

# Maintaining ‘Quality Control’ in Small Group Ministries

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Small group ministries are “hot”! Never before have I seen so many different congregations seriously studying the feasibility of beginning such a ministry. At the College Avenue church in El Dorado, Arkansas, we have had some sort of small groups for more than 22 years and they’ve been a rich blessing to the spiritual health and growth of our church family. We have found that strong bonds of love and fellowship between Christians can be forged in this format *and* that the more informal atmosphere of a small group can allow non-Christians to comfortably “test the waters” before making a full commitment to Jesus.

However, I have talked with some church leaders who are reluctant to introduce small groups because they are uncomfortable with them structurally, viewing groups as “dividing” their members in geographically scattered home gatherings, as opposed to “uniting” them in one larger group in the more familiar, church-building assembly. I believe such a reaction stems from a misconception of the relationship between small groups and the congregation as a whole. Our experience is that when small groups are done right, they can create even greater unity in a church family. Nevertheless, I do *not* minimize such concerns because I realize that shepherds of the flock have the responsibility to be on guard against divisions, whether from the creation of personal cliques or the promotion of false doctrines (Acts 20:28-31).

Since the decentralized structure of a small group ministry *could* provide the opportunity for divisions to develop, over the years we have developed some definite ideas about maintaining what we call “quality control” in our program. We have found the following four things to be essential in ensuring that small groups build up the whole church.

**1. First, our small group program has a clearly defined purpose and structure.** It is not uncommon for individuals who desire the more personal atmosphere of a small group ministry to urge their elders to implement such a program in their congregation. If the church leaders simply seek to appease those individuals by letting them “start a few groups,” however, the leaders are inviting future difficulties by failing to integrate the groups with the overall mission of the church.

Every congregational ministry should have well-defined goals, and small group programs are no exception. No healthy program or ministry can “run itself” and stay on the right tract indefinitely, and any leadership which gives some of its members the vague mandate to “go off and do something in small groups” is asking for trouble. On the other hand, if the leaders reject such a request out of hand without giving it serious consideration, they may be missing out on an approach that has great potential for enriching the church (and which already has supporters whose enthusiasm can be harnessed).

Therefore it would be far better to consider such requests in relation to the larger goals of the church. One of the first things elders should ask is “What could we accomplish with such a ministry? What purposes could small groups serve in our congregation’s mission?” Small

groups may serve many different functions, from Bible study to fellowship to outreach to discipleship training. I recommend that church leaders who are asking these questions read the books of John Ellas (*Church Growth Through Groups* and *Clear Choices for Churches*) and *Leading Life-Changing Small Groups* by Bill Donahue.

Our elders went through this process by appointing several individuals with demonstrated ministry competence to investigate small groups and draw up a proposal for a program that would fit our congregation's goals and needs. After this task force had reported back to the elders, the necessary adjustments had been incorporated, and the decision was made to implement the ministry, the elders then asked those same individuals to serve as the leaders of the program. It is the responsibility of these leaders to coordinate the groups and regularly report back to the elders on their progress.

From the beginning our shepherds resolved that the primary purpose of introducing this new ministry would be to provide a more comfortable and nonthreatening environment for non-Christians to be introduced to Jesus and His teachings. Over the years we have realized many other benefits from our small groups: this format is an excellent tool for assimilating new members and building relationships, and the unique dynamics of group interaction as we wrestle with a passage together has led to some of the richest Bible studies that our church members have ever experienced. However, we try to keep our primary purpose of evangelism before the congregation by praying in both our congregational assemblies and small group meetings for the success of the group's outreach; by furnishing brochures for our members to use in inviting their friends; by designing our group sessions and study material to be accessible to unchurched individuals; and by noting in our monthly attendance records the number of visitors the groups are attracting.

**2. Second, our elders have been personally and publicly involved in the program from the beginning.** When we kicked off our small group ministry, **all** of our shepherds were in the pulpit every Sunday for six weeks, publicly explaining the purpose of the program and visibly demonstrating their support. In addition, our elders encouraged members to participate in a group and to invite their unsaved friends.

At the beginning of the program our shepherds rotated among the groups on a weekly basis. This enabled them to show their support and to get a first-hand look at the functioning of the groups. As time went on, however, our elders desired the opportunity to belong to a group of their own. Although it is still understood that any overseer is welcome to visit any group at any time, all of our shepherds have gone on to take a more permanent position in the ministry, serving as leaders, co-leaders, or hosts of a group. Our elders have found that this program can actually enhance their shepherding since it provides more opportunities for personal interaction and prayer requests.

**3. Third, we conduct a weekly group leaders meeting.** In addition to an initial training workshop for group leaders and co-leaders, we conduct a leaders meeting each Sunday morning during the Bible class hour. Program leaders like the weekly meeting because it gives them the opportunity to build enthusiasm, receive attendance reports, discuss any concerns, and highlight possible evangelistic contacts who can be invited to a group. Small group leaders like the

meeting because it gives them the opportunity to review and rehearse that week's lesson. Reviewing the lesson together provides three benefits; it greatly lessens the burden of preparation for the leaders; the interaction between group leaders enriches everyone's insights and understandings of the text; and it provides occasions to discuss and practice group leadership skills. *We strongly believe that the weekly group leaders meeting is a key factor in maintaining "quality control" in this ministry.*

**4. Finally, all of the groups use the same Bible discussion guides.** Our groups are given a great deal of flexibility as to when and where to meet, so long as their schedule doesn't compete with our Sunday morning or Wednesday night programs. However, *all* of our groups use the same Bible discussion guides.

We would *never* recruit group leaders and then expect them to launch off into "whatever you want to discuss" for four reasons: it might create an unhealthy competition between groups for the more creative or popular teachers; it could allow individual leaders or group members to use group meetings to promote their own personal agendas; we wanted our members to know that if circumstances cause them to miss their usual group, they can attend any other home meeting without losing the continuity of whatever series we are studying; and finally, we feel requiring group leaders to come up with their own material would create an undue burden on them.

From the beginning, therefore, we decided to furnish group leaders with discussion guides. However, we were dissatisfied with much of the material we reviewed: some study guides were too lecture-oriented while other material was better-suited for group discussion but lacked Scriptural substance. After struggling to find material with an appropriate balance between solid Bible teaching and small group dynamics, we ended up producing our own discussion guides.

Each lesson covers a specific Biblical text, has a specific aim, and supplies the group leader with a summary statement to give them a place to "wrap up." And each lesson contains carefully-worded, open-ended questions which are designed to allow group members to "discover" and make personal application of the truths in the passage they are studying. In practice this promotes the spontaneous interaction and personal participation of group members which is so vital to such a format while at the same time it helps to ensure that the discussion is actually grounded in God's Word.

Since participation in small groups is more effective when it is voluntary and because some individuals will prefer to continue meeting at the building or will meet to partake of the Lord's Supper, we continue to provide an assembly at the building. However, those who meet in our auditorium on Sunday nights always study the same material as the groups, so that those who assemble at the building would never feel like they're being "shut out" or are "second class" because they have not chosen to join one of the home-based groups.

## Conclusion

We have found that small groups provide a marvelous format for personal participation between Christians and outreach to the unchurched. This format has proven to be popular with our members, but more importantly, we believe it actually moves us toward a more Biblical

understanding of the undenominational nature of first-century Christianity by helping us to recapture the crucial “one another” dynamic of the early church. While the decentralized structure of small groups has presented some challenges to our traditional concepts, the four factors discussed in this article have helped us to maintain what we call “quality control” in our program. That prevents any of our small groups from becoming self-serving or divisive and encourages all of our groups to be united in building up the whole body of Christ.

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