

# ***Small Tasks, Big Ministry***

*By Peter Freedman Bowden*

I believe there is a lot more to small group ministry than the session plan and what happens during the scheduled group time. In fact, the community and ministry emerging from the groups I've worked with have been because of what my co-leaders and I have done outside of the group. There are many times when the ministry is in the smallest of acts. Whether you are a group participant, leader or minister, I invite you to consider how doing some of the following would impact the relationships in your group(s).

Either alone or in a facilitator group try discussing each of the following ideas and questions. Give each person an opportunity to share their approach. Note that each of the following could potentially serve as the focus for a full meeting of small group ministry facilitators!

## **First Contact**

When my congregation first launched its small group ministry I started a practice that has served me well. I got together for coffee with each person interested in joining my group. Why? Half the people joining the group I had known for years but knew little about. The rest had come out of no where and were strangers. I thought it would be easier for them to become integrated as a group if I knew them as individuals. That one cup of coffee made a huge difference. It helps newcomers feel comfortable with me as the leader, I answer questions on issues they didn't quite get about the groups, and offered a brief orientation. Later this served to spare existing groups from repeated orientations. When people arrive at the group they have had their questions answered, know at least one other person (me) and are ready to go. Sometimes I even give them some of the previous session to look over.

- How do you make contact with newcomers?
- How do you orient people who have just signed up for a new group or are joining an existing one?

## **Use the Phone**

Email is easy and safe and generally time efficient. The phone is more personal. For these reasons I intentionally try to use the phone with members of my group. Think about who calls you at home, especially now that we have the "do not call list". Generally it is friends, colleagues, family – people we are connected to. The act of calling a person at home and maybe even talking to them in person increases the sense of caring and connection.

- Do you use email for "group business"?
- What would happen if you phoned instead?
- If you are resistant to that idea, why?

## **The "Are you alive?" Call**

Though I admit I've failed to do this on occasion, I always try to contact a person who misses a session the same night. With cell phones I'm getting better at making these calls. I even let everyone in the group know that someone from the group – it doesn't have to be me - is going to call them if they miss a session to make sure they are okay. Imagine missing a group meeting because you were hit by a car and no one called! This shows that we care, reduces the likelihood people will skip a session "just because" and increases the ability of group members to respond to real ministry needs.

- What do you do when someone misses a group?
- What does this behavior communicate?

## **Going to Church**

I think it is an important practice to end every group session with an invitation to attend church. Small groups alone do not cut it. I ask people if I'll see them on Sunday. You might consider sitting together in service with group members if you can. If not, plan on catching up in your fellowship hour. Though church attendance is not "required", it does make a difference. If a person in my group stops going to church – or never has – without being pushy, I make a point of finding out why. I assume that many people come to our church hoping to be full participants in the community and assume that if this doesn't come to pass, there is a reason. Finding out what the reason is shows that you care and gives you the chance to help or at least bring feedback to the church.

- How often do your group participants attend worship services and other church events?
- Does your group discuss upcoming events?

### **Hand Out Session Plan**

If you use prepared sessions, I suggest making copies to hand out to all of your group participants. There are many good reasons to do this. It makes it easier to share the tasks of reading openings, closing, chalice lightings and so on. Many people are visual learners and will get more out of the session with the plan in hand. Some people do better writing thoughts down and will enjoy scribbling thoughts on the sheet you hand out. Every session I participate in there are multiple things that people share which I want to ask more about or follow up on in some way outside of our group. Giving each person a session sheet and having pens on hand will increase what I call “follow up ministry”. Two of my favorite reasons for sharing plans is that it encourages people to tell others about the group and makes it easy for people to come back to the session topic between sessions. I had a man join a group after reading three of our sessions. Each time his wife brought a session home she’d show him and then he’d want to talk about it. Finally she said “No! Join a group.” He did.

- If you use a prepared session plan, do you hand out a copy of it to each member of the group?

### **Share a Meal**

There is something about eating together that transforms a community. My goal, though I don’t always realize it, is to have one meal with group members per season. I’m talking about getting together outside of the group time either in a home or a restaurant.

- What kind of contact do your group members have with each other outside of the group?

### **Share the Care**

The reality is that there is no way I could do all of the above alone. Fortunately we are called on to share these tasks. Yes, I strive to do all of the above, but only for part of my group. I have a co-leader or leader in training who is working with the other part. In addition, from day one each of us have been developing a new leader to work with us. When you split these ministry tasks between co-leaders and then work with an apprentice on your half suddenly the “burden” becomes very light. In fact, it is so light that you have room in your heart and schedule to care for more people.

- Do you have a co-leader or some other person you are mentoring as a leader?

- What is the impact on the group of having (or not having) multiple leaders?

Our small group ministries are evolving many wonderful and exciting ways of deepening and expanding the ministry of our congregations. If you have developed a practice or culture within your small group ministry or even a single group I’d love to hear from you! Send me an email or give me a call. For up to date contact info visit my personal website at [www.peterbowden.com](http://www.peterbowden.com).

*By Peter Freedman Bowden.*

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## *Questions from “Small Tasks, Big Ministry”*

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