

Twelve Principles for Successful Small Groups

By Caleb Rosado*

The current interest in small groups has generated a lot of literature, much of it based on theory and not in actual practice. The 12 Principles for Successful Small Groups outlined below are not just theory, but are the result of a successful small group in continuous operation for more than six years. Begun in January 1992 for the purposes of spiritual nurture and Christian fellowship, this small group, comprised of members from the Arcata/McKinleyville Seventh-day Adventist Church, has been successful because it operates on the basis of these twelve principles. These principles, though they emerged from actual practice, are based on sound theory about collective human behavior in small groups. They are here shared so that others who desire to form small groups, or who have been unsuccessful with small groups in the past, may benefit from principles that, in fact, do work in real life situations.

“The formation of small companies [small groups] as a basis of Christian effort has been presented to me by One who cannot err. If there is a large number in the church, let the members be formed into small companies, to work not only for the church members, but for unbelievers.” 7T 21-22

What is a Group?

A group consists of two or more people who are united by *social relations* and interact together on the basis of shared expectations about each other’s behavior.

Groups have three characteristics:

- Are bounded—they have *boundaries* based on attachments (social bonds)
- Share role expectations—they have *beliefs* in common (interests and values)
- Interact in patterned ways—they have *behaviors* that distinguish the group (based on their purpose)

The Twelve Principles:

For small groups to be successful, and last beyond their initial fervor and interest, the following principles need to be considered.

1. Keep the group *small*—10 to 15 persons maximum.
 - Anything beyond this becomes too large and the group will end up breaking up into smaller subgroups.
 - Anything beyond this size becomes too large for most homes.
 - The minimum size for an effective small group is 6 (six).
2. The single most important factor for the success of a small group is *commitment*.
 - Without commitment the group will not last.
 - It is the “glue” that holds the group together.
 - By commitment is meant the discipline to make the group a priority in one’s life and be there on a regular basis.
 - This does not mean that one cannot miss on occasions, since vacations, special dates, campmeeting, evangelistic efforts, and unforeseen as well as planned events will take a person(s) away from the weekly gathering.

- When does one cancel a meeting? Rule of operation: If four or more persons will be absent, the group gathering is canceled or rescheduled.
3. Small groups work best when their purpose is clear—every member is to be involved for spiritual growth, and not a time for one person to lecture while all others just listen.
 - The leader of a small group is not one who takes control of the group, but is a facilitator who seeks to involve all participants in the discussions, dialogues, and decisions, and may not necessarily be the same person all the time.
 - Decisions in small groups are made on the basis of *consensus*—group harmony—and not by a democratic process, a majority vote. While consensus does not work for large groups, it is the principle of operation for small groups.
 - The primary reason for a small group, as opposed to a large group, is so that all present can become involved and feel a part of the group.
 4. Members comprising a group should have a common bond, interest, and purpose.
 - Not all members of a given church belong together in the same group, due to differences of interests, personalities, temperaments, and just plain group chemistry.
 - This does not mean that group members should be clones of each other, for the result would then be “groupthink”—the suspension of independent judgment in favor of group harmony.
 - It means that some members are more compatible with certain members than with others.
 - Effective small groups all have members with a common interest.
 5. The group needs to be semi-closed, meaning that the same persons meet week after week.
 - If the group membership is different every time, it will lack continuity.
 - Different persons every week results in a lack of commitment, in that there is no responsibility to be there on a regular basis, since the membership is different every time.
 - It prevents a sense of “family,” attachment, openness, trust, and frankness to develop, since the membership is in constant flux.
 - Every time a new person enters the group, the dynamics of the group changes. The old group bond is severed and has to be reconfigured, and it takes time to bring it back to the old level of trust and attachment.
 - For this reason Ellen G. White, in talking about small groups, declares: “Let them keep their bond of union unbroken, pressing together in love and unity,...” 7T 22.
 - Semi-closed also means that if someone wants to bring a visitor, this will be alright as long as the rest are informed. But the point is for the same group of people to be meeting together week after week to build a sense of rapport, group comfort, trust, commitment, and confidentiality.
 6. Confidentiality is a requirement.
 - Without confidentiality no sense of trust and commitment will develop in the group.
 - By confidentiality is meant two things:

- People are free to share whatever they desire, since this is one of the purposes of the group, to allow for freedom of expression. People should be free to say whatever is in their hearts without experiencing a spirit of negative judgment.
 - Whatever is shared in the group *stays in the group*. There is no discussing or sharing of comments or contents of sensitive material with anyone outside the group.
- This is also the reason why the group needs to be semi-closed.
 - The key to developing confidentiality in a group is *respect!* All members of a group need to feel that their persons, ideas, and contributions are valued. This does not mean that all ideas and contributions are of equal worth. But the principle here is: *treat people the way they want to be treated*.
7. Select a topic, a book for discussion, or Bible theme and section that is of interest to all.
 - This will ensure the involvement of all present.
 - By having a “say” in the selection of topic or book, all can take ownership and feel a sense of belonging.
 - Vary the selection of material.
 8. Use a simple format for the meeting.
 - Usually a small group meets once a week for 2-3 hours.
 - May begin with a meal—light or full—prepared by host family or it can be a potluck. Not required, but it does bring about a sense of closeness, since there is nothing like sitting around a table and breaking bread to bring about a sense of family in the group. The fact that each hosting family has to make an investment to provide for the rest, results in attachments and a sense of commitment.
 - What is included in the format depends on the desires of the group.
 - Allow at least an hour for discussion of topic or book or Bible portion.
 - Open with prayer and close with a season of prayer.
 9. It is often best to meet in different homes, rather than in the church.
 - More informal, relaxed atmosphere.
 - Investment of time, place, and refreshments results in a high commitment.
 - Modeled after the biblical pattern, where early believers met in homes.
 - For groups whose members have small children, arrangements should be made to meet the needs of the children separate from the group.
 10. Meet on a regular basis without breaking up for vacations, except on special occasions, such as campmeeting, evangelistic efforts, or Christmas; yet even these are for a short stint.
 - To break up for the summer, for example, makes it hard to get started again.
 - It makes it harder to establish a sense of commitment to the group.
 - Regularly meeting year-round gives a sense of the importance and value of the group to the life of all members.
 11. Small groups do not replace regular church programs.
 - A small group is not a substitute for church.

- It is part of the overall church program to enhance the opportunity for all members to get involved in ministry.
- Thus, small groups are an aspect of church life, but not the whole of church life.

12. Small groups are not for everyone.

- Not everyone will be comfortable in a small group.
- Some people do not like to open up to others, and find the intimacy of the small group threatening to their sense of privacy and protectiveness.
- Also some people like to control, and do not like the thought of having to be on an equal basis with others. Thus, their presence, dominance, and attitude will disrupt the successful functioning of a small group.
- To be an effective small group member means that one needs to be accepting of self and of others on an equal basis. This is most difficult for some people. A small group is not for such.

These are not the only principles with regard to small groups; there are many others. But if these are followed, success will be the outcome.

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them,” Matthew 18:20.

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