

How to Increase Regular Commitment to Small Groups

4 principles we can learn from the early church
Andrew Wheeler

“I can't come tonight—I have to take my daughter to soccer practice.”

“We're out of town this weekend for our son's travelling baseball team.”

“We won't be there next week—we're celebrating our anniversary.”

And so it goes. Week after week, group members miss due to some conflict—and in any conflict, small group seems to lose out. Life happens, conflicts do arise, and small group is not the only priority for our members. But what if we could make our group's time together so valuable, members would schedule other activities around it? What if small group was so important to members, they would turn down conflicting invitations and events? What if small group could move up on our members' lists of priorities? To do so, we must look to the early church.

Faithful to the Word

There is no indication that the early church members had to cajole one another into meeting together. What was their secret? They devoted themselves to the apostles' teachings (Acts 2:42–47). In fact, when an issue arose later regarding the distribution of food among the church's widows, the leaders recognized they needed to address the issue in a way that did not distract from the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:1–4). This faithfulness to the Word pleased the entire group (Acts 6:5), and God blessed their priorities by spreading the Word, growing their numbers, and even converting some of their opponents (Acts 6:7).

Similarly, our small groups need to be faithful to the Word. Believers are called to be committed to the Bible; as a result, the choosing and leading of a good, relevant Bible study encourages commitment to the group. Even recovery and healing groups need to be focused on the Word if any real life-change is to happen. How can a small-group leader help keep the group grounded in the Word?

Keep the studies based on the Bible.

A good inductive study helps group members learn to feed themselves from the Word, but not all studies must be inductive. Many good media-based resources are available. Occasionally reading a book together can add variety, but remember that a steady diet of other people's teachings can reduce the central focus on God's Word and limit the growth of group members in their ability to study the Word on their own.

Focus on becoming and making disciples.

Our small groups must be faithful to Jesus' Great Commission to make disciples, starting with the group members. Our Bible studies need to go beyond imparting information to inducing

transformation (Rom. 12:2). As we learn, we should find ourselves becoming less like the world and more like Jesus. Faithfulness to the group increases radically as the group produces life transformation in its members.

Key Questions:

- How central is the Bible in your small group?
- Are your Bible studies producing transformation in your group members?

Faithful to the Community

The early church devoted themselves to fellowship in several ways, all of which you can incorporate into your group:

They ate together.

We don't emphasize this much today, but it was important to the early church. Not only is eating together one of the four "pillars" of Acts 2:42, but we see it again in verse 46. This repetition tells us the importance of this aspect of fellowship. The act of taking meals together helps to connect people in a disconnected world. Today, many people have never met most of their "friends." Relationships tend to be defined by social media posts—but real relationships require face time. Sharing a meal together allows for relaxed and meaningful conversation that strengthens the loyalty of group members to each other.

They met together.

Publicly in the temple courts, privately in believers' homes—the early church gathered often (Acts 2:46). Their time together was a high priority. It can be easy for us to dismiss this priority, thinking, "Well, they weren't as busy as we are." But most of our busyness is of our own choosing. We tend to gloss over some of the challenges and time constraints that the early church had; we don't have to make our own clothes, raise our own food, or deal with the level of daily life-sustaining activities the first century church did. In the midst of these time-consuming activities, the early church was still faithful in meeting together.

In *Making Room for Life*, Randy Frazee lays out a strong case for replacing much of the mayhem in our lives with a more coherent, life-giving pattern of relationships and activities—a pattern that allows for real connections. These relationships require time together to develop, but they strengthen group members' commitment.

They took care of each other.

"All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need" (Acts 2:44–45). We see the continuing of this pattern in Acts 4:32–37, and again in the taking care of the needy among them through the distribution of food to their widows (Acts 6:1–7). In both the Acts 2 and the Acts 6 narratives, Luke concludes the passage by noting how the church grew.

A popular song from years ago proclaimed, “They will know we are Christians by our love.” But how will they know about that love? John answers this question: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:16–18; see also James 2:14–17).

Eating together, meeting together, and taking care of each other—carried out consistently—will build strong relationships and increase commitment within the group. Obviously, there are challenges. Geographical distance, family activities, seasons of life, and other situations contrive to keep us from building deep, interdependent relationships. As small-group leaders, we must be sensitive to these challenges while still finding ways to raise the value of the group in the eyes of our members.

Key Questions:

- How often does your group take meals together?
- How well do your group members care for each other?

Faithful to the Mission

Prior to the day of Pentecost, Jesus outlined the mission of the church: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The church carried out this mission. Meeting together in the temple courts, they publicly proclaimed the gospel first in Jerusalem (Acts 2:46). As the persecution worsened, the church scattered beyond Jerusalem—first to Samaria (Acts 8) and then to the nations beyond (the rest of Acts). Individuals like Peter, John, Stephen, Philip, and Paul carried out specific evangelistic activities; but beyond this, the church lived out its life in the community in such a way as to gain favor in the eyes of the people (Acts 2:43, 47; 4:21).

Our small groups may not have quite so ambitious a mission. But as part of the body, we’re also part of that mission force. A group having a focus beyond just the group members themselves creates a purpose that inspires commitment.

Key Questions:

- Does your group have a mission statement?
- Do your group members have a sense of purpose both within the group and “beyond the walls”?

Faithful in Prayer

“They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers” (Acts 1:14). Jesus had commanded the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4). They waited in prayer, and God answered powerfully

on the day of Pentecost. From this point, one of the main themes of the book of Acts is God's work in response to prayer:

- Acts 2: God sends the Holy Spirit in power in response to prayer.
- Acts 4:23–31: God again sends the Holy Spirit in power in response to prayer. Throughout the book, God continues to answer prayer that he would perform miracles and enable his servants to speak boldly (verses 29–30; see also Acts 5:12–16, 42).
- Acts 9: God responds to Paul's prayer by sending Ananias to restore his sight and baptize him.
- Acts 10: God answers the prayer of Cornelius by sending Peter to him to share the gospel.
- Acts 12: God responds to the prayers of the gathered group at the house of Mary, the mother of John, also called Mark, by miraculously releasing Peter from prison.
- Acts 13: God answers the prayers of the church at Antioch by sending out Paul and Barnabas as missionaries.

And the story continues throughout the book. Praying together—and seeing God respond to those prayers—was one of the highlights for the early church.

Undoubtedly, the early church prayed for the needs of members as part of how they cared for each other within the community. Most of the recorded prayers in Acts, however, aren't about this—they are focused more on the mission of the church and on God's glory. These effectual fervent prayers energized the church by fixing their attention more vertically than horizontally. Both are important, but the typical prayer time of many of our small groups tends to focus more on the horizontal than on the vertical. As we shift the balance of our prayer times more toward the vertical, we enable our members to more fully experience God's presence—and as the group becomes accustomed to sensing God's presence among them, the level of commitment within the group increases.

Key Questions:

- Does your group pray regularly and effectively together?
- How does your prayer time tend to be focused?

Increasing members' dedication to our small groups is not a matter of "guilting" our members into coming to meetings any more than developing a sense of stewardship in a congregation is a matter of cajoling them at the time of the offering.

Growing the level of dedication in our groups is more a matter of creating a group environment members find valuable enough to make a priority—not just in meeting times, but in caring for each other, upholding each other in prayer, and more. As we devote ourselves to the foundational priorities of the early church, we will create groups that promote life transformation, community, interdependence, and commitment.

—Andrew Wheeler is the author of *Together in Prayer*.

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