

4 Benefits of Planned Breaks in Small Group Ministry

By Andrew Mason*

Genesis 2:3 (NKJV) says, “Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it he rested from all his work which God had created and made.” If the Eternal Creator of the Universe rested from work then we finite human beings should make sure we rest. I believe the same is true for small group ministry and leaders as well. This is why I implement *planned breaks* into our small group ministry at our church.

I don't think there is anything inherently evil about having a continuous small group ministry. Some churches do it and do it successfully. I can share with you from experience that many people and even leaders have questioned me as to why we take breaks. They point out that it can break the momentum of the group. They also share concern about people who begin attending the church during a small group break. What if they're looking for a group to join and there isn't one there? What if they never get connected and stop attending the church before the next small group launch?

Those are valid concerns with genuine merit. My initial response is that I feel there isn't one model that addresses every need perfectly. What I have to ask myself is the following question: How do I help as many people as possible grow in relationship, discipleship and leadership through small groups in a way that is sustainable over the long haul? I have discovered that one of the best ways is to run three 10-12 week small group terms throughout the year with four to six week planned breaks in-between.

I believe there are four benefits to this approach.

1. Leadership Longevity

I expect a lot from my small group leaders. I want them to be praying every day for their group members, approaching two to four people to be assistant Leaders, meet one-on-one with assistant leaders for personal development, invite new people to their group, care for group members and be diligent in preparation for their small group meetings. I believe they will be able to serve as small group leaders for a longer duration if I build in “rest” for them. Whatever I can do to avoid burning out my lay leadership is of value to me.

2. Assimilating New People

Most people don't want to feel like they're showing up late to the party. They don't want to feel like they're the stranger in an established family. By having *planned breaks* it creates more small group launches throughout the year. Small group launches create a sense and, to a large degree, a reality, that I can join a small group for the first time and not have to catch up on the study.

Each time we approach a fresh launch of small groups we promote them vigorously for three weeks leading up to the launch. We discover that many people who have never attended a small group before will take the plunge when the groups are starting a new 10-12 week term.

3. Lower Commitment Level

I'm sure that sounds ungodly and carnal at first glance, but let me explain. If people feel like they have to commit to attending a group for an entire year, they may be less likely to ever try one out. However, if they know there's an easy on-and-off ramp, they will be less intimidated and more open to stepping out of their comfort zones and into someone's living room.

4. Ideal Windows for Group Multiplication

Setting goals for group multiplication is easier with *planned breaks*. When I instruct our group leaders to set group multiplication goals, I simply point them to consider one of three times a year we do new small group terms: spring (February through April), summer (June through mid-August) or fall (late September through early December). As I personally develop assistant leaders in my own group that I lead, I can point them to one of those three windows to consider branching out and leading their own group as well.

A new small group term is also an ideal time for a multiplied group to launch for the first time. New groups are very fragile on the front end and need to get off to a solid start of five to six people in attendance. Launching at the same time the church is promoting small groups is a perfect overlap. This is only possible because of *planned breaks*.

I also want to add that our groups are still encouraged to have communication and interaction during *planned breaks*. While a group may suspend the weekly gathering and Bible study, they can still contact each other, meet up for coffee one-on-one, plan a group fellowship activity or holiday party. Many times, it's during the *planned breaks* that we see the organic fruit of genuine biblical community because groups are doing life together without any church programming guiding it.

In conclusion, consider the following verse from Leviticus 25:3-5 (NKJV), "*Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather its fruit; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a sabbath to the Lord. You shall neither sow your field nor prune your vineyard. What grows of its own accord of your harvest you shall not reap, nor gather the grapes of your untended vine, for it is a year of rest for the land.*" The principle that God was giving the Hebrew farmers was that they could produce more in **6 years of work + 1 year of rest + God** than they could with **7 years of work – (minus) rest – (minus) God**. In other words, the land needed rest in order to maintain its productivity and God would add his favor upon it when it was given that needed rest. When we take rests as a small group ministry, I believe God blesses us, our leaders and the quality of our small group ministry.

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