

Five Essentials for Small Group Health

How to keep your groups growing vibrantly.

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Churches all over the nation are recognizing a need to get small groups going in their congregations. But getting small groups started in a church and keeping the groups healthy are two completely different jobs.

As head of Touch Outreach Ministry, my job is to look at churches that have failed with small groups and to try to help them find health. As I've done that, I've seen several principles of health emerge:

1. **Relationships must be a priority.** Holistic small groups can only work when relationships between group members are considered number one. And that means having regular contact outside of meetings. I've experienced a vast majority of the transformation in my life through a small group experience, and it happened because of this principle. The groups have been very intimate friends of mine with whom I can share transparently. They've loved me unconditionally, and we've been able to show Christ to one another. I didn't view it as an opt-in thing. Without it, it would be like not having enough air to breath. They've been that valuable.
2. **Leaders need adequate training.** Jesus is the best example of this. He discipled his people. He spent a lot of time with them, and out of relationship they started mimicking him, doing things the way he did them. Lots of leaders were produced this way, and they did great things—like planting churches and going to the uttermost parts of the world.

Many churches get the process backwards. They want to give people a title and then train them. Jesus never did that. He spent three and a half years training and developing. Then he said, "You are my disciples." I think this is the way we ought to do it. We need to get people to serve in ministry and affirm them as we see their gifts. Then we can say "You're really good at this. Do you realize that? Wouldn't you like to be a leader?"

Another reason adequate training is so important is that it gives you the opportunity to get to know the character of potential leaders. One of my biggest fears is promoting people to small group leadership too quickly. Sometimes when churches are desperate for leaders, they'll fast-track people into leadership without really knowing their character. Then a year later they find out the person's marriage is on the rocks or they're addicted to pornography or something like that. Had they gotten to know these people and their personal problems, then they could've said, "Your house isn't in order. We're not going to give you leadership elsewhere."

3. **Everyone should be viewed as a leader.** Everyone in the group has some spiritual gift and should be encouraged to develop it. These gifts often surface through leading. So everyone should be given the opportunity to lead in some way.
4. **Healthy groups divide and multiply.** A healthy family raises children who want to become independent and start families of their own. They don't break relationship. They just move out and start their own family. They come back and visit, and eventually the parents might move back in with the kids. Small groups should function in the same way.

It really bothers me when the "fifty-year-old kid" stays at home in our churches and never wants to be a leader.

5. **The focus of the group should be living out the Gospel.** I don't think holistic small groups should be Bible studies. I think they should be a place where the group applies God's Word to their lives. They should gather together on a weekly basis to experience the presence, the power and the purpose of Christ in their lives. I suggest that if we stopped learning anything new about the Bible and only put into practice what we know today, we'd have three or four lifetimes of practical application that we could make in our small group setting without ever learning one more new truth about the Bible.

As with any health or fitness program, success is not instantaneous. This is definitely a transferable truth when it comes to developing small group ministry. Good health takes time and dedication. So remember to be patient!