

# Rethink Sunday School & Small Groups

*MINISTRY IN A POST-COVID WORLD*

## 1 Why COVID-19 Has Impacted Sunday School & Small Groups

The heartbeat and primary connection point of most churches flows from the Sunday School or small group ministry. So often, the component that really enables individuals and families to stay connected to the church is their ability to find fellowship with other believers. In the midst of COVID-19, many churches pivoted their ministry and moved their group life online, fairly quickly. In many of these cases, churches were able to see a higher level of engagement initially from these groups. Over time, though, the novelty of this has worn off and the numbers have settled somewhat. However, what the pandemic has shown is that groups can develop alternative means to gathering. The future of group life and possibly even new group creation may not begin in actual personal attendance.

The argument that the scattered church really is able to gather without being in the same place is gaining momentum in some circles. There is a generation of young believers who see digital communication as normative; but, meeting and interacting with people face-to-face can never truly be replaced with screens. However, these coming generations work from home, video chat with family regularly and even engage their doctor through an app. As we look to the future, not knowing the full effect of COVID-19, groups must think outside their normal boxes more and more to reach and commune with new generations. The use of digital tools have opened the door for further and deeper weekly interaction for those who want to connect beyond their scheduled group time. It also may be that groups maintain some element of online components moving forward to enable those who, for one reason or another, are unable to attend any given week. Meeting without leaving home provides a huge plus for the family on the go. The foundation of group life remains the same, but the form may look very different in the years to come.

## 2 Practical Guidance

**Group Depth** - It's possible many churches will return to groups as they were before the pandemic. However, some churches have allowed their Sunday School or small groups to meet at different times other than Sunday morning in order to make it more convenient during this crisis. In truth, some of these groups have preferred this interaction and engendered a deeper connection with their class. It has been very often argued that the screen hinders vulnerability, but in reality, many of the next generation have grown up with screens. Good or bad, many are seeing the screen as a medium of protection allowing for more vulnerability than face-to-face interaction. As we work to reach Millennials and Generation Z, it is very possible that this new church model may help people become spiritually connected to a group of caring people IF the leadership of the group can develop a real sense of Biblical community.

**Group Make-up** - As people return to physical church gatherings in many congregations, the next step will entail the return of Sunday School and/or small groups. These may not happen all at once, but the hope is for churches to allow their groups to begin to reconnect in person. That being said, for many classes, the vulnerable, the uncertain and those with young children may not immediately return. Some

may not return for some time. This is not necessarily going to be the case in regions with lower confirmed COVID-19 infections, but it will be the case in urban communities and in places that have seen higher infection rates. This will change the make-up of a portion of these groups when they gather. There is a good probability that many see a long-term reduction in physical numbers for their groups. Classes may need to stay online for the time being. It is possible that many groups will cease to exist for a period of time altogether. The impact of this on each church will be varied, but it goes without saying that churches will have to develop new leaders, provide better training, adapt class sizes and allow for some fluctuation of group membership. Staying connected to individuals in these classes is of the utmost importance due to the possible isolation and struggle that many will face without the physical presence of their Sunday School or small group.

**Group Format** - What once required a specific location and time, now can be accomplished in our homes. This has enabled an hour-long discipleship group to be just that—an hour. Individuals who could not meet a particular week due to family illness or other contributing factors now have an alternative option at home. Churches could even potentially double the number of their groups on campus by having them share space by meeting every other week in the building and the alternate week online. These new technologies and developments have allowed churches the chance to think progressively about how groups interact and are designed.

### **3 Creating Movement**

**Think Engagement** - One idea is to think less about the group structure and more about the level of engagement. For years, many have moved to small groups off campus looking for the freedom to meet in homes or at alternative times. The problem has been that those groups have always seen a drop in the numbers coming and connecting. There is good reason for this. The church has provided an easy way for families to worship and connect in one basic time slot. When they come and connect in groups and then worship as the body, together, several key aspects of spiritual development can be accomplished at once. Another struggle for small groups has been the difficulty of providing ministry and care for children in the home. Moving to all digital groups may be a solution for some churches and it may be very helpful in the midst of the pandemic. Still, the value of face-to-face connection cannot be underestimated. Being in the same room at the same time really helps people connect. However, if there is one thing we have learned through all this, groups can meet on the church campus, at another location, or online. Many groups will begin to value a hybrid approach in the future.

**Think Care** - Ultimately, a vital component of a small group or Sunday School class is the care group. This subcategory of the entire gathering allows individuals to connect and not be lost in the class. Care groups focus more on the personal needs of the individuals and families in the group. Churches have the opportunity through many of these new digital tools to help their people press into these relationships even further. Care groups can meet as a group in small, gender-based cohorts or even one-on-one to ensure that people are doing well. Mental and spiritual health are vital ministries of the church, especially in this difficult season. Everyone must be intentional about helping churches reach their people in the most personal ways possible. The chance to reach out to someone who has a need, is disconnected or, even worse, is struggling deeply is an invaluable resource churches must provide.

**Think New Leaders** - One of the most important and valuable aspects in any group is the necessity to create new units. When groups multiply, they reach more people. In these uncertain times, one thing classes can do is spend time raising up new leaders. For example, teachers can invest in their apprentices, providing them opportunities to teach all or parts of an online lesson. Because of the use of online technology, people are more willing to allow someone who is not as polished to help lead and teach. This will also allow for more feedback between lessons for teachers to assist these budding teachers. This is also true of other volunteer positions for classes as well. Now is the time to reach out and draw in more leaders and volunteers and train them.

## 4 Personalizing Discipleship & Groups

- Speak with your Sunday School/group leaders to see how things have been going in their online format. Have they gained or lost momentum?
- Help Sunday School/group leaders identify apprentices for each class.
- Help classes/groups develop a plan to begin, or continue, to raise up those that will become leaders for new units to be developed (we can help with that plan if needed).
- Make sure that groups are staying connected and that no one is lost. Make sure every group has a plan to stay regularly connected to the members of their group, and help set up care groups for each class, as needed.
- Develop an ongoing training plan for volunteers and leaders to continue to grow and develop as leaders.

## 5 Connect With Us

Do you have questions or need resources? If so, we are a phone call away. Check us out at [www.louisianabaptists.org](http://www.louisianabaptists.org). Or, contact one of us directly:

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*NOTE: Adapted from an article written by Lance Crowell and Mark Yoakum of the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention.*