

Big Small Groups

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You can't do it all.
You know that.
But it still happens.
Students.
Families.
Programs.
Crises.
Phone calls.
Coffee.
Fast food.
Super-size me... ministry style.

We've all experienced feeling relationally overwhelmed in ministry and there are a million time-management seminars ready to better schedule and balance your life. While helpful, they don't solve the ever-present needs associated with people's fragmented lives. They need Jesus. They need the church. Often, they need you. That's a lot of pressure.

Some say that's why churches have small groups. Through these venues, we can manage, care, and disciple more effectively. This may be true, but I talk with many youth workers incorporating small groups who still feel like they are the lone caregivers. Why might this be?

On the encouraging side, it's usually the youth worker who's connected with students. Students trust those who have "gone there" with them, spending the long hours investing in the relationship. Students come to you, because they trust you. Kudos.

On the challenging side, I find that the DNA by which we lead our youth ministries isn't always the same DNA that we use to guide our small groups. Maybe the reason that the overwhelming need for care falls back to youth workers is that they haven't set up volunteer small group leaders properly. Maybe assumptions need to be re-imagined...

It's not delegation

Some view small groups as a programmatic answer. Break down the masses to control the chaos. For high schoolers, have enough leaders to keep them focused. For middle schoolers, assign enough leaders to preempt anarchy! While logistical elements must be considered, volunteer small group leaders commissioned to simply "divide and conquer" through "delegation," will miss our missional point.

Students can be delegated to volunteers, but love, affinity, trust, and relationship cannot. Every small group gets launched into a new set of relationships and

relationships cannot be delegated or outsourced. Watch a student thrive in one group and check out in another. This is a textbook example of delegating structure at the expense of the deeper, relational elements.

It's not just teaching.

When we only incorporate small groups for programmatic change, we turn small group volunteer roles into programmatic roles. Often, the emphasis focuses on what the volunteers' teach- the "lesson" is the product we "distribute" in our ecclesiastical down-line. What happens, then, is that the majority of small group time is spent on content. I value communities discovering truth together as they unpack the biblical narrative, but I get concerned when volunteer leaders think that their primary role is simply that of "teacher." This reinforces an unhealthy perspective that spirituality is knowledge. Students don't need more teachers; they need mentors.

Honestly, it's easier to teach a lesson than mentor. Typically teachers have control, ask the questions, and hold the power to make groups give the "right" answer. One who only "teaches" can do so with little relational investment. She/he can be present without really being there. Maybe you have volunteers in your ministry who "just want to teach the word." Consider channeling their passion toward understanding that the Word (the logos) is ultimately embodied in a person (Jesus), not in information. Likewise, our volunteers need to embody the message, not just teach it. Maybe that's why students come back to you. Lessons are taught, but the true message hasn't been communicated.

What if we encouraged our volunteers to spend less time on delivering content and spent more time investing in relationships? This calls for a different type of volunteer and different volunteer expectations.

So, let's guide our volunteers beyond traditional assumptions...

Beyond dependence to interdependence. Many small group volunteers feel that it all depends on them and they try to reproduce church or youth group programming in a small group context. Remind volunteers that this isn't necessary. Emphasize that they play an important role in a bigger, missional direction of the youth ministry (and church!). Therefore, give them the freedom focus on their mentoring role, trusting that other elements of a student's formation (for example teaching, worship, service, etc.) can be met interdependently within the broader context. Try this: Give volunteers practical "next step" questions from church or youth group time. Encourage them to take the conversation/experience further.

Beyond monologue to dialogue. Remind your small group volunteers that the goal is not to download more content, but to nurture the information they already possess through deeper exploration of students' faith and life. Train your volunteers to come up with a few good questions over, say, a passage they read

with their small group. Their role is to listen, discover, and learn more than to give the right answer. Try this: Ask volunteers what they're hearing from their small group, versus what they're teaching.

Beyond programmed time to sacrificial time. Remind small group volunteers that in a mentoring relationship, the scheduled, small group time is more touch-base time than essential time. Many volunteers fret over attendance, consistency, and group size. I have found that students show up at our scheduled small group times, when volunteers show up at their scheduled game, band, drama, after school, and dinner times. Encourage volunteers to put as much time into occasional phone calls, emails, and visits demonstrating a greater interest in their lives than in their attendance. Try this: Ask volunteers what they're discovering about their students versus "how many students showed up."

Beyond delegation to trust. It's probably fair to say that the reason many small group volunteers fail to share the mentoring load is that youth workers are afraid to share the load. We love students and naturally gravitate toward them. Often we short-circuit the volunteer's impact because we "butt in" on the relationship rather than letting the volunteer take the mentoring lead. Try this: Support your volunteers by sending students, who come to you, back to them. Look for opportunities for your volunteers to succeed relationally through building trust in their connections with students.

We can't do it all. We weren't meant to. Let's re-frame what small groups and volunteers are about by resisting programmatic delegation and embracing an embodied gospel community. Small groups, then, might become bigger than we ever imagined.

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