

Is Your Group Too Polite? The Balance Between Safety and Risk

*“Something opens our wings.
Something makes boredom and hurt disappear.
Someone fills the cup in front of us.
We taste only sacredness.”*

--Rumi

Participating in Small Group Ministry offers us the opportunity for deep spiritual exploration and for spiritual transformation. Our job as facilitators is to cultivate an environment conducive to deep exploration. How do we do this? We often focus on the importance of creating a “safe space.” **The paradox is that we need the safe space in order to take risks.** Too much safety leads to feeling bored and stifled. Too much risk leads to feeling fearful and hesitant. Our aim is that balance in between.

The adage states, “The truth will set you free.” Indeed, it is the search for truth that powers the engine of our spiritual exploration. In a workshop I lead recently, a participant talked about excessive politeness in a group as an indicator of low trust. I think he was right on in this. **If your group is “too polite” members will not be able to delve deep enough for meaningful exchange.** What to do? You may want to do a session in your group on politeness and risk, to engage the group in the issue. You may want to revisit your ground rules about confidentiality to see if there is confusion or lack of clarity. You may need to model appropriate risk taking yourself to invite the group members to go deeper. You may also want to brainstorm about the issue in your monthly meeting with the minister and other facilitators in your congregations (assuming you have one).

To create an environment conducive to both risk and safety, as facilitators, we ourselves, need to become comfortable with just witnessing. When someone is struggling or in pain, we tend either to retreat away from that person, or to try to “fix it”. **In our small groups we practice the art of being present.** As facilitators, we need to cultivate the practices of breathing, listening and just witnessing without judgment. Speaking the truth is essential for real transformation. When a person knows that she or he can struggle to articulate the truth from his or her own experience in an environment of acceptance, then powerful stuff happens. Religious educator, Nelle Morton, calls this process “hearing each other into speech.” Part of the power of small group ministry is the witnessing of this sacred process. Wishing you the best in developing a healthy group that explores that energizing balancing between safety and risk.

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