

BASIC STRATEGIES FOR CREATING AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

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As a new believer I was often asked to consider joining a small group. I tried a couple and decided they were not for me. One group consisted of a few emotional women who spent most of the group timing crying and complaining. I wasn't good at crying, so I never went back. The second group looked more promising as we gathered for refreshments. That is, until a woman just about impaled me to the wall asking, "so... what is the shape of your soul?" I remember being quite embarrassed, as I didn't know my soul had a shape and was at a loss for words! I felt very threatened with my private personality thinking she had no right to ask me a question like that. This was certainly not a positive experience with a small group.

Now, years later in my spiritual journey, this very question seems appropriate to ask, but only in the stage of small-group growth where relationships and trust have been developed.

Small groups function for different purposes according to the vision of the individual church. Healthy small groups create powerful venues for spiritual growth. It is important for the small-group director to assist leaders in understanding and implementing a few tools. These tools will help create the environment where small-group members are comfortable, open, vulnerable, and accountable as they journey together in their Christian faith. Trust and comfort do not happen immediately. Forcing an environment for self-revelation and truth speaking too early in the group's life will inhibit the natural process of authenticity and often result in group members hiding behind the mask of falsehood.

Here are a few tools that will help create an environment for appropriate disclosure and authenticity in your small group: spiritual storytelling, covenant building, listening skills, asking appropriate questions, and group prayer.

Spiritual Autobiographies

Everyone has a story to tell. Everyone likes to listen to stories! Encouraging and assisting members to share their story paints a picture marked by the presence of God. Each story is different describing the imprint of God in unique ways. Sharing stories early in the life of the group is part of the "getting to know you" process that begins the bonding and building of trusting relationships.

Most small groups are as diverse as the spiritual journeys of those in the group. Hearing a few defining moments, on-going spiritual

growth, yearnings, and goals inform and encourage the group. A spiritual autobiography is not only the testimony of one's conversion, as central as that is to that person's faith, but it is the story of God's presence before personal belief...and God's presence as they travel through life. The spiritual autobiography becomes a chronicle of an individual's pilgrimage in their quest to know and to follow God.

As stories are shared, group members begin to learn and understand more deeply about their forming group. Bonding begins to develop as connections, similarities, doubts, tensions, and perhaps failures surface. Often recognition and connection occur as one listens to another's journey as the spiritual peaks and valleys, dark nights of the soul, and joyous or quiet celebrations are shared. Thoughts of "I'm not alone in my struggles" pepper the minds of the listeners. Knowing some deeper details of each another helps the group understand mind-sets, responses, personalities, and expectations. Authenticity begins to surface, trust starts to develop, and the small group connects in the safe environment of the gathering.

(Check out resources for writing spiritual autobiographies. One perfect suggestion: *Spiritual Storytelling*, Richard Peace, NavPress; 1996.)

Covenant Building

Every small group has a covenant, either it is an assumed covenant, or an intentionally designed covenant. In order to become a healthy small group where authenticity, trust, and appropriate disclosure develop, the group must consider designing a group covenant. What are the expectations of each member? Why have they joined the group? What do they want to see happen in and through the small group experience? These are some of the questions that should be addressed. Verbalizing and notating goals and purposes begin the important process of group ownership. Basically the group decides "what is in and what is out." The covenant becomes the steps the group is willing to take for the growth and edification of the group.

Covenants should be revisited often. Evaluation allows opportunities to make changes in goals, expectations, and group process. As new people join a group, the covenant should be part of the joining process allowing the new member to understand and agree with what the current group has designed. When crisis or conflict occurs, tweaking the covenant might be in order.

Patterns are developed quickly in group life. Therefore, designing the covenant early helps to establish patterns that are healthy. Group leaders should consider topics of intentions, accountability, commitment, personal vulnerability, goals, mission, boundaries, expectations, hopes, and fears.

Active Listening

Calling attention to the skill of listening well helps create a more caring, thoughtful group dynamic. When the leader reviews what active listening really means, group members focus differently on what they are hearing from one another. Often when one person is sharing thoughts, other members are thinking about their response, critiquing what is being said, anxious to “top the story,” or planning how to give the right advice.

Central to effective active listening is the leader’s ability to lead and to facilitate discussion. Early in the stage of group life, questions or comments are directed to the group leader. Knowing how to redirect a conversation to include other group members is critical. Encouraging group members to be thoughtful about responses, to focus on the person sharing, and to hold their thoughts until the appropriate time helps to build an environment of care and authenticity. If members feel they are not being listened to or will always get advice, sharing becomes less truthful.

Suggest group members consider these questions as they actively listen:

- Silent prayer: Ask the Holy Spirit for discernment.
- What did you hear?
- What did you feel while you were listening?
- What might God be showing you through this person?
- What might you want to say to this person concerning God’s leading?
- Is there something you want to speak back to this person for encouragement or for admonishment (when the time is right)?

Asking Appropriate Questions

Recognizing the stage of life development in a small group is important when thinking about the questions a leader might ask the group. Immediately asking a member about the shape of their soul in most cases will create an anxious environment! Often small-

group guidebooks do not include personal sharing questions which are appropriate for the life cycle of the group. But leaders, by knowing their group, have powerful opportunities to ask questions that are safe and appropriate for personal disclosure; questions that will move the group along to higher accountability while maintaining a healthy environment for group vulnerability.

Construct questions yourself (or rephrase suggested questions) that require a personal response; the “so what?” of the particular Scripture study. If questions do not focus on “what will I do differently because I studied this Scripture?” the personal implication is lost and the group stays at a more clichéd sharing level. As the group matures in developing trust and authenticity, more challenging questions for personal disclosure become more comfortable and transforming.

Prayer Guidelines

Prayer allotment and patterns at times become the nemesis of group life. The allotted time for prayer is often consumed by a prayer concern discussion, not allowing proper time for prayer itself. How you as a group desire to use prayer time should be part of your covenant design. Will you include praying for the world, church, neighborhood, friends, or relatives? Or will your prayer time be spent focusing on each member’s individual spiritual journey? From experience over the years, the group that focuses on prayer just for one another develops an incredible sense of accountability, authenticity, and celebration as members notice God working in their lives. Explore different prayer patterns that allow each person to pray often and not one person dominating. Using the ACTS (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication) format, conversational prayer, and prayer partners are worth implementing.

Unless your purpose for gathering as a group is for connection and fellowship only, these are tools that are important to consider as a leader begins a new group. Getting to know one another’s story, designing a covenant, listening attentively, asking appropriate questions, and praying intentionally allow groups to bond faster, develop increasing trust levels, and create accountability and authenticity. When this environment is experienced, members grow spiritually and mature in their Christian faith, which should be at some level, the goal of every group!