



## DEFINE YOUR MISSION BEFORE REPLACING MEMBERS

BY

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Your small group has delighted in the same people for two years. You've rejoiced together and cried together. You've prayed for kids and parents, ministries and jobs—and you've seen answers. You couldn't ask for a better group. But now one couple is moving out of state and another just feels called to move on. Your group is reeling with emotions as the impact of these losses sets in.

In the life cycle of small groups, the reality is that people come and people go. There are many reasons for this, but to maintain vitality in your group, you may—or may not—want to replace departing members. But how? And why? This is a place where leaders often panic and make serious mistakes.

In the ancient Roman Empire, it was said, "All roads lead to Rome." In small groups, all roads lead to *mission*. A group's mission is quite simply its purpose or reason for existence. It is, in fact, your roadmap. How can you as a leader even think about adding people to your group until you know what your group is intended to accomplish?

The departure of these members gives you a wonderful opportunity to make sure the group is on track with what it was originally designed to accomplish, or perhaps with what the members want it to be now. So sit down with the remaining members and decide what kind of group you've had and if that's the type of group you want to continue. This is a good time to schedule a potluck and discussion. Those leaving don't need to be at this meeting, and in fact, it may be better not to have their influence. This is a decision that needs to be made by those remaining.

At this meeting, the members can discuss the group's mission. Are they meeting primarily for discipleship, or for relationship? Does your group do Bible study by "sprinkling," or by "immersion?" Do they have a social action, or a ministry goal? Do they want to evangelize or harmonize? Do they want to have an open

or a closed group? Do they intend to multiply in a year or two or stay together until death do us part? Has the mission changed since the group formed?

Members can also discuss what they've liked and disliked about the existing group. Did it move too quickly or too slowly? Did each member feel included and valued? Were there problems they don't want to add to or increase, such as childcare, meeting time conflicts, or location constraints?

Realize that as you bring in new people, the group dynamics will change. Even if you've developed a group with depth and openness, people will most likely move back to superficial discussions, at least until the new people can be tested and integrated. This process can be fairly rapid, or it can take a year or more to get back to the present level of intimacy. After an honest discussion, you may decide that your group isn't at a place in its life cycle where you want to risk this. But be sure that there's a good group purpose if you decide not to replace members. The key is, don't ignore the need to make a decision, and don't stay smaller just because it's more comfortable. For example, a couple recently left the group I'm in. However, after weighing our options, we decided that we've just begun to deal openly about some deep personal issues, and since the mission of our group is deep growth, we didn't want to risk adding people right now. We'll reevaluate in a year or so.

Once the group reaches consensus, which may take more than one meeting, it's helpful to write up the agreement as a group covenant. Members can sign it before inviting people in, or when the new group starts.

Defining your mission is critical to give members confidence that this group is one they want to invest their time and energy in. When the group as a whole defines its mission and decides to add or not to add, members feel that their opinions count. They're more likely to have a sense of ownership in the success of the group. And that will make your life as a leader much easier.

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