

# Barriers to Leading Small Groups among Generation Z and Younger Millennials: An Exploratory Factor Analysis and Implications for Recruitment and Training

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## Abstract

Small groups are an essential aspect of contemporary churches, playing an important role in community building, support, spiritual formation, and accountability. However, their number and impact are often limited due to a lack of people willing to lead a small group, a problem faced by each new generation. This exploratory study of 217 young adults in church small groups (median age = 24.0 years), including both

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leaders and non-leaders of small groups, examines potential barriers to small group leadership. An exploratory factor analysis found six barriers: Desire to lead a small group, Skills in group dynamics, Desire to positively influence others, Social support, Biblical foundations, and Stability. The hypothesis that some barriers would be greater than others was supported: Stability and Desire to lead a small group were the greatest barriers whereas Desire to positively influence others was the lowest. The hypothesis that these barriers would be greater for non-leaders of small groups than for leaders of small groups was supported for all six barriers. The difference between leaders and non-leaders was largest for Desire to lead a small group, Skills in group dynamics, Social support, and especially Biblical foundations. These results lead to important insights for recruiting and training Generation Z and younger Millennials to be small group leaders.

### **Keywords**

Small groups, leadership training, Christian education, group dynamics, Generation Z, young adults, church

## **Introduction**

Small groups play an essential role in contemporary American churches, but the shortage of capable and willing leaders to lead such groups may hinder a church from developing new groups (Atkinson & Rose, 2020; Rynsburger & Lamport, 2008; Wuthnow, 1994b). The purpose of this study is to explore possible barriers to small group leadership, especially among Generation Z and younger Millennials, to understand how churches can better develop the needed leadership.

### **The Importance of Small Groups**

Although the use of small groups for training and discipleship goes back to Jesus and his apostles, the contemporary small group movement developed in the 1980s as American churches tended to grow larger, creating a need for new forms of community (Donahue & Gowler, 2014). By the 1990s, nearly half of Americans in churches were members of small group Bible studies, characterized by shared leadership, curriculum chosen by the group, and sizes that would meet comfortably in a member's home (Wuthnow, 1994a, 1994b). Small group Bible studies have been gradually replacing adult Sunday School groups (characterized by a single teacher leading a group, standardized lesson plans, limited only in size by the room used for meeting on the church campus on Sunday mornings), the preceding dominant form of adult spiritual formation in American churches (Atkinson & Rose, 2020). Some of the spiritual benefits perceived by members of these small groups include feeling closer to God, a greater love of others, a better understanding of the Bible, healed relationships, answers to prayer, and developing a lifestyle that is a witness to non-

Christians (Donahue & Gowler, 2014; Wuthnow, 1994a). These small group Bible studies are the focus of this study, although other forms of small groups exist in churches for other purposes such as helping members overcome substance abuse or work through the grieving process (Wuthnow, 1994b).

Small group Bible studies seem to be an especially appropriate structure for spiritual formation in the cultural context of 21<sup>st</sup> century America (Atkinson & Rose, 2020; Rynsburger & Lamport, 2008; Wuthnow, 1994a). Increasing levels of education and greater individualism push church members to want to take greater responsibility for their own spiritual growth, rather than passively receiving teaching in large group lectures. The interaction in the small groups permits a more thorough integration of biblical concepts and the day-to-day life of members. Similarly, as families become smaller, marriage becomes less frequent, and personal face-to-face interaction with others becomes rarer, small groups provide a source of community for many who have few or any close relationships with those around them.

From an organizational perspective, small groups are particularly beneficial to contemporary churches, especially as megachurches increasingly become more common (Loveland & Wheeler, 2003; Stetzer, 2013; Thumma & Bird, 2015). Small groups enable individuals to use their spiritual gifts, care for one another, share prayer requests, pray for others, discuss how to put biblical principles into practice, and reinforce through discussion ideas from the weekly sermon, none of which can be easily done at activities that involve the whole church (Wuthnow, 1994a).

From a theological perspective, small groups are important because they provide a context that promotes spiritual growth (2 Pet. 3:18, Phil. 1:6-9, Col. 1:10), community (Heb. 10:25, 1 Thess. 5:11), and the study of God's Word (Deut. 6:6-7, Acts 2:42, 1 Pet. 2:2), all of which are interrelated. All small groups, whether secular or Christian, promote community (Wuthnow, 1994a, 1994b). It is typically claimed that community provides the best context for spiritual growth (Rose, 2017) because so much of what Christ calls us to involves relationships, such as loving one another (John 13:34-35) and serving one another (1 Pet. 4:10). However, the degree to which small groups actually promote spiritual growth varies (Hartwig et al., 2020; Rynsburger & Lamport, 2009). The quality of Bible study in groups is often subpar; members who have participated in small group Bible studies for decades may only have a rudimentary understanding of the Bible (Donahue & Gowler, 2014; Rynsburger & Lamport, 2008; Wuthnow, 1994a, 1994b). Nevertheless, the opportunities provided by small groups for prayer, service, spiritual gift development, and outreach (Hartwig et al., 2020; Rose, 2017) may also promote spiritual growth.

### **The Importance of Small Group Leaders**

The degree to which small groups achieve their purposes depends heavily on the leadership of the group (Egli & Wang, 2014; Hartwig et al., 2020; Lamport & Rynsburger, 2008). Skills and knowledge related to group dynamics and studying the Bible are fundamental to leading a healthy small group Bible study. The tension between overemphasizing Bible teaching (e.g., a leader who lectures on a biblical text and allows very little group sharing) and overemphasizing community within the

group (e.g., allowing all interpretations of a biblical passage to have equal weight) is one that many small groups do not resolve, resulting in suboptimal functioning (Hartwig et al., 2020; Rynsburger & Lamport, 2008; Wuthnow, 1994a).

In general, churches feel a need for more (Wuthnow, 1994b) and better-trained leaders (Atkinson & Rose, 2020; Egli & Wang, 2014; Kirkpatrick, 1995). Wuthnow (1994b, p. 101) proposes that church-based training of small group leaders should cover biblical knowledge, group dynamics, personality assessment, group assessment, spiritual formation, and group growth. Kirkpatrick (1995) proposes that topics should include creating community, leading group sharing, leading Bible study, leading group prayer, keeping the group focused on its task or mission, group reproduction, and problem-solving. Such a broad range of topics is necessary because a small group influences and is influenced by so many aspects of its members' lives.

### **Barriers to Small Group Leadership**

Although it is clear that more and better-trained leaders can help the small group ministry of a church, it is less clear why some, if not most, church members are hesitant to lead small groups. The purpose of this study is to better understand the barriers to small group leadership that prevent small group members from wanting to lead a small group. A special emphasis will be placed on young adults in their 20s (younger Millennials and Gen Z) because the long-term future of small group ministry depends on their contribution and because they seem less likely to participate in such groups (Barna, 2011; Twenge, 2019; Twenge et al., 2015).

This study will explore possible reasons that young adults are unwilling to lead a small group. We hypothesize first that some of these reasons will be felt more strongly than others, that is, that some barriers to leadership will be higher than others. This hypothesis might appear trivial since the only way it could not be true is if all the barriers were exactly the same height, a highly unlikely scenario. However, the value of this hypothesis comes from the ability to demonstrate that it is true, that is, to measure the heights of the barriers precisely enough to demonstrate that there is a significant difference among them. Significant differences indicate that the differences are most likely not due to chance and that the same differences would be found in the entire population represented by the sample if it were examined (Dunaetz, 2020b; Fisher, 1925). If the data enables us to determine that there is a significant difference between the height of the barriers, we can determine which barriers are higher than others, providing evidence of what we should do to change the existing situation. If we cannot find evidence that some barriers are significantly higher than others, then any differences measured in the specific sample of those who participated in the study may very well be due to chance; we would have no justification for generalizing the results to a broader population. If there are significant differences in the height of the barriers, then further statistical analyses are justified.

Secondly, in comparing small group leaders to members of small groups who are not leaders, we hypothesize that leaders will view these reasons as less significant barriers to leadership than do non-leaders. If such barriers can be found and

understood, this knowledge can help church leaders better recruit and train small group leaders from among the young adults in their congregations.

## Method

This study was conducted in the context of a research methods course for a Master of Science program in organizational psychology at a Christian university in California (Azusa Pacific University). Students offered to perform research for a large contemporary church in Los Angeles. The pastor of small groups expressed a need to better understand what could be done to increase the number of young adult small group members who would be willing to become small group leaders. The research team chose to focus on potential barriers to leading a small group as perceived by Generation Z and young Millennial small group members, using survey research to measure the variables necessary to test the hypotheses.

### Participants

As is typical in church-based research (Dunaetz, 2020a), an online convenience sample recruited from the research team's social network was recruited. Participants were required to have experience in a church-based small group. In total, 231 people participated, resulting in 217 completed and usable surveys.

The average age of the participants was 27.3 years, 67% were female, and 61% had a bachelor's degree or higher. Concerning ethnicity, 46% of the participants self-identified as white, 35% as Hispanic, 21% as Asian, and 6% as Black; participants could choose multiple ethnicities as appropriate. As for small group experience, 54% of the participants had led small groups.

The data was collected in April 2020 at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, quite possibly influencing participants' responses. Terror management theory, a highly researched description of how people's attitudes and behaviors change when death is salient as it was during the period of data collection, predicts that participants would have a heightened awareness of and commitment to cultural and religious values (Dunaetz, 2020c; Greenberg et al., 1986). Moreover, the instability that people would feel due to the uncertainty of the situation could influence the results. These history effects (Campbell & Stanley, 1963; Crano et al., 2015) may be a threat to external validity, but they may also serve to amplify some differences and relationships, making them easier to detect.

**Selection of Barriers to Explore.** Student members of the research team, who themselves were in their 20s, researched potential barriers to small group leadership using self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and the literature on motivation to lead (Chen, 2016; Clemmons & Fields, 2011), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997, 2000; Lievens et al., 1997), work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Miner et al., 2015), and organizational commitment (Kent, 2017; Meyer & Allen, 1991) as frameworks for generating ideas. Through discussion and brainstorming (Paulus & Dzindolet, 1993), they created a list of 28 potential barriers to small group leadership that young adults in small groups might face (see Table 1, first column). The items were constructed so that agreement with the statement

would indicate readiness to lead a small group whereas disagreement would indicate a barrier to leading a small group. Small group members (both leaders and non-leaders) indicated how much they agreed with the statements (Strongly disagree = 1, Strongly agree = 5) so that higher scores indicated a greater readiness to lead and lower scores indicated greater barriers. An exploratory factor analysis (Fabrigar et al., 1999) was performed to find families of barriers that were strongly associated with each other (Table 1). Six broad barriers were found (see Results). Composite variables for the families of barriers that could be identified were created and used to test the hypotheses.

## Results

Six factors emerged from the exploratory factor analysis of participants' responses ( $N = 217$ ) to 28 statements indicating readiness to lead a small group by using a principal component analysis as the extraction method and a varimax rotation (Table 1). An exploratory factor analysis basically looks for families of items (in this case, statements that indicate readiness to lead a small group) that have similar responses by the participants. Each family of responses is identified by a column. If there is a number in the column for a given item, this means that the item belongs in the family; if there is no number, the item is not in the family. These families are called factors. By examining which items fall into each family, the meaning of the family (or factor) can be determined and identified with a label. Approximately 70% of the variance of the responses was accounted for by these six factors.

### The Six Barriers to Small Group Leadership

The first barrier to emerge, the first factor of the factor analysis, consists of 10 items that indicate a desire to lead a small group such as "I would like to lead a small group" and "I would find joy in leading a small group." This first factor, or barrier, is labeled "Desire to lead a small group."

The second factor relates to the knowledge and skills needed to lead a group. It consists of 8 items such as "I know how to manage a small group" and "I possess the skills that I believe a small group leader should have." This barrier is labeled "Skills in group dynamics."

The third factor groups several measures of one's general desire to influence others in a positive way, including beliefs that one is able to lead others. It consists of 8 items such as "I would like to positively influence others," "I like creating a positive atmosphere," and "I like structuring information." This barrier is labeled "Desire to positively influence others." Whereas the second factor is especially focused on group dynamics, this third factor focuses on influencing others in general.

The fourth factor relates broadly to beliefs about the support and encouragement that one receives, especially from people in one's church. It consists of 6 items such as "People would probably support me if I were a small group leader," "I am happy with the atmosphere at church," and "I have the opportunity to

be a small group leader.” This barrier is labeled “Social support.”

The fifth factor groups the items related to Bible knowledge and helping others grow. The 2 items in this factor are “I have the ability to help others grow in their faith” and “I have sufficient knowledge about the Bible and Christianity to lead a small group.” This barrier is labeled “Biblical foundations.”

The sixth factor includes measures of ambient stability that permit a person to risk leading a small group. It consists of three items including “I am not afraid to fail” and “My life is stable enough to be a small group leader.” This barrier is labeled “Stability.” It is quite likely that this factor was strongly influenced by the instability caused by the COVID-19 pandemic which was quite salient when the data was collected.

These six factors were used to create six composite, latent variables, each representing a barrier to leadership, a standard use of exploratory factor analyses (Fabrigar et al., 1999; Gorsuch, 1983). The average of all the items which had a factor loading greater than .40 was computed for each barrier and for each participant. Some items were used for more than one barrier; further research on these latent variables could indicate that some items could be eliminated or replaced with more refined ones. Each scale has a potential range of 1 to 5. These scores can be interpreted in two conceptually equivalent ways: 1) Higher scores indicate greater readiness to be a small group leader, or 2) lower scores indicate a greater barrier to small group leadership.

The descriptive statistics of these six barriers are presented in Table 2. The coefficient of reliability (Cronbach, 1951) is an important measure of how well the created scales measure a single concept; high scores ( $> .70$ ) indicate that the central concept measured by the scales is well-defined, while low scores indicate that other non-central concepts are highly influencing the measurements. In this study, all the coefficients of reliability were good ( $\alpha > .70$ ), except for the sixth factor Stability. This factor only had 3 items and, as mentioned, was likely influenced by the instability of the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic when the data were collected. There are probably other aspects of instability that were captured by some, but not all, of these three items, resulting in a low reliability. Therefore, any interpretation of this factor remains questionable.

Some of the six factors were correlated with demographic variables. None of these six factors were correlated with gender ( $p > .05$ ). Education was only correlated with Desire to lead a small group ( $r = -.14, p < .05$ ), indicating that more educated people had a slightly lower desire to lead a small group than less educated people. Age was negatively correlated with Skills in group dynamics ( $r = -.19, p < .01$ ) and Desire to positively influence others ( $r = -.20, p < .01$ ). These correlations are perhaps due to a greater self-awareness that comes with age or education, less availability to be involved in ministry, or perhaps less openness to new experiences.

**Table 1.**  
*Exploratory Factor Analysis of Barriers to Small Group Leadership*

Item	Factor Loadings						Factor Interpretations
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
1. I know how to manage a small group.		.788					1 = Desire to lead a small group
2. I know how to challenge and teach others.		.684					2 = Skills in group dynamics
3. I know how to lead a discussion		.620	.457				3 = Desire to positively influence others
4. I possess the skills that I believe a small group leader should have.		.797					4 = Social support
5. I am not afraid to lead a small group.		.618					5 = Biblical Foundations
6. I have the skills to lead a small group to success		.733					6 = Stability
7. I can inspire others.			.488				
8. I can speak in front of a group.		.401	.533				
9. I have the ability to help others grow in their faith.					.809		
10. I have sufficient knowledge about the Bible and Christianity to lead a small group.					.752		
11. I would like to lead a small group.	.865						
12. I am interested in being a small group leader.	.856						
13. My interests align with the duties of a small group leader.	.725						
14. I would like to positively influence others.			.795				
15. I like structuring information.			.647				
16. I like creating a positive atmosphere.			.818				
17. I like initiating conversations.			.696				
18. I am not afraid to fail.						.775	
19. My life is stable enough to be a small group leader.						.449	
20. I am happy with the atmosphere at church.				.455		.581	
21. I would find joy in leading a small group.	.749						
22. People would probably support me if I were a small group leader.				.680			
23. I would get a lot out of being a small group leader.	.550			.440			
24. I have the opportunity to be a small group leader.	.442		.434				
25. I have enough time to be a small group leader.	.574						
26. I would grow if I were a small group leader.	.453		.407	.570			
27. I would love to be a small group leader.	.853						
28. I would probably be successful as a small group leader.	.405	.509		.442			
Eigenvalue (after rotation)	5.390	4.45	3.92	2.17	1.95	1.61	
% of Variance	19.240	15.88	14.00	7.76	6.95	5.74	
Total Variance							69.56%

Note: Only factor loading > .40 are shown. Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

**Table 2.**

*Descriptive Statistics of the Six Barriers and Effect Sizes of the Differences Between Leaders and Non-Leaders*

Barrier	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range	Number of Items	Coefficient of Reliability	<i>d</i>
1. Desire to lead a small group	3.64	0.78	1.20-5.00	10	0.93	.96***
2. Skills in group dynamics	3.88	0.70	1.00-5.00	8	0.91	.94***
3. Desire to positively influence others	4.11	0.60	1.00-5.00	9	0.86	.52***
4. Social support	3.90	0.66	1.33-5.00	5	0.81	.82***
5. Biblical foundations	3.73	0.87	1.50-5.00	2	0.78	1.11***
6. Stability	3.56	0.77	1.00-5.00	3	0.54	.24*

*Note:* Higher means indicate greater readiness to lead small groups or lower barriers to recruit small group leaders.

The effect size *d* is a standardized measure of the difference between leaders and non-leaders.

Positive values of *d* indicate that leaders scored higher than non-leaders.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ , 1 tailed.

## Hypothesis Testing

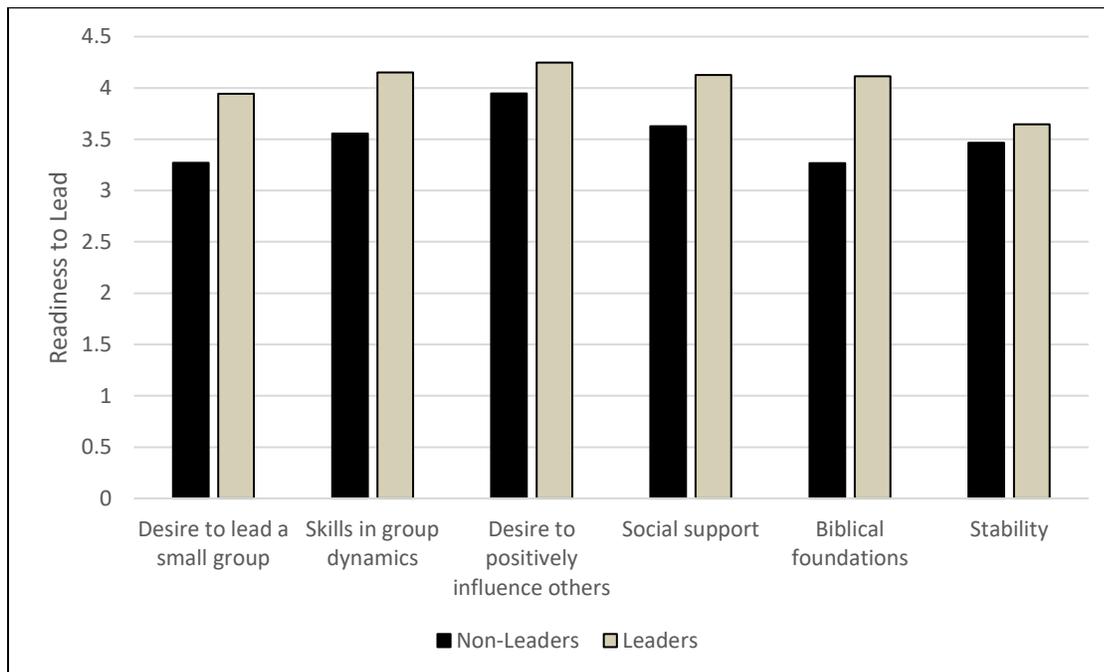
This study tested two hypotheses concerning the six barriers discovered in the factor analysis. Both hypotheses were supported.

**Hypothesis 1: Magnitude of the Barriers.** The first hypothesis was some of the barriers to small group leadership would be significantly greater than others. The means of the six constructed barriers are shown in Table 2. Lower means indicate greater barriers to small group leadership. An analysis of variance of these 6 means indicates that their variation is greater than chance if there were no difference between them in the general population,  $F(5, 1296) = 16.05, p < .001$ . The greatest barrier (lowest mean) is for Stability, a barrier that was perhaps strongly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic which was just starting during the period of data collection. However, even if we remove this factor, there was a significant difference between the remaining 5 barriers,  $F(4, 1080) = 13.45, p < .001$ . Visual inspection of these 5 barriers indicates that Desire to positively influence others was the lowest barrier (i.e., the highest mean;  $M = 4.1$ ) and the two highest barriers are Desire to lead a small group and Biblical foundations (i.e., the lowest means;  $M_s = 3.6-3.7$ ). The two other factors, Skills in group dynamics and Social support, were intermediate barriers to small group leadership ( $M_s = 3.9$ ).

**Hypothesis 2: Differences in Leaders and Non-Leaders.** The second hypothesis predicted that the barriers to small group leadership would be greater for people

who have not led a small group than for people who have led a small group. In a sense, this hypothesis tests whether the six extracted factors indeed indicate measures of readiness to lead.

For all six factors, the mean readiness to lead was significantly greater for leaders than for non-leaders (Figure 1 and Table 2). The difference was smallest for Stability, the factor most likely reflecting the conditions created by the pandemic; the effect size  $d$  (a standardized measure of the difference between two averages, final column of Table 2) for this factor was small ( $d = .24$ ; Cohen, 1988), indicating that there was little difference between leaders' and non-leaders' Stability at the time of the survey,  $t(215) = 1.74$ ,  $p = .04$ , 1-tailed. This means that this barrier (which is higher than the other barriers) was most likely primarily due to the circumstances, rather than to any differences between leaders and non-leaders. This implies that training that focuses on stability would be potentially beneficial for everyone, especially since levels of emotional stability tend to be lower for Generation Z than for previous generations (Twenge, Joiner, et al., 2018; Twenge, Martin, et al., 2018).



**Figure 1.** Differences in Readiness to Lead a Small Group between Leaders and Non-Leaders

Using Cohen's (1988) criteria for evaluating effect sizes, the effect size describing the difference in means between leaders and non-leaders for Desire to positively influence others was medium ( $d = .52$ ). That is, the difference between leaders and non-leaders concerning their desire to have a positive effect on others is real, but not very large. This indicates that many non-

leaders may want to have a positive effect on others, but it is not clear that they know how to have this influence. Such people could especially benefit from small group leadership training and encouragement to consider leading a small group.

However, the effect size is large for the remaining four factors, Desire to lead a small group ( $d = .96$ ), Skills in group dynamics ( $d = .94$ ), Social support ( $d = .82$ ), and especially Biblical foundations ( $d = 1.11$ ). In all four of these areas, small group leaders scored much higher than non-leaders, indicating that these are barriers that need to be the focus of leadership development in order to raise up small group leaders.

## Discussion

This exploratory factor analysis of barriers to small group leadership among Generation Z and younger Millennial small group members found six principal barriers: Desire to lead a small group, Skills in group dynamics, Desire to positively influence others, Social support, Biblical foundations, and Stability. Stability was the greatest barrier to small group leadership; this was perhaps an artefact of the COVID-19 pandemic that was just starting when the data was collected. The next greatest barriers were Desire to lead a small group and Biblical foundations. The lowest barrier was Desire to positively influence others.

Small group members who have been small group leaders scored significantly higher in all six domains than small group members without small group leadership experience. The difference between leaders and non-leaders was smallest for Stability, as would be expected if the pandemic were the primary driving force for this factor; this factor may have been more influenced by the external circumstances than by characteristics of the leaders and non-leaders. The difference between leaders and non-leaders' Desire to positively influence others was the smallest of the remaining differences, indicating that there is relatively little difference between leaders and non-leaders in wanting to have a positive impact on those around them. There were large differences between leaders and non-leaders for the other four domains, indicating potential focal points for recruiting and developing new small group leaders.

### Implications for Small Group Leader Recruitment and Training

The four barriers characterized by large differences between small group leaders and non-leaders (Desire to lead a small group, Skills in group dynamics, Social support, and Biblical foundations) each point to different strategies concerning the recruitment and training of small group leaders. There are many different approaches to recruiting and training small group

leaders (Coleman, 1991; Donahue & Robinson, 2005; Kirkpatrick, 1995); many of the following ideas can be applied to them.

**Desire to lead a small group.** From a social exchange perspective (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), a person will have a desire to lead a small group when the benefits of leading a small group outweigh the costs involved in leading a small group. This implies that potential leaders need to be made aware of the benefits that come from leading a small group. These might include helping others grow spiritually, developing one's own gifts, developing significant and lasting friendships, networking that might lead to potential ministry, social, or professional opportunities, and especially being "a good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:23). Such benefits may be publicized either privately to individuals with leadership potential or publicly through church announcements and publications.

Similarly, publicly expressing gratitude to current small group leaders can motivate potential leaders to consider leading a small group. Public expressions of gratitude by the church leadership demonstrate what is valued by the church and how individuals can contribute to the well-being of others (Dunaetz & Lanum, In press). The public recognition of small group leaders might motivate some people who should not lead small groups (because of lack of gifting or spiritual maturity), but this serves to underscore that the desire to lead a small group is not sufficient to place someone in a leadership role.

**Skills in Group Dynamics.** Since the early days of the small group movement (Atkinson & Rose, 2020; Kirkpatrick, 1995; Lamport & Rynsburger, 2008), training small group leaders to create community while accomplishing the other purposes of the small group has been at the forefront of proposed leadership training programs. Since preaching is often modeled by church leadership, there is a tendency for small group leaders to view lecture-style teaching as the appropriate way to lead a small group (Wuthnow, 1994a, 1994b), an approach to andragogy which is not especially effective (Knowles, 1970). Group formation (Hogg & Turner, 1985), participatory learning (Pretty et al., 1995), group cohesion (Greer, 2012), and group leadership (Hoyt et al., 2003) are all topics in group dynamics that would help prepare small group leaders.

**Social Support.** The importance of providing social support to small group leaders is not a topic typically addressed in works directed to leaders of small group ministries (e.g., Hartwig et al., 2020; Kirkpatrick, 1995; Lamport & Rynsburger, 2008). However, it emerged in this study as a notable barrier to small group leadership. Some of the approaches used to increase the Desire to lead a small group (see above) may contribute to social support on the collective level (e.g., public expressions of gratitude for small group leaders), but individual attention, concern, and care from the leader of a church's small group ministry may be even more effective.

**Biblical Foundations.** Several authors have noted the lack of biblical knowledge and the superficial spirituality that often characterize small groups (Donahue & Gowler, 2014; Rynsburger & Lamport, 2009; Wuthnow, 1994a, 1994b). This study indicates that not only are church leaders aware of this need, but potential small group leaders are also aware of their lack of biblical knowledge and ability to help others grow spiritually. The difference between leaders and non-leaders for this factor was greater than for any other factor found.

With the decline of Christian colleges (Adams, 2020a, 2020b) and the tendency of megachurches to attract people through seeker-friendly preaching that only minimally influences people's beliefs or values (Dunaetz et al., 2021), other approaches to provide sufficient biblical knowledge to potential small group leaders are necessary. Small groups themselves may provide additional Bible knowledge beyond what is heard in sermons, but the discussions in small groups tend to focus on application and there is a tendency toward an "anything-goes form of spirituality" (Wuthnow, 1994a, p. 358) where deviant interpretations are tolerated in order to maintain the unity of the group. The most effective way to meet the need for greater Bible knowledge may be the development of local church-based programs that bring Bible School-level teaching to all church members who desire it. This study found that some barriers to leading a small group increase with age and education (perhaps because older people have less free time, more responsibilities, and/or less openness to new experiences). This means that it could be especially useful to encourage gifted youth to participate in such training.

Nevertheless, if the training focuses primarily on adults, it would be wise to take into consideration Knowles' (1970) principles of andragogy which emphasize the unique needs of adults when studying compared to traditional students. These include the need to be involved in designing the learning process (e.g., choosing the ways they will learn and the projects they undertake), the need for instruction to build upon their experiences (both negative and positive) rather than abstract theory, the need to see the immediate relevance to their situation, and the need to focus on solving problems that are relevant to their situation.

Contemporary megachurches might be especially well-equipped to provide such training. Typically evangelical in doctrine (Thumma & Travis, 2007), megachurches often have a plethora of highly skilled members who may be underutilized (von der Ruhr & Daniels, 2012). Rising levels of education have led to an oversupply of people with graduate education who are willing to teach at the college level for little beyond symbolic remuneration, such as adjunct faculty and graduate students (Bousquet, 2008). Such teachers, especially seminary graduates, could use their gifts in a very meaningful way by providing traditional Bible-school level teaching. A simple curriculum covering the Bible could significantly raise the level of Bible

knowledge of participants, at a fraction of the cost that such training would cost in an accredited institution. The presence and promotion of such a program would benefit not only the participating students but also would communicate to other church attenders the importance of the Bible.

### **Limitations**

Although this study has provided broad insights about the barriers to small group leadership that Generation Z and younger Millennials face, several limitations can be noted. First, the sample most likely reflects the geographic distribution of the social networks of the authors, which is likely to consist of mainly Californians; the culture of California is high in both cultural looseness and collectivism and may influence how small group Bible studies are understood (Carpenter, 2000; Dunaetz, 2019; Gelfand et al., 2006). Secondly, the barriers discovered in this study were highly dependent on the list of proposed reasons that people might provide for leading or not leading a small group Bible study; if the research team had included other potential reasons (e.g., items concerning political pressure, food insecurity, or fear of the pandemic), other factors might have made a significant contribution to the variance extracted in the exploratory factor analysis. Similarly, a third limitation involves the COVID-19 pandemic which was highly salient during the period of data collection; as previously noted, it is not clear how this may have influenced the study. Another limitation is that this study, being quantitative in nature, could not capture the unique experiences of each of the participants; more subjective, qualitative research would enable these unique experiences to be better captured, perhaps through interviews or focus groups.

### **Conclusion**

For an effective small group ministry, churches need to raise up new small group leaders, especially among young adults. This study has found that among Generation Z and younger Millennials, there are at least six barriers to small group leadership: Desire to lead a small group, Skills in group dynamics, Desire to positively influence others, Social support, Biblical foundations, and Stability. Leaders of small group ministries need to creatively find ways to meet the associated needs to overcome these barriers, a challenge which is difficult, but not impossible, if approached with creativity, focus, and dependence on God's Spirit.

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