

Three Elements of Vibrant Small Groups

What a small group is and isn't

Bill Search

Not many people take a Sunday drive anymore. In fact, I'm not sure if anyone ever really took a Sunday drive. But as a child my father would refer to slow, clueless drivers as Sunday drivers. Sure, they were in a car, heading toward a destination, but they didn't have a clue what the destination was. They were just lollygagging down the road.

A lot of small groups are like Sunday drivers. They might enjoy the journey, but they don't know where they're heading and don't have much motivation to get to their destination in a timely fashion. In an effort to make space for all those Sunday driver small-group leaders, we're willing to call just about anything a small group. It doesn't matter if it's big or small, long-term or short-term, purposeful or purposeless—you can call anything a small group.

What a Small Group Is Not

However, if you want a vibrant, healthy small group you have to be intentional. You have to put some effort into it. You have to know where you're heading and have a plan on how to get there. And, at the most basic level, you have to know what a vibrant small group truly is. I like to start by examining what a vibrant small group *is not*.

Intense Bible Study or Class

If a group simply becomes an information dump or an academic pursuit you will quickly lose the point (and probably lose your members). I loved college. I am one of those weird people who enjoy a good lecture, a challenging book, and writing papers. But when I think back on what I loved most about college, it's people. It's the relationships that stand out 20 years later. If the small-group experience becomes an intense learning space where members are pupils and leaders are lecturers, you will miss the whole idea of community and family that the New Testament writers

paint in vivid detail. Certainly the Bible should be part of the group—but if you develop Bible scholars who know the Word and don't live it, you've simply re-created the very Pharisees and Sadducees that plagued Jesus' ministry.

Social Club

Other small groups swing to the opposite extreme from the intense Bible study. In fact, they are all process and no product. They are so relationally focused they don't accomplish much. They enjoy a good meal together, swap stories, and play games. Sure, it's fun to be part of the social club, but who has the time? In our over-stressed, over-scheduled world most people shed unnecessary responsibilities. And the social club will be the first to go. A good group challenges its members to grow to be like Christ, but the social club doesn't concern itself with that—which is a key reason it's not a healthy small group.

A Group of 12

I'm not sure when it happened but at some point in the last few decades the official number of small-group membership became 12. Perhaps it's because of the popularity of the number 12 in the Bible (12 tribes, 12 disciples ...). If Jesus' team had 12, the reasoning goes, so should ours. Of course, Jesus' team had 13 since he was part of his own team, but that's a technicality. The truth is that you can have a vibrant small group with 3 or 30—it just depends on how you handle discussion time. So don't get hung up on the total group number.

Home-based

I'm a huge fan of small groups meeting in homes. I think it follows the example we see in the New Testament. It's a comfortable place for most people to relax. It reinforces the number one metaphor of the church in the Bible: the family. That said, the Bible does not insist that groups meet in homes. In fact, the Bible clearly teaches that the setting doesn't matter as much as the heart of the people. Homes, classrooms, conference rooms, and coffee shops are all acceptable places to gather.

A Weekly Meeting

Every men's group I lead meets weekly. Other than a few weeks off for holidays or vacations, my group meets. Our relationships run deep, and our commitment is clear. My community group, though, is a different story. We'll meet every week for a month, shift to every other week for a while, or take a few weeks off if necessary. We schedule our gathering around our work, kids, and vacations. Certainly a group that meets infrequently risks losing its identity quickly. We have to work hard to keep up relationships. But we believe that the meeting frequency shouldn't feel like an obligation or chore. At the same time, it shouldn't feel like a capricious, thrown-together meeting designed around the convenience of the group members.

Three Patterns of Vibrant Groups

So what are the core pieces of a healthy group? In my years of experience leading groups and leading small-group ministries, I have identified three core patterns of healthy groups. You can add to this list, but you can't reduce it without harming the group. The three patterns are connecting, changing, and cultivating. You will notice that all three of these words are verbs—simply put, they involve action. They don't *describe* community; they are the *actions* of a vibrant community.

Connecting

The first pattern of a healthy group is the relational pattern. You have to build a relational bridge strong enough to hold the weight of truth. Imagine in your first group meeting the leader reads James 1 and asks each new member to share a trial or temptation they are facing. How would you reply? Would you be 100 percent honest and transparent? I doubt it. If you are like me you might say, "Well, I'm tempted to be too generous. And sometimes I have a short fuse." However, if you know the people in your group and you are comfortable with them, you will likely feel safe enough to share what is really going on in your life.

If you don't build the relationships within the group you won't have a group for long. A few years ago, Gallup conducted research on church health. One of the important factors that contributed to enthusiasm for church was friendship. If you have no friends at church you will likely wander away. If you do have friends—people who call you when you're absent, ask how you are doing spiritually, and encourage you—you will likely have a strong commitment to your church. Likewise, you will have a strong commitment to your small group.

Simple things you can do to develop the connecting pattern in your group:

- Start each meeting with an icebreaker.
- Plan out group meetings at least a month or two in advance so everyone knows when to meet.
- Deal with negative group dynamics (like the person who dominates the conversation in the group).
- Call and e-mail people who miss a meeting.

Changing

The second key pattern of a healthy group is the growth pattern. Some call it edification or sanctification or metamorphoses. Simply put, it's change! A vibrant group helps you change into the person God intends you to be.

In his book *Change or Die*, Alan Deutschman discovered some clues to how people change. His big secret was community! If you want to change you need the right kind of relationships that reinforce the right kind of behavior. This is confirmed by life.

Through much of my middle and high school years I was a champion cussier. I think I received my freshmen letter in creative swearing. It was the '80s, after all, and the era of Eddie Murphy stand-up routines and *Beverly Hills Cop* movies. But the biggest influence was my friends. Most of my friends played on the varsity swearing team, too.

In the summer of 1988, I attended a Youth for Christ conference and was challenged to turn over my life to Christ. In the next few months, I fell into a new crowd—one that told me I really didn't need to swear in order to impress them. In fact, most of my new friends rarely swore. And before too long, my vocabulary improved.

Hearing truth is one part of change. But a community that challenges you and reinforces that change really matters. As Deutshman said in his book, it's hard to eat a salad if all your friends are gorging on wings!

Simple things you can do to develop the changing pattern in your group:

- Study the Bible for application. Answer the question, "So what do we do with this?"
- Invite each member to share areas they are trying to improve and offer accountability.
- Create a judgment-free zone where members can share what's going on without feeling judged by the group (or feeling like a special project).
- Keep the focus on Jesus Christ who gives us the strength to change.

Cultivating

The third key pattern of a vibrant group is the missional pattern. The other two patterns are very exclusive. They focus on the group and the individuals within the group. This pattern is inclusive and focused on others. You might call it service, outreach, mission, or evangelism. I use a farm metaphor. As you cultivate hearts for other people you are turning up the soil in your life (and hopefully in others).

Have you ever noticed that a healthy family reaches out? My wife and I have been blessed with three wonderful children. I love family time around the table. My wife and kids are my favorite people to watch movies with, eat dinner with, and vacation with. I love my family.

In a decade or so, all three of my kids will (hopefully) move out. They'll start careers, get married, or start families of their own. Then my dinner table will just need two chairs. But that is exactly how it should be. If you look at my family right now, you'll notice my beautiful wife and darling kids. But if all three of my children still live with Karyn and me in two decades, you'll think there's something wrong with our family. Family movie night that involves snuggling with my 39-year-old daughter while her 36-year-old sister grooms a doll's hair, and my 32-year-old son plays his Nintendo DS is disturbing! Right now it's cute; 25 years from now, it's gross!

A small group that is only focused on keeping the band together will actually ruin the very thing they are attempting to protect. If you want to have a healthy, vibrant group, you need to have a mission beyond caring for the people in your family room.

Simple things you can do to develop the cultivating pattern in your group:

- Study evangelism and spiritual gifts in the group with the purpose of practicing what you learn.
- Have each person identify at least two non-Christians they are praying for (and ask for a progress report every couple months).
- Adopt a needy part of the world, and learn as much as you can. Pray for the country (or countries) and perhaps support a mission there.
- Serve at least quarterly as a group or encourage every group member to serve regularly.

Wrap Up

Starting a group is easy, but developing a healthy, vibrant group takes effort and intentionality. Guide your group to become a group that is connecting, changing, and cultivating. As you focus on these big patterns of vibrant small groups, the other aspects of small groups will fall into place.

—*Bill Search is author of [Simple Small Groups](#). Copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.*

Discuss:

1. How can you keep small groups from falling into the categories under "What Small Groups Are Not"?
2. Which pattern is most prevalent in your small groups? How can you help groups value the other two?
3. What tools can you use to communicate these patterns to group leaders and coaches?

© 2023 Christianity Today - a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.