


Training Theme:

Growing Small Groups

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How to Use This Resource

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

What makes a small group different from a social club? Spiritual growth. But without some intentional planning, small groups can lose this important aspect, becoming stagnant and stuck. This Training Theme is perfect for training yourself or other leaders to lead growing groups. Use the variety of resources in a number of ways. For one idea, use the Retreat Plan at the end of this Training Theme.

Devotional, Assessments, and Case Studies

"The Difficult Work of Spiritual Growth" sets up the foundation for this Training Theme. Work through 2 Peter 1: 3–10 alone or with a group of other leaders. Take the two assessments to gauge how well your group promotes life change. Then the case studies highlight different aspects of encouraging spiritual growth in groups. Read through the real-life stories and consider the questions at the end.

How-To Articles

These seven articles will train you to lead a growing small group. The first two articles focus on prayer and care among group members and their importance for spiritual growth. Then "Be a Model of Authenticity" and "Permission to Be Real" explain how to make your group a safe place for deeper sharing. "Measuring Spiritual Growth" and "Hand-Crafted Application Questions" show you how to create realistic, measurable spiritual growth objectives. The final article introduces the role spiritual disciplines can play in your group.

—AMY JACKSON is Managing Editor of SmallGroups.com.

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To contact the editors:

E-mail SmallGroups@christianitytoday.com

Mail SMALLGROUPS.COM, Christianity Today
465 Gundersen Drive, Carol Stream, IL 60188



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The Difficult Work of Spiritual Growth

Exploring the necessary partnerships with God and one another

By Amy Jackson

In 2 Peter 1:3–11 (NLT), Peter writes to believers:

By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. We have received all of this by coming to know him, the one who called us to himself by means of his marvelous glory and excellence. And because of his glory and excellence, he has given us great and precious promises. These are the promises that enable you to share his divine nature and escape the world's corruption caused by human desires.

In view of all this, make every effort to respond to God's promises. Supplement your faith with a generous provision of moral excellence, and moral excellence with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with patient endurance, and patient endurance with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love for everyone.

The more you grow like this, the more productive and useful you will be in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But those who fail to develop in this way are shortsighted or blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their old sins. So, dear brothers and sisters, work hard to prove that you really are among those God has called and chosen. Do these things, and you will never fall away. Then God will give you a grand entrance into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Peter starts off the letter with this call to growth, but he doesn't treat spiritual growth like we often do. He doesn't appeal to the popular DIY method of spiritual formation that requires believers to do all the work. After all, he doesn't say that the believers must do this "because God says," and he doesn't mention following the numerous laws they would have been familiar with. Peter also doesn't tell believers to simply sit back and wait for God to change them, acting as if the believers have no role in spiritual formation. Instead, Peter talks about a partnership with God.

Peter starts off by reminding the believers that God has already provided everything needed for godly living. He's already done the work that allows us access to him, and he's already made clear to us his promises. It is, in fact, *in view of all this*, that Peter says the believers should seek to grow—as a response to God's promises.

We respond by taking our base of faith—our belief that God's promises are true—and adding to it moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, patient endurance, godliness, brotherly affection, and love for everyone. We open ourselves up to the changes God wants to make in us, working hard to grow into and live up to the identity God has given us.

The reward for this difficult, collaborative work with God? We'll be more productive and useful for kingdom work, we won't fall away, and we will have a grand entrance into the kingdom. When we respond to God's promises by working with him on spiritual growth, we will be rewarded, and we'll be able to fully live the lives to which God has called us.

Along the way, though, we need people like Peter to remind us of God's promises, to remind us why we're doing this hard work. We need good models in our lives, people who can show us how to live the Christian life. We need people to encourage us when we get tired of the work of self-control . . . or perseverance . . . or brotherly love. We need people to keep us from being shortsighted or blind, forgetting that we've been cleansed of our sin. We need people to speak love and truth into our lives on those days when we've started believing the devil's lies. We need a community to walk with us through spiritual growth, a support system of Christ-followers at various points along the journey. Together we can make sure we never fall away. Together we can have a grand entrance into the kingdom.

—AMY JACKSON is managing editor of SmallGroups.com; copyright 2013 by Christianity Today.

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Discuss

1. Why are small groups important to spiritual growth? How have small groups impacted your spiritual growth?
2. What will it take to lead a small group that is focused on partnering with God and one another for spiritual growth? What will that group look like?
3. How can you help group members understand the partnership with God for spiritual growth rather than depending solely on God or solely on their own efforts?

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Five Tasks for Small-Group Leaders

Do you make time for these important tasks?

By LifeTogetherToday.com

	Often true of me	Occasionally true of me	Never true of me
<p>1. I minister to the needs of our group members. One of the critical roles of a small-group leader is to shepherd the people in your group. You need to pray for and actively love each member. That means making sure people feel connected with others in the group and being attentive to what people say. As the shepherd of the small group, you need to see the needs of your group members.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>2. I mentor them toward spiritual maturity. An effective small-group leader seeks to cultivate the spiritual habits of his or her group. You must first know the condition of those under your care. Then, as you lead the group, ask this for each person: "What is the next step in his or her spiritual maturity?"</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>3. I motivate my group members to ministry. A key shepherding function of small-group leaders is to motivate each member to harness his or her spiritual gifts for service in God's kingdom. You, as the leader of the group, must model this principle. Do your members know what their spiritual gifts are? Are your group members growing in their gifts?</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>4. I multiply the life and mission of our small group. Every group member must learn to multiply his or her life by passing on the faith or through starting new small groups. As a leader, that may mean training other leaders, consistently inviting new people, or challenging group members to make a difference in their daily lives.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>5. I model a surrendered heart. Pride, arrogance, and worldly leadership have no place in a small group. God works best in our weakness. When Satan tries to strangle healthy small groups through petty conflicts among members, you need to model a surrendered, humble attitude. What should you lay down on the altar to be consumed by the fire of God's presence? God loves the confessions and prayers of a broken and contrite heart.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

—Adapted from LifeTogetherToday.com; used with permission.

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Are Group Members Experiencing Life Change?

Take a deeper look at several categories of group life.

By Rick Lowry

The greatest reward for any small-group leader is to see real life change happen in the members of his or her group. Unfortunately, life change is kind of hard to quantify. We don't always see the evidence that our group members are growing unless we take the time to look—and unless we look in the right places.

The following tool can help. It will assist you in focusing on the habits and patterns of behavior demonstrated by group members who are merely participating—meaning, they attend meetings, take part in discussions, but don't demonstrate spiritual transformation—and those whose lives are changing.

In each of the charts below, a score of 1 indicates that all of your group members are experiencing no life change, while a score of 10 indicates that all of your group members are experiencing significant life change. True statements on the left indicate a score between 1 and 4, while true statements on the right indicate a score between 7 and 10. Circle the number that seems to best describe your group in each chart. By taking a broad look at all of the scores together, you should get a good idea about the areas where growth is occurring in your group—and the areas where you'll need to do some work. If you're not where you'd like to be, try the challenge step offered in each chart.

Attendance and Interaction									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
-Most members attend the group at least once a month. -Some members attend every meeting.						-Most members attend every meeting. -Members continue to interact, connect, and function as a community between group meetings.			
Challenge: Identify a "Community Coordinator" who can help group members connect at a deeper level through social interaction outside of group time, communicating prayer requests during the week, and so on.									

Bible Study									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
-Group members bring a Bible to the meeting and participate in the discussion. -Most members engage in some kind of Bible reading on their own.						-Most group meetings feature one or two people who are excited about something they read in the Bible during the week. -Most group members demonstrate a desire to help others learn what they have learned.			
Challenge: Once a month, see if you can substitute your "regular" group meeting with an event that is entirely focused on applying what everyone has learned.									

Worship and Prayer									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
-Most group members attend your church's weekly worship service. -You pray as a group each week during the group meetings, with several people feeling comfortable to pray out loud.						-Most group members experience private times of prayer and worship throughout the week. -Group members have encountered and been moved by the Holy Spirit during group meetings and in their own private devotions.			
Challenge: Plan a group meeting that is worship and prayer only, and include elements that will encourage members to think about intimacy with God in new ways.									

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Shepherding and Care									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
-Group members view prayer time as the primary vehicle for learning about the personal needs of others. -Some members will call or check in on a group member experiencing a tragedy or personal crisis.						-Group members who are hurting readily share their struggles, both in and outside of group meetings. -They receive ongoing encouragement and sacrificial support from the rest of the group.			
Challenge: The next time a crisis hits someone in your group, challenge your group members to stick by them sacrificially and see it through to the end.									

Serving Others									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
-Group members bring refreshments and/or supplies to group meetings when assigned. -Most group members participate in "official" group service projects.						-Group members actively seek out ways to serve and support others during the week (especially other group members). -Most group members have a regular impact in their community, including "official" service projects and individual acts of care and compassion.			
Challenge: Read John 13:1–17 in a group meeting and conduct a foot-washing ceremony during which group members commit to serve one another.									

Outreach and Evangelism									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
-Your group recognizes the importance of evangelism by setting up an "empty chair" or praying for people to become saved.						-Your group spends a significant amount of time each month in prayer for people who need salvation. -Several group members have helped people outside of the group come to faith in Jesus during the past year.			
Challenge: Ask each of your group members to identify and pray daily for 10 people who need to experience salvation. Set a group-wide goal for the number of people who you hope will experience salvation in the next year.									

Accountability									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
-Most group members share prayer requests, sometimes including "struggles." -A few group members have set up accountability relationships.						-Members of the group routinely confess sin to the group as a whole, or to individual accountability partners.			
Challenge: Set a goal to have every member of your small group involved in a one-on-one accountability relationship before the end of the year.									

—RICK LOWRY is the Small Groups Pastor at Crossroads Christian Church in Newburgh, Indiana; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today.

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Prayer Requests for Authentic Change

Praying for one another along the painful path of transformation

By Wayne Jacobsen

"The Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God" (Romans 8:27).

You'd have thought I'd just cussed by the way the mouths around the table soundlessly fell open. And all I'd said was, "I don't think I can pray that for you."

The woman who had just asked us to pray was perhaps the most shocked of all.

My home group had just finished eating dinner, and we were sharing prayer requests. With obvious distress, Kris had told of her daughter's plan to move in with her boyfriend that weekend, and Kris asked us to pray that God wouldn't allow it.

I usually try not to take exception to people's prayer requests, but I have a low tolerance for requests I think God will not answer. On this occasion, I didn't keep quiet.

Once they all caught their breath, I explained. "I think all of us here can understand why you want God to stop her from doing that. If anyone here feels that's what God wants, you're free to pray that way. I'm wondering, however, whether asking God to override someone's ability to make moral choices isn't akin to witchcraft."

I could see Kris was near seething at my bluntness, so I hurried on. "What I suggest we pray for is that God would reveal himself to your daughter. That he would let her see clearly the choice she is making. And that God will show you how to trust him and love your daughter, even if she makes the stupidest mistake of her young life."

I had hardly finished before Kris blurted out through tears, "That's exactly what I need."

We gathered around her to pray. Instead of praying for the situation not to take a distressing turn, we prayed for Kris. What could have been a sympathetic but shallow exercise in prayer became a marvelous discovery of how God works in difficult situations.

—WAYNE JACOBSEN is author of [Authentic Relationships: Discover the Lost Art of "One Anothering"](#); copyright 2004 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How does praying for one another help us grow spiritually?
2. How do our prayer requests show where we're at spiritually?
3. What do you think of Jacobsen's response to Kris? How was it helpful? Hurtful?
4. Jacobsen writes that he has a low tolerance for requests that he thinks God will not answer. What other kinds of prayer requests are not helpful?
5. How can you lead group members to pray for things that align with God's will?

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Embracing Tangents

How talking about aliens brought my small group together

By Justin Marr

"How do we get them to like each other?" I asked, scribbling nonsense on a fresh sheet of paper.

"No idea. There's a section in our leader's handbook about group bonding, though." My friend Taylor and I had just started a college Bible study group, and after hours of brainstorming, we still had nothing.

"What does it say?" Taylor resurfaced the handbook from under an impressive display of desk junk and started flipping pages.

"It says something about discussing promises and commitment," he said, handing it over. "It's called 'group covenant' or something." I quickly skimmed the recommended questions. It was about inspiring ownership in our newly formed community and figuring out ways to keep each other accountable to the cause.

"Let's do it," I said.

A few hours later we all gathered together in an outdated common area connected to the dining hall.

"So, what does the word 'covenant' make you guys think of?" I yelled over the other five conversations going on in the room.

"Halo!" one of them blurted. Everyone else in the room laughed in agreement.

"Halo? Like the Xbox game?" I rolled my eyes.

"Yeah, that's what I thought of, too!" another guy added. They proceeded to tell me about this alien alliance called the "Covenant" and how they wanted to kill the human race. I looked at Taylor with wide, helpless eyes, like a mouse about to get pounced on. But he had started to speak effervescently about the difference in quality between Halo 2 and Halo 3. The war was over before it even started. There is absolutely no hope once 20 college males start talking about video games.

When things like this happen, I'm tempted to think God has left the room. Sure, God is present when we gather, but what if we're talking about how a video game's plasma grenades are awesome?

But something important was happening during that conversation. I didn't see it then, but it was there and it was profound. We were becoming brothers. At the time, I would have said this conversation was a waste of time. I didn't think life-changing community could be built on a tangent. But in those moments we were being bound and woven together by our common experience: killing aliens. The more we talked about it, the more everyone in the room realized they could be themselves. We all became comfortable in the realization that, even though this was a Bible study group, it didn't have to be ruled by serious conversation and uninterrupted Jesus talk. We could joke around and talk about everyday things like a huge touchdown in last night's game or a sweet action movie with tons of explosions.

I believe without any doubt that these diversions can be the seeds that grow into authentic community. Obviously, the deep discussions are helpful and beneficial, but perhaps the tangents are just as useful. Maybe God purposely wedges those tangents in between your preplanned questions.

Before the Halo incident, discussing deep topics felt forced and awkward, but afterward it was different. When Taylor and I brought up issues like regret and guilt, we found surprising vulnerability. When we brought up evangelism and the problems people have with organized religion, we saw thoughtful honesty and an inspiration to change those negative associations.

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We were no longer just a bunch of guys sitting around an open Bible, hoping to become better people. Instead, we were united in our determination to let Jesus' words urge us into spiritual maturity. We were willing to let our peers challenge us to grow beyond the surface level. In this way we became more than just friends—we were brothers. But it didn't come without trust built upon off-topic laughter, silly stories, and wrestling matches.

Small groups are a beautiful way to create authentic community, but they need more than intentionality to be real. They need spontaneity, too. So while it may feel natural to fight every tangent, think again. Next time a side conversation is born out of a new pasta recipe or the hilarious things kids say, try to embrace it. You may not get what you expect, but looking back on the years of brotherhood we shared, I praise God for plasma grenades.

—JUSTIN MARR is a small-group leader and blogs at TheSocialHunger.com. This article is adapted from his blog; used with permission from the author.

Discuss

1. What is your normal reaction to tangents in your small-group meetings?
2. How might tangents deepen relationships between group members?
3. What's the benefit of deeper relationships to spiritual growth?
4. How might you embrace some tangents to intentionally learn more about your group members?
5. How can you plan for more fun and down time with your group so that relationships are deepened?

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A Small-Group Leader's Most Important Job

Extensive research on small groups shows a leader's prayer life is paramount to success.

By Jim Egli

A religious expert wanting to cut through the confusion of 613 Old Testament statutes came to Jesus and asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" Jesus gave his famous reply, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Mark 12:28–32).

Like the scribe who came to Jesus, I was a confused small-group expert just a few years back. I kept hearing advice from a plethora of small-group authors and speakers, each promoting different methods and models. All of them were confident and persuasive, but their contradictory theories couldn't all be right. Someone needed to cut through the confusion by doing serious, scientific research on what really creates healthy, growing small groups. We needed to look past the models to discover the key underlying principles.

I wanted to get to the bottom of things. I wanted an answer to the question, "What's the most important part of leading a small group?" So I completed a Ph.D. degree and did extensive statistical research involving over 3,000 small-group leaders in more than 200 churches to probe that question, and the answer I found was surprisingly simple.

The most important dimension of leading a group is your prayer life—your connection to God.

What You Do in Secret

Along with my research partner—Dwight Marable, director of Missions International—I probed hundreds of items, asking questions about group dynamics, leadership behaviors, and group meetings. But the highest correlations to small-group health and growth were to the unseen dimensions of a group leader's relationship with God. Out of the hundreds of questions we asked, the leaders' answers to the following questions yielded the most pivotal results:

- How consistently do you take time for prayer and Bible reading?
- Are you praying daily for your non-Christian friends to come to know Jesus?
- How many days in the past week did you pray for your small-group members?
- Do you pray for your group meetings in the days leading up to it?
- How much time, on average, do you spend in daily prayer and Bible reading?

The leaders whose answers revealed a strong relationship with God had groups that were healthier and faster growing. These groups experienced a deeper level of care between members, had a clearer sense of mission beyond their group, and produced more leaders and new groups.

However, the research revealed that the biggest difference a strong prayer life makes comes in the evangelistic effectiveness of a small group. One question that we asked group leaders was how many people had come to Christ through the influence of their group or group members in the past nine months. The contrast between leaders with a strong prayer life and a weak prayer life was startling.

Eighty-three percent of leaders with a strong prayer life reported that at least one person had come to Jesus through the influence of their group, whereas only 19 percent of leaders with a weak prayer life could say the same. It didn't surprise us that leaders with a growing relationship with God had groups that were bringing more people to Christ, but it was shocking how much of a difference it makes. Leaders with a strong prayer life have groups that, on average, have more than four times the evangelistic impact as groups led by leaders with a weak prayer life.

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How Do You Prepare for Your Small-Group Meetings?

The biggest surprise in our research concerned how small-group leaders prepare for their group meetings. Two questions that we asked leaders were: *How much time do you spend on average preparing the lesson for your small-group meeting?* and *How much time do you spend on average praying for your small-group meeting?*

Much to our surprise, the research revealed absolutely zero correlation between time spent preparing the lesson and whether the group was growing in any way. In other words, when you statistically compare hundreds of leaders spending two hours preparing their lessons with hundreds of leaders spending five minutes preparing their lesson, there is no difference at all between those two groups in whether their groups are bringing more people to Christ, adding new members, or producing more leaders.

But there are very high correlations when it comes to whether the group leaders are praying for their meetings.

Most leaders reported spending significantly more time preparing their lesson than they did praying for their meeting. They didn't realize that the time spent preparing their lesson or questions makes little difference, while time spent praying for their members and their meeting makes a big difference. Apparently things depend more on God than on you. Or, put another way, it's more important to prepare your heart than it is to prepare your notes.

How about you? Do you spend more time lining up your lesson, or do you take more time praying for others and inviting God to work in your meeting?

I'd like to challenge you to try an experiment for the next three meetings. Take more time praying for your members and asking God to work in your meeting than you take preparing your lesson or discussion. I think you'll see a noticeable difference in how your meetings go.

This discovery changed a lot of things for me. I spend significantly more time praying as a small-group leader now and less time going over the group lesson ahead of time. What we learned also changed how our church does small-group leader training. We spend less time training people how to prepare for and lead a discussion and more time teaching people how to grow in their relationship with the Lord.

Why Is Prayer So Important?

Why does the prayer life of the leader make such a difference in the health and growth of a small group? The research doesn't tell us why, it only tells us that a very strong correlation exists. But I don't think it's hard to figure out.

Jesus said in John 15:5 (NLT): "I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing." When we are connected to Jesus, his life is flowing through us. Leaders who are taking time with Jesus have a secret power source. They are receiving direction. Christ's grace, peace, compassion, and power are flowing more freely to and through their groups. Perhaps the group members are also connecting to Jesus more strongly and consistently themselves. Basically, our research statistically proved John 15:5. If you want to see Jesus' life flowing in your small group, stay connected to him.

Is That All?

Our research revealed four critical dimensions to small-group life and leadership. We have labeled them with four action verbs: Pray (your prayer life), Reach (reaching out to those that need Jesus), Care (showing practical love to one another), and Empower (giving away ministry and leadership to others). Basically, it comes down to loving God and loving others.

What's the most important part of leading a small group? Our research revealed it's not about your abilities, your personality traits, or getting extensive training. It all comes down to relationships with God and others. Or, as Jesus once said: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." And, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

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—JIM EGLI is the Leadership Pastor of the Vineyard Church in Urbana, Illinois, and is the co-author of [Small Groups, Big Impact](#); copyright 2010 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. Why do you think the prayer life of a small-group leader so greatly impacts the health and growth of the group?
2. How much time do you spend in prayer for your group meetings and group members?
3. How will you set aside specific time each week to pray for your group?

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Creating a Community of Care

Five tips for a more caring small group

By Jay Firebaugh

My good friend and mentor Jim Egli has this to say in *Small Groups, Big Impact*: "People want to join groups where there is a strong level of care. That is, when group members really care about each other, when they pray for one another, eat together, and have fun together, taking time with one another in between their meetings, new people want to be part of the group. Groups with a high level of care effectively assimilate others into group life."

Leaders tend to focus only on the meeting, but the meeting is probably only about 25 percent of what really matters in making your group successful. Yes, if your meeting is disorganized and boring, that won't help create a healthy group. But for the most part, you can have average meetings and still have a mega-successful group if you create a community of care. And that's the 75 percent you need to focus most on as a leader. Here are some tips to get you started.

1. *Genuinely care about your group members.* Regularly think about them and what's going on in their lives. Make them part of your ongoing thoughts and not just something you think about on meeting nights.
2. *Pray for your group members.* Jim's research has shown that the most significant thing a small-group leader can do to help group success is to pray daily for the people in the group. Not technique, flare, giftedness, or style—just forming the habit of daily prayer for each group member.
3. *Cultivate a climate where people can share authentically about their lives.* If the conversation is only superficial or sticks solely to Bible facts, then it's hard to really care about each other. It's quite a different matter when you begin to intertwine your hearts as you truly get to know each other. When that occurs, care happens naturally. Help set a caring climate by being open and honest in your own sharing. This will encourage everyone else in your group to do the same.
4. *Do things together beyond the meeting night.* Sit together at church. Go out to dinner. Watch the big game. Help each other out. Serve as a group. Spending informal time together will help deepen your friendships.
5. *Work at creating cross-care.* Leaders always set the pace by modeling, and when the people in the group start caring for each other, you'll know you've got genuine community. You can't do all the caring, and it means more to have the care from someone else in the group, too, so help your group members minister to and pray for one another. You'll know you're really there when you start finding out about things second and third hand!

It's not rocket science. Invest in doing the things that will make your small group a caring community. Watch your relationships grow deeper and your impact grow wider.

—JAY FIREBAUGH is the Director of Small Groups at New Life Church in Gahanna, Ohio. You can check out practical tools for pastors and small-group leaders on his [All About Small Groups](#) Facebook page. Used with permission from the author.

Discuss

1. In what ways is your small group already a caring community?
2. What will it take to become a more caring community?
3. What can you do this month that will move your group to be more caring?

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Be a Model of Authenticity

Why group leaders have a critical role in encouraging life change

By Reid Smith

There are several factors that influence the interpersonal dynamics within a small group. One of the most important factors is how "real" the group leader can be with his or her group members. In fact, the health of a group is almost always linked to how free people feel they can be with one another, and that starts with the leader.

Authenticity is key to success as a small-group leader. It nourishes true community and builds healthy relationships. Here are 10 practices that will help you model the kind of transparency that will create the best conditions for biblical community to grow.

When you ask a personal question, be ready to answer first.

It helps to prepare for this by knowing the actual questions and order of questions you plan to present during your group's Bible study and discussion time. Here are two rules of thumb to follow:

- *The earlier the better.* Plan to share more personally toward the beginning of your group's discussion time, because this will encourage more open communication throughout.
- *Think through your personal responses.* The more prepared you are to answer, the more ready you will be to take risks. As you review discussion questions in advance, imagine how you would answer each one and consider how you can actively be transparent.

Take things slow and steady.

Believe it or not, "planned authenticity" is not an oxymoron. Generally speaking, the more you know people, the more open you can be. It's better to be gradual in a group setting when people don't know each other. For example, baring your soul in the first gathering of a new group could scare some people off. Note the natural progression of Jesus' openness in his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). You can be strategic in self-revelation while being led by revelation from the Holy Spirit.

Don't wait too long.

When it comes to authenticity, the pace of the leader will set the pace of the group. If you want honest conversation, you need to be honest yourself—and it's best to do this toward the beginning of your group's season of study together.

Communicate truth and your personal response to it.

People like to know what other people think and how they feel in response to something. When you as the leader can express both, it invites others to new levels of participation. It's good leadership to tell your group members if and why you agree with a biblical principle that's being taught, but you should also share the challenges you face in living out your faith. For example, "It's so important to have a devotional time each day, but there are seasons when I struggle with this. Lately, I've let other things take priority in my life and I want this to change. Please pray for me." Though some might view this as vulnerability that reveals weakness, the opposite is true. Here's what it really shows:

- *A truth.* Spending time with God each day is important to our spiritual growth.
- *You're human.* Nobody is perfect and does what is right all the time.
- *You want what God wants.* To develop your relationship with the Lord.
- *You need help like everyone else to respond in faith.* We need God and community for life transformation.

Grace unlocks authenticity.

Conversations about God's amazing grace and our dependency on Christ have a way of encouraging authenticity. The more your group's discussion is focused on the person of Jesus Christ, the freer people will be to tell the truth about who they are and where they're at in their relationship with God and others. Point people to Christ and express how we are all equally in need of grace. Leveling the playing field and equalizing our need for grace releases realness in your group participants.

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Err on the side of risk.

It is not unusual to question whether to share your thoughts and struggles. In your own mind, ask the Lord to help you discern if there is any reason why you should not share something that might be vulnerable or feel like a risk. Your authenticity is most effectively communicated when you put your personal interests aside and take risks for those listening.

Share what you really value and love even if you think those around you may not apprehend or accept what you say.

People are looking for leaders with guts and who are true to themselves. While leaders shouldn't go looking for ways to disagree, it's completely acceptable to share views that might not be unanimous or popular. Do share with humility, though, and express the fact that the kingdom is large enough for some disagreements.

Don't spin.

When you get something wrong, acknowledge it openly and maintain a positive attitude rather than trying to put a positive spin on your mistake. Be real without being hard on yourself. Beating yourself up for getting something wrong raises the stakes for others to share openly. With a smile on your face, simply share what you thought, that you learned differently, and that you're glad you did.

Forgiveness enables authentic relationships; unforgiveness disables them.

We don't hold onto grudges; they hold onto us. Grudges and unforgiveness toward others erect barriers in relationships and make it more difficult to be authentic. In other words, a lack of forgiveness will produce a lack of authenticity. It's imperative for us to be right with people if we want to be real with others.

Employ the "Socratic Virtues" in your group facilitation.

These would include the following:

Listening. When people feel they're being heard, they *want* to share.

Patience. People who tend to be shy will need more time to open up. When they experience love expressed as patience, they will participate—in time. It's worth the wait because when these people open up, it can be the tipping point in your group dynamic and take everyone to a new depth of authenticity.

Perseverance. Like patience, perseverance is an expression of love. When people know you'll go the distance with them, they'll go deeper in dialogue.

Examining your doubts. If you feel like you're holding back in what you're sharing, prayerfully discern if it is something God wants you to tell others, and go with your gut. If it seems like something is missing in what another person is sharing, carefully weigh if you should call it out in the group by asking questions or if you should talk another time outside the group; either action can help to build authenticity.

Talking frankly. People believe you're being real when you talk frankly with them. Honest input from the heart of a person you know cares about you is a treasure that transforms the relationship. Barriers to authenticity are removed when you share without hesitation or fear.

Postponing judgment. Always be an advocate for the person who shares, especially when they are being transparent. This doesn't mean you always agree with their point of view, but that you're always for them as a person. Give people time to share their heart and don't be quick to draw conclusions. People will not feel safe enough to share their heart if they feel rushed or judged. You want to really hear them so you can understand their heart.

Be willing to revise your opinion and respect other points of view. Your willingness to change your opinion demonstrates a flexibility and openness, which invites people into dialogue. Most people do not enjoy debating and arguing points and opinion. They enjoy talking with somebody who respects the insights of others and really listens to them.

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—REID SMITH is the Community Life pastor of the multi-site Christ Fellowship Church in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, and the founder of the 2orMore small-group leadership training and resource ministry. Copyright 2009 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How well do you currently model authenticity? How might you improve?
2. How comfortable are you with sharing your own struggles? Why do you think that is?
3. Which of the Socratic Virtues are you strongest in? Weakest?

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Permission to Be Real

Helping people open up is a valuable skill for small-group leaders.

By Seth Widner

I grew up attending Sunday school and Bible study classes in church—all of which were packed full of great information about the truths of Scripture. The purpose of those classes was to educate people with the knowledge of Scripture. They were guided by a set curriculum, and the focus was always on the content of that particular study. In essence, everything was knowledge-driven.

The Problem with Knowledge

I learned a lot of great things in those classes over the years and met many great people. Although I gained knowledge of Scripture, I made very little connection with my fellow participants. Our interactions didn't really connect us together in any way. When I talked, I was normally shouting out an answer, hoping that I would gain the approval of my teachers and peers.

During those years, I was struggling with several sins, and my mind was plagued with questions and doubts about my faith. But I didn't dare bring that up in front of my classmates or my teachers. Why? I feared that I would be rejected. I didn't feel as if I had permission or freedom to be real. So I wore a mask to cover up my struggles and weaknesses, hoping my teachers or classmates would believe I was perfect.

Our small groups must be safe places for people to remove their masks. Group members must have permission to be authentic, to be real. A healthy small group contains people who live transparent lives before Christ and one another. First John 1:7 says, "If we walk in the light, as he (Jesus) is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin."

Here are some practical tips to help your group be real:

1. *Be the example.* If you want your group to live transparent lives with one another, you must pave the way. No matter what type of day you're having, tell your group about it. If you never pick up a mask to cover your sins or struggles, you will be giving them permission to be real about their own.
2. *Let them see your weaknesses.* Never allow your group to think you're perfect. That sets up an unfair expectation.
3. *Allow you group to see you being real with God through prayer.* For a greater understanding of our freedom to express our emotions to God, read through the Psalms.
4. *When you sense someone being real with your group, thank them for it.* It takes courage to be real!
5. *Ask great follow-up questions.* When group members request prayer, ask them how they want you to pray. If group members state their perspective on a topic or question, ask them to explain their point of view more.

Following Up

Let's follow up on that last point: follow-up questions. They are a great way to help your group members open up and apply what they're learning through your group. In small groups, it's crucial to ask the right questions. This begins with the discussion questions from whatever material we're studying, but we shouldn't stop there. Those questions are designed to stimulate conversation, but once the conversation begins, we must keep things flowing.

We can do this by asking great follow-up questions. A great follow-up question places people in a position to conform their lives more to Christ, and prevents a group from staying on the surface level in their walks with God. Follow-up questions give the needed details that offer explanations for our answers. These can come during our group discussions, casual conversations, or while sharing prayer requests.

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For example, Jillian was in a difficult season of her life. Every week, her prayer request seemed to be the same as before. She would simply say, "Please pray for me at work. I have a lot of stress." Her leaders recognized that Jillian was keeping things on the surface level. So they asked great follow-up questions. "What is the source of your stress?" This opened a door for Jillian to provide more details. Then she simply said, "Pray for me." Her leaders then asked, "How would you like us to pray?" By asking those simple follow-up questions, Jillian was able to open up more with her group. Her eyes were also opened to the source of her stress and she included the group in praying for specific things.

Here are some tips to help you begin asking great follow-up questions:

1. *Request an explanation for an answer.* This will help provide more details and background for a given answer.
2. *Ask open-ended questions.* An open question requires more details, while a closed-ended question simply requires a "yes or no" answer.
 - a. Open question: What is your method of getting to work?
 - b. Closed question: Do you drive to work?
3. *Practice makes perfect.* Find a friend or family member to practice on. Simply ask them a question and go from there. Remember that follow-up questions provide more details.
4. *Create the expectation for your group's discussion.* Once you use follow-up questions with your group, they will catch on quickly. Soon they will learn that it's important to provide details to their answers and prayer requests. Eventually, you'll ask fewer follow-up questions because your group will begin giving more details beforehand!

—SETH WIDNER is Family Pastor of The Journey Church in Fernandina Beach, Florida. Copyright 2010 by the author and Christianity Today. Used with permission.

Discuss

1. Is your group more knowledge-based or sharing-based? Was this an intentional decision? Why or why not?
2. Do group members feel permission to be real in your group? Why or why not?
3. What follow-up questions might you ask to get members to go deeper during prayer time?

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Measuring Spiritual Growth

Using objectives and doorposts

By Alan Danielson

There's an old saying in business: "Measured performance is improved performance." It also appears to be true of ministry. Absolutely nothing in my 20-plus years of church experience has ever proven this statement wrong. In church we measure what's important to us. Even churches that don't measure attendance measure the weekly offering! It comes down to this: when we want to improve something, we measure it. Then we can track improvement and know when we've reached our goals. Measurable goals are simple when tracking tangible things like attendance and offerings, but how do we effectively measure spiritual growth?

For decades churches have tried to measure the spiritual growth of parishioners by having people complete courses, studies, classes, and curricula. As such, we've helped people acquire certificates, degrees, and accolades. Why have we done this? Because processes and participation are easy to measure. And these numbers allow us to monitor progress and tell us if people are on the right trajectory. Right?

Sadly, we just don't see enough evidence that this approach has really produced disciples. The problem is that curricula and classes don't necessarily produce disciples; rather, they produce knowledge. While disciples should continue to grow in knowledge, growth in knowledge does not mean the person is a disciple—the Pharisees are all the proof we need. So, tracking discipleship by class participation and completion is just not enough.

Furthermore, this approach to discipleship has produced a lot of church elitism. By accumulating accolades, we've given people the sense that they've arrived, something no disciple should feel. Once people have completed the outlined courses and received the certificates, it's easy for them to feel like they're "done." But sanctification isn't complete until we arrive in heaven, so our earthly efforts at discipleship should never make people feel like they've arrived. This was another problem with the Pharisees.

In reaction to this, many of us in church leadership tried something different. Rather than tracking class participation, we set up ongoing small groups. Then we started tracking the number of groups and participants. Since tracking knowledge didn't work, we began tracking relationships. We felt that disciples were being made when people "stuck" to a group.

This approach has failed to produce consistent, ongoing life-change on a large scale, though. And perhaps we were silly to believe it could. If Christian relationships were truly enough to produce disciples, why didn't it work for Judas? He had a three-year, face-to-face relationship with Jesus, yet Judas still fell away. Relationships just aren't enough. If they were, everyone who has been connected to church for a while would be extremely Christlike. But we've all known people who go to church regularly yet are enormously rude, selfish, negative, bitter, and just plain mean. Relationships with other Christians are certainly a good thing, and they definitely contribute to discipleship, but measuring relationships still misses the mark.

So what should we measure? How do we, as church leaders, create pathways that lead people to genuine life change without puffing them up, burning them out, and aiming them in the wrong direction? I'll answer this question by focusing on two types of measurables: objectives and doorposts.

Objectives

When I say "objectives" I mean the "front end" of spiritual development. Objectives are easy-to-measure goals that embody what we would like people to aim for and accomplish. Objectives give us an idea of where disciples are going. The measurables I addressed earlier, like group and class attendance, certainly fit under the umbrella of objectives. When determining what objectives you would like to measure, be sure to incorporate the following principles.

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Spiritual growth objectives should be holistic. Spiritual growth is so much more than church attendance, group attendance, and Bible study. Spiritual growth goals should encompass the life of a disciple rather than just one or two aspects of a disciple's life. For example, *Financial Peace University* (FPU) is a great discipleship tool. FPU is a class that teaches biblical personal finance. Through Dave Ramsey's teachings, we can measure the number of people in our church who are learning how to conquer debt, live on a budget, plan for the future, and become generous givers. However, if FPU were our only discipleship tool, it would not be enough. We must create discipleship plans that address *many* aspects of people's lives.

Craig Groeschel, the senior pastor of Edmond, Oklahoma's LifeChurch.tv wrote a book called *Chazown*. In it he breaks down discipleship into five key areas: physical life, relationships with people, relationship with God, work life, and financial life. I love the way pastor Groeschel thinks about spiritual growth: it's all-encompassing. You can't grow to wholeness in Christ by being a good steward yet still being a negative, bitter, complainer or by being a good friend yet a lazy employee. Holistic thinking in spiritual growth is key.

Small-group leaders should continually remind group members that becoming like Christ is an all-encompassing endeavor. A great way to do this is to embrace a more holistic approach to group life. Don't just study the Bible and pray together. These are essential practices, but they don't cover other aspects of spiritual growth. Do mission projects together. Eat healthy foods together. Exercise together. Play together. Spend time with one another's families. Hold one another financially accountable. This may sound like a lot, but it's really not. Don't try to do it all in a month, but plan to do these things together over the long haul. The point here is simple: people learn best by doing. *Do* spiritual growth together rather than just talking and praying about it.

Spiritual growth objectives should be realistic. The goals you set for people should fit into real life. To help those you lead establish realistic objectives, teach people how to weave their spiritual growth objectives into their daily lives so the objectives aren't perceived as a burden. You may also need to ask them to replace other habits or activities with the new objectives. We often burn out people spiritually by heaping more and more on them. Instead, we should only ask people to add on if they subtract something.

Small-group leaders can help members create realistic spiritual growth goals by making "stop doing lists." Ask group members what growth goals they'd like to accomplish. Then challenge them to look at their lives and decide what they need to stop doing in order to make room for their goals. Group leaders can best lead this activity by creating their own stop doing lists and openly sharing them. Group leaders also should be willing to have the group hold them accountable.

Spiritual growth objectives should be systematic. I heard Andy Stanley say, "Systems create behaviors," and that statement has stuck with me. If I want to lead people to adopt certain behaviors, I must create systems that lead them to those behaviors. For example, asking a disciple to read the entire Bible in a year is a nice goal. However, it's an objective that is doomed to fail without a system of support. Giving the same person a version of *The One Year Bible* or pointing them to YouVersion.com and asking them to read the Bible in a year gives them the goal and the system to achieve it.

You could also hold one another accountable to your goals by checking in about your goals each week at your meetings and sending reminder e-mails or texts throughout the week. For example, if your group decides they all want to read the Bible every day for 40 days, send the entire group a text at 7:00 a.m. each day for the 40 days.

It's likely that your group members will have different spiritual growth goals, so teach them to leverage their own systems. Remind group members that their smart phones and computers can be programmed with reminders for pretty much everything. The point here is to get people thinking not only about behaviors but also about systems that motivate behaviors.

The bottom line is this: you measure what you think is important, so create systems to promote and increase those measurements. One of the best ways to create these systems is leveraging what I call "doorposts."

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Doorposts

Objectives represent the "front end" of spiritual development. Doorposts, on the other hand, represent the hindsight of spiritual development. They are the points we refer back to in order to tell others, and remind ourselves, how God has changed us.

The term "doorposts" comes from the Hebrew word *mezuzah*. In Deuteronomy 6:9 God commanded Israel to attach his commands to the doorposts of their homes. The point of hanging the commands on the doorposts was to remind God's people of what he had done for them and what he expected of them. In today's busy world, we need reminders like this more than ever.

A doorpost is different from an objective because an objective has a definitive end. A few years ago I reached a milestone when I finished a marathon. By training for the marathon I lost a lot of weight and was in the best shape of my life. The marathon was an objective: an achievable goal. Once it was achieved, I was done.

A mezuzah or doorpost is not something that is achievable; rather, it is something that reminds us of a previous achievement. Like a literal doorpost in your home, this figurative doorpost is something you encounter every day that regularly reminds you of what was while simultaneously inspiring you with what could be.

Right now the certificate stating that I finished the marathon and a photo of my thinner self are tucked away in a drawer. They aren't doing me much good there. But if I were to frame the certificate and photo and hang it in my office, they would serve as a powerful and motivating doorpost. An even better motivator would be getting an identical empty frame and hanging it next to the first one. The first frame would remind me of what was, while the second would remind me of what can be.

What if our lives were full of spiritual doorposts? How might the people you lead be different if they were surrounded by reminders of previous spiritual growth achievements while simultaneously being inspired to go even further? Here are some principles that will help you create effective doorposts for your spiritual growth goals.

Spiritual growth doorposts should be visible. Spiritual growth doorposts do not belong in a box, drawer, file cabinet, or computer spreadsheet; they belong out in the open where they can be seen. At our church, we ask families to complete a course called Family ID. In it, families write their family vision or mission statement, identify their core values, and create plans to live them out. After going through the course, we create doorposts by having those families put their handprints on canvases that are hung in our building so families are reminded of their unique Family IDs every time they walk into the building.

Spiritual growth doorposts should be emotional. By this I mean that doorposts should evoke an emotional response. When people complete *Financial Peace University* at our church, we put their chopped up credit cards in jars that we display in the lobby. When they see the jars, they are emotionally reminded of how good it felt to cut up the cards. Additionally, they are continually reminded that they don't ever want to go back to the world of financial bondage.

Spiritual growth doorposts should be inspiring. This is slightly different than the previous principle in that doorposts should inspire those who have not yet completed the spiritual growth objectives. When people who haven't gone through Family ID see the handprints in our building and read the short explanation hanging next to the canvases, they are inspired to go through Family ID themselves.

Spiritual growth doorposts should tell stories. We'll occasionally feature a video in church about a person or family who has reached a spiritual growth objective. This video serves as a doorpost because it is visible, it evokes emotion, and it inspires. Most importantly, though, the video tells a story. Human beings process and assimilate information best through stories. In this sense, the entire Bible is one big doorpost. It tells stories of faith, triumph, failure, hope, growth, and love. These stories motivate us to grow in our faith. Whatever doorposts you decide to implement in your church, be sure to tell stories about them.

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Final Thoughts

Leveraging objectives and doorposts will help you move people in the right direction spiritually. The more you consider and implement the principles mentioned above, the more effective your discipleship methods will be. However, no matter what spiritual growth plans you put into place, never forget the following four things.

The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is responsible for drawing people to faith in Christ. The same Holy Spirit is also responsible for drawing people closer to Christ after they've become Christians. Church leaders sometimes feel like we are responsible for discipleship. Nothing could be further from the truth. We are not responsible for discipleship; the Holy Spirit is. At most, we are responsible for fostering environments and opportunities for the Holy Spirit to work. Don't ever think that by creating objectives and doorposts your people will automatically become spiritually mature believers. Objectives and doorposts are environmental tools for the Holy Spirit.

The Slow Cooker Principle

In our fast paced, high tech culture we desire microwavable spiritual growth. Growing to be like Jesus is not a microwaveable process though; it's a life-long process. In fact, discipleship is more like a slow cooker. It takes time for people to mature spiritually. Don't ever think that your spiritual growth objectives and doorposts will quickly create disciples. They won't. Over time, however, in conjunction with the Spirit's work, they will help facilitate powerful and lasting change.

Measure the Right Things

Keep track of your objectives, but more importantly, measure your doorposts. The more doorposts you have on display, the more people will be inspired to grow.

Think Before You Toss

While you have learned some new ideas about measuring spiritual growth, don't just take your current systems and throw them out. Consider how your current systems can be an effective part of measuring life-change. Just because a current system hasn't yet given you the results you want doesn't mean it's intrinsically bad. Pray about how your church can best implement objectives and doorposts—even within your current systems.

—ALAN DANIELSON is the Senior Pastor of New Life Bible Church in Norman, Oklahoma; copyright 2012 Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What spiritual growth objectives do you have? When would you like to complete them?
2. How can you help group members develop their own spiritual growth objectives?
3. What can serve as doorposts to remind group members all God has done in and through your group?

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Hand-Crafted Application Questions

Make sure your material fits your group members.

By Rick Lowry

I've been leading small groups for about 40 years. When I began back in the 70s, not many printed materials existed for groups. Most of what was available was fact-oriented: "To whom was Jesus speaking when he said, 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men?'"

Today, we've moved way beyond "just the Bible facts" to an era of application. Group members have come to expect an answer to the question, "What do I need to do about this over the next week?" as a normal part of any Bible study. These days I have a wide range of application-oriented study guides to choose from. No small-group leaders in the history of the church have had better tools available, and everything comes as quickly as the touch of a computer mouse or a smart phone.

But even though I have many studies to choose from, when it comes to the very special people in my own small group, I find that I often need to think of application questions that suit their specific needs and current life situations. Use the following guidelines to create effective application questions tailored specifically for the needs of your group.

Think F.O.R.M.

The most effective application questions include things that almost everybody is interested in and have in common with others. The acronym F.O.R.M. is a good place to start as you prepare for the application section of your lesson:

- *Family.* Most people like to talk about their family. It might be their immediate family, their extended family, their adopted family, or their church family. Here are some examples:
 - How can we act on the guideline Paul gives us here to "serve one another in love" when it comes to our spouses and children?
 - This passage says for husbands to "love your wives as Christ loved the church." Are there any men here who can give some everyday examples of situations where husbands can act on this? (And if you really want to have fun, let wives offer their ideas when the husbands are done!)
 - As members of a church family, how can we "bear one another's burdens"?
- *Occupation.* Since our jobs are where we spend most of our time, we are always looking for ways to live out our faith at work. Think of questions like these:
 - How do Paul's instructions to slaves relate to the modern-day workplace?
 - What attitudes does Joseph model for us as a worker under the supervision of his masters/bosses?
 - Can you think of a work situation where we can practice Paul's challenge: "Don't take revenge, but leave room for God's wrath"?
- *Religion.* Using application questions about our faith helps keep the study moving in a spiritual direction. Here are some examples:
 - Ephesians says that we have "access" to God. Let's have some volunteers talk about how they thought about God when they were growing up.
 - This passage in Acts 8 tells about a man who was baptized. How does his baptism experience parallel yours? How is it different?
 - James says that pure religion is visiting orphan and widows in their distress. What are some of the viewpoints about "pure" religion that people embrace today? How do they differ from the ideal James suggests?
- *Motivation.* If you have been leading your group for a while, you have begun to know the heart of each group member. What is it that really motivates them? What is the thing that gets their adrenaline going?

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- Tom, you enjoy sports and athletic activities. What do you think of when Paul tells us to "run in such a way as to get the prize"?
- I know that many of you have a real burden for the poor. Tell us what you think this group might do to apply what Jesus says here about the sheep and the goats.

Help People Tell Their Stories

Application becomes action when people can see how to live out this passage in their daily lives.

- Can anyone think of a time when God called you to "sell your possessions and give to the poor"?
- Has God ever led you to talk to an unlikely person about Christ? Did you resist?

Combine Application and Accountability

It's easy to talk about "how this passage might be lived out," but it's much harder to declare what I am going to do this week to live it out. Actions speak louder than words.

For example, it's not very helpful to say: "I hope everyone is reading through the Bible this year." But you can gain a lot more traction in terms of application with: "We've all said we plan to read through the Bible this year. How about if I make it a weekly question in our meeting to ask how everyone is progressing with their Bible reading?"

Also, don't be afraid to incorporate accountability into a discussion about specific temptations and sins. "This passage says not to get drunk on wine but to be filled with the Spirit. If anyone here is struggling with an addiction that you'd like us to pray about, now would be a good time."

Be Specific

Try to avoid vague or general questions like, "How can Christians today pray without ceasing?" A better option would be: "What step could we take this week to live in a spirit of prayer in our daily lives?"

Don't Be Afraid to Ask the Hard Questions

People rise to challenges. So try to avoid application questions and activities that are "milk and toast" (Hebrews 5). Things like: "Paul says we should be servants; what if we all sign up to be greeters and take up the offering at worship?" Instead, go for the meat: "What's a way this week that I could serve a person I don't really like?"

The same is true for allowing jargon and "church phrases" to keep us from getting our hands dirty. Avoid a question like: "How can people be more committed to Christ?" On the other hand, this is a challenge: "Jesus says here in Luke that in order to follow him we have to give up everything we have. What specifically would you have to give up in order to truly follow Jesus?"

Be Sensitive to Teachable Moments

It's important that you prepare well as a leader, and I recommend you have several key application questions written into your lesson. But be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit as the discussion progresses. It's okay to create application questions on the fly as you sense what God is doing in each person's heart during the meeting.

Begin with the Bible

Application is important, but make sure it's based on solid Bible teaching. In a small group, we start with the Bible, and then take action in daily life based on the truth of Scripture that we have learned. Application without Scripture is also milk without meat.

—RICK LOWRY is the Small Groups Pastor at Crossroads Christian Church in Newburgh, Indiana; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How many application questions do you usually ask in your meetings?
2. How might you ask application questions that are specific to your group?
3. What application questions might you ask that require group members to think rather than answer with easy answers?

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Corporate Spiritual Disciplines: The Basics

Are you open to something new in your small group?

By Trevor Lee

Nothing really good happens without hard work. It takes months of sweating to lose a few pounds. Friendships are forged through consistent interaction over years. A solid reputation is built over a lifetime. All of these take intentionality and determination to build and maintain.

Our spiritual lives are no different. A living, growing, dynamic relationship with God through the Holy Spirit requires consistency and determination. James 4:8 says, "Come near to God and he will come near to you." That sounds nice, but without some intentionality it's easy to go long periods of time without drawing near to him. That's why spiritual disciplines are essential to our spiritual development. Like a workout routine for getting in physical shape, the disciplines can keep us moving in the right direction with God even on the days we don't feel like it.

Spiritual disciplines are many times done alone, but there is no reason they need to be. In fact, adding some corporate spiritual disciplines to your small group can help ensure that your time together brings everyone nearer to God.

Before taking a look at some specific spiritual disciplines, how about a quick refresher on spiritual disciplines in general?

What Are Spiritual Disciplines?

Spiritual disciplines are a common concept in Christianity, but that doesn't mean everyone has great clarity on what they are and what they're good for. In his classic work *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster says that spiritual disciplines are the things that open the way for God to do the inner transformation he wants to do. The disciplines do not transform us—God transforms us by his Spirit—but the disciplines prepare us for that transformation.

One important spiritual discipline is studying Scripture. Right now I begin each morning by reading a chapter from Psalms, one from Mark, and one from Romans. Well, many mornings anyway—I'm far from perfectly disciplined when it comes to the disciplines! I don't put pressure on myself to have a life-changing insight each day; I just try to have an open heart to whatever God might want to point out.

One day I was reading Psalm 9, and I came across this verse: "I will tell of all your wonderful deeds." It was like the Holy Spirit hit me over the head! I spent some time in prayer and realized I don't often declare the great things God does for my family, my friends, or our church. I often bring requests before God, but I regularly fail to point out all the great ways he is working in the world. This has challenged me to be disciplined about declaring God's wonderful deeds. The challenge came because of the discipline of reading Scripture.

This is often how the disciplines work. You don't know when or how, but God will use them to draw you nearer to him and his purposes for you. Understood in a very broad way, spiritual disciplines can be almost anything that helps open us to the work the Spirit wants to do in us. Some of the traditional spiritual disciplines are meditation, prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, and service.

Benefits of Corporate Spiritual Disciplines

No need to complicate the difference between individual and corporate spiritual disciplines—they are either practiced alone or in community. It's as simple as that! There are some disciplines that are better suited to an individual or corporate expression, but there aren't any that must be practiced one way or the other. That being

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said, Richard Foster lists four disciplines that are especially well-suited to corporate expression: confession, worship, guidance, and celebration.

Adding some corporate disciplines to your small group can pay huge dividends. Agreeing to practice disciplines together helps guard against a stagnant group. Small groups too often settle into a relational routine that doesn't challenge people to grow spiritually. Corporate disciplines will provide a consistent challenge. Spending time with others, going through a lesson, and praying together can become pretty comfortable. But when you add in guidance, worship, or even confession it will be more difficult to settle in.

This is important because we don't grow as much if we're not being stretched. Whatever discomfort comes along with practicing corporate disciplines will be worth it because of the increased potential for spiritual growth in your group.

Try This!

Here are a few examples to help you get started with practicing spiritual disciplines together:

Celebration: Have a Party! Next time God does something worth celebrating, don't let it pass quietly. Whether it's healing, provision of a job, or an answer to something your group has prayed about for a long time, take the opportunity to throw a party.

Unfortunately, celebration often isn't a strong point in Christian circles. We might say thank you to God, but we seldom go all out and throw a party when God acts. Remember what happened in the story of the prodigal son when the lost son returned home? The father spared no expense celebrating. So next time God does something worth celebrating in your group, instead of just saying thank you in a prayer, take a whole gathering and throw a great party to celebrate. Have someone bake a special treat or go out to dinner together. Invite family and friends to celebrate with you.

An important part of making this happen is being aware of what God is doing. If you don't already do this, adopt the discipline of having time during your group gathering to share the things people have seen God do since the last gathering.

Guidance: Seeking God Together. Often when someone brings a concern or decision to other group members, the group prays about it and then hopes God leads the individual facing the situation. A great alternative is to commit to discernment as a group.

Depending on how quickly the situation needs to be resolved or the decision needs to be made, take a few weeks to pray together for God's guidance and direction. Then share with each other what God seems to be saying. For example, if Mary is trying to decide how best to help her elderly mother, the group can devote themselves to pray about the issue both during and outside of group meetings. Group members can pray and then listen for God's wisdom in the situation. At the next group meeting, group members (including Mary) can share what they feel God's wisdom may be in the situation. The group should then devote more time to praying about the situation and for Mary during the meeting. Many people approaching God's throne about this issue is powerful. Together, they can discern what Mary should do and support her throughout the decision process.

Confession: Opening up. "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other that you may be healed" (James 5:16).

My first reaction to confessing sin in a small group is: "Yeah right!" This is the most intimidating discipline to practice in a small group, but it is also the most powerful. We fear that confessing our sin will make people think less of us and leave us embarrassed. But mutual confession has a way of binding us to each other because it is such an intimate practice. Confessing sin to others can also help stop the power of sin in our lives.

One way to incorporate this discipline is in your prayer time. Encourage people who would like to confess to say, "God, I confess to you and these friends . . ." Follow this time of confession with specific prayer for any people who take the bold step of confessing something. Be warned, it's very likely this will only work if you're

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willing to lead the way by confessing first. Even if no one confesses something for a few weeks, stick with it. After all, it's called a discipline.

Brainstorm More Ideas

Some disciplines will work for your small group and others won't. A great way to get started with this is to take some time to explain spiritual disciplines to your group and then brainstorm some ideas together. This gives the group members a personal investment in the things you're trying. Then try things and feel free to move on if the things you try aren't helpful, just don't drop them because they aren't easy—good things seldom are.

—TREVOR LEE is pastor of Mountair Christian Church in Lakewood, Colorado; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today.

Discuss:

1. What's your initial reaction to incorporating spiritual disciplines into your group meeting?
2. What fears or concerns do you have about practicing spiritual disciplines as a group?
3. How might practicing spiritual disciplines together benefit each individual in your group as well as the group as a whole?

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Further Exploration

Websites and books to help keep your group growing

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

- [Corporate Spiritual Disciplines for Small Groups](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Do You Lead a Life-Changing Small Group?](#) (Assessment Pack)
- [Empowering Group Members](#) (Training Theme)
- [Healthy Boundaries for Small Groups](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Improving Small-Group Accountability](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Making Small Groups Fun!](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Meaningful Application in Groups](#) (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.

[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).

[How People Grow: What the Bible Reveals About Personal Growth](#) by Henry Cloud and John Townsend. Age-old keys to growth from Scripture to help people resolve issues of relationships, maturity, emotional problems, and overall spiritual growth (Zondervan, 2004; ISBN 978-0310257370).

[Spiritual Maturity: Principles of Spiritual Growth for Every Believer](#) by J. Oswald Sanders. As we embrace God's providence, hardship, and more, we can move from infancy toward the fruitful maturity we were created to enjoy (Moody Publishers, 2007; ISBN 978-0802482525).

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Retreat Plan

How to create a one-day retreat on the theme of "Growing Small Groups"

SMALLGROUPS.COM training themes expand easily into one-day (or even weekend) training events. Here is a sample schedule you may follow for the theme of growing small groups. The purpose of this event is to give your leaders the tools they need to cultivate spiritual growth in their groups.

Morning

- ♦ 9:00–10:15 A.M. **Opening Session:** Hand out copies of "The Difficult Work of Spiritual Growth" and allow time for leaders to read the devotional and answer the questions. Then have leaders split into groups of three to five for discussion. At 9:30, hand out "Are Group Members Experiencing Life Change?" and have leaders complete the assessment. Then allow leaders to discuss the results in their groups.
- ♦ 10:15–11:15 A.M. **Case Study:** Divide leaders into groups of three to five. Give half the groups copies of "Prayer Requests for Authentic Change," and the other half copies of "Embracing Tangents." Have groups read the case studies and answer the questions together. With 20 minutes left, reconvene to have groups share their insights into the case studies.
- ♦ 11:15–12:00. **Activity:** Do a fun activity together to give everyone a bit of a break from pure discussion. One idea is to form three teams: one with just one member, one with two members, and one with three members. Give each group an identical puzzle (20–50 pieces) and ask them to put it together. Afterward, discuss who finished first and why. Talk about the benefits of teamwork and the potential struggles of teamwork. Then talk through the importance of teamwork in spiritual growth. For more ideas, be sure to see our [icebreakers](#).
- ♦ 12:00–1:00 P.M. **Lunch**

Afternoon

- ♦ 1:00–2:30 P.M. **Second Session:** Pass out copies of "A Small-Group Leader's Most Important Job." Allow time for leaders to read through the article and answer the questions. Allow 15 to 20 minutes of prayer for group members. Then have leaders divide into groups of three to five and read "Creating a Community of Care" together and talk about the implications of the two articles for their groups.
- ♦ 2:30–3:00 P.M. **Stretch Break.**
- ♦ 3–4:30 P.M. **Final Session:** Pass out copies of "Permission to Be Real" and "Hand-Crafted Application Questions." Have leaders read the articles and answer the questions. Then have leaders divide into groups of three to five and discuss how they can better focus on application in their groups. For the last 30 minutes, reconvene as a large group and have leaders share their insights.

You can create similar retreat plans for any of the other SMALLGROUPS.COM themes. Simply determine what you want to accomplish and select the handouts that support your objectives.