

Developing Small Group Accountability

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Toward the end of the movie "*Simon Birch*," the driver of a school bus full of children (on their way home from a winter church camp) tries to avoid a deer in the road. In doing so he finds himself careening down a lake embankment and crashing into the frigid winter waters. The children panic fearing the worst when little Simon gets their attention and says, "Stop it. I am not going to let anything happen to anybody here. Understand?" He and his friend then proceed to lead each child to safety.

What if you and I took that same approach with the people in our small groups? What if we declared to them, "Stop. We are not going to let anything happen to you. We are going to extend to you the grace, love and forgiveness like you have never known before." In his book, "The Safest Place on Earth," Larry Crabb (a popular counselor and author) defines Christianity as a place where someone can hit bottom and be ok. Not that they made ok choices but that that person is ok within the group. When someone hits bottom, does your group turn to them or away from them?

Creating a "safe place" where people can truly open up and share at a deep intimate level is an important step in developing real intimacy in small group community. The beginning of this journey starts by allowing people to disclose parts of their personal life story and being affirmed by their fellow group members. It is sharing from the light side of life and moving to our deepest needs. But this is just the beginning. The authors of "The Ascent of a Leader," explain that there is a difference between "disclosure" and "vulnerability." In disclosure, I get to decide what and how much I disclose, but vulnerability is allowing someone to know everything about me- good and bad, strengths and weaknesses. This is where I become totally open and vulnerable about my entire life. What are we talking about? The next step past disclosure is accountability.

Accountability is the turbocharger for individual spiritual growth and group intimacy. Many of us say we want to grow spiritually, but we fall short mainly because we are not willing to become vulnerable with someone in our group. Here is a list of suggestions to build accountability into your small group.

Group Goals

1. Divide your small group by gender regularly to allow members to engage in more intimate discussions.
2. Challenge each group member to seek out an accountability partner within the group (men with men and women with women). Base your selection on natural affinity. Whom do you enjoy being with? With whom are you at ease in your group?
3. Consider allowing time (about 10 minutes) for accountability partners to get together during selected meetings. Accountability pairs should find a quiet place to discuss their responses to customize accountability questions.
4. Encourage members to meet outside the group setting and discuss issues for which they need accountability.

5. Select accountability questions that relate to the following areas: your relationship with God, your relationship with your spouse, your relationship with your children, your use of time and money, moral and ethical behavior, and areas of personal struggle.

Here are a few sample questions

1. Have you spent time praying and reading Scripture this week?
2. Have you compromised your integrity this week?
3. Have you been above reproach in your financial dealings this week?
4. Have you spent sufficient time with your family this week?
5. Have you lied about anything we have just talked about?
6. Develop an accountability covenant. Agree to meet with your partner. Agree to answer one question in one of the areas mentioned above at each group meeting. (You select your own question, but rotate the question each week.) Agree to uphold one another in prayer each day until the group ends. Agree to listen to each other's problems with your eyes and your heart. Finally, agree to a specific day when the both of you will either renew your covenant or end your accountability relationship.

The goal of accountability is to increase your ability to bear fruit through an encouraging and challenging relationship with another brother or sister in Christ. *"He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm"* (Proverbs 13:20).

Individual Goals

Too often we attend church services and small group meetings with masks on, concealing our sinfulness from ourselves and the rest of the group. The church should be the one place where we are able to admit our imperfections, the place we feel we must not act perfect. For "all are sinners." A hidden sinful life-style poisons a person from within. Unexpressed sin holds the person in bondage to it. Confession may be the key to taking off the masks. Does the word *confession* make you uncomfortable? Do you think only of priests in small, dark booths? True, we evangelical Christians are not "into" confession. But there it is, in *James 5:16*: *"Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed."*

Scripture emphasizes confession in other places as well, from Adam to the Levitical priests to the psalmist to the prophets to the New Testament church. The best setting for learning about and eventually practicing Christian confession is in the small group. People are more likely to confess their sins among just a few people whom they trust, who can hold them accountable, and who can be held accountable.

This isn't going to happen in your first meeting, and maybe not even in your twenty-first. Accountability and trust, the prerequisites to confession, take time. With these things in mind, here are five things you can do to make confession a natural part of your small group.

1. Know one another. Community-building is an essential part of your meeting. Icebreaker questions help. So do application questions in the Bible study that ask people to share their opinions and feelings. As people get to know each other, they will be more comfortable with one another. Then they will begin to trust one another.
2. Be vulnerable. Usually the leader needs to open up his or her life before other group members will do the same. When you take off your mask, others will be encouraged to take off theirs.

3. Be confidential. Group members won't share personal struggles and areas of sin if they think it might be blabbed outside the group. Be sure everyone knows that things said in the group are held in confidentiality. Remind them of this especially when a deep concern is expressed.

4. Care for one another. People will open up more when they are sure you really care about them. Be ready to help in times of physical, emotional and spiritual need. People will respond by sharing their struggles with you.

5. Hold each other accountable. Accountability is a tough discipline. But we cannot do it alone. We need each other. At first try holding one another accountable for being on time to meetings, then for disciplines such as personal prayer and Bible study, and then, as trust is built, for issues that deal with sin.