

As Pastor of Life Groups, Todd Elliot knew the relational and spiritual benefits that community would bring to Beach Church's members. This South Carolina community church hosted a broad mix of people and a healthy weekend attendance of 1,200 adults—from young vacationing families to retirees. There was just one problem. Despite several attempts to create a successful groups culture, Beach Church Life Groups felt more artificial and awkward and less natural and relational.

Past efforts in creating authentic groups had left Todd asking, *Can there be anything organic about structured assimilation?*

In his search for a solution, he came across *Creating Community – 5 Keys to Building a Small Group Culture*. After reading it, he decided that North Point's groups model was worth investigating further. Through North Point's website, Todd found a link to [Inside North Point](#), where he found a wealth of resources for church leaders interested in the nuts and bolts of North Point Ministries. In his research Todd discovered the GroupLink Starter Kit, a do-it-yourself guide to recreating GroupLink, a 2-hour event where people connect with others in their same stage of life and area of town to form community groups.

While Inside North Point provides a great deal of information and the kit contains a 12-minute video featuring actual footage from a GroupLink event hosted at North Point Community Church, there was one burning question that prevented Todd from purchasing the kit. *Does it really work?*

If hosting a two-hour event was enough to create organic assimilation of small groups, Todd needed to see this for himself.

As it happened, North Point Community Church was about to host its annual Fall GroupLink event for married couples. Todd packed up his church van along with several staff members and made the trek from Myrtle Beach to Alpharetta, Ga.

Arriving several hours before the event, Todd and team entered the church to find Director of Assimilation Jenny Boyett, along with her team of staff and volunteers, knee-deep in preparation for the evening's festivities. Taking full advantage of this opportunity, Todd watched, learned, and listened as the night unfolded, paying close attention for solutions that could be applied to Beach Church's wanting groups ministry.

Common Group Life Challenges

Historically, Beach Church's groups program faced two common hurdles—sign up and retention. Like North Point, Beach Church utilized Sunday bulletins, stage announcements, and occasional plugs from the pulpit to promote group life. But only 50% of the folks that signed up to attend a LifeLink event actually attended. More challenging still was the fact that of the 50% who attended the assimilation event, only half of those folks stuck it out with their small group.

These are not unique challenges. We talk to many church leaders who struggle with the same issues. To address these issues amongst our own church family, Andy spends one Sunday each year emphasizing the importance of community to our attendees. That [sermon](#) takes place two weeks before the annual Fall GroupLink event. This encouragement, coupled with pre-service videos, table signups, and mentions in the bulletin, helps generate a buzz across North Point Ministries' three campuses.

Retention is a different beast. No amount of event preparation or planning will influence whether group members commit to long-term participation. However, at North Point, 91% of GroupLink married participants commit beyond the 8-week courting phase. Why?

It's All in the Assimilation

One of the most difficult aspects of organic community is the actual formation of groups. For many group ministry directors like Todd Elliot, there is a tendency to *over-prepare* through meticulous planning and event structure. Organizing groups by neighborhood, stage of life, or area of town, looks great...on paper. In an effort to simplify the process for hesitant group participants, Beach Church attempted a pre-placement model, where folks were placed in groups based on a certain criteria—such as neighborhood—prior to the event. In this case, LifeLink became a “get to know your group” kind of event instead of a place where relational connections were made.

What Todd found was that placing people together based on one-dimensional information was negatively impacting the program's retention rate. Just because two couples lived in the same community did not necessarily mean they were a perfect fit for a life group.

So as Todd sat in the West Auditorium of North Point Community Church watching 540 married people mingle by area of town, he was looking for one thing—the secret to assimilation.

Enter the assimilators.

At each GroupLink event, a team of assimilators works the room—carefully matching people based on observations like age, stage of life, or which night of the week the couple wants to meet. The assimilator's job is to get to know two or three group leaders prior to the event and then use that knowledge to help group seekers navigate the mingling period in search of “natural” connections. This eliminates *some* of the pressure created by first impressions. “The role of assimilator is crucial to the success of GroupLink. Without these volunteers, people who understand their role and ultimately the goal and mission of community within our organization, this process would not succeed,” said Jenny Boyett.

In an effort to avoid on-site assimilation challenges, it is tempting to ‘over-structure’ both the process and the event. By factoring out people's natural attraction (or lack there of) you essentially quash the organic nature of group assimilation. In doing that, any hope of group retention is lost. And there's one other thing that North Point's groups model relies

on—divine intervention. “There *is* a great deal of planning involved, but ultimately we leave a lot of room for God in the process,” said Boyett.

So Todd watched as 56 groups were formed with the help of North Point’s assimilation team. Renewed and energized, Todd and his team returned to Myrtle Beach with vision for community in coastal Carolina.

In January of 2009, Todd, along with a part-time staff member and one volunteer, organized its latest GroupLink-inspired event—called LifeLink. To generate a buzz among its 1,200 attendees, Todd used stage announcements, bulletin inserts, and a sign up table on Sunday. In addition to the GroupLink Starter Kit, Beach Church utilized some of North Point’s GroupLink promotional pre-service videos—great for poking fun at the assimilation process yet highlighting the very rewarding nature of community.

The Results

Ninety folks registered; sixty attended. Of those who came to the event, 90% were brand new to community. By the end of the evening, seekers felt like connections were being made, leaders were praying with their new group members, and everyone was encouraged by seeing first-hand the divine formation of 10 new community groups.

Better but Not Perfect

“There are inherent challenges in this process. You will always have people who are uncomfortable in environments like this. Putting introverts and extroverts in the same room together and asking them to open up and communicate with perfect strangers isn’t easy, and it may not be for everyone. But we have taken the first few steps in creating a successful small group culture at Beach Church,” said Elliot.

Internal Use Only