

Small Group Ministry Survey: Early Patterns Emerge

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In early February 2016, the SGM Network Publications Team sent out a survey to all SGM Network members and Covenant Group News subscribers. We've learned a great deal from the responses and very much appreciate your participation. Your collective input has pointed to the need for support programs that the SGM Network will put in place later this year. (Editor's note: See the mentoring concept introduced on page nine.) In this article, we report some of the preliminary findings of the survey.

This is a qualitative survey that is analyzed by searching for the patterns that emerge (or don't emerge) in the responses. In doing this search, I was surprised by the number of informative issues that were raised. This article addresses 4 issues that were discovered, followed by a description of the patterns. Then it offers a brief discussion of possible implications for our programs, and some alternatives for consideration.

Key Findings

1. What is in a name?

While the acronym for the overall program is SGM, less than half of the respondents in our study used Small Group Ministry in their program name. A large number were named Covenant Groups followed by Chalice Circles, with many named quite uniquely. For example, some were identified by their meeting time and others by what they aspired to achieve; e.g. , Spirituality, Wisdom, etc.

Clearly, a variety of names were chosen that work locally. What occurs to me is that a shared name communicates that the programs are all a part of one community. The SGM community then can be understood as a large entity that shares goals, resources, and needs and could better work together for some purposes and common concerns.

Please understand that this is my opinion and I do not yet know what others think about this. I am guessing that there might be some push-back because of an attachment to their name. There are ways to finesse this "either/or" dynamic. If all programs used SGM as prefix to their chosen name, both names could be used. For example, SGM: Chalice Circles at (Church name.) How about using both?

2. Where are the Ministers?

The survey asked if the Minister was able to be involved in the SGM program. The responses varied widely. Nearly half of the respondents indicated that their Minister was not involved at all with their SGM program.

Others respondents identified a variety of ministerial roles that were covered by their ministers. For example, about one-fourth were consultants, as needed. Some ministers only attended the monthly meetings with the facilitators. A few of the ministers were described as involved in all program activities.

Ministerial involvement with the SGM Program has long been described as an important factor for the success of the program. While involvement of ministers may support a wide variety of purposes, I

would suggest that one of the main purposes would be that the group members may identify ministerial needs that they pursue with their Ministers. This is the Small Group Ministry.

3. How are the new facilitators trained and how are the existing facilitators supported?

The survey data revealed that there may be a strong relationship between having a Program Coordination Team and a commitment to training and on-going support of facilitators.

Half of the respondents indicated that they did not have a Coordinating Team. Further review revealed that most of these same programs also did not offer initial training to new facilitators. They also were not likely to provide support to the facilitators by holding regular meeting sessions with them.

Facilitating groups can be complex at times. Understanding group dynamics and knowing how the purpose of the group determines how to lead a group is essential. While group facilitation is interesting and important, guidance should be available, as needed. Without the support, it is likely that there may be a higher turn-over of facilitators.

4. Are you ready to dream about the future of your SGM Program?

Respondents to this survey indicated the year their Program began. The range was from 2001 through 2016. Earlier groups were much more engaged in thinking about what changes might be developed by 2016. Groups with short histories found it difficult to think about new goals. Most either did not list dreams about the future or just hoped there could be more of what they were developing now.

Programs that have been in place for several years had a variety of wishes and dreams for the future. Creativity governed their list of ways to do outreach, ways to recruit members, ways to form partnership in the community, and many more ideas about how to enhance their SGM program.

These results suggest that this type of question regarding the future is more pertinent to Programs with a significant history. Perhaps reports from them could later be shared with the “younger” programs .

Overall, it makes sense that if a Program is young and has not completed what is needed in getting established, that thinking about ten years ahead would not likely be a priority.

Another approach to consider would be to develop a generic mission statement for all Small Group Ministries. Mission statements provide a framework to evaluate choices. When a proposal is made to enhance or expand a program, the leaders can hold the idea up to the mission to see if they are compatible.

Thank you for reviewing these findings and remarks that I have made about these survey findings. We would welcome your thoughts and suggestions. Write to us at office@smallgroupministry.net

-Taken from the Small Group Ministry Network Journal, Spring 2016