

## Behind the Scenes of Small Group Ministry

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**A successful small group ministry (SGM) program requires a support structure of individuals working together to keep the program running smoothly. Foremost there must be oversight of the entire SGM program and coordination of the four areas of responsibility: leadership, membership, content, and visibility.** Leadership is facilitator support; membership is group formation; content is session plans; and visibility is program promotion. Depending on program size, these functions can be performed by the Program Coordinator (PC) and minister or by a Steering Team. (See a companion article by Susan Hollister in the Fall 2006 Issue of the Quarterly which discusses the way these functions vary by congregation size).

**Oversight: The Coordinator guides the program, keeps the vision of small group ministry, sets long-range goals, and makes adjustments to improve the program. In a medium to large program with ten or more groups, a Steering Team (ST) provides oversight.** The ST is composed of the Program Coordinator(s), the minister, several facilitators, and facilitator coaches. They plan and lead the monthly facilitators' meetings, recruit new facilitators, develop a training curriculum, and coordinate training sessions.

**The ST may also evaluate the program at year's end,** asking participants about favorite topics, topic preferences, reasons for joining a group, and whether expectations were met. (The Network web site has a selection of evaluation forms contributed by congregations across the country). Based on questionnaire results, the Coordinator(s) or team make necessary changes to enhance the program and expand its appeal in the congregation.

**Leadership: The Leadership function is to recruit, train and support group leaders or facilitators.** The initial facilitators may be an outgrowth of the program's implementation team. **To purposefully grow the program, it is essential to have a cadre of well-trained facilitators in reserve.** Potential facilitators are

chosen on the basis of SGM experience, qualities and skills, and interest in serving as a group leader. Training includes topics such as the mission of small group ministry, the SGM model and session components, facilitator expectations and responsibilities, facilitation skills, group health maintenance, and support resources.

**Monthly leadership meetings are the most important way to support facilitators.** Facilitator meetings have a dual purpose: they model the SGM format and provide peer consultation. The format includes two check-ins: personal check-in for deeper connection among facilitators, and group check-in, an opportunity to share both successes and challenges and to brainstorm solutions with fellow leaders. Discussion topics center around skill building on a practical issue, such as welcoming a new member or dealing with disruptive behaviors. In a large program it is effective to divide the facilitators into two or more groups of ten. Steering Team members and coaches, former facilitators experienced in both SGM and group dynamics, meet with each group.

**Membership: The most important tool for membership is the data base of group composition, contact information, and meeting logistics.** Initially the minister and/or Program Coordinator manage the information, add new members to groups, and monitor group status. As the program grows, the job may be divided among two or more people on the Steering Team. In a program with 10+ groups, a staff member may be enlisted part-time to manage the data base, receive sign-up sheets, send out orientation materials, and communicate group status to the PC(s).

Many programs have ongoing sign-ups, adding new group members throughout the year. In addition, the Steering Team may sponsor a Covenant Group kickoff event in September when people can ask questions, participate in a "sampler" small group, and fill in a registration form.

**Content:** There is a variety of Small Group

Ministry/Covenant Group session plans used in congregations. The Coordinator or ST may choose a book of published sessions and make copies available to all the facilitators. Some groups use a book format and discuss a different chapter at each meeting, or they may choose their own topics and take turns presenting them. The minister often writes the session plans and relates them to current sermons. In larger programs a session team works with the minister to develop session plans. They also solicit topic suggestions from group members. Creating a session plan can even be a service activity! Part of the monthly facilitator meeting is devoted to distributing and discussing session plans. The facilitators may even “try it on for size” by answering the discussion questions during the meeting.

**Visibility:** The Program Coordinator or Steering Team keeps Small Group Ministry at the forefront by publishing newsletter articles and Sunday bulletin notices and by extending invitations from the pulpit. They also manage a bulletin board and/or webpage and host sign-up Sundays. The team produces communication tools: a brochure, program guidelines, fliers, sign-up sheets, and a welcome letter for new group members. They acknowledge the dedication of facilitators by scheduling a recognition or Installation Sunday and an annual appreciation dinner.

Like a well-oiled machine, the five-part structure supports Small Group Ministry or Covenant Groups from the wings and ensures the program’s continued growth and success.