

Interview Questions for *Successful Small Groups: From Concept to Practice*
By Teena M. Stewart

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For Interviewer: You are interviewing the author of the book, *Successful Small Groups: From Concept to Practice*. The book is intended to help churches successfully launch small groups and provide insightful tips for managing them while developing leaders.

Interview Questions

1. Why would a church need this book?

A. Some churches already have small groups in place, but most could benefit from more coaching tips in order to improve how their groups are managed. Many want to know how to launch more groups but aren't necessarily aware of what they are doing well and what needs to improve.

Other churches may have only one or two Bible studies and they desperately want to provide more but they just don't know how. Sometimes churches are unaware they need small groups. My hope is that this book makes leaders more aware how important they are. Small groups are an indicator of a church's health. Groups act as a sort of surrogate family and way for Christians to support each other. But they also provide a means of growing more leads and equipping people for ministry plus providing a strong Biblical foundation.

2. How does this book differ from, say, a book that tells how to lead a Bible study?

A. It's much more comprehensive. A book on how to lead a Bible study would focus more on the ins and out of the lesson, how to teach scripture, the materials. That's all very important. But it might not address additional information that will help their groups stay healthy and develop leaders. Groups that focus on Bible study alone, often miss areas where they could be supporting members and helping them grow. The subjects I cover concentrate on helping groups stay well-rounded.

3. Why did you write this book? What do you hope readers will take away from it?

A. I've been in church ministry for years and have worked shoulder to shoulder with my husband, Jeff, who is an ordained minister. We've lead a number of small groups and I have done several on my own. It has been a sort of learn-as-you-go process. And, like many leaders, we've made mistakes. I think people often write books as a way to encourage other leaders and equip them and that is why I wrote this one.

God has made me an equipper and so it's only natural that I want to help people succeed and grow to maturity. As a matter of fact, I write a regular equipping column through <http://www.Ministryinmotion.net> called Purpose-filled Ministry.

But, to get back to the book, the book starts out talking about how parents share info and give advice to their kids because they want to spare the hurts of making costly mistakes. I went through the same thing while working on this book. If I can help leaders get there sooner and avoid certain pitfalls, if I can help equip them so that they equip other leaders and develop more groups, then together we can bring more people into God's kingdom and that's what it's really all about.

4. I've heard people say that this book is very different from other books they've read on small groups. What sets it apart?

Sometimes I think I should have been born in Missouri, the "show me" state. I'm a very visual person. I learn by seeing. I have graphic art training along with writing training. So I tend to gravitate toward showing people how something is done so that they don't have to reinvent the wheel when trying to learn something new. I haven't seen any small groups books that include the visual examples I have. I've included flyers based on real materials small groups I know of have used to state their purpose and core values and to promote their groups. I've included samples of group names to show the importance of having a good group name and stress the creative factor. I also have forms and questionnaires that help people determine where they and their groups are at and what work areas they might have.

It's all very practical and can be adapted to suit their needs. It's not meant to be a one-size-fits all, but it does help give them the visuals and really reduces the amount of work they have to do.

5. What are three benefits of participating in a small group.

A. Well, there are a lot more than three but some of the key ones are that we are not designed to try to make it through life on our own. We need some sort of support network. Though we may attend church, most of us at a Sunday service don't really have time to connect and share our deep needs. So small groups provide that caring community.

They also provide a training ground for people to learn God's Word. We might think that people really know their Bibles, especially if they attend church, but the truth is, people are less and less familiar with scripture. So small groups provide a great learning environment where they can study together, ask questions, even tough questions and go out into their every day lives with some Biblical foundations to use as guidelines for raising families, responding to work situations and interacting with other people.

Finally, small groups provide a safe environment where people can share needs and hurts and pray for each other. Again, there just isn't time at a weekend service. People barely connect. And the larger the congregation, the more isolated they will feel, so small

groups are crucial for providing that sense of belonging. If people feel they belong and they matter, they will be more likely to linger and make the church their home for the long-haul. It's usually the people who aren't connect who become what I call members who are missing in action, who come for a while and then disappear.

6. What advice would you give a church that is seeking to launch small groups or may have a small group program that is struggling?

A. If you don't already have small groups, it's really important to get your core leadership to understand and buy into the concept. Launching groups without preparing the soil will make it more difficult your small group program to be successful. I'm not saying it won't be, but having your core leadership behind you is crucial. People need to see the benefits of the groups and you have to get everyone on the same page. It needs to be a campaign. I cover this in the book.

If a church already has groups but they only have a few and those are struggling, again, it is probably because the congregation doesn't understand the value of them. Before people will commit to something like a small group they have to see successes and what is in it for them. Having existing group members share some of their stories and how their groups have helped and impacted their lives is a great way to spur interest. I can't go into all the details of how right now, but I cover it well in my book.

7. Your book contains examples of successes and struggles from real life groups. Can you talk a little about those?

Some of it is taken from my own person experience with groups and others examples are from groups from a variety of churches. The challenges a group faces depends on that particular group. Every group is different. But there are still some things the crop up that many groups have to deal with. I have examples of some of these common things. Such as how groups have had to multiply after growing to large, stories of how groups have decided when to close down, discussions about problem group members, samples of what affinity groups are. (Those are groups that are specifically tied into a topics, such as recovery groups, craft groups, sports groups, etc.

8. Your book includes a trouble shooting section. Why did you feel that was important?

As much as we want to believe that all groups are healthy, sometimes they aren't or sometimes they might experience turmoil due to problems a specific group member has. Sometimes it is caused by needy group members who dominate a group. They can suck other group members dry to the point that the group members may even dread going. Or some members may talk too much. The more members you have, the more the chatty group members eat into the time that other might want to share.

There are a lot of other examples of group challenges that I cover. I suggest ways to deal with them.

9. Was there anything new you learned while writing this book?

Yes. I would have to say I have. I used enter into leading a group asking what I could give back to members. But now I have to say that I see that it is often reversed. Over the past few years I have benefited from group members who have blessed me and taught me, even though I was the group facilitator. So, it's important to remember that just because we might be in a leadership position, there is still plenty we can learn from our members who pour out their care and their wisdom on us. It can truly be a surprise blessing and it can be humbling.

10. What experience do you have as a small group leader?

A. Let's see. I have helped lead a young-marrieds group when we were newlyweds, a parenting teens group, several couples group. I helped multiply a couple's group and launch a new group from that group when one group got too big. And, more recently, I have facilitated a women's group. It was my first time doing a women's group and I absolutely love the dynamics. We are very close. I have also worked along-side my husband, Jeff who served in a discipleship pastor role, developing groups as well as group leader workshops.

11. You and your husband have recently left traditional church ministry to start a new ministry that might involve small groups. Can you talk a little about that?

A. Sure. Over the past few years we've noticed how people gravitate to coffee shops and we wondered what the big deal was. Why would someone pay four bucks for a cup of coffee. But then we began to see that it wasn't so much the coffee as it was the relaxed and intimate environment. People feel comfortable in coffee shops and you see them gathered informally in small groups. God kept speaking to us telling us that it is often easier to connect with people in the market place—such as coffee shops—than to try to bring them to church. Churches are knocking themselves out trying to come up with new ways to get people into their buildings. We felt that maybe it was time to shift and try to make the coffee shop the venue. So we've done something crazy.

We put our house on the market and sold it in order to start a coffee shop in Hickory, NC where we hope to connect with unchurched people and use it as a hub for launching small groups. We'll also be using music for outreach as well. Again, it's about the small, intimate environment where people feel safe to connect. We want to reach the people who would not come to church and we don't expect them to come to church.

We are having to raise our support for the ministry aspect and to have a place to live because we don't have enough after selling our house for both. Crazy. I know.

12. Where is *Successful Small Groups: From Concept to Practice* available to purchase?

A. Local Christian bookstores such as, amazon.com, christianbook.com, beaconhillsbooks.com or call Beacon Hill Press (816) 753-407.

13. Where can people learn more about your ministry, including your coffee shop ministry?

A. Thanks for asking. They can go to http://www.ministryinmotion.net/teena_stewart.html

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