

# Dealing with Small Group Killers



We've all been there. A new group has formed, and its members are excited about its potential. But, before the group realizes it, it becomes hijacked by someone who uses the group as their personal therapy session. One-by-one group members begin showing up less and less. Or the group that never got going because all its members seemed to be infected by a spiritual malaise where the facilitator offered new discussion starters only to have the group stare back at her passively? Small groups are made up of people, so they will have challenges. Some common small group bad behaviors include: neediness, noncompliance, passivity, over-talking, aggression, narcissism and spiritualization, There are many ways to kill a small group and some groups are more creative than others. Dynamics determine the vitality and the sustainability of any group. There are ways of managing those dynamics that allow for a transformational experience among even the most diverse of participants.

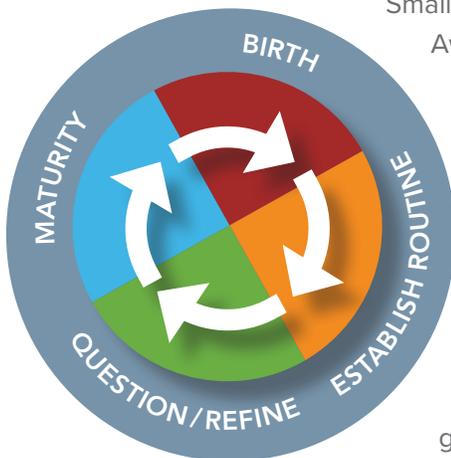
## Opening Prayer .....

God of us, source of all wisdom and compassion, make yourself known to us in our fellowship this day. May the thoughts we think and the actions we do through this group bring about renewal and reconciliation for the whole community. **Amen.**

### Discussion

- What has been the most powerful small group in your life? Why? What made it powerful?
- In what ways have you seen small groups drive away others? How could this have been avoided?

### Life Cycle of a Small Group



Small groups grow and change through the different seasons, just like people.

Awareness and acknowledgement of these stages are key to helping address resistance to change from within the group as well as embrace the growth of the group as it enters new stages of development. Kevin Watson, author of *The Class Meetings Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience*, outlines the life cycle of a group: birth, establishing a routine, questioning, and refining purpose and maturity.

Problems often arise after the routine of the group has been established and the group begins to question their purpose. Remember what preacher and author Andy Stanley says, "vision leaks." Returning to the purpose of the small group often is important to survive this stage of small group development.

## On Monotony

“Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, “Do it again”; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, “Do it again” to the sun; and every evening, “Do it again” to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.”

**G.K. Chesterton**

## Basic Principles for Dealing with Problems in Groups

1. Establish ground rules and expectations from the beginning\* (avoid the “bait and switch”). Include members in developing the shared rules.
2. Develop a covenant and renew the covenant on a monthly or quarterly basis.
3. Consider adding specific expectations into your covenant around individual and group behavior, including time limits for sharing.
4. Name some of the struggles of small groups from the get-go (share the list previously listed).
5. Understand the challenge of people work in light of our first General Rule (do no harm).

\*Even in an existing group, it might be important to take a step back and use one gathering time to revisit expectations or write a covenant for your time together moving forward.

## Addressing Bad Group Behavior

If reminders to return to the covenant agreement fail in curbing bad group behavior or habits, part of the facilitator’s job is to address the concerns for fear of causing small group members to leave. Scripture has some guidance in this arena:

- Paul encourages us to speak “the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love” (Eph. 4:15-16).
- An oft-quoted scripture provides a method for dealing with conflict within a community: “If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him—work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you’ve made a friend. If he won’t listen, take one or two others along so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest, and try again. If he still won’t listen, tell the church. If he won’t listen to the church, you’ll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God’s forgiving love” (Matt. 18:15-17, MSG).
- Be wary of the words you use, however, “Take this most seriously: A yes on earth is yes in heaven; a no on earth is no in heaven. What you say to one another is eternal. I mean this. When two of you get together on anything at all on earth and make a prayer of it, my Father in heaven goes into action. And when two or three of you are together because of me, you can be sure that I’ll be there” (Matt. 18:18-20, MSG).



## CLOSING [UNISON] PRAYER

**By your Spirit make us one with Christ,  
one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world,  
Through your Son, Jesus Christ,  
With the Holy Spirit in your holy church,  
All honor and glory is yours,  
Almighty God, now and forever. Amen**



### RESOURCES:

Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Making Small Groups Work: What Every Small Group Leader Needs to Know* (Zondervan, 2003).

Kevin Watson, *The Class Meetings Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience*.