

## Holding the Vision of Small Group Ministry

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We've reached a point in our Association's small group ministry movement where a large number of congregations have been working with this ministry for years. Since the turn of the millennium hundreds of congregations have launched new small group ministries, the exact number we do not know. Of the congregations completing the resource needs survey on our website, many are stable and thriving. At the same time, a good number are reporting "floundering programs." After launching a program three or more years ago, members are reporting the following kinds of problems:

- \* The agreed upon meeting format isn't followed.
- \* The check-in time has ballooned to fill the meeting.
- \* Groups have become closed and insular.
- \* There is a shortage of new facilitators.
- \* Due to facilitator shortage, groups are not promoted.
- \* Facilitators no longer meet regularly for support.
- \* Groups don't engage in service projects.
- \* Over time, enrollment has slowly dropped.

I suspect most of you reading this can identify with at least some of these issues. And this is by no means an exhaustive list! This ministry presents many opportunities and challenges. In my consulting work, I find that many of the biggest problems, including those listed above, result from a failure to communicate the vision for this ministry consistently over time. Of this I am certain, as soon as the communication of the vision slips, so too does the ministry.

On my street there are some homes with huge gardens. They remind me of how our congregations launch and maintain their small group ministries. Some have clear visions, plans for what will bloom each season and definite coordination. The gardeners weed. They prune. They make sure the soil is both fertilized and

watered. When you look at these gardens, it is clear that they were loved and cared for.

Just down the block there is a house that tells a different story. At some point each Spring, an entire year's worth of decaying leaves, weeds and garbage are removed. Most of the plants are removed. The mess of the year before is erased. After a big exciting trip to the garden shop a beautiful array of plants and flowers are planted. They look perfect! Mulch is placed. A brand new garden gnome and cute little animals are scattered here and there. For several weeks they have a picture perfect garden.

Then life happens. The weeds start creeping in. Bugs, snails, slugs and grubs do their work. Some plants start growing out of control. Week by week you can see it transform from something worthy of a spread in a Martha Stewart magazine to an eyesore. Before long the garden is a wreck. Do I care? Not too much. We go to this house for the barbecues in the back yard. Gardening isn't a priority at this home and we all know it. It's a barbecue house.

I've heard some people say that the Sunday service and the sermon are the real meat of church. If that is so, then some of our congregations launch small group ministries by borrowing the minister, master of the beef, for a time, enlisting her support in exploring the purpose and vision for this ministry. Often a year is taken to explore, design, launch, and promote a congregation-wide small group ministry. With great fanfare the group ministry is started. Everyone is clear on what it is about, why we're all doing it, and the role of groups in the new and improved vision for congregational life. Some might even go so far as to clearly communicate the role of small groups in transforming our society.

Beautiful. I love a fresh small group ministry. No weeds. Groups and group facilitators are still open-minded. The vision is clear in their minds and hearts. The minister and other small group leadership are right there supporting facilitators. Month after month they strive to make sure the first year is a success.

Then people get busy. While a congregation is exploring, designing and launching a small group ministry it takes a significant amount of energy on the part of the minister and the lay leadership. Once the program has been launched, it sometimes becomes apparent that the minister can't sustain the level of support offered during this "designing and launching" period. Most ministers, if asked, would probably report that their schedules were taxed at the start of a small group ministry program.

Small group ministry enables us to share ministry and build community. At the same time, the reality is that small group ministry doesn't get rid of work. It doesn't save any time. Ministers and lay leaders are always commenting to me that they didn't realize how much time it would take. My response is that a healthy small group ministry can easily grow to a size and complexity that rivals your children's religious education program.

What happens when our congregations are confronted with the amount of work and care that small group ministry requires? There is a great deal of work related to small group ministry that can be delegated and shared. It is healthy and appropriate for this to happen. But we must be careful when it comes to vision.

Most congregations that launch small group ministries have their minister as the primary vision caster during this process. The minister's support of this ministry is perhaps the greatest indicator of its initial success. I think most lay leaders and ministers understand this. Yes, we need the minister to help us sell this to the congregation. Yes, we need the minister to give this airtime from the pulpit.

The truth is that the need for holding up the vision never goes away. Small group ministry needs the primary vision caster to continually promote the role of small groups and shared ministry in congregational life. Once the communication fails at the public level, in worship, in newsletter articles, and so on, the entire small group ministry program starts to suffer. This ministry can't thrive as a behind-the-scenes or invisible ministry. It takes a strong lay leader or other staff person to uphold the vision

for this ministry when the primary vision caster(s) has stopped broadcasting the message.