

Objectives of the Group

I have joined a number of Bible study groups over the years and never once did anyone explain the objectives to me. I don't think anyone thought about objectives because it was a Bible study group so obviously the objective must be to study the Bible. I guess if you called it a small group or a cell group then the objectives would not be so obvious. If you called it a growth group then the obvious objective would be to grow but how that growth is going to happen would not be so obvious. Besides studying the Bible we always prayed somewhere during the meeting so you could call prayer an objective too. Friendships were formed so you could call making friends another objective. Combine Bible study and the ensuing conversation and in Christian jargon you call that fellowship, another objective.

Karen and Rod Morris in Leading Better Bible Studies (page 106) talk about a purpose statement for the group. If people don't agree to this purpose statement then there is disunity in the group and people may join together to shift towards a different goal, they say. I've never found this. Generally if people don't like something about the group they leave rather than push things the way they want to go.

Colin Marshall in Growth Groups lists evangelism as one of the objectives. If this is one of the objectives then it will have a large bearing on how you study the Bible i.e. you will be looking for passages or interpreting passages with a view to encourage people to evangelise others. Rather than let the passage speak its own message you will be pushing your own agenda into the passage. I've seen this happen in some evangelical churches where nearly every sermon has an evangelistic message somewhere along the way.

Marshall also emphasises commitment to the group and commitment to evangelism i.e. page 113, "Commitments would include areas such as: attendance, punctuality, preparation and willingness to contribute to the evangelistic effort of the group." I would prefer people to come to the group because they *want to* rather than because they feel obliged to come.

If evangelism is an objective then you will need a plan for people who come along as new converts or if they are interested in knowing more about Christianity. If these people join the group then it will affect what you study in the Bible and the depth of study of particular passages. Alternatively, you could put all the newbies in the same group where they would be studying at roughly the same level. The problem with this is that you are separating the new person from the person who brought them along in the first place and the newbie may not want that. I'm all for evangelism but perhaps it is best done on a one-to-one basis until you get them up to speed with the rest of the group.

Larry Osborne in Sticky Church chapter 13 says that the primary purpose for the sermon-based small groups in his church is to foster significant Christ-centred relationships (page 101). The idea behind "sticky" church is to stop the flow of people out the back door once they have come in the front door and he has done this by getting people involved in small groups as soon as possible. Like Marshall, Osborne wants people to make a commitment to their small group and even has a written covenant (appendix 3) that members are supposed to sign up to.

Osborne says "Despite the nearly universal emphasis on the need for life-on-life relationships, virtually every small group model out there has much less to do with creating and sustaining long-term significant relationships than with promoting evangelism and church growth, or shepherding the flock. . . .

Such common practises as having an empty chair waiting to be filled, asking groups to continually divide and multiply, and assigning people into groups based on geography have little to do with fostering long-term significant relationships. Fact is, in many cases these things make it harder to maintain ongoing relationships." (Page 105.)

So there is a range of objectives and a range to level of commitment to those objectives. It would be a good idea to make those objectives and commitments clear when a group begins. But most people join small groups some time after they begin and the questions they need to be answered are:

What are the objectives?

Do you explain these objectives to new people entering the group?

Do you ask for some kind of commitment to the group?