

Practical Ministry Skills:

Develop Real Relationships

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When we tell people about small groups, we almost always tout the relationships that they can form through the group. And it's true: great relationships can be formed in and through small groups. But then during small-group meetings, we tend to focus on other aspects—like study and prayer—and hope that the relationships will figure themselves out. Unfortunately, though, without giving some intentional attention to developing and maintaining real relationships, they probably won't happen. And without deepening relationships, there probably won't be much spiritual growth either. This resource will give you the tools to begin developing real relationships in your group right away.

Overview

What can we actually expect from the friendships in our small groups? Can they really be close? Seth Widner and Michael C. Mack explain what to expect and how to help small-group members have realistic expectations.

Practical Tips

These eight articles address a number of helpful ways to develop relationships in your group. Mark Ingmire offers great ways you can lead the charge as the leader, and Beatrice Schoenrock and Carter Moss explain lots of great ideas to have fun together during and outside of meetings. Learn how to stay connected through Facebook on page 14, and why food really is important at small-group meetings on page 16. Carolyn Taketa shows how to develop a few closer relationships within groups to help with spiritual growth, and Peri Gilbert reminds leaders not to forget about the newcomers at group. Lastly, learn how your group can be open to those affected by mental illness.

—AMY JACKSON is Managing Editor of SmallGroups.com.

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On Small Groups and Friendship

Relationships are a key ingredient in group life, but we must understand the limitations.

By Seth Widner

We live in a world of independence. We want to do everything ourselves. People can order any item they wish online. Customers like to go through self-check-out lines at stores to avoid conversation with an employee. We get our food "to go" instead of sitting inside the restaurant. And after a long day at work, we tend to relax by watching television or reading by ourselves—or communicating with others from a safe distance via social media or texting.

Lonely People

But one of the main outcomes of our independence is loneliness. And our country is packed full of lonely people. In fact, sociologists call our country "The Loneliest Nation on the Planet."

Jenny is a good example. She wakes up early and drives to her job alone. She sits in an isolated cubicle and talks to people on the phone all day. In her attempts to sell her company's product, she never makes a relational connection with her customers, and her business prevents her from taking needed breaks and talking with fellow employees. She even eats her lunch in the confines of her cubicle. At the end of the day, she is exhausted. She gets in her car and buys dinner through a fast-food window. As she pulls into her driveway, she notices her neighbor smiling and waving at her. Jenny offers a nervous smile as she pulls into the garage, closing the door immediately. *I'm too tired to talk to anybody right now*, she thinks. Eating her dinner by herself, she watches television. Before going to sleep that evening she thinks, *There must be something else that life has to offer*.

We are surrounded by lonely people like Jenny who lack relationships and yet aren't quite sure how to acquire them. Some are even afraid of relationships. They've been taught a lie by our culture that they must be independent—not relying on anybody for anything. Unfortunately, this just makes us miserable.

As small-group leaders, we hold the cure to loneliness: community. By allowing God to use us, we can show people a different way to live—together. In Genesis 1:26, God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness . . ." God is a community in himself, and he created us to walk in community, too. By helping people find community in our small groups, we help break the chains of loneliness. And when those chains are gone, people are free to reflect the image of our Creator.

Not Everyone Will Be Best Friends

It's unrealistic to expect that everyone in the group will form equally deep and meaningful relationships with every other person in the group. Instead, we need to have a proper understanding of how relationships really work in small groups, and we need to avoid becoming bogged down by unrealistic expectations.

For example, Jim and Katherine ran into some fellow small-group leaders in a restaurant and decided to share a meal together. Jim and Katherine asked their friends how their group was doing. Immediately, their faces lit up as they talked about how well everyone was connecting. Close friendships were forming and their group even enjoyed spending time together outside of their regular gatherings. Throughout the rest of the meal, Jim and Katherine felt like they were failures as group leaders because their group members were not as close as their friends'.

In truth, Jim and Katherine held a false expectation in their minds. They believed that a connecting small group will always have people who are becoming the best of friends. This is a lie that can trap a leader in the chains of false expectations.

Every group has a unique personality because of the different personalities of the people involved. Some groups will connect more than others; they may even develop close friendships and do so quickly. Other groups will never reach this level of intimacy. But that doesn't mean the group failed to connect.

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In group life, "connecting" refers to developing a growing relationship with a specific group of people. It's that simple. And that means different groups will connect at varying levels of depth. Some groups will connect through intimate friendships. Others will connect by simply showing up each week. It's good for a leader to carry hopes to have a group of close friendships. But a leader should also celebrate if they simply have a group that keeps showing up!

Trust Is a Vital Ingredient

Whatever level of connection and friendship develops in your group, trust will play a part in solidifying those relationships.

Tom was a part of my first small group. I noticed early on that Tom seemed nervous and shy during our discussion times. One day he approached me, one on one, and explained that he was afraid to pray in front of people. Tom requested that I never call on him to pray during our group gatherings. I assured him that I would not embarrass him like that.

Several weeks later, Tom was hosting our small-group meeting. Before we began our dinner, he announced that he was going to pray for the evening meal. We all bowed our heads as he gave thanks for our food. I was grinning from ear to ear!

What empowered Tom to overcome his fear of praying in front of our group? Trust. Over a span of several weeks, Tom learned that he could be himself around the group. When the group members accepted Tom, he developed a trust in us.

While not everyone in a small group will become best friends, it's crucial that small-group participants establish a strong trust with one another. This trust must be established early within a group's existence. Although trust will take time to grow, plant the seed immediately.

Here are two easy ways you can begin to establish and build your group's trust level:

1. Establish a "come as you are" environment. Let people know they can be genuine.
2. Have your group commit to the following statement: "What is said in the group stays in the group." Nothing destroys trust faster than gossip.

Once you have established a trust within your group, guard it well. Trust always determines the health of a group, and relationships will only develop if trust is present.

—SETH WIDNER is a former family pastor and is the founder of i58revolution, an organization that supports healthy families; copyright 2009 by the Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. Have you established a level of trust in your small group? How can you deepen that trust?
2. What expectations have you had about the relationships in your group? Are they realistic expectations?
3. What can you celebrate about the relationships in your group? In what ways is there room for growth?

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Small-Group Expectations

Help your group members see the value of living in community.

By Michael C. Mack

Transforming gatherings into truly relational communities is completely possible. First, check your expectations and commitment to relationships in the group. Then consider these tips:

1. Refrain from trying to count everyone and everything. While we do need to be good stewards of all that God has entrusted to us, we need to be careful not to make this ministry all about facts and figures. Developing relationships and spiritual growth are not easy to measure, and doing too much measuring can draw you away from living relationally.
2. Consider how small-group members' minds and hearts can be transformed to understand the value of living in community. Study community in Scripture. Help them to commit to God's Word and his will for living in his relational kingdom.
3. Rather than the church grouping people artificially, help people find their own groups. While the former method may seem easier, it's less relational and organic, and I've found that it has shorter-term results. Instead, help people figure out where they're already in community with others—for instance, where they serve, where they live or work, what interests they have, and what activities they're involved in. One example we've found that many people like is connecting through their kids' friends.
4. Be careful not to make small groups just one more thing to do in an already hectic schedule. Instead, as indicated above, help people see the value of being in relationships and then help them enter into these relationships naturally.
5. Help group members reform their expectations of what a small group is. This will come from your practical theology of community. Train leaders to use a small-group covenant that spells out the small group's expectations and ground rules for living together in community.
6. Encourage groups to study and apply the "one another" passages from the New Testament. One idea is simply to take one of these passages each week and discuss how they'll live it out.
7. Encourage groups to connect in community between meetings: play together, hang out together, and serve together. Encourage them to get involved in one another's lives—in things they already do anyway, like attending their kids' games together, eating together, doing yard work together, and so on.

Remember that with all of these, the leader must go first, showing the value of living in community. And be patient. Building a relational culture won't happen overnight. As Scott Boren observes, though, God is not in a hurry. So while many of us want to see biblical community grow quickly in our groups, we must learn to work in God's timing. As we do, God will "do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us" (Ephesians 3:20).

—MICHAEL C. MACK is a founder of and advisor for SmallGroups.com, author of 14 small-group books and discussion guides, and a small-group ministry consultant; copyright 2009 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. When and how did you discover the value of living in community? What keeps you passionate about it today?
2. How can you help communicate the value of living in community to your group members?
3. How can you help your group members better understand the expectations of group life?

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Emphasize Relationships in Your Group

How to set the stage for real friendships

By Mark Ingmire

When we talk about the key parts of a small group, we usually talk about the Bible study, sharing, prayer, group mission, or outreach. Because we see these as the most important elements, our leader training focuses on doing those things well. However, there's one part of group life which we don't pay as much attention to, yet has huge importance: relationships. Though we may spend little time training how to build, deepen, and maintain friendships within the group, we can't ignore them if we want groups to be healthy. And we can't assume they'll naturally develop.

Consider for a moment a small group without deep relationships. This group will be made up of simple acquaintances who don't do much to support one another. They'll hold in hurt and disagreements rather than seek to forgive wrongs committed against each other because they're not invested in the relationships. They won't respond to needs that are expressed, assuming someone else will take care of it. And they won't experience much life change together because depth and accountability simply aren't present.

Without a strong emphasis on relationships, the best thing a small group can do is impart head knowledge. That same knowledge, when discussed in an environment that promotes relationships, has the power to move from the head to the heart. Group members allow that knowledge to impact them, and they seek to apply it. That's when life change happens. So let's look at how we can model and emphasize healthy and life-changing relationships within small groups.

Make the Group Safe

You can establish a few guidelines during the group's discussion that will help foster relationships. Introduce these guidelines before you jump into your study time to help you model how a healthy, life-changing group functions.

Be Transparent

One of my greatest frustrations is group members who respond to questions with superficial answers. To help with this, you'll need to model transparent sharing, talking about your real needs, struggles, and frustrations. Your group can tell if you're being transparent or superficial, and they'll follow your lead. You may find that it isn't easy being transparent, but it's important to try. The more you practice, the easier it will be. Your transparency will give your group members permission to be transparent, sharing their true selves with the group. This is part of tilling the soil of relationships.

Don't Rescue

When people share an experience which has deeply impacted them, it's our tendency to try to make them feel better about the situation or about themselves. This is especially true if a group member gets emotional. I have heard people say, "God will use that situation," or "It will be okay." Although both of these sentiments may be true, they quickly shut down further sharing. Rather than responding with these sentiments, allow time to pause and reflect, thank them for sharing, and perhaps respond by saying "I'm so sorry," or "That sounds like a really tough situation."

This is especially important when group members have difficulty expressing themselves. Perhaps they're stuttering or searching for the words to express what they're thinking. Rather than allow them the space to sort it out and say what they're thinking and feeling, we try to rush in and rescue them by putting words into their mouths. We must recognize that this is because *we* feel uncomfortable, not because it's helpful to the people sharing. Rather than rush in to try to finish their thoughts for them, be patient and allow them to express themselves. After they've shared, you can always ask questions to clarify what they meant.

No Side Conversations

If you begin a side conversation while another person is sharing, it communicates that you're not listening and, worse, that you don't care about what's being said. When someone is sharing in the group, give your full

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attention to him or her. If group members try to start a side conversation with you, steer their attention to the person sharing with the group.

Don't Fix

Here are actual pieces of advice I've heard in small-group discussions:

- I think you should sue their pants off.
- You need to pray harder and read your Bible more.
- You need to just get over it.

Giving advice is extremely dangerous. First, the advice given is often bad advice. Second, the person sharing usually isn't asking for advice. Instead of giving advice, listen and ask follow-up questions to help the person unpack the situation. The best way to advance the conversation without giving advice is simply to recognize the situation's importance. Saying something like, "Wow, I'm so sorry you're in this situation," expresses your empathy and concern for the situation, yet doesn't give any advice.

A mistake group leaders often make is jumping in too early to say, "Let's pray about this." Realistically, not everyone is ready to pray about an issue they bring up. Rather than jump to conclusions about the best way to pray for the situation, ask follow-up questions that help the group member clarify the issue and better understand his or her thoughts and feelings. You might ask, "So how did that make you feel?" or "What are your concerns with this situation?" Before heading to prayer, consider asking what the person would like prayer for. Too often the way we pray for others consists of giving advice. For instance, someone might pray, "Give Lauren the courage to speak up to Tony," when Lauren hasn't said anything about desiring to speak up to him. This kind of advice-giving will shut down the group member from sharing in the future.

Use "I" Statements

When group members use "we" in regards to how they feel or think, they remove themselves from the ownership of their statement. For instance, a group member might say, "We all struggle with forgiving others," in an effort to keep the conversation more surface-level. When we use the word "I," we take ownership. So, using our example, a group member should instead say, "I struggle to forgive my mom for what she's done." Using "I" statements communicates that you trust your fellow group members enough to be honest with them about your thoughts and feelings. If you model using "I" statements, your group members will follow suit.

We Don't All Have to Agree

Whenever people gather, there are bound to be disagreements—even if they're over silly things like the type of snacks to bring. For some reason, though, in small groups we often feel that we should all agree on everything. But that's simply not true. There's a big difference between sharing an opinion and trying to convince everyone else in the group that they should share your opinion. If group members feel others will just try to convince them of the "right" way to think, they won't share their own opinions. Remember that freedom to share is an indispensable part of being a small group. Without this safety, group members won't share, and you likely won't experience much life change together.

Learn to Really Listen

Pay attention to the group member who is sharing. Practice being an active listener. Show interest by keeping good eye contact, nodding your head, leaning slightly toward the speaker, and reflecting back to the group member what has been shared. Don't be distracted by texting, thinking up your next response, or watching the clock. Group members feel valued when they know that you're listening. (For more on listening well, check out [Become a Great Listener](#).)

Stay In Touch Between Meetings

There are 168 hours in one week. If your group meets for 2 hours every week, there are 166 hours where life is happening for your group members. Every hour that passes separates group members a little more, which means you'll have to spend quite a bit of time reconnecting at each meeting.

While there's nothing wrong with taking time to reconnect at meetings, you can help minimize this dynamic by modeling how to keep in touch with group members between meetings and encouraging others to do the same. In order to do this, make sure group members have each other's contact information. That keeps you from

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being the bottleneck for developing relationships. If someone is absent from one of your group meetings, for instance, anyone in the group is able to contact him or her without having to get the information from you first.

Staying in touch between meetings also helps you prepare for future meetings. The conversations you have during the week will help you get to know your group members better which helps you know how best to lead. Your group members may feel more comfortable sharing with you or others individually rather than with the entire small group.

Care for Group Members

Talk is cheap. You can say that you care about your group members as much as you want, but if you never actually do anything to take care of them, your words won't mean anything. The axiom proves true: Actions speak louder than words.

In order for relationships to grow, you'll have to engage in meaningful acts of service. There are several simple things you can do as a leader to model and emphasize serving one another. It doesn't necessarily mean mowing their lawn or doing their laundry—unless that's what they really need. Rather, there are lots of simple things you can do to let people know you care.

Celebrate Birthdays

It may seem overly simple, but recognizing and celebrating group members' birthdays is a great way to care for them. Plus, it gives your group a reason to party, which is always fun. Don't pass up this easy way to serve your members.

Celebrate Special Occasions

Be attentive to what your small-group members are involved in outside of group life. When a group member graduates from school, gets a promotion, or earns recognition in your community, celebrate! Likewise, if group members are participating in a local play, coordinating a community event, or excelling on a sports league, attend their events and cheer them on. Being there for your group members' interests and achievements will go a long way in communicating that you care.

Have Dinner Together

Over the course of a few months, have each group member over to your home for a home cooked meal. Sharing a meal is a very personal way to build relationships with people in your group, and it helps them feel valued. Alternatively, invite pairs of group members over for dinner not only to develop your relationship with each of them but also to foster a relationship between the two group members.

Quickly Address Needs

When a group member expresses a need for help, don't let your only response be, "Let's pray about that." It's great to pray, but you'll also want to see if there's anything you or the group can do to help. If you're not sure what might help, ask.

As you begin to invest in relationships within your group, you'll see deeper sharing and more life change happening. Never underestimate the importance of healthy relationships in a group. If you want to see growth, you'll need to invest in relationships.

—MARK INGMIRE is the Small Groups and Adult Education Pastor at Savannah Christian Church in Savannah, Georgia; copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How safe is your group for developing deep relationships? What can you do to make it safer?
2. Name three ways you could keep in touch with your group members between meetings. How well are you doing this currently?
3. How well do you care for your group members? What's one thing you can do in the next week to do this better?

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Practical Ideas for Strengthening Group Relationships

Taking advantage of face to face time

By Beatrice Schoenrock

Small groups are fundamentally about creating deeper relationships within a larger church body so that we can more fully be the church to one another. Small-group leaders are most often the catalysts and facilitators for helping members deepen these relationships. Here are several practical ideas to build the important relationships needed for group members to grow in community and personal holiness.

Ideas for Regular Meetings

Regular small-group meetings are the avenue for building relationships. Beginning each meeting with a time of catching up on your week(s) helps foster community. Let this catch-up time also be a time for expressing gratitude. Members can share in each other's joys and expand their own ability to see the goodness of God in daily life. As group members become more comfortable with each other, they will hopefully begin to share more deeply about how God is meeting their needs. Leaders can often set the tone of disclosure and depth by sharing their personal joys and struggles. This shows other members that it's okay to be honest about their deeper needs.

Sharing Stories

Sharing testimonies and faith stories is another way that regular meetings help members connect. One way of doing this is to have one person share their story per month. Alternatively, you might set aside several group meetings in a row to talk through all of your group members' stories. It may be helpful for leaders to share their stories first to set up how to share and for how long. Help group members prepare by giving them three or four key questions to focus on. Here are some possible questions:

- What is your family background? What role did faith play in your family and early development?
- What was the felt need (loneliness, failure, shattered sense of identity, etc.) that drew you to a personal relationship with Christ?
- How did you come to Christ? What role did friends, family, the church, the Bible, or circumstances play in how you understood your need for a Savior?
- What has been the result of your decision to follow Christ? How does your decision currently impact you?

Structuring stories in this way helps members trace God's fingerprint on their lives. It can also give insights into the members' reactions and answers during discussions.

A secondary benefit of having members share their stories is that it helps them prepare to share their testimonies with those outside the faith. To help give the stories focus, these questions intentionally move members through the before, how, and after involved in sharing their testimonies.

Praying Together—Not Just Alone

Praying together is one of the ways we can fulfill the command Paul gave to carry each other's burdens and fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2). Social science is catching up to the wisdom of the Bible. Two social scientists [summarize their research](#) on religion, social networks, and life satisfaction this way: "It is neither faith nor communities, per se, that are important, but communities of faith. For life satisfaction, praying together seems to be better than either bowling together or praying alone." The importance of praying together, not just praying alone, can't be denied. This research should spur leaders on to reprioritizing the importance of group prayer in developing connectedness with each other and with God.

Ideas for Special Occasions

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Group activities build community and memories through shared experiences. Shared experiences outside of regular small-group meetings allow members to see different sides of each other. Pursuing service opportunities as a small group is a good way to introduce members to different ministries of the church while allowing them to volunteer with familiar people.

Group Potlucks

Special occasions can be as simple as a monthly potluck with the group. The potluck can be held during the regular meeting time or at a different time during the week. Having the leader or a social coordinator select a theme (such as Mexican food, breakfast, or soups) for the meal provides guidance on what to bring. Passing around a sign-up sheet for the meal helps members know how to contribute. The potluck meal can easily be combined with sharing testimonies.

Meeting Gender Needs

Depending on the composition of the group, social occasions mean different things. For a women's group, a craft or movie night could be a fun, relaxing change of pace. Crafts can be as simple as making cards or decorations for an upcoming holiday or as complex as quilting together. The key to social activities for women's groups is providing time where women can connect through verbal expression. For a men's group, something more active often helps men connect. Possible options include softball or a [baggo](#) tournament. Groups that are mixed gender can include social occasions which alternate between activities that get group members active or allow for time to chat.

Another social activity that may appeal to both men and women is a cooking war between the genders. Determining two or three categories on which something like a cupcake war would be judged allows teams to focus on specific areas they'd like to win, for example, best tasting and best decorated. Teams can meet separately to bake and decorate and then come together for judging and enjoying the fruit of their labor.

Celebrating Together

Holidays also provide a good reason to get together and deepen relationships. Attending a Good Friday service together or participating in a [Christian Seder](#) are opportunities which do not interfere with family Easter plans. A Christmas party with a White Elephant exchange provides for plenty of laughs. Having each member bring in two canned items (that will be given to a food pantry) and sharing why they use or don't use these items is another simple Christmas or Thanksgiving idea.

Serving Others

Serving together as a small group is another way to build community as you share in the burdens of others. When we help fellow group members or church members build up the body of Christ. Volunteering as a group in the community through a church service day is a great way to serve organizations that work in the community. Taking one night a quarter for the whole group to serve at a soup kitchen or homeless shelter helps groups come out of the world of their problems and see the larger needs around them. Serving as a group helps members overcome the nervousness they feel in an environment that may be new or intimidating, such as a homeless shelter.

Developing community is essential to a meaningful small-group experience. Community enhances our understanding of the triune God, and it forms us into members of one body. May God guide you as you develop a community of believers that encourages one another to pursue Christ.

—BEATRICE SHOENROCK is a contributor for our sister resource Today's Christian Woman and has served as a small-group leader; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How often do you allow time for sharing stories and testimonies?
2. How can you elevate the importance of praying together in your group? How can you develop deeper sharing and prayer?
3. What kinds of interactions do group members have outside of meetings? What activities or celebrations can you plan (or delegate to a group member to plan) in order to deepen relationships?

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Building Real Relationships

What you can do outside of small-group meetings

By Carter Moss

Dairy Queen, the arcade, the bowling alley, the movie theater, the swimming pool, the campground, Disneyworld: what do all these places have in common? Yes, they're all fun places to go, especially with kids. But more than that: these are all places where I have hung out with my small group. And I'm incredibly grateful for that! Through time spent in these environments, we've created some great long-lasting memories, lived some really funny stories, shown our kids the value of community, and—most importantly—deepened our relationships with each other.

Have you ever wrestled with how to get the people in your group to form deeper relationships that go beyond surface level? I have. Sometimes we tinker with the meeting format: more time at the start to let people catch up with each other, more time at the end so people can socialize, better icebreakers, more time for prayer requests, more in-depth study questions. I've tried all of these strategies in the various groups I've led, and I'm actually a big fan of them. But often we can miss one incredibly important thing—the solution doesn't always lie in tweaking the meeting format. One of the best ways to build and strengthen relationships in a small group is to spend time together *outside* the small-group meeting.

I love that that the Gospel writers intentionally included so many examples of Jesus hanging out with his small group of disciples—eating, attending weddings, visiting people, spending time on the lake, and more. They did so much more than just talk about Scripture and pray together, although that was obviously a very important part of their relationship. They shared life together. And I believe Jesus modeled this for a reason.

I know what many of you are thinking: *I have enough trouble getting people to make time to show up to small group. And now you're saying I have to get them to show up to even more stuff?* That's a great question. For the answer, let's look at some ways we might accomplish this. Be warned, though: A few of these ideas might push us out of our comfort zone.

Plan Group Activities

One of the best places to start with relationship building outside of meetings is simply to schedule some fun activities that the group can do together. What kind of activity? That's up to you and your group! There are only three real boundaries with this. The first is that you should choose something the group is interested in. For instance, if camping isn't something that all group members are interested in, don't plan a camping trip.

The second boundary is to choose something that won't confuse people in their spiritual journey. For instance, just because you're okay with meeting at the local bar or watching the latest horror movie doesn't mean your group members will be. Be aware of any spiritual struggles that your activity might awaken.

Third, is that you need to keep the cost in mind. It can be very uncomfortable and even embarrassing for people in the group who might not be able to afford to join in the group activity. When I've suggested ideas that might be cost-prohibitive, I have said out loud to the group that we don't want that to be an obstacle, and I've encouraged the group members to contact me individually to let me know if it's a challenge for them. Then when someone does contact me, we can find a way to work it out, or I plan for a different idea.

There are all sorts of things to do including dinner or dessert out, bowling, skating rinks, movie theaters, rock climbing, holiday festivals, the zoo, the beach—and lots more! The real question is: which one is right for your group?

Making Time

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Wondering how the people in your group will have time for activities? One idea is to do something on the night your group normally meets in place of the usual group meeting. I've planned weeks, sometimes even spur of the moment, where we scrap the study and grab ice cream instead. And, to be honest, those often end up being the most memorable small-group meetings we have, with meaningful discussions and authentic sharing. No matter what, though, they're fun and life-giving for people stuck in their tiring, chaotic lives. If you have an activity that works better on the weekend or at some other time, that's okay too.

To make some margin for the activity, you might cancel group that week so that people have extra time for this activity instead. I know for some of us, the idea of cancelling group freaks us out—it freaked me out for a long time! But then I realized that it's okay to cancel once in awhile. I can assure you that the group won't suddenly implode, and God's kingdom work doesn't halt to a stop. In fact, people really appreciate it, and the break in our usual rhythm to have some fun really energizes everyone for when we return to our "regularly scheduled programming."

Family Friendly

I think it's awesome to do activities that involve the whole family. This makes it easier logistically for all the families who struggle to find childcare, and it's a great way to model community, fun, and healthy relationships for our kids. It lets them watch how we interact as adults. At the same time, I think it's valuable to have a few specific outings without kids for some focused quality adult time. You can either challenge everyone to find their own babysitter, or have all the kids hang at one group member's house with a sitter there, which is a great way to allow them a fun time of their own.

Frequency

The frequency of group activities is entirely up to you. I've done it just a couple times a year, and I've had groups with monthly activities. Only you can know the right amount of activities for your group, but I'd challenge you to do something at least three or four times a year. And if thinking up ideas, planning them, and executing them isn't your strong suit, this is an excellent opportunity to involve the strengths of other people in your group. I've found it to be a great way to engage the person who gets really excited about social gatherings and maybe isn't super involved in any other way like leading, hosting, or contributing a lot to the discussions. You can have one person become the "social coordinator," or you can have different people organize outings each time. This results not only in more fun for the group and less on your plate, but also in more ownership by the members and better retention of newer members.

Encourage Individual Friendships

There are a lot of options for organizing activities for your entire group. But if that's your only approach, there are some drawbacks. First of all, you'll create a bottleneck—either you or the person who's organizing the social events. Second, it can be difficult to find activities that everyone in your group can agree on and can make time for. Whole group activities are a great start, but it shouldn't be the place you stop. The next way to deepen relationships is to encourage group members to get together with another person or family from the group on their own.

There are several ways to do this. For example, I have challenged my small group with this: "Over the next two weeks, pick at least one other person or couple from the group and invite them over to hang out." I let them know it could be dinner or dessert, meeting up for coffee, or meeting at the park so the kids can play. Consider challenging your group to do something like this, and perhaps give them a specific timeframe or specific options to help them follow through. Remember, though, that *you* have to model this. So invite someone over, and consider picking the person you know the least or the person who hasn't been invited by anyone yet.

Some people get nervous about this because they fear cliques forming within the group. As a leader, you have to keep an eye on them to ensure that it never becomes detrimental or overly exclusive. But it's okay for people to make some "best friends" within the group. What beautiful fruit to come out of our small groups! I also appreciate that sometimes a few families or people will really bond and later decided to branch off and start a new group, which means another group was formed to help people experience community. In one of my groups, there were two couples that lived near each other and were going through the same life stage. They

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were pregnant at the same time, so they really bonded, and a strong friendship formed. And I loved it! Plus, when it came time for me to transition out of the group, they were able to step up and lead it together.

Rhythms of Life

There is still one more level of creating relational time outside of group. On one hand, it's sometimes the hardest step relationally; on the other hand, it fits the best into the natural rhythm of people's lives. This eliminates the "we don't have time to fit one more thing into our schedule" barrier. And it all begins with this question: What activities are you already doing in your life, and what would it look like to start including others?

Holidays

Holidays are a great place to start. For many years now, we join with a group of friends from small group to take our kids trick-or-treating. It definitely makes the night more chaotic trying to keep track of all the kids, but it's a blast. And now my kids don't know any different, which I love. The same goes for the Fourth of July. Every year we're in town for the holiday, we have a barbecue with families from our small group. And a few years when we had no family in town, we've done Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner with families from the small group. To some, these holidays are meant to spend with family. Perhaps spending the day with people from your small group seems a bit too radical. But let me challenge you with this—why *not* share these experiences together? It seems to me that if we want to do life together, this is what it looks like.

Kids' Activities

Think about the other rhythms in your life. If your week is spent taking your kids to sporting events or school plays and choir concerts, why not invite others in the group to come watch? We've done that as a small group, and it's not only a fun time to hang out together, but also a supportive time for the families because they like knowing there are others cheering on their kids.

Vacations

If you're ready to take a bigger step, consider going on vacation with other families from your small group. I'm not a huge camper, but I've brought my family on multiple weekend camping trips with friends from our small group. It was great because we got to go with people who actually know how to camp! And yes, we even went on vacation to Disney World with some families from small group. I'm still not sure how we managed to walk all those miles through all those parks and get on all those rides with so many kids, but we had a blast. We still share those stories today.

Deepen Relationships

There is no doubt that spiritual growth is our goal in small groups, but sometimes we don't go deep enough with our relationships, and they're just as important. In fact, what often drives people to check out a small group in the first place is their desire for relationship. Adults crave genuine friendships like they had in high school and college, but it's so much harder to find now. If it doesn't come from neighbors or coworkers, where can those types of friendships develop? Weekend church services are great, but it's hard to get too deep when you only see people for a few minutes before and after service. That's where small groups can provide the opportunity for people to build genuine relationships, sharing life and growing spiritually. If you become a leader who creates opportunities outside of the weekly meetings for fun, memories, extended conversations, and real relationship building, you can help people have—often for the first time—one of the most beautiful experiences God wants for them: authentic life-giving community.

—CARTER MOSS is a pastor and is passionate about small groups and relationships; copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How often does your group spend time together doing something fun outside of meetings?
2. How can you spend more time with your group without actually adding to your schedule?
3. What have been your feelings on individuals or couples in your group getting especially close? Have they changed at all?

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Stay Connected Through Facebook

How to make the most of private Facebook groups

By Amy Jackson

For the first time, I'm using a private Facebook group to foster connections within my small group—and it's been an extremely useful tool. If your group members have Facebook accounts, consider using this free tool that will allow you to connect in new ways throughout the week.

Confidential Sharing

When setting up a Facebook group, be sure to make it a "secret" group. This will ensure that only the members of the group will be able to see posts. This means they will not show up on newsfeeds or on individual members' profiles. A secret group will allow your group members to share with confidence.

Smart Phone Ready

If you're looking for a way to instantly contact all your members at once, look no further—especially if your group members have smart phones. Group members' phones will alert them that there's a new message for them on Facebook.

Easily Add and Remove Members

When someone new joins, it's easy to add him or her to the group. I was once part of an e-mail chain that constantly added and removed people. They were always sending out e-mails with the updated information so that all the members could update their e-mail address books. With Facebook groups, there's no need to do this. Simply add a new member and all messages going forward are sent to him or her. In the same way, if people leave the group, you can easily remove them.

Connect Throughout the Week

Set posting permissions to allow all group members to post on the group's page. This allows all group members to like comments, post comments, and share photos and documents. Let everyone contribute to the online discussion just like in your actual meetings. Group members can share prayer requests or other needs throughout the week. On a practical note, you may want to set up some guidelines for what to share—for instance, you may want to make it clear that posts about personal businesses are not welcome.

Comment Strings

No long reply-all threads to read through on Facebook. Simply scroll through the comments posted. It's a lot cleaner and easier to look through than a reply-all e-mail. Even better—you won't "lose" comments by accidentally deleting your e-mail. Simply scroll down the page until you find the information you're looking for.

See Who Has Read Posts

Have you ever sent out an e-mail and wondered if anyone actually read it? With Facebook groups, you'll never wonder again. The page will show you exactly who has seen your post. I once had to cancel our meeting last minute. I posted the information to our page and could check to see who had seen the post. Everyone quickly saw the message, and I could rest assured that no one would show up accidentally.

Keep the Conversation Going

I love being able to write a quick post about the chapter we'll be discussing at our next meeting. Something like, "I loved her description of grace on page 45" can spark discussion before you even get together. One week I came across a YouTube video that was on the topic of our study and posted it. It came out in our discussion that week.

Post Links to Resources

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I've found myself frequently saying "Let me get back to you on that" in meetings. One of the great things about Facebook groups is they allow you to get back to them sooner. For instance, one woman asked me how to access the podcasts our church offers. The next day I posted a link to the podcasts on our group page. Or perhaps your church is putting on a special event and has a webpage with more information. You can link to the page so everyone in your group can check it out. Better yet, if the event information is posted on Facebook, you can share the post directly to your group's page.

Poll Feature

This is one of my favorites. Instead of talking about when to have our Christmas party in a meeting when no one had calendars to look at, I asked a question on our Facebook page. The poll feature allows you to ask a question, offer several possible choices, and allow group members to add their own choices. So I asked when we should meet. Within a few hours, all my group members had seen the post, checked the box for when they were available, and even left comments with other ideas.

Share Videos, Photos, and Files

Whether it's a group picture, a video from a recent service activity, or the PDF of your next study, you can share it through your Facebook group. No need to send it over e-mail and worry about file sizes. Plus, how often do we say we'll share our photos from an event but never get around to sending them out? Now you can each upload them to the page and let other group members use them as they'd like.

Create Events

Have an event coming up: a party, service day, or prayer walk? Create an event on your page that allows members to RSVP, comment, and see all the details in one place.

Empower Connections Between Group Members

Sometimes leaders can serve as a bottleneck for relationships between group members. When you're all connected through the Facebook group, members can contact one another directly and deepen relationships. In fact, the page has everyone's profile pictures across the top so group members can simply click on the face of the person they want to connect with.

Information in One Place

If your group members are already using Facebook, their birthday, interests, and work information are already entered. Learn more about your group members and their interests and passions. And let group members get to know one another too.

Share Ownership

Too often leaders do all the work. Facebook groups send the message that everyone has something to contribute. If one person has an idea for a service project, he or she can post about it. When someone shares a prayer request, group members can respond themselves through a comment or private message.

—AMY JACKSON is the Managing Editor of SmallGroups.com; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How many of your group members already use Facebook? Could creating a Facebook group be a feasible option for you?
2. How might your relationships and conversations go deeper as a result of interacting through Facebook between meetings?
3. In what ways might connecting group members through Facebook empower them to share ownership of the group and of their relationships within the group?

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Incorporate Food into Your Small-Group Meetings

How eating together can contribute to deeper relationships in your group

By John Wentz

For a long time I have said it. I have taught it, wrote it, and people in all the groups I have ever been a part of can repeat it. Somewhere in church history I would probably be burned at the stake for saying it, but I hold firm to this conviction:

"Church is all about food."

Consider the biblical evidence:

- The story of mankind begins in a *garden* with the eating of forbidden *fruit*.
- God saves his people from Pharaoh's hand through the sharing of a Passover *meal*.
- God provides mysterious *manna* for his people while they wander in the desert.
- God demands the *eating* of food at his worship and sacrifice events.
- Jesus shows up and refers to himself as the *bread* of life and gives his followers a Communion *meal* to remember him by.
- The early church expands exponentially as followers of the way share *meals* in their homes.
- And according to Jesus, we are all headed to a great *banquet* after this life in a city filled with *fruit* trees.

So it's not out of line to say that church really is all about food. Sharing meals is a highly spiritual activity and choosing to include food into your next gathering can bear fruit in great ways. As you incorporate food into your small-group meetings, you'll see the relational temperature rise.

At Community Christian Church we believe that eating is so spiritual, we list it as one of five missional practices for connecting with other people: **B**egin with prayer, **L**isten, **E**at, **S**erve, **S**hare your story. We have seen time and time again how eating with others invites them into a space where friendship develops, conflict can be resolved, memories are made, and the story of Jesus is shared. Taking time to share meals with people—whether at your home, in your workplace, or in your small group—is essential to building community.

You'll want to know going into this that coordinating food in your small group time can be an extra task to coordinate, especially when you're trying to manage all of the other responsibilities of leading a flourishing small group. That's why it's so important to have a host in your group. (For more information about how you can empower a host in your small group, check out the [Small-Group Host Orientation Guide](#).)

Seven Ways to Include Food in Your Group

Full Meal Before the Meeting

Sharing a meal creates a great environment for those in your group to feel welcome and able to settle into a good space for discussion. It also helps take the hangry (hunger that makes you a little angry) away for those that need a little blood sugar adjustment.

If you decide to go this route, you might decide to do it for seven to eight weeks. Make sure the host—or another group member—coordinates all of the meals so you don't have to worry about it. Coordinating could be as simple as designating a family or person to be responsible for a night or as complicated as making sure a potluck dinner has a variety of food rather than all desserts.

After that time frame, you can simply serve light snacks. This can give your group members a nice break from routine. It can also allow for extra discussion time or prayer. You could still encourage group members to get

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dinner together before the meeting. If you're switching from dinner to light snacks, be sure to communicate this ahead of time.

One way we've used this model at COMMUNITY is during our Alpha course small group. It works really well for this group because it creates a great relaxing environment for those who are not comfortable with the small-group environment or who might be rushing in from work. We've done the Alpha course with lots of participants, and pulled off 10 weeks of meals by asking other small groups to provide the meal for the group. This exposes participants in the Alpha course to some of our existing small groups. It also gives our small groups the opportunity to directly contribute to helping people find their way back to God and meet newer people who are still clarifying their faith.

Eat Outside of Your Group Time

We have one small group that meets right after our Saturday night service for their small-group meeting and afterward goes out to eat at a local affordable restaurant. It has provided an easy way to invite new people to come and just hang out with the group. It also gives members the opportunity to clarify anything that was discussed during the discussion time in a very relaxed environment. The downside is that this can get pretty expensive for members of the group. But because we have a lot of single people in that group who enjoy going out to eat, it seems to work out pretty well.

Light snacks

Even if you don't think a full meal would work for your group, there's another option. For instance, if your group meets on a weeknight with a limited time frame, serve light snacks. Even a simple snack can give people something to fidget with and keep on their lap during the discussion time to help them open up. It's amazing how much more open group members can be when they have something to do with their hands.

Cookouts

In the summer we encourage all of our small groups to take time to barbecue and invite their friends and neighbors who do not attend church. Through this initiative we actually went so far as to give everyone a bottle of barbecue sauce to get them started! It's amazing to see how just setting out a grill, some chairs, and a few tables in your driveway can provide a fun opportunity for neighbors to bring their own meat, side dishes, and drinks, and spend time getting to know each other. We have seen this build a great sense of community in neighborhoods as people find their way back to God. This works especially well if at least a few group members live in the same neighborhood.

Monthly "Come and See"

If your small group doesn't have time to do a full meal *every* week, consider taking one week a month when your group hosts a party where people can just come and eat. This is a great opportunity to invite people to come check out your small group. Take time the week before your Come and See night to pray for those you will invite. Over time, watch as people begin to visit during the rest of the month!

Provide a Meal for Others

Other groups would be blessed to have your small group come and cater the meal for them one week. It can make for a nice party and some good cross-pollination of groups. Consider providing a meal for a ministry team at your church as a sign of appreciation. We have a small group at COMMUNITY that feeds the creative arts teams serving at weekend services. Because our artists commit lots of hours on the weekend to serve, this is an incredible blessing! Giving your food away as a group can be a lot of fun.

Food Fights

Nothing says fun like a good competition! Having a quarterly food competition in your group is a great way to showcase the talents of those who like to make chili, desserts, or other amazing dishes. And with shows like Chopped, Top Chef, and the Next Great Baker, food competitions are growing in popularity. A little contest within or between small groups can become memorable and fun. Consider a Christmas cookie competition, a chili cook off, or a creative recipes contest.

Tips for Making It Work

However you decide to incorporate food into your small-group gathering, here are four things to keep in mind:

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Share the Load

Giving people an opportunity to bring food to your meeting is a fantastic way for people to feel like they're contributing members of the group. It's also a great way to recognize a potential future host.

As the leader, you might have to jumpstart meal coordination in the beginning. However, I recommend that you quickly find a way to empower someone in the group to coordinate all of your meals. I've seen in my own leadership how coordinating childcare, food, discussion, and everything else can quickly become a burden that reduces my joy of leading the group. It also limits the opportunities for others to contribute in significant ways. So share the load!

Accommodate for Allergies

Very few people enjoy speaking up about their allergies, but we need to make sure to accommodate for those in the group. Right now in my small group we have a child with a severe peanut, egg, and seafood allergy that would result in a trip to the ER if those foods were brought to the group. So make sure to communicate ahead of time about any allergies in the group so that no one feels left out. Making sure that healthy options are present is also wise. It may be easy to just have chips, donuts, and soda, but it's always nice to have fruit, water, or other healthy options available for those who want them.

Communicate Well

However you decide to coordinate your menu, make sure that people know the details. Confirm with people so that they know what they're bringing, how much to bring, if utensils are needed, and what time to bring the food.

Invite Others

If your group loves to eat, this could be a great opportunity to attract new people to your group. I've found that serving food is a great introduction to inviting people. Being able to say, "Check out the group and at least you'll get a free meal" is a great way to get people to come and experience small-group life.

I'm always amazed at how groups bond over food. Perhaps this is why God chose Communion and Passover as ways to draw his body together. There's great spiritual significance in the Communion meal we share to remember Christ. It's in the sharing of the Passover bread and cup that reminds us we're part of a much larger body—the body of Christ.

—JOHN WENTZ serves as Small Group Champion for all 14 campuses of Community Christian Church, and as the Small Group Director for their Yellow Box Campus in Naperville, Illinois; copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. In what ways have you incorporated food into your group meetings?
2. How have you seen food help open people up?
3. Who in your group might help you coordinate food at your meetings so you don't have to?

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Develop Spiritual Friendships in Your Group

How to cultivate deeper relationships with a few

By Carolyn Taketa

Years ago when I was a rookie small-group director, I had the privilege of sitting across from a well-known pastor and expert in biblical community. I had many questions about what makes people change and how groups can help people grow. He answered patiently, and then made a surprising statement: "Perhaps the best thing that groups can do for people is help them meet one or two spiritual friends who will deeply encourage and challenge them to grow." I was both baffled and intrigued.

At first glance, his statement seemed to devalue small groups by using the group merely as a conduit, much like a dating service, to find a spiritual friend. Yet, over time, the wisdom of his observation became apparent. Although he valued the dynamics of a small group, he recognized the inherent limitations in a group of 8 to 12 for people to know and engage each other in mutual discipleship and true accountability. So along with pursuing mutual growth within a group, he was advocating going one step further: finding and developing a friendship of the soul.

Practically speaking, there is rarely enough time in a weekly meeting for everyone to talk and be heard fully. The level of being known and knowing others in a small group varies greatly by individuals, personalities, and group dynamics. Generally, the willingness to be vulnerable and the level of personal sharing in the group tend to reflect the least common denominator, the weakest relational link in the group. In addition, it wouldn't be comfortable, nor would it be appropriate, for everyone to share sensitive struggles with the whole group. Yet when we are vulnerable, when we can confess our sins and struggles to one another, we experience the power of the Holy Spirit to transform our darkness into light and bring his healing, freedom, and joy. Realistically, this will most likely happen in smaller clusters of two or three where people have invested intentionally in relationships with each other.

What is a Spiritual Friend?

Over the course of my life, I have been blessed with a handful of friendships that go beyond the usual definition of a friend. These relationships are marked by a mutual commitment to follow Jesus, reciprocal sharing, deep concern, desiring the best for one another, and a willingness not only to encourage but also to challenge each other. At times an anchor to hold us steady and sometimes a buoy to lift us up, spiritual friends journey toward Jesus together. Whether they last for a season or for a lifetime, these relationships profoundly shape us. More than simply ysharing common interests or having fun together, a spiritual friend helps us move toward becoming more of whom God has created us to be. With love, encouragement, and exhortation, like "iron sharpening iron," (Proverbs 27:17) our spiritual friends connect the dots between what is happening in our lives and the work God is doing in us.

There's a poignant scene in *The Lion King* where Simba is discouraged, lonely, confused, and close to giving up. Then his father appears to him in a vision and declares, "You are more than what you have become." The King reminds Simba of who he is—son of the king—and exhorts him to become more, to live out that identity fully, and to take his rightful place in the kingdom.

Likewise, as we face the challenges of life, we sometimes lose sight of our identity. We forget that we are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), a masterpiece created for good works (Ephesians 2:10), freed from bondage (Romans 6), and a beloved child of God (Romans 8:14–17). We need a friend who sees into our hearts, into our deepest fears and longings, and speaks truth with grace into those spaces. We need a friend who reminds us that we are a work in progress being perfected daily by our savior. We need a friend to give us hope when we have none, believe on our behalf when our faith stalls, petition God when we can't pray, celebrate God's goodness, keep pointing us to Jesus, and walk with us in the spiritual journey of life.

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These friendships do not just happen by accident. They are cultivated through much time, effort, commitment, and sacrifice. To become a spiritual friend to another means being willing to disrupt schedules, experience discomfort, sacrifice time and energy, risk rejection or pain, work through conflict, speak tough truths with grace, and lift each other up in consistent prayer before God. In essence, it's a relationship that seeks to live out the "one another" verses in the New Testament.

Why Are Spiritual Friendships Needed in Groups?

For the leader of a typical small group of 8 to 12 people, it will be challenging to know all your members well enough to shepherd them and help them take appropriate next steps. Even for the most diligent leader, it's hard to pay attention to the activity and trajectory of God's movement in all the members' lives. However, these limitations do not exist in smaller clusters. Within a friendship pair or triad, there is time and space for deeper knowing, sharing, and discerning of God's work in each other. When these relationships form within the group, people can care for one another in ways beyond the abilities of the group as a whole. This will in turn enrich the whole group by increasing the general level of trust, commitment, and discipleship.

Leaders may inadvertently limit spiritual friendships from developing when they believe the myth that everyone in the group needs to be at the same relational level with each other. Although this may arise from their rightful desire to be inclusive and not cliquey, it can be unrealistic and unhelpful. It's possible to accept and love everyone in the group and still allow a few closer friendships to develop naturally. Jesus modeled this as well. He loved each of the Twelve, but he had an especially close relationship with three: Peter, James, and John.

So instead of feeling guilty that you as the leader can't give equal attention to every member, pick a couple of people with whom you can form deeper spiritual friendships. This will likely become a source of encouragement for you, a healthy model of mutual discipleship for the group, and will increase the general level of depth within the group as a whole.

How Do You Develop Spiritual Friendships in a Small Group?

Within a small group, you'll likely find one or two people with whom you just "click." You may have similar backgrounds, common interests, life circumstances, or related ministries that draw you together. As a leader, you can help members make those connections and nurture friendships that have a spiritual focus.

One popular practice in small groups is to assign prayer partners to pray intentionally for one another—and even check in with one another—during the week. Although this method is based on the best intentions of encouraging accountability, it often seems to devolve into a checklist approach of interaction with an assigned partner. These tend to create superficial relationships of limited scope with the goal of behavior modification. What if instead, we made spiritual friendship the goal and allowed the process to unfold in a Spirit-led, organic way?

We can encourage interested group members (not everyone will be ready or desire to participate) to pick one or two people in the group of the same gender whom they want to get to know better. Then ask them to make that relationship (or those relationships) a priority by interacting regularly (e.g., in person, by phone, online, by text) outside of group gatherings. Exhort them to be open, vulnerable, and take risks in speaking and receiving truth in love. Ask them to commit to the relationship for a certain period of time to start and see how it develops. You might encourage them to do some of the following together:

- Follow up on the small-group discussion by talking together about next steps God is moving them to take.
- Set goals for the friendship and a mutual level of commitment.
- Serve side-by-side inside or outside the church.
- Learn something together (perhaps using a devotional, book, podcast, or article).
- Ask each other critical questions.
- Share meals with each other's families to get to know them better.
- Set up regular times to meet or check in by phone, text, or social media.
- Pray regularly for each other.
- Pray and listen to God together.

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The beauty of finding a spiritual friend from within the small group is that it expands on a relationship with someone who may already be doing life with you in multiple areas. By forming a spiritual friendship with someone in your small group, there's a good chance your time together will come naturally: through your small-group meetings, serving together as part of the group or the whole church, and even living near one another. Living near one another might even mean that your kids attend the same school or sporting events. This gives you both continuity and a layered depth to your relationship that can cultivate greater openness, mutual discipleship, and accountability. Then you will experience one of the most powerful benefits of a small group: a place where you can find, develop, and cultivate friendships of the soul.

—CAROLYN TAKETA is the Executive Director of Small Groups at Calvary Community Church in Westlake Village, California, and an editorial advisor for SmallGroups.com; copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. When have you experienced a spiritual friendship? What was (or is) it like?
2. Who in your group do you naturally gravitate toward? How might you develop an intentional friendship with him or her?
3. How might you help your group members make connections that could lead to spiritual friendships?

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Making Room for New Members

How to really help them feel welcome

By Peri Gilbert

It's happened to me, and I'll bet it's happened to you. You walk into a room filled with laughter and conversation. You have a smile on your face, ready to embark on the journey of relationships—except when you try to join in, all you hear are crickets.

When we promote small groups at The Simple Church, we constantly tell potential group members that "there is chair for you." And we tell our small-group leaders that we always want to make room for one more. That's a core element of our small-group ministry: making room for newcomers.

That's why I was surprised one Sunday when a woman approached me and asked if we had any life groups where she could meet people. I thought to myself: *Well, that's what happens in all of our life groups.*

I asked her if she had been to one of our groups, and she stated that she had—but no one talked to her. My mind ran through a number of scenarios about how that could happen, but they all tilted toward blaming this woman. Maybe she came in late or was shy. Maybe she didn't really engage in the conversations, and that's why she was unable to meet anyone.

Then a week later, I went to an event early to see if people needed help. I am no stranger to this crowd. But when I walked into the room, only 1 out of about 15 people even acknowledged me with a brief smile. "Chirp, chirp, chirp" was all I heard. Everyone was engaged in their own conversations and fun, and I was an afterthought.

I felt like God had given me a real-life illustration on the feelings of that young woman. In that instant, I realized what she meant. All of our mottos didn't matter. There had been room for her in the small group she attended, but there had been no effort made to include her in relationships.

Relationships Matter

That's an important word: *relationships*. Small groups are designed to build relationships. We make room for people so we can invest in them through relationships. Or at least, we are supposed to.

Oftentimes people come to our groups with broken hearts and lives. They come wanting to receive something: emotional, spiritual, or mental support. In some realm, whether in the church or secular world, they've become disenchanted with the relationships in their lives. When they enter a small group, they're looking for something different—something better.

The question is: Will they find it?

As small-group leaders, it's easy to become comfortable with the regular members of our group. We essentially form a miniature family. We create room in our home and lives so that we can invest in this family every week, which is good.

Still, we must always be aware of the new person in the room—of the chair now occupied, and the life now eager to change.

Rather than hash out who is responsible for what in relationships, let's consider Jesus' words: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31) and "Whatever you do for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). It's up to us to welcome and comfort the new people in our small group.

Practical Steps

Here are a few steps to ensure that no person is left out of your small group:

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Don't forget to see. As people arrive at the group and conversations begin, we tend to become engrossed in our circle of dialogue and forget to monitor who is around us. We can become blind to anyone else who comes through the door because we are so focused within our conversations. But rather than wait for the newcomer to engage us when they arrive, we need to engage them. If you have a large group, consider enlisting the help of a few members to be greeters and to help new people feel welcome.

It takes more than an acknowledgement. A smile can be a wonderful tool of welcome; however, it's not enough for someone who is new to your group. They need to be engaged in conversation and introduced to other members of the group. These are the building blocks that form relationships.

Give them some context. Remember that a newcomer will not have access to the backstory of the different participants in your group. That means they may not be able to jump into an existing conversation without a bit of help from you. Therefore, give them context for the questions or ideas that come up or have been key topics lately.

Provide a guide. If someone has never attended a small group or knows little of small-group life, he or she may not understand how the group meeting will work. This tension can be relieved by inviting the newcomer to sit with a guide that will be with them throughout the different activities of the group. This guide can be you, or it can be someone that you know will do a good job of welcoming and easing fears for the new attendee.

These steps are simple, but they also can be overlooked as we grow more comfortable with the people in our group. It's important to keep these steps in the forefront of our minds as leaders so that room is always available for newcomers, and new relationships are always possible.

—PERI GILBERT is the Small-Group Coordinator at The Simple Church in Bossier City, Louisiana; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. Think back on the last time your group had a newcomer. How well did the group welcome him or her?
2. How can you model proper welcoming of newcomers to your group members?
3. Who in your group can you enlist to help you welcome newcomers?

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Including People Affected by Mental Illness

How to be a real friend to those who are struggling

By Amy Simpson

Most people don't talk much about mental illness. And because of this silence, many of us have the misconception that mental illness is something rare, something that happens to unusual people at the margins of society.

We couldn't be more wrong. Every year in the United States, more than 25 percent of adults suffer from a diagnosable mental illness. These afflictions include serious and chronic diseases like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, as well as more common problems like depression and anxiety disorders—and everything in between.

Most church leaders have encountered mental illness in their churches. When people seek help for mental illness, 25 percent of them go first to the church. This is higher than the percentage of people who go to psychiatrists and general medical doctors. Many people are looking to the church for help, and many church leaders don't know how to help.

Small-group leaders are in a unique position because they minister so closely to a few people. When mental illness affects someone in a small group, either personally or as a family issue, that person brings a burden to every meeting. Small-group leaders and members may not know how to help and may respond in ways that are counterproductive. Here are some productive ways you can respond:

Acknowledge your fears. Many of our first reactions to mental illness are based in fear, either because we see our own potential reflected in people with mental illness, because we believe people with mental illness are inherently violent (which is not true), or because we're nervous about uncomfortable conversations or situations we don't know how to handle. It's important to acknowledge these fears and to learn to separate legitimate fear from irrational fear.

Recognize and embrace the truth that people with mental illness are people created in the image of God, loved and valuable. People with mental illness are no less important than others, and people with symptoms are no less valuable than when they're not experiencing symptoms. This attitude is an important starting point for ministry.

Foster a culture of compassion and authenticity in your group. Set the example so it becomes normal for people to be real about what they're experiencing, even when that truth is not pretty. This doesn't have to mean your group is obsessed with sharing the worst about themselves with no regard for social consequences; this can be modeled in a healthy and redemptive way. Neither does it have to mean giving people an excuse to stay where they are and refuse to grow. It's just a matter of giving people the chance to be honest about who they are and the circumstances of their lives. This will go a long way toward allowing people affected by mental illness to feel less marginalized.

Watch your response. If a person announces he or she has a mental disorder, don't act shocked, try to give them answers about why they are suffering, or try to solve the problem for them. Accept the news as you would an announcement that someone has a heart condition or a back injury. A loving and emotionally even response will show acceptance and maturity that mental illness is not always met with.

Care for them. Think about what your group is already equipped to do for someone in crisis or suffering from other kinds of sickness, and do that same kind of practical ministry: bring meals, care for their children, visit them in the hospital, and visit them at home if you're welcome. Also realize that unlike some other medical conditions, mental illness is often chronic or repetitive. So the crisis might repeat itself, and you may need to

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provide this kind of support again. You may even need to help on an ongoing basis for a matter of years. It's important to have appropriate expectations and to be patient with afflicted people and their families.

Consider helping financially, especially with the cost of medications and treatments. Psychiatric medication can cost thousands of dollars every month. Insurance companies tend to approach coverage differently for mental disorders, and necessary treatments aren't always covered. Many people affected by mental illness lose their jobs or are disabled for a time, with obvious financial implications.

Establish your personal boundaries and stick to them. Are you willing for group members to call you at home? Visit your home? How much time can you spend doing direct ministry outside your group meetings? Answer questions like these, tell your group about your boundaries, and apply them consistently with everyone in the group. Then stick to them. If someone violates your personal boundaries or demands more of you than you can give, grant the person the dignity of restating your boundaries rather than just ignore the person or drop out of his or her life.

Model acceptance. Set an example of acceptance during your group prayer times by sometimes praying for people affected by mental illness, just as you do for people affected by other forms of illness and injury. Without sharing any confidential information, mention people struggling with mental illness in your prayer requests—maybe someone in your family or workplace is suffering, or make your request general. Do this without passing judgment or giving commentary on people's illness. This ministry can go a long way toward creating a feeling of safety and hope.

As a group, decide what kind of behavior you will tolerate. Make those expectations very clear to everyone, and establish what action you'll take if someone violates those group expectations. Then if a person's behavior becomes a problem, follow the established process. But be sure to make clear you are addressing the person's *behavior*, rather than the mental illness. Don't assign an amateur diagnosis, and don't suggest that the person needs to "fix themselves" before being accepted into the body of Christ. Simply restate the group's expectations and your requirement that they be honored. Please also be gracious when forming the expectations, allowing for some latitude in social skills and focusing on what's truly important.

Work through a Bible study on mental illness. SmallGroups.com offers a great study called [Ministering to Those with a Mental Illness](#), or read a mental-health-related book (such as my book *Troubled Minds*) together and discuss it. Mental illness is rarely addressed in sermons, church classes, and small groups. Bring the issue out into the open and give people permission to discuss it while wrestling through their theological questions.

Get some training. Encourage your church to host a small-group training event for all small-group leaders, perhaps through [FaithNet programs](#), sponsored by the [National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI\)](#).

Pray together. If someone in your group is affected by mental illness and gives permission, pray for that person as a group. But please do this in a way that does not suggest that prayer is a substitute for mental-health treatment. Simply demonstrate that you care, that you know God cares, and that you believe prayer is powerful in the life of every suffering person—and an important part of every pursuit of healing.

Call the police when necessary. If you believe a person is a danger to self or others, always call the police. Don't try to handle it on your own.

Refer to a professional when appropriate. If you believe someone needs referral to a mental-health professional for treatment, talk to the leaders in your church or contact a local Christian counselor for suggestions.

Remember, you are an example of God's love. The way you treat people affected by mental illness will probably translate, at least to some degree, into how they believe God perceives and treats them. Your attitude and actions are powerful. Please make them thoughtful and sensitive.

—Amy Simpson is author of [Troubled Minds: Mental Illness and the Church's Mission](#) and serves as editor of Christianity Today's [Gifted for Leadership](#); copyright 2013 by Christianity Today.

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Discuss

1. Who in your small group has been affected by mental illness—either their own or a family member's? Who in your church?
2. How have you seen people in your church and/or small group respond to mental illness in the past?
3. How can you set the tone in your group to accept and love those who are affected by mental illness?

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Further Exploration

Websites and books to help small-group leaders develop real relationships in their groups

[SmallGroups.com](#). We specialize in equipping churches and small-group leaders to make disciples and strengthen community.

- [Are We Building Trust?](#) (Assessment Pack)
- [Handling Conflict in Small Groups](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Helping Group Members Become Great Listeners](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Healthy Boundaries for Small Groups](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Leading 101](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Making Small Groups Fun](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Ministering to Difficult Group Members](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Physical Presence Matters](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [The First Meeting](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)

[BuildingChurchLeaders.com](#). A website with practical training tools for various church leadership roles.

[LeadershipJournal.net](#). A website offering practical advice and articles for church leaders.

[GiftedforLeadership.com](#). A website ministering to women leaders.

[Authentic Relationships: Discover the Lost Art of "One Anothering"](#) by Wayne Jacobsen and Clay Jacobsen. In a culture that promotes isolation and autonomy, this book reveals life-changing methods for creating healthy relationships and authentic community (Baker Books, 2003; ISBN 978-0801064517).

[Making Small Groups Work](#) by Henry Cloud and John Townsend. See growth in your group and learn how to overcome common relationship obstacles (Zondervan, 2003; ISBN 978-0310250289).

[The Connecting Church 2.0: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community](#) by Randy Frazee. This book paints a beautiful portrait of biblical community and talks about the sacrifices we will have to make in order to experience life together (Zondervan, 2013; ISBN 978-0310494355).