

How to Pursue Spiritual Growth in Small Groups

3 keys to experience lasting life change
Dr. Bill Donahue

The relationship between spiritual growth and small groups is a bit tricky. Ask a small-group leader, “Is spiritual growth *important* to our groups?” and you’ll hear an enthusiastic, “Absolutely!” But follow that with this risky query: “Okay, but is it actually *possible* for real change to happen in our groups?” Many would force the reply, “Of course, it’s possible.” But a hint of doubt would betray their real feelings. Even if it is possible, how do we as leaders work alongside the Holy Spirit to foster that growth?

It’s like asking Cubs fans whether it’s *possible* for the North siderers to win the World Series. The required answer is, “Sure. Next year is going to be the Cubs’ year!” But deep down, they may wonder.

Press further, though, and you’ll reach the question that gnaws at the soul of every small-group leader: “Is spiritual growth actually *happening* in our small groups?” Don’t be surprised if people respond with silence, confusion, shame, or doubt—or all four.

Spiritual Growth Is Communal

It’s hard to foster growth, but the Bible exhorts us in Colossians 1:28 to admonish and teach everyone with all wisdom, “so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.” The Bible is clear on this, giving us over 25 “one another” statements exhorting us to pray for, serve, love, encourage, and comfort one another—just to name a few.

Church leaders remain convinced that people find hope and strength for their journey when they gather regularly with a small community for mutual support and wisdom. Among the many passages that connect spiritual maturity with community life, Ephesians 4:14–16 is exemplary:

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. *From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*

Spiritual growth assessments also confirm what the Bible teaches. The popular REVEAL survey, used by thousands of churches, confirms the essential role of community in spiritual development. Those most committed to Christ (“Christ-centered” in REVEAL terminology) had the highest participation rates in groups and in other forms of community such as spiritual friendships, serving teams, and spiritual mentors. Many said that the small group was still the core component of community life for them, even though they voluntarily participated in other expressions of community.

Even when churches no longer offer official groups or require participation in a group for membership, people “group” anyway, even creating their own. No one committed to walking with Jesus wants to do the Christian life alone.

Yes, intentional community is essential for life change, and it’s clearly taught in the Bible and confirmed with data. But privately we may fearfully wonder, “Can our groups *actually* produce disciples? Can we become radically transformed human beings who are nuts about Jesus, instead of just nuts?”

Spiritual Growth Is for Everyone

Admittedly, we expect spiritual formation success from people like Pastor John Ortberg—certainly *his* group can change. Or if we'd had intensive mentoring from Dallas Willard, it surely would have carried us to the threshold of heaven itself! And is there really any doubt that if Richard Foster and the Renovare team led our group ministry, we'd experience non-stop spiritual growth, 24/7, every week of every year?

That's what too many of us believe—really, we do. For *them* it is possible. But not for *us*. They are transformational titans, but we are spiritual slugs.

But our spiritual heroes are not super saints. Trust me. I've seen Ortberg paralyzed in the pulpit and sweating in a staff meeting. And once I heard him say a really bad word.

What attracts us to our spiritual heroes is that they're pursuing a life of devotion, seeking to make themselves available to the transforming grace of God in every part of their lives. But in this they're neither unique nor specially equipped. Instead, they're doing something focused and intentional. And it's something we can all do. But lasting change requires the partnership and mutual engagement of others in the body of Christ. This is what the church is supposed to do and be.

Todd Hunter, in *Christianity Beyond Belief* puts it this way, regarding the need for a community to practice and proclaim the good news of Jesus to the world: “*We are cooperative friends* with Jesus, living in creative goodness, for the sake of others, in the power of the Holy Spirit” (emphasis mine).

Hunter affirms that it takes a community of friends living in the name of Jesus to change one another and transform the world. Thankfully, there are people throughout the ages who have experienced this kind of life and can serve as our guides. And, apart from a few mystics called to a more solitary, ascetic life of prayer and spirituality, our spiritual ancestors will all tell you that intentional group life—centered on communal living in the way of Jesus—is a major contributor to lasting progress and permanent change.

That is what people called the early church: people of The Way. Not people of the doctrinal statement. Not people of the political party. Not even people of the Book. Long before they were called Christians, they were called The Way. The remarkable love and lifestyle of this group of people was powerful, unique, and transforming.

Spiritual growth is both an opportunity and a possibility for every Christ-follower. And every team, prayer circle, and small group in the church has the potential to become a catalytic, change-oriented community of people in hot pursuit of a new way of life.

Spiritual Growth Takes Effort

But such growth will take effort, something we grace-focused people consider downright heresy when it comes to all things spiritual. I'm not advocating works—I am talking about effort. Go ahead and look up the phrase “make every effort” in the Bible. Peter, Paul, the writer of Hebrews, and Jesus all used it. Why? Because they had given up on grace? No. Just the opposite: Grace makes the effort possible!

The spiritual life takes effort. We don't drift into maturity any more than we drift into physical fitness, or academic excellence, or artistic brilliance. And we don't simply wander into deep, transforming community. Words like *strive*, *labor*, and *effort* are not foreign to the Bible, or to spiritual growth. In fact, they're used often, confirming the need for brothers and sisters to band together so we may “spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24).

In interviews and meetings with Dallas Willard, I often heard him remark, “God is opposed to earning, but not to effort.” The difference is that effort is powered by grace, while earning is fueled by pride. The words of the Bible and the practice of committed believers through the ages bear this out. Becoming a Christ-like community

that changes lives requires vulnerability, honesty, self-awareness, and the willingness to truly be changed by the Spirit and the Scriptures.

I am a big fan of Jean Vanier. In his book *Community and Growth*, Vanier describes what community does to produce change. I have used this quote in several resources because it so dramatically captures the spirit of life change in relationship, and the effort that will be required:

Community is the place where our limitations, our fears and our egoism are revealed to us. We discover our poverty and our weaknesses, our inability to get along with some people, our mental and emotional blocks, our affective or sexual disturbances, our seemingly insatiable desires, our frustrations and jealousies, our hatred and our wish to destroy. While we are alone, we could believe we loved everyone. Now that we are with others, living with them all the time, we realize how incapable we are of loving, how much we denied to others, how closed in on ourselves we are. . . . Community is the place where the power of the ego is revealed and where it is called to die so that people become one body and give much life.

Dying to self and becoming people of The Way will not be easy. We must stand on our identity in Christ, remembering who we really are, and what the gospel is doing in us. We must understand how the Word has the ability to shape us as we commit to the transforming practice of community life.

So indeed we *make every effort*—persisting in prayer, working through conflict, listening with intensity, serving despite weakness, and leading with diligence. In so doing we will not earn God’s favor—we already have that—but we will grow in grace, sharpen our focus, and reap the rewards of faithfulness, as Scripture promises.

Whatever we do, we must not do it alone. In community we will discover what real transformation looks like: ordinary people like you and me, meeting in average small groups, led by reluctant leaders, fueled by the transforming grace of God, and empowered by his Spirit. It’s a messy process, this community thing. And it takes effort. But the church—this ragtag group of spiritual misfits—is called to live in a community of oneness for the sake of others. And I, for one, am continuing to learn more about how to enter this community with honesty, humility, and skill.

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