

by Erin Kealy

It seems like everyone is doing small groups these days. Whether it's free market, principle of 12, or a Sunday school program, growing churches see the need for small groups. The question becomes, "What makes a church's small group system successful?" Many churches have discovered that it boils down to excellence in tracking your groups and members.

How do you do that?

Over 1000 churches think they've found the answer

"Excellerate has been helping small group churches around the world operate more efficiently for over nine years," says Pete Sciacchetano, Leader Developer of Excellerate. So what exactly is Excellerate? It is a complete church management solution designed specifically for churches with small groups. Excellerate tracks everything from member information, visitors and follow-up, classes, teams, to contributions, plus it has advanced tools to help churches' small groups succeed.

From two systems to one

Many churches track their small groups in a spreadsheet or database apart from their main membership system, and inevitably experience frustration as they try to keep two systems up-to-date. Churches also face challenges when generating reports that need data from separate sources. Having everything in one system allows church leaders to save time, no longer updating information in two places. With Excellerate, reports such as "Small Group Members Who Have Completed Leadership Class," can easily be generated, since class and small group information are in the same system.

Church leaders have seen the value of small groups as an effective tool to connect with

and minister to people, but they are often unable to effectively keep up with the health and progress of their small groups. Knowing who is in each group is not enough. Measuring success in all aspects of your church's vision increases your effectiveness at reaching people.

Many small group structures—One customizable program

"We've seen all kinds of small group structures—everything from Sunday school classes, free market groups to more structured models like 5 x 5 and principle of 12. We've seen combinations of different structures and totally original concepts," Sciacchetano says. "That's why Excellerate must be customizable to support all the different implementations of small groups. We want to support the vision God has given to each church. Churches no longer have to conform to rigid church management software." This philosophy extends to all areas of the system, not just small groups. Users can create new reports, add their own fields to the database, and customize online group reporting and visitor follow-up. "Our technical support team understands this, and is available to customize reports, screens, or online forms for our customers as part of their technical support plan, so they can have what they need to fulfill their vision," adds Jude Horn, Lead Support Analyst for Excellerate.

Top 6 things every small group church should track

From Joel Comiskey, (www.cellchurchsolutions.com), an internationally recognized small group church consultant

1. Small group attendance
2. Visitors to the groups
3. Visitation - did the leader visit group members and group newcomers?
4. Group multiplication goal date
5. Each group members' progress in the training track.
6. Prayer requests

More tracking in less time—Internet Integration

Tracking all of this information would normally be an administrative nightmare, but with Excellerate's Internet integration, small group leaders can access their groups online and enter their weekly meeting reports, eliminating paper forms and wasted time manually entering information. Excellerate easily integrates with church websites providing new pages for visitor follow-up tracking, small group reporting, and member information updating. Leaders can also review various reports online, which allows them to easily monitor their success. Internet integration gives you the best of both worlds—a fast, in-house church management system that's not dependant on the status of your internet connection, plus web-based access that empowers your leaders with the information they need, as well as the ability to submit information that helps ensure successful groups.

Mercy Church—Getting down to business

Jason Weathered from Mercy Church in California explains how accurate tracking opened their eyes: "The goal for us, as a church, is to be able to measure our progress as we work toward the goals that God has given us. Just as any successful business must consistently analyze and consider the state of its operations, we are determined to look at the true condition of our church. Excellerate has enabled us to look at the reality of our successes and our failures. For instance, using Excellerate's web integration and cell leader reports, we saw that we were really struggling

to win people to Jesus, especially men. Our church was growing, but we were under a bit of a false impression that many of these new people were new believers. Now we can see plainly whether or not our growth is coming from new believers, or only from Christians moving into town or coming from other churches. We started praying for a breakthrough in this area."

"The other benefit is that we can celebrate when we see a breakthrough! It used to be very hard to know what was happening in all of the cell groups. Are they growing? How many people are in our cells? Do they have first time visitors? Are the cells winning people to Christ?"

More time with people not paper—The goal

Les Lamb, Associate Pastor of Oshawa Community Church in Canada sums it up this way—"What a difference Excellerate has made in our church! I have more time to be with people, because I spend so much less time manually entering attendance for our training track (with a barcode scanner) and our cell groups (importing online reports) each week. Visitor follow-up is a snap, and we know exactly what's going on in our cells. It's great to have one program for everything from finances to counseling to contact info to attendance, so that our staff can access the information they need to fulfill our mission to advance the Kingdom!"

Case Study from New Zealand

Robert Cooper was responsible for purchase and installation of Excellerate at

Christian Life Centre Auckland, New Zealand. He has since moved to another role within that organization. He shares here his personal experience in working with Excellerate.

“I don’t know how it happened for you, but I was employed as “New People’s Pastor” and ended up looking after our database. I’m no expert, not even what you’d describe as a computer whiz, but I was asked to take it on because I showed some aptitude for being able to extract information that was useful! The database we had been using was not very user friendly, so I started looking at alternatives. We got on to Excellerate through an unexpected reference from another local church. I downloaded the demo version and started playing around with it—making extensive use of the Help menu. Within days I was able to find my way around and extracting more information than I could with our previous system. This led to further discussions (this time introducing some technical experts) and before long we were installing Excellerate as our new database.

Introducing Excellerate to our staff (around 50 of them at the time) was incredibly easy. I was able to do the training from a user’s perspective, unlike our previous database that required us to employ a technician who had to be trained in the USA. It would be true to say that 90% of what we wanted from a database was achievable by all staff from day one. Realistically, most users’ requirements are pretty straightforward—“Give me Joe Public’s phone number,” “I want to email all my team members,” “How many 18–25 year olds do we have?”, “Who hasn’t been to our Friends of the Vision Course?”, or “How

many people are in a small group?” We could do all of that immediately.

Then we received a request to speed up the registration process for our kids’ programs. With Excellerate’s barcode system, we could achieve this, even in our extension services that did not have direct access to our database.

Next we received a request from our volunteer pastoral care team. They wanted to enter records of their visits/counseling appointments from home—via a web interface. This was not a standard part of the Excellerate package, but for a reasonable fee, the Excellerate team was able to open up this possibility for us, using individualized password access to only those records they had been assigned to.

We now have over 10,000 active records in our database and our goal is to ensure that each of those people is “known” (not just a number). We have 9 services and 4 locations operating every weekend, and do not keep individual attendance records at these services. We strongly encourage all our people to belong to a small group, but we still have a significant number who do not. This is requiring us to make full use of the Visits/Counsel features of that database, in conjunction with the small group reporting. This enables us to find out who has not been contacted recently—and to do something about it.”

Excellerate offers solutions for churches of all sizes. For more information see their website at www.excellerate.com

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