

Learning Forgiveness:

The Role of Small Group Ministries

A National Study

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With varying emphasis, forgiveness has been stressed in the teachings of nearly all religious traditions. From ancient writings to more recent ones, sacred texts and their interpreters speak candidly about anger, conflict, the desire for vengeance, and the need for individuals and societies to move past these frayed emotions and broken relationships. Forgiveness is not simply an abstract theological doctrine or even an ideal to which only saints can aspire; it is an aspect of the practical, day-to-day life struggles with which people everywhere are confronted.

The importance of forgiveness is now being rediscovered. Television talk-show hosts debate whether or not it should play a more prominent role in the political life of our nation. National leaders offer statements on behalf of their countries, asking victims of war, slavery, and exploitation for forgiveness. Psychologists argue that forgiveness is essential for maintaining happy marriages and good relations with neighbors and co-workers.

But if forgiveness is so important, how can people learn what it means and how to practice it in their lives?

For some years now, religious leaders have been experimenting with small group ministries. Bible study groups, prayer fellowships, house churches, covenant groups, and support groups of all kinds are becoming increasingly attractive in the life of local congregations. Could these ministries be an effective place for people to learn about forgiveness?

This report summarizes the results of a national study that aimed to answer this question. It examines the role of small groups in promoting forgiveness and considers how effective these efforts can be.

The Forgiveness Study

Through the generous support of the John F. Templeton Foundation, a national study was commissioned to find out how many Americans are currently involved in small group ministries, whether or not their groups are doing anything to encourage members to think about forgiveness, and whether or not these efforts are producing effects in members' lives. The research focused on six questions:

- How much do small groups emphasize forgiveness?
- What kinds of small groups emphasize forgiveness?
- What are the effects of emphasizing forgiveness?
- Are the effects of emphasizing forgiveness lasting?
- How do people in small groups understand forgiveness?
- What implications do the answers to these questions have for religious leaders?

We commissioned the Gallup Organization to conduct a large, nationally-representative survey of the adult population of the United States.¹ Doing so, we found that 35 percent of adults nationally claim to be members of a small group: either they say they attend a “prayer group meeting or Bible study group” or they are “involved in any other small group, such as a self-help group, support group, men’s or women’s group, or Sunday school class.”

We then asked these people who were involved in small groups a series of questions to find out what kinds of groups they belonged to, how often they participated, whether or not the group paid attention to forgiveness, and what people might be experiencing as a result of being in their groups. In all, we interviewed 1,379 people. A year and a half later, we interviewed about a third of

these people again. We also conducted thirty indepth qualitative interviews with people to learn more about their experiences with forgiveness, half of these were with lay people who were participating in small groups at their churches and half were with clergy who had experience leading small groups.²

Seventy percent of the people we surveyed said their group was part of the regular activities of their church or synagogue. Of these, the most common words used to describe their group were: Bible study group, prayer fellowship, Sunday school class, and discussion group. Of those in other kinds of groups, the most common descriptions were: discussion group, support group, special interest group, and self-help group. The groups were similar in many respects.

The following figures provide an overview of what the members of small groups are like nationally and how they compare with the adult population of the United States in general:³

62 percent of small group members are women, compared with 51 percent of the U.S. population at large

43 percent of small group members are age 31 to 49, 38 percent are age 50 or over, and only 16 percent are age 18 to 30; these figures are roughly the same as for the adult population as a whole

79 percent of small group members are white, while most of the remainder are African American; these figures are the same as in the nation at large

Members of small groups tend to be better educated than the general population: 42 percent are college graduates, 30 percent have some post-secondary education, and only 28 percent have no education beyond

high school (comparable figures for the U.S. adult population in national surveys are 28 percent, 26 percent, and 46 percent)

Small group members are disproportionately likely to be Protestants (52 percent, compared with 46 percent in the general population), and they are underrepresented among Catholics (15 percent versus 26 percent nationally)

85 percent of small group members are church members, compared with 60 percent in the general population

70 percent of small group members attend religious services weekly, compared with 28 percent of the general population; only 14 percent of small group members attend religious services less than once a month, compared with 47 percent of the general population

The data suggest that most small group members are actually active in their groups and take their participation seriously, gaining personal satisfaction from it as well as other perceived benefits to themselves and their faith:

64 percent say they attend their group's meetings about once a week, while most of the remainder (29 percent) attend at least monthly

55 percent have been members of their group for at least five years; only 12 percent have been involved less than a year

83 percent say the group is very important to them personally; 43 percent say it is extremely important

87 percent indicate that they are very satisfied with their group; 39 percent are extremely satisfied with it

72 percent say almost everyone in the group comes every time

64 percent say their group meetings last for at least an hour and a half; more than a third (37 percent) attend meetings that last at least two hours

The median size of small groups is between sixteen and twenty members; a quarter have fewer than ten members and a quarter have more than thirty members

86 percent say their group provides emotional support to its members

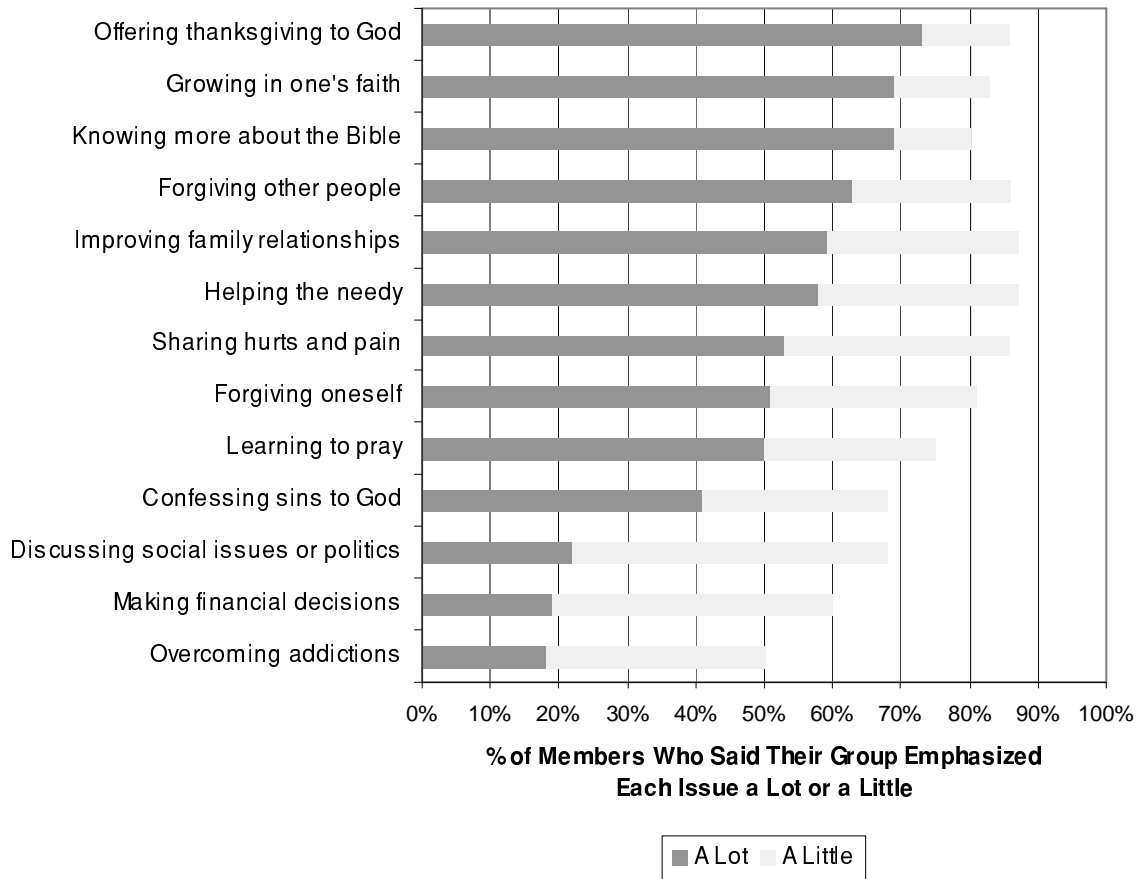
90 percent say the group has helped make them feel like they were not alone; 89 percent say it gave them encouragement when they were feeling down; and 64 percent say it helped them through an emotional crisis

77 percent say their faith has deepened as a result of being in the group; 62 percent indicate that their faith has deepened *a lot*

How Much Do Small Groups Emphasize Forgiveness?

We asked all the members of small groups the following question: “During the past year, has the group devoted a lot of attention, a little attention, or no attention to each of the following?” We then read a list of possible topics, including “Forgiving other people” and “Forgiving oneself.” The results are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Forgiveness Is One of the Topics Most Often Emphasized in Small Groups



In Figure 1, 86 percent of group members say their group has paid at least some attention to “forgiving other people” in the past year, and 63 percent say their group has paid a lot of attention to this aspect of forgiveness. These percentages are about as high as for other commonly emphasized topics, such as offering thanksgiving to God, growing in one’s faith, and knowing more about the Bible. Seventy-five percent of group members say their group pays at least a little attention to “forgiving oneself,” and 50 percent indicate that their group emphasizes this topic a lot.

What Kinds of Groups Emphasize Forgiveness?

Figure 2. Forgiveness is Emphasized in Many Different Kinds of Groups

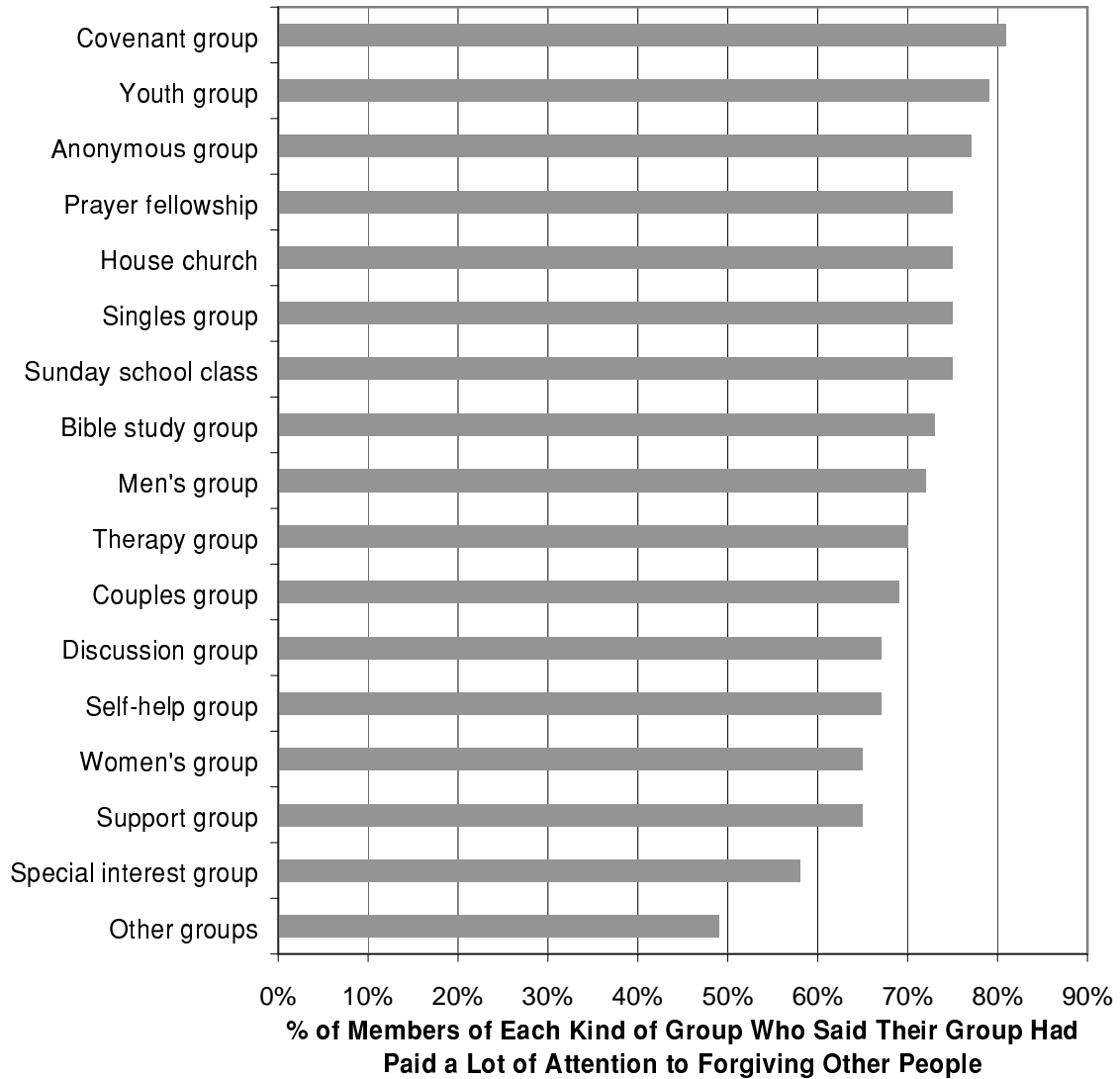


Figure 2 shows the percentages of members of various kinds of groups who say their group has paid a lot of attention to forgiving other people in the past year.⁴ Covenant groups are apparently the ones in which forgiveness is most likely to be emphasized. Special interest groups and groups not aptly characterized by any of the labels shown in the figure are the least likely to emphasize forgiveness. All other groups commonly emphasize forgiveness.

Figure 3. Forgiveness Is Most Often Emphasized in Church Groups and in Groups that Discuss the Bible, Provide Emotional Support, and Devote Time to Prayer

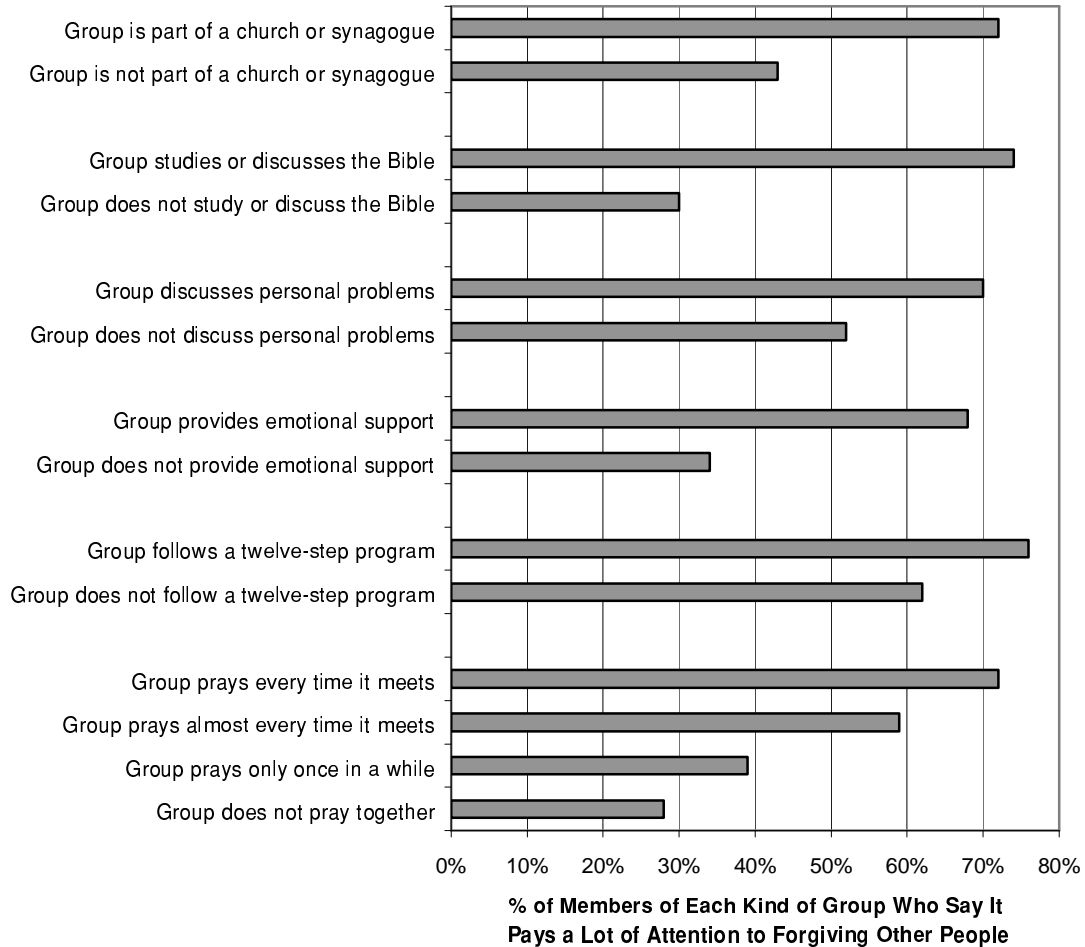


Figure 3 shows some of the group characteristics that increase the likelihood that the group emphasizes forgiveness. Being sponsored by a church, studying the Bible, discussing personal problems, providing emotional support, and following a twelve-step program (such as Alcoholics Anonymous) all make a difference. Spending time together in prayer makes the most difference.⁵

Our qualitative interviews provide further evidence of what small groups actually do to encourage their members to think about forgiveness:

- Use books or study guides that emphasize forgiveness

A Baptist pastor mentions a couple's group at his church that has used Dennis and Barbara Rainey's Building Your Mate's Self-Esteem as a way of emphasizing the importance of forgiveness in marriage.

A member of a Methodist women's group says her group recently spent several months discussing Ken Sande's The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict.

An Episcopal priest says one of the covenant groups in his parish decided to focus on forgiveness for six months; to do so, they selected biblical stories that talked about forgiveness and used Bible commentaries to assist in preparing each week's discussion.

- Engage in confessional prayer

A Baptist layman says the members of his Bible study group find it difficult to talk about personal problems, but do mention them during times of prayer when everyone's eyes are closed and they are speaking to God; he knows people in the group think more seriously about making amends to others after these times of prayer.

A Catholic woman who has been a member for the past five years of a group in her parish that meets regularly to pray the rosary together observes that praying like this builds intimate friendships which then become the vehicle for

sharing pent-up anger and other frustrations; being able to talk about these issues, she says, is the first step on the road to seeking forgiveness.

- Encourage sharing of personal problems

The minister at an independent evangelical church recalls members of one Bible study group talking about physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. Because the group climate was supportive, several members acknowledged having been abused, and then others did as well. The group then focused gradually on forgiveness as a way of moving past the effects of abuse.

A Lutheran woman says sharing personal problems in her Bible study group has been helpful because doing so encourages everyone to move beyond the sin of pride—believing that they are immune to the need for forgiveness or the need to ask someone to forgive them.

- Discuss biblical principles of accountability

At a Presbyterian church, the leader of a Bible study group says he encourages people to talk about their personal problems, but then leads the discussion toward examining what the Bible says about addressing these problems. Group members hold one another accountable, for example, by asking each other what they had done during the week about some problem they had raised at a previous meeting.

A used car salesman who leads a Southern Baptist fellowship group says he takes a firm hand in encouraging members of his group to confront their differences, talk through their conflicts, and live up to the biblical injunction of loving one another.

- Talk about models of forgiveness

A Lutheran woman says her group has reminded her of the importance of forgiveness by studying how Jesus, the apostles, or various Old Testament characters forgave people who had harmed them.

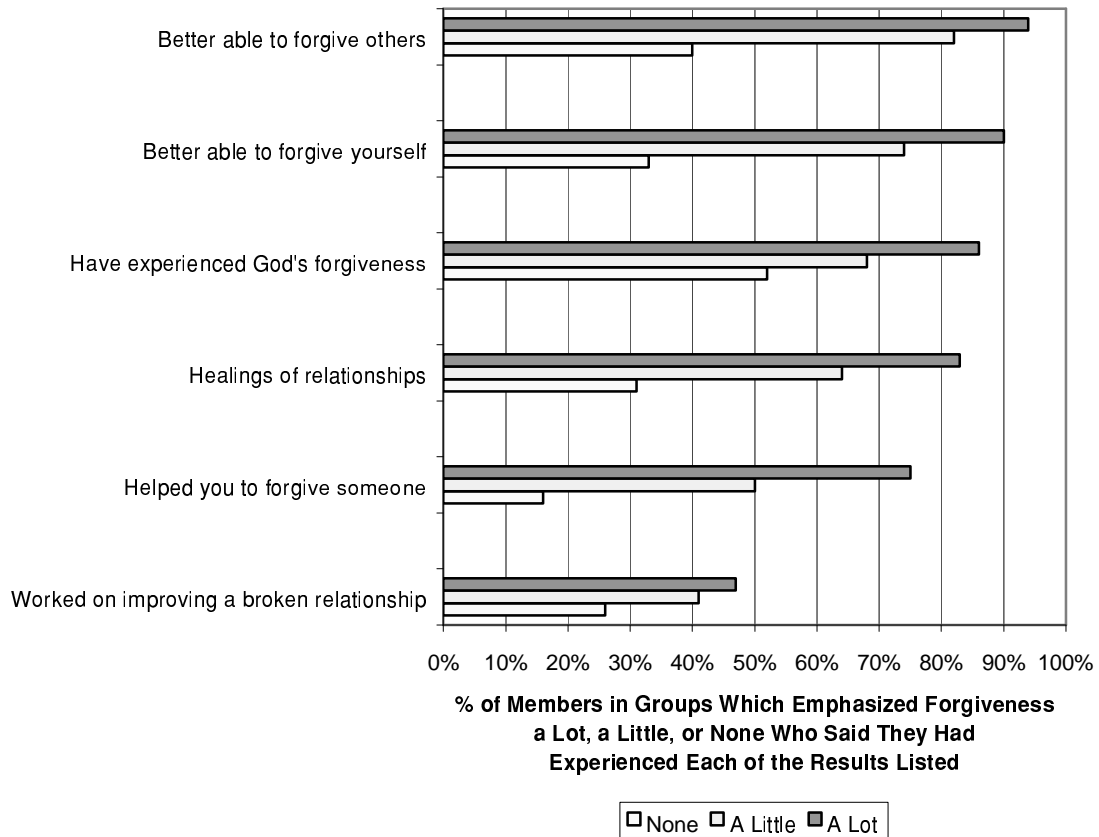
A Catholic priest emphasizes how small groups in his parish encourage forgiveness by discussing the life of Jesus. “Jesus forgave everybody from the cross for crucifying Him and therefore we have to forgive everybody. So the next thing is, Well, has the person said that they are sorry for what they have done? Well, no. But the people didn’t tell Jesus that they were sorry for what they (had done) and He forgave them anyway. So then theologically that needs to be dealt with. They need to understand the scriptural context of that, the theological nature of that and how it applies. That sometimes requires a lot of work.”

An Assemblies of God pastor who thinks small groups are one of the most effective ways of strengthening believers says members have to “model” forgiveness toward each other. He notes examples of conflict among members that have provided occasions for modeling forgiveness.

What Are the Effects of Emphasizing Forgiveness?

Another aim of our research was to assess whether or not small groups that emphasize forgiveness actually make a difference in the lives of their members. Do members feel they are better able to forgive others, and do they in fact engage in activities that involve forgiveness? Figure 4 presents some comparisons of members whose groups emphasized forgiveness a lot with members whose groups emphasized forgiveness only a little or none.

Figure 4. Group Emphasis on Forgiveness Is Associated with Members Saying They Experience and Practice Forgiveness



The data in Figure 4 show that members of groups that emphasize forgiveness a lot are more likely than those in groups that emphasize forgiveness a little (or none) to say that they are better able to forgive others (and themselves) as a result of being in their group, to have experienced God's forgiveness, to have experienced healings of relationships, to have received help in forgiving someone, and to have worked on improving a broken relationship. In short, what people are exposed to in small groups does seem to make a difference in their own perceptions and behavior.⁶

Figure 5. In Groups That Emphasize Forgiveness, A Majority of Members Who Have Personal Conflicts Say They Have Been Able to Work on Improving Broken Relationships

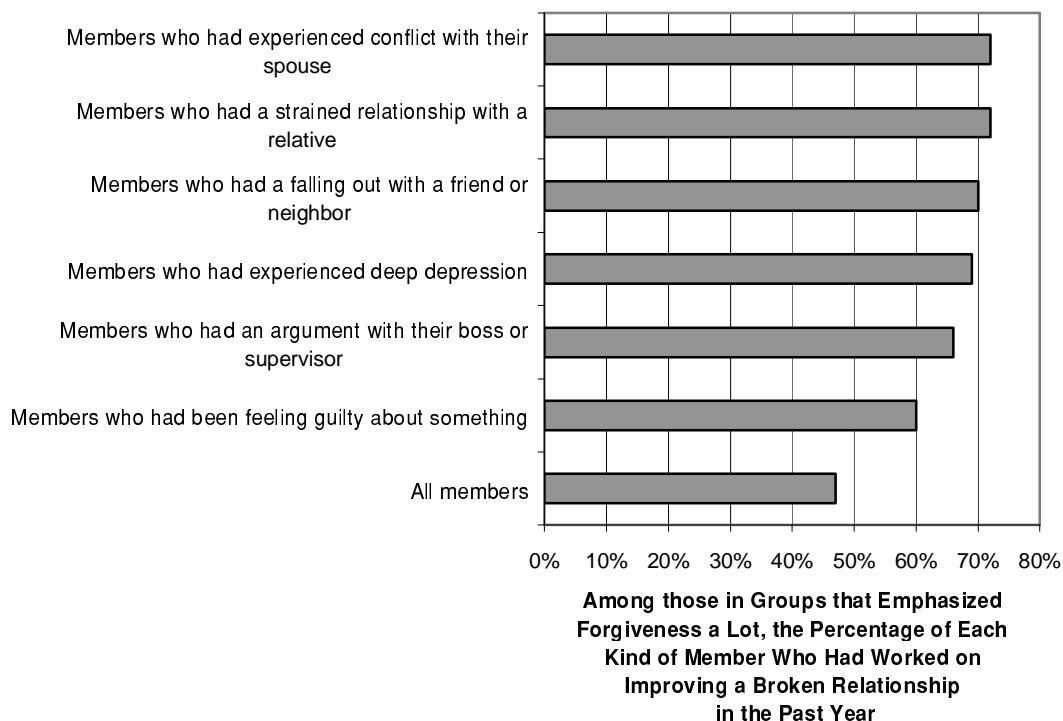


Figure 5 shows the effects of group participation in a different way. Because some members may have experienced more conflict in their lives than others, we want to know especially about group effects for those who have actually experienced various kinds of conflict. Where groups have emphasized forgiveness, the data show that a large majority (about 70 percent) of those with particular problems in their lives have actually been able to work on improving broken relationships.⁷

Figure 6. Participating in Groups That Emphasize Forgiveness Is Associated with Other Perceived Benefits

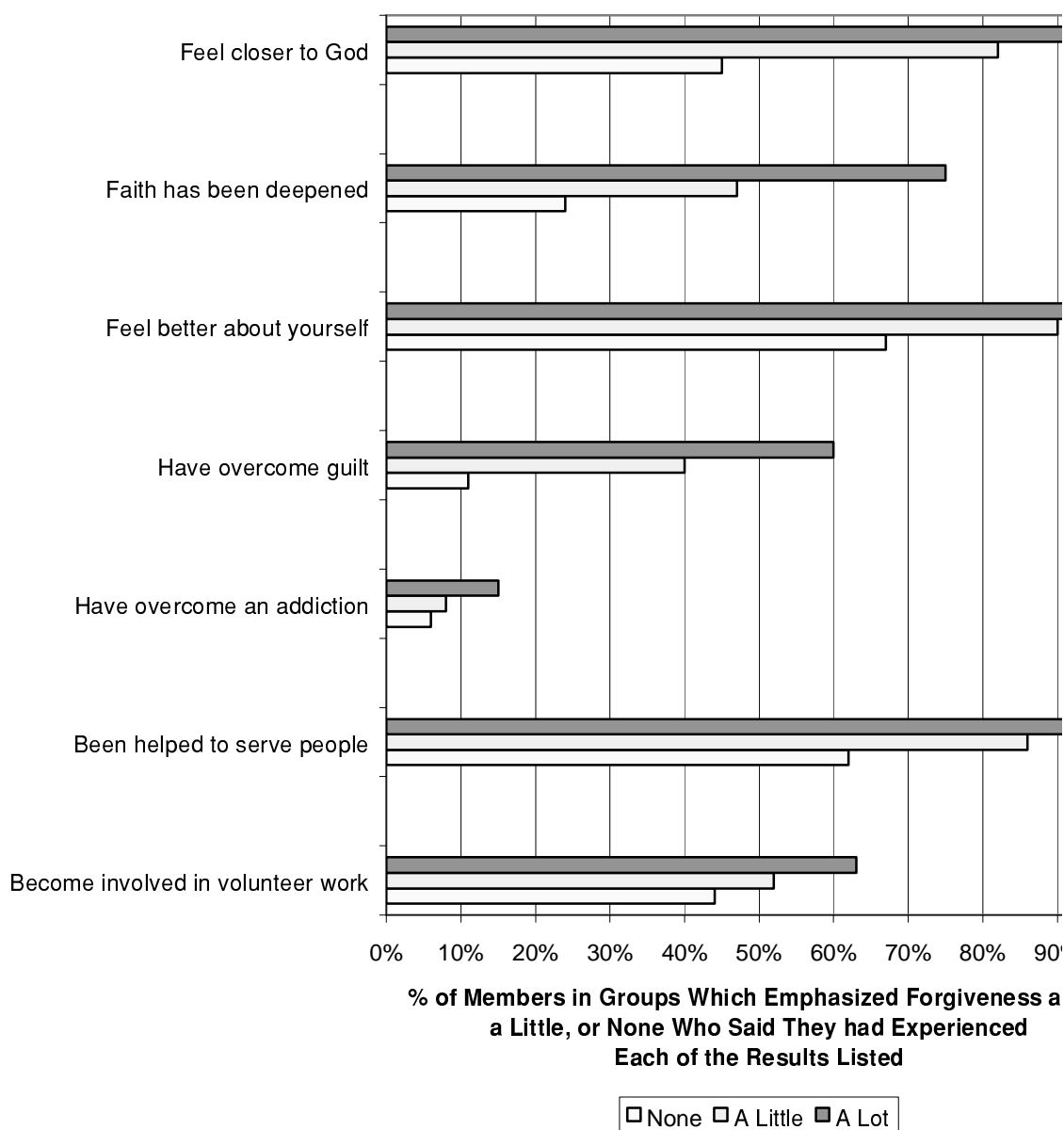


Figure 6 shows that people in groups that emphasize forgiveness are also

more likely than other people to say that they have benefitted in other ways: they say they feel closer to God as a result of being in their group, feel that their faith has deepened, and feel better about themselves. They are also more likely than other people to report that they have been able to overcome guilt, that their group helped them overcome an addiction, that they are better able to serve other people, and that they have become involved in volunteer work in their communities.⁸

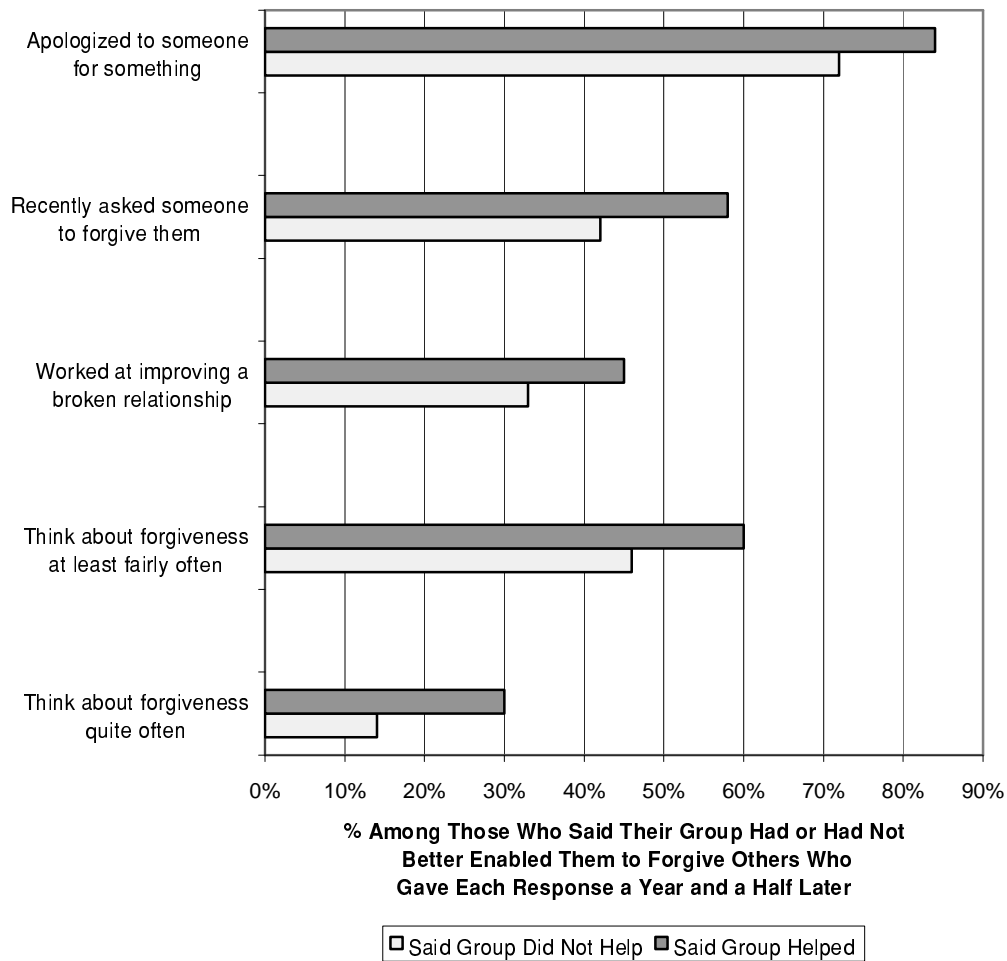
Are the Effects of Emphasizing Forgiveness Lasting?

A survey, conducted at only one time, is helpful for establishing relationships, but nevertheless is limited in telling us whether those relationships last. It could be, for example, that people in groups which emphasize forgiveness are reminded of its importance and thus do in fact forgive others more often—but then forget to do so a few months later when their group is focusing on something else. It could also be that someone responding to a survey starts thinking about forgiveness, giving consistent answers to various questions on the topic, but would not answer the same way in another context.

To resolve these problems, as best we could, we decided to try to follow up some of the people included in our national survey, reinterviewing them again at a later date. Doing this in a national study is difficult for a variety of reasons: people move or change telephone numbers, they happened to be in the hospital or on a business trip when we tried to recontact them, or they were too busy in other ways to want to be reinterviewed. Still, we thought it worth the effort to contact as many people as we could to see what we could find out.

Our follow-up study was conducted approximately eighteen months after the original study. We were able to track down 444 of our original respondents.

Figure 7. Follow-Up Study Shows That Members Whose Group Helped Them with Forgiveness Continue to Be More Likely to Practice Forgiveness



In Figure 7, the responses eighteen months later of those who initially said their group had enabled them to forgive others are compared with the responses of those who initially said their group had not enabled them to forgive others. On all of the items shown, there are significant differences.⁹

How Do People in Small Groups Understand Forgiveness?

Is forgiveness just a trite word that people scarcely think about, a meaningless string of syllables that has become too familiar by virtue of being repeated too much at church and in the popular culture? Or do people actually have some serious ideas about what it means? Because most small groups emphasize forgiveness, and because most members of small groups claim to have thought about forgiveness, we can benefit by listening to what they say about it. Our indepth interviews are most helpful in this regard, but we also gained a few ideas from the survey.

- As near as humanly possible, forgiveness should be unconditional

It may be difficult to forgive someone if that person continues to engage in harmful behavior or refuses to acknowledge wrong-doing. But in our survey, a majority of small group members took the view that forgiveness should not be contingent on how the other person behaves. Seventy-seven percent *disagreed* with the statement, “You should not forgive someone unless they admit that they have done something wrong.” And 70 percent *disagreed* with the statement, “You should not forgive someone unless they stop doing what was wrong.”

A homemaker in her early forties who has been learning about forgiveness at the Bible study group she attends observes: “Forgiveness shouldn’t come with a price tag on it. I shouldn’t expect anything more from you. I might hope for changed action, but I shouldn’t really expect anything. We’re not giving God anything and we’ve got total unconditional forgiveness from Him.”

A Baptist man says the person being forgiven doesn't need to admit that he or she did something wrong; the important thing, he says, is for the person doing the forgiving to recognize that a wrong had been committed, and then deciding not to pay back that person by doing something vengeful.

Those who think the person being forgiven also needs to do something usually say this is only because that person will benefit; for instance, an insurance agent says a spouse who has been forgiven will probably be a better spouse if he or she acknowledges the problem and tries to do better.

- Forgiveness is largely a matter of developing a new attitude toward someone

Consistent with the idea that forgiveness should not depend on how the other person behaves, most small group members think the burden falls mainly on the person doing the forgiving, and that burden is to somehow change one's own attitude. In the survey, 87 percent agreed that "Forgiveness mainly involves changing your own attitude"

A woman who sued her husband for divorce after he abused their daughter recalls: "I saw that it was something that was beyond my control. I thought by watching, looking, talking, convincing that I could control the situation and I realized that I could not control that situation. It was a terrifying situation to feel helpless and not be able to help a helpless child. I ran into the arms of the church basically because my former husband was saying that I was crazy and he also had this psychiatrist who was our marital counselor who said he would back me up in court." Her change in attitude involved trusting that God was still in control and then trying to work through her anger and resentment.

A Presbyterian man points out that forgiveness does not mean denying your feelings or not having them in the first place. For instance, "Anger is a gift from God. It's a smoke alarm that goes off in our house that says something is wrong in our environment. Then once the alarm goes off, it's up to us to take a look at what it is. The anger may be appropriate. Maybe we have been assaulted or insulted or something and we need to respond to that reality." In his view, the change in attitude comes as one looks at the anger and decides what to do with it.

- Forgiveness usually needs to include some actual communication

Forgiveness is not simply a matter of secretly changing one's attitude; most people in small groups think it is necessary to interact with the other person in a way that communicates this change of attitude and thus tries to restore the relationship. For instance, seventy-one percent agreed that "Forgiveness requires actually telling someone you are sorry.

An older man who attends a Catholic church recalls a falling out he had recently with his wife over a blood pressure machine he was using (he claimed it was malfunctioning; she said it wasn't). He felt peeved and then, the more he thought about it, the angrier he became because he thought she didn't trust his judgment anymore. Eventually he was able to tell her he was sorry for being ill-tempered, and he felt better after that.

A young man who remembers stealing a jacket when he was in high school recalls that it was difficult to actually go and make apologies, but his dad made him do it; doing so then made it possible for the other person to say that he was willing to forgive and forget.

A woman who had been angry with her mother for years says she was eventually able to change her attitude toward her mother, but by that time her mother was dead; she regrets never having been able to actually tell her mother that things were okay.

- Forgiveness is a process that may take a long time

Although some fractured relationships can be healed with a brief apology, most small group members recognize that forgiveness involves more than this, either because it takes a long time to restore a badly broken relationship or because forgiveness is a lifelong process that has to be relearned and practiced in new situations. Seventy-two percent of those in the survey agreed that “Forgiveness is something one needs to work at over a long period of time.”

The divorced woman whose husband abused their daughter describes forgiveness as a process that, in this case, has been going on for nine years and still isn't over: “It's a process. You make a choice. What do I want? And then you try to work towards that choice. I have to say, it's not easy. Sometimes I scream and say I hate this person because this wound does not heal.”

The homemaker in her forties says the process is lengthy because it often takes her a long time to admit that there's a problem in one of her relationships, then she feels hurt or angry or guilty, eventually she may start praying about the problem, then gradually she starts to look at it in a new way, she may still feel angry or guilty, and it may take even longer until she has been able to patch up the relationship by behaving differently. She says

the hardest part is often forgiving herself for doing something stupid or feeling petty.

A Catholic man who has been involved for a number of years in a spiritual direction group talks about his divorce and learning to forgive himself and his wife as a ten-year process: "There was a long period of struggling over the settlement of the terms of the divorce and all the crap that goes on in that sort of thing. There was a lot of resentment. Which took a blow in the form of a low grade depression over the whole thing. And a lot of anger." The process involved becoming more honest with himself than he had been in the past, rethinking his entire relationship with the church, and getting professional help along the way. At times he feels the process is not yet finished, but he knows he has made progress because his children who were once quite alienated from him are now on better terms with him.

The follow-up study provides some additional evidence about the nature of forgiveness among participants in small groups. We can see what forgiveness means by considering how those in the follow-up study who said they had recently forgiven someone responded to several other questions. Specifically, among those who had recently forgiven someone: 89 percent said they had also recently asked for God's forgiveness, and of these, about half (45 percent) had asked God to forgive them for something specific while about the same number (42 percent) had asked God for forgiveness in general. Overwhelmingly, people had asked God for forgiveness on their own (75 percent), rather than during a religious service. In addition, among those who had asked someone for forgiveness, a large majority (68 percent) said someone they knew had, in turn, asked them for forgiveness. In short, most of these people experience forgiveness as a two-way process, not just as a matter of asking for it or giving it. The study also suggests that forgiveness is unfinished business for many people:

a third (32 percent) of those who had asked someone for forgiveness said there was someone in their life who they still wished they could forgive. And 25 percent admitted that forgiveness either does not come easily or depends on the situation, rather than always coming easily.

One other aspect of forgiveness is also evident in these data: asking for forgiveness goes hand in hand with vulnerability. People who ask for forgiveness, the study shows, are more likely than those who do not ask for forgiveness to say they have been feeling guilty, depressed, sad, or lonely and to acknowledge that they may be having family problems or trouble figuring out what is important in life. This is an important finding. In some of the scholarly literature it has been assumed that forgiveness is the remedy for people's problems. Maybe so. But if it is, it still seems to require that people acknowledge their problems in the first place.

What Does This Research Imply for Religious Leaders?

The main implications of this research for religious leaders are the following:

1. Small group ministries can be an effective way of helping people learn about forgiveness. At least a third of Americans are already participating in small groups of some kind, and at least two-thirds of these people say their group emphasizes the importance of forgiveness.
2. If small groups emphasize forgiveness, then members are indeed more likely to think about forgiveness, say they have experienced God's forgiveness, and work on overcoming broken relationships.

3. If small groups emphasize forgiveness, there may be other positive consequences as well, such as members feeling that their relationship to God is closer, feeling better about themselves, and reaching out to help other people.
4. While many different kinds of small groups can encourage forgiveness, the activities that help most are specifically religious activities, particularly praying together and studying the Bible; it helps for people to share problems and hold each other accountable, but it is not enough just for people to show up regularly and have a good time.
5. Although psychologists and other social scientists try to identify purely secular components of the forgiveness process, the evidence from small groups suggests that forgiveness still needs to be thought of in theological terms; people insist that there is a relationship between divine forgiveness and human forgiveness, and they acknowledge that it is hard to truly forgive someone without God's help.
6. Study guides are quite helpful for encouraging group discussions about forgiveness; members appreciate the examples and applications in these guides, and often learn more than when forgiveness is simply mentioned from time to time in other contexts.
7. Forgiveness varies from situation to situation, is complex, messy, and emotional; group members appreciate being able to compare notes and learn from each other.
8. There are no easy formulas or generalizable techniques for learning forgiveness; stories and story-telling in small groups are valuable because they give people examples to follow and let people create meaningful accounts of their own experiences of forgiveness.

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Notes

¹ The survey was conducted between November 1998 and February 1999. Using random-digit dialing, 4,292 potential respondents were screened to determine whether or not they were involved in relevant groups. I wish to thank Harry Cotugno, John McNee, and George Gallup Jr. for their assistance with the survey.

² The indepth qualitative interviews were conducted in people's homes or at their churches by professionally trained interviewers. This part of the field work was performed by Response Analysis, a division of Roper Starch, Inc. I wish to thank Linda Russell for her assistance with this part of the study.

³ The figures for the national population are from a representative survey of the U.S. adult population involving 1,530 respondents which I conducted through the Gallup Organization in 1999.

⁴ The group descriptions in Figure 2 were read to respondents and they could choose as many as they thought applied to their own group; if respondents were involved in more than one group, they were asked to answer all the questions with reference to the group in which they were most actively involved.

⁵ The relationships shown in Figure 3 are all statistically significant at or beyond the .05 level of probability.

⁶ In Figure 4, the first, second, and fourth items are from a question that asked, "As a result of being in this group, which of these, if any, have you experienced?" The third item is from a list of eight statements that included "I have experienced God's forgiveness," to which respondents were asked to say if the statement described them very well, fairly well, not very well, or not at all (the percentages shown in the figure are those who responded "very well" or "fairly well"). The fifth item is from a question that read, "Has the group ever helped you, personally, in any of the following ways?" The last item shown in the figure is from a question that asked, "In recent months, did you happen to do any of these things?" All of the items were embedded in larger lists of items so as not to cue respondents toward answering consistently about forgiveness. The differences shown in Figure 4 are all statistically significant at or beyond the .05 level of probability.

⁷ The information in Figure 5 is presented for descriptive purposes. Additional analysis of these data show statistically significant differences between respondents in groups that emphasized forgiveness a lot, a little, or none in their likelihood of having worked to improve a broken relationship *among respondents* who had been experiencing each kind of problem.

⁸ These items are from the same questions as those discussed in Note 6 for Figure 4; all relationships are statistically significant at or beyond the .05 level of probability.

⁹ Caution is indicated in interpreting the results from the follow-up study because of the numbers of respondents in the initial survey who did not participate in the follow-up study. Nevertheless, comparisons of the two sets of respondents show relatively minor differences on most demographic variables; those who participated in the follow-up are slightly more likely to be female, older, white, married, and regular church-goers.