

The Role of Confidentiality

One of the essential elements of small group ministry is the use of covenants in groups. A covenant specifies the purpose of each group and how it will function. It serves to define process, format and policy, regulating group life much the way DNA governs the workings of living cells. Often confidentiality in small group ministry is addressed by individual group covenants. Confidentiality impacts how groups welcome new participants, whether they feel like shared ministry groups or therapy groups, how members communicate outside of the group, and the way ministry needs are shared with staff and shared ministry team. Given its impact on group life confidentiality is best addressed at the policy level.

Defaulting to Confidential

If we do not address confidentiality at the policy level it comes up during the group covenanting process. When groups covenant it is normal for group leaders to ask participants for suggestions. *What level of confidentiality should we have?* With a prompt like this it is no surprise that someone suggests that the group be confidential. This is usually stated as “What is said in the group stays in the group”. This is a far cry from the Rev. Bob Hill’s suggestion in *The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry* (p. 32). He suggests not promising confidentiality and offering a statement that includes “avoiding gossip” and not “speaking disrespectfully to or about one another”.

It should be expected that at least one person in a group will have experience with a therapist, support group or some other form of individual or group therapy. Therapy groups tend to have moderate to extremely high levels of confidentiality. Without a general policy groups will tend to default to the highest level of confidentiality requested during the covenanting process. This is understandable, should be anticipated, planned for and avoided!

Closed & Isolated Groups

There are a number of problems that arise with high confidentiality and the very deep disclosure that it encourages. Creating a very safe space for sharing can easily allow a group to tip towards being like therapy. This may lead to some people leaving the group. It also places a great burden on the group, especially the facilitator. As more deep and personal stories are told the sense of intimacy and connection increases. At some point participants are likely to feel uncomfortable having newcomers join the group.

Adding newcomers to a group requires the group to go through a new process of opening up and bonding. Groups that have climbed “a mountain of self disclosure” do not want to come back down to ground level. Many of our congregations have had groups state that they have gone “too deep” for newcomers to join. Again, this makes sense. But it is not what shared ministry is about. If you have groups with high confidentiality do not be surprised when they tell you they are now officially closed.

In addition to encouraging closed groups, high confidentiality can weaken the ministry connections between the group, group leader and larger shared ministry of the congregation. When groups have high levels of confidentiality group leaders may reach a point where they are no longer comfortable bringing ministry needs to their minister(s) or in facilitator training/support sessions. A group leader may tell a minister that she/he has a concern about the group but feels sharing it will violate group's covenant. In a shared ministry system group leaders are part of the ministry team of the congregation. In order for them to serve in this capacity it is essential that they be able to receive support, training and guidance from the ministry staff and other shared ministry leaders.

The other extreme

The opposite of highly confidential groups are groups with no regard for how, when and why information is shared. This other extreme is where we find gossip and people sharing information for their own benefit. Similarly, groups that are 100% open and welcome to people dropping in have trouble reaching the levels of intimacy and connection that are characteristic of healthy small ministry groups. This may work for sample groups – stop by to see what a group is like after church – but are not advised for long term ministry groups.

The Middle Path

When it comes to sharing there is a middle path between *anything goes* and *total confidentiality*. This is *respectful sharing*. This is what the Rev. Bob Hill is speaking of when he discourages gossip and warns against promising confidentiality – the two extremes. As a guideline respectful sharing takes more thought than either extreme. It asks that we be mindful and consider why want to share information. Who is it serving? How will it strengthen the ministry or community of this congregation? Should I ask permission first? Using respectful sharing is a balancing act and is there for more difficult to spell out in concrete terms. A good rule of thumb is to ask when there is any question as to whether or not a fellow group member would approve.

On Changing Policies

If you have an existing small group ministry and need to address issues around confidentiality take time to work towards a shared understanding with your leaders. Discuss the role of confidentiality with ministry staff, lay leaders, coaches, and facilitators and participants. It is important to respect existing group covenants that have been the basis for their shared ministry with one another.

Relate Vision to Policy

To have a strong small group ministry your entire congregation must know what the vision for this ministry is. This includes participants, non-participants, members and friends. This vision must then be connected with the policies you are using. Leaders and participants are more apt to act in the spirit of your congregation's shared ministry and long term vision if they understand it, agree with it, and it is shared with them regularly.

UU SMALL GROUP MINISTRY NETWORK MEMBERS

Help this resource evolve

We invite you to share your feedback, ideas and related experience on confidentiality in small groups. We will expand this resource as new ideas are shared with this community.

Below are some feedback ideas:

- 1) Stories about the impact of confidentiality on your small group ministry.
- 2) A specific case that require alternate advice.
- 3) Books, articles and other resources related to this topic.
- 4) Other learning on this topic you would like to share.
- 5) Ideas for working with group leaders on this topic during ongoing training meetings.

Email ideas to: peter@smallgroupministry.net

You may also use a feedback form at: <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/feedback.html>