



Planning for Big Success with Small Groups.

➔ Taking Your Small Group Ministry to the Next Level

Over the last several decades, small groups, sometimes called cell groups, have grown in number and influence to become a central focus of church life. In fact, many churches have changed their entire structure to become churches of small groups. The reason for this is simple: smaller groups serve to develop closer relationships, encourage more responsibility, and foster spiritual growth.

Whether your church refers to them as small groups, community groups, home groups, care groups, or some other name, these smaller groups are structured in a way to meet the spiritual and relational needs of their members. People who belong to a group have a sense of connection that those in larger congregations don't experience. This is where the real "ministry" of your ministry happens. As the directional leader of these small groups, you want a growing, vibrant ministry through which your people are strengthened and encouraged, engaging each other in spiritual growth, serving others and worshiping together.

So why is it – with so many advantages for group members – that managing a small group ministry seems so much like herding cats? Despite all the benefits, many times groups lack direction and definition, leaving group leaders and participants feeling tentative and confused. Often, church staff members have no way of knowing vital information about groups and the members in those groups.

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Without organized systems and processes in place for managing small groups, staff members can't know what groups are available, when they meet, what topics are being studied, how many people are in a group, when new members join a group – or even which groups are still meeting. While some leaders communicate well with church staff members about their groups, many don't, which leads to an inconsistent, poorly organized small group ministry.

The answer to this frustration can be found with Web-based small group management software that can be implemented by any church, from the newest ministries to the largest congregations with hundreds of small groups. With an easy-to-use, online interface, this innovative software solution offers small group ministries the ability to use the Internet to collect important demographic and contact information, connect prospects with group leaders and facilitate effective communication at all levels of the ministry. In addition, the information can be easily accessed from the office, home, or a Web-enabled hand-held device.



Tip

Communication is Key

For the numerous members in your small group ministry, the most important thing you can provide is the ability to easily access information and communicate with each other, while relaying the respective information back to the church. When information is not flowing and communication is lacking, people feel confused, disconnected, and out-of-touch. Rather than leaving this vital communication up to leaders who may have different levels of commitment in this area, why not set up a ready-made communication system that keeps everyone involved?

Consider the following:

With the right online software package, you can allow your various leaders and group members to login with their own private username and password and only see information pertaining to their group. For example, they can find the contact information of the other members, see their group calendars and meeting schedules, and send emails to each other or to the group. They may print a directory of their group, see any reading assignments for the next group meeting, or even print mailing labels. The small group leaders may have additional rights to mark attendance for their group and then see trends and statistics relating to their group.

As with all computerized systems, however, the information available to you is only as good as the information entered on the front end. But with a little instruction and encouragement, along with an easy-to-use system, participants at all levels can enjoy a meaningful, effective small group experience. The remaining portion of this paper details the individual benefits a small group ministry software solution has to each participant.

➔ Pastor or Small Groups Pastor/Director

Whether your small groups ministry director is the pastor of the church, a staff member hired specifically for working with small groups, or an unpaid lay person, the person in charge of small groups has a huge responsibility to care for the groups in your congregation.

This person sets the vision and direction of the entire small groups ministry. The director is responsible for developing the mission and vision statements, setting objectives, developing the ministry strategy, choosing and training the various types of leaders, and communicating that vision to other members of the church staff, coaches, leaders, groups – and the congregation at large.

For ministry directors, information about the ministry is critical to monitoring its overall health. With a web portal solution – in which all members of the ministry are responsible for recording their small group activity – ministry directors can have unlimited Internet access to the program, which opens up important information with the click of a mouse, including:

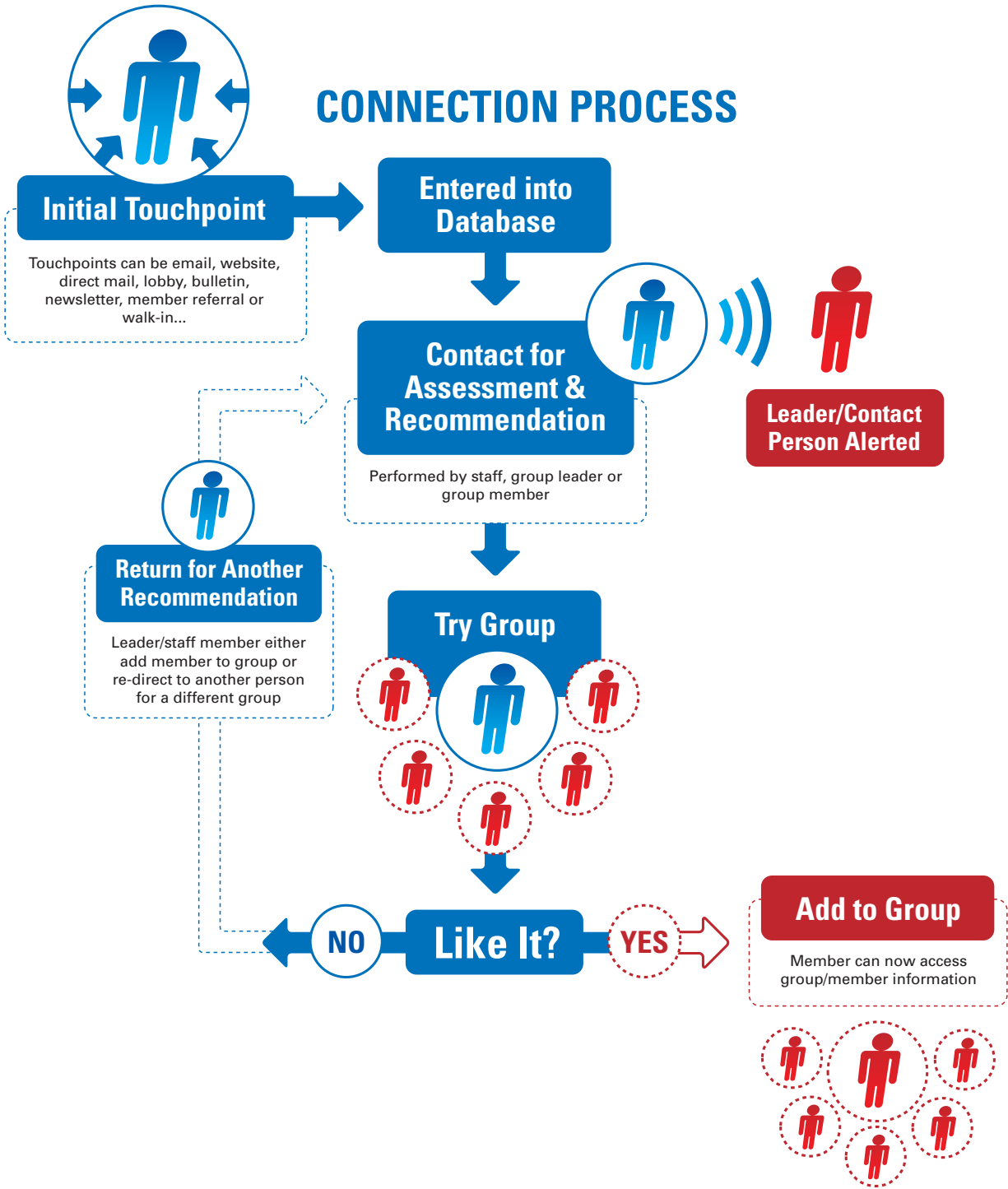
- Number and description of current, active groups (along with number of participants in each).
- Attendance tracking and trends for each group.
- Tracking the contacts made by the leaders.
- Prospects that have expressed interest in a group but have not been contacted.
- New groups recently formed.
- Group profiles/demographics, including which ones are open to new members.
- Tracking where each leader is in the training process.

The small groups director or pastor can quickly see if leaders have been through applicable training courses, how many new members have been added to the ministry, which groups are coming to a close, when the last communication from a leader was sent to his group, how frequently coaching sessions are happening – and the list is virtually endless. When used properly, all of this information can help small group leaders get a better handle on the current climate of their small group ministry.

➔ Small Groups Church Staff/Connections Staff

Members of the small group church staff are the glue that holds the ministry together. While small group pastors oversee the strategic process of managing small group ministry, staff members are responsible for executing a successful

integration process for connecting new group members, ensuring that all potential small group participants are connected with the appropriate leaders. Armed with the right tools and information, church staff can make decisions about matching prospects to an existing group to fit their needs. They can track prospects from their first online inquiry to the time they actually join a group.



Tips

IMAGINE...**For the Church**

Imagine if your church members and attendees could go to your church web site and search for small groups that interest them. At this site, they would be able to search for all available small groups and choose one to visit, based on criteria such as stage-of-life, geographic location or current study topic. They could also find small groups that had child care, if that was their need. In addition, they could request more information and have the leader of the group contact them.

For the Small Group Leader

What if, when that person requested more information, not only did the leader receive an email asking them to contact the prospect, but a task was automatically set up to keep the leader accountable for contacting the prospect and inviting them to the next group meeting. What if the leader could even review and mark-off their task list online?

For the Church Staff

Once the assigned contact is made, the leader could return to the church's small group web portal and enter a brief report about the contact with the prospect and any resulting action from the contact. All this information will then be stored in the church's central database and available to the church staff.

For the Member

When a member indicates to a leader that they are ready to join the group, the leader can go online and add them to the group's roster, which will trigger an update to their record in the church's database. Once they are part of the group, the member has access to a list of the other members and can email them or see their phone numbers to contact them, thus reinforcing the relationships between the members.

Church staff members are also responsible for setting up and maintaining the information on small groups and their members in the main database. With this information, they should be able to generate for the director comprehensive reports that reflect new membership, member participation, study materials, and other details related to group life.

No matter how many different levels of leadership you have in your small group ministry, there must be an easy way for small group staff members to connect your church members, attendees, and prospects to the right groups. Once these people are connected to a group, there must be a good solution in place to track their spiritual growth for your small group ministry to flourish.

“For the small group ministry, the most important thing you can provide is the ability to easily access information and communicate with each other...”

➔ Coaches/Directors/Mentors

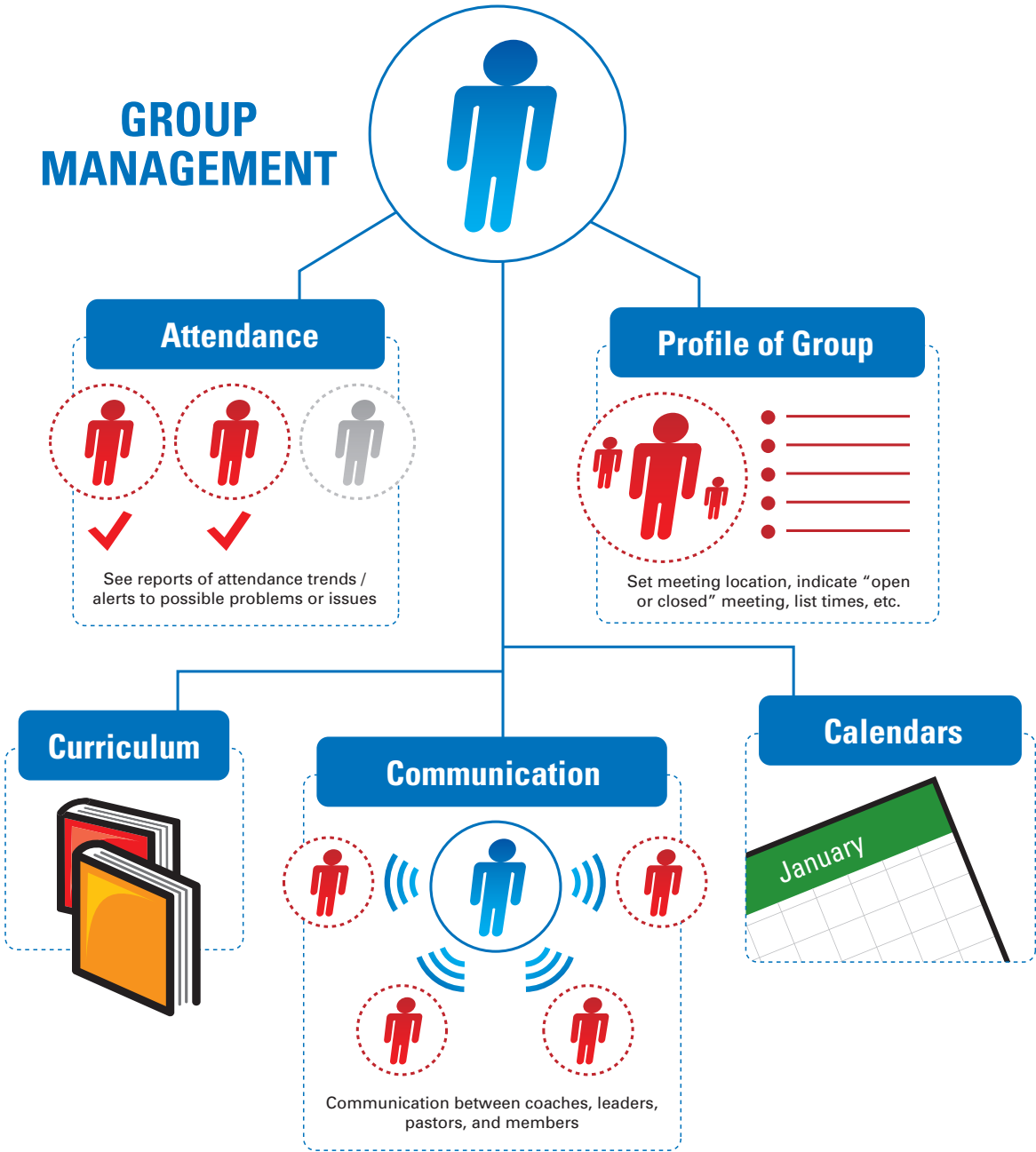
Coaches are appointed by small group pastors and are mentors to the small group leaders. They are the central communication point between the pastors and the small group leaders. Coaches communicate the progress of their leaders and their groups to the pastor/director.

Since you cannot manage what you cannot measure, it is vital for coaches and leaders at all levels of small groups to have access to reports that can give insight into the health of the ministry, quickly address issues as they come up, and help course-correct if necessary.

For example, while reviewing attendance reports for the groups under his care, a coach may notice one group growing beyond a manageable size. With this information, the coach and leader can discuss when and how the group could split into two, and who the spin-off group's leader should be, among other considerations. Also, if the coach notices on a report that a group is studying a particular book or topic, the coach can offer targeted assistance and insight.

Once this kind of situation has been identified and addressed with the leader, the coach can enter the course of action into the system for the director or pastor to review when the next report is generated.

In addition, training events could be made available online, thus answering many questions from leaders, such as “How do I facilitate difficult discussions?”, “Why isn't my group connecting like they should?” or “How do I use the new communication system?”



➡ **Leaders/Facilitators/Hosts**

Small Group Leaders run the group sessions and often teach a topic or curriculum. As the name implies, they are the leaders of the group. They should be involved in intentionally building relationships with their group members and helping them grow. According to Willow Creek

Association, an influential authority on small group life, leaders are charged with:

- Modeling Christ-like behavior to the group members, showing an example of how to live effectively.
- Acting as a shepherd to the group, helping each member to take the next step spiritually.
- Facilitating group interaction in order to build relationships.
- Resolving conflict in a biblical manner.
- Developing a group that cares for the needs of others.
- Keeping an open mind about inviting others into the group.
- Helping group members initiate spiritual conversations with others.
- Identifying and developing the next group leader.

While group leaders are primarily involved with developing relationships with their group members, they are sometimes left without a good solution for executing the administrative tasks related to their groups. They don't have to go searching for information about:

- A group member who has missed several meetings and might need to be contacted.
- New people in the church who might be interested in the group.
- The vision of the church, ensuring a topic that aligns with what the church believes.
- Group events.
- Member's contact information.
- Pertinent details about group life to the church staff, such as when a new member joins the group.
- Group directories.
- Topics to teach.

With an effective web portal, leaders have all the information they need, right at their fingertips.

➔ Small Group Members

Those interested in a small group could base their decision to join a group on several different factors such as location, meeting date, emphasis, life stage, or other variables. Yet, despite the factors for choosing a small group, prospective members are looking for connection with others who are like them. They want to be part of a group; more specifically, a group that has a reason for being and a purpose bigger than themselves.

How do those people interested in a group find the right group? One obvious way, of course, is by an initial contact with the small group staff or connections staff. That staff person may talk with the prospect and assess their interests and availability to help recommend the right groups. With the right software package, however, those people could also go online; choose the specific criteria or factors they need, and search for groups that meet their needs. They can even contact the leaders of the groups that interest them to find out more about the groups before visiting one.





Once members are connected to a group, they want to be able to communicate with other members and build relationships. Their needs shift from searching for a group to becoming a key part of the group. Depending on their reason for joining the group, they may want to learn more about specific subjects, build relationships with other people, and even work toward becoming a leader of a group. So, how do they accomplish their goals?

Building relationships, which strengthens the small groups, requires easy communication with each other and within the entire group. The right small group software will facilitate this communication by giving members access to other members' contact information. The software should allow members to email each other or the group and/or provide phone numbers for their group members. Members should be able to contact one another and set up times for coffee or lunch. They should have the ability to go online and see who has a birthday coming up, and then print mailing labels for birthday cards. They need the ability to email the group, day or night, to tell them about a specific prayer request or need. Members should also be able to go online and confirm their assignment for their next meeting or possibly even track their progress toward becoming a leader. Promoting fellowship and personal connections outside of the small group meetings improves the overall health and longevity of your groups. The capabilities are limitless but only with the right online software!

➡ Endless Possibilities

Of course, the possibilities offered by today's software solutions are not limited to the examples given above. There are virtually endless possibilities for how these solutions can help your small group ministry run as efficiently as possible, resulting in the relational connections and spiritual growth that are at the heart of your small group ministry.

To get more information about how ACS Technologies can help you take your small group ministry to another level, please visit acstechnologies.com/totalsolutions or call us toll-free 800-736-7425.

➡ More About ACS Technologies

ACS Technologies is a leading provider of information management solutions for churches, schools, and other faith-based organizations. Founded in 1978, ACS Technologies serves over 22,000 organizations worldwide. From church management software to forms and supplies to professional Web sites and consulting, we offer six product and service suites in order to meet our clients' varied needs.

Since 1978, ACS Technologies has developed outstanding software products designed specifically for faith-based organizations, focusing on the special needs you address every day. We've designed our products to work together, integrating them to increase efficiency and reduce redundancies for your benefit. Our mission is simple, and our vision is focused – we empower our client partners with specially designed software solutions.



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