

Keeping Small Group Ministry Programs Vital

By Rev. Dr. M'ellen Kennedy, Lincoln, Vermont, Revised 10/09

Some Reasons Why Groups Get Stale:

- *Not doing service projects.* Consider doing a session on the importance of service. The SGM Coordinator or Steering Committee can compile a list of possible service projects to make it easy for groups to choose one.
- *Not welcoming new members.* Groups can get insular and stale over time with just the same members.
- *Folks don't feel safe, thus conversation is shallow.* Maybe this is because purpose, ground rules, or format are not clear. Maybe it's time for a Group Health Check-Up to clarify these. (See "The Regular Group Health Check-Up," SGM Quarterly, Fall 2006, <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/public.html>)
- *Discussion is theoretical and intellectual but not as deep as it could be.* Check to see if the session questions are eliciting theoretical rather than personal responses. A ground rule that encourages depth of speaking is "Speak from your experience" or "Use 'I' statements."
- *Session topics are not appropriate or of interest to participants.* Consider having participants do a Group Health Check-Up where they brainstorm ideas for topics that interest them.
- *Sessions are shallow, too broad, too academic and and/or not provocative -- especially the questions.* Strong sessions and questions bring folks to the edge of understanding, to the edge of mystery; they open the heart and inspire.
- *Attendance is sporadic so folks are feeling less connected and willing to share.* When attendance lags, it may be an indicator of a deeper concern. A Group Health Check-Up might help.

Encouraging Continuity over Time in a Congregation's Small Group Ministry Program:

This is a challenge in all congregational programs, not just for SGM (i.e., for Adult Religious Education, Children's RE, Social Justice, Membership, etc). Having dynamic groups where the members are experiencing transformational (aha) moments or epiphanies, is the best insurance for a strong ongoing program. When SGM members are making friends, feeling connected, growing spiritually and being challenged and fed, then they find the program fulfilling. From these dynamic groups, members will naturally become inspired and arise as new leaders for the program.

- Pay attention to writing or finding (on-line or in booklets) high quality sessions that stimulate and challenge participants.
- Pay attention to regular support for facilitators (this will ensure a healthy environment in the groups) preferably through the monthly Facilitators Meeting. These meetings should: re-inspire facilitators with the vision of SGM, offer an opportunity for friendship and support among facilitators, and continue to build facilitators' skills and confidence. Meetings become stale if they lack one of these 3 parts. To build facilitators' skills, meetings can cover topics such as listening deeply, encouraging respect, inviting "aha" moments, knowing from experience, dealing with folks who challenge, etc.
- Develop a Steering Committee or other group that meets regularly and oversees the program. The committee ensures that there is a clear way for folks to find out about small group ministry and get involved, and it ensures that facilitators are being supported. The article "Behind the Scenes of Small Group Ministry" by Susan Hollister has more ideas on the big picture. (See *SGM Quarterly*, Winter 2008, <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/public.html>)
- Make sure SGM has an appropriate home within the committee structure of your congregation

- and that the Board supports the program. Ensure SGM has a line item in the budget.
- Make sure the minister(s) is/are in touch with and supportive of the program (if they're not already actively involved in the steering committee). Minimally this might involve preaching once a year on the power of SGM, and meeting occasionally with facilitators
 - Do on-going publicity for your SGM groups and program through the newsletter column, a bulletin board, announcements, a fall kick-off, an SGM event with testimonials from members, etc. (See "Recruiting New Members To Your SGM Program" by Rev. Calvin Dame, SGM Quarterly, Fall 2004, <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/public.html>)
 - Encourage the groups to do a Regular Health Check-Up to maintain quality groups and deal with challenges while they're manageable.
 - Celebrate the successes of your SGM program in worship services and in the newsletter. Have a party!
 - Keep the vision of SGM in front of the congregation through inspirational preaching, articles, PR, etc....

-Taken from the Small Group Ministry Network Journal, Fall 2013