

How to Start Small Groups

Growing Larger by Acting Smaller



#SEE^{ALL}THE PEOPLE

"We cannot disciple people that we are not in relationship with. Discipleship begins with relationship."

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This booklet is a companion piece to:

Developing an Intentional Discipleship System: A Guide for Congregations

by Rev. Junius B. Dotson

Introduction

There is an old story about a Boy Scout leader who wanted to teach the troop about first aid. So he took his troop into the woods near the neighborhood where most of the kids lived. He left one boy under a tree and instructed the boy to pretend he was wounded. His plan was to take the rest of the troop over the next hill, give them detailed teaching on how to bandage a wound, then rush back over to save the “wounded victim.” However, he got so engrossed in his own demonstration that he forgot the poor kid over the hill. Suddenly it dawned on the leader that the young boy had been left for a considerable period of time unattended. Together, the troop rushed back over the hill only to find a note stuck in the ground which read, “Have bled to death and gone home!”

A lot of people have “bled to death” and left our churches for a variety of reasons including inadequate care, lack of spiritual growth, loneliness, and the inability to feel needed by the gathering of believers. Many churches continue to cling to the old school method of “pastor as only care-giver.” Fewer churches have thought through a strategic discipleship system. And most have no purposeful way of connecting people to God and to each other. A small group system does all of those things.

Cornerstone was a new church start in 1990. I really knew very little about starting a church. At that time, there was very little help from denominational sources in the area of new church starts. Since then, a plethora of helpful information and training abounds. But I did have passion, and I understood how to empower leaders to lead as well as develop organization. The church began with over 250 people on the first Sunday. While we did experience some drop off in attendance as is common in new starts, the church never dipped below 120 in attendance. Instead, it grew at a slow

steady pace of approximately 10% per year. That trend has continued for nearly 20 years. We also had several devoted lay people who shared the same vision for a growing dynamic church on the south edge of Grand Rapids, Michigan.

A Spirit of Grumpiness

We did not start out with an intentional small group ministry. It was not until the church grew to about 180 and was pushing the 200 mark, that I sensed something happening. I describe it now as a “spirit of grumpiness” that came over our church. At first I was confused. Things seemed to be going well. New people continued to visit. Teams were doing their ministries and giving their best. Why the grumpiness?

I needed to step back from the trees in order to see the forest again. After prayer and analysis, I realized that we were growing beyond the point of knowing everyone’s names. I realized that many congregations stop their growth at this point because they are not willing to take that step. So I did two things. I began to preach frequently that “knowing all the names” is a nice thing, but it’s not our main mission. We existed to lead people into relationship with Jesus Christ.

The second step was to intentionally launch small groups. While every person does not need to know every name, it is vitally important that someone knows your name and knows your needs. Small group ministry was born out of that “grumpiness” that comes with growth and change. Once we made these changes, our attendance once again began to move upward. The “spirit of grumpiness” disappeared as well.

The Main Goal

Small group ministry will begin when the key leadership of a church decides that it must become part of the church culture. The pastor and key lay leaders must be willing to articulate the goal publicly over and over again. A preaching series on small groups could be the catalyst for a total church makeover. At Cornerstone, small group culture now exists. It is part of who we are. We continue to dedicate at least two Sundays per year to casting vision for everyone to join a Life Group. We attempt to mention it many more times in other weekly messages as necessary. Years ago, when the Wii gaming system first came out, we did a fall kick off series called “Wii, Not Me.” The series used some popular Wii games but the focus was moving away from self-sufficiency and doing life with others.

The main goal of small group ministry is to connect people to Christ and to each other. It is as simple as that. Keep the focus simple and make it easier to hit the target. The whole purpose in launching such ministry is to help people connect to God in a deeper way by sharing their spiritual walks with each other. People are encouraged to keep going when they realize that they are not alone in many of the struggles or joys of life. The second purpose is to develop deeper friendships and not walk through life alone. This simple goal of connecting people to God and to each other must be articulated often through sermons and church communication.

The Big “Why?” of Groups

Biblical Mandate

Small group ministry is not a new trendy program to implement in the local church. It really is a biblical mandate in so many ways. Think about it: God exists in community. One way to think about the Trinity is that God exists in a small group! The way the Father, Son, and Spirit relate to each other gives us a clue to how God imagined the biblical community.

From the very beginning of creation, God said that *it was not good to be alone*. (Genesis 2:18) Too much aloneness leads to loneliness and isolation. God dreams of authentic communities of believers who share a common purpose and mission. Jesus’ prayer in John 17 disclosed his heart...*that they may be one as we are one*. It is in the love for each other that the world will recognize the Savior.

Jesus started a small group. Even the Savior did not wish to live life alone! The early church met first in small groups. Believe it or not, the early church did not sit in pews facing forward listening to a person talk at them for 20-30 minutes and call it church. They met in groups, experienced teaching, talked, shared food, and did mission together. Paul even said in Acts 20:20 as he left Ephesus that he had not failed to teach them publicly and from house to house. Publicly and from house to house...that is God’s 20/20 vision for the local church: worship and discipleship.

God wants your church to grow. So many times, I’ve heard pastors say, “It is not about numbers!” Isn’t it? Numbers of course represent people. Someone was counting in the Book of Acts. Can you imagine John in the back of the crowd counting...2,347...2,348? “Hey, Peter, we had about 3,000 here today! Your sermon was awesome!” As you read through

Acts, the number keeps growing. Is there any doubt that God cares about numbers because numbers are people. God wants your church to grow!

Practical Mandate

I am uncertain where this story originated, but I heard of a wounded soldier who tried to get some medical help? The soldier was wounded in a battle and ordered to the nearest military hospital. Arriving at the entrance, he saw two doors. One was marked *For Minor Wounds*, the other *For Serious Wounds*. He entered the first door and walked down a long hallway. At the end of the hall, he saw two more doors. The first read *For Officers*, the other *For Enlisted Personnel*. The soldier went through the second door. Again, he found himself walking down a long hallway with two doors at the end. One read *Army*, the other *Marines*. The wounded soldier took the second door and found himself back out on the street. When he got back to his unit, his buddies asked, “How did your trip to the hospital go?” The soldier replied, “The people really didn’t help me much, but, man, are they organized!”

That story reminds me that most local churches are highly organized. We have all sorts of committees and teams in place. We fill out the district forms dutifully every year and fill a name into every possible position. Pastor and lay people run to meeting after meeting to plan event after event. We are highly organized, but we often “don’t help people very much,” as the soldier said.

There are some very practical reasons why your church needs groups no matter what the size. One reason is that your church needs a coherent consistent discipleship system. People do not mature by listening to sermons. In our church, we constantly say, “Our job as pastors is not to feed you.” (A very popular notion) Our job is to make you hungry for more of God. The job of worship is to inspire people to want more

of God, go deeper through personal disciplines and group interaction. Small groups provide that space for discussion, questions, learning to pray, serving, etc.

A second reason for starting small groups is that is the only effective way to care for people. Pastors falsely believe that they can give care to the whole church. This simply is not true. Nor is it the best use of the pastor's time. People must learn to care for people. People need to give love as well as receive it. Groups provide that kind of care for each other inherently. The church is happier in the long run. New people can be cared for. The pastor has more time in his/her schedule for truly leading. When groups begin to function in this capacity, the ministry gets returned to the people, where it belongs.

At Cornerstone, we say frequently that groups are our "front line" of care. "Sooner or later something will happen in your life or your family's life. It is important that someone knows and responds. If you fail to join a group, just know that we may not know what is happening in your life. One or two staff people cannot adequately care for hundreds of people."

Not long ago I received a letter from a 92 year old woman from our church at the end of the year. She was sending an "extra" contribution and did not want it accredited to her yearly pledge. She wanted to give something more out of appreciation for the care that she had received. In her words, "I miss being at church and seeing you and all the others. The snow and ice prevent me from driving for now. My small group is still a support for me even though I have not been able to attend regular worship. They continue to invite me to luncheons and study times. I am very grateful to them for their care."

One fall our church decided to form a new life group with all of the couples who were married over the summer. Six couples responded. One couple who had been a part of the church as single people, agreed to lead. The group did a marriage

study and quickly bonded together by sharing life experience. After one year, one couple who had not previously attended church became pregnant. On the Friday night when Stephanie was taken to the hospital for delivery, everything went wrong. Suddenly, a medical crisis arose and it looked as if Stephanie might not survive the birth. Pat, her husband, did not think to call the pastor. Instead, he called the group leader. Within 30 minutes, most of group assembled at the hospital and waited and prayed. One day later, Stephanie took a turn for the better. The next day, she was released with her healthy baby. Four days later, the pastor found out about the trauma. At first the pastor was tempted to be angry for not being informed, but on second thought, realized the life group system worked as it was designed to do. Lay people were equipped to do the work of the ministry.

A third reason is that groups effectively assimilate people into the vision, ownership, and ministry of your church. Our best leaders are people who have come through the small group system. They buy into the vision of our church and are actively engaged in reaching new people for Christ.

Tim and Stacy had been attending for nearly a year. They had some church background but had never studied the Bible, prayed out loud, joined a church, or given financially in any substantive way. They were invited into a new life group by neighbors who had decided to launch the group. Over the course of weeks, the leader of the group gently began to teach the new participants how to pray out loud and read their Bibles for growth. After two years in the group, Tim and Stacy also responded to a capital fund drive with their first pledge ever.

The Big “How” of Small Groups

So how do you launch a small group ministry in a church where they do not exist? Probably the most important word to learn in church ministry is “movement.” How do we as church leaders create “movement” from sitting in pews in worship to active engagement with other people in a home group?

Cast the Vision

The first step is to cast the vision. Casting the vision takes time and the ability to articulate why our church needs this, or why we are missing a big piece of what church is without this ministry. Preaching is one of the most effective ways to cast vision. At Cornerstone, we will dedicate a series from time to time and talk about it for three weeks. One series a few years ago was “Wii, Not Me.” We used various video games as part of the creative presentation to move people toward groups. If not a series, we will always dedicate one or two Sundays per year to inspiring people to join a life group. In addition the pastors will try to mention this value often in messages preached week after week.

Sometimes we cast vision with negative messages as well. Once we did a drama about everything you never want to do in a small group. The skit featured a small group gathered in a living room when a new couple came to the door that someone had invited. The leader blurted out that apparently they didn’t get the word that food was expected. He then invited them in only to make one mistake after the other in embarrassing them and calling on them to pray. The humor set a tone for how a group should operate.

You can also cast vision with personal stories of how small groups touched a person's life. I'll never forget the day Jake, a 60 something year old man, told about his mother's illness and near death. According to Jake, "Within one hour, most of my life group gathered with me in the hospital to wait and pray." He went on to tell how his group supported him in the ensuing days of life and death as his mom experienced a slow recovery. As Jake began to sob, I knew we had chosen the right story. Sign-ups that day were significantly higher than previous times. Most people want to belong to a group of people who love and care about them, and a group that allows them to love in return.

Give Opportunities to Join

A second piece of movement is to give people an opportunity to actually "taste and see," or to sign-up to be in a small group. Our Director of Groups hosts a two hour event three times per year called Life Link. We use the event to "link" people together in "Life groups." The director makes a fun night out of it having invented a version of the game LIFE where people progressively share things about themselves around tables and finally connect with others with common interests or experiences.

As a smaller church that may not have enough people to do a Lifelink kind of event, you can also simply have a bulletin drop out or a lobby sign-up sheet to gather interested people. In small churches where everyone already feels like "they know everyone else," concentrate on the newer people. Moving the older existing people to feel the need of a group is very difficult to do. Let it go. Start where the need is most felt.

Implement Your Strategy

Third, movement requires you to at last implement your strategy. Many great ideas fail in the church because leaders are reluctant to pull the trigger. Never be afraid of failure if this is the direction you feel God is leading. Dynamic churches try new things. Then you persist in overcoming obstacles in your way. Sometimes you decide to stop and conclude that this was not the right time.

How will you actually get small group ministry up and running? After you have carefully planned and prepared, begin your small group ministry at times that makes sense for your mission field. Usually, the fall when school gets back into session is an ideal time. The second best time is after New Years. Many people make resolutions and the church needs to capitalize on that motivation. The winter provides a “good run” of weeks before spring sports or warm weather (depending on your geographic location) sets in and vacations begin.

Start where you are and with who you have that are interested. Do not be discouraged if the whole church is not excited about your strategy. Of course, great preparation and communication is essential, but people who already have existing deeper relationships will not always feel compelled to come along. Many times pastors or lay leaders say that their church does not feel the need for small groups. This is usually because the church is small and people all seem to know each other. The task of implementation will be more difficult in small churches. However, it is the existing folks who are vocal about not having a need. I encourage them to start groups with newer people. Of course, if your church never has a guest, you may not sense the need either. Don't be afraid to start small. Start with one group. Add one when a few more new people come. If anything happens, use their testimonies in church. Continue to preach and use your small group as an illustration of the support that can come through doing life together.

Set the DNA Carefully

I wish someone would have shared that bit of advice with me. When we launched small group ministry, we assumed that most people were busy and probably wouldn't attend a weekly meeting. So we set the DNA for groups to meet every other week. That guideline existed for a number of years, just long enough to become "the way we do it."

When our new director took over the ministry, she saw some flaws in the system. One of them was the need for weekly meeting. Weekly helps build community so much faster. It strengthens spiritual growth, accountability, and friendship. So for the last few years, we have been transitioning our small groups and trying to reset the DNA. This is not easy. Some groups will resist. Again, our director focuses most attention on the new groups forming, not on the change resisters.

A Workable Plan

The new DNA we are attempting to put into small groups includes three things. One is the twelve week system. We now encourage groups to meet for 12 weeks in a row. Then take one month off. Months off include December, April, and August. They also coincide with typical busy months or holiday times. The groups need a break, but the consistency of 12 weeks builds strong ties. The added value of a 12 week system is that people can opt out at the end of 12 weeks or opt in at that time as well. Sometimes, a small group simply isn't a good fit. We encourage people to finish out the 12 and then graciously step out to look for another group.

One man came to me recently who said, "I'm going to finish out the twelve weeks, but then I'm going to look for a new group. Those people are just too old acting for my wife and me." Turns out he and his wife were almost the same age and that was part of the reason our director plugged them

into that group. However, in his job with the public schools, he associates with teenagers a lot and thinks completely differently than others his age. We encouraged him to take advantage of the trimester break and look for a new group.

A second part of our plan includes a group covenant. At the beginning of each new 12 week segment, the group is asked to resign a covenant of agreement for the next 12. This boosts weekly attendance and keeps commitment levels high. The covenant covers attendance, willingness to share openly, keeping up with studies, and praying together. One group in our church had met for two years but had never broken through to a level of intimacy that had been hoped for in small group ministry. The introduction of the covenant along with its questions of “what keeps you from sharing openly in this group,” totally changed the DNA of the group and bonded them together in a close way after just one evening.

A third part of our new plan is quarterly small group leader training nights. During the “off months,” our director organizes a training night with some new skill for group leaders. These have been useful for newer leaders and for troubleshooting existing group struggles. Again, the groups that were formed before we changed some the “DNA” are resistant to change and even to attending group leader training nights. Many of the groups “trade leadership” around to various members, but it is essential that some one person is the connector to the larger church.

Each quarter we try to teach another piece of the church vision at these training nights. We teach on leadership, how to study the Bible and pray together, and where to find mission opportunities for your group to do together. Those three emphases match the LOVE, GROW, REACH purposes of our church body.

A Typical Meeting

Most of the time we encourage groups to meet in homes where the setting is casual and inviting. Opening your home also reveals something about you and builds a deeper bond. A few of our groups that are large or have many children involved use the church, but they give up the personal touch to do this.

A “typical” small group meeting might stretch over two hours. Many groups meet in the evening and begin with sharing food together. The group that I am a part of meets at 6:30 and begin with a simple potluck meal. In order to keep the focus of the night on study and not on food, we have covenanted together to begin eating by 6:40 with whoever is there. The food portion ends by 7:00.

For the next hour and 20 minutes, the group will proceed with some kind of study that has been chosen by the leader or with group consensus. Our Director of Groups maintains a resource center with many studies available for browsing. By 8:20, one of our members who are responsible for calling the group to prayer, suggests we curtail the study and move to prayer requests and sharing. Our prayer leader usually suggests the group stand, hold hands, and pray over the various requests.

The meeting concludes with a little more conversation, usually some dessert, and people are home by around 9:00. Each of our groups takes responsibility for their own child care. Some meet without children. Most meet with children present in another room of the house. In all of the groups that Colleen and I have been a part of over the years, our children looked forward to “small group” night as much as the adults.

Missional Mindset

Over the last few years we have been trying to establish a missional mindset in our life groups. We encourage our groups to use three out of twelve meetings per trimester in mission together. Sometimes groups will do something to serve the church. Last summer our group pulled weeds in the church landscape one evening. When we put on our teaching conferences at church, groups will often volunteer to set up or clean up. One life group takes responsibility to serve communion at our Saturday night worship once per month.

However, our goal is get our people in mission all over the city. Groups serve breakfast at a homeless ministry monthly for nearly 200 people. Some groups help out the local food banks with organization. A food truck shows up at our church once per month to give away food and groups will help distribute and organize. Our church participates in a local temporary shelter ministry with 14 other churches. Four times per year, our church will become home to 4 or 5 homeless families and groups will help with food, play, tutoring, and any other needs during that week.

We encourage groups to be creative with their energies in mission. A few years ago, we formed a new group in which 2 or 3 participants had experience as tree trimmers (also known as Cherry Pickers). One man still worked for a company with a truck designed for that purpose. As they began to creatively brainstorm mission, they wondered if anyone needed tree trimming. One call to Senior Neighbors in the city uncovered a need voiced by an elderly woman whose trees were beating against her house. She had no funds to hire a trimmer. The group went into action. They spent one whole Saturday trimming her tree and getting to know this elderly woman. The kingdom was advanced with the gifts that God had already put into the group.

“Go Big or Go Home”

Sometimes, to launch, relaunch, or to give your group ministry a boost, it is necessary to bring the whole church around one common theme. One summer we decided to strategically use a fall campaign to double the size of our group ministry. With careful planning, we selected the theme of Christian Community and designed a six week study around it.

The next step was to use July and August to recruit group leaders first. We were attempting to launch 100 new groups one fall. We knew this was an audacious goal. So six weeks ahead of the launch, we began to recruit leaders during weekend worship. Over four Sundays, we cast vision and recruited leaders. We used the term “host” and said the criteria was opening your home and using your index finger. We intended to give the “host” some easy formatted DVD curriculum to use in their homes. A study guide was prepared for each session. Nearly 75 signed up to start a new group that fall.

Weekend services were designed around the same themes. In this way, the whole church is brought to a focus point around one common theme. The yearly campaign idea brings clarity to the church’s mission. It also brings unity of vision and purpose. Preaching will energize the small group meetings.

Once the leaders were in place, we began the sign-ups to join a small group. We also encourage the leaders to go out and find people even unconnected with the church to join their group. My wife Colleen and I actually did this in our own neighborhood. We were amazed that several people who had never visited our church readily agree to join our new small group and do a study of Christian Community. Personal invitation is powerful. All became regular attendees at church in the course of time.

Colleen and I began by walking around our neighborhood. I can still remember feeling a bit anxious even though I was a pastor. But this is what we had asked our people to do. We approached one house where I knew a woman lived who had attended occasionally. Her husband had never come to church.

He answered the door and invited us into the house. He said that his wife was napping and asked what he could do for us. I blurted out that we were starting a group at our house on Christian Community and was inviting them to join. I'll never forget his response. "We can do that." A few hours later when his wife woke up, she called me from the bedroom wondering what on earth had I said because her husband told her they were going to attend a church group at the pastor's house. She was thrilled but just as shocked as we were. They attended and I even invited him to lead one question by the second week. He began attending church and has been a part of the fellowship ever since. Invitation is a powerful tool!

Think Ahead

If you choose to go down the road of the fall campaign to kick off a small group movement in your church, be sure to plan for follow-up just in case it works! What will these new groups do after they complete the six week campaign study? One of the mistakes we made at Cornerstone on our very first campaign was to not prepare for the end game. The six week study ended. Our new small group director resigned, and only then did we realize that nothing had been prepared to give to these new groups. Many did not survive the shaky transition time. Now we understand the need for the hand-off to a new study immediately or even before the six week period is over.

God's Math is Multiplication

One of the newest challenges for us as a church is that we have launched 2 more campuses in the last three years. Now, when we have a life group launch focus, we have to do it x3. This has stretched our team leaders to be creative and deploy high capacity volunteers at each campus who can lead the charge.

Random Things We've Learned

1. Connect people any way you can. People relate to each other through common crisis, calendars, concerns, cities, culture, and commitments. There is no one way that is the right way. Sometimes people connect with each other in ways that surprise even the leadership. Others will have to try more than one group before they find personality matches that are compatible for weekly gatherings.
2. Remember, there is a "pain in every pew." When I have said that out loud, many people laugh thinking I'm talking about difficult people. That is not the point here. Everyone has pains that need to be expressed and healed. You may be in a church that resists small groups or acts as if none is needed. Do not be fooled. There are many pains and having someone who can authentically share your life journey is an awesome and necessary thing.
3. Teach all of your teams and committees how to act like small groups for each other. This is a good place to start. Take a few minutes near the beginning or end of the task meeting to share life, prayer, concerns, joys, and the spiritual journey. Use some scripture to focus the time. In short, care for each other. Do more than business.
4. Let outside events be a catalyst for new groups to form. Our first men's groups formed as a result of a neighboring church hosting a weekend men's conference. The speaker challenged all the men attending to go back to your home

church and form accountability groups. They did. All 22 men who attended invited friends and in one week about half of our parking lot filled up on a Friday morning with several new groups. This trend has continued with women's conferences, marriage seminars, etc. Use what is available to you.

5. Maintain oversight in curriculum used by your groups. Make it a requirement that groups must choose approved curriculum. Too many times someone in a group will lead others astray with strange teaching that is their particular passion or hobby horse. Have a trusted lay person or pastor responsible and an approval process.
6. Never let an irregular person ruin a group. This almost sounds counter-intuitive to the Christian life that is all about healing and rehabilitating the lost or confused. However, an irregular person is someone who talks too much, has little social awareness, breaks confidentiality frequently, or acts in other ways that turn people off. The group leader must deal with these problems directly and privately. If help is needed, call in the director of groups or the pastor for back up. But if left unattended, an irregular person can ruin not only the group, but in people's decision to be part of groups in the future.
7. People will usually stay in your church if they get connected. This is one of the values of a strong small group system. The back door gets closed quickly if newcomers can make friends and have deeper connections. The desire to move on or check out other churches is lessened.
8. Groups provide excellent training ground for your future leaders. Often, a person will learn to read the Bible, pray, and discuss with others in a group setting. They will gain more excitement for your church and its vision simply by being tied into the church.

9. Weekend sermons can provide excellent small group curriculum if someone is trained to write in-depth questions and Bible study for each one. We have found it helpful to include such a discussion guide and sermon outline in each week's bulletin. About 50% of our groups now use the weekend message as their discussion material.
10. Small group ministry is often messy. It is not always black and white. People never stay within the lines. You will be forced to make many mid-course corrections and adjustments as you go. People are internally ready for groups at different times. There is no perfect formula for everything that pertains to small group ministry.

I wish you well on this adventure. Groups have provided the context of growth at Cornerstone Church. People have stayed because they have found community and friendship. This New Testament model of meeting in homes is not a ministry fad. It was the way the early church did church. We were made for community with each other and made to grow closer and closer to God through that community.

For more Small Group Resources:

- **Small Groups in the Wesleyan Way Podcast**
blog.umcdiscipleship.org/category/leadership/wesleyan-way
- **Covenant Discipleship Resources**
bookstore.upperroom.org/Products/PDR1/covenant-discipleship-bundle.aspx
- **The Disciples Journal**
bookstore.upperroom.org/Products/DR850/a-disciples-journal-2017.aspx

About the Author



Brad Kalajainen is the founding and lead pastor of Cornerstone UMC in Grand Rapids, MI. Cornerstone began as a church plant in 1990. Cornerstone has experienced continual growth over 26+ years, and is now a multisite church of three campuses in Caledonia, Wyoming, and Heritage Hill downtown Grand Rapids. Brad's passion is helping people know Jesus and make him known, and helping churches recover their vision and effectiveness.

Approximately 2,500 people worship on one of the Cornerstone campuses every week. Cornerstone is deeply involved in helping to break the cycle of poverty in the Grand Rapids area through several community partnerships. Cornerstone has also established a global outreach to northern Kenya through both clean water and evangelism efforts.

Brad coaches, consults in areas of new church planting and church revitalization, leadership, growth, and multisite ministry related topics. Brad has been married to Colleen for 38 years. They have two grown children, Kaylee and Ben, and, one son-in-law Mitch.



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