

How to Fail at Small Groups

My church had grown in the past, but we had reached a plateau of around 200 members. People were complaining that they didn't know others seated around them. At a church growth seminar I attended, the leader said the solution was to begin a series of small fellowship groups of eight to twelve people. I knew that was the answer to the growth problem and the cry for intimate fellowship.

I proceeded to form a few small groups. I talked to each group, gave them some material, and encouraged them to enjoy this wondrous, new experience. I don't suppose it will surprise experienced leaders that these groups died within three months.

I quickly realized that while many books and lecturers proclaim that the small group should be the basic structure of the church, few point out the problems to avoid. From my experience, I've identified five pitfalls that can lead to the demise of a small group.

One: Lack of Leader Training or Guidance

The leader is the most important element in a group. My initial mistake was to assume that leadership could be transferred from person to person with equal success. I learned the hard way that people should have some experience in small groups before they try to lead.

The best way to train leaders is to form a model group. Choose those you believe would make good leaders and model what will be expected of them. As they see you leading discussions, sharing, and dealing with conflict in the group, they will begin to understand what it takes to be a leader.

Two: Lack of an Understood Contract

From the beginning, members should know the group's purpose and what is expected of them. If people understand that the group will last for eight weeks and has a twofold purpose of Bible study and fellowship, chances are good that they will attend faithfully and achieve those purposes.

This lack has killed more than one group I've started. One man in an early group complained, "I came here to study the Bible, not to spill my guts to the people here." I had never told him that one of my purposes for forming the group was to build relationships among the members. He came expecting to spend the whole time in study and felt betrayed when we didn't.

Three: Not Taking Time for Relationships

The covenant of a small group should clearly state that part of your purpose is to grow in fellowship with each other. New Testament writers tell us fifty-eight times to be engaged in specific activities in relationship with other people, which will enable us to serve more effectively and grow spiritually. What better place to perform these responsibilities than a small group?

People have an inborn need to know and be known. One of the best ways to facilitate relationships in a small group is to use questions that encourage people to say something about themselves, such as, "Where did you go on your first date with your spouse, and how did you feel that night? What is your favorite place in your home, and why? When did God become more than a word to you?"

Four: Choosing Lecture Over Discussion

People don't remember much of a lecture. They learn much better if there is a discussion in which they can discover truth for themselves. Remember these two guidelines: Don't ask questions that have a correct answer (such as, "Is Jesus Christ really God?"), and let the group members be the experts. Ask them a question they will know something about, and let them discuss it.

Five: Not Knowing When to End

Groups pass through a series of stages: (a) precontract, when they discuss their purposes and goals; (b) orientation, when they get used to each other; (c) power and control, a time in which people decide who is in control and what roles they will take; (d) trust, when they enjoy the group and each other—it usually takes several meetings to get to this point; (e) differentiation, where people begin to lose interest because they are ready for a change; and (f) conclusion or new beginning, a time to celebrate what the group has meant to them and move on or begin again.

When you see differentiation taking place, don't try to pump life into a dying group. Celebrate what the group has meant to you and move on. If you end the group on a positive note, rather than allowing it to die slowly, the members will be more likely to move on to other groups.

People in small groups often experience explosive spiritual growth. Such groups are vitally needed today. But approach them with careful planning, because it is much harder to start again after people have experienced failure. As you build, avoiding the pitfalls, may your experiences prove positive!

—Bruce T. Ballast, Chino, California