

2006

The Resource Page

... creative and practical ideas

Brought to you this month
by Mike Harton



Using small groups in Christian education

EFFECTIVENESS FOR LEARNING

I once heard George Barna comment that small groups are ineffective for making disciples. Although that has not been my experience, after listening to his explanation I realized Barna has a particular mental model of small groups, and that the kind of group he described would not be effective for discipling.

Carl George, the Fuller Seminary church growth guru, includes small groups as an integral part of his Meta Church Model. George is the champion of the “empty chair” concept, meaning that any group should always have an empty chair representing the need to reach out to new people. But therein lies the problem with George’s small group model (and Barna’s concept) for discipling. Groups dedicated only to reaching out to new people will be minimally effective in discipling.

Balancing open and closed groups

T-Net International, an effective discipling strategy developed in the Evangelical Free Church (see Hull’s *The Discipling Church*), introduced the idea that to be effective a church needs a balance between open groups and closed groups. Although these two categories have been referenced for at least 30 years, awareness of the need for balance is new.

Open groups are those perpetually open to new people joining, and in fact, inviting new people may be a chief objective. Closed groups form around a particular purpose, often develop a covenant, and once formed do not invite new participants. Sharing is personal and generally very

honest, although not the same as in therapy groups.

Including both open and closed groups in Christian education can insure a balanced focus on outreach and discipleship. In this model, Sunday school classes are open groups, focused on assimilation and fellowship. While these classes participate in Bible study, they do not try to make Bible scholars of members, nor do they engage in ongoing ministry projects as a class. There is no attempt to develop intimacy or deep trust for sharing. The Bible study simply reaches into the scripture for the day to find a nugget of truth members can digest and apply immediately at home, work or school. An effort is made, however, to whet appetites for deeper study.

Deeper study occurs in closed groups where intimacy based on trusting relationships encourages participants to probe, struggle, challenge and rethink assumptions, personalizing the teachings of scripture. Two things happen in closed groups to encourage deepening faith (discipleship): sharing personal spiritual struggles and reflection. Reflection is required for significant learning.

Small group ministry for discipleship

The usual approach to starting small groups is haphazard at best. We guess at what people may respond to or we decide what they need. Why not be intentional?

First, start small. Begin a pilot group comprised of 12 folks willing to try an experiment in intentional discipleship for 12 weeks. After two or three weeks, enlist two group members as apprentice leaders who will observe dynamics in the group and lead a session or two. While the pilot group is in operation, plan a sequenced set of groups.

The beginning group (ex.: “101” or “Covenant”) would include those new to the faith or wanting to explore what being a Christian is all about. The second group would encompass those Christians needing to develop the spiritual disciplines. Mature Christians, perhaps already practicing the disciplines but wanting to be stretched in their faith, would comprise the third group.

When the pilot group concludes, tweak your plan according to the group’s evaluation, and enlist the two apprentices to begin new groups. With the leader of the pilot and the two apprentices you will be ready to launch three groups (and then subsequently each group leader will enlist apprentices). Groups may meet for 4-12 weeks, although a semester system is preferable.

Generally, if you describe the goals and study contents of each group, assigning members will not be necessary. Maintain records for the various groups and encourage members to continue moving through the three types. Of course, those in level-three groups will continue at that level but select different studies each semester.

ENSURING SUCCESS OF NEW GROUPS

Some groups seem to thrive while others struggle or fold after just a few meetings. Group dynamics often determine the success or failure of groups. Usually success or failure is due to leadership, personalities, structure and focus — or lack thereof.

In the small group model proposed earlier, leaders are not asked to direct a group in which they have not participated and apprenticed. Shared leadership is a goal toward which to strive in any group. While the designated leader primarily monitors

THE RESOURCE PAGE is provided by the Congregational Life office of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in partnership with *Baptists Today* and for those dedicated lay leaders working in the educational ministries of local churches. This month’s page was written by Mike Harton, a regional coordinator for CBF’s Initiative for Ministerial Excellence and an adjunct teacher at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond.