



Open ... Or Closed???

Small Groups ...

So what do you say, is it ... Open or Closed???

We have been discussing small adult group strategy and whether a small group should be **open** or **closed**. An open group always allows new persons to join. This approach is the principal strategy of the traditional small groups that meet for Sunday School. A closed group closes to new members as soon as it begins meeting. The idea is that trust and acceptance can only build over time. If new people constantly join the group, members must start developing trust all over again. Proponents for the closed group strategy say it keeps the group moving into greater levels of intimacy that encourage opening up and sharing.

For those of us struggling with the idea of a closed group strategy, because we know an open group is really a closed group, the thought of a closed group scares us to death! Small groups do not need any more excuses to be closed because they typically migrate to this mindset anyway.



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In the Beginning

Sunday morning small groups were founded on the principle of openness and doing the Great Commission and then breaking into new small groups at the

appropriate time. Evangelism was a founding purpose of Sunday School small groups. Knowing that most small groups tend to gravitate toward being closed and inwardly focused throws a monkey wrench into the consideration of using the closed group strategy. Could our thinking be wrong regarding this approach?

One of the closed group methods I see almost everywhere I travel is a strategy employed by a Georgia church. Basically, small adult groups are created at the church and, after a time, spun out to homes in the community where they remain closed for a certain period. The members of the group all agree to a covenant and part of that covenant states that at the appropriate time they will split into a new group or groups. If indeed these home groups produce new groups and reach new people, can traditional small group churches sit back and criticize this strategy? After all, most mainstream churches are static or dying because they are not producing greater numbers of open Bible groups! Only time will tell how effectively the closed-group model works in generating additional small groups.

Considering the Children

The biggest challenge for adult small closed groups meeting in homes is what to do about the children. Churches that provide for preschool, children, and high school groups on Sunday mornings are on the right track. Our kids must experience

meaningful small group Bible study each week. While these churches provide space for the kids on Sunday mornings, their parents do small groups off campus during the week. The churches where the kids are at home while their parents meet in small groups could be in grave danger of raising Biblically illiterate children. While it is not always the case, many times only babysitting takes place. We certainly do not want to impair our kids' Bible knowledge and spiritual growth just because we want to meet in our own adult small group.

The churches I see as doing this right are the ones providing full-blown Bible study on Sunday mornings for their kids. The adults may meet in their small groups during the week, leaving their kids with babysitters, but their kids are still getting their spiritual food every Sunday morning. I don't have a problem with this model.

Could We Have Missed the Mark?

Is the new trend toward closed adult small groups the best way? It remains to be seen. However, the model has some good points. A case can be made for the amount of time home groups have each week to study versus the time a traditional class has on Sunday morning. What about the claim that home groups become more intimate, closer, and more caring, as well as holding each other more accountable than traditional Sunday morning groups? Does teaching style have anything to do with this?

What does teaching style have to do with the small group development? For years, the dominant teaching method used in Sunday morning small groups was lecture. Not much room for intimacy there! In home groups, the teacher acts more as a facilitator who guides the Bible lesson discussion. Learners all participate and share their thoughts regarding the study, which results in deeper relationships. Such discussion also requires more time and a willingness on the teacher's part to not have all the answers (at the moment).

Teaching philosophy has much to do with where I see small groups moving in the future. I believe much of the trust and deep relationships developed between members can be achieved in a traditional class for adults on Sunday morning, but it will never happen if lecture is the only teaching method! Teachers must use small groups and several different methods to foster discussion and idea sharing so class members can talk to one another on a deeper level.

These spiritual discussions broaden the level of fellowship and lead to trust and stronger relationships. Lecture will not produce the same meaningful results.

What We've Learned

Research indicates that of the four basic adult learning styles, only one stresses lecture as the sole method. The other three styles focus on interaction, discussion, sharing ideas, coaching, hands-on experiences, and so on. These three styles represent the teaching approach that most adult learners desire today. I believe many chose lecture because it is how we were taught, and we think it is the easiest and best way to teach.

Home groups also seem to be "safer" environments for learners to share what they really feel and think. Normally, no more than eight to 15 people comprise a group, and everyone feels it is "ok" to enter the discussion. This is a critical point! Learners must feel at ease or they will not open up and participate. If I were in a class of 30 where the teacher is lecturing and then

stops and poses a question to the group, even as an educator, I would be a little reluctant to answer because I do not feel safe in front of such a large group. What if I'm wrong? I'm supposed to know the answer! I am not comfortable in this environment. I would rather have the opportunity to converse with a few of my friends sitting close by and field test my answer before being put on the spot in front of a large group!

Lecture is the method used by most Sunday morning Bible teachers across the country. Many educators, myself included, have lobbied for years against using lecture as the primary method of teaching small group Bible classes. We could realize much of what the home Bible study groups claim they achieve in "deeper Bible study and relationships with learners" if we taught differently on Sunday, even though we still have to fight the "not enough time" issue.

So the question is still on the table: open or closed groups? ♦

