How to Overcome Six Common Barriers to Spiritual Growth in Your Small Groups

As presented in a live satellite seminar on Church Communication Network (CCN) by Dr. Henry Cloud and Bill Donahue

Small group experts Dr. Henry Cloud and Bill Donahue offer the following guidelines for identifying and eliminating six barriers that prevent spiritual growth in small groups:

**Barrier #1: No Clearly Defined Purpose**

*Indicators:*
- Tentative sharing
- Overly dependent on the leader
- Irregular attendance, lack of commitment
- Meetings are easily “hijacked”

*Action: Clarifying the Purpose*
- Is the purpose designed by church or decided by group?
- Clarify the intentions and expectations
- Make the purpose specific enough to be followed
- Provide clear action steps

**Barrier #2: Prior Group Experience**

*Indicators:*
- Surface-level sharing
- Members promote a personal agenda
- Fear and reluctance based on bad experience

*Action: Discussing Desires and Wishes*
- What would a preferred future look like?
- What kind of environment do we want in this group?

**Barrier #3: Fear of Self-Disclosure**

*Indicators:*
- Superficial comments and sharing
- Prayers are always focused on others
- Spiritualization

*Action: Story-telling & Safety*
- Begin by sharing stories
- Use sub-grouping to create safety
- Commit to confidentiality
- Leader models appropriate self-disclosure
Barrier #4: Unfamiliar With Biblical Community

Indicators:
- Cannot receive praise, gifts, or correction
- Religiosity replaces authentic community
- Unwilling to express pain

Action: Teaching and Modeling Authenticity
- Discuss values (love, weakness, respect, mutuality)

Barrier #5: Absence of Ground Rules

Indicators:
- Floundering, feelings of aimlessness
- Fear of sharing
- Misbehavior
- Uncertainty in decision-making

Action: Forming a Covenant
- Define ground rules
- Clearly express expectations (grace vs. legalism)
- Invite feedback
- Enforcement of ground rules linked to group purpose

Barrier #6: Poor Choice of Curriculum

Indicators:
- Lack of process (rigidity)
- Lack of structure (loose)
- No bridge from study to practical living
- No “moments” with God and others

Action: Choosing and Using Curriculum Wisely
- Choose “group-friendly” material
- Consider spiritual depth and experience
- Link to group purpose
- Recognize group limitations

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