

Two of the Best Questions to Ask to Determine if Your Small Groups are Working

A couple days ago a church leader asked me if I thought small groups were kind of “old school and over with?” He continued to suggest that small groups were now passé and wanted to know the new cutting edge innovative thing.

I pressed in further in order to better understand his question and discovered that small groups were *not* working at *his* church. Although it sounded like his church is healthy and growing, the small group attendance is declining. His interpretation and conclusion of their reality, is that small groups are over. My thoughts are different.

Small groups have been a part of culture from the beginning because people are created to flourish and grow in community. But what has always been on the table is *how* we do small groups. The structure, format and method will always change and evolve. For example, I love hearing stories about some of the cool digital/online small group innovations that help people in larger churches connect. There will always be new and innovative ways to do small groups, but small groups are here to stay.

Perhaps a better question to ask is, “Are your small groups working?”

Two of the best questions to ask to help figure out if your group life is working are:

- *What is the purpose of your small groups?*
- *How do you measure success of your small groups?*

Let's start with purpose.

If you don't know the true purpose of your small group ministry, the leaders won't know and you'll never be as effective as you'd like to be. When I interview small group leaders in any local church, and ask that question, it's amazing how many different answers I get. It's important to train your small group leaders to know the purpose. It is essential that the leaders stay focused on the purpose or all that effort and energy will slide sideways to good fellowship at best, or general busyness at worst. Don't get me wrong, good Christian fellowship is great, but that's a lot of work for something that often happens naturally on its own.

So, what is your purpose? (Why do you meet?) Here are the 7 most common answers.

- **Bible Study.** We meet to study God's word in depth to learn more about biblical principles.
- **Connection.** We meet to help make the church become more “sticky” and help our large church feel smaller by enhancing healthy relationships.
- **Serve.** We meet not so much in a group discussion format, but the group comprises a serving team and provides a ministry that serves people and supports the church overall.

- **Prayer.** We meet to pursue God in deeper ways, intercede for others and the church as a whole.
- **Spiritual Maturity.** We meet with a purpose of spiritual formation overall, seeking to grow in our faith and walk with God.
- **Care.** We meet with a focus on pastoral care and shepherding. Our church is large and the staff can't keep up with caring for all the people personally.
- **Evangelism.** We meet with a desire to engage people who are not yet Christians with the ultimate desire to see them say yes to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Nothing new right? Right. But here's my challenge to you. More often than not church leaders say something like: "All those components are part of our small group system." I understand that answer, but I want to challenge you with this thought, if you don't intentionally choose your primary focus, you will lose your effectiveness. Look at the list again. Do you think that your small groups can achieve all those elements? I'm going to press back and say they can't. So, again, what is your focus? If you get that settled, you are on your way toward much greater effectiveness.

I believe we would all agree that the big picture is **life change**. In some ways that seems highly subjective and possibly illusive. But on the other hand, it's really easy to see when someone in your group has truly experienced change in their life.

Life change is the best measure of success regardless of your choice of focus or purpose. You may be tempted to form a list of attributes or scripture passages by which to measure the spiritual maturity of people in your small groups. I have done that multiple times over the years. Each time I've been part of an effort like that to "measure success" (measure life change) it turns into a mechanical nightmare and eventually fades into non-existence. In small church environments, it works okay for a while, but the larger you get the more unmanageable it becomes and you'll likely find yourself looking for something much more intuitive and organic.

Let me offer a simple, powerful way to measure success (assess life change).

Gather stories! That's it! Gather stories of life change. Don't make it more complicated. Train your leaders to look for, gather and send you clear and concise stories of how real change is taking place in the lives of small group attenders. They can be:

- **God Stories** – Where God shows up and does what only God can do!
- **Growth Stories** – How a person takes steps toward being more like Jesus.
- **Gift Stories** – How a person understands that God has gifted them for Kingdom purpose and serving in ministry. (Story about serving in a ministry.)

Tell these stories on Sunday morning! Your church will love 3-4 minute videos of the stories. They don't need to be highly produced. Just make sure the point of the story is clear and that you capture heart. It's also a great idea to include these stories, videos and even live testimonies within your sermon.

This practice creates momentum and begins to infuse group life into the culture of your church

and each time you open groups and invite new people to join, you'll see greater participation. Of course you need good systems (the method for getting people connected to groups) and good group leaders and apprentice leaders, (effective and consistent training), but you also need the ministry of group life to be clearly part of the (ministry) culture of your church.

Your small group ministry is one of the most important things you can do in your church. It's also a lot of work. I can promise you that if you are not fully committed to small group ministry the results will be average at best. If you're going to do it, go for it 100%. If your church feels too busy, it may be wise to lean out or simplify your ministry menu in order to do a better job with the most important ministries. Small groups don't work well as "one of the things you do." It needs to be at the top of the list if you want great results.

The method or structure you select isn't nearly as important as knowing your purpose and how you measure success. My prayer for you is that you truly experience life change through group life in your church!

> [Read more from Dan.](#)

Would you like to know more about the importance of small groups in the life and health of your church? [Connect with an Auxano Navigator and start a conversation with our team.](#)