

From Ho-hum Small Groups to Life-Changing Relationships

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We're wired for small groups. So how can we take them from bastions of boredom and obligatory spiritual growth activity to exciting opportunities to develop true, intentional, spiritual friendships? Here are four ways to get out of a rut.



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Think about a group of close friends you've had in the past. What was it like? I bet you had a lot of fun. Maybe you rode bikes and played stickball with your friends in grade school. Or you went on road trips with your college buddies.

You know one thing you probably *didn't* do? Sit around in a circle asking each other scripted questions about your “high-risk areas.”

This is the problem with many men’s small groups—and why you may not be drawn to one yourself. Most men’s groups consist of a variation of this standard agenda: talk about your week in five minutes or less; discuss a book or Bible study; pray. “See ya next time!”

This may challenge your mind, but it’s not likely to challenge your soul at a deeper level. Why? Doing a study with some guys for an hour every week or two builds acquaintances, not friends—and [certainly not brothers](#).

Why small groups?

Small groups are where it’s at for men. Seriously. Whether it’s a baseball team, video gamer group, high school musical cast, fraternity, or business networking group, we are naturally drawn to do things in small groups.

Small groups allow us to focus on shared interests, work together for a common goal, be a part of a community that cares for each other, and even practice self-sacrifice for the good of another person or of the group. Truly, we are wired for this.

So how can we rescue Christian men’s small groups from becoming bastions of boredom and obligatory spiritual growth activity and reshape them as an exciting opportunity to develop true, *intentional, spiritual friendships*?

If your small group is stuck in a rut, here are four things to add in:

1) Get shoulder to shoulder.

Men are more likely to build relationships **doing** things together than they are sitting around for a book club. Former Navigator staff Geoff Gorsuch has said, “Women bond face-to-face in shared conversation. Men bond **shoulder-to-shoulder** in shared responsibility.”

For me, almost all of my fondest memories of being with my brothers are activity-based. Learning to shoot a gun, white water rafting, sitting around a campfire, building a deck. These were all precursors to meaningful conversations.

So look for opportunities to spend time *doing* things. The activity doesn't have to be "spiritual." The goal is to build relationships where you build trust and unity. Which brings us to...

2) Let your guard down.

Most of us walk around with a mask of some kind on. Social media has exacerbated this phenomenon by prompting us to show only the high points in our lives.

When we interact personally, we often fall into the attitude of "everything's fine." It's fake and soulless. And the relationships built around these kinds of interactions are powerless.

One of the benefits of shared activity is that it tires you out. Tired men who have been together in shared activity have built up an unspoken trust. Fatigue and trust together can result in an openness that gets below the surface, past the niceties. Without the energy to keep your guard up, you're more likely to get to the blood and guts of your life. Or in other words...

3) Engage your heart.

In today's culture, our heads are engaged constantly. We live in a "culture of thinking" that values intellect and reasoning above all else.

Go into a church and you'll see this reflected. Sermons, classes, and studies are all designed to help us learn by developing our intellect.

But we don't just want to *learn*; we want to *grow*. We don't just want facts; we want our lives to change. To spark true spiritual growth, your heart has to be changed.

Be purposeful about engaging other men at the heart level as well. What makes you emotional? What gets you fired up, teared up, or riled up? These are the times when we change the most—painful times, difficult times, or even exciting times.

And these times are best experienced in community with brothers who will cry, laugh, celebrate, or even get a little ticked off right along with you.

4) Go small(er).

Finally, even if you have a small group of guys who are pretty close, within that group it is good for guys to pair up to go even deeper. Many times, these will be two guys who connect and get along super well.

But it can also be an opportunity for an older, more spiritually mature guy to intentionally engage with a younger guy who needs a spiritual father or big brother to speak into his life.

This is where more time studying the Scriptures together, praying, and confronting stumbling blocks or deep hurt can be instrumental in helping a man grow and mature in his faith—and prepare him to do that for someone who is behind him on his spiritual journey in the future.

Small Groups Jesus' Way

Is there a place for small group Bible Study? [Absolutely](#). Small groups are a great place for guys to engage Scripture and teaching, to learn from each other and share struggles, and to grow in faith and in knowledge. A solid small group resource (and we've got a few) will help you learn about the Bible and apply it to common situations.

The challenge is to go beyond a study, not to avoid it.

In Jesus' day, following a rabbi didn't mean meeting him at the synagogues on the Sabbath. It meant, literally, following him around as he walked from town to town, spending hours talking and hanging out together, sharing meals, watching him interact with others. It was hands on training.

Remember, before Jesus taught the disciples very much, they went to a party at a wedding together ([Mark 2](#)). Later, he sent them out in pairs to preach and heal and then come back and give a report ([Mark 6](#)). When they had trouble doing what he taught them to do, such as casting out a demon, they came back to him for help.

If you're bored or frustrated with your small group—or avoiding one altogether—break out of circle time. Catch a movie, go mountain biking, paint a widow's house. Don't just sit there; grab some buddies and *do* something!

And look for that brother who's ahead or behind you in their journey—a man with whom you can lock arms with for a time to share life, go deeper, and grow.

THE BIG IDEA: Small groups that are all head and no heart will quickly become either very comfortable or very boring. Engaging the head, heart, *and* hands—doing things together outside of the group to build the Kingdom—is the way to maximize the potential for brotherhood and life change.

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