



WHAT HAPPENS BEST IN SAME GENDER GROUPS

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I took a risk! “The 20 Somethings” inquired about having inter-generational small group leaders. In other words, they wanted some of us older people to be willing to lead their groups. As Minister of Small Groups at this large church in Boston, I decided I certainly would take the challenge. On sign-up night I had 16 young men/women eager to dive into the material I had provided. It was a large group and I was convinced that some would drop out. No one seemed to know each other, and I, in a few fleeting moments, asked myself why I had offered to take on this task! No one dropped out. I began leading them through the stages of designing a covenant and eventually assisted them through the healthy stages of growth. We became significant spiritual friends quite quickly. At the end of the year, still 17 strong, we evaluated our group experience and decided to continue on for just one more year.

Being so large was a weakness, but I had a hard time convincing anyone to leave. In September, we started back in full force. Even though we remained at 17 people, there was constant hesitation and, quite frankly, refusal to divide into smaller groups for discussion and prayer. They just wanted to be together! This weakened the spiritual growth and accountability due to its size and mixed gender. It frustrated me. At the end of the term, I began to remind them that we would be ending our time together. Tears started to flow from a few women. The young men were silent.

Saying “no” has been hard for me! I almost gave in, but made a wiser decision. After challenging the young men and a few of the young women to form new gender groups, I agreed to lead the remaining nine young women one more year. I agreed with full intention that there would be changes. I turned very autocratic in my leadership! Our new group would be designed as an accountability group. In order to do that, our prayer would be about us. Understanding that even though Aunt Tilly down the street was worthy of our prayers, we all agreed that we would only pray, with exception of emergencies, for our own issues in order to maintain integrity, intimacy, trust, and accountability. I assured them that the Holy Spirit would greatly bless our time together...and He did! Our discussions became more focused on where life and truth intersected for us according to our scripture study. By confessing our weaknesses and sins and asking for prayer and support, God worked the willingness for accountability with one another into our lives. Any small group can do that with healthy leadership, but our former group had been too large and a certain amount of safety from vulnerability had been established. In this new “Awesome” group, God did amazing things in each of us as we

struggled with issues of life, spirituality, goals, failures, and achievements. Relationships were healed and strengthened and God was glorified. This didn’t happen just because we were a small group of women, but because we took the steps necessary for vibrant small group life. Our group is history, but our relationships continue to this day. It was the most powerful, fulfilling group I have experienced.

FOUR BASIC SUGGESTIONS:

Designing covenants are critical

A covenant, including goals/purposes, what is in, and what is out is critical. Covenants give freedom and boundaries and allow members to have ownership in expectations. If it’s a women’s group, obviously only women will be included! If spiritual growth and accountability is a goal, all need to agree and be reminded from time to time. Integrity and vulnerability are key words. Life change happens when we come face to face with God’s Word and respond accordingly. In my experience of leading groups, this doesn’t happen as well in mixed gender groups.

Small Groups function best with 10-12 people

When groups become larger than 10-12, absenteeism is greater, certain people become more dominating, shy people withdraw, vulnerability is rare and accountability tends not to happen. There are various ways to counteract the larger group by dividing into smaller groups for prayer or discussions, but often the feeling of being “one” isn’t the same. Time to form two groups!

Intentional leadership

Group leaders should understand the various stages of growth and how to take the group through that experience. Whether it is a men’s group or women’s group, different interactions take place as groups travel through growth stages. Far too often groups falter in the early stage and never move beyond superficial interaction. There needs to be a high trust level with one another. Achieving vulnerability and accountability allows the deeper issues of what really matters in life to be discussed and dealt with, while being open to the Holy Spirit for change.

Same gender groups have advantages

Of course, everything depends on your goals and purposes of the small group you are designing. If it’s just for fellowship, the group can be large and mixed gender groups are more popular. If a group

is intentional on spiritual growth, same gender groups are far better as they are more apt to create intimate, vulnerable, high trust level settings where lives can be changed.

Small groups are formed for a reason. They come in all shapes and sizes! If a group decides to dig deeply into scripture and be accountable for integrating those truths into their daily lives, I am convinced it happens best in same gender groups.