

## A Relational Model of Connection Taken from DRIVE 08 article

I talk to churches weekly who have embraced the model of small groups but aren't exactly sure how to plug their attendees into them. It's an often daunting and time-consuming process and they are eager to find a streamlined, effective way of moving their group seekers into community groups. In the past this was the case for us too.

Like many of the churches I speak with, we plugged people into groups by what we called "spreadsheet assimilation." We would get a card of interest from a group seeker, enter them onto a spreadsheet and then act as a liaison between the seeker and the group leader seeking members, going back and forth between the two, trying our best to determine if they would be a good match. What we found though was that while we expended mass amounts of time and energy into the process, our matchmaking efforts was largely fruitless and even more significant, the longevity of the group suffered greatly. What was the problem? Why was this happening? We were working all the time, being diligent to match the preferences of the group seeker to the group leader as to what day, time, and area of town they wanted to meet – even sometimes down to the study they wanted, yet people were not getting connected. We were frustrated and exhausted from the endless back and forth of acting as the middleman and getting minimal results. Group seekers and leaders oftentimes didn't get back to us in a timely fashion. We would have to send numerous emails and make several phone calls sometimes to get responses to simple questions. It seemed sometimes that we cared more than they did. But weren't they the ones that wanted a group? After all, they were the ones that sent in a card seeking one in the first place. We came to realize the problem was there was no initial relational connection between the group seekers and group leaders.

About eight years ago, GroupLink was created. GroupLink is a two-hour even where people can meet and connect with others in their area of town and stage of life to start a community group. GroupLink met two needs. One, we needed a simple way to move our thousands of attendees on Sunday mornings into small groups. Even if our "spreadsheet assimilation" had been effective, we knew that at the rate the church was growing, there was no way it would be sustainable long term. Secondly, we wanted a way for group seekers and group leaders to meet face to face and take ownership of their connection. We believed that if they could talk to each other and make an initial connection, that they would be set-up for greater success in their group experience and there would be a sense of not wanting to let the other down – that hopefully they would at least come to the first meeting and stick through the initial 8 week starter period. There is something about having a face-to-face conversation with someone that creates a sense of ownership and responsibility and a very different kind of connection. We realized that it was one that couldn't have happened in our former method of assimilation. There were no faces then. There were no initial conversations. It made it easier to not follow-through with the commitment or to respond to an email.

When people make the effort to come to GroupLink, we know they are ready and committed to joining a group. It is easy to fill out a card on Sunday morning indicating interest in joining a group. It is not easy for many to come to an event with hundreds of people they don't know, make themselves vulnerable and meet others to form a community group. This was a moment of clarity for us. The level of commitment initially matches the level of commitment long term.

Eighty-five percent of groups formed through GroupLink continue into a full-blown community group after the initial eight-week starter period. It is both effective and successful. Instead of acting as a middleman in the connection process, our staff now acts as more of a facilitator in a "hands-off" approach allowing people to naturally connect as we watch God bring groups together. By focusing on a relational model of connection our group seekers are set-up for a better group experience which ultimately leads to the life change we know can happen in the context of a community group.