

## Evaluating the Effectiveness of Your Small Group Ministry Program

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As I talk with lay and professional leaders involved in Small Group Ministry (SGM), a common concern is how do we evaluate the effectiveness of our programs? In the field of educational evaluation, a distinction is made by evaluators between summative and formative evaluation. Summative evaluation is what typically comes to mind when we think about evaluation. Summative evaluation refers to a formal assessment or judgement, of whether a program has accomplished its intended goals once the program is complete.

Formative evaluation on the other hand, is on-going assessing of a program in process that is used to guide and rework the program as the program organically grows. In Small Group Ministry, formative evaluation is likely to be most helpful, at least at first. In fact, in the basic SGM model there are two already existing opportunities for formative evaluation.

The first opportunity for formative evaluation is the "check-out" that is part of the close of every meeting. It is an opportunity for each member to speak briefly one last time before the meeting closes. The check-out can take the form of "likes and wishes." This means that each person is given a chance to say briefly what they liked about the meeting and what they would have wished for. Each person of course can pass, that is, opt to say nothing. There is typically no discussion at this time (since it's the close of the meeting). In the go-round of "likes and wishes" the members and the facilitator(s) get a quick read or pulse on the group. For example, several members may make a comment something like, "I wish we started on time." This is feedback for the whole group that attention is perhaps needed to this area of how the group is functioning. "Likes and wishes" as a check-out offers an organic, informal opportunity for formative evaluation. Whatever is shared in this part of the meeting can guide the facilitator and members to celebrate the great things about the group and also to attend to the areas that need it.

Another natural opportunity for formative evaluation is the monthly facilitators meetings. The basic SGM model suggests that group facilitators meet monthly with the professional minister(s) and/or lay ministry team. The point of these meetings is to uphold the vision of SGM, to provide ongoing support for facilitators and to offer an opportunity for skill building for facilitators. Monthly meetings usually include a "group check-in" where facilitators get to share how they're doing in their job as facilitator and how they feel the group is going. Successes get celebrated here. And facilitators also get a chance to talk over challenges and to brainstorm ways to address them. Groups that may be struggling can get help to improve their functioning before problems get too serious and before a facilitator gets overwhelmed by the challenge. This is part of the beauty of the model. The monthly facilitators meeting provides an opportunity for a regular, sharing and formative evaluation. At the end of these meetings facilitators often go away energized and with new insights to bring back to their groups to enhance the group's functioning.

I would love to hear your experiences with evaluating your SGM Program, both formative and summative approaches. At this point I have not heard of any comprehensive summative evaluation of an SGM Program by one of our congregations. If your congregation is or has done one, let us know and we'll share it here so others can learn from your experience. Wishing you the best with your vital work as a facilitator.