

5 Ways to Motivate People to Join Small Groups

Through participation, we not only meet the needs of others, but also grow in our own spiritual gifts.
Joel Comiskey

Tom recently stopped attending my Wednesday night men's life group, and the group felt his absence. Tom is fun, energetic, and encouraging. I took him out to lunch to dive more deeply into his life, but I also had another question: What could we do to keep him coming back to life group? He said, "Joel, I love the group. I like the flexibility and how we minister to each other. The reality is, I'm tired after working all day fixing air conditioners in the California heat. Most nights, I'd rather relax in front of the television than go to life group."

What could I say to motivate Tom? "Stay home"? "Come when you feel like it"? I could have asked our men's group not to meet weekly, but knowing Tom, he probably would have the same struggles and reasons for not attending. Yes, our group missed Tom when he wasn't there, but Tom also needed the group. God wanted to mold Tom into a stronger disciple of Jesus Christ, and group life would help him in the process.

So how do we motivate people like Tom to remain faithful in our small groups? What about those group members who don't attend regularly? How do we entice them back to fuller participation? Let's start by clearing up two common tactics that *do not* work to motivate people to join and stay involved in small groups.

Hammering on "Shoulds"

It does not work to tell people they *should* be in a small group. We are all inundated with *shoulds*. Many of them come from Satan and his demons. Some come from family or work. So when the group coordinator shares another *should*, the overworked person in the pews thinks, "No way am I going to add something else to my busy schedule." After all, they feel more obligated to fulfill the *shoulds* closer to home, like marriage, family, work, and friends.

Focusing on Church Growth

I have the privilege of traveling around the world and seeing explosive growth in churches, and I rejoice in what God is doing through small-group ministry. But telling people to join a group because groups will help the church grow in numbers doesn't motivate people. Neither does telling them that you need more small groups to help "close the backdoor." Those who are serving Jesus and making room in their schedules for groups are not going to do so because of church growth goals.

Better Tactics

So what will help move people toward greater commitment to small-group ministry? Here are five things that *do* motivate:

Emphasizing Community

One thing on everyone's mind is how short life is, and how lonely it is when lived alone. It speaks volumes of the ability of small groups to provide real community when you share a testimony of how a group member went through a hard time and was surrounded by small-group members who prayed, loved, and cared.

Nancy would be a perfect candidate to give her testimony. When she first started attending my wife's life group, she was pregnant and single. She faced life alone because her family lived in another city. The life group became a family to her, and they prepared for the baby as though it were their own. They even gave Nancy a baby shower at one of the group meetings. When Nancy went into labor, a group member drove her to the

hospital. Another brought her and the baby home. The group members provided meals for her. Nancy experienced God's unconditional love through the group. In the weeks after the baby was born, Nancy and her baby attended the group, and she received Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior.

If Nancy was too afraid to stand before the congregation on Sunday to testify, a video might be a great vehicle, or she might even give permission for someone else to share her testimony.

There's a good chance that those not attending a group will reconsider their involvement when reflecting on their own busy, lonely lives.

Showing How Needs Are Met

Another need small groups can meet is the need to grow and change. Many people struggle to grow in their Christian lives. Share stories of how people have grown as a result of their time in a small group. Christ's own disciples were molded and shaped in a small group. Rejoice in how someone discovered his or her spiritual gifts, received Jesus, grew closer to Jesus, experienced, healing, or learned how to evangelize through small-group outreach. Let others know what God is doing through small groups to help people grow, and they will be enticed to get involved.

Explaining Why Groups Are Biblical

Although heart-warming testimonies stir people to join groups, emotional reasons alone won't keep them there. Showing up each week requires sacrifice and commitment. So remind people that God wants them to be involved in a small group—it's biblical. When a member knows they are obeying God by being in a small group, the inner-argument turns from I *should* be in a group to I *need* to be in a group. We as believers are people of the Book. We are under the authority of God's inerrant Word, and God's Word has a lot to say about small groups.

Sharing biblical principles works great in the announcements, during coaching meetings, and especially between leaders and members. Just as pastors should remind the church regularly about the biblical foundation for small-group ministry, group leaders should also be bold in reminding members the small-group format is biblical, and worthy of both their time and effort to be involved.

Consider these biblical arguments for small groups:

The church as the family of God.

The image of family is the primary metaphor for life in the New Testament church. God forged the church—his new family—in houses to reflect a close-knit, one-another relationship, where

Making disciples who make disciples (Matt. 28:18–20).

I believe this is the most important biblical reason, as Jesus chose the small-group atmosphere to make disciples, and to help them overcome conflict. Jesus said, "Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples" (John 13:35). The early church fulfilled Christ's small-group strategy as they ministered from house to house.

Helping People Use Their Spiritual Gifts

There's an innate desire in each person to want to understand their place in Christ's body. As members are reminded the best way to discover and use spiritual gifts is in the small group, they will have a new impetus to join one. The reality is that all the spiritual gift passages were written to small-group members (1 Cor. 12–14; Rom. 12; Eph. 4; 1 Pet. 4). In fact, when Paul talks about the parts of the body of Christ and how each person is

intimately needed, he also talks about spiritual gifts. A person's spiritual gift is the key to understanding his or her role in the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12–31).

The more people develop relationships in the context of a group, the better idea they will have concerning their own spiritual giftedness. Spiritual gift tests, while helping believers think through the possibilities, are insufficient in themselves. Gift surveys do provide a glimpse of how to perceive giftedness, but people can project into those self-identifying questionnaires the gifts they *desire* to have, rather than affirming—and developing—the gifts they *actually* have. Once the group becomes comfortable with each other and more knowledgeable about spiritual gifts, the leader can encourage believers to seek confirmation of their gifts from those within the group.

Each person should ask, "What do people confirm in me?" If others notice your capacity to clarify the meaning of Scripture, you may have the gift of teaching. If you love to plan future activities, perhaps you have the gift of administration. Those who love to reach people for Jesus might have the gift of evangelism. Joy, excitement, and fulfillment should accompany the exercise of spiritual gifts. Gifts were given for the edification of the body of Christ—when you edify someone with your gift, others will let you know.

Depending on Prayer

The first and foremost solution to motivating people to be in groups is prayer—a humble, radical crying out to God for help. Only God can motivate people to prioritize group life. Commitment to prayer is the arsenal God has given to his entire body of believers—it's the most important tool God has given the church to make disciples. As we pray, God will break down cultural resistance and help members to live New Testament lifestyles in community with one another.

So what did I say to Tom about his lack of small-group involvement? I told him how much we needed him and how his gift of exhortation was essential to the other members of the group. I also reminded him God wanted him in the group to grow spiritually and to become a more mature Christian. I once again shared with him that the small group is God's way of molding and shaping us to be like him, and that it was worth his while to prioritize it each week. Tom readily agreed and committed himself afresh to group life.

I realize Tom will continue to wrestle with his commitment to group life. But I'm encouraged that as Tom knows how much he is needed and understands more deeply the biblical base for small-group life, he will grow in his faithfulness and fruitfulness.

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