

Healthy Small Groups

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What does it take to have great small groups? How can we make sure that our programs thrive? I'm continually asking myself these questions for the program in my congregation, and I recently found another useful way to ask it. One of my favorite blog and podcast sites is Unseminary.com (stuff you wish they taught in seminary) and recently they featured Baptist small groups pastor Ben Reed (<http://www.unseminary.com/benreed>) to talk about how they do small group programs. And Ben talked about his program in terms of health. Both universally healthy features, but even more, what's healthy in your particular context. My favorite line was, "**Figure out in your context what health looks like, and work towards that.**"

Since then, I've been asking two questions to folks about their small groups. The first is, what makes a healthy small group? Here are some of the responses I've gotten: Regular attendance, groups have covenants, skilled or trained facilitators, clear announcement of the purpose of the group, open to new participants, time for getting to know one another, church politics avoided, respectful relationships, accountability, connected with the minister or coordinating committee, attraction rather than assignment into groups, appropriate gender balance, facilitator checking in with folks who miss meetings, communication between meetings, not required sharing, structure to the sessions, and encouragement to go deeper with reflections.

The second question is connected with the first – what makes a healthy small group program? Here are some of folks' thoughts: Regular facilitator training, linked to monthly themes, groups are not static, groups don't selfselect members, don't become cliques, program is dynamic with new groups starting, service projects are happening, planned reforming of groups, times for celebration, no alcohol during group meetings, heterogeneous groups, shared or rotated facilitation of groups, bringing up new facilitators, groups stay connected with the larger congregation, and new folks in the congregation are specifically invited to join a small group.

There's a lot of variety in all of these answers! And since every congregation is different, health may look a little different. It's also amazing how much energy we spend worrying about things that are really secondary to these foundational health elements. In my queries, no one has yet mentioned how often groups meet or what their specific topic matter is. In Ben Reed's program, there is a lot of variance in where the groups meet. But here's what Ben says about that: "At the end of the day I don't care where a group meets. I don't care if they meet at a Starbucks, on a school campus, or at home. What I care about is small group health. So if they are pursuing health, I am thrilled. I don't care how long they meet or where they meet as long as they are pursuing health."

I got to take a practical stab at applying the first of these questions, as two church members approached me recently to ask about starting up a new small group on some topics that they both are particularly interested in. I wanted to be able to give them a few foundational guidelines and let them feel empowered to be creative with the rest of the design. Here are the four elements of what I think a healthy group looks like in my context:

Covenant: The group has a covenant they have agreed upon that includes expectations for how the group functions together and some sort of expectation for attendance.

Welcoming: The group is open to new participants during our registration periods, and participants choose where to go rather than getting selected by the groups.

Growth-Oriented: The main focus of the group is personal and spiritual growth (as distinguished from support groups, educational groups, or social groups, although these things may also happen in the group, just not as the main focus).

Connection: The group is connected to the Coordinating Team and the minister, including participation in the facilitator orientation and keeping the team/minister in the loop with regard to group life and progress and any issues that may arise.

“Figure out in your context what health looks like, and work towards that.” What about your program? What do healthy groups look like? What does a healthy program look like? Do you have any changes that you might need to make to work towards more health? Summer is often a time for taking a step back to see the larger picture of programs and think about what you might want to plan for the next church year; to see what has worked, what might need to be changed, and what might need to be invented anew. May your work and leadership on small groups be blessed.

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