

SHAPING VIRTUES IN SMALL GROUP

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For nearly four decades I've been attending small groups in my local church. If I do the math on the number of small group meetings I've attended over those years I arrive at a conservative estimate of over five hundred meetings. That's a lot of grouping! When I first started, small groups were the cool thing churches were doing. Showing up at Alan and Linda Redrup's house was a highlight of our week. We weren't always the first to arrive but we definitely staked our claim as the last to leave.

You go to enough small groups over time and you discover that not all small group experiences are life changing. There are times I've wondered, "What are we doing here?" That's even happened in groups I've been leading! But over the years I've learned a huge lesson. The gathering of the church, whether it is all together or "breaking bread in their homes" (Acts 2:46), is not for the purpose of epic experience. That can happen at particular moments. (I can point to some key small group meetings that were life changing for me.) However, small groups don't accomplish their main purpose that way.

Shaped Over Time

Small groups shape us over time. In the words of the Apostle Paul, they help us

grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (Eph. 4:15-16).

There is nothing in Paul's language that says we can grow up in Christ alone. We grow as we are joined and held together as a body. There is also nothing that says we can grow up in a single event. The whole flow of Paul's words is about experience over time. Finally, there is no lack of clarity about the goal of our growing together. It is to build up the body in love, into Christ. A small group is healthy when all of its members are meaningfully connected, relating toward a common goal, over time, becoming more like Christ.

So how do we know whether a group is, over time, actually promoting this healthy life together? Our Shaping Virtues can provide a wonderful guide to making sure our small group is accomplishing the purpose for which it is intended.

Humility

We find a wonderful sense of commonality when we come into our small group aware that we are needy—“works in progress”—and we simply let people see us that way. If you’ve ever been in a business or committee meeting where everyone is trading on their strengths and skills, you know what competition for first importance is all about. But if we humbly acknowledge to each other what we all know to be true about ourselves, we find our focus shifts from our position in the group to God’s grace working through the group (Jas. 4:6).

Joy and Gratitude

More times than I’d like to admit I look at small group night on my calendar and secretly hope there is a city-wide electrical outage that cancels our group but keeps my TV working at home. But it really isn’t hard to access joy as I get my lazy self up to go. I can remember the joy of my early years as a Christian, when gathering together with the saints was new and delightful. I can think of those saints in other places where gathering is not permitted, or in our own country where gathering isn’t easy. And I can remind myself of how God has given me some of my closest relationships through attending the same small group together.

Mostly I can access joy to attend because joy is both a gift of salvation and the meaningful response to finding myself a child of God through the saving work of Christ. In other words, joy and gratitude are intertwined. As I consider what God has done for me on the cross and is doing with me in his church my heart wells with gratitude and a real joy motivates me toward my small group.

Encouragement

This is one of the greatest aspects of a healthy small group experience. We gather together and ‘come alongside’ one another; that’s the literal idea behind encouragement. We encourage folks who are in the battle with sin and the world. We comfort one another in times of trial and remind each other of how God loves us. I tell my community group leaders, they can drop a lot of balls and swing and miss in their discussion in a group or meeting, but a group that learns to encourage one another is a place people want to be.

Generosity

This is where I’ve seen God move mightily through groups. Even now I know folks in our church who would be destitute without the financial and practical help they are getting from their friends. One group I oversaw a few years ago went so far in its generosity toward a member battling cancer that its effort was noted in *USA Today*. A group doesn’t have to have deep pockets either. Often times what is most meaningful to people is not lavish provision, but timely support—paying for a car repair, covering a rent payment, providing an anonymous gift card for a family outing. People don’t need to know who is being generous, they just need to experience generosity.

Servanthood

Servanthood flows out of the others-focused practice that small groups train us in. It comes in the form of wise counsel, compassionate prayer, and careful conversation. But it also comes in the more practical forms of helping move, providing meals or babysitting. The key here is mutuality. We may be the one who serves at one point, but eventually we will need to receive service ourselves. What a wonderful thing to sit in a group knowing that all of the members have been on both sides of that equation with each other at some point.

Godliness

This brings us back full circle. The goal of small group is to “grow up in every way into him ... into Christ” (Eph. 4:15). That’s a great definition of godliness: growing into Christ. It is a process that won’t be completed until we are glorified in the age to come, but it is something we should be experiencing throughout our lives. Our lives are meant to rub against each other to form something we can’t be by ourselves: distinctive representatives of Jesus Christ to a desperate world.

Helping One Another Along the Journey

Small groups are a place where God works in us together so that we can see him work through us to others. I love the way John Loftness says it in the book that carved out SGC’s vision for gathering together in homes. In *Why Small Groups?* he says,

We’re like the Israelites trudging through the wilderness, like the disciples huddled in the upper room after Jesus’ ascension, like the pilgrims on the Mayflower. The negative view is that we’re stuck with one another— confined by a desert, a hostile Jerusalem, or a stormy sea. But ‘stuck’ is not the biblical attitude. Rather, we belong to one another. We are pilgrims on our way to the promised land, called to help one another along on the journey.⁴¹

We help one another as we manifest the very Shaping Virtues we’ve listed above. When a group is marked by those, small group has depth, purpose, and meaning. And that is why small groups exist.

⁴¹ John Loftness, *Why Small Groups?*, ed. C.J. Mahaney (Gaithersburg, MD: People of Destiny International, 1996), 23.