



The Small Groups Model

The Small Groups Model stand as the antithesis to the often unspoken belief that "bigger is better." Some even go so far as to brag about how many small groups they have, exposing their captivity to the numbers game.

Size really does matter. The bigger the group, the greater the performance; the smaller the group, the greater the fellowship. These aren't guarantees; simply tendencies.

Worship, with a focus on God, can take place in a large group, a small group or individually. Religious education, with a goal of instruction, usually functions better in a smaller setting and with dialogue. Fellowship, with a goal of shared intimacy, occurs best in a small group through interaction.

"Small groups" come in a variety of shapes and styles. Some seem task-oriented and seek to accomplish a goal, such as a church committee, a youth group leadership planning team, a praise band. Others seem more social in nature, like hanging out at a youth leader's house on Friday nights, skate boarding together, just jamming when it comes to music. Still others blend programs and people, such as a drama group, food prep team, or creating videos for the youth group.

A more conventional understanding of small groups refers to a collection of 6-12 people who meet together regularly for personal and spiritual growth.

Biblical Basis

The Old Testament family unit functioned as a small group (Deuteronomy 6:1-9). Jesus chose 12 disciples to be with him (Mark 3:13-14). The early church worshiped in the temple, but met in homes for fellowship (Acts 2:46-47).

While speaking to the disciples about forgiveness and confronting divisions among believers, Jesus explained, "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst" (Matthew 18:20 NASB). This was never intended to be a hopeful excuse when few people show up for a church meeting. It promises presence when God's people meet together in His name. Listening to God easily becomes more personal in the small group setting.

What It Looks Like

Small groups that gather for personal and spiritual growth must develop trust in order to grow. Usually this begins somewhat superficially as people get acquainted with one another. Simple get-to-know-you games

and gimmicks can pave the way for appreciation, understanding, and greater depth. The first few times a new group meets, a larger percentage of time will need to be devoted to growing friendships. In general, males find it easier to get acquainted through activities, preferably physical ones. Often females need merely a brief starting point to launch their conversational skills.

Spiritual growth needs more than swapping personal stories. An outside source of authority, namely the Bible, guides the group to something greater than anecdotes or personal biases or opinions. Different forms of prayer invite participants to express their needs, their joys, their hopes, and their gratitude. When participants acknowledge and submit to the greater power called God in prayer, it levels the playing field within the group rather than creating a hierarchy.

Group rules provide security by establishing boundaries within which growth can take place. Although these would seem obvious to some, they should be identified and endorsed by individuals within the group. These include respect, authenticity, confidentiality, accountability, and common sense elements such as engaging but not dominating discussions, and taking reasonable risks to grow.

Keys To Make It Work

Perhaps the greatest key to small groups is the leader. This person needs to be someone who understands God as well as group dynamics. The leader serves as a facilitator to create a safe climate from which participants will take reasonable risks. A clear-cut manual can't determine what to do in a given situation. The leader must. Sometimes this means to back off and other times it means to plunge forward.

Commitment prevents many youth and young adults from joining or staying with a

small group. Personal invitations with dialogue can set appropriate expectations. An open period of 2-3 gatherings provides an opportunity for individuals to check things out to see if they will be part of the small group. But then a commitment needs to be made to meet consistently as a small group. Without that, the group will start from "ground zero" each session rather than building on previously established trust.

Setting a terminal point enables participants to make the commitment. Otherwise they fear losing face or being a "drop out." Consider the rhythm of your target group as you set up 8-12 sessions to gather and then take a break. Young people are more likely to commit to a weekly gathering over a 2-3 month span than an indefinite promise each week. After taking a break for a few weeks, start afresh and allow others to join, or break into two groups and start the process anew.

Input from God needs to be applied to personal living. Instead of admonishing others how to live, personal applications stem from God's calling on the individual, which then receives encouragement, prayer support, and follow up from the rest of the group. The group provides security for the individual to respond to God, and then the group assists the individual to follow through with the individual's response.

Obstacles

Busyness prevents many from committing to a small group. Simple logistics such as time and place sometimes make gathering regularly difficult or impossible. Negative previous experiences with small groups can create a credibility gap regarding their value and potency.

Fear and insecurity stop others. Ironically, both can best be dealt with in a small group. The small group facilitator continues to be the

key to initiate and to direct the small group. Sharing too much or not enough can derail a group, as can broken confidences or personal friction that divides rather than strengthens through growth, forgiveness, and grace.

Opportunities

Some say that the best evidence for Christ is a loving and loveable Christian. A similar statement could be made regarding small groups—the best evidence for the value of small groups is a small group that works.

