



Casting Vision from Day One

How to lay the groundwork for a healthy, long-term small group

By Spence Shelton

Do you believe lives will be forever changed for the glory of God through the small group you are leading? Honestly, what is your answer to that question right now?

Here is something big you need to get your mind around: God designed transformation to happen through friendship. This is such empowering news for you as a small-group leader! As you begin leading, you *must* believe and anticipate that life-change will happen with the members your group when you press the truths of Christ into one another's lives. God is willing and able to use you as a catalyst for life-change. Will you believe him for it?

One of the most critical elements in the early stages of a small group is casting the vision for where you want the group to go. Small-group leaders commonly make the mistake of assuming their group members are as excited about and committed to the group as they are. In reality, the best thing you can give your group early on is a compelling dream they can jump on board with. The next time your group gathers, you need to be ready to give them a brief (10 minutes or less usually) but big vision of what's in store for the group. The goal of this article is to help you:

1. Get that huge vision for your group
2. Develop a strategy to take you there
3. Prepare to talk to your group about it.

Step 1: Build a God-Sized Vision for Your Group

The best place to begin building your vision is by looking at the dream Jesus has for your small group. After all, this group belongs to God, not you. So why not shoot for a God-sized vision instead of a you-sized one! Christ calls us to make disciples (Matthew 28:19). This is what Christ did, and what he called the church to do. Therefore, this is what your small group should be designed to accomplish.

A survey of Jesus' teaching in the gospels reveals four significant themes that, together, summarize what the life of a disciple looks like. They are identified here as a Gospel Identity, Worship, Community, and Mission. The two places these themes are most prominent include the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:34–40) and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–20).

- **Gospel Identity.** Disciples must find their motivation for holiness in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; any other source will leave them tired and unfulfilled. Indeed, even your spiritual activity will not earn you any points with God. God will not forgive your sins because you do good deeds. Thankfully, small groups are a great place for us to constantly remind and encourage one another in our shared gospel identity.
- **Worship.** You and I were made to worship. Worship is more than just music; it's a lifestyle. When we consider who God is and all that he's done for us, the logical response is to offer our entire lives back to him (Romans 12:1). Every action, every circumstance, even every thought is an opportunity to worship (1 Corinthians 10:31). Your group will seek to draw people closer to God by living a lifestyle of worship.
- **Community.** Jesus calls us to model him in loving one another because it is by this love the world will know we are his disciples (John 13:34–35; 15:12). He prayed to God that we would experience a unity that resembled the unity of the trinity (John 17:11; 20–23). Paul calls the church to a unity so deep it should operate like a single human body (Ephesians 4:1–16). For a small group this means being intentional to love one another as Christ loved us and to encourage one another in holiness (Hebrews 10:24–26).

- **Mission.** Every Christian is called to be a minister of the gospel through both acts of loving service and a willingness to share the gospel with others. We want to take the kingdom of God into the arts, business, education—and every other dimension of our community. We believe that the real "ministry" happens outside the church Monday through Saturday, not inside our auditorium for an hour on Sunday. We believe that the scope of God's love is worldwide and we are committed to taking the gospel to the farthest, most unreached places of the world. For small groups this means we exist for the sake of others and must fight the tendency of the flesh to serve only our own needs.

These four themes are four foundational elements of a small group's vision. Before you keep reading, it's time to write down what the vision for your group will be:

Sample: Our small group exists to make disciples. We will push each other to always remember Christ first and to worship God as our first reaction to all life throws at us. We will love one another, especially when it's not easy to do so. We carry the hope of the world, and our group will be characterized by an active and intentional love of our world both locally and globally.

Your small group's vision: _____

Step 2: Decide on the Strategy to Get You There

To achieve this vision, your group will have to commit to a strategy. This is where you lay down a couple of important elements that are crucial to push a group towards long-term health and keep it from stagnating somewhere down the line.

Your strategy should include these elements:

- **Collective Ownership.** Even though you are the group leader, is not your group. Each person in the group has just as much ownership of it as you. This means every one must have a role. Too many leaders place their God-sized visions on their own shoulders and burn out within six or nine months. Leader, you must be willing to delegate important responsibilities to those in your group. It's God's group, after all, and you are a member of it!
- **Multiplication.** If you are making disciples who make disciples, at some point you will have people ready to lead a new small group. If your group is anticipating this from Day 1, they will celebrate the day someone leaves to launch a new group. If you spring this on the group a week before it happens, they will mourn it. Make multiplication a part of your strategy. And as you delegate leadership roles, do so while looking for the next small-group leader at your church or in your ministry.
- **Commitment.** This is not a casual, come-if-you-feel-like-it small group. Real friendships require time and energy. So part of how you achieve your vision is by agreeing to make group life a priority. Set the bar high!
- **Confidentiality.** With commitment must come an agreement to trust one another. While this trust will only truly come as friendships are built, you can set the course for that by making confidentiality an expectation in your group. If you expect people to be real, they have to trust you are giving them a safe environment to do so.

Sample strategy: To see our vision realized, we will each actively participate in group life. This is not the leader's group. This is our group. As a disciple-making group, we will actively seek to raise up and send out those who God is preparing to be future leaders. We will prioritize group life, letting someone know in advance on the rare occasion we will not be there. We will practice trust through confidentiality in what we share with one another.

Your Group's Strategy: _____

Step 3: Casting the Vision to the Group

Good news, the hard work is done. Now we just need to share this great stuff with your group! Here are a couple of things for you to remember as you share this with the group:

- **Pray.** Your group's growth is not up to you, ultimately. It's up to God and the working of his Spirit in your group. So begin now to pray for your time of sharing this vision. Pray that God would give your group members attentive ears, and that the group would begin to unify itself around this vision.
- **Keep it central.** When you share your vision with the group, it should be the only thing up for discussion. This should not be an afterthought. Share the vision and allow conversation around it. Ensure everyone is tracking with where you are heading. Even spend time praying together over it after your conversation has ended.
- **Keep it short.** You could spend months on this, but your people need to know that what you are seeking to accomplish is, in fact, doable. People need the key points (your vision and strategy) and they need it often. Better to reinforce this several times over the first few months together than exhaust it just once at the beginning.
- **Keep it real.** This isn't a seminary professor's lecture. It's your heart-felt belief of what group life can be like. Tell them that. Speak from the heart. Set the stage now for the transparency you hope to see happen down the road.

I know it may seem daunting now, but leading a small group is one of the most rewarding experiences one can have as a follower of Christ. You can do it!

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Discuss

1. Have you experienced life-change as a result of participating in a small group?
2. What is most difficult about coming up with a vision for your small group?
3. What is most difficult about coming up with a strategy?