

Small Groups Sometimes Skip the Agenda

Small-group agendas don't change people's lives. Christ does.

By Dan Lentz

One of the secrets of effective small-group ministry is to train group leaders to think in terms of developing a group agenda rather than relying exclusively on a curriculum. Specifically, train leaders to develop a small-group agenda that incorporates all the values you have adopted for your ministry. Curriculum is simply a tool that is part of the group agenda.

The basic small-group agenda may vary depending on the values of your ministry and the types of small groups you have, but remember that what happens in the small-group time and in between small-group gatherings will determine people's perception of small-group life. Make that perception the correct one right off the bat. It is much easier to model the correct Christian community lifestyle initially than to correct a bad experience later.

But remember—agendas are never the most important element of your small group.

When agendas clash with reality

A small-group leader can have the best long-term plan and run the mechanics of the group agenda with skill and precision, but that doesn't guarantee a life-changing small-group experience. In the end, agendas don't change lives; Christ does.

Terminal illness, divorce, parenting issues, financial stress—the list of human problems that will not be on a small-group leader's meeting agenda seems endless. When thinking about the people who face these struggles, one of the biggest jobs of a small-group leader is not so much to be a teacher, but rather a navigator. As author Tom Bandy puts it, small-group leaders are "midwives" who are constantly coaching the painful birth of something new that God is doing in group members' lives.

A leader's response to people's struggles is not necessarily, "Can I help you find a solution to this pain?" or, "What knowledge or scriptural application do you lack that would make your situation better?" Rather, we are often far more helpful when we say, "Can I help this new thing to be born and to grow in you?"

The key to helping group members navigate through the chaos of life involves helping them process the love and truth of an infinite God, while dealing with any number of finite human problems. When people do not wrestle with that intersection, it leaves them feeling disconnected and makes the chaos seem as pronounced as ever.

Small-group leaders can help bring some order to the chaos. At any given time and in any given situation, the Christian leader can help position group members in between the finite and the infinite. A leader can ask simple questions, such as the ones below, to help group members that are hurting position themselves correctly.

- "Would you be open to discovering what the Bible says about your life in this circumstance?"

- "Where has your story and God's story intersected recently?"
- "If you really believed the Word we have studied tonight, how would it change your life?"
- "What is God saying to you right now?"
- "How will you live differently tomorrow because of what we have talked about today?"

How can group leaders get all of this accomplished?

As you look over your small-group values—things like fellowship, discipleship, service, and outreach—it is unlikely, even with the best agenda, that your leaders will get all of them accomplished in an hour and a half once a week. This is particularly true when individual needs of group members surface that require the group to postpone the meeting agenda and rally around someone in need of God's special touch.

So, you need to develop and train leaders to think in terms of finding a rhythm to community where these things can be incorporated into group life over time. For instance, let's say service is one of the core values on the small-group agenda. Group members can certainly serve one another daily, but if a leader wants the group to practice this value, he needs to occasionally plan a service activity for the group to do together.

That might not be practical at every group gathering, of course, so instead he can plan a service project once every couple of months. Better yet, designate someone in the group with gifting in service and administration to coordinate a service project on a regular basis. If a leader doesn't plan ahead, things fall off the radar screen and the group agenda doesn't get accomplished, values don't get instilled into group members, and small groups tend to lose focus. They become ingrown and hard to sustain over the long haul.

And remember, Jesus is the real leader of every small group. Continuously encourage leaders to pray and rely fully on his Spirit at work in their groups as they do life together.

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