


Practical Ministry Skills:

Conquer Common Meeting Problems

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How to Use This Resource

Take a quick peek here to maximize the content in this training download.

You've gone through leader training, picked a great study, and formed a group of people you're excited to get to know. And then you actually start meeting—and you wonder why you ever wanted to be a leader in the first place. Whether it's spotty attendance, a study that bombs, awkward relationships, childcare woes, or another common meeting problem, you're ready to turn in your resignation. But there's hope! We've gathered advice from the experts to help you get back on track.

Overview

Before you jump into the practical how-tos of figuring out your group concerns, read these two articles. Heather Zempel explains the three levels of small-group problems and which you should tackle on your own—and which you should get some help with. Then Scott Boren encourages you to embrace your small-group problems, seeing them as an opportunity to grow.

Practical Help

These practical how-to articles will help you conquer eight of the most common problems that small-group leaders face. Head straight to the problem you're having right now to find some relief, but be sure to read them all so you'll know how to handle them in the future.

—AMY JACKSON is Managing Editor of SmallGroups.com.

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Three Levels of Small-Group Problems

Different problems require different strategies.

By Heather Zempel

My husband and I purchased a house recently, and it got me thinking: Do you ever wish you could just put your small group on the market and let some new leader deal with the problems? If you've never felt this way, then you probably haven't been leading for very long.

If you lead a small group, you *will* encounter problems. There's no way around it. When you deal with people, it gets messy. These problems can range from the fairly benign (people won't talk in my group) to the very serious (someone has threatened suicide). That isn't to scare you—it's to equip you.

When faced with a problem, it's important to identify the type and severity of the problem, and then determine the next course of action. Different levels of problems require different strategies.

Level 1 Problems

Level 1 problems will be encountered in every small group at some point. Examples include:

- People won't engage in discussion
- People shy away from praying out loud
- Someone repeatedly skips down rabbit trails and takes the whole group on the journey
- Prayer requests are shallow
- Extra Grace Required (EGR) people who are a bit more needy than the average group member

These are typical small-group issues, and you'll face them at some point if you haven't already. Here are some steps for addressing these Level 1 small-group problems:

Pray. Don't use prayer as a last resort; stay on offense with prayer.

Address the issue with the person individually. Seek to understand the person's perspective. Make observations instead of accusations. For instance, "I've noticed that you don't comment much in the discussion. Is there something we can do to make it easier for you to engage the topic?"

Be creative. This is especially helpful for the person skipping down rabbit trails. Come up with a time limit, a hand signal, or some other means to help the person stay on track. Make it fun rather than burdensome.

Be patient. None of these problems will kill your group, and taking the time to allow them to be solved naturally will create a culture where community can emerge.

Level 2 Problems

Level 2 problems will occur in your group if you stay together long enough to allow real community to emerge. Here are some examples:

- Someone in the group monopolizes the conversation or takes on an authoritative or self-righteous tone
- Someone in the group constantly causes division or makes divisive comments
- "Discussions" (read: fights, arguments, conflict) erupt in your group
- Conversations and relationships remain shallow and surface-level
- Gossip runs rampant
- You have chronic complainers, or negative talk and attitudes emerge
- Someone in your group needs to be confronted about a sin

These problems require a little more skill and a bit of confidence to handle effectively. Here are some ideas:

Pray. Again, get out of the defensive posture and attack from an offensive position.

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Don't ignore the issue. You know there's a problem, and it's likely that everyone else in the group knows, too. Ignoring problems never makes them go away.

If the problem lies primarily with one individual, approach that person first. Again, make observations instead of accusations. Seek to understand the person's perspective. Pray together about the situation.

Get help when needed. If the individual is unresponsive or unrepentant, implement the biblical method for conflict resolution found in Matthew 18:15–20. Get a co-leader, coach, or pastor involved in the process.

If something happens in your group, process it as a group. Don't ignore the fact that the tension exists. Address the issue within the group setting.

Protect the group. If a problem persists, it may be necessary to ask a person to leave the group (See "When You Need to Remove a Group Member" for wisdom).

Level 3 Problems

Some unfortunate leaders encounter Level 3 problems during their first week of leadership. Others lead for years before encountering one. These are problems that you're not equipped or expected to handle on your own—they're outside the scope of small-group leader responsibilities. Examples include the following:

- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Repeated offensive activity in the group
- Inappropriate relational and/or sexual behavior between group members
- Repeated divisiveness
- Suicidal tendencies and/or threats
- Eating disorders
- Divorce
- Mental and emotional instability

Here are the action steps:

Prayer. Pray for the situation, but also be sure to get others (fellow group leaders, accountability partners, pastors, etc.) to pray for *you*.

Notify your coach and/or pastor immediately. Be sensitive about who you tell. If it's a big problem, you may need to send it all the way up the chain to a member of the pastoral team immediately.

Be honest. If the group member thinks he or she has told you something in confidence, inform him or her that you are obligated, as a leader within your church, to let a member of the pastoral team know about the issue.

Follow up. Your coach or pastor will work with you to develop an appropriate plan of action and care.

If you're a small-group leader, don't submit your letter of resignation yet! Working with people is tough because people are broken. John Ortberg has said, "People who love authentic community always prefer the pain of temporary chaos to the peace of permanent superficiality." Ortberg is right on. As leaders who believe in the power of life-changing community, we must be willing to deal with the temporary chaos of these issues so we can move past superficial community.

—HEATHER ZEMPEL is Pastor of Discipleship at National Community Church in Washington, D.C., and author of [Community Is Messy](#). Copyright 2007 by Heather Zempel and National Community Church; used with permission.

Discuss

1. What kinds of problems have you encountered? Which level do they fall in?
2. What is the difference between problems you should handle yourself and problems you should report?
3. Who should you contact with Level 3 problems?

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Embrace Meeting Problems

God meets us in our struggles to change us for the better.

By Scott Boren

I have three confessions to make:

Confession 1: I like being a successful leader.

Confession 2: I don't like people to see my struggles as a leader. This reality gets challenged in every small group because group members know my leadership up close and personal. They see the successes, and they see my struggles. I wish that I could say that all my group leadership has been a steady climb from one victory of faith to the next. But alas, this leads me to my last confession.

Confession 3: The journey of leadership is full of ups and downs, peaks and valleys. I formerly thought that the key was finding my way back to the peaks because I believed God is somehow more involved in the growth—the success. I assumed that God was more interested in things like new group members, new groups, great community, and transparency. After all, that's what most of our training is about.

However, the journey has taught me this: I've learned a lot more from struggles than I have from victories.

Not a Martyr Complex

Don't worry. I don't love struggling. It's not fun, and I never run toward struggles thinking, "Wow, this is awesome! I get to learn something new!"

I remember the first time I led a meeting that was a complete failure. During the icebreaker, a couple shared a fight they were having. We spent the next two hours in separate rooms trying to minister to them. We left exhausted. And the couple drove away still angry. I take no glory in that experience; but I did learn something crucial that night about leadership: We have nothing to give people who are in pain. Rather than connect them to Jesus, we tried to connect that hurting couple to our advice. We all lost.

Sometimes the only way to learn something is through failure. Struggles are not things that we avoid—and we shouldn't try to get out of them as quickly as possible. Instead, they're valleys to walk through, times and places to eagerly seek Jesus in the midst of it all. It's in the valley that we learn to wrestle with God.

The Wrestling of Jacob

The story of Jacob serves as a guide for how we can learn from our struggles. Jacob was smart and successful. He was good with money. He set goals, and he worked to accomplish those goals. He was not afraid of hard work. He wanted his brother's birthright, so he traded for it. Then he saw a woman and worked for 14 years to earn her hand. After this, he found a way to get rich, so he made a plan and implemented it.

Then Jacob headed back home with his wives and children. But his home was not a place of open arms. The last time he'd seen his brother Esau, he'd been running for his life because he'd stolen Esau's birthright. As he entered his homeland, Jacob's brother was coming to meet him. To appease Esau, Jacob sent him a gift of 220 goats, 220 sheep, 30 camels, 50 cows, and 30 donkeys. When they were young, Jacob had lied. Now that they were older, he would try to buy Esau's love.

Even with this bribe, Jacob feared for his life. He wasn't smart enough, strong enough, rich enough, or determined enough to protect himself this time. In Genesis 32:11, Jacob prays to God, "Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children." But God did much more than that.

On the night before the meeting with Esau, Jacob was alone, and the Bible says "a man wrestled with him till daybreak" (Genesis 32:24). As they wrestled, the man touched Jacob's hip and wrenched it. But before Jacob would let him go, he demanded a blessing. Though it's not clear at first who the man is, God revealed himself

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when he changed Jacob's name. Instead of being called Jacob, "the deceiver," he would forever be called Israel, or "God-struggler" (literally, "one who wrestles with God").

The blessing Jacob asked for didn't come as expected. God didn't bless Jacob with strength to meet his brother. He didn't give him more money to handle the problem. Nor did he make him smarter. Rather, he made him weaker. God blessed Jacob with brokenness. He brought him to the end of himself and gave him a permanent limp to remind him of his new name and his master.

After this blessing of brokenness, the walls came down between Jacob and his brother. Jacob came in humility, and Esau came in forgiveness. God's blessing coincides with brokenness. Often we think we should lead out of strength. But God doesn't want to make us stronger. He wants us to lean into our weakness and embrace who we are in it. This is the place of blessing!

Larry Crabb writes, "Brokenness is a condition, one that is always there, inside, beneath the surface, carefully hidden for as long as we can keep a facade in place. We live in brokenness. We just don't always see it, either in ourselves or in others."

Give me broken leaders over those who lead out of bravado and strength any day. Broken leaders know their limitations. They don't live a lie by trying to be perfect. Only a broken heart can love. Only a person who has come to the end of self can be real.

When we lead others, we face situations that cause us to wrestle with God. These situations are not issues to overcome so that we can get to the real ministry of group life. We must allow these situations to drive us into brokenness so we can come to grips with who we truly are as the beloved of God.

Common Struggles

Over the years, I've found that there are many different leadership struggles we face in group life. All of them are opportunities to seek God in a new way and see what he is doing in and through us in the valley. These include:

- Members who cause problems
- Discovering that you're not good at leading a key part of group life
- Discouragement, even wanting to quit
- Not knowing what to do
- Personal (private) weakness
- Burnout
- The temptation to complain

There are many more, of course. When (not *if*) you find yourself in the midst of these struggles, the key is to find God there and ask what he wants to do in you. Yes *you!* Not the group. Not those who are causing issues. Not the members who quit coming, or the loud kids who disrupt everything. What does God want to do in *you*?

When you face struggles, don't ignore it. Learn to be honest and bring it to God, and ask what he wants to do in you. This is an opportunity for you to meet God in a new way. Wrestle with him if you have to. Like Jacob, you will be blessed. You will be changed. And you will be a better leader.

—SCOTT BOREN is the author of several books including [Leading Small Groups in the Way of Jesus](#). This article is adapted from *Leading Small Groups in the Way of Jesus*, which has an entire chapter dedicated to this theme; copyright 2015 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How do you feel when you encounter problems in your group: discouraged, frustrated, angry?
2. Do you tend to ignore problems or rush in too quickly to fix things? How healthy is your natural tendency?
3. When have you grown as a result of helping someone else with a problem? How might God be working on you through your group problems?

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When Group Attendance Is Spotty

How to make the most of low attendance and draw people back to your group

By Sam O'Neal

Fresh out of college, my wife and I accepted a part-time position at our local church to launch and organize a new ministry for young adults. It was a fun ride, but my wife and I quickly learned one important fact about the young adults in our community: they didn't regularly attend church activities.

My wife and I used a small group to launch the ministry, and we had several singles and couples who were interested and began attending—sometimes. One week, we could have as many as 18 or 20 young adults bursting the seams of our living room. The next week, we might have 3 or 4. Attendance shifted wildly from meeting to meeting without notice, and seemingly without cause.

This was pretty frustrating at first. We put a lot of effort into hosting our group gatherings—especially my wife. She took pride in preparing homemade snacks and treats for everyone who showed up. In a week we could go from scrambling to find extra chairs and extra food to desperately offering mounds of uneaten guacamole to everyone as they left.

To be honest, we felt more than a little bitterness in those early days. *Didn't our group members know how hard we worked?* We wondered if we were doing something wrong when almost nobody showed up. worried that people refused to show up because they'd had a negative experience the week before.

Eventually, we learned that sporadic attendance was simply part of young-adult ministry. It was a cultural quirk that didn't reflect on our performance as group leaders. Still, we learned a few tricks during those years about ministering effectively in the face of sporadic attendance.

Take Advantage of Low Attendance

It may sound strange, but spotty attendance can provide a lot of interesting ministry opportunities within your group. When you think about it, there are some things you can do with a group of 4–6 that you can't do with a group of 8 or more. For example, low-attendance gatherings are a great time to pull the plug on your own agenda and open the floor for questions. People are often more comfortable asking deeper-level questions in a smaller group than in a group with lots of people—the same is true when it comes to asking questions that reveal doubt or uncertainty about key doctrines.

In other words, a group gathering where only a few people show up is a great time to concentrate specifically on those people and see how they would like to go deeper. The key is shifting the focus away from your plan and on to your group members.

In fact, there were several times when my wife and I scrapped our meeting agenda altogether when only one or two group members showed up. When that happened, we shifted from a traditional small-group gathering to a purely social event—a time to hang out with a couple of people and get to know them better as individuals. We learned a lot about our group members' stories during those meetings, and they learned a lot more about ours.

Here are some additional ideas for taking advantage of a low-attendance group meeting:

- **Play some games.** Having fun is a great way to knock down relational barriers and strengthen connections. So don't feel guilty about breaking out your favorite board games and having some good ol' fashioned fun with your group members.
- **Share your stories.** As I mentioned above, people may be more willing to open up and be vulnerable in a smaller group. So don't be afraid to ask some questions that encourage people to share their stories. "How did the two of you meet?" "When did you first become interested in following Jesus?" "What has God been teaching you these last few years?" Of course, if you choose to ask these kinds of

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questions, you need to be prepared (and willing) to answer them as well.

- **Go out.** Another way to help people open up and feel more comfortable is to leave the place where you have "official" group meetings and reconvene at a coffee shop or restaurant, instead. Relocating to a more social environment is a great way to help smaller groups of people feel more social.
- **Continue as normal.** I don't want to give the impression that you always have to drastically change your plans whenever several people skip a gathering. It's perfectly acceptable to carry on as normal with your regularly scheduled meeting.

Push for Consistency

Having a lower-attendance group meeting every now and then is no cause for a concern. But if your group suffers from sporadic attendance over a longer period of time—say, several months—you may want to make some changes to seek a more consistent level of participation.

One way to do this is to openly and clearly communicate your expectations. I've known many people who viewed attendance as purely optional each week, simply because they were never told otherwise. If they had a bad hair day or wanted to watch a football game, they felt no qualms about skipping. They were never told that consistent attendance is an important element of belonging to a group.

So take a few minutes to think through your expectations. What do you expect from your group members in terms of attendance? What kind of boundaries do you want to set, if any, and how strictly are you willing to enforce those boundaries?

I have been part of small groups where regular participation wasn't just expected—it was required in order to remain a member of the group. If you had to miss a gathering, you were expected to alert the group leader in advance. I didn't mind these strict boundaries because they were communicated upfront, and everyone knew about them.

Remember this as you contemplate boundaries and expectations for your own group: When you set up strict boundaries for group attendance, you will have fewer group members, but they'll attend regularly. When you have loose or non-existent boundaries, you will have more group members, but they'll attend sporadically. You need to find your own happy medium. But once you decide, communicate clearly what you expect and why.

Remind group members about your next meeting by contacting them through social media or sending a text the day of your gather. Then reach out to group members who don't attend regularly. Send notes, texts, or e-mails to let them know you missed them at your last gathering. Sure, this may seem overly aggressive to a few group members who don't like being bothered. More often, however, these notes or phone calls will help people understand that you care about them and enjoy their presence in your group.

Finally, don't be afraid to have personal conversations with group members who have trouble attending on a consistent basis. Don't beat around the bush. Be honest and upfront: "We really enjoy having you in our group, but I've noticed you come to only half our gatherings each month. Is there anything we can do to make things more comfortable for you?" You're not being overly aggressive or pushy by initiating these kinds of conversations. You're being a leader. You're also showing your group members that you value their company, and that consistent attendance is an important element for spiritual growth and connection within a community.

—SAM O'NEAL is an editor at LifeWay and an editorial advisor for SmallGroups.com; copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. When have you experienced spotty attendance? How did you respond?
2. The next time you have low attendance, how might you alter the meeting to make the most of it?
3. Who in your group might need a personal conversation about their attendance? How might you initiate one?

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When a Bible Study Bombs

Can you salvage the study, or is it time to move on?

By Sam O'Neal

As a small-group leader, there are few experiences as satisfying as when your group responds positively to a group study.

You've been there, right? You spend hours digging through possible Bible studies in a store or online. You run everything by your group and make a decision on what you'll study for the next several weeks or months. You do all the work to make sure everyone has a copy in advance. You do your best to prepare in the days leading up to the first gathering, and then—eureka! It works. People enjoy the study and are excited for more.

Conversely, there are few experiences as frustrating as when a Bible study bombs. I'm sure you've been there, as well. Maybe people are a lot less talkative than usual. Maybe your group members seem confused by the material or disagree with key doctrines. Maybe your people are openly hostile and complain about the study. Whatever the case, it's a bitter experience to put lots of effort into preparing for a Bible study, only to see it flop.

So what should you do? Consider these steps to move forward when a Bible study bombs.

Give It Some Time

You don't want to be hasty when making decisions about your group, even when you feel a Bible study is a dud. The truth is that any number of factors can cause a negative experience during a group gathering. Your group may also need some time to adjust if the study offers new features or a different way of approaching group discussion.

Do your best to observe your group the first time you use a new Bible study or curriculum. Ask questions to assess your group's reaction to the material. Pay attention to people who seem confused or dissatisfied.

As you lead the second session, keep an eye open for signs of improvement. Do group members seem to have a better handle on the material? Are there fewer complaints? Fewer long stretches of silence? If so, then there's a good chance your group will adapt to the material without having to take any drastic measures.

By the time you reach the third session, you've likely seen how your group will react to the curriculum moving forward. If it's not working by this point, you'll need to decide what to do next.

Take It to the Group

You're the leader of your small group, which means you bear a lot of the responsibility for the group running smoothly. You're probably the main decision-maker when it comes to selecting which curriculum material to use.

But that doesn't mean you should be the only decision-maker.

If you feel like a particular Bible study hasn't lived up to your standards, be honest about the situation with your group members. Express your opinions on the matter, and be specific. Say what you don't like and why you don't like it. Just as important, open the floor for your group members to express their own opinions.

This doesn't have to be a cataclysmic event, complete with weeping and gnashing of teeth. Don't waste time assigning blame or bad-mouthing specific writers or publishing companies. Instead, you want to engage your group members around this specific question: "What should we do next?"

Salvage, if Possible

There are many factors that may prevent you from entirely abandoning a Bible study in favor of something else. Money is one. Nobody wants to waste their money if they don't have to.

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For that reason, consider doing some surgery on the Bible study in order to salvage something useable. See if you can spend some time reworking different portions of the material in order to improve the experience for yourself and your group members.

Unfortunately, I have a lot of experience with these kinds of salvage operations. I've found the best way to squeeze some life out of a dead Bible study is to follow the Scripture outline from the original material. In my experience, most Bible studies do a good job of structuring themselves around a major theme or a primary passage of Scripture. If the study is about marriage, for example, it probably contains a solid list of Scripture verses that focus on marriage each week. If the study is on the Book of James, chances are good the authors have already divided the book into manageable sections.

This is important because if you have a plan for engaging Scripture, you have a solid foundation on which to salvage the Bible study. In fact, all you need to do is think up an activity or two, connect some discussion questions to the Scripture passages, and offer a way for group members to apply what they've learned.

Let's stop for a moment on the subject of discussion questions. A lot of people have a difficult time writing questions that actually spark discussion, so the idea of performing surgery on a study with poor questions may seem daunting. Thankfully, you can get a lot of discussion mileage out of some very simple questions:

- What do you like best about this passage? Why?
- What questions do you have about this passage?
- What will it look like to obey this passage in your everyday life?
- As a group, how can we encourage one another toward obedience?

If you only use these four questions in connection with a solid Scripture passage, you'll have a great discussion. Feel free to branch out, of course, but these four questions will help your group engage the text, clear up confusion, and move toward application both as individuals and as a group.

Move On When Necessary

No matter how much you want to fix a struggling Bible study, there may come a time when you simply need to pull the plug. You'll know when that time hits. If your group members have a difficult time engaging the study over several weeks, and if you're unable to salvage the material in a way that gives you confidence going forward—it's time to let go.

Again, I understand that abandoning a Bible study midstream can be stressful both financially and emotionally. But remember that the ultimate goal of any small-group experience is spiritual transformation. And if a dud of a Bible study is obstructing the potential growth of you and your group members, you need to take action as the leader.

This is a good chance to learn something together as a group. When you decide a study has failed, talk about it with your group members. Encourage them to engage the following questions so that none of you need to experience another Bible study bomb in the near future:

- What was most difficult or confusing about this Bible study?
- What was the study missing that would have made it better?
- What should we avoid in the future when choosing curriculum material?

Giving your group members a chance to evaluate what happened in recent weeks will help soften the blow of abandoning a Bible study. It will also give them a sense of ownership in your group, which is a blessing for all involved.

In a perfect world, every Bible study and curriculum option would effortlessly inspire your group members to greater knowledge of God's Word and greater obedience of his commands. But we don't live in a perfect world. So, be on the lookout for material that doesn't connect with your people. And when a Bible study bombs, do your best to salvage the situation in whatever ways are possible.

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—SAM O'NEAL is an editor at LifeWay and an editorial advisor for SmallGroups.com; copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. When have you experienced a study bombing? What was that experience like? What did you do?
2. How comfortable do you feel salvaging a bombed study and coming up with your own questions? Why?
3. How might having a group conversation about a bombed study help you pick a better study the next time around?

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When You Have Childcare Issues

Find a good option that honors both the adults and children.

By Trevor Lee

Sometimes you become knowledgeable in a topic by devoting hours of intentional study to it—like going to graduate school. Other times your circumstances force you to become knowledgeable—like when your first child is born. When I came to Trailhead Church as pastor, I entered an environment where there were as many kids under 12 as there were adults. That's exciting, but when it came to small groups it was (and is) a challenge.

This abundance of children had already taken its toll on the life of small groups within the church. Years before, when there were fewer children, small groups thrived. But as more families had children, leading meaningful small-group gatherings became a lot more difficult. Slowly, groups quit meeting as families. Men and women met separately so that one parent could stay home with the kids. Participation waned in those groups over time, though.

Five Options

When we decided we wanted to pursue family groups, childcare became a major issue we needed to address. Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach to childcare, we've learned that different solutions work best for different groups. We encourage group leaders to try several options to figure out what works best for their group, and we've developed a list of five options that we suggest:

1. Have groups support each other.

When a church has multiple groups with kids, one of the easiest solutions is to have groups support each other by trading childcare duties. This is a tangible way people in your church can serve each other. It eliminates any cost and provides natural interaction between groups. If everyone in a group is on board with this approach, it also doesn't require a huge time commitment for anyone because group members can take turns.

In a small church this can happen organically. In a larger church it might be helpful to match groups more systematically. We encourage our group leaders to consider this approach first because we place a high value on community, and this approach to caring for kids goes the furthest in reflecting that value.

2. Take turns engaging the kids.

Another option is to ask each person or couple in the group to take a turn being with the kids during the gathering. The downside of this is that someone will always miss the adult study and conversation. If group members see this as an opportunity to help the children know the love of God and teach them to follow his ways, however, this can become a joyful task.

This is an option that works well with groups that meet at least twice a month. Some of our groups only meet once a month officially. In that case, missing one time with the adults means going two months without that community, and that's too long. If your group meets every week, however, it's less of an issue to take a turn being with the kids.

3. Make the kids part of the group.

In my current group, we have seven kids. The youngest is six years old. Because they're a little older, it's pretty easy for them to play together in another room without supervision for part of the time. We also place a high value on making the kids part of the group rather than just finding ways to manage them. This has led us to do a couple of things.

First, we all eat together. Kids and adults sit together, and the adults actively engage the kids in conversation and relationship during the meal. We want them to know we're all in community together. After the meal, we encourage the kids to play for about 30 minutes while we have an adults-only conversation. At the end of that

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time, the adults take five minutes to figure out a way to meaningfully engage the kids on whatever we've been discussing. Then we bring the kids back to ask them questions or do an activity related to our discussion.

We've seen some beautiful results from this. The first time we did it, I summoned the kids to the room where we were meeting and my 9-year-old son rolled his eyes and said, "Ugh, why do we have to do this!" I think he was expecting a sermon. But as we began asking the kids questions about how they experience love and what that might mean for their relationship with God, they were engaged. After everyone left, I asked my son if the conversation time had been as bad as he thought it would be. He enthusiastically responded, "No, that was actually pretty fun!"

This solution won't work for every group, but when the dynamics are right it can have tremendous advantages for the adults *and* kids.

4. Hire a babysitter.

For some groups, this is the best option. Before small groups go this direction, though, we encourage them to consider if it's *best*. It can communicate that kids are a distraction to be managed rather than people to be engaged. Sometimes this is the best option, though, especially if there are very young children in the group.

Rather than each family hiring a babysitter, the children still get to be together and in the same location as the parents. Plus, when each family chips in, the cost of hiring someone to be with the kids doesn't need to be prohibitive.

We have one small group that hires a babysitter to come for one hour when they get together. They all eat together, and adults intentionally interact with the kids. Then they do a short lesson with the kids before the babysitter comes, and the adults have uninterrupted time to study and interact. This is something that has worked well for them, and it's helping create a healthy group.

5. Have less official meetings.

One of the things we've been experimenting with is meeting less—at least officially. We have groups that meet only once a month for study and intentional conversation. Then they meet at least one other time for fellowship or service where the kids and adults are together. We also encourage these group members to engage with one another outside of official meeting times. People go to the park together, have each other over for dinner, and go to coffee one-on-one. All of these things develop greater connection among group members and make the official meetings more meaningful. Usually groups that do this also meet longer when they do get together. Instead of an hour to study, discuss, and pray, groups meet for an afternoon—eating, playing, talking, and praying.

The benefit of this for childcare is that you only need to figure out childcare once a month. This will not be a good solution for everyone. Some may balk at the idea of meeting less frequently. It's true that consistency builds greater strength in groups, but with the right strategy, fewer official meetings can be offset in other ways.

Mix and Match

Often the best solution for childcare in small groups is not just one thing. Most of our groups have decided on an approach to childcare that is a hybrid of two or more of these options. Ultimately, the goal is to handle childcare in a way that cultivates healthy group life for the adults *and* the kids.

—TREVOR LEE is the Lead Pastor of Trailhead Church in Littleton, Colorado; copyright 2015 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. Is childcare an issue for your group? Why or why not?
2. Which of these five options seem especially appealing for your group?
3. What other options might you add to this list?

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When Your Group Has Plateaued Spiritually

How to infuse new life into your group

By Michael C. Mack

As a small-group minister and consultant, I've noticed a disheartening fact: many groups in America have plateaued. They're not growing or reproducing, and group members aren't becoming more Christlike.

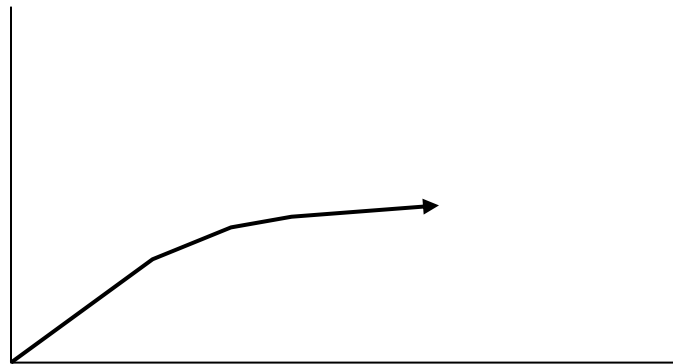
Why do small groups settle for *average*? Why do we settle for good-enough meetings led by ordinary leaders who have okay spiritual lives? Why do so many groups simply have basic Bible studies, engaging in surface-level conversations while sitting on their comfy couches? So many have drifted into mediocrity, becoming "nice little groups."

I believe small-group community is the environment where spiritual growth happens best. That's why plateaued groups exasperate me so much. Your neighbors won't want to join a group like this. These groups will never have an impact on the community. They will not transform lives. Worst of all, these stagnant, plateaued, narcissistic groups dishonor God

See, *good* small groups are the enemy of *great* small groups. Jim Collins opens *Good to Great* with these wise words: "Good is the enemy of great. And that is one of the key reasons why we have so little that becomes great." God promises to make us into something great (Genesis 12:2). Yet countless small groups settle for *good*. They acquiesce to ordinary and adequate rather than strive for transformational ministry.

In his book, *The Relational Way*, Scott Boren discusses the fact that we've settled for "a life of spiritual mediocrity and below average small groups." In these groups, he says, "people gather every week to help each other feel better about their lives, but there is no call to war, no call to enter into the spiritual battle to lead men and women from captivity. Instead, small groups become enclaves for what Eugene Peterson calls the spirituality of narcissism." Do Scott's observations infuriate you as much as they do me?

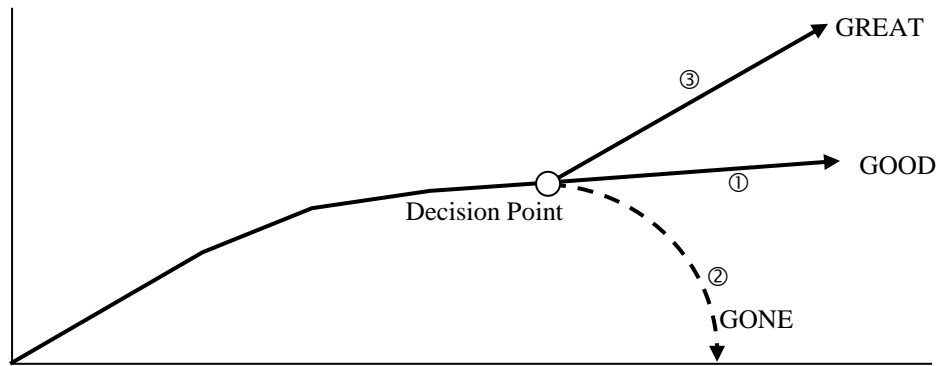
Small groups generally don't start off with plateauing as their goal. I think most groups want to accomplish something great for God. Along the way, however, they lose their focus and begin to stagnate. Their growth curve looks like this:



Groups come to a decision point along their journey where they must choose one of these three options:

- continue settling for the comfort of *good*
- fall into a death spiral and eventually be *gone*
- get out of their comfort zones and pursue *great*

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A good group can remain in this plateaued state for years. They simply drift along being lukewarm without ever making much of a difference. This is sad. Jesus says about such people, "I never knew you" (Matthew 7:21–23) and "I spit you out of my mouth" (Revelation 3:16). I don't think we want to settle for *good*!

At least a group that is declining does not continue to perpetuate this unhealthy position. Some groups just need to die and allow members to join new groups that launch with healthier values.

Reclaim God's Mission

Missional is a popular word in the vocabulary of Christian writers and speakers. The way I like to define it is simply, "God's mission is our mission." A great group is focused on God's mission rather than group members' agendas.

The fact is, many small groups in America are not mission-minded. They are good at caring for one another and studying the Bible That *is* good—but it's not great! In *Good to Great*, Collins discusses the need to "confront the brutal facts." You and your group members need to honestly and diligently confront the brutal facts of how your current reality compares to the truth of God's Word. This examination may lead you to a major decision point in your life together: to move off your comfy couches to do something God-sized, or to remain where you are and maintain the status quo.

Getting out of your comfort zone to do ministry together places you in a position where you must depend more on God than yourselves. This stimulates growth. It also takes the focus off yourselves and your troubles and turns you instead to think of others first.

One of my favorite movies is *Groundhog Day*. Phil, the main character played by Bill Murray, keeps reliving the same day, Groundhog Day, over and over. He wakes up to the same song, goes through the same motions, and meets the same people every day. That would be pretty boring if it weren't for some intriguing character development. Over time, instead of turning bitter because of his circumstances, Phil begins using the unique opportunities he has to serve others. His heart begins to change, which finally changes his circumstances. The movie is a good illustration of this basic truth: serving others develops our character and changes our heart.

The Difference Between Good and Great

What do great groups do that good groups miss? Here are five activities I've noticed as I've consulted various churches:

Great groups change things up.

Plateaued groups are stagnant groups. Usually the group has become predictable—same old study in the same old place at the same old time with the same old people. Your group may also be so tied to your same old agenda that the Holy Spirit feels like an uninvited guest. So shake things up! It may be as simple as switching your agenda around from meeting to meeting, or you may need to completely throw it out. Before you do anything, though, prayerfully evaluate your focus. Be sure you are pursuing God's agenda for the group.

Great groups invite new people.

Groups must be intentional about inviting new people or they will become closed cliques. It's not enough, though, simply to invite new people. Make sure you're open and welcoming when they attend. Make them feel

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like part of the group. Talk about this often as a group. The "empty chair" is an old standby to help group members remember that the group is open to new people. Simply leave at least one chair empty at every meeting and remind everyone that you still have space to invite others.

Great groups share their faith.

This seems so painfully obvious to me that I hate to even spend much time on it, but the problem is that many small groups are plateaued simply because they are ignoring the very first word of Christ's commission for us: "Go." Instead, too many groups stay in huddles. We stay in our closed meetings, our comfy living rooms, and our comfort zones—and we wonder why we've plateaued. Our unarguable call is to "Go and make disciples of all nations." We don't need another Bible study about it. It's time to pray and just do it.

Great groups serve others.

When you notice that your group has plateaued, one of the easiest ways to step out of your holy huddle is to serve people outside the group. Change the focus of your group from "us" to "them." As I mentioned earlier, serving others changes your hearts as well.

Great groups have God-sized plans.

I challenge small groups to do something so big that if God isn't in it, it's destined to fail. I call these "God-Sized Plans" or GSPs. In Acts 5:38–39, one of the Pharisees described the ministry of the apostles in God-sized terms: "If their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God." A GSP is always focused outside the group, making an impact on the community and world. Pursuing a God-Sized Plan purposely moves a group out of safety and security and into taking great risks with great faith. I encourage groups to ask God what he would want them to do. I think you'll find that God will do immeasurably more than we could ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

Jim Collins closes his book by encouraging readers, "Get involved in something that you care so much about that you want to make it the greatest it can possibly be, not because of what you will get out of it, but because it can be done." And not just because it can be done, but because God can do it. He will accomplish great things through great, growing groups like yours.

—MICHAEL C. MACK is the founder of and an editorial advisor for SmallGroups.com, and he consults small-group ministries through his ministry, [Small Group Leadership](#); copyright 2015 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. When have you been part of a plateaued group? How did you know it had plateaued?
2. How missional is your small group? Are you more focused on caring and sharing or on serving those outside the group?
3. Which of the five practices are most appealing to you? Which are scariest? Why?

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When Your Group Is Ingrown

We love to stay together—but it may be time to break up.

By Allen White

Most groups in North America like to stay together. That was shockingly clear to me when I arrived at the last church where I served and discovered about half of the groups were closed. I was informed that my predecessor made a rule that any group with more than 12 people had to divide into two groups. To avoid this, groups hovered right at 12 members, refusing to add anyone new.

Staying Together Is Easy—But Hard on the Group

We can call it "multiplying" or "birthing" groups, but let's face it, splitting up a group feels more like a divorce. We enjoy our togetherness, and we don't want to go through the pain of splitting up. But, this leads to other problems.

Groups Eventually Lose Their Edge

Group members want to feel accepted and understood. They want a familiar place where they can discuss the current chapter of their story without having to recap the first 36 chapters. When a group has spent a lot of time together, the group members become more like family. They've been through highs and lows together, and they've walked together through it all. They've learned to love and accept group members just as they are.

But every group must maintain a balance between truth and understanding. Group members need to be accepted, but they also need people to tell them the truth. One of the most liberating days for me came when I shared a real worry about my future with my group. One of the guys looked me in the eye and said, "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard you say." The truth set me free. What a relief! I didn't need to worry about it anymore, because it was stupid. Simple as that.

When a group has been together for a while, however, the understanding tends to go up, and the truth telling tends to go down. When once upon a time we might have been less understanding about someone's behavior, pointing out the issue, now we tend to lapse into, "Well, that's not good, but we understand why he does that." Acceptance of the member has now morphed into acceptance of his behavior. Unfortunately, this is a sign that the group has devolved into a social club and is making no difference in the lives of group members.

Not all long-term groups fall into this lethargy. Some groups maintain their edge, but it takes concerted effort. Without that effort, groups slip toward being lukewarm.

Long-Term Groups Shrink in Size

Every group loses members. People move away, aren't able to make it to the meetings anymore, or choose to get involved in other groups or ministries. While a few members pledge to stick together, the group eventually shrinks and may simply die out. Unless the group is making a consistent effort to bring in new members, the beginning of the group starts the clock for its end.

Long-Term Groups Have Difficulty Adding Members

If a group has been together for a while, it's hard to get new members to stick—even if they're regularly inviting new people. Several years ago, a group leader came to me concerned about the decline of his group. Originally, the group started out with six couples, but over time several couples could no longer participate in the group. When the leader approached me, they were down to three couples which included him and his wife.

They were good group leaders, and they led a good group. But now as they tried to rebuild the group by inviting new members, they discovered they couldn't get new members to stay. They were warm people. Their group was made up of solid believers. There was nothing wacky going on. But no one seemed to stay very long.

With a little examination, I figured out the problem: New members felt like outsiders. There were inside jokes and nods of understanding that eluded new folks. While no one did anything intentionally to drive these new

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members away, their close-knit dynamic was deflecting new members from the group. Without intentionally helping new people feel welcome, they'll likely leave.

The Remedy for Ingrown Groups

Many small-group pastors and directors like to simply "blow up" ingrown groups. They ask that the group comes to an official end, and the group members find new groups to be part of. But this definitely makes group members uncomfortable. The remedy can be much simpler, though, and less painful. Quite simply, the remedy to being ingrown is reaching out and inviting new group members.

Many people point to the natural group life cycle and explain that groups that have been meeting 18 months or more will simply dwindle and die at some point. But I know of healthy long-term groups that have been meeting longer than that. The key is prayerfully inviting new people into the group on a regular basis. New people breathe new life into groups.

One way to continually send new people to existing groups is to have sign ups at church events. The small-group director then assigns new people to existing groups. It's also a good idea to have church-wide series once or twice a year where all small groups participate in the same study. All groups are starting a new study, which makes new people feel welcome. This provides a great opportunity to add new people to existing groups. It also becomes a regular rhythm for groups to invite new people.

But, as I've mentioned, adding new people to an existing group can be difficult because many long-term groups unintentionally deflect new members. What can be done to stop this? Rather than just keep sending new people to an existing group, especially one that is ingrown, the group needs to take ownership of inviting new people.

Carl George, author of *The Nine Keys to Effective Small Group Leadership*, told me once, "There is no such thing as a closed group. They're just exclusive." While we tend to see this as a negative, it could be a real positive if they're regularly inviting people into such a close-knit, loving community. The key, though, is that they invite people personally. When group members invite their friends to a closed group, the new members already have a relationship as they join the group. The group member can fill in the friend on inside jokes and help explain the group dynamics. When group members of a closed group feel ownership of inviting new people, new members are more likely to stick.

Hold Loosely to Your Group

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus once said, "No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man." The same could be applied to groups. No one visits the same group twice. There's always someone missing, someone visiting, or a change to the group dynamics. It's never quite the same.

Several years ago, I started a men's group. The first week we had 12 guys. We sat around a big table in the middle of Panera Bread. For a variety of reasons, that was the first and only day that group of 12 guys ever met. Some left. Others joined. We continually added new people from our church sign ups. Today, the group has a steady 10 members, but only one original member remains. In fact, even I've moved on. Another leader took my place when I left, and has been leading for several years. And the group is still going strong. As they continue adding new people, it leaves room for others to move on to other groups and ministries. They enjoy the benefits of an established group, though only one person has been there from the beginning.

If I or the original group members had held too tightly to "our" group, the group would have died long ago. Instead, it continues on, reaching new people.

Some Groups Prefer Comfort

Some people appreciate an ingrown group. It's a comfortable place. They're not pressured to change or grow. They can remain the same and enjoy a circle of friends. The question is: Are safety and comfort always good?

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I do understand why we seek out places of comfort. We live in a world that beats us up on a regular basis. But groups that only offer a comfortable place of acceptance miss out on the call to help one another grow in Christ. Healthy groups both accept and confront. Ingrown groups aren't healthy. They're on the path to death.

If an ingrown group isn't willing to reach out to new people, the group will run its course and eventually disappear. Sadly, there's nothing a coach or director can do to change this. The group must want to change, and for some, the comfort and safety of a long-term group is too much to give up. Hopefully, though, ingrown groups can see the benefits of reaching out to new people and growing spiritually in a group.

—ALLEN WHITE is a pastor, teacher, writer, and speaker; copyright 2015 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What healthy long-term groups do you know of? What are they doing that keeps them healthy and thriving?
2. Why do you think so many groups become ingrown?
3. How can you turn you turn your group outward so you don't become ingrown?

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When Relationships Aren't as Deep as You'd Hoped

How to grapple with four challenges to meaningful relationships

By Bill Search

Building communities within our church is hard work. It feels like it shouldn't be—after all, God created us for community. But we live in a broken world that has altered and inhibited the relationships God created us to enjoy.

For that reason, it's helpful to examine the different road blocks that prevent communities from being formed and damage communities that used to be healthy. Here are four of the biggest community killers that we as church leaders have to overcome:

The Challenge of Time

The first challenge to cultivating relationships is a tension we keenly feel in our Western world: We simply don't have enough time. People talk about time in the U.S. like some people in the developing world talk about food or water.

I was standing in the atrium of my church a few years ago handing out cards about small groups. A young, newly married couple came up to me and began to chat. When I asked if we could connect them with a group, they explained that they'd like to do it down the road, but they were really busy right now. I almost laughed in their faces. I have three kids, a demanding job, and a home to maintain. Busy? They don't know *anything* about being busy. But it's a common song today, isn't it?

Do you know what most people are busy doing? In a typical week, people spend most of their time at work. The second biggest consumer of time is sleep. Both of those are necessary. But do you know what the third most time-consuming activity is? Watching television.

According to the Nielsen Media Service, the average American watches nearly 5 hours of TV a day. That's 35 hours a week and over 1,500 hours per year. Let me break that down another way. The average American watches 1.5 days of TV per week. That turns into 78 days per year—which is 1.6 months out of every year watching television! So, an average person who lives to be 70 will spend 5,460 days of his or her life watching TV. That's 15 years!

If churches and small groups are going to conquer this community killer, we must challenge people to really look at what's keeping them busy. Randy Frazee addressed this in [Making Room for Life](#). As developers of community, part of our mission is to help people find the time they need to make relationships a priority. We must continue to emphasize the importance of gathering together, and we should celebrate what happens as a result of our time together. This will emphasize the need to make time for relationships.

The Challenge of Avoidance

The second challenge to cultivating relationships is what I would call avoidance. This happens in a relationship when you know you need to deal with some conflict or problem, but you don't.

My first real job is a good example of this. Right out of college I served on staff at a church with a man named Fred. He was a championship talker. You could mention any subject and he'd wax on for what felt like hours. Fred had a thought about everything. Now, I'll be transparent for a minute here—I'm a talker, too. I come from a long line of talkers, ramblers, and conversation dominators. (But since I'm writing this and not Fred, I will say that Fred had my talkativeness beat hands down.) Fred and I pretty much controlled all the words on our staff of eight people. This went on for months. Every staff meeting, every lunch gathering, was like a ping-pong match between Fred and me. Every now and then we'd take a breath and someone else would talk, but we were quickly back at it.

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I didn't know this was a problem. (I was too busy talking). But after several months, our boss pulled me aside and asked, "Do you know that after meetings Sara goes back to her office and cries?" I couldn't understand why. Then my boss explained that Sara—who was a bright seminary graduate—couldn't get a word in edgewise thanks to Fred and me. For months our group had avoided the ugly truth that two talkers were killing the dynamic. But it took just one courageous guy to step up and challenge us. I'm glad he did! Our group was dramatically better after that. If my boss had avoided the problem, our group would have continued to suffer. And I wouldn't have grown in the way I relate to others.

Does a problem exist in your group that regularly damages the people, relationships, or interactions within it? If so, you've got to deal with it. Avoiding it will only make things worse. If you're not sure how to handle the issue, talk with your coach or pastor. Then decide on an action plan and follow through. Don't avoid the issue any longer.

The Challenge of Strange People

The third challenge to cultivating relationships is what we in pastoral circles are often tempted to call "weirdoes." Some call them ECR (extra care required) or EGR (extra grace required) people. Some gently refer to them as Emotional Black Holes. But to put things simply, they are strange. We don't want to give these people our e-mail addresses or cell phone numbers, much less spend time with them in a group.

Most of us have a weirdo or two in our lives. Maybe it's End Times Larry, who sees the imminent return of Christ in every newspaper headline. Or it could be Needy Ned, who "just wants a special woman to share his life with." Maybe it's Steve the Bible Expert, who always knows more about the intricacies of the Bible than anyone else in the history of humanity. Or it could be Bill the amateur comedian (that's me!). As the saying goes, if you can't identify the extra grace required person in your group, it's probably you!

I think John Ortberg said it best in his book [*Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them*](#). Ortberg writes that we all have an "as-is" tag. Like the seconds rack at the back of a department store, we're all slightly imperfect. We're all weird.

But you know what? Odd people have a lot to teach us. Jesus says that "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). It's these people that often provide the best opportunity for us to learn to love. In fact, the more we love them, the more we love God.

John puts it this way: "Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen" (1 John 4:20–21). The strange people are a gift to your group. They are a gift from God.

The Challenge of Unreal Expectations

The fourth challenge to cultivating relationships and building community is unreal expectations. Let's face it: we all have expectations—and we usually think they're reasonable. But here are just a few of the expectations often placed on small groups: intimacy, accountability, evangelism, close fellowship, deep worship, and so on.

Sometimes it feels like our church leadership expects our small groups to take a person from unbeliever to missionary in two years—in a group that meets every other week and takes summers and holidays off! It's simply unrealistic to expect this on a regular basis.

Perhaps the biggest challenge, however, is the expectation of intimacy. Let me ask you: How often have you tried to "sell" small groups based on intimacy, promising deep friendships?

In [*The Search to Belong*](#), Joe Myers points out that people only need a few intimate relationships. We need lots of social and personal relationships, but intimacy isn't required to enjoy a relationship. In fact, intimacy can deter it. Imagine you're in a couples' small group and one of the men shares that he really struggles with lust. He tells the couples circled around the coffee table how difficult it is not to look at women and take a sensual snapshot. That's an intimate level of sharing! But does his sharing help or harm the group?

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It's not that a small group shouldn't be intimate, but when people expect a "deep" group to mean a certain level of intimacy, they'll usually be mad if the group stays at the surface. Other people expect their small group to be "deep" by being an intense Bible Study—especially people who have a background with Campus Crusade or The Navigators. If you expect a typical small group to morph into an in-depth exploration of biblical texts, you will be disappointed. It's not that we want "shallow"—it's that we can't agree what "deep" is.

In order to address these unreal expectations, it's important for your group to honestly talk about what each group member hopes to experience. And when a person voices an unreal expectation, it's more than okay for you to set expectations that are more reasonable.

While these may seem like daunting barriers to community, God is able to overcome them all. If we're willing to follow his guidance and learn from him through the people and circumstances of our group, we'll make great strides in demolishing these barriers.

—BILL SEARCH is the Senior Pastor at Rolling Hills Christian church in El Dorado Hills, California, and the author of [Simple Small Groups](#); copyright 2010 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How can you encourage group members to make time for your small group and the people in your small group?
2. Do you have any strange people in your group? What might they have to teach you? How might you grow through your relationship?
3. How are small groups "sold" to your church? Are people promised friends, intimacy, accountability, life change? Are these promises realistic or unrealistic?

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When You Need to Remove a Group Member

It should only be a last resort, but sometimes it's necessary.

By Carolyn Taketa

We all want to believe that anyone can join and belong to a small group. After all, isn't that the premise for most of our small group promotions? In rare cases, however, there may be people who are too emotionally unhealthy, mentally unstable, or exceedingly disruptive to be part of a small group.

Grace First

First, let's establish what is *not* cause for removal from a group. Just as God is patient with us, our default posture as leaders and Christ-followers should be acceptance and grace toward others. We do not remove people just because they're socially awkward, judgmental, needy, abrasive, insecure, self-absorbed, arrogant, critical, demanding, confrontational, or engaging in inappropriate behavior. All of us have likely fit into one of these "extra care required" categories at different times in our lives.

Though it may be uncomfortable or challenging for you and your group to have a member with difficult personality characteristics, this by itself is not cause for removal. We all need love and compassion as we move along our spiritual journey. Being part of a group means you have committed to be in process with others as they grow toward maturity in Christ. In addition, God could be sharpening your leadership as well as your group's humility and patience by bringing someone who causes all of you to stretch beyond your comfort zones. At the same time, God may be using your group to provide a place of grace and belonging for this person with a difficult personality, who has likely been rejected in the past.

When Jesus put together his first small group, he could have picked "perfect" disciples (e.g., spiritually mature, humble, teachable, patient, kind, easy to get along with, discerning, and wise). Yet, he didn't. Consider some of the personality characteristics of Jesus' disciples: zealous, brash, pessimistic, judgmental, intolerant, selfish, impulsive, competitive, greedy, and disloyal. If Jesus had been a typical small-group leader, he would have needed multiple coaching conversations to help him manage and lead this diverse, stubborn, and difficult group. Jesus understood the value of process and knew that these men would eventually become far more than they could possibly imagine. We are all works in progress in the hands of a loving, powerful God who can and does change us, bit by bit, into Christ's image.

In addition, we don't ask people to leave when they're going through a crisis or difficult season in life. When people experience loss, divorce, significant illness, or some other challenging circumstance of life, they're likely to be more draining or needy. Caring for members through such a demanding season of life is a great spiritual growth opportunity for the group. You will experience much of Christ's heart as you extend yourselves in compassion and patience for a fellow group member caught in painful circumstances or the grieving process. Be mindful, though, of taking on too much. For example, it's possible that someone struggling with a tragic life event may need additional support specific to that need such as grief counseling, cancer support, or divorce recovery. The group need not take on every aspect of support, but it should continue to walk alongside the group member and point them to additional resources.

Finally, it must be understood that asking a member to leave the group is the last resort after multiple conversations and interventions. In each instance, before taking action, the leader (and perhaps a coach or director) needs to clearly request that the member stop the disruptive behavior—even asking several times. If the group member cannot or will not, we need to consider the needs of the whole group and determine whether the group (and the leader) can withstand and overcome the damaging and disruptive behavior.

When It's Time to Part Ways

Though we don't want to reject someone by removing them from the group, we also have a responsibility to protect the rest of the group from further damage. The needs of the many can't be sacrificed by allowing the tyranny of one member. If the group member's behavior is unlikely to change, the burden on the group may

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ultimately be too much to bear, which may result in other group members leaving. Plus, the leader is likely to become discouraged and give up.

So when is it appropriate to ask a member to leave the group? Here are a few situations that may warrant removal:

1. A Group Member Who Attacks the Bible

This is a challenging situation arising when someone has a hostile attitude toward the Bible and is intent on attacking it. This is very different from the person who is curious, skeptical, or even respectfully disagreeing by asking questions and trying to understand the Scriptures. This person, on the other hand, has an agenda, refuses to take the Bible seriously, relishes debating its value, and demeans its authority in members' lives.

For example, "John" had been attending a small group for several months. The leader shared with us how John often made derisive comments about how the Bible was just a fable, unreliable, and not a source of spiritual authority. John was not open to other views and continued to be argumentative and disruptive, posing a challenging situation for this group of new believers. When we spoke with John, he admitted that though he had been a Christian and a church attender for decades, he really didn't believe the Bible is the authoritative Word of God, and he wanted the freedom to repeatedly share that opinion with the group. It became evident that he didn't want to be part of a small group to grow spiritually but rather, he wanted an audience for his views. We asked John to leave that group but offered another group led by a strong, spiritually mature, experienced leader who would be able to address his comments, admonish him as needed, and protect other group members.

2. A Group Member Who Uses the Group for Therapy

This is a common issue that requires much prayer and discernment. We are all broken and in need more care from time to time. A typical small group, however, is not designed nor intended to be a therapy session or a support and recovery group. When someone repeatedly monopolizes group time with their emotional issues and shows no desire or ability to change, they may not be emotionally healthy enough to be in a typical group. Most leaders are not equipped to handle significant mental health issues and may find this too difficult for the group. The member seeking help may be stuck and not know how to move forward. The person would be better served in counseling or a recovery group with the expertise to handle the issue.

In these types of situations, we give clear boundaries and ask the group member to refrain from using the group for therapy and instead get the help he or she needs to move forward (e.g., counseling, medication, support group). If the person is responsive, he or she is allowed to stay in the group with other support structures in place.

3. Group Members Who Divorce

When a couple within the group separates or divorces, it puts major stress on the group, especially if the group has been together for a long time. Realistically, if both spouses stay in the group, it will force the group members to take sides, causing dissension. Usually, it's best for the leader to have a conversation with each spouse individually and discuss who might remain in the existing group while the other person finds another group to join. Of course if it's a group for married couples, then both spouses will eventually need to transition to a different type of group. In any event, it's important for the group to process the loss, support both people through prayer, and continue personal friendships even after they're no longer part of the group. Regardless of what happens, both spouses will need support, which may now be provided in one-on-one relationships or other smaller clusters of members rather than the whole group.

4. A Group Member Who Shops Around

This is when someone has been to several small groups and after a short time, complains about the group and demands a new group. These people are consumeristic and have a pattern of bouncing from group to group, while complaining and comparing them. This behavior is disruptive to the leaders and the groups.

For example, "Sue" had been to three different groups in one year. In group meetings, she was incredibly vocal about what she didn't like about the group and leader. She stayed in a group long enough for the leader to ask

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her to moderate her critical comments and disruptive behavior. Then Sue took offense, blamed the leader and/or group, stopped going to meetings, and came to me asking for a new group. Then the cycle would repeat.

When Sue approached us to complain about the "problems" of the third group, we had a challenging conversation with her where we gently but firmly explained how her behavior was unhelpful to each of the three groups she had tried out. We refused to send her to a new group and asked her to take specific steps to change this negative pattern of behavior before starting another group. Of course, no leader is perfect, and no group is perfect, but when we see people shopping around, we need to intervene.

In small-group ministry, we long to see everyone find a place to belong and grow in Christ. Yet, we have a responsibility to protect and guide the people God has entrusted to us. That might mean that sometimes, as a last resort, we need to remove a person from our group. When that time comes, let's do so with love, clarity, wisdom, and grace.

—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 2015 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How can we be sure that our default stance is one filled with grace?
2. Is there someone in your group who may need to be removed? If so, why do you think this is the best approach?
3. Who should you talk to if you feel you need to remove a group member? Should you contact your coach, small-group pastor, or another leader?

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When Your Group Prayers Fall Flat

Don't settle for ho-hum group prayers.

By Andrew Wheeler

Our small group met monthly to pray for the persecuted church around the world and for missionaries from our church. We were all committed to God, to prayer, and to each other, and several of us were experienced pray-ers. Yet some of our prayer times—well, most of them—really seemed to fall flat.

Often my mind wandered during prayer. I seldom felt we were connecting as a group. Although I knew God was with us, I rarely felt lifted into his presence. Many times I drove home from group glad we had met, but not particularly inspired. Why did our group struggle to "click" when we interceded together?

Like many small groups, we lacked effectiveness in this area because we failed to take into account two key dimensions of group prayer.

A Balancing Act

Group prayer—unlike private prayer—involves both vertical and horizontal dimensions. When we pray in a group, we are praying *to* God (the vertical dimension) *with* other people (the horizontal dimension). Effective group prayer requires a balance between both of these dimensions. When the horizontal isn't taken into consideration, the result tends to be long, winding prayers that diminish participation. When the vertical is lacking, prayers are often said more for the benefit of other people than for God, and can move the focus away from God rather than toward him.

Balancing the vertical and horizontal dimensions of group prayer doesn't happen automatically, but our group discovered some principles and practices that help:

All Together Now

Praying with people means that we pray as a team, sometimes even limiting our individual prayers for the benefit of others. This is the horizontal aspect of group prayer.

Focus

One way to improve a group's ability to pray as a team is to focus the topic. Prayer times in the early church often centered on a single overriding concern. Acts 1:15–26 describes a group of believers praying for God's guidance in choosing a replacement apostle for Judas Iscariot. Acts 12 shows a similar assembly praying for Peter's release from prison.

Narrowing the focus in this way allows a number of people to express their desires for a particular situation to God. When multiple subjects for prayer are opened simultaneously, participants often skip from topic to topic rather than developing a prayer together in unity and agreement.

So our group made three changes that helped us focus our prayer time. First, we limited our topic to the persecuted church. Second, instead of praying generally for countries where persecution is rampant, we now pray for specific needs in three to five countries using a recent prayer list from [International Christian Concern](#). Finally, we changed the format of our prayer times. We used to read through all the requests on the list and then pray. Now someone reads aloud the information for the first country, and we pray about those needs. When there is a general sense that we've covered that country, we move on to the next nation, reading its needs aloud, and then praying.

This format could be adapted for nearly any prayer focus. For example, if you're praying for members' personal requests, focus on one person at a time instead of gathering everyone's requests at the beginning. You'll experience greater unity in prayer and help people remember what to pray for.

Short and Sweet

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Praying short prayers is another way to improve the horizontal dimension of group prayer. Our tendency, however, is to do the opposite. Long, winding prayers may be perfectly appropriate in the prayer closet, but they are seldom conducive to community prayer. Prolonged prayers often cause group members to tune out. God may have an infinite attention span, but your group members don't!

Long prayers also communicate—usually unintentionally—that the pray-er is not interested in the contributions of the rest of the group. Such lack of consideration discourages others from participating and destroys a sense of community.

Since our group began concentrating on one country at a time, our individual prayers have been briefer and more targeted. When we read through the entire list of requests before praying, some members responded by covering a number of subjects in their "turn." These prayers grew long, causing people to tune out and preventing any real agreement in prayer. Our new format limits the scope of individual prayers and makes it easier for us to keep them short.

The Up Side

There is also a vertical aspect to group prayer. Praying to God means that we talk to him rather than addressing others in the group. We also focus on his presence and will rather than our circumstances.

Centered on God

First, we must remember that God is our real audience. In a group, it's easy to slip into addressing other people in prayer rather than God: "Lord, may *we* be more seeker-focused, may *we* reach out to our lost neighbors, may *we* be prepared at all times to speak the gospel." This type of prayer draws the focus away from God and often leaves the group feeling preached to rather than prayed for.

Here's how we might pray for the same subject in a way that puts the attention on God: "Lord, would *you* give us a greater heart for the lost and open doors for us to share the gospel?" The distinction in wording may be subtle, but the difference in focus is clear. The second prayer clearly asks God, not the group, to act. Praying this way honors God's sovereignty and encourages group members to seek him for life change rather than their own attempts.

We can also lose sight of our real audience by offering prayers that are more descriptive than intercessory. God knows what we need before we ask (Matthew 6:8). When we load our prayers with information aimed at group members rather than God, we accentuate the horizontal dimension of community prayer at the expense of the vertical dimension.

Our group had this problem. Because we all read the list of requests silently before we prayed, we weren't sure others had read (or remembered) the entire list. So we spent much of our prayer time recapping the details we'd just read on the list of requests. Now that one person reads the information and requests aloud, we know everyone is on the same page, and we can focus on asking God to act.

Kingdom Requests

Focusing our prayers on God involves not only whom we address, but also what we ask for. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:9–10). Jesus then instructed the disciples to seek God for their daily needs, for forgiveness, and for guidance. A few verses later, Jesus told his disciples to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (v. 33).

It seems Jesus intended "your kingdom come, your will be done" to be the context for all prayers brought to God. Often, however, our prayers are dominated by immediate concerns such as financial or medical issues. Those are valid topics for prayer, but it's possible to "seek first his kingdom" as we're praying for them. We pray for God's financial provision, but we pray also to be content with what he has given, for wisdom in financial decisions, and for a steward's heart. We pray for healing, but we pray also that God will develop Christlike character in us through our trials.

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Praying this way may not come naturally at first. But as God works in our hearts, we begin to desire what he desires, and the focus of our requests shifts. We seek his bigger purposes—even as we ask him to act in the daily circumstances of our lives.

Our group continues to meet monthly to pray. Now that we're incorporating these principles, we're growing in our ability to pray together well. Although we're still experimenting and fine-tuning our approach, the unity we experience in our meetings indicates that we're on the right track.

—ANDREW WHEELER is author of [Together in Prayer](#). This article originally appeared in the Nov/Dec 2007 issue of Discipleship Journal. Reprinted with permission.

Discuss

1. How do you feel about your group prayer times? Do you feel like you've met God, or do you feel like they haven't accomplished much? Why?
2. How well does your group balance the vertical and horizontal aspects of prayer? How might you get better at balancing the two?
3. What one or two ideas can you implement this week to improve your group prayer time?

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Further Exploration

Websites and books to help you handle common meeting problems

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

- [Develop Real Relationships](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Leading 101](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Leading Outside the Box](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Handling Conflict in Small Groups](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Healthy Boundaries for Small Groups](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Ministering to Difficult Group Members](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Minister to Multiple Spiritual Maturity Levels](#) (Training Theme)

[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.

[Field Guide for Small Group Leaders](#) by Sam O'Neal. Great, practical advice for leading small-group meetings (IVP Connect, 2012; ISBN 978-0830810918).

[Leading Life-Changing Small Groups](#) by Bill Donahue. A comprehensive go-to resource for small-group leaders (Zondervan, 2012; ISBN 978-0310331254).

[Making Small Groups Work](#) by Henry Cloud and John Townsend. This is a one-stop small-group leader's guide for gatherings of all sorts (Zondervan, 2003; ISBN 978-0310250289).

[Why Didn't You Warn Me?](#) by Pat J. Sikora. This focused guide trains the novice or experienced small-group leader to deal effectively with the obstacles of group life (Standard Publishing, 2007; ISBN 978-0784720752).