



# EQUIPPER

The monthly e-zine from the U.S. Church Administration and Development (CAD) team of Grace Communion International.

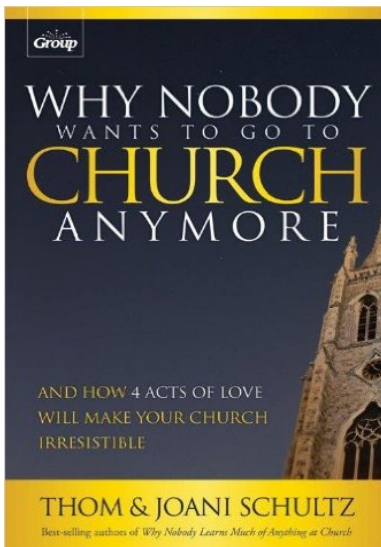
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[www.gci.org/equipper](http://www.gci.org/equipper)

Dear pastors and ministry leaders:

These days we hear a lot about the decline of the church in North America. Fewer people are regular attenders and younger ones seem to be staying away in droves. Upon learning of these statistics, some church leaders get defensive and blame the culture, while others throw up their hands in defeat. But others roll up their sleeves and prayerfully focus on doing what we're called to do, which is *to be the church*. What does that mean? Many things, but certainly it means being *a welcoming community* where people experience something rare in our often impersonal world: *a sense of belonging*.



According to Thom and Joani Schultz in their book *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore (and How 4 Acts of Love Will Make Your Church Irresistible)*, truly welcoming communities of faith express God's love in these four ways:

1. **Radical hospitality.** This means being like Jesus, the "friend of sinners," who welcomed everyone, drawing them to himself with unconditional love.
2. **Fearless conversation.** Today, people want the opportunity to dialogue rather than to sit passively and listen. They want a safe environment where they can converse, including asking hard questions without fear of criticism.
3. **Genuine humility.** People hunger for a community that says: "We're in this together. We all struggle. No one has all the answers. We're all trying to know and follow Jesus together."
4. **Divine anticipation.** People want to know that God is real. In addition to the biblical stories about God, they long to encounter God in everyday life.

In our world, fewer and fewer people are drawn to the church as an institution. If they come, they typically do so seeking connection with God and with fellow-seekers. To be that place of connection, it's important to be structured in ways that make the above-mentioned expressions of love visible and readily accessible—both to guests and to existing members. A key structure in that regard is the *small group*—an assembly of about 8 to 15 caring, hospitable people who, in humility, welcome dialogue, anticipating a real encounter with the living God.

Many of our U.S. congregations had small groups for a time, primarily for member care. Most of those groups have lapsed, and some congregations became small groups in size. But whatever your experience and current situation, I encourage your church to look again at utilizing small group structures as a means to facilitate belonging within welcoming community. Toward that end, you'll find some helpful resources on page two.

In Christ's service,

Greg Williams, Director of GCI-USA Church Administration and Development

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*Equipping all kinds of churches for all kinds of people in all kinds of places.*

## Small group resources

Following are links to websites along with quotes from articles that helpfully address launching, leading and multiplying small groups in a congregational setting.

- **Faith Talk Equipper** (<http://faithtalkgroups.blogspot.com/>). This GCI website is a treasure-trove of helpful resources including discussion guides and videos designed for equipping small group facilitators, hosts and others.
- **Q Place** (<http://www.qplace.com/>) a website with a wide array of resources for small group ministry.
- **SmallGroups.com** (<http://www.smallgroups.com/>) a website chockful of helpful resources (many are free).
- **Gospel-centered community or Christian social club?** This article at <http://tinyurl.com/nujxx45> will help you steer clear of some common mistakes related to small groups.
- A principal benefit of small groups is the way they provide “safe places” where people feel free to dialogue. People today desire to talk about what they are learning and, when rightly led, a small group provides that opportunity, including being able to ask questions without fear of embarrassment.
- Another benefit of small groups is noted in the book *Transformational Groups* by Stetzer & Geiger:
 

Small group attenders are much more likely than non-group members to read their Bible regularly—67% compared to only 27%. Being involved in a small group also made Christians more likely to pray for others and confess sins to God.
- Some pastors say their members are already too busy with church programs to participate in a small group. Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger in *Simple Church* reply by asking church leaders to consider their programming carefully, asking whether it is making disciples or just making people busy. They comment:
 

Many of our churches have become so cluttered that people have a difficult time encountering the simple and powerful message of Christ—so cluttered that many people are busy doing church instead of being the church.
- When asked how he has been able to integrate his members into small groups, Larry Osborne (pastor of North Coast church in Vista, California), said a key is making sure the best people in the congregation are involved as small group facilitators. When asked how he is able to pull that off, he replied:
 

It’s vital to cut the competition. If a church has so much programming going on that people are stretched too thin, small groups inevitably will fall to the back of the priority list. You end up not having your key leaders with you because they’re already overwhelmed.



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