's bottom line several times during the message.
2. **A KEY VERSE.** We provide every communicator with a key verse or passage, as well as our take on this passage, to make sure the communicator presents it from the same perspective that our small group leaders will.

3. **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS.** Lastly, we provide our communicators with 4-5 questions that small group leaders will be asking during small group. We ask that the communicator write his or her talk in a way that makes these questions highly relevant. Sometimes we even take it a step further and give the communicator ideas for creating tension in their talk that can be resolved in the small group.

There's one more thing we do to prepare our communicators that may seem counterintuitive. As they're creating their talk, we encourage them not to spend too much time on practical application. A great talk can potentially be applied to a kid's life in an unlimited number of ways. A talk on gratitude might mean one thing for the kid who has five ponies and a rollercoaster in his backyard and something entirely different for the kid who will be lucky to get a single Christmas present this year. There's no way a communicator can unpack every scenario or give examples that relates to every kid in the room! But a small group leader can. When small group leaders are given enough time in small groups, the time they spend contextualizing the message for their few will help the message stick.

**Remember, when you prioritize for small groups, small group leaders become the stars.** As you evaluate what happens on your stage with your communicators, here is a question I like to ask: Big moments from the stage are easy wins, but how do we help the biggest moments happen in the small group where it can be processed within the context of trusted relationships?

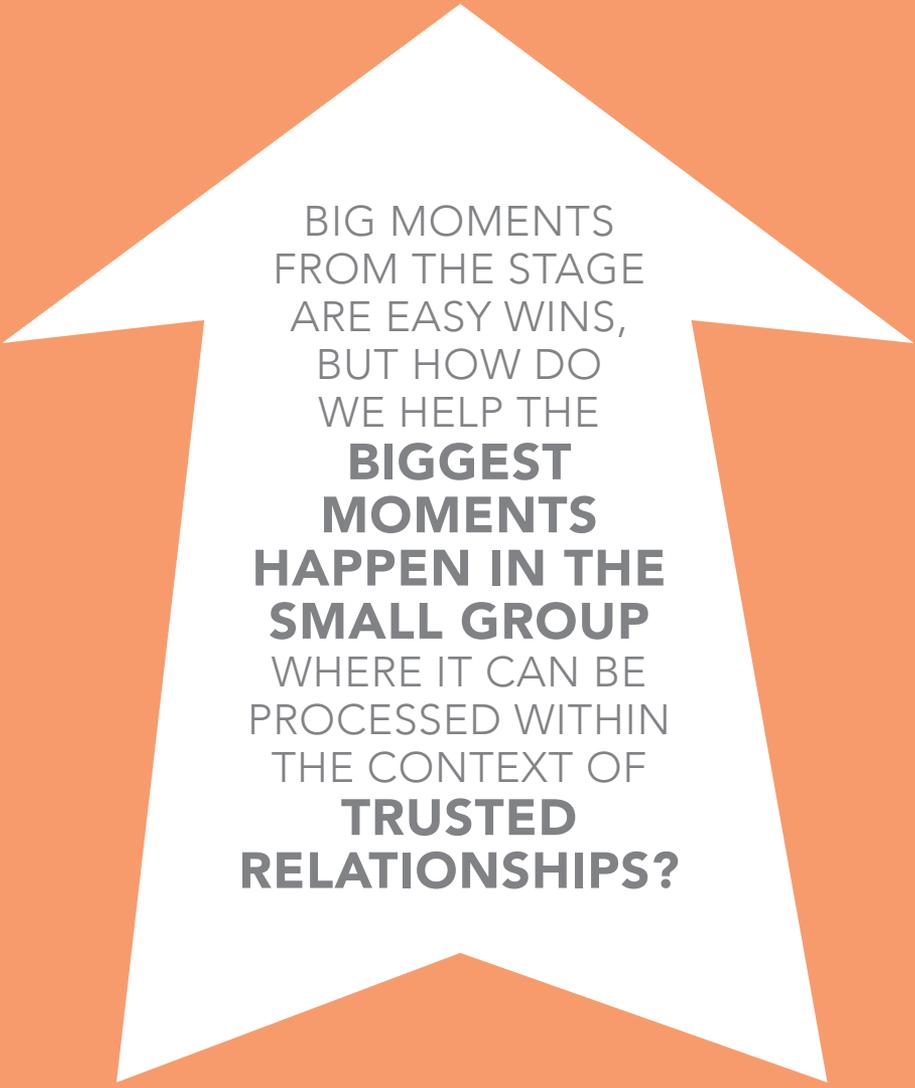
Reprioritizing groups for weekly programming amplifies the message, ensuring that the carefully crafted content and message hits its mark and becomes personal for every student.

## EVENTS THAT PRIORITIZE GROUPS

In recent years, I've learned a few big ideas, but none more significant than this: less is more.

I remember one year early in my ministry—2003. I'll never forget that year. From March to October of 2003, I had 347 events. Okay, I made that number up, but it was a crazy year.

At the time, I was leading a ministry of 300 elementary kids on my own, while our preschool director handled the little ones. Every week we had three services: two Sunday School sessions and a midweek program.



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On top of those three weekly services, that year I also executed:  
a community-wide lock-in  
a Spring Break day camp  
an end-of-school pool party  
an eight-week summer day camp  
a four-day overnight camp for older church kids  
a four-day camp for younger church kids  
a huge Vacation Bible School  
a mission trip for leaders to East Asia  
a back-to-school party  
and the biggest fall festival imaginable.

It may not have been 532 events, but it sure felt like it. We kept the kids busy and it was fun. Sort of.

More than ten years later, I have a much larger staff and far more resources, but we only execute three or four events a year. And do you know what's crazy? I see far more traction around these three or four events than I did around the 891 events I used to do.

What has made all the difference? Well, for one thing, it's a lot easier for our team to do fewer events really well. But there's another reason. I think the biggest reason these events have been successful is that we began tying small groups into our events. When we plan our events now, we ask: Will this event directly help small groups win? And if the answer is no, we don't do them. (Okay, we're not 100% there yet, but we're pretty close.) We're trying to see all of our events as arrows that point to small groups.

Last year we even added a new event that we felt would help both families and small group leaders win. We hosted a Family BBQ on the Sunday we promoted kids and students to their next grade. At that BBQ, we took 20 minutes to cast vision for how we thought parents and small group leaders could work together to pass faith to the next generation. Then we dismissed everyone to a meet and greet for parents and small group leaders. For the next hour, parents and small group leaders met, shook hands, hugged and exchanged stories about their kids. The night ended with everyone sharing dinner together. It was fun. It was beautiful. It was strategic. And it was simple. We were blown away by how many parents and small group leaders not only showed up, but were *excited* about what was happening.

Do you want to know an interesting byproduct of doing events that prioritize relationships through small groups? It makes it easier for us to connect the disconnected. Every year I have a handful of teenagers who do not attend our student programs. There's often resistance—especially for teenagers—to try out a program where they don't know anyone. However, even if I can't get them to our weekly program, I can usually convince them to come to Winter Camp. Who doesn't love camp? So far, every disconnected student who has gone to Winter Camp has come back firmly rooted in a student ministry small group. Amazing, right? The same is true for new kids. I often ask parents who are new to our church how their kids are connecting in their groups. My follow-up question is almost always, "Have you signed them up for Winter Camp yet?" Having an event that helps kids connect with each other and with our ministry is priceless!

Remember the secret to great events: less is more. When your events strategically point to what you value most in ministry, they make a greater impact—which means you can do them less often. We see events and programs as steps to small groups, which are far more important than the events and programs themselves. So we ruthlessly guard our calendars, because more events on the calendar only distract from the effectiveness of the events that prioritize small groups.

## REPRIORITIZE YOUR VOLUNTEERS

You probably realize this already, but I'm going to say it anyway: if you're ever going to make small groups more of a priority in your ministry, you'll first need to make the people who *lead* those small groups more of a priority. Volunteer appreciation is a big deal. We work really hard to make sure our volunteers are well "thanked," no matter what role they occupy. However, it's fairly obvious that we should favor the role of the small group leader. It's not that small group leaders are better people, it's just that their role is so critical. So, how do we know if our volunteer culture is an arrow that points straight to small groups?



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We've learned all kinds of things during our journey toward prioritizing small groups. Initially, we realized that we needed small group leaders. So for a while, small group leaders were the only kind of volunteer we tried to recruit. But since we had pretty high standards for those serving in the role of small group leader, we had many people who didn't make the cut. When that happened, we didn't know what to do with those people! Unfortunately, many of those could-be volunteers fell through the cracks as a result of our tunnel vision. Our inability to connect those people with our ministry was a hard lesson to learn.

Eventually we realized that as important as small group leaders are, they aren't the only kind of volunteers we need. We also need a bunch of additional volunteers! Greeters, room assistants, supply coordinators, check-out volunteers, and a variety of other roles are necessary for making small groups better. When a small group leader has to leave his group to grab supplies, or misses the chance to have a conversation with a kid because she's working the check-out station, we're failing to prioritize small groups. Our other types of volunteers may not be directly involved with the small group experience, but they allow small group leaders to better focus their time on doing what only they can do—relationships!

In our ministry, we frequently cast vision for the role of the small group leader. Whether it's during the recruiting process or during our pre-service volunteer gatherings, we constantly speak to the importance of what happens in groups—but we don't only communicate this to small group leaders. We explain to greeters how important their job is because they help connect first-time kids to a small group for the first time. Hosts and storytellers understand they are significant because they set up the critical conversations that will happen afterward in small groups. Every volunteer is important because they all reinforce, in their own way, the time that kids will spend in small group. We cast this vision frequently and consistently and that means that all of our volunteers are more likely to understand why we do what we do. **Everyone understands the importance of their job in light of how what they do leads to kids having conversations with consistent and trusted leaders.**

## REPRIORITIZE YOUR BUDGET

When you reprioritize for groups, just think of all the money you'll save when you're not pulling off 1,047 events in a year . . . or whatever that number was. That's good news, right?

The truth is, though, making small groups a priority probably won't be free. Sure, relationships don't cost a thing. But supporting those relationships probably will. No matter how big or small your budget is, how you spend your money should change when you take an honest look at your budget through the lens of small groups. If you're going to see your budget as an arrow that points to small groups, then some things will probably need to be funded that haven't been funded in the past.

Prioritizing groups has certainly had an impact on our budget. Most volunteers can be trained for their positions pretty quickly, without much financial investment. But a small group leader is different. Not only are there skills to learn, but there is a vision that takes a little time to capture. We find that a lunch or coffee meeting with a potential small group leader can give us adequate time to cast vision for what leading a small group looks like. When we have a chance to unpack the role with them in conversation, we'll have a much better shot at getting their hearts to connect with the role and the vision—and getting them to stick with that role for far longer. It may cost us a few lunches or lattes, but it's worth it.

After that lunch or coffee meeting, we also want to put resources in the hands of every small group leader that will help them do their job better. That costs a few dollars, too. Once a new SGL is placed in our ministry, we give them a copy of *Lead Small* and encourage them to read it in a few weeks so we can have follow-up conversations about what they've read. Then there are other training opportunities to consider, like meetings, events, or resources we find along the way. Training SGLs requires a bit of investment.

In our children's ministry, we frequently give small group leaders postcards so they can write notes to the kids in their groups. We tell them to give us the cards and we'll take care of postage. Dozens of postcards being sent every week begin to add up (especially if it hasn't been budgeted) but it makes a big difference to the kids who receive them.

We also ask our leaders to connect with kids, or even the parents of kids, outside of church. To help with that, we've sometimes passed out Starbucks gift cards or collected receipts for reimbursement. Yes, this does add up, but imagine the impact your ministry could have if dozens of leaders began meeting with kids and parents from your church! I know there have been items in my ministry budget that certainly didn't have this kind of impact—and that's why we changed the way we budget.

We also encourage our leaders to do big stuff with their groups outside of church. Things like:

- Meet the kids at the mall for dinner and a movie.
- Organize a serving project with a fun activity afterward.
- Host a Christmas party at your house.

In most cases, it's not a big deal for the kids to bring enough money to cover their expenses. However, anytime kids gather, there will always be extra expenses. Someone will forget their money. Maybe it's a special occasion and the leader wants to treat one of the students. Maybe the leader is providing dessert for the Christmas party. Because these are the events and gatherings where long-term friendships and relationships are forged, and this is what we want every one of our small group leaders to do, we tell them they can turn in their expenses and be reimbursed. Because sometimes a small group leader needs a little push, or maybe just some help, to organize something

Now, you probably don't naturally have a line item in your budget (if you even have a budget!) for volunteers to meet parents for coffee, but reevaluating what you have, and how you spend it, is essential for making small groups more of a priority. Relational ministry isn't free. But I'm convinced every dollar we spend on it is worth it the investment. (Especially compared to what you probably spent at Oriental Trading or the Dollar Store last year.)

## REPRIORITIZE YOUR TIME

Your time is the last thing I want to talk about reprioritizing.

Whether or not you have other staff members working with you, reprioritizing for groups means you're going to need to change the way you spend your time. In other words, the ways you spend your time should be arrows pointing to small groups.

So if you are the only person on staff, what percentage of your time is dedicated to recruiting, developing, and caring for Small Group Leaders? Many times, we are ruled by the tyranny of what's most urgent (like the program that needs to happen every Sunday), and all we can give our small group leaders are leftovers. However, if small groups really are the most important thing to us, we might need to reevaluate the time we spend in staff meetings, doing message planning, searching for awesome cat videos on YouTube, or supply runs to Walmart. Because the way we spend our time reflects our priorities.



THE WAY WE  
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**PRIORITIES.**

My student pastor hasn't led a service in over a month. Every month or so, he removes himself from the stage by scheduling guest communicators (or even the occasional video) to do the teaching for him. He's still around, maybe even playing the role of host, but he takes time off from communicating (and preparing to communicate) and invests that time into his leaders. That's probably the reason he's nearly doubled the number of small group leaders on his team for two years in a row!

Your leaders need you. They need your attention and your time. Consider how reprioritizing your time could allow groups to thrive under your leadership, because there are probably things taking up your time that could be dropped or handed off to a volunteer.

Speaking of caring for your leaders, reprioritizing for groups may mean changing the organizational structure of your ministry so that you can better care for your small group leaders. Actually, it might even mean changing the way you organize your staff.

Reprioritizing your time means extra focus on small group leaders. Maybe that means it's *you* focusing on your small group leaders. But what happens when you have 20, 40, or even 60 small group leaders? No one person can lead that many people! That's why you need to develop what we call "small group leader coaches." You need faithful men and women who can equip and care for small group leaders, just like you would do if you had the capacity to care for all of them. When you have coaches in place, your focus can change from investing in small group leaders to investing in coaches who will invest in small group leaders. Reprioritizing your time means investing significant time into your coaches who will in turn invest in the small group leaders.

So who, and what, are coaches? Coaches can be some of your best small group leaders who you ask to take on a new kind of role. Transitioning a small group leader into a coach can be tricky, though. Because they're so good at being a small group leader, they may be resistant to leave that role. This is perfectly natural. Some small group leaders may opt to become a coach only after they transition a group of kids to the next grade or next ministry.

However, resist the urge to "get your house in order" before looking for coaches. Some ministries have a hard time recruiting coaches when they still need small group leaders. It may feel counter-intuitive, especially when recruiting a coach means leaving an opening for a small group leader vacant. But go for it anyway. Recruit coaches!

You need them. Once you have others on your team who care about small group leaders like you do, you'll find the small group leader vacancies will begin filling up faster than you could fill them on your own. Together, you'll create a better environment that retains small group leaders while you recruit more to your team.

My church is still early in the process of raising up coaches. Currently, we're bringing on 4-6 new coaches every quarter. Every time that number grows, our environment changes in such a positive way. Coaches take so much weight off of our staff, which allows us to not only focus on leading at a higher level, but it also allows us to multiply our influence through the influence of our coaches.

Now let's talk about the big picture of coaches for a second. If your ministry grows . . . and grows . . . and grows . . . you may find yourself with not only a ton of small group leaders, but a ton of coaches, too. So what happens if your ministry has grown to the point where you have so many coaches, you can't effectively lead them all? If you find yourself in that position, it's possible you're ready to make a change in your staff. It might be time to consider bringing on a small groups director—someone whose primary responsibility is overseeing coaches, while coaches oversee small group leaders. This person wouldn't necessarily have to be full time, or even part time, as long as there is someone recruiting, developing, and caring for your coaches. As you grow into this structure, you might consider hiring a small group director of the opposite gender as you so that they can lead the coaches of their gender, while you lead the coaches of yours. Imagine the impact you could have with this kind of structure!

So there you have it! If you want to reprioritize for groups, you'll need to reprioritize your programming, your events, your volunteers, and your time.

Although I didn't quite understand the importance and value of small groups when I first got started in ministry, I'm grateful for all I've learned since those early years. It may have taken me a while to get to where I am now, but I feel like I'm finally living out what I had hoped to do in the beginning—influence the lives of as many kids as possible. And since I've learned to make small groups a priority and empower small group leaders to do the influencing, we're getting to make an impact on a scale I could never have imagined. **Through our small group leaders, our church has created the space for hundreds of kids and students to receive the same depth of personal and spiritual care that I could have provided for only a few.** And best of all, I get to see lives being changed through the faithfulness of others—our small group leaders.



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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **What are some ways you can adjust your weekly programming to better point to small groups?**

Jot down a few ideas.

2. **Make a list of every special event, camp, trip, or activity you did in the last year. How well did these programs point to small groups?**

Circle the programs you can change to be more strategic.  
Put an X by the programs you should consider killing.  
Underline the programs that are most strategic.  
And take a few notes on how you'd like to move forward.

3. **Make a list of every type of volunteer you have in your ministry. How do each of those volunteers help support your small group leaders?** Are there any additional volunteer roles you need to create so that SGLs can better focus on relationships?

4. **What are some ways you'd like to financially invest in small groups or small group leaders, but fear you don't have the resources?**

If you have a ministry budget, what are some cuts or substitutions you could make to better support small groups or small group leaders? (And if you don't have a ministry budget, what are some steps you might take to request or raise the resources you need?)

5. **Do an analysis of the way you (and/or your staff) spends your time. Draw a pie chart if it helps you visualize it.** Do you need to increase the percentage of your time you are spending on small groups and small group leaders? What can you change or cut in the rest of your week to make that happen?