

Group Counseling and Campus Ministry

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Introduction

In 1970 I left campus ministry to begin a graduate program in counseling. I went back to school because I found myself doing a lot of counseling for which I evaluated myself as being ill equipped to do well. When I left the campus we were at the end of the "social action 60's" when more students would involve themselves in a weekly tutoring program than would take part in a Bible study. Next to Viet Nam, the biggest question was, "What can I do to make the world a better place to live?"

Three years later following an internship in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), a residency in Pastoral Counseling and a MA in Guidance and Counseling I returned to the campus. Times and students had changed. We were entering the "pietistic 70's" when students were more job oriented, more religious and more inner directed. The human potential movement was affecting every area of our life, and the students' biggest question seemed to be, "Who *am* I?"

After three years in an excellent counseling program I felt confident of my counseling skills and "qualified" to help students deal with both the question of the 60's and the question of the 70's—which were and are not mutually exclusive. Elizabeth O'Connor had named that melding process as "journey inward, journey outward."¹ Still I really did not intend to establish counseling groups as a part of our campus ministry program. In fact, my first group just happened because some students requested a growth group as a way of putting some direction into their lives. Also one of them had participated in a modified group during her summer missions orientation.

Several things made me look to groups as a way of helping students deal with their own life situations. First, the matter of time—the myriad duties of a campus minister do not allow much time for individual counseling. During my first year at UNC-G I began seeing a lot of students in individual counseling, and it

became apparent very early that a good stewardship of my time did not allow that much time investment in only a few. Second, the problems that students brought had some common themes: low self-esteem, lack of confidence, handling conflicts and hostility, communications difficulties with roommates and friends, establishing some sense of independence from parents and sexuality. Third, I was seeing students who were basically healthy, who were for the most part going through normal developmental processes, and whose situational difficulties were usually short termed but could develop into lifetime unhealthy habits of coping unless intervention took place. Fourth, the students whom I saw in individual counseling over a long period of time tended to drop out of our BSU program. All these realizations plus the success of that first volunteer group gave me the impetus to look for a way to implement growth groups into our total program.

I had had excellent experiences in my own small group in CPE, both as a participant with my peers and in a group counseling setting as a co-leader for one and one-half years. I had been affirmed and confronted, set goals and realized them, had grown and been encouraged to change by my peers. Those group experiences were part of what I believe Paul meant in "working out your own salvation" (Philippians 2:12), and what Jackie Smith calls "continued conversion."² I knew students should be able to be to each other what my group had been to me if they were led into "structured, experience-centered learning" events whose goals were awareness and change.³ They really are the experts at being 18, 19, or 20 years of age! But I had skills which could help them be healthy and whole when they became 40, 60 or 80 years old.

Now I was faced with the problem that my counseling training had equipped me to do therapy or correction, and what I needed was a focus on growth or prevention. So, I had to retool again, so soon! I did a lot of reading, I participated in a growth group leadership workshop; and I had an opportunity to co-lead a group at summer missions orientation. I already knew and understood group dynamics so the transition of that knowledge to a growth group setting was relatively easy. My second year at UNC-G I introduced growth groups as a part of our on-going ministry.

Organizing Growth Groups

I still don't find students standing in line to join a group; in fact, this semester I don't have one. Even after having growth

groups as a part of our ministry for four years, new students still have to be introduced to growth groups as a vital, challenging, fun, and sometimes quick way to mature in their interpersonal relations. Though college students are described as much more honest and open than when I was a student, I find that most of their conversations are very general. They still play roles and most come to college with a second-hand faith which has not yet been claimed personally. That is "safe" behaviour. Groups appear as threatening, but growth groups can be the impetus towards helping students move to and through "searching faith" to "owned faith."

To recruit for growth groups we build in a lot of interaction activities during our first BSU meetings each year, either using printed material which is available ("Serendipity" Series or "Faith at Work" magazine) or by adapting our own. This helps students get acquainted quicker and used to talking on more than a superficial level. It also frees the students to question and to know that they are not expected to have all their life mapped out even if they are Christians.

Our printed and verbal announcements help to publicize and define growth groups (as different from therapy) in that they will focus on discovering and making use of strengths which everyone has and setting future goals for change. A growth group is a laboratory in interpersonal relationships where a person discovers things about herself or himself and then tries out new and healthier ways of interacting. A growth group is a microcosm of life, except the group has the added dimension of being emotionally committed to helping each person grow.

Students are invited to an inquiry meeting the second week of classes. At that meeting we try to clear up any questions and further clarify the purpose of a growth group. Usually someone who has been a participant in a previous group will share some general impressions of his or her experiences. I will usually list some areas which have been discussed in groups before, and those areas will usually follow the general themes mentioned in an earlier paragraph. Those students who do want to join a group are divided into first timers and repeaters and a convenient day and time to meet is selected. If there are enough first timers to form more than one group, the selection of groups could be made on the basis of meeting time. Best friends, roommates and dating couples (except for a pre-marriage workshop) are asked to select different groups

to enhance the possibility of openness and less dependency. We have more female than male students so many of our groups are all female. All one sex or equally divided male-female groups seem to function best. The group size may vary from 6-10, but I prefer a group of eight.

A group should be able to set its own rules, but some have become standard for us in semester groups.

1. The group meets weekly for 12 weeks. If we can arrange it, one of those sessions would be for an extended session or overnight. This allows time for publicizing the groups, with the closing coming a week before exams begin.
2. We meet for 1½ hours each week with an agreed starting time, with attendance expected at every meeting. Every experience we have had of a member being absent has stopped the group process for that meeting.
3. We meet at our Baptist Center for every session, unless an extended session is held at a retreat center or my home. The Center provides informal comfort and privacy from interruption.
4. All material that is discussed is confidential. I consider a group experience as sacred as worship, taking seriously that God is present whenever we are meeting. Though I might not evaluate some of the material we cover as very serious; it probably is to that student, and that trust should not be betrayed. (Modified groups on communications skills or similar events that cover role playing or theory and do not involve a lot of personal data might not carry that restriction.)
5. All participants are encouraged to speak in the first person and directly to other members of the group. This speeds identification with her (his) own feelings and actions.
6. A participant must make a personal contact specifying as clearly as possible what goals she (he) has during the life of this group. This contract may be periodically evaluated, but it is shared with the group and with all other contracts becomes a part of the group agenda during the second session of her (his) group.
7. Some reading material will be suggested and referred to as tools for meeting goals. For a beginning group, I like to use: *PEOPLEMAKING* by Virginia Satir to help identify and correct patterns of communications. *BORN TO WIN* by James and Jongeward, especially chapter 7 which deals with personal and sexual identity. It is based on Trans-

actional Analysis which is an easily understood tool for describing elements of personality. And THE ANGRY BOOK by Theodore Rubin offers the best explanation for understanding and handling correctly all human feeling, especially anger. It helps people understand that feelings just are; their value comes in how the feelings get acted out.

A first session with a group would be structured to help the group members begin to get acquainted in some non-threatening way. They might be asked to share three objects from their billfolds or purses and say why they selected them. We would spend some time talking about the here and now feelings of being in the group. Part of our time would center on discussing and committing ourselves to rules for our group. Only after the first session would a person be expected to commit herself (himself) to the group. If a person chooses to stay in the group, then the contract would be assigned for the second session. The contracts would be the starting agenda for the next session. Leadership for the first session would lie mostly with me with the hope that responsibility for group agenda would come from the group in succeeding sessions. Periodically I will use some group time on short teaching lessons related to a topic under discussion. Usually that material would come from the books mentioned earlier. This would not be true as much for a group of repeaters as would be probable in a first timers group.

Each session of a group will generally end with a short evaluation by the group. The closing might include a trust exercise or a prayer time. Midway in the life of a growth group a major evaluation would take place so members could rethink their contracts. The last session is reserved for closing when members reflect on changes in perceptions of other members and when affirmation is exchanged. This helps the members to deal with their separation creatively and gives them some data to deal with other separations which will take place in their lives.

During the school year we will have some adjunct programming on self-esteem; identifying and handling of feeling, especially anger, developing new relationships with parents; and dating, courtship and marriage. Over the years we have had weekend retreats on values clarifications, human sexuality and life planning, as well as Bible study. This kind of intentional programming helps students to begin to claim their own beliefs in these areas. If they are not now, or have not been in a growth group, the programs could take away some of the fear of group life. If they are in a group, the

programs just help to solidify decisions they are making within the group.

Results

I have never used a testing instrument in our groups, so our evaluations are subjective, but overall I believe growth groups have added a very positive dimension to our ministry. In the four years only one student has dropped out of a group without finishing. Usually growth is directly related to how much a person opens up or risks in the group. Most of the students in those groups have continued active in BSU and much of our leadership has come from students who have been part of a beginning group. Now that growth group elements are part of council and committee meetings, we do not have many students who are repeaters. All of our team experiences through BSU incorporate an intentional element for personal sharing.

Growth groups are an efficient and effective use of time both for me and the students. My involvement in the groups keeps me growing as well.

Since beginning growth groups as a part of our BSU program I have had an opportunity to offer some modified workshops in the dorms on communications skills, human sexuality and death and dying. These can never involve the participants as deeply as our 12 week groups, but it does give me an opportunity to meet and minister to students and dorm counselors who would never come to our Center.

Statewide we use growth group experiences in the orientation of summer missionaries, both for personal growth and team building. This helps a team to build up trust and surface conflict areas early in the life of the team so that the task of the team (music, drama, evangelism) is not deterred later on in the summer. Our spring conference always features a special group experience for seniors to help them deal with the anxiety associated with graduation, separation and life planning. One of our state level associates is specially trained to lead life planning workshops on our campuses. Each year there is a weekend group for engaged couples and marriage enrichment.

Conclusions

Whether to have groups or not is really not the question for us. Since Jesus selected the twelve we have had groups. The question seems rather to be how well we use the groups to help

students in their maturing process. You may not want to start growth groups as a separate entity in your campus ministry, but by learning the skills and techniques of interpersonal growth groups you can enhance all the small groups which presently exist in your ministry, whether a Bible study, evangelism group, weekend revival team or folk group.

If you are going to lead growth groups you should get the training to do it well. One rule I try to live by is not to lead in an area of life in which I have no expertise or in a conflict area which I have not resolved. In an academic community we all have Christian professionals to whom we can turn for leadership in specialized areas such as life planning or marriage enrichment, so we should not try to do that for which we are not qualified.

Jesus said that he came so that we could have abundant life and know the truth and be freed. (John 10:10 and John 8:32). I have seen students discover freeing truth and move onto abundantly living from an experience in a growth group. That is not the only way, and it is not an end unto itself, but if used wisely in campus ministry it can give intentional direction to many students who are still living second hand lives.

Footnotes

1. Elizabeth O'Connor, JOURNEY INWARD, JOURNEY OUTWARD (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1968)
2. Jackie Smith, LEADING GROUPS IN PERSONAL GROWTH (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1973), p. 9.
3. Ibid., p. 9.
4. John Westerhoff, WILL OUR CHILDREN HAVE FAITH? (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), p. 89 ff.

Bibliography

The following bibliography can be helpful to you if you are considering beginning growth groups within your student group or church. They vary from general books which talk about groups to some which offer a very structured guideline for the content of a group. The reading can be helpful even if you want to incorporate growth elements into your present programming such as Bible study, council and committee meetings and existing teams. Some of the books can even be used by an individual for personal study. The list is representative, but it is not exhaustive.

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