

WRITTEN BY A SMALL GROUP

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SMALL GROUP

NEW EDITION

LEADERS' HANDBOOK

DEVELOPING
TRANSFORMATIONAL
COMMUNITIES



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1106

THE STORY OF A TRANSFORMATIONAL COMMUNITY

J. Alex Kirk

TWO WORDS describe my first two years of ministry experience: utter failure.

I graduated from the University of North Carolina, a traditional campus complete with all the trimmings: great basketball, a gorgeous Southern-style campus, and all the joys and tribulations of dorm life. My experiences as a student in our 250-person InterVarsity Christian Fellowship chapter shaped me in profound ways—particularly my understanding of the value and centrality of community. Small group Bible studies were the foundation of community for our chapter. Investing my life in an authentic and intentional community over the course of four years in small groups radically transformed my character and my understanding of the gospel. I was sold. As I wrapped up my senior year I applied to be a campus minister with InterVarsity.

I was given the task of working by myself at Virginia Commonwealth University, a commuter campus in Richmond, Virginia. VCU was a large, urban university known less for its football team (it had none) and more for its art department (complete with all *those* trimmings: multicolored hair, tattoos and piercings where I had never seen piercings before). I knew nothing about art—even my stick-figures were ugly. Nevertheless, more than one person told me that the VCU students were lucky to have me, and I was rather inclined to agree with them. I was sure that I was ready to plunge into my first assignment.

When I arrived at VCU, the InterVarsity chapter was a healthy and thriving fellowship of fifty students. By the end of my second year on campus, we were down to fifteen. I tried everything, but nothing could stop our free-fall. The chapter was dying and I had killed it. In my darker moments, I considered looking into whether or not Wal-Mart greeters received decent health benefits.

Frustrated was the word that described me best for much of those first two years. I struggled to understand the campus culture. As my feelings of failure grew, so, too, did my need for self-justification. I couldn't stop privately comparing my experience as a student at UNC with what I considered to be an inferior student experience at VCU. I was alternately full of despair and pride. Instead of learning to love the people to whom God had sent me, I was railing against them.

Student life on a commuter campus is fragmented. Over 80 percent of the VCU students did not live on campus in residence halls. On top of a full academic course load, many of them worked from ten to forty hours a week. On school days they got in their cars, drove to campus, parked, went to class, got back in their cars and left for the day. That was the extent of their interaction with life on campus.

Our chapter reflected the scattered student lifestyle. One of our small group leaders lived forty-five minutes from campus. I had learned as a student that authentic and vibrant community was the operating system of a healthy campus ministry—that apart from holy relationships there could be no holy outcomes. In my experience, small groups formed the heartbeat of this kind of community. But who had time for small groups, holy relationships or dynamic community at VCU?

Near the end of my second year I gave a desperate talk at our Thursday night “large” group. We looked at Mark 6, the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. One tiny detail recorded by Mark captured my imagination: “Then Jesus directed them [the disciples] to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass” (Mark 6:39). The people complied, and Jesus proceeded to miraculously feed them.

I proposed to the students who were returning the next year that we needed “a patch of green grass” to call our own. We needed a home base, a hub, a center. We needed our own patch of green grass in the middle of the city. I asked them to consider what it might look like if our community had a place where we might gather together to be fed by Jesus. I asked them to choose to make proximity to campus a priority in their living decisions for the next year.

Chris, Emmanuel, Joel and Steve—who made up the majority of our dwindling men’s small group Bible study—were in the room that evening. They had been talking about living together the next year in an off-campus apartment. The Lord captured their hearts with the vision of creating a patch of green grass for our chapter. They spent several weeks looking for apartments, dismissing anything further than walking distance from campus. Eventually, God gave them (and us) 1106 Grove Avenue, Apartment 1, half a block off campus. It even

had a decent-sized living room—big enough for us, anyway. So the next fall we moved our men's small group and our Thursday night gathering into the living room of 1106.

And that fall, from God-only-knows-where, people came.

Students met at 1106 for small group Bible studies during the week and gathered for worship on Thursday nights. On weekends people showed up unannounced and were welcomed. Impromptu parties popped up with great regularity. The Tuesday night men's small group morphed from a one-hour Bible study "meeting" to a Bible study plus after-party that ran into the early morning hours (most often involving video games). On Thursday nights we filled the living room, overflowed into the kitchen, down the hall and onto open window sills. From one small group, the Lord was rebuilding an entire community.

One weekend our patch of green grass hosted what became our annual root beer keg party. Much to my students' delight, it was broken up by the police (his exact words: "You guys are kind of loud . . . and I *know* that's not root beer!").

All year long "1106" in our vernacular meant a place that was home. But it was more than a place; it was a group of people, a transformational community, a glorious juxtaposition of activity and rest, of retreat and energy, of welcoming in and sending out. Chris, Emmanuel, Joel and Steve worked hard to make it that way. And as this small group of men worked to bless other people, they themselves were blessed. In their small group community they learned conflict, forgiveness, encouragement, accountability, long-suffering and the joy of being a part of God's mission in community. The guys at 1106 provided the physical space and the relational synergy to build a larger greenhouse of community

where many lives were changed. On a campus fraught with commuter-driven isolation, loneliness and fragmentation, the Spirit used this small group of men and a little patch of green grass to create holy ground and a holy community of his people. Our community popped with vibrancy, energy and welcome.

We ended that year having grown from fifteen to fifty-five. The next year we found a spot on campus to meet, and we grew from fifty-five to ninety. The next year we grew from ninety to 140. The growth went beyond numbers: addictions were broken; artists learned to use their gifts to bless others for the glory of God; people far from God were brought near to him. We built relationships with fraternities and sororities and partnered in service projects. We built relationships with cultural groups and participated in interracial dialogues. We painted ourselves silver and did ridiculous outreach events on campus. Later we helped launch a new ministry at VCU to reach out to a specific community on campus, and they saw tremendous growth and fruit. Dozens of other patches of green grass were planted, so that several generations of small group leaders would point back to 1106 as a critical part of their spiritual journey. All of this out of one small group of four guys.

I tore up the Wal-Mart application.

THE VISION FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL COMMUNITIES

From one small group of twelve disciples, Jesus launched a movement that changed the world. He's still changing the world through the legacy of that first small group, and he's doing it in part through the ministry of small groups. We want to invite you to join in this movement. We want to prepare you to lead a small group.

Here's what we mean when we say "small group":

A small group is a transformational community that studies the Bible, prays and participates in God's mission together for the purposes of God's transforming work.

Notice that the vision for small groups has transformational community at its center. Not cheap community. Not virtual community. Not what-we-happen-to-have-in-common-at-the-moment community. Not small-talk-in-passing community. Not community when it's convenient. *Transformational* community.

The commuter college campus is not the only place where we find lives devoid of genuine, life-giving relationships. From the cities to the suburbs to the most rural outposts (even and especially on traditional college campuses), there is a pandemic of loneliness and isolation in our culture. That the vast majority of the people in your church or campus or neighborhood or workplace are deeply lonely is one of the most crippling crises of our time.

We were created for community: it is part of what it means to be created in the image of a God-in-relationship: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. These are innately *relational* words. A father must have offspring; a son comes from parents; a spirit is inherent in something or someone. God *is* a relationship. And the world God made reflects his relational nature: grass and geese and planets and water are all specific combinations of relationships between atoms and protons and electrons. Humans likewise are a dizzying combination of relationships: organs and muscles and synapses firing. Our bodies are a web of relationships, and we were made for relationships. That is part of what it means to be made in God's image.

Without a life of healthy, interdependent relationships, we are ill-equipped to answer the most important questions in

life: Who am I? Who (or what) is God? What am I doing here? Apart from relationships that encourage and challenge us, we are barely alive.

Transformational community is thus the critical component of any thriving small group. Transformational communities have specific practices, disciplines that create the space for transformation to happen: these involve studying the Scriptures, praying and participating in God's redemptive mission together. We'll take a brief look at each of these disciplines now and unpack them in greater detail in future chapters.

STUDYING THE BIBLE (EVEN ECCLESIASTES)

Bethany was in trouble and she knew it. She had a significant, up-front role in our ministry. But spiritual questions had turned into spiritual struggles that had developed into full-blown spiritual depression. And now Bethany was deep in the pit of despair. Nothing made sense any more: academics, relationships, God.

Complicating the crisis was her Old Testament class. Every Tuesday and Thursday for an hour and fifteen minutes Bethany faced an all-out assault on the trustworthiness and reliability of the stories and the character of God that were presented in the Scriptures. Not only was she emotionally distraught, she was intellectually bewildered. Was it possible to know anything about God at all?

Few people in Bethany's life knew that the only time she could muster up the ability to read Scripture or to pray was when she was in front of three hundred people on Thursday nights. Bethany wasn't pretending that things were fine—actually, she was in near-panic mode. But she was unsure about what to do with her leadership role in the chapter or the vacuum in her life that used to be her soul.

I was one of the few who knew the full story of Bethany's struggles. In spite of our weekly meetings and my fervent prayers, I watched helplessly as she slipped further into the abyss. Eventually it became clear that a number of things had to change. One of those things was that Bethany needed to find a way to reconnect with God in the midst of her struggles.

Second semester, Bethany joined a small group that was just getting started. I was encouraged by her initiative until I heard what book of Scripture they were studying: Ecclesiastes.

In case you haven't been recreationally reading through Ecclesiastes recently, here's how the book *starts*:

The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem:

“Meaningless! Meaningless!”

says the Teacher.

“Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless.” (Ecclesiastes 1:1-2)

Now I had a new prayer for Bethany: *Please God, protect Bethany from Ecclesiastes.*

While Bethany faithfully attended the small group, the Lord gathered together a community to encourage and pray for her. They shared in her struggles, and together they wrestled with the Scriptures. At the end of the spring semester Bethany was still struggling, but in the midst of the struggle there were a few fresh experiences of clarity. And Ecclesiastes had been a part of it. “Ecclesiastes was good for me,” Bethany said as she continued to work through her questions. “I've had to wrestle with the realization that, maybe, apart from God everything *is* meaningless.”

Bethany's personal struggles and the challenges of her Old Testament class had disconnected her from God's larger, life-giving story—the only one whose arc and width are large

enough to gather up the details of our little stories and make sense of them all. Without God's story to help frame our personal stories, we're like a note wrenched out of a symphony—we still make noise, but without the beauty or purpose that was intended. We do not know God, and we do not know what he is about; consequently, we do not know who we are or what we are to be about.

A small group is a Scripture-centered community where people can regularly be oriented and reoriented as they find their place in the life-giving story of God. We create patches of green grass for people to be fed by the Scriptures, to learn this story as well as to live out of it.

I had to ask the Lord later for forgiveness about the whole “protect her from Ecclesiastes” thing.

A small group is a transformational community that *studies the Bible*, prays and participates in God's mission together for the purposes of God's transforming work.

PRAYER: INTERCEDING OVER TEETER-TOTTERS

After eight years as the InterVarsity staff worker at VCU, I was getting antsy. It felt like it was time to move on, but I wasn't quite sure where to go or what the next step would be. One night in the fall of my ninth year, I received a phone call offering me the opportunity go back to work with InterVarsity at my alma mater, the University of North Carolina.

To my old friends from college the opportunity sounded like a no-brainer, but I wasn't so sure. My wife, Kelly, and I were firmly entrenched in our church and community in Richmond. On top of that, the InterVarsity chapter at UNC was in significant transition. I had four wonderful years as a student there, and nine years after that to over-romanticize my experiences

and to conveniently forget all that was painful. What if I went back and things fell apart? What if I repeated my “utter-failure” experience? What if my second time around at UNC tainted my (admittedly) rose-colored-glasses-love for my alma mater? And most important: was God calling us to do this?

As Kelly and I discussed the decision, we’d teeter-totter back and forth. One day I would lean toward going and she would lean toward staying. The next day we’d switch places. After a couple of weeks we were both feeling teeter-totter queasiness. We needed to bring our small group into the decision-making process.

We asked our friends if we could hijack the group for one week to help us make the “do we stay or do we go” decision. We asked them to spend the week praying for us and listening to the Lord on our behalf. We invited them to jot down any questions, insights or thoughts they had as they prayed. At the end of the week we would gather for a time of prayer, question-asking and discernment together.

The next week I was on the “stay” end of the teeter-totter; Kelly was on the “go” end. For over an hour our small group asked us good questions and spent time praying over us. There was no definitive moment that night—no lightning bolt from the sky or angels dancing—but as we closed our time together in prayer, I realized that I had moved, ever so slightly, toward the “go” end of the teeter-totter.

Surprisingly, Kelly *hadn’t* moved. We were on the same side for the first time. Over the next couple of weeks our small group continued to pray alongside us. In the end this small group (comprising some of our closest friends in Richmond) blessed us to leave them as they affirmed the decision to go.

Four years later, the rose-colored glasses are a little beat up, but they’re still intact.

We live in a fallen world. One of the ramifications of the Fall is that we have to work a little harder to interact with God—to know his will, to hear his voice, to worship him as he deserves. Many times we equate worship only with singing, and prayer requests amount to little more than “Pray for my uncle’s sprained big toe.”

A small group becomes a transformational community in part when, as we intentionally build trust, we are able to push past relationships-as-usual to a place where we can be radically *known*. But the goal is not just to be known but to usher one another into the presence of Christ—to worship and intercede and listen together for his voice for ourselves, for one another, for our world.

Kelly and I were stuck as we tried to make a major life decision. As we submitted ourselves to the small group community he had given us and invited them to shape our decision, the Lord moved. This is nothing like relationships-as-usual. This is transformational community.

It didn’t just happen. It was cultivated through a feedback loop: our willingness to make our decision a communal prayer experience was the result of many months of our group genuinely praying for one another. At the same time, the small group’s willingness to engage with our decision continued to deepen our corporate commitment to genuinely pray for one another.

A small group is a transformational community that studies the Bible, *prays* and participates in God’s mission together for the purposes of God’s transforming work.

PARTICIPATING IN GOD’S MISSION

“I’ve got to admit, I was starting to wonder what they were

doing with all of this money.” Will was a fantastic small group leader for a first-year men’s small group. He was recounting his recent spring break trip to Jamaica. Adam, a member of Will’s small group, had gone the year before and recruited the small group to go back over spring break. They were doing basic community development and bridge-building: they were building homes and relationships in order to share their faith and connect people in the community to the local church.

“I was doing the math, and it just wasn’t adding up,” Will continued. “They not only seemed to be charging us a lot for the trip but they also wanted us to bring all this stuff: clothes and tools and duct tape . . . they had this whole list. I have to confess that I was getting a little grumpy.”

“And then I got there. And I met the people. And all I could think was, *What else can I give?*”

Mission, as we’ll use it in the context of discussing small groups, is a broad word describing any of God’s activities to bring restoration, hope, healing and change to our world. God’s mission throughout history is the work of restoration—the work of making things right, moving them toward their intended state. This includes reconciling people to himself (evangelism) and to one another. Restoration happens between individuals in ways that are structural, even cosmic in scope: nations, genders, races, socioeconomic groups, neighborhoods and humans to the rest of the created order.

The patch of green grass does not exist solely for itself. It is a place of gathering together, to be sure, but it is also a place of sending, of mobilizing. As God’s people, we are called not only to be reconciled to God but to be a part of his reconciling work in the world. Participating in God’s mission includes any restoring and reconciling activity—from service projects to evangelistic events. Crosscultural work like Will’s trip is a sub-

set of God's mission to bring the hope of the gospel wherever there is ruin in place of peace. The act of participating in God's mission is leaning into the reality that God is already at work. As we join that work we are finding our true calling in the world as Christ's ambassadors—we are living lives that matter.

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Our hope and prayer is that you will have stories of your own that sound much like the stories above: individual lives changed, communities transformed, the world changed. This book is about helping you to lead these types of small groups.

In order to better serve and equip you, we've gathered together a group of people from all over the country, made up of different ethnicities, ages, backgrounds and passions. We want this handbook to be as helpful and user-friendly in as many different contexts as possible. We will obviously be drawing from the small group ministries that we've seen on various college campuses, but all of us are sold enough on small groups that we've led them in church contexts as well.

We have broken up the responsibilities of a small group leader into seven categories resulting in eight chapters: gathering your small group, building community, studying the Scriptures, praying and worshiping, shepherding a flock, mobilizing for evangelism and service, and identifying and developing future leaders. Community is so central that we gave it twice the space, and a final chapter is included to help you grow and develop personally as a leader. Each of these chapters is a piece of the small group puzzle, and each one is de-

signed to stand alone so that you can reference it later.

The greatest need in the church today is for trained small group leaders. As you read this, people involved in small groups are being changed and becoming change agents all over the world. Jesus inaugurated small groups; the global church is the result of one. Several years ago one small group resurrected a small and dying Christian community on a little part of the world called Virginia Commonwealth University. The 1106 story is just one of the countless stories throughout history of God raising up transformational communities all over the world. But transformational communities don't just magically appear. The call is urgent and relentless: who will lead? Who will take a risk to step out and create a patch of green grass for people to gather together, to be met by the Lord?

We trust if you're reading this that you're heeding that call. We pray that this book equips you for the work ahead.