

Problem Solving in Cyberspace

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Church people seem to be naturally cautious about innovations, and they are "late adopters" when it comes to small groups on the internet. Always tell small group leaders and participants that it will take one or two experiments before they begin to feel comfortable ... and provide lots of coaching to help them work through their difficulties. In my experience, there are two basic kinds of internet groups: "Real Time" and "Slow Motion". Each has its opportunities ... and problems.

"Real Time Groups"

Our mistake is to assume that these are just regular face-to-face groups, with twelve people, meeting at a regular time each week, for about two hours, but relocated from our living room to the internet. In fact, these groups are better with fewer people. Programs like *Skype*, *Webex*, and *Go-to-Meeting* work best with six people. This assumption leads to problems.

- Solutions to Tech Problems

Visual imaging uses more bandwidth, and the group is often at the mercy of the *least effective* internet link or the *poorest equipment* used by any single participant. Coach everyone in advance to ensure a good connection:

1. Subscribe to whatever internet provider is used by the nearest small business;
2. Invest in high quality webcams;
3. Use headphones with microphones to block out extraneous noises.

Most software programs allow people to also connect via mobile or landline phones if they lose internet connection. Provide participants in advance with the phone codes. The small group leader should have a list of all alternative contact so that (s)he can "rescue" lost parties. Sometimes 2-3 people can actually be together and share a connection and webcam, but make sure you invest in a desktop microphone designed for conference calls, rather than individual microphones that are highly directional.

- Solutions to Diminishing Intimacy

Webcams allow you to see facial expressions and body language, but even then the small group leader needs to be more assertive to guide conversation. Encourage participants to speak in smaller "bytes" rather than long monologues. Be quick to jump in to encourage the shy or interrupt the talkative. Move the conversation deeper with leading questions:

1. What do you think?
2. How do you feel?
3. What's worrying you about this?
4. What's exciting you about that?
5. Whose response do you want most?

Most software programs allow text messaging between individual participants concurrent with the ongoing conversation. Small group leaders use this to prompt, encourage, or direct the flow of conversation. They also allow you to record the conversation and create a "podcast" that can be shared with additional group members.

- Solutions to Sidetracks

When we meet face-to-face, we often rely on subtle clues to detect boredom or eliminate tangents, but this is harder to do on line. Again, the leader needs to prepare more deliberately behave more assertively.

1. Send an agenda, document, or hyperlink to a video or website in advance;
2. State the goal or focus of the conversation clearly at the beginning, but repeat it periodically during the conversation;

3. Summarize the key points being made whenever there is a natural break in conversation.

Most software programs allow the leader to show her or his screen to everyone else. (Note participants often cannot then see each other, so don't share your screen for long). This means you can actually look at a Bible passage or document together, or jointly go to experience a video or website. Prepare in advance to do this so you do not waste time fussing.

- Solutions to Lost Spiritual Depth

When we meet face-to-face, we also rely on nuances of voice and body language to convey ideas we cannot express in words. This is also harder to do on line, and we feel particularly helpless when a participant is upset or emotional.

1. Encourage participants to move slightly away from their webcam so that you can see their upper body ... and it is easier to appreciate their posture of prayer or emotional support.
2. Equip participants in advance with certain memorized scriptures or mantras, or even common devotional objects, that can be repeated together or focus group spirituality.

Small group participants often follow-up with more personal skype or telephone conversation, and this makes the overall group experience more personal and supportive.

"Real Time" groups can be very intimate experiences, but they require smaller numbers and more guidance by the leader. Does spontaneity suffer? Paradoxically, as the leader defines purpose and boundaries more intentionally, participants become more spontaneous because they trust the leader to keep everyone on track.

"Slow Motion Groups"

Some on line small groups function like limited access forums or chat rooms. They are a more elaborate form of text messaging, embedded with hyperlinks that can draw participants to images, videos, and websites. I call them "slow motion" because you don't actually see or talk with another person "real time", but enter and exit the group conversation whenever you have the time or opportunity. Remember that "intimacy" actually has two components: *intensity* and *consistency*. What "Slow Motion Groups" sacrifice in intensity is made up by consistent participation over a long period of time. Many groups have clear covenants in which participants are expected to check in and interact with the group at regular intervals.

It is important to understand that "Slow Motion" groups *are not Facebook!* These forums are only accessible by password, and the covenant is customized to guard confidentiality. One of the biggest problems with on line small groups is that a podcast or text archive preserves the threads of conversation. Participants must be absolutely confident that their comments will not be shared beyond the group.

- Solutions to Tech Problems

Many church websites can support multiple exclusive access forums. A simple seminar can teach potential participants how to join them, and how to navigate through the threads of conversation. The small group leader can organize various threads into topics, and participants can revisit conversations or start new ones.

The most common problem is that these forums require typing skills. Fortunately, participants can use sophisticated dictation software like *Dragonspeak* that dramatically reduce or eliminate typing on a keyboard.

- Solutions to Diminishing Intimacy

Since participants don't see each other and interact in "real time", it may seem that intimacy suffers. On the other hand, the "slow motion" flow of the forum allows participants time to think and express themselves clearly.

1. Encourage participants to use their mobile devices to contribute to the small group forum "on the fly", so that they can bring their most current perceptions and reflections to the group as they happen.
2. Build a regular discipline of interaction into the small group covenant, so that over an extended period of time the unique personalities of each participant begin to be revealed.

Remember that "Slow Motion" groups often stay together for extended periods of time. They can even be combined with face-to-face gatherings in any location.

- Solutions to Sidetracks

The sidetracks in small group forums are usually caused by strong personalities voicing outrageous or controversial points of view. The small group leader must regularly reiterate the purpose of the group, be prepared to declare a particular thread to be finished, and compel the group to move on to other matters. A small group covenant may actually be posted on the website for each group defining core values of respect, generosity, peace, and so on. Most software programs allow the administrator of the forum (i.e. small group leader) the power to deny repeated offenders continued access to the group after fair warning.

- Solutions to Lost Spiritual Depth

The good news is that "Slow Motion" groups can involve a great number of participants. It is the size and diversity of participants that can add spiritual depth and interest to group conversations. There are several techniques leaders can use to push threads of conversation deeper.

1. Ask a participant to deepen the meaning of their comment by sharing the life context from which their perspective emerges. The more participants speak biographically, the more they reveal their deeper passions and anxieties, hurts and hopes.
2. Invite individual participants to share a personal prayer in writing ... or to describe the spiritual disciplines, favourite scriptures, or powerful images that shape their experiences of God.

As the small group leader organizes the ongoing conversation into distinct topical threads, (s)he can designate specific files for prayers, breakthrough insights, favourite images and music, and so on. If a participant allows it, they can provide contact information for individual participants to follow up in more private conversation.

"Slow Motion" groups can also be very intimate experiences, but they require more patience on the part of the leader and great care to protect the confidentiality of participants. Do individuals get lost? Paradoxically, as the leader more assertively protects the group from dominating personalities and imposed personal agendas, participants feel more free to express themselves and respectful of one another.

There are many possibilities for hybrid small groups that combine face-to-face, real time interaction over long distances, and ongoing threads of conversation over extended periods of time. The more technological advances network mobile devices and different media, the more individuals can participate with small groups in their own way, in their own time, for their unique personal goals. The post-modern world is *on the move* ... and I predict that online small groups will actually become the "new norm".