

Creating Small Group Ministry Session Plans

After a congregation gets their Small Group Ministry Program up and running, the next question is how to provide good “content” for group discussion? Some congregations use an affinity group model, i.e. quilting, Buddhism, women’s groups, social action, writing, etc. With this approach, the challenge of finding session topics is likely narrowed and groups may not use common sessions.

But most congregations form groups specifically to encourage spiritual exploration and depth. Even here, practice varies: some groups chose topics on their own, some adopt existing curriculum, others explore books chapter by chapter. In some congregations groups are assigned a common topic for each meeting. In at least one program, the sermon, the RE program and the small groups all explore a common theme each month!

Still, the most common practice seems to be creating or finding Small Group Ministry Sessions. In Augusta we have a loose leaf notebook of topics that groups work through at their own pace, and we have been sharing our topics in various ways since we started. I encourage congregations with good topics to make them available, with the strong caveat to respect copyright laws (see page 2).

We have a Topics Committee responsible for creating and approving session topics. Groups and individuals also create and submit topics to the committee for editing and distribution, and I think that our committee is good at shaping sessions to work well for small group ministry! Here is how we work:

We aim to make our sessions facilitator friendly, so we seldom require any kind of preparation on the part of the facilitator. Busy facilitators should be able to get to their group, pull out the topic for the day and start to read.

Then, almost any subject can make a good session. If it would make a sermon, a column, an article a discussion at coffee hour or a self-help book, it will work in a group. The trick is asking the right questions in the right way.

First, keep it simple: groups meet for two hours, at most, and a good part of that time goes, appropriately, to checking in and connecting. So the topics need to be focused. Solitude, for instance, can be loneliness or creative retreat, each will work better as a topic then muddled into one session. Then, keep the questions in a session to a minimum. Three questions

at most, two can be plenty. No group can work through five or more questions in any depth in any one meeting. We do not write multi-session topics, though groups sometimes mine a topic for several meetings.

Then, questions need to open out into discussion rather than direct attention towards a particular conclusion or telescope a right answer. When you look at a question, you should be able to imagine discussion going in a couple of directions.

Also, groups need variety so topics need diversity. There are timeless and serious themes: God, heaven, moral choices, death. Then there are topics that are amusing or warm and fuzzy: pets, most embarrassing moments, a group learning everyone’s favorite dance.

Our sessions begin and end with readings. These can be thematic to introduce, support or enlarge a session’s topic, but they do not need to be. A reading can aim to reconvene the group, quiet the mood or simply celebrate our lives. If anything, I would tend to choose readings that are broader and more general. Thematic readings may work better as part of the topic section.

Finally, keep a sense of perspective. Small group ministry is about connecting people, deepening our spiritual lives; creating community, strengthening our congregations and creating opportunities to serve. We are not creating graduate theological courses, nor should we mimic new age fads. Small group ministry sessions should aim to provide real questions to engage real people in discussions that matter in the living our real lives.

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