

Care and Self-help Groups

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Open any newspaper today and you will see a large number of notices for self-help groups, ranging from the traditional 12-step groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, to the more unusual, such as Incest Survivors. Groups now exist to address a full range of human problems and predicaments. What do they actually do?

Meeting Spiritual Needs

Early on, self-help groups emerged primarily to assist people with their addictions. Participation in these groups tended to be long-term. More recently, self-help groups have emerged to help people cope with myriad other life problems. A divorce-recovery group would be a good example of such a coping group. Participation in these groups tends to be short-term.

The 12-step formula, though not explicitly Christian, proclaims unmistakably Christian themes like grace, redemption, and sanctification. People who enter a 12-step group are asked to acknowledge powerlessness over their addiction and affirm their dependence on a Higher Power for recovery. During recovery, which is a life-long process, people attempt to make amends with others they may have harmed along the way.

Treating addictions in this unabashedly spiritual fashion has turned out to be successful where conventional psychology has often failed. Individual therapy, while typically an adjunct to a person's recovery program, usually does not provide what the spiritually oriented 12-step program provides. The founders of Alcoholics Anonymous made their most significant contribution by identifying the underlying spiritual need, which could be met best in a small-group setting.

Offering Mutual Support

Such explicitly Christian themes are not necessarily a part of every self-help group, however. Without the 12-step formula, groups rely primarily on mutual caring and support to help one another through difficult circumstances. Parents who have had young children die, for example, frequently discover that only other parents who have experienced the same tragedy can understand the depth of their pain and loss.

The internal dynamics and leadership of small groups are as varied as the life issues they address. Most groups do have a leader or at least people who are assigned to be facilitators. In some cases, these leaders have training in social work or psychology, but most often leadership simply emerges from people who have experienced the particular

issue of concern. The act of leadership itself can be part of the recovery process for these people.

Connecting with the Church

Churches are uniquely qualified to offer and sponsor self-help groups, not only because the church has space to make available but also because the church is equipped theologically and spiritually for the task of healing. Most churches enter self-help group ministry when they recognize a particular need within their membership or community. For example, recognizing a high number of widows and widowers, church leaders may encourage a group like THEOS (They Help Each Other Spiritually), which meets the needs of young and middle-aged widowers.

Sometimes churches can draw on the services of existing national organizations to help them start a self-help group. Other times churches must go it alone. In those cases, leaders should feel free to borrow from and adapt other readily available models.

Leadership is the key ingredient for success. Groups usually begin with a small core of highly committed people who themselves have a need for care and support. While pastors ordinarily do not lead the self-help group itself, they can and should equip and provide resources for the leaders. Churches need not discount what they have to offer spiritually, either; people who seek out self-help groups are usually quite open to the Good News of the gospel.

(from Six Types of Small Groups to Help Churches An excerpt from Leadership Handbook of Outreach and Care)