

Three Reasons You Need a Small Group, Too

Small-group ministry leaders can't just talk about life in small groups—we need to be experiencing it ourselves.
Carolyn Taketa

If you were around in the mid-1980s, you may recall a television commercial for a hair replacement product with the iconic tag line, “I’m not only the Hair Club President, I’m also a client.” This president delivered this punch line looking serious and holding dramatic “before and after” pictures of his head. Though it was a bit cheesy—and often spoofed by popular culture at the time—his sincere and vulnerable claim gave credibility to his company’s product.

Similarly, we all need to be able to say, “I’m not only the small-group ministry leader, I’m also a small-group member.” Why? First, it lends legitimacy and credibility to your ministry. Second, it’s healthy for your soul. Third, it gives you real-life experiences in real-time—a valuable resource for relating to and training your group leaders.

Credibility for Your Ministry

It’s a critical part of our role as a small-group ministry leader to champion these groups as an important catalyst for spiritual growth. To stand up front and invite people to join a group—while we ourselves are not part of a group—lacks authenticity and credibility. For the sake of integrity, you can’t sell what you don’t want to buy. If you believe what you are professing about the value of biblical community, you will naturally want to engage in a group as a vital part of your relationship with God. As you tell stories of life change from your small group, it will bear witness to others in the congregation—and hopefully prompt them to engage in group life as well.

Some of the reasons you’re not in a group may be valid and may apply for a specific season of life. But overall, the norm for a small-group ministry leader needs to be a personal, meaningful engagement within a group. So let’s work through some reasons why you might be reluctant to join a group, and some options for how you could make it work:

“I don’t feel safe in a small group because they might end up judging me, or gossiping about staff or the church.”

This is a challenging issue because people tend to have explicit or implicit expectations of church leaders. You can, however, prayerfully hand-pick the people in your group and choose those who are more mature and trustworthy. Give yourself permission not to just take random people from the connection process. Instead, specifically invite people whom you would like to grow in relationship with. You could also mix it up at different times of the year. For example, during a fall campaign season of six-to-eight weeks, you can have a more random group, or one populated with potential leaders for future group planting. Then, for the rest of the year, you can meet with a group of people who have the potential to become trusted peer friends.

“My spouse doesn’t want to be in a group.”

We want to be sensitive to our spouses who often make sacrifices for our ministry responsibilities. It would be good to ask what specifically your spouse does not like about being part of a small group. Is it because you typically lead and focus on others, so he or she feels left out or uncomfortable? Is it because he or she will need to clean and host? One pastor’s wife told me how much she does not like hosting and how annoyed she was when her husband volunteered their home without giving thought to the preparations needed. Maybe you could talk together about people you would like to invite into a group, or a mission you’d like to pursue as a group.

Honor your spouse by choosing at least a few people whom your spouse would enjoy getting to know better. You could even consider joining a single gender group at a time that doesn't conflict with family obligations.

“I'm so busy with ministry, I don't want to add another evening obligation to my schedule.”

Yes, life is busy, and we must make wise decisions about what we commit to. Just as we ask people in our congregation to make room for a group, would you take a closer look at your calendar and see if there is something on the schedule that can be moved to make space for a group? Maybe you can meet every other week, or invite the group into something you are already doing. For example, when our kids were young, we would go to a local diner for a simple dinner after Saturday night services. Since we were eating anyway, we invited a couple families to come along and that became our small group. Over time, we added more families and expanded to add Bible study, worship, playdates, and game nights. One key to managing the additional time commitment is to look for people who already overlap into other relational spheres of your life (e.g., work, school, neighborhood, recreation). This increases your points of contact and makes it easier to build friendships.

Healthy for Your Soul

We were created for deep relationships with God and with others. Yet, many of us—even in relational ministries like small groups—lack the close circle of friends who support us, encourage us, serve us, and hold us accountable. We need to let a few trusted people get close enough to see us as we are—to help us know the truth about who we are, who God is, and what he is calling us to become. Every person in vocational ministry needs a safe, relational space where they can step out of the leader/pastor/minister role and just be themselves. As we well know, significant relationships do not develop without intentional investment of time, energy, and vulnerability. We need to be willing to risk letting group members see the “real” person behind the role in humble, appropriate ways.

Sometimes, the people in the group will not let us drop the “role,” and it may become another place where we stay in ministry mode. If that is the case, I encourage you to be clear and set expectations early of what you would like for the group to be for you. I've been in groups where people initially kept turning to me to ask for my “expert” opinion, or joke about how we had to be the “perfect group” because I was in it. I've had to be open, clear, and honest with those groups and say (often more than once) something like this:

Hey, I may lead in this ministry and may know a lot about groups, but I'm here for the same reason you are. I need a safe place where I can voice my fears, struggles, and joys. Just like you, I want a group where God will work in and through each one of us to help us grow more like Jesus. So, please don't ask me about church politics, policies, or the “inside scoop.” I may share prayer requests related to the church, but part of how you can bless me and our church is by giving me a safe, supportive space where I can just be myself.

It has been invaluable for me, our marriage, and our family to meet regularly with people who care about me—not as a staff member, but as a sister in Christ, wife, mom, and friend. Being in a small groups has also provided consistent support for my ministry through prayer, and a confidential space to wrestle through challenging work situations in an appropriate manner. One thing that may be helpful in releasing expectations from yourself and others is to choose not to be the leader of your group. As a ministry point leader, you are probably used to being the leader in the room and comfortable in that role. By not being the designated leader, you may be able to relax more—and enjoy learning to submit to another's authority.

Valuable for Training

There is a huge difference between a travel agent and a travel guide. One makes the reservations and sets you up to take the trip, while the other is alongside you on the trip. Which would you prefer when navigating uncharted paths? When you are personally in a small group, you can adopt the more helpful role of a travel guide who has experienced much of the same issues your leaders are experiencing. For example, when your leaders ask about challenging members (e.g., over-talkers, under-talkers, inconsistent attenders, emotionally draining members), you can empathize because you have experienced them in your group as well. These are not just abstract concepts, but real-time issues to share. You know first-hand the struggles they are facing when they try to get group members to take more ownership, be more evangelistic, do a service project, engage in healthy conflict, or even just show up regularly. Your leaders get to see you “walk the talk,” thereby adding credibility to your coaching, training, and problem solving.

In addition, people in your group can be a thoughtful source of feedback about happenings in your ministry or in the church generally. There is a tendency that the higher up you are in an organization, the more likely you’ll be in an “echo chamber,” disconnected from the perspectives of the typical congregant. It is beneficial to have wise friends share their perceptions and suggestions when needed. For example, when our church was going through a difficult leadership transition, my group shared valid concerns they had about the process. As committed members who wanted God’s best for our church, their feedback was valuable. Wise suggestions and prayer support from trustworthy sources who love you, your ministry, and your church is priceless.

When I first started in vocational ministry, a wise mentor told me, “You can’t give away what you do not possess.” In other words, we minister out of the abundance of our lives with God—our passions, learnings, growth, and experiences. For credibility, health, and effective training, we need to be in a group ourselves, personally experiencing the transforming power of God’s Spirit unleashed in community.

—Carolyn Taketa is the pastor of small groups at Calvary Community Church in Westlake Village, California. She is a former attorney and the current host of Group Talk, a monthly podcast for the Small Group Network.

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