

RESEARCH PAPER:
Small Group Dynamics from a Biblical and Theological Perspective

In order to effectively lead a spiritual small group or oversee a small group ministry, it is important to have a good understanding of small group dynamics. This paper will present an overview of the main dynamics of spiritual small groups from a Christian ministry perspective.

GROUP FORMATION

In starting the process of forming a small group, there needs to be a person to initially coordinate and make the necessary arrangements. That lead coordinating person will spearhead the administrative decision-making and its implementation.¹ One of the first decisions is what the purpose of the group will be, keeping in mind how that fits into the parent ministry organization's mission.² With the purpose thought out, the coordinator then should present the idea to the ministry's leadership to obtain their approval, guidance, support, and endorsement.³ Now having approval in hand, the next priority is to start identifying and contacting potential group members, while watching for any with leadership capabilities.⁴

As people are being initially gathered together, the group's identity and composition can begin to take shape. Guided by the clear purpose of the group, the type of the group can be established, whether it will be primarily a "task, teaching, growth, support," affinity, holistic, or some other type of group.⁵ The meeting days and times can be tentatively determined, along with the start date and duration.⁶ A suitable location should be found, preferably geographically close but not in a church building.⁷ The home or building should be inviting, pleasant, accommodating, and in a safe, easily accessible neighborhood with adequate parking.⁸ When a leader has been selected for the group, then the meeting format can be formulated and would normally include fellowship, worship, Bible study, prayer, ministry, outreach focus, and refreshments.⁹ Now advertising can be implemented, especially by word of mouth, in the church's bulletin, and from the pastor enthusiastically promoting it from the pulpit.¹⁰

GOALS

As the group begins meeting, the leadership should clearly present and define the goals of the group, and then consistently reinforce them thereafter.¹¹ Of course, one goal is to provide a friendly social environment that is safe, supportive, nurturing, caring, accepting, attracting, interactive, and meaningful.¹² Resting on a foundation of common interests, group members should bond with each other in solid, trusting friendships.¹³ In essence, as a group they establish

¹ Ross, 53.

² Isgar, 19.

³ Ross, 53.

⁴ Price, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3, 4; Gladen, 151; Arnold, *Small Group Outreach*, 105.

⁶ Price, 8.

⁷ Watts, 118; Gladen, 57.

⁸ Watts, 118; Hunsicker, 205.

⁹ Severance.

¹⁰ Price, 9; Cho, 107.

¹¹ Ross, 53.

¹² Womack, 40.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 39.

a covenant, laying out how they are going to behave towards each other in love and respect, and intimately support each other emotionally and spiritually.¹⁴

Another goal is to foster spiritual understanding, which includes applicative growth towards maturity and active ministering, especially in a caring community group setting.¹⁵ As they study the Bible together, members should feel free to discuss the passage, express their beliefs, and give opinions or advice.¹⁶ Verbally processing biblical concepts will help people to mold their beliefs and their faith on their journey to becoming “healthy followers of Christ”.¹⁷ Individual and corporate prayer in the group also will fortify their faith.¹⁸

Putting their faith into action, group members should resolutely pursue the goal of evangelistically reaching out to connect with and draw in others outside the group.¹⁹ A characteristic of this goal is God’s people interacting and working together to live out their mission of bringing God’s kingdom to their neighborhood, community, and the world.²⁰ A desired result from this all-inclusive outreach mindset is that the group should be regularly engaging in discussing, planning, and implementing outreach strategies, techniques, and projects.²¹ Another result can be the birth of a new small group.²²

ROLES

Perhaps the most visible of roles within a small group is the leader, who typically provides leadership and shepherding in a variety of capacities.²³ In addition to the leader and perhaps an apprentice-leader, there usually is a host, who provides the home to meet in.²⁴ There may also be a person who coordinates the snack food, a person who plans social events, and a person who excels at persistent prayer.²⁵

By nature, there is a fundamental role expectation within small groups for each individual member to conduct and behave in alignment with the group’s rules.²⁶ Members are expected to be worthy of trust and to be willing to build trust.²⁷ Each person is to live in harmony with others in the group, which means there should be a maintaining of proper boundaries in thoughts, words, and actions.²⁸ There should be an attitude of mutual support, not competitiveness.²⁹ Respect and appreciation of each other’s unique personality and contribution should be predominant.³⁰ With authenticity and sincerity, members should relate to each other in a way that affirms, builds confidence, rallies around, and extends “a cushion of love and comfort”.³¹

¹⁴ John 13:34; Boren, 104; Bird, 26.

¹⁵ Ephesians 4:12-13; Boren, 17; Zersen, 234; Donahue, 29.

¹⁶ Womack, 40.

¹⁷ Bird, 29; Gladen, 47.

¹⁸ Womack, 40.

¹⁹ Luke 19:10; Cho, 114.

²⁰ Boren, 24, 17, 18.

²¹ Severance; Morley.

²² Coleman, 33.

²³ Donahue, 162.

²⁴ Coleman, 5.

²⁵ Arterburn, 79.

²⁶ Ross, 32.

²⁷ Isgar, 42.

²⁸ Meyer, *One Anothering, Volume 2*, 87; Arnold, *Seven Tools*, 30.

²⁹ Reid, 395, 397.

³⁰ Arnold, *Seven Tools*, 74.

³¹ Reid 397; Grady; Selzer, 39; Gwaltney, 11.

Corporately, members are expected to protect the unity and functionality of the group by maintaining confidentiality, refraining from gossiping or slandering, guarding sound doctrine, and working to enhance the quality of the group's activities.³²

As members mature spiritually, they are expected to fulfill the role of ministering to each other by upholding in prayer, cultivating accountability, challenging to pursue godliness, and sharing Scriptures.³³ On a higher level, members can minister by helping to determine God's will, identify spiritual gifting, and bearing burdens of each other.³⁴

COMMUNICATION

Ministering to each other obviously involves extensive communication, which should be characterized by openness, honesty, transparency, and "speaking the truth in love".³⁵ In a ministering environment of a small group, there should be security and freedom to express thoughts, opinions, feedback, personal interests, feelings, reactions, ideas, doubts, fears, needs, concerns, struggles, hurts, and scars.³⁶ Members should be encouraged, edified, and supported as they share stories, testimonies, accounts of their spiritual pilgrimage, experiences of increased self-understanding, and personal information about themselves and their past.³⁷

An important aspect of verbal communication is a willingness to receive and listen without interrupting, criticizing, judging, ridiculing, or trying to fix the problem necessarily.³⁸ In other words, this give-and-take approach to communication should always be gracious.³⁹ This considerate and intimate communication in which members open and pour out their hearts creates stronger relational bonds in a "deeper level of fellowship" in community.⁴⁰

During the formal part of the meeting, communication takes the forms of ice-breakers, sharing time, ministering, prayer requests, praying, teaching, reading Scriptures, discussions, asking questions, singing, worshipping, and planning.⁴¹ Informally, communication should be occurring before the meeting starts, after the meeting ends, and outside the meetings during the week in one-on-one, subgroup, or social situations.⁴² Contact situations can be in person, by phone, or through social media such as Facebook, Twitter, E-mails, or text messages.⁴³

Communication can also occur through advertising or announcements in the church's services, bulletins, pamphlets, or website.⁴⁴ Ideally, the head pastor should be promoting the groups from the pulpit and within the church's leadership, perhaps sharing inspiring stories, developments, or updates.⁴⁵

LEADERSHIP

³² Titus 1:9; Selzer, 43; Price, 47; Hestenes, 94; Earley, 43; Walton, 105; Veach.

³³ James 5:16; Gladen, 84; Arnold, *Seven Tools*, 7; Meyer, *One Anothering, Volume 2*, 74; Tripp; *Consider The 5Ws*.

³⁴ Gladen, 64, 63; Galatians 6:2.

³⁵ Price, 50; Ephesians 4:15 NIV.

³⁶ Price, 51; Boren, 112, 108; Grady; Selzer, 39; Ashbrook, 187, 188; Piwowarski, 35.

³⁷ Ephesians 4:29; Selzer, 38; Boren, 121; Hunsicker, 192; Gwaltney, 5; Reid, 399; Hestenes, 102; Stanley, 4.

³⁸ James 1:19; Price, 49; Meyer, *One Anothering, Volume 2*, 42, 56; Boren, 113, 108, 120.

³⁹ Ashbrook, 188; Hunsicker, 207.

⁴⁰ Grady; Hunsicker, 206; Reid, 402; Selzer, 38.

⁴¹ Price, 16, 13; Severance; Omartian, 115, 114.

⁴² Hestenes, 106; Boren, 109; Gladen, 55.

⁴³ Boren, 109; Gladen, 207.

⁴⁴ Gladen, 207.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

A central person in the composition of a small group is the leader, whose functions and performance are critical to the health of the group.⁴⁶ Some primary functions of the leader are to structure the format of the meeting, lead the study, and facilitate the discussions.⁴⁷ As the leader prepares for and oversees the meeting, diligence is maintained to ensure that it proceeds in a timely, orderly, and proper fashion, with communication and teaching being clear and consistent.⁴⁸ The leader knows the direction that the group should go, and orchestrates all of the steps to facilitate that outcome.⁴⁹ Essentially, the leader acts as an “administrator, social director, path finder, moderator, commentator, cheerleader, police officer”, recruiter, and advisor.⁵⁰

The leader may also do the teaching, seeking to inspire learning and application of biblical principles into real-life situations of the members.⁵¹ Consequently, the leader is thereby responsible to acquire a curriculum, preferably that gets the members to learn and to think about their spirituality in interesting, relevant, and engaging ways.⁵² All of the leader’s activities ultimately rest upon the goal of facilitating, nurturing, and developing the spiritual growth of each member.⁵³ This “concern and care for the well-being of each of the group members” is accomplished through servant leadership.⁵⁴ Having a shepherd’s heart, the servant leader cares for and guides each of them on their path toward spiritual maturity.⁵⁵

Another function of the leader should be to discover, develop, and deploy the service and leadership potential of members.⁵⁶ This is done by mentoring, apprenticing, pouring into their lives, discerning their giftedness, placing them in serving situations, inspiring them, connecting with them relationally, and acknowledging their contributions.⁵⁷ In all of the leader’s activities, there should be the modeling of inherent noble virtues such as warmth, acceptance, love, respect, honesty, sensitivity, genuineness, transparency, openness, empathy, and accountability.⁵⁸

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Conflicts and difficulties are inevitable within small groups.⁵⁹ If left unaddressed or unchecked, they can quickly erode the enjoyment of a group, thereby dissuading people from attending.⁶⁰ Contrary to normal thinking, groups can actually benefit from working through conflicts, becoming more mature with deeper understanding and appreciation of each other.⁶¹ The struggle and long discussions about the conflict can facilitate learning, community, and

⁴⁶ Logan, 129.

⁴⁷ Donahue, 39; Arterburn, 79.

⁴⁸ Hestenes, 37; Arnold, *Seven Tools*, 56; *Helping You Build*, 43, 84, 42; Shotwell, 134, 135.

⁴⁹ *Helping You Build*, 43; Sanders, 126.

⁵⁰ Ross, 19; *Helping You Build*, 33.

⁵¹ Gladen, 72; Colan, 13.

⁵² Donahue, 39; Arterburn, 71, 73; Wuthnow, 1240.

⁵³ Gladen, 162; Donahue, 29.

⁵⁴ Hestenes, 39; *Helping You Build*, 33.

⁵⁵ Gladen, 51; Donahue, 162, 38.

⁵⁶ Earley, *8 Habits*, 70, 73, 74.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 65, 71; Donahue, 162; Colan, 23; Gladen, 90; Mattera, 5.

⁵⁸ Ross, 38, 39; Cho, 140; Price, 52-54, 85.

⁵⁹ Price, 35.

⁶⁰ Arterburn, 72.

⁶¹ Reid, 403.

organization of the group.⁶² On top of all this is the mandate from God in Romans 14:19 NIV, "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification."

There are numerous common types or sources of potential conflict. A person may be: dominating the conversation or the meeting; excessively talking; overly emotional or needy; intoxicated or high on drugs; rationally unaware; or completely silent.⁶³ There may be profanity, inappropriate topics, destructive feedback, unhelpful advice-giving, consistent arguing, displays of anger, breaking of confidentiality, unacceptable romance, repeated rude interrupting, character flaws, gossip, or sinful behaviors.⁶⁴ Personality differences, wandering off topic, submitting wrong answers, strongly verbalizing opinions, and errant doctrine can also generate tension and conflict.⁶⁵

Typically and by default, the leader needs to be the person who initiates action steps to deal with intra-group conflict.⁶⁶ Some biblical guidelines and principles for dealing with conflict include: "accept one another" in Romans 15:7 NIV; "live in harmony with one another" in 1 Peter 3:8 NIV; "bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another" in Colossians 3:13 NIV; "submit to one another" in Ephesians 5:21 NIV; praying; extending grace; embracing truth; possessing love and humility, pursuing reconciliation and restoration, and utilizing wisdom, perseverance, and gentle persuasion.⁶⁷

Although each conflict has its own unique circumstance requiring specific treatment steps, some general techniques for addressing and resolving conflicts are: presenting applicable biblical principles; redirecting the conversation; affirming and validating positive behavior; instituting accountability; speaking to the person privately after the meeting; asking for clarification; acknowledging emotions; changing the form of the questions; expressing appreciation for valued virtues or participation; referring to professional help; requesting intervention from a church leader; reviewing the group's rules; agreeing to disagree; and removing the person from the group.⁶⁸

PRAYER

An easy-to-overlook but vital dynamic of a spiritual small group is prayer. Prayer is a form of communion with God that members can learn and experience both together and individually within a small group.⁶⁹ They can learn how to pray, gain experience in praying out loud in a group, and be exposed to various methods of praying, such as: "silent; circle; conversational; designated; popcorn; or concerns" praying.⁷⁰ Their understanding of the potentials of prayer will expand as they see prayers answered, which will help them develop a balanced concept of God in relation to how He answers prayer.⁷¹ Through repeated participation, members can gain confidence in various aspects of praying, such as sharing prayer requests, interceding for others,

⁶² Stevens, 179; Earley, *Pocket Guide*, 41.

⁶³ Arterburn, 72; Omartian, 116; Price, 37, 91, 86; Cloud, 2.

⁶⁴ Price, 38, 39, 86, 90; *Helping You Build*, 107; Cloud, 2.

⁶⁵ Price, 173; Earley, *Pocket Guide*, 203; Cloud, 2; Hunsicker, 197.

⁶⁶ Arterburn, 72.

⁶⁷ Cloud, 2; Stevens, 178.

⁶⁸ Gladen, 49; Earley, *Pocket Guide*, 202, 43; Cloud, 3; Price, 36, 37, 38, 174, 41; Coleman, 52.

⁶⁹ *Helping You Build*, 19; Hestenes, 107; Arnold, *Seven Tools*, 68; Womack, 40.

⁷⁰ Hestenes, 107; Meyer, *One Anothering, Volume*, 34.

⁷¹ Meyer, *One Anothering, Volume 1*, 28, 30.

encouraging others, expressing their inner thinking to God, bonding with others, depending upon the Holy Spirit, and effectively praying for a diversity of needs.⁷²

CHILDREN

Another important issue for many small groups is how to successfully integrate children in the meetings.⁷³ To simplify this complex problem, there are two basic options to involving children in the meetings. One option is to integrate the children into the entire meeting, which would require: patience; tolerance of interruptions; extensive teaching on how to behave and participate properly; and accepting as well as treating each child as a full member.⁷⁴ The other option is to have the children join in with the adults on only select parts of the meeting, and then separate them into another part of the house to have their own activities under the oversight of some adults.⁷⁵ With either of these two options, involving the children in the meeting is definitely worth pursuing because the extended-family-like atmosphere and spiritual activities of the small group can have a huge impact on their lives.⁷⁶

CLOSURE

In conclusion, the information presented in this overview paper can be useful in acquiring a basic understanding of main dynamics of a spiritual small group. Furthermore, in application this information can assist in monitoring, evaluating, and improving group effectiveness and success - for the “glory of God” and the benefit of members.⁷⁷

⁷² James 5:16; Walton, 112; Womack, 40; Omartian, 103; Hestenes, 37; Stafford, 44.

⁷³ Earley, *Pocket Guide*, 207.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 208; Boren, 125, 124.

⁷⁵ Earley, *Pocket Guide*, 208; *Helping You Build*, 87.

⁷⁶ *Helping You Build*, 88; Earley, *Pocket Guide*, 209.

⁷⁷ 1 Corinthians 10:31 NIV; Donahue, 61; Earley, *Pocket Guide*, 227.

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