

# Overcoming Growth Plateaus in Small Groups

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Based on my book *Christian Chaos* (Abingdon Press)

We need to think of small group growth as a dynamic “flow” of maturity, rather than as a learning process. When I was a child I floated toy boats down the creek near our home. Sometimes the boat shot downstream; sometimes it got trapped in eddies and even seemed to go backwards; and sometimes it got stuck on some rock dam in the river. Sometimes the boat corrected itself; sometimes it requires gentle nudge with a stick; and sometimes I had to pick it up and move it along.

Small groups grow in two basic ways: relationships and faith<sup>1</sup>. There are many potential “growth” plateaus for individuals or the group as a whole. Some can be overcome by group cooperation, and others must be overcome by skilled leadership. How do you know if a small group is on a plateau? The most common sign is lackadaisical participation. If group members start arriving late, leaving early, or skip a meeting; or if they are distracted by cell phones or unusually quiet; or if it becomes harder and harder to move beyond friendly miscellany and refreshments toward eye contact and significant conversation, then the group is on a plateau.

## Relationship-Building Flow

The relationship-building flow begins with the first conversations of the group ... the chatter about families, careers, and common interests that starts any relationship. The first plateau is boredom. The special sign of boredom is *idle speculation* (as people try to add zest to the conversation by inventing stories, gossiping, and fictionalizing their experience to make it seem artificially dramatic). Groups usually correct themselves, and move on to share information about whatever the affinity is that has brought them together. If not, the leader should begin feeding into the conversation new information, insight, data, or provocative statistics to capture attention.

Shared information often leads to competition. In a Bible study group, for example, people may compete to be more knowledgeable than others. The special sign of competition is *one on one conversation* (when two individuals seem to spend all their energy debating with each other and ignore the rest of the group).

<u>Flow</u>	<u>Risk</u>
✓ <b>Conversation</b>	<b>Boredom</b>
✓ <b>Information</b>	<b>Competition</b>
✓ <b>Ideas</b>	<b>Disagreement</b>
✓ <b>Feelings</b>	<b>Conflicts</b>
✓ <b>Dreams</b>	<b>Shock</b>
✓ <b>Team Action</b>	<b>Stagnation</b>
✓ <b>Multiplication</b>	<b>Grief</b>

The solution is to share creative ideas and personal experiences with the whole group. If necessary, the leader should interrupt personal debates. Reality test the interest of the group as a whole. If there is interest, deliberately ask others for input to restart group conversation; and if there is no interest firmly set the debate aside and move on.

This can lead the group into disagreements about principles and tactics. The Christian Gardening Group, for example, may quarrel about the best way to grow some plant. The special sign of that disagreement has become unhealthy is *closed or unhappy body language* (people cross their arms, shift chairs backwards, or look troubled without saying anything). Overcome this by inviting people to share their feelings of joy, anxiety, hurt, and hope. The leader may need to share their personal feelings first to create an environment of honesty. As a rule of thumb, the longer the group stays on a plateau of disagreement, the more honest (and vulnerable) the leader needs to become about their own feelings.

At this point personality conflicts may plateau group growth. The special sign of conflict is a *spike in emotion* (tension, tears, raised voices, etc.) These are not often resolved naturally, but require the skilled intervention of a leader. The leader may want to get the advice of the pastor or staff person who oversees small group

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<sup>1</sup> See my the second half of my book *Christian Chaos* (Abingdon Press).

development. Personality inventory exercises, modeling acceptance of diversity, review of the Biblical “fruits of the Spirit”, and reinforcement of the core values of the church help overcome this plateau. It is important to understand that conflict is actually *a positive turning point in the life of a small group*. It can be a dramatic leap in maturity and trust. Once overcome, group members are more tightly united and the "relational flow" accelerates.

Deeper acceptance unleashes the sharing of dreams for the future. Often the affinity itself is forgotten, and people speak eye to eye and heart to heart for the first time (perhaps in their lives). Individuals might be shocked by the yearnings and aspirations of people they thought they knew well, and this can halt momentum for growth. The special sign of shock is *alarm* (people preface replies with words like "I can't believe that you ..." or "How dare you ..." or exclamations of surprise). The leader can overcome this by using the mission of God to redeem the world as a greater purpose with which all Christian aspirations align, but which can embrace many different styles and tactics.

Acceptance and openness emboldens the group to do something to bless outsiders of the group. The Christian Gardening Group raises vegetables for the local food bank; or the Bible Study Group participates in a rehab project in New Orleans. If the service project lasts too long, or becomes to routine, the group may lose focus and burn out. The special sign of stagnation is *sudden desire to form a committee* (people want to transform the small group into a task group and recruit volunteers to do jobs). The leader now knows that this small group, as a single entity, is over. Some group members may want to form a new small group with an affinity for this particular mission; and other members may want to follow a different path for spiritual growth. The leader introduces the possibility of group multiplication, and then guides the grief felt when people move on to new relationships.

### Faith-Building Flow

This second current in the flow of maturation begins with the basic covenant for prayer, Bible reading, and mutual support consciously made by group members. It is anchored in the bedrock beliefs of the church, or the nearness of God that is the confidence and yearning of the group. The danger, of course, is that modern people (and particularly Baby boomers!) are habitually *afraid of accountability*. They struggle with spiritual discipline both within, and in between, meetings. The desire of people to grow in faith may be sufficient to motivate people, but the leader may need to introduce specific tools for meditation, prayer, or Bible reading to help them on the way. Spend time brainstorming questions of faith (e.g. "I always wondered about ..."). The promise of finding answers lures people to greater discipline.

Curiosity is the next step in faith-building. People may be curious about Bible history, theology, comparisons of Christianity to other religions, or the spiritual habits of historic or contemporary “saints”. This can lead to consternation as people discover ambiguities and contradictions, or realize the hidden doubts of their heroes. The special sign of consternation is *cynicism and sarcasm* (people begin to make jokes, resort to stereotypes and satire, or dismiss out of hand particular scriptures, dogmas, or ancient beliefs without serious reflection). The leaders should not be hasty to move on. Challenge cynicism by pausing to explore and compare ancient and contemporary assumptions.

Deeper Bible study is usually the result, but it may also involve more extensive reading of Christian commentaries. Once again, group members may become competitive or judgmental. The special sign of competition is *proof texting* (people quote texts or authorities to contradict one another). The best antidote is to refer to the person and work of Jesus Christ as the center of faith.

<u>Flow</u>	<u>Risk</u>
✓ <b>Covenant</b>	<b>Indiscipline</b>
✓ <b>Curiosity</b>	<b>Consternation</b>
✓ <b>Bible Awareness</b>	<b>Competition</b>
✓ <b>Trust</b>	<b>Dependency</b>
✓ <b>Questioning</b>	<b>Fear</b>
✓ <b>Action</b>	<b>Judgment</b>
✓ <b>Holy Discontent</b>	<b>Self-Doubt</b>
	<b>Self-doubt</b>

This brings clarity, but also allows mystery, and shifts conversation from "proof" to "faith". You can also guide the group to reflect on the bedrock beliefs and motivating vision of the church. Sometimes this requires the intervention of a pastor. Deeper trust opens the door to allow different perspectives.

The downside of intervention is always dependency. Groups can plateau by simply obeying or accepting uncritically the faith interpretations of an authority. The special sign of dependency is *blind obedience* (people quote a sermon, appeal to an expert, or simply stop talking after the pastor has spoken). The leader should be honest to share their own questions about faith, and encourage others to do the same. As a rule of thumb, never let the pastor have the last word! The deeper the dependency the more daring the small group leader must become to both declare their personal faith and raise their personal (and as yet unanswered) questions about faith. It is important to realize that just as overcoming *personality conflict* accelerated relational growth, so also overcoming *blind obedience* accelerates spiritual growth. Pastors should not be alarmed when they do not have the last word; but rather celebrate the accelerated spiritual quest of the small group.

The deeper honesty of the group provokes courage of conviction. However, it can also uncover the deep fear of meaningless evil that is embedded in real life. The special sign of fear is *personal doubt*. This is deeper than intellectual questioning, and reflects the deeper ambiguities of living. People stop talking, and start confessing feelings of emptiness, anger at fate, and anxiety about guilt. If the group dwells on this too long, it will become sidetracked by self-pity or revert to a support group. The best response to a plateau of fearfulness is *not* reinforcement of dogma, but immersion in mission. It is in mission that we experience Jesus face to face. Focus outward, not inward.

Ironically, the principle mark of maturity is a kind of "holy discontent". People crave more of Jesus Christ. They want to go deeper than the present circumstance of the group may allow. This can be a time of insecurity for group members. The sign of self-doubt is *false humility* (people trivialize their gifts, artificially minimize their opportunities, and ask "Who, me?") It is at this point that the leader knows that this group, as a single entity, is over. The leader takes each member of the group aside (for coffee or lunch) and mentors each individual to discern their next step of faith. Guide them to the next small group, or to the next mentoring relationship, that can help them go deeper into the mystery of Christ, and/or go further in the mission of Christ.

The path to maturity is fluid, like the current of a stream. We constantly get stuck and unstuck. Remember that the stream is always and continuously running in the direction of God's great ocean of grace.