



The State of Small Groups in the Church

Staying Connected During
the Pandemic and Beyond

*Featuring Insights From Bill Search and Small
Group Leaders From Around North America*




Introduction

The year 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic forced dramatic changes in nearly all aspects of life, and church is no exception. With health uncertainties, new operating restrictions, and full lockdowns in some regions, churches were forced to pivot to new ways of operating and serving their members. These new strategies have had varying degrees of success, and many churches are still trying to find the right formula that works for them.

Despite attempts to move services online, churches around the world felt the impact of the epidemic with attendance numbers falling across the spring and summer of 2020. According to a Pew Research study in July 2020, 17% of people who had regularly attended worship before COVID-19 had not attended worship in any way, virtual or in person, in the month prior.¹ Interviews with pastors indicated that small group attendance has been similarly affected.

1. "Americans Oppose Religious Exemptions From Coronavirus-Related Restrictions" Pew Research Center, Washington D.C. Aug. 7, 2020 https://www.pewforum.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2020/08/F_08.07.20_coronavirus_religious_services.FULL_REPORT.pdf



This report will establish best practices for online small group ministry.

RightNow Media partners with more than 20,000 churches across the world to provide video Bible study content. Through our daily interactions with pastors, small group leaders, and other ministry leaders, we identified a felt need in the global church for resources and strategies to keep small groups connected during this time of social distancing. This report on the state of small groups will share successful strategies that churches have used in the pandemic, establish tips and best practices for online small group ministry, and attempt to predict what effects this unique time will have on small groups in the future.

Methodology

RightNow Media conducted interviews of several pastors and small group experts from varying locations across North America, including Bill Search, author of *The Essential Guide for Small Group Leaders*. In addition, RightNow Media's internal viewership data were used to illustrate usage of online resources in small group settings. The interviews and internal data were supplemented by secondary research from other organizations that have conducted surveys of pastors such as Barna Group, Lifeway, and other similar sources.

The Effects of COVID-19 On Small Groups

The Necessity of Jumping into the Digital Age

According to a Barna survey fielded in April 2020, 73% of pastors said that they were assessing the effectiveness of their church's online and digital presence. More than half (55%) said their church staff is developing new strategies and resources to encourage connectedness among the members of their church.² Leaders from churches interviewed remarked that in at least one way the COVID-19 epidemic had forced their church to change and upgrade their operations in order to reach people during their shutdowns.



Regardless of church size, nearly all churches now have the equipment and at least some experience using the tools to broadcast online and stream lessons and services. Almost universally leaders noted that despite the negative consequences of the pandemic, being forced to learn how to stream lessons, sermons, and training for leaders online was going to be a positive force in their ministries moving forward.



For instance, pastors were surprised to realize their potential global reach as a result of this digital shift. Churches can now reach anyone in the world with an internet connection, and pastors shared that international attendees have started joining their services and virtual small groups. Interestingly, churches struggling to maintain their local communities now have international reach and are impacting the global church. However, this silver lining does not diminish the primary call of pastors to their local congregations.

2. "Americans Oppose Religious Exemptions From Coronavirus- Related Restrictions" Pew Research Center, Washington D.C. Aug. 7, 2020 https://www.pewforum.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2020/08/F_08.07.20_coronavirus_religious_services_FULL_REPORT.pdf

A Time to Rethink: Re-orienting Priorities Based on People

Church leaders emphasized that while transition may have been difficult, the pandemic allowed them the time to take a step back to reassess their operations and reorient their ministries.

“The pandemic really helped us get back to the heart of the true mission of the church and focusing on people with a disciples-making-disciples model!” - Jamie Davis, Associate Groups Pastor of Faith Promise Church (TN)

While social distancing has made gathering in larger groups more difficult, it has had slightly less of an impact on one-on-one disciple-making relationships. During this season, some Christians are increasingly turning back to small meetings of three or fewer, meeting in coffee shops, parks, or in people’s homes both in lieu of and in addition to meeting in online larger groups. These face-to-face meetings have been a welcome solution for those who find they aren’t engaged in online small groups in the same way they are in-person.



Online and Hybrid Small Groups: Hits, Misses, and Zoom Fatigue

Though online small groups existed before 2020, this year has been the first time most churchgoers have experienced one themselves. Most pastors reported that while the initial response to Zoom small groups was positive, there was a decline in membership and participation as group members grew tired of online meetings. While some online small groups are still just as active now as they were during the beginning of the pandemic, the majority of groups are increasingly looking for ways to meet in person. This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as “Zoom fatigue,” and church leaders most often attributed it to the following factors →

300 Million

Zoom’s daily meeting participants grew from 10 million in December 2019 to more than 300 million in April 2020.

Source: <https://blog.zoom.us/90-day-security-plan-progress-report-april-22/>

Reasons for Zoom Fatigue

Overuse

1 Since people are forced to use video conferencing in so many areas of their lives, it has made it more difficult to get them back online for small group gatherings.

Technical Problems

2 Technological barriers prevent some members from being able to fully embrace online groups.

External Problems

3 Social isolation, depression, fears about finances, and many other issues have caused some people to retreat from any kind of group experience.

Missing Pieces

4 The lack of physical touch, the lack of ability to read body language, and other physical elements can make attendees feel like important aspects of small group meetings are missing.



These success stories highlight new ways members can experience community through online small groups.

The Good News

The good news is that some of these problems may be alleviated in the future when the pandemic is past. When small group members aren't constantly using video conferencing throughout the day for work and personal life, and when some of the external problems like social isolation and fears about finances subside, online groups may be seen as a more appealing option for small group gatherings. And as video conferencing tools are used more frequently, technical mastery over the platforms and improving "Zoom etiquette" may also remove barriers to success. For every story about small group leaders dissatisfied with virtual options, we found encouraging stories about how online small groups were beneficial for members who would otherwise be unable to meet in person.

When Online Small Groups Work Best— Beyond the Pandemic

- For college students to connect even when they're home for holiday breaks
- For working professionals to meet during short lunch breaks at work
- For parents of young children to find connection amidst a busy schedule
- For elderly church members who may have trouble making it to church
- For small groups that usually meet in-person but are unable to do so due to inclement weather or other reasons

Tips for Running a Successful Online Small Group

The biggest question raised by church leaders in our interviews was, “How do I run a successful online small group?” While many church leaders noted successful aspects of their online groups, the prevailing sentiment seemed to be that virtual small groups are still a puzzle to be solved. To help shed light on what makes an online small group successful, RightNow Media compiled the helpful tips mentioned by pastors and small group leaders during interviews. The answers boiled down to four main ideas.



1. Form and maintain connections outside the small group.

Since personal connection is much more difficult virtually, how can church and small group leaders overcome personal connection problems? Most pastors interviewed suggested that effective community actually takes place outside the small group sessions.

“If your small group, in person or not, only exists as a small group for one or two hours every week or every other week, you’re probably not going to have a great group experience. But if your group is texting, emailing, interacting on social media, having phone calls, and occasionally meeting up in person, the odds are when your group does get together in that two-hour block, there’s far more relationship connectivity.”

- Bill Search, Author and Executive Pastor of Ministries at Crossings Community Church (OK)

2. Properly resource, train, and trust your leaders.

Small group leaders are key to the success of any small group, and church leaders need to make sure they are setting up their small group leaders for success. Churches with comprehensive guidelines on planning and conducting small group meetings lead to more effective groups and to leaders who are not confused or overwhelmed.

It is vital to any small group to have trained leaders. Churches were forced to move quickly during the pandemic to train small group leaders through live video sessions and/or pre-recorded video training. Many pastors noted the shift from online to virtual training would likely be permanent due to the comparative ease of training leaders.

Group leaders also need curriculum and resources to lead their groups well. Church leaders can support their small group leaders by making sure they are properly resourced with curriculum and discussion questions from resources like RightNow Media, LifeWay, or other similar organizations. Establishing and maintaining clear lines of communication between small group leaders and the church staff help them become more agile and able to tackle potential problems together.

“At the end of the day, you can have the best systems and you can have the best teachers, but if you don’t have strong spiritual leaders that are providing discipleship for them then, in a way, it’s all for nothing.”

- Luke Bilberry, Family Ministry
Pastor of Chapel Pointe (MI)





“We have tried to adopt a ‘less is more’ approach with our life group leadership by leading shorter sessions and making sure to always end on time. This helps create the expectation that this is an hour. It’s going to be full of good stuff, but when that hour is done, the time is done. It’s better to have people leaving wanting more than feeling like they had enough.”

- Kyle Nix, Life Groups Pastor
of Woodlands Church (TX)

3. Keep it short. Keep it tight. Keep it consistent.

Since the medium of the meeting is different with a virtual group, small group leaders may consider adjusting the format to better fit the online screen. The most necessary adjustment is the length of meetings. While there isn’t necessarily a perfect amount of time that applies to all groups, several of the small groups that church leaders said had real success online were shorter than an hour.

Pastors overseeing successful online small group ministries also advised having smaller, tight-knit groups. Several pastors we spoke with said they were either considering or actively in the process of reorganizing their small groups. A smaller group has several benefits over a larger one: scheduling is easier; forming tight, deeper disciple-making relationships is easier; and it increases the likelihood that all members are able to participate.

Church leaders also said each small group member should have a fairly good idea of what to expect when they show up for their meeting. Adequate communication between small group leaders and small group members ensures that each member of a group has the right expectations. Also, making sure to consistently begin and end on time is one of the best ways to cut down on fatigue and ensure that members are staying engaged.



4. Remember the fundamentals of a good small group.

Many of the principles and skills that go into making an in-person small group successful are also applicable in an online setting. Outside of technology and format changes, the principles of a good small group remain the same:

- Ask great questions that promote deep discussion.
- Keep your meetings focused on what the Bible has to say.
- Encourage all group members to share and participate.

For a more extensive guide on the fundamentals of leading a small group Bible study, in person or online, watch [*6 Tips for a Great Small Group*](#), a video series by Bill Search, available exclusively on RightNow Media.

“One of the biggest things I really push our connection group leaders to do is to care as much as they can for their people. So it’s reaching out to a family once a week just saying, ‘How can I pray for you?’ Those kind of things. Make sure you’re taking care of your people in whatever way, shape, or form that takes.”

- Tyler Van Voorst, Connections
Pastor at Good News Church (SD)



How Do Online Small Groups Fit into the Bigger Church Picture?

Church leaders overwhelmingly confirmed that there would be a place for virtual groups going forward. Now that most of the world has been exposed to virtual gatherings in some capacity, people are no longer afraid of using the technology. Some church leaders have even noted that their church's small groups may continue to meet online because of its convenience. Because of this ease of use, online small groups are also able to provide an initial entry into church community for many people. The logistical issues of childcare and travel time become nonfactors, making the online medium an easier way for busy people to engage with their church. Primarily, though, many pastors and small group leaders see virtual groups as either a niche option for engaging members who have difficulty meeting in person or as a backup plan for groups that temporarily can't gather together.

But church leaders shouldn't be bracing for a permanent shift to online groups. While COVID-19 may have lasting impacts on churches and small groups, this is only a temporary season. People will eventually return to physical gatherings, if they haven't already.

Utilizing virtual tools to take small groups online has proven to be a creative solution for an unprecedented challenge, and there are clearly postpandemic situations where they can continue to be used. In addition, this time has reminded pastors of the church's core purpose of ministering to people—and possibly on a much larger scale.

Christians and non-Christians alike are searching for hope, comfort, and connection in ways they haven't before. The church now has an unprecedented opportunity to share the love and hope of Christ to the world. Online small groups and digital discipleship tools have proven to play a useful role in helping to accomplish this mission now and in the years to come.

RightNow Media's Role in Serving Small Groups

THROUGH CONTENT

RightNow Media believes the mission of the church matters. We're here to serve the church. We want to see disciples of Jesus loving God and loving others whether in church, in the workplace, or at home. So we provide Christians across the globe with resources that will inspire them to champion the mission Jesus gave to his people: making disciples of all nations.

RightNow Media is the world's largest customizable library of biblical video resources for every person in your church or ministry. Hear from trusted pastors and Christian leaders like Francis Chan, Jennie Allen, Matt Chandler, Dr. Tony Evans, and more. These videos and their accompanying small group study guides can be used to resource your small group leaders, empowering them to lead their groups. RightNow Media also has a large selection of training courses to teach pastors and small group leaders how to lead Bible studies and how to equip new leaders in the church.

By providing your ministry with access to this streaming library of more than 20,000 videos, you can equip and disciple your people every day of the week. RightNow Media content can be watched on all major streaming devices so everyone in your church can deepen their faith anytime, anywhere. In addition to studies on books of the Bible, there are personal care resources available on topics like marriage, parenting, personal finances, and mental health, plus a library just for kids with hundreds of entertaining faith-based shows.



RightNow Media's Role in Serving Small Groups

THROUGH CONNECTIONS

As online small groups become an increasingly important in the church, RightNow Media also offers a virtual small groups platform to its users. Staying connected to friends, family, and small groups has never been easier with our RightNow Media Groups feature, used by thousands of people each month. One person can play, pause, and rewind videos for the entire group, while everyone watches along together and discusses the video face-to-face. Use the groups feature to learn, encourage one another, and grow in your faith.



The RightNow Media Groups Feature



Online Small Groups

Watch a series together on the RightNow Media groups feature then discuss the content with your small group.



Counseling Sessions

Use this feature for counseling sessions with individuals and married couples.



Staff Training

Leaders can watch a study together for church staff meetings.



Family Connections

Families can use this feature to see one another and connect over encouraging content.

Learn more about how RightNow Media can help you equip and disciple to your people every day of the week. Schedule your free demo of the platform today!

www.rightnowmedia.org

(972) 560-4000