

## Small Group Ministry: Tips for Maximizing the Effectiveness of Small Groups

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I've used small group work in Christian education for well over half a century. Small groups are valuable means of helping people accomplish certain objectives, but it is important to keep in mind the strengths and limitations of this valuable teaching method. It is necessary to provide guidance, monitoring, and management of the formation, functioning, and feedback of the groups in order to minimize counterproductive developments and maximize the groups' effectiveness.

Careful social science research reveals that the optimum number of people in a small group is four, perceived as being large enough for the likelihood that something significant will be said, and small enough to facilitate wanting to talk. That is the number where most people feel comfortable in speaking. For every number over four, fewer people feel comfortable in sharing what they are thinking, and they are thus less inclined to participate in the group discussion. One or two groups may need to have only three people in them.

The teacher should appoint one person in each small group to be the Recorder who lists the responses of the group members. Telling the groups to appoint their own Recorder wastes too much time and emotional energy for some. Use one of the enjoyable, fast, and informative ways of selecting the Recorder.

One way to appoint the Recorder is to say that the Recorder will be the group member whose birthday is closest to today, or the one who lives farthest away. After a specified amount of time, reconvene as a large group. The lists can be given to the teacher or, if enough time permits, the Recorders can each mention one response that was given in their group. After each Recorder has mentioned one, the first Recorder can specify a second comment that was mentioned in his or her group. The Recorders can then report one each in turn until all the responses of each group have been disclosed. Do not have the reporters state all the responses that were mentioned in their group all at once, so other reporters will have something to say that their group stated. This is a basic principle in the debriefing of all small group tasks.

Regarding the Recorders, be careful of the term you use for this responsibility. You will find it easier and quicker to select someone willing to undertake this task, if you do not ask him or her to be the "leader" of the small group. The word leader is a scary concept for many people, possibly including the one(s) whose birthday is closest to today or who live the farthest away. Many people don't want to be referred to as the leader, which is a responsibility involving certain abilities and gifts, even a calling, that they intuitively don't feel they have. However, these same people, even though they may not feel qualified to be a leader, and certainly not the leader, even of a small group, often will agree to be the Recorder for the small group.

List on a projection screen, writing board, or flip chart, the responses of the recorders. Add any comments you want to make.