

Practical Ministry Skills:

Leading Outside the Box



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How to Use This Resource

Take a quick peek here to maximize the content in this training download.

Sometimes routines can be helpful—they help things become second-nature. Other times, routines produce staleness—like when your small group gets a little too comfortable with doing the same thing at each meeting. And when we get too comfortable, we miss out on all the work God wants to do in and through us.

This resource will give tons of practical ways you can mix up your next small-group meeting and help deepen your relationships with one another and with God.

Change Up What You're Already Doing

Sometimes simple changes go a long way. You're probably already doing some great things like praying together and meeting regularly, but changing up these elements from time to time will definitely help your group members grow. Discover new ways to pray together in "Group Prayer Ideas" and lead your group in a creative prayer experience with Keri Wyatt Kent's article. Plus, "Make Your Discussions Fun" and "Shake It Up!" give excellent, easy ideas to change things up.

Add New Elements to Your Meeting

Sometimes we need to try something totally new to get us out of a rut. That's where these articles will help. Discover ideas on practicing corporate spiritual disciplines together from Trevor Lee, how to keep your group connected through Facebook, and how to set up a meeting rhythm that allows you to mix things up regularly. Plus, Will Johnston offers a special meeting agenda based on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*.

—AMY JACKSON is Managing Editor of SmallGroups.com.

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Three Elements of Vibrant Small Groups

What a small group is and isn't

By 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 for getting 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 enjoys 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

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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 Deutschman 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).

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- 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 of 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.

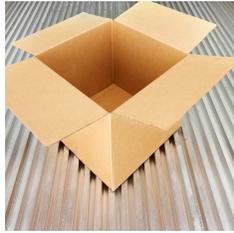
Wrap Up

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 your small group from falling into the categories under "What Small Groups Are Not"?
2. Which pattern is most prevalent in your small group? Which one is weakest?
3. What creative things can you do to live out these patterns?



Make Your Discussions Fun

It goes beyond avoiding boredom.

By Rick Howerton

If you'd like to see your attendance at small-group meetings dwindle into oblivion, just make sure your discussions are boring and that fun is ousted any time it happens to show up. That's because fun and laughter are a necessity for life transformation and essential if you want a healthy small group.

I know you may be thinking, *Howerton has lost his mind*. But when a group is laughing together, a few amazing things are happening: 1) group members are becoming a community by creating memories, 2) a healthy environment is being established because healthy communities experience all emotions together, and 3) each heart is being pried open, making it possible for God to do a work in each individual in attendance.

But how do we do this? How does a non-comedian create a fun environment?

Host Experiences, not Meetings

Many of us see our small-group gatherings as "meetings." The term in and of itself connects with something most people hate: "another boring meeting." Just changing this concept in your own mind will help you as a leader begin to plan an experience that is more emotive—and it may help if you change the term, as well.

Make Laughter Welcome

Group leaders need to create an environment that lets attendees know laughter is welcomed. Do this early in the gathering. Every great communicator knows that if they want the audience to laugh throughout their talk, they must let the audience know that laughter is welcomed. They do this by creating laughter in the first few minutes of their talk.

We must embrace this principle in our small groups also. Many group leaders use effective icebreakers to accomplish this goal. Some groups eat a meal together before diving into the Bible study. If you eat together, bring up something during the meal that happened to you or you saw on television that was funny. In most instances, others will follow your story with stories of their own and the environment you're looking for will be established.

Remember the Spice of Life

That is, variety. Many groups do the same old, same old every week. But you can relieve a lot of boredom by keeping your group members on the edge of their seats. If you typically have snacks at the beginning of the gathering, for example, have them later—just before you start the biblical conversation. Surprise attendees upon arrival by giving them something they can hold that will tie to the Bible study later. Meet in the local park sometime. The list of ideas is as far reaching as your imagination and your courage. Some will balk, but no one will be bored if you vary the way you do group.

Go Beyond Talking

Do more than just have discussions where people talk back and forth; inject activities into the experience. For instance, when discussing the "full armor of God," give attendees aluminum foil and have them clothe one group member in "full armor."

I promise there will be laughter if you do, and no one will forget the experience.

Take Advantage of Special Days

Use holidays and special events as excuses to enhance the group experience and build communal memories. If your belief system allows it, ask group members to dress up for Halloween as someone who has greatly affected their story.

Or, if the Super Bowl is coming up, take a poll concerning who will win and what the score will be. Have a prize for the person who chooses the winner and gets closest to the final score. (By the way, those who balk about guessing often win.) Again, the options are as open as your imagination.

Use Outside Sources

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Most of us are not comedians. We watch others who are captivating teachers or humorists, and wish we could be like them. The truth is, we don't have to be. All around us are images, statements, jokes, and stories that we can use to create fun in our group meetings.

Here is a quick list of things that you can find that may create laughter and fun during your group gathering:

- **YouTube videos.** If you see a funny video or scene on television, it's almost guaranteed to pop up later on YouTube, which means you can show it to your group for free. But there's so much more there than just what you see on television. You can type in almost any topic and find a hilarious video content. Just to give you some examples of what's out there, go to www.youtube.com and type in "small groups funny."
- **Bumper stickers.** When you see a hilarious or thought-provoking bumper sticker, pull over and write down that statement. For some reason funny stuff on bumper stickers resonates with people.
- **Jokes.** When a group member tells you a funny joke, ask him or her to repeat it at the next group gathering. This encourages the group member as well as helping to create the free environment you want to establish.
- **Stories.** Stories from childhood and youth will often evoke laughter and will almost always lead to others telling their own. If you can get this ball rolling as people are showing up for group or during a meal, you've got a winner almost every time.

Use the Bible

Many of the historical accounts in Scripture open the door to laughter. As a leader, be especially careful not to inhibit laughter when it happens in these situations, unless it gets to the point that the laughter keeps the group from understanding and embracing a truth God is unveiling. Let laughter happen when it is natural, normal, and doesn't diminish the glory of God.

Keep It Natural

Remember, fun and laughter are normal and natural. In many instances the only thing keeping a group from experiencing the joy God offers is when someone (often the group leader) subtly stifles that joy.

Here are a few final things to keep in mind as you seek to maintain a natural environment for fun:

- **Laughter is contagious.** When someone laughs, allow yourself to join them in their laughter. Others are almost certain join the two of you.
- **Empower those who contribute laughter.** In most instances someone in the group is known as being "the comedian" or "funny." Empower that person to live out that role as long as they don't take over the gathering. You can silently empower them by simply allowing them to be humorous without stifling them.
- **Have fun outside the group, too.** Remember this: the more fun and laughter group members experience together away from meetings, the more fun and laughter they will experience during group meetings.
- **Enjoy yourself!** Enjoy life, laugh with your group members, don't take yourself too seriously, and remember that a healthy follower of Christ is joyful. Leaders model and others follow; if you laugh, others will laugh with you.

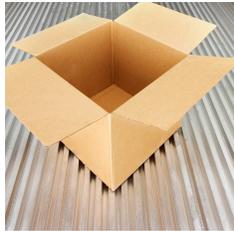
Small-group leader, one of the marks of a community that is closely bonded is laughter. Utilizing some of these ideas will aid you in creating a healthy community and will make your group a place others want to join.

So laugh, linger in it, and enjoy the outcomes!

—RICK HOWERTON is the Global Groups Environmentalist for NavPress Publishers and [a regular blogger](#); copyright 2011 by Christianity Today.

Discuss:

1. How often does your group laugh together? What usually starts the laughter?
2. What can you do to make sure group members know that laughter is welcome?
3. Come up with three ideas to inspire laughter that you could implement at your next group meeting. Which one or two will work the best?



Shake It Up!

Easy ways to energize your group meetings

By Mark Ingmire

If you sense that your small-group meetings have become routine, it just may be time to shake things up. For me, creativity doesn't come easy, leading my group in song would be painful for all, and trying something new scares me to death. Therefore, shaking things up may seem improbable, but the good news is that it doesn't take dramatic ideas to shake up your group meetings. Here are a few things anyone can do to shake up the meeting and energize your small group.

Change the Meeting Location

Meet in a different group member's home, a park, or a restaurant. This doesn't mean it becomes your permanent place to meet; rather, it's a diversion from what your small group normally experiences. Some of my best memories have been suspending our study and car pooling to a nearby ice cream shop. We spend the hour sharing stories from our week and enjoying each other's company. I've found that going to a new destination enables group members to gain fresh perspectives of one another and the group as a whole.

But you don't need to suspend your study if you're meeting somewhere else—especially if it's somewhere quiet. Just changing the location can help group members learn more about each other.

One reminder, though: If your small group provides childcare and you do change your meeting location for a night or longer, remember to consider your group's childcare needs. You may want to choose a location close to where you normally do childcare or arrange to take childcare with you.

Here's a longer list of alternate places to meet:

- Coffee shop
- Ice cream parlor
- Public park
- Beach
- Lakeshore
- Restaurant
- Food court at the mall
- Nature trail (if all your members can participate)
- Your church's auditorium or sanctuary
- Neighborhood clubhouse
- Another group member's home
- Historical landmark

Incorporate Group Activities

Small-group game nights and cookouts can be a lot of fun and help you mix up your routine. But with a little intentionality, you can create activities that will really help your group members grow. Here are ideas of intentional activities that fit right into your regular meetings.

Lesson Application

Generally speaking, the application portion of a small-group lesson is nothing more than a couple of questions that solicit individual response that prompt group members to ask, "What am I going to do?" Rarely do application questions ask "What are we as a group going to do?"

So wrap up your next lesson by applying what you've learned in a group project. Develop and organize the project to be done during one of your next meetings. Depending on the lesson's application, it could involve serving residents of a care home, hosting a neighborhood cookout, putting together care packages for deployed soldiers, or helping a fellow group member. When you apply what you've learned as a group, you'll develop unity and a group identity.

Media

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Watch a movie and discuss it in light of Scripture. This group activity often takes a little longer than a typical group meeting, so you might want to plan for a separate meeting day or break it up into two parts. For great movie discussion guides, see offerings from SmallGroups.com and ChristianBibleStudies.com. If you're not up to watching a movie, you can select short television or movie clips to set up your lesson.

Change the Agenda

When every meeting looks exactly the same, the same things happen every time. And it's easy to get stuck in a rut that way. Mix up your normal agenda with one of these ideas.

Celebrate the Lord's Supper

This can work anytime, but I find it most meaningful during the seasons of Easter and Christmas. Celebrating the Lord's Supper in small groups has been done since the beginning of the church (Acts 2:46). Therefore, it would be natural for a small group to do this today. Apart from sharing the two emblems of the Lord's Supper, there are several things you can do to make it more meaningful.

- Teach about the Lord's Supper using Scripture.
- Incorporate music before or after.
- Explore the symbols of Passover.
- Share Jesus' impact in your life.
- Write sins on strips of paper and then shred or burn before celebrating the Lord's Supper.
- Spend time praying for one another's personal needs and concerns.

Worship

Introduce singing as part of your meeting, even if you don't do it at every meeting. Sing together periodically or on special occasions, and use special songs fit for the occasion. It can be a really great experience for your group.

Bring your iPod or a worship CD to your group meeting, choosing songs that are familiar to your group members, and make copies of the lyrics for everybody. Consider songs sung during weekend services or songs from Christian radio. You don't need to be a professional singer or worship leader to do this. God is not concerned about how perfect your singing voice is.

For more worship songs to use with your group, see the collection at SmallGroups.com, which includes both audio and video files.

Let Someone Else Lead

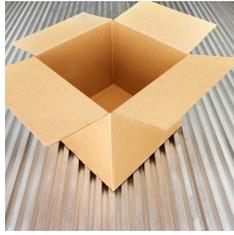
Let someone else in the group facilitate the lesson. You can make this a great experience that brings freshness to the group by asking someone who participates well in the group's discussion—sharing helpful, constructive, and thoughtful comments without cutting others down or preaching from a soapbox. Keep the agenda the same, but allow the guest leader to design the lesson and lead the discussion. Who knows? You might find a future leader through this process.

Remember that all small groups need a little shake up once in a while. Incorporating simple adjustments from time to time can help you group members grow spiritually and in their relationships with one another. Shake up your group this week. You'll see increased participation, excitement, and energy.

—MARK INGMIRE is the Small Groups and Adult Education Pastor at Savannah Christian Church in Savannah, Georgia; copyright 2013 by Christianity Today.

Discuss:

1. When was the last time you tried to shake things up in your small group? What did you do? What was the result?
2. What are signs that your small group might be in a rut?
3. What activities energize you that might also energize your small group?



Group Prayer Ideas

Ideas and guidelines for praying together

By Andrew Wheeler

The time we spend in prayer during our group meetings often evolves into a somewhat hurried ritual, an obligatory component of our meetings that leaves us wishing it were something more. But it doesn't have to be that way. Prayer can be an exciting, challenging, and growing experience for the group. Here are a few ideas to help your group members explore different ways to pray together. My hope is that you'll develop a more dynamic, meaningful prayer life.

National or International Days of Prayer

One of the greatest aspects of being a part of the church is the unity of participating in major prayer events as one body. Prayer observances can lift your group members' eyes beyond your group and expand your understanding of God's love. Here are a few well-known prayer observances:

National Day of Prayer

Held on the first Thursday of May each year, this is the largest prayer event in the United States, with local events in hundreds of cities. Your group can either participate as a group in a local event or hold a time of prayer for our country in your normal group meeting that occurs closest to the actual day. More information can be found at www.ndptf.org. For more ideas on praying for our country, check out [OneCry America](#) and [Presidential Prayer Team](#).

International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church

It is illegal to own a Bible in 53 countries. One of the largest global prayer observances is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church (IDOP). Held on the second Sunday in November, this day of prayer focuses on countries around the world where believers suffer persecution for their faith. Several websites feature information that can be used to guide prayer times for the persecuted church. For more information, check out [Open Doors USA](#), [International Christian Concern](#), and [Voice of the Martyrs](#). Open Doors USA even offers videos and songs.

Seek God for the City

An annual 40-day period of prayer corresponding with Lent, this movement includes a daily prayer guide and suggestions for prayer for your local neighborhoods, community, and city. Your group could take a prayer walk through a neighborhood or around key places like schools and government buildings, using prayer suggestions from the guide to focus your prayers. The guide is published by [Waymakers](#).

You may find that one or more of these prayer experiences kindles a deep compassion in your group members for a particular issue or country. If that's the case, regularly set aside time for prayer—it needn't be a whole evening. For example, set aside 5–10 minutes in each meeting to pray for one country where believers are persecuted.

Pray for a Church Leader

Set aside an evening to pray for a church staff member or key volunteer. Invite the person to your meeting, explaining that you want to spend time praying for him or her. Allow your guest to share prayer request from his or her ministry, family, or life in general. Make sure you express that what is shared will remain confidential. Instruct your group members not to probe for further information with questions. Instead, allow your guest to decide how much to share.

In order for this to truly minister to the leader, create an atmosphere for intimate sharing. If you normally meet in a public place (like a restaurant), you'll want to find a more private setting for this meeting. Your guest will not be comfortable sharing potentially confidential information in a public setting. You might also consider getting a small gift for your guest to thank him or her.

Lift Each Other Up in Prayer

Spend an evening praying more deeply for your group members than normal. To ensure that each group member participates equally in sharing and receiving prayer, divide up the time equally among group

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members. For example, if you have six group members and you have an hour to pray, allot 10 minutes to each group member—5 minutes for sharing, and 5 minutes for other group members to pray. To keep sharing on track, ask group members something specific to share about such as, "How do you see God at work in your life today, and how would you like to see his kingdom displayed in your life?" Guiding the sharing time like this can help get past surface issues to deeper subjects of God's working in each group member's life.

Missional Prayer Night

Spend an evening in prayer for something outside the group. This can really help stretch the group members and take prayer to the next level. Besides praying for national and global concerns listed above, spend time praying for your immediate community.

You might do a prayer walk through your church. I've participated in a church prayer walk each December. We walk the church, praying for all the non-believers who will enter our doors during the holidays. We also pray for each of our staff members and key volunteers during the especially busy season. We walk through all the rooms of the church, praying for what will take place in each of them. This has become one of my favorite prayer experiences each year.

You might also do a prayer walk through your neighborhood, especially if you're a neighborhood group. Pray for your neighbors, local businesses, and community centers where people gather. If you've never done a prayer walk before, you can learn more from [Waymakers](#).

Consider volunteering as a group at a local ministry such as a food pantry, shelter, or kids' program. Then follow up your experience with an evening of prayer for the ministry. Gather some prayer requests while you're volunteering or contact someone at the ministry for prayer requests before your group meeting.

If you want to incorporate a global focus, there are many options. If your church supports missionaries, add your name to their mailing lists to receive their prayer letters. Then spend an evening praying for them. Or have your group adopt a child through [World Vision](#) or [Compassion](#), and spend an evening each quarter or so praying for that child. Encourage group members to research issues that God puts on their hearts, such as human trafficking, poverty, or unreached people groups, and have them bring information and lead a time of prayer around those issues.

How to Pray as a Group

Whether you're praying for a church leader, for our country, or for each other, a few basic principles will help your evening of prayer be a great experience for everyone.

Agreement

Acts 1:14 describes how the early believers were "together in prayer." This means more than just being in the same place at the same time while praying. The King James Version puts it this way: "These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication." Praying in one accord, or agreeing in prayer (Matthew 18:19) is what differentiates group prayer from private prayer.

It's important to listen to each other as you pray and pick up on the conversation that the group is having with God. Be open to the Spirit's leading of the group, rather than focusing your thoughts on what you will pray when your turn comes. Stay on topic with the group, and pick up the refrain of prayer from others.

Picture a conversation in which no one responds to anything that anyone else says, but instead all the participants speak about their own topics. The result is a series of monologues, not a true conversation. The same is true of prayer; if each person prays whatever is on his or her heart without listening to how God is leading the group, there is no true agreement in prayer.

Brevity

Nothing kills a prayer time more surely than one or two people dominating the time with long prayers. Winding prayers cause group members to disengage. They also communicate that the one praying is not interested in the prayer contributions of others. Instead, pray brief prayers and allow others to pray as well. Additionally, brief prayers enable all the group members to participate on an equal footing. Mature and new believers are equally able to pray short, simple prayers.

At the same time, God may lead you to pray about several topics or people. Feel free to pray multiple times, but keep each prayer brief and focused. This will help other group members keep track of what is being prayed for, allowing them to pick up on the conversation of the prayer and pray in agreement.

LEADING OUTSIDE THE BOX**Christ-Centeredness**

Christ-centered praying is a matter of focus in a couple of ways. First, focus your prayers on God's intervention rather than on the specifics of the circumstances for which you pray. And if you're praying for other group members, be sure to address your prayers to God rather than to the group members. Focus on what you want God to do in a person's life rather than the changes you think the person needs to make.

Second, focus your prayers on God's agenda rather than on your own biases. This is important at all times, but especially when praying over potentially divisive topics (such as politics). Focusing on God's agenda is more than just a casual nod to God's will. Praying this way means pleading with God to bring about his will and his kingdom in the situations for which you pray. And it means praying with open hearts, letting God answer as he chooses rather than insisting that he answer a certain way (see 2 Corinthians 12:7–10).

Pray in Preparation

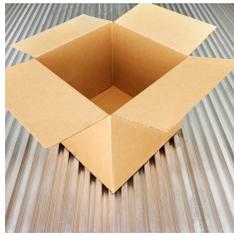
As with any new group experience, different members may be in different places when it comes to prayer. Pray in advance for your group members, asking God to prepare their hearts for your evening of prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your extended prayer time, and thank God in advance for his presence and for hearing your prayers.

Prepare the environment to make the experience special and meaningful. Decide ahead of time what directions you'll give group members. Clear directions help set expectations and keep everyone comfortable in their participation. Be sure to set the expectation that group members will pray briefly, and that they may pray multiple times or pray silently on any given topic. Tell group members to pay attention to how the Holy Spirit is prompting them to pray.

—ANDREW WHEELER is the author of *Together in Prayer*; copyright 2013 by Christianity Today.

Discuss:

1. How might your group spend more meaningful time in prayer for one another?
2. How often does your group pray about national or global concerns? How might you incorporate this?
3. How well do your group members pray as a group? Which of Wheeler's suggestions does your group most need help with: agreement, brevity, or Christ-centeredness?



Prayer Stations Experience

Eight creative ways to connect with God

By Keri Wyatt Kent

Prayer can become so routine that we take this great gift for granted. Whispers in the ear of God grow stale in our mouths. Dare we admit it? We're bored of it—and if we are bored, how much more is God as he listens to our droning?

Creativity revitalizes our prayer life—we need not limit our communication with God to sitting quietly, head bowed, eyes closed, outlining thanks and requests. God, infinite in both power and methods, is always creative in his ways. We, too, can be creative—even in how we pray.

Jesus' disciples, coming upon him as he prayed, asked boldly, "teach us to pray." He taught them words to say (see Matthew 6), which reflected attitude and actions consistent with his other teachings.

As small-group leaders, we are discipling our group members. And while we can teach words to a specific prayer or lead discussions about prayer, our group members will learn more when they try things for themselves. To talk about prayer is a poor substitute for actually praying. To simply talk often keeps us at a distance, but to involve our physical selves—to see, taste, or touch—deepens the experience.

And that is what prayer stations do: provide a kinesthetic experience, a new perspective, something that will open up new neural pathways in our spiritual connection with God. This list is not definitive. Hopefully, it will inspire you not only to pray more creatively but also to come up with even more ways to communicate with God.

Devote about an hour of your meeting time to the prayer station experience. Set up tables around the room or in various rooms of the house or building where you meet.

Explain to the group that they will be visiting each of the stations on their own, although there may be more than one person at any given station at a time. Remind them that this is not a time for chatting, but for quiet reflection as they move from station to station. Encourage them not to rush, but to take time between stations to simply reflect. They do not have to visit all the stations, and there is no prize for finishing quickly.

Be sure to take plenty of time at the end of your meeting to debrief the prayer station experience, letting members share what they learned. You can simply ask, "Where did God meet you in this experience?" or "What surprised you?"

It will be helpful for each person to have a journal or a sheet of paper to carry with them from station to station. Each station needs the materials listed, and the instructions printed on a sheet of paper.

Vine and Branches

Materials:

Vines (purchase grapevines from a craft store or find small flexible branches from your backyard)
Paper "leaves" cut out, with a hole punched in one end, and a piece of string or yarn through the hole (left untied)
Paper with John 15:1-4 printed out

Instructions:

Jesus told us we are to abide in him, stay connected with him, as close as a branch to a vine, a leaf on a tree.

Spend some time meditating on John 15:1-4. Journal your thoughts:

What connects you to the vine?

What keeps you from being connected?

What does God need to prune in your life?

Is there something you need to give over to him?

LEADING OUTSIDE THE BOX

After spending some time with God, write your name on the leaf, and tie it to the vine. Write one or two sentences about your experience in your journal.

Living Water

Materials:

- Pitcher of water
- Small paper or plastic cups
- Paper with John 4:1–26 printed on it, or a Bible open to that passage

Instructions:

Read through the Bible passage slowly. Ask God to speak to you.

Spend a few moments thinking about your spiritual thirst. What are you thirsty for? What are you longing for? Let your answer come from the deepest part of you. Go beyond surface desires to what your heart truly needs. Lay that before God. Feel that thirst.

Pour some water into a cup, and take a sip. Feel the water going down your throat, easing your physical thirst. As you do, think of Jesus slaking your spiritual thirst. Focus on his promises to meet your needs. Thank him for the gift of living water.

Ebenezer

Materials:

- Small river rocks (available at craft stores)
- Sharpie (permanent) markers
- A large wooden or ceramic bowl
- Paper with 1 Samuel 7:10–12 on it.

Instructions:

What battle are you fighting right now that you have no hope of winning without God's help? Spend some time praying about the battle, perhaps writing in your journal about it.

In the Old Testament, we often read of God's people building altars—simple piles of stones—to commemorate God's work in their lives. Samuel built such an altar, and gave it a name: Ebenezer, which means "stone of help."

Can you think of a situation where the Lord "helped you thus far" in your life? How has he helped you in past difficult circumstances, where has he showed himself faithful?

Select a stone from the pile. Write a word or two on the stone representing the way God has helped you. Pray that he will once again, as he has before, provide help. Place the stone in the bowl.

Together we will build an altar, as a testimony to how God has helped us thus far. Look at the other stones, and be encouraged by the testimony of others.

Breaking the Chains

Materials:

- Paper chain made of construction paper loops
- Markers
- Small trash can

Instructions:

Turn to Romans 6 and read it to yourself, allowing the words to take root in your heart. Consider: What binds you, what holds you back?

Take a few minutes to pray quietly. Start by saying, "God, forgive me for..."

Using the marker, write down a specific sin that binds you and keeps you from understanding the freedom you have in Christ directly on the paper chain link. Be specific and use as many links as you need.

Now pray through each binding link, ripping them off the chain as you ask for God's forgiveness and proclaim the victory of Christ's righteousness. You can pray specifically through verses 7, 14, 17–18. Shred the chain links after you have ripped them from the chain, and toss them in the trash can.

Illustrating a Psalm

LEADING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Materials:

Drawing paper
 Crayons, markers, colored pencils, drawing charcoal
 Paper printed with selected verses from the Psalms (Suggestions: Psalms 18, 23, 24, 42, 98, 100, 121, 131, 139) or just put out a couple of Bibles and let people select their own

Instructions:

Read through a few of the Psalms on the papers, or turn to a favorite Psalm in the Bible. Take your time, read through the verses slowly and meditatively.

On a piece of drawing paper, draw a picture or design in response to what you've read. Take your drawing with you.

Alternate: leave the drawings on the table for others to look at. Then take yours home at the end of the meeting.

Broken

Materials:

Old flower pots, pottery, or ceramic tiles
 Markers
 Safety goggles
 Tarp
 Hammer
 Paper with Galatians 5:13–26 printed on it

Instructions:

Note: This station can be messy.

Begin by taking a moment to breathe, to invite God to speak to you. Read slowly through the verses from Galatians 5 printed on the paper.

These verses are really about freedom—how when we live by the Spirit we find freedom, but when we live by the flesh what feels like freedom (to indulge) is actually binding us.

Spend a bit of time looking at the sins listed in verses 19–21. Ask God to show you where you need to be set free from sin. It's easy to skim the list and say "I haven't been engaging in witchcraft or orgies, so I'm off the hook." But what about envy? Or even idolatry? You may not worship a graven image, but what is most important in your life: maybe financial security, popularity, having the right stuff or a nicer home? These things can be idols in our lives. Arranging our lives around having them can be idolatry. Ask God to show you what sins hold you captive. Ask him to set you free.

When you are ready, take one of the pots. If you like, write a word or two on it to represent the sinful pattern or habit you want to break. Put on the safety goggles, set the pot on the tarp, and smash it with the hammer.

God doesn't just remove our sinful nature; he replaces it with his Spirit. As we read earlier: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." Your smashed pot is a symbol of how you've "crucified the flesh" and now can live in freedom of the Spirit.

Optional: Place the broken pieces on the table, and use them to create a mosaic. This can be done individually, or by the group as a separate activity. God takes our broken pieces and creates something beautiful.

Confession

Materials:

Paper with Psalm 103:8–14 and Romans 3:21–24 printed on it
 Washable markers
 Large clear vase filled with water (you may want to put a washcloth or layer of small stones in the bottom to cushion)
 Smooth river rocks, as flat as possible

Instructions:

LEADING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Spend some time asking God to meet you in this station. This is not about guilt or shame, but the truth that sets us free.

The Bible tells us that we have all sinned, yet God offers us the free gift of forgiveness.

What sin do you need to confess to God? What have you done, or left undone? Where have you been less than loving and kind? Are there situations where you were selfish or untruthful? Ask God to show you these, knowing that all the while, he is looking at you in love.

Pick one sin that has been a burden to you, one you truly wish to be free of (because the truth is, sometimes we hang on to sins). Write a word or two on one of the stones, to represent this burden.

Gently slip the stone into the vase of water and watch it sink. Imagine this stone is your sin, which God has removed, and thrown to the bottom of the sea. Notice how the word fades as the water washes the stone.

End your time at this station by thanking God for his forgiveness, rejoicing in the truth that he cleanses us from all unrighteousness.

Mirror**Materials:**

A small handheld mirror or one hung on the wall at the station
 Dry-erase markers
 Paper towels
 Paper with 2 Corinthians 3:17–18 and 1 John 3:1 printed on it

Instructions:

Sit quietly for a moment. Ask God to meet you, to set you free with his truth.

Take a look at your face in the mirror. When you look at yourself, what do you tell yourself? Do you point out your imperfections? Do you think "Not good enough"? Are they messages of shame, grief, or insecurity?

Take a dry-erase marker and write the things that come to mind on the mirror. Be honest and brave. What negative things do you say about yourself?

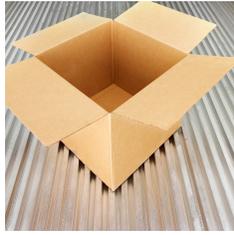
Now consider what God says when he looks at you. The Bible tells us that God looks at us as deeply loved children. His love is not something we earn by good works, but a free gift that he gives to us. He looks at us through Jesus and sees only that perfection. He has completely forgiven us. He loves you deeply, completely, unconditionally.

Using a paper towel, erase the negative words you've written on the mirror. Now write "deeply loved child of God" on the mirror. Look at yourself through the words. Thank God for his unconditional love for you.

—KERI WYATT KENT is an author and speaker and has led and coached groups at Willow Creek Community Church for two decades. Learn more about her ministry at www.keriyattkent.com; copyright 2013 by Christianity Today.

Discuss:

1. When will you schedule a night set aside for prayer stations?
2. Which of these prayer stations would work best for your group members? Why?
3. What other ideas for prayer stations can you come up with?



Finding Your Rhythm

Make the most of your time together by learning when to push and when to sit back.

By Ben Reed

When I was young, my golf coach used to tell me, "Ben, you haven't found your rhythm. Slow down and get in the zone."

"Got it, coach!" I'd say, having no idea what he meant.

Recently, my wife and I have started doing CrossFit, an intense workout program. We love it, and in the time we've been going, I've learned two things:

1. If I push too hard, too fast, I'll burn out before the workout is over.
2. If I go too slowly, I'll still have gas left in the tank when I'm done—and I won't have done all I could.

With CrossFit, I have to find my rhythm in order to maximize my time, effort, and abilities. And there's no one-size-fits-all rhythm for every athlete, so all athletes must determine what rhythm works best for them.

Although it's been many years since my golf coach told me to find my rhythm, I finally feel like I get it. Finding your rhythm means pacing yourself, learning when to push, and when to sit back. It means knowing when to hit the gas and when to hit the brakes.

Small-Group Rhythm

Our small group also follows a rhythm. We understood that we needed to find a rhythm that allowed us to maximize our time together without getting burned out. And we've found that our particular rhythm has meant great participation and deep relationships.

We have three components to our rhythm:

Regular Meetings

We ask all of our groups at Long Hollow to meet at least twice a month for fellowship, discussion, and prayer. Here's the truth: authentic community is nearly impossible to cultivate when you meet less frequently than this. It's important for small-group members to reorient the rhythm of their life to include small group. Many groups, including my own, meet every week to build authentic community.

Fun Events

Once every month, our group puts down our study and just has fun. Having fun together is a way of taking your foot off of the gas. It helps people breathe, build deeper relationships, and invest more of their lives in the group.

I've found that the week following our activity, group members are much more apt to dive deeper into each other's lives. Instead of just seeing ourselves as a group that studies the Bible together, we see ourselves as doing life together.

Having fun also shows others that we serve a good God. Check out Psalm 126:2: "Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.'" Did you catch that? When our mouths are filled with laughter, others are convinced that God has done great things among us.

Could the flipside be true? If our mouths aren't filled with laughter, could people become convinced that the God we serve isn't good? That he doesn't take delight in loving his people? That the God we give witness to is ultimately boring, dull, and lifeless?

Having fun together is a gift from God. And so is the snort that happens when you belly laugh. Laughing together forms a tight-knit, authentic community.

LEADING OUTSIDE THE BOX

To help these fun events truly feel like fun and not a burden, schedule your time together for the same time you normally meet. Here are several ideas for fun events:

- *Game night.* There's no better way to see the depravity of man in action than to invite people's competitive natures out during game night. Be warned: Playing a game of cards, Apples to Apples, Catch Phrase, Cranium, or Scattergories will bring lots of laughs.
- *Potluck.* Tell everyone to bring a main dish, side dish, or dessert. And be sure to make a casserole. A potluck isn't a potluck without a casserole.
- *Eat out.* Just be sure to consider whether your group members can afford this. You may need to choose a less expensive restaurant so everyone is comfortable. Or you might consider paying for a few of your group members.
- *Guys/Girls night.* Have the guys watch the kids, and the girls do a fun activity together. Next month have the girls watch the kids while the men hang out.
- *Bowling.* People of all ages can enjoy bowling together. And you're less likely to hurt yourself than with skating.
- *Trivia night.* Just down the road from where our group meets, a Mexican restaurant puts on trivia night. Our group has loved participating as a team. There may be something like this close to you, too.

Serving

Our groups serve once a quarter. Some groups pick a project from a list of ideas we've put together. Others have thoughts, ideas, and passions of their own that they run with. I don't tell groups how to serve. I simply inspire and encourage our groups to be on mission, being others-focused and gospel-oriented.

Find Your Rhythm

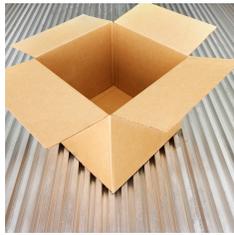
Our group's rhythm consists of meeting once a week, partying once a month, and serving once a quarter. This rhythm involves both stepping on the gas and stepping on the brake. It allows time to deepen relationships and dig into what God's teaching us. And it works perfectly for us.

But your group is different, so you may need a different rhythm. You'll need to decide what a win looks like for your small group: do you need more time to build relationships through fun events? Do you need to be stretched to serve more? Do you need more time together to study something in depth? Begin to structure your group around that win by building in rhythms that accomplish your goal. Use your goals and the nature of your group to determine the right rhythm for you. Find your rhythm and settle in.

—BEN REED is Small Groups Pastor at Long Hollow Baptist Church in Gallatin, Tennessee; copyright 2013 by Christianity Today.

Discuss:

1. Do you feel like your group is always stepping on the gas or stepping on the brake? Why?
2. How often do you set aside meetings simply to be together and enjoy one another? What might incorporating these fun meetings do for your group?
3. What kind of meeting rhythm would work for your group?



Corporate Spiritual Disciplines: The Basics

Are you open to something new in your small group?

By Trevor Lee

Nothing really good happens without hard work. It takes months of sweating to lose a few pounds. Friendships are forged through consistent interaction over years. A solid reputation is built over a lifetime. All of these take intentionality and determination to build and maintain.

Our spiritual lives are no different. A living, growing, dynamic relationship with God through the Holy Spirit requires consistency and determination. James 4:8 says, "Come near to God and he will come near to you." That sounds nice, but without some intentionality it's easy to go long periods of time without drawing near to him. That's why spiritual disciplines are essential to our spiritual development. Like a workout routine for getting in physical shape, the disciplines can keep us moving in the right direction with God even on the days we don't feel like it.

Spiritual disciplines are many times done alone, but there is no reason they need to be. In fact, adding some corporate spiritual disciplines to your small group can help ensure that your time together brings everyone nearer to God.

Before taking a look at specific spiritual disciplines, how about a quick refresher on spiritual disciplines in general?

What Are Spiritual Disciplines?

Spiritual disciplines have become a common concept in Christianity. But that doesn't mean everyone has great clarity on what they are or what they're good for. In his classic work *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster says that spiritual disciplines are the things that open the way for God to do the inner transformation he wants to do. The disciplines do not transform us—God transforms us by his Spirit—but the disciplines prepare us for that transformation.

One important spiritual discipline is studying Scripture. Right now I begin each morning by reading a chapter from Psalms, one from Mark, and one from Romans. Well, many mornings anyway—I'm far from perfectly disciplined when it comes to the disciplines! I don't put pressure on myself to have a life-changing insight each day; I just try to have an open heart to whatever God might want to point out.

One day I was reading Psalm 9 and I came across this verse: "I will tell of all your wonderful deeds." It was like the Holy Spirit hit me over the head! I spent some time in prayer and realized I don't often declare the great things God does for my family, my friends, or our church. I often bring requests before God, but I regularly fail to point out all the great ways he is working in the world. This has challenged me to be disciplined about declaring God's wonderful deeds. The challenge came because of the discipline of reading Scripture.

This is often how the disciplines work. You don't know when or how, but God will use them to draw you nearer to him and his purposes for you. Understood in a very broad way, spiritual disciplines can be almost anything that helps to open us to the work the Spirit wants to do in us. Some of the traditional spiritual disciplines are meditation, prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, and service (the eight listed in *Celebration of Discipline*).

Benefits of Corporate Spiritual Disciplines

No need to complicate the difference between individual and corporate spiritual disciplines—they are either practiced alone or in community. It's as simple as that! There are some disciplines that are better suited to individual or corporate expression, but there aren't any that must be practiced one way or the other. That being said, Richard Foster lists four disciplines that are especially well-suited to corporate expression: confession, worship, guidance, and celebration.

Adding some corporate disciplines to your small group can pay huge dividends. Agreeing to practice disciplines together helps guard against a stagnant group. Small groups too often settle into a relational routine that doesn't challenge people to grow spiritually. Corporate disciplines will provide a consistent challenge.

LEADING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Spending time with others, going through a lesson, and praying together can become pretty comfortable. But when you add in guidance, worship, or even confession it will be more difficult to settle in.

This is important because we don't grow as much if we're not being stretched at all. Whatever discomfort comes along with practicing corporate disciplines will be worth it because of the increased potential for spiritual growth in your group.

Try This!

Here are a few examples to help you get started with practicing spiritual disciplines together:

Celebration: Have a Party! Next time God does something worth celebrating, don't let it pass quietly. Whether it's healing, provision of a job, or an answer to something your group has prayed about for a long time, take the opportunity to throw a party.

Unfortunately, celebration often isn't a strong point in Christian circles. We might say thank you to God, but we seldom go all out and throw a party when God acts. Remember what happened in the story of the prodigal son when the lost son returned home? The father spared no expense celebrating. So next time God does something worth celebrating in your group, instead of just saying thank you in a prayer, take a whole gathering and throw a great party to celebrate. Have someone bake a special treat or go out to dinner together. Invite family and friends to celebrate with you.

An important part of making this happen is being aware of what God is doing. If you don't already do this, adopt the discipline of having time during your group gathering to share the things people have seen God do since the last gathering.

Guidance: Seeking God Together. Often when someone brings a concern or decision to other group members, the group prays about it and then hopes God leads the individual facing the situation. A great alternative is to commit to discernment as a group.

Depending on how quickly the situation needs to be resolved or the decision needs to be made, take a few weeks to pray together for God's guidance and direction. Then share with each other what God seems to be saying. For example, if Mary is trying to decide how best to help her elderly mother, the group can devote themselves to pray about the issue both during and outside of group meetings. Group members can pray and then listen for God's wisdom in the situation. At the next group meeting, group members (including Mary) can share what they feel God's wisdom may be in the situation. The group should then devote more time during the meeting to pray about the situation and for Mary. Many people approaching God's throne about this issue is powerful. Together, they can discern what Mary should do and support her throughout the decision process.

Confession: Leaving Space. "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other that you may be healed" (James 5:16).

My first reaction to confessing sin in a small group is: "Yeah, right!" This is the most intimidating discipline to practice in a small group, but it is also the most powerful. We fear that confessing our sin will make people think less of us and leave us embarrassed. But mutual confession has a way of binding us to each other because it is such an intimate practice. Confessing sin to others can also help stop the power of sin in our lives.

One way to incorporate this discipline is in your prayer time. Encourage people who would like to confess to say, "God, I confess to you and these friends ..." Follow this time of confession with specific prayer for any people who take the bold step of confessing something. Be warned, it is very likely this will only work if you're willing to lead the way by confessing first. Even if no one confesses something for a few weeks, stick with it. After all, it's called a discipline.

Brainstorm More Ideas

Some disciplines will work for your small group and others won't. A great way to get started with this is to take some time to explain spiritual disciplines to your group and then build group ownership by brainstorming some ideas together. Try out a few ideas and feel free to move on if they aren't working. Just don't drop them because they aren't easy—good things seldom are.

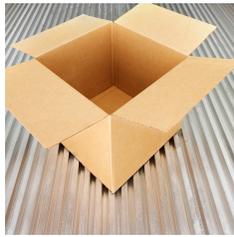
—TREVOR LEE is pastor of Mountair Christian Church in Lakewood, Colorado; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today.

LEADING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Discuss:

1. What's your initial reaction to incorporating spiritual disciplines into your group meeting?
2. What fears or concerns do you have about practicing spiritual disciplines as a group?
3. How might practicing spiritual disciplines together benefit each individual in your group as well as the group as a whole?

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Follow in the Footsteps of Bonhoeffer

A meeting plan for going deeper

By Will Johnston

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian who lived during the rise of Nazism. He was a prophetic voice to the German Church, recognizing the evil of Adolf Hitler long before most of the world. He valiantly fought Hitler's takeover of the German Church and was eventually imprisoned and executed for his role in an assassination attempt against the Führer.

As part of his fight to preserve the true gospel of Jesus Christ, he founded an underground seminary for aspiring pastors because the traditional seminaries had been taken over by the Nazis. However, this seminary provided not only academic and pastoral training, but also whole-life training, teaching them to be and make disciples of Jesus.

Bonhoeffer and his students all lived together on a large estate in the German countryside, and it was against this backdrop that he wrote *Life Together*, a treatise on Christian community. In it, Bonhoeffer described what he believed Christian communal life should look like. He also laid out a morning routine that he found helpful, and (with a few minor adjustments) it makes an interesting framework for a small-group meeting.

Trying It Out

My small group has been reading *Life Together* and decided to try out his plan. It was an interesting experiment. The prayer time at the end was one of the best group prayer times I've ever had. There was a long list of prayer needs, but praying for each of them didn't become just a list to get through. Because the group is slowly becoming a true community, I was able to genuinely pray for the things that my group members need and the group was able to participate in that prayer without becoming bored.

If you decide to experiment with this, I'd encourage you to share the responsibilities with your group members. Have one person lead the prayer from the Psalms, another lead the singing, others read the Scriptures, and ask a few people to bring food for the meal. Sharing responsibilities will not only lighten your load, but also allows others to feel ownership of the group. It can also help prepare them for potentially leading their own groups in the future.

I hope this proves to be a valuable experience for your group as it was for mine. Follow Bonhoeffer's plan below at your next group meeting, using the small-group ideas to guide you.

Pray from the Psalms

From ancient times in the Church a special significance has been attached to the common use of psalms. In many churches to this day, the Psalter constitutes the beginning of every service of common worship. The custom has been largely lost and we must find our way back to its prayers. The Psalter occupies a unique place in the Holy Scriptures. It is God's Word and, with a few exceptions, the prayer of men as well. (From Life Together)

Small-Group Idea:

As a group, read a psalm responsively. The main reader can read the odd-numbered verses, while the group reads the even-numbered verses in unison. Make this reading a prayer to God.

Sing a Hymn

Why do Christians sing when they are together? The reason is, quite simply, because in singing together it is possible for them to speak and pray the same Word at the same time; in other words, because here they can unite in the Word. All devotion, all attention should be concentrated upon the Word in the hymn. The fact that we do not speak it but sing it only expresses the fact that our spoken words are inadequate to express what we want to say, that the burden of our song goes far beyond all human words.

Small-Group Idea:

LEADING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Have someone in the group select a worship song or hymn that will be commonly known to the group members and lead the group in singing it.

Read the Scriptures

As a whole the Scriptures are God's revealing Word. Only in the infiniteness of its inner relationships, in the connection of the Old and New Testaments, of promise and fulfillment, sacrifice and law, law and gospel, cross and resurrection, faith and obedience, having and hoping, will the full witness to Jesus Christ the Lord be perceived. This is why common devotions will include, besides the prayer of the Psalms, a longer reading from the Old and the New Testament.

Small-Group Idea:

Have one member in the group select and read aloud a chapter from the Old Testament and another member select and read aloud a chapter from the New Testament.

Sing a Hymn

Again, have someone in the group choose a song that will be commonly known to the group members and lead them in singing it.

Pray Together

We have heard God's Word, and we have been permitted to join in the hymn of the Church; but now we are to pray to God as a fellowship, and this prayer must really be our word, our prayer for this day, for our work, for our fellowship, for the particular needs and sins that oppress us in common, for the persons who are committed to our care.

Small-Group Idea:

Spend a few minutes discussing group members' prayer requests. Then spend time praying for those needs. Bonhoeffer recommends that the group leader be the person who prays aloud.

Eat Together

Not until the fellowship has been nourished and strengthened with the bread of eternal life does it come together to receive from God earthly bread for this temporal life. Giving thanks and asking God's blessing, the Christian family receives its daily bread from the hand of the Lord. Ever since Jesus Christ sat at table with his disciples, the table fellowship of his community has been blessed by his presence.

The fellowship of the table teaches Christians that here they still eat the perishable bread of the earthly pilgrimage. But if they share this bread with one another, they shall also one day receive the imperishable bread together in the Father's house.

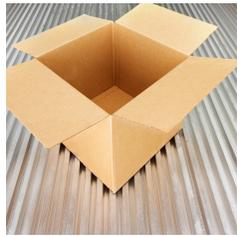
Small-Group Idea:

This one's pretty simple. Eat together! Enjoy a meal or even just some snacks.

—WILL JOHNSTON is the Small Group Catalyst for National Community Church in Washington, D.C.; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Discuss:

1. What does your normal group agenda look like? Why is it set up that way?
2. What about this agenda appeals to you? Why?
3. How can you incorporate this agenda or aspects of it into your next meeting?



Make a Facebook Group for Your Group

Enhance your meetings by continuing the conversation online.

By Amy Jackson

For the first time, I'm using a private Facebook group to foster connections within my small group—and it's been an extremely useful tool. If your group members have Facebook accounts, consider using this free tool that will allow you to connect in new ways throughout the week. This easy way to connect can help deepen relationships, keep you connected, and allow conversation to continue outside of the meeting.

Confidential Sharing

When setting up a Facebook group, be sure to make it a "secret" group. This will ensure that only the members of the group will be able to see posts. This means they will not show up on newsfeeds or on individual members' profiles. A secret group will allow your group members to share with confidence.

Smart Phone Ready

If you're looking for a way to instantly contact all your members at once, look no further—especially if your group members have smart phones. Group members' phones will alert them that there's a new message for them on Facebook.

Easily Add and Remove Members

When someone new joins, it's easy to add him or her to the group. I was once part of an e-mail chain that constantly added and removed people. They were always sending out e-mails with the updated information so that all the members could update their e-mail address books. With Facebook groups, there's no need to do this. Simply add a new member and all messages are sent to him or her. In the same way, if people leave the group, you can easily remove them.

Connect Throughout the Week

Set posting permissions to allow all group members to post on the group's page. This allows all group members to like comments, post comments, and share photos and documents. Let everyone contribute to the online discussion just like in your actual meetings. Group members can share prayer requests or other needs throughout the week. On a practical note, you may want to set up some guidelines for what to share—for instance, you may want to make it clear that posts about personal businesses are not welcome.

Comment Strings

No long reply all threads to read through on Facebook. Simply scroll through the comments posted. It's a lot cleaner and easier to look through than a reply-all e-mail. Even better—you won't "lose" comments by accidentally deleting your e-mail. Simply scroll down the page until you find the information you're looking for.

See Who Has Read Posts

Have you ever sent out an e-mail and wondered if anyone actually read it? With Facebook groups, you'll never wonder again. The page will show you exactly who has seen your post. I once had to cancel our meeting last minute. I posted the information to our page and could check to see who had seen the post. Everyone quickly saw the message, and I could rest assured that no one would show up accidentally.

Keep the Conversation Going

I love being able to write a quick post about the chapter we'll be discussing at our next meeting. Something like, "I loved her description of grace on page 45" can spark discussion before you even get together. One week I came across a YouTube video that was on the topic of our study and posted it. It came out in our discussion that week.

Post Links to Resources

I've found myself frequently saying "Let me get back to you on that" in meetings. One of the great things about Facebook groups is they allow you to get back to them sooner. For instance, one woman asked me how to access the podcasts our church offers. The next day I posted a link to the podcasts on our group page. Or

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perhaps your church is putting on a special event and has a webpage with more information. You can link to the page so everyone in your group can check it out.

Poll Feature

This is one of my favorites. Instead of talking about when to have our Christmas party in a meeting when no one had calendars to look at, I asked a poll question on our Facebook page. The poll feature allows you to ask a question, offer several possible choices, and allow group members to add their own choices. So I asked when we should meet. Within a few hours, all my group members had seen the post, checked the box for when they were available, and even left comments with other ideas.

Share Videos, Photos, and Files

Whether it's a group picture, a video from a recent service activity, or the PDF of your next study, you can share it through your Facebook group. No need to send it over e-mail and worry about file sizes. Plus, how often do we say we'll share our photos from an event but never get around to sending them out? Now you can each upload them to the page and let other group members use them as they'd like.

Create Events

Do you have a party, service day, prayer walk, or other event coming up? Create an event on your page that allows members to RSVP, comment, and see all the details in one place.

Empower Connections Between Group Members

Sometimes leaders can serve as a bottleneck for relationships between group members. When you're all connected through the Facebook group, members can contact one another directly and deepen relationships. In fact, the page has everyone's profile pictures across the top so group members can simply click on the face of the person they want to connect with.

Information in One Place

If your group members are already using Facebook, their birthday, interests, and work information are already entered. Learn more about your group members and their interests and passions. And let group members get to know one another too.

Share Ownership

Too often leaders do all the work. Facebook groups send the message that everyone has something to contribute. If one person has an idea for a service project, he or she can post about it. When someone shares a prayer request, group members can respond themselves through a comment or private message.

—AMY JACKSON is the Managing Editor of SmallGroups.com; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Discuss:

1. How many of your group members already use Facebook? Does it make sense to create a group?
2. How might staying connected in this way between meetings affect your time together?
3. How might having a Facebook group allow you to incorporate more fun into the life of your group?



Further Exploration

Websites and books to help you think outside the box of "normal" small-group meetings

SmallGroups.com. We specialize in equipping churches and small-group leaders to make disciples and strengthen community.

- [Corporate Spiritual Disciplines for Small Groups](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Do You Lead a Life-Changing Small Group?](#) (Assessment Pack)
- [Leading 101](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Making Small Groups Fun!](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Plan a One-Day Retreat for Your Small Group](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)

SmallGroups.com also offers many activities and icebreakers to help shake up your meetings. Browse our [icebreakers](#), or use our [Meeting Builder tool](#) to search on a specific topic.

BuildingChurchLeaders.com. A website with practical training tools for various church leadership roles.

LeadershipJournal.net. A website offering practical advice and articles for church leaders.

GiftedforLeadership.com. A website ministering to women leaders.

TodaysChristianWoman.com. A website ministering to Christian women.

[Discipleship Journal's Best Small-Group Ideas, Volume 1](#) by *Discipleship Journal*. A collection of 101 hands-on tips and creative ideas for your small group (NAV Press, 1996, 2005; ISBN 978-1576838471).

[Simple Small Groups: A User-Friendly Guide for Small Group Leaders](#) by *Bill Search*. Discover three essential components to successful and transformative small-group meetings (Baker Books, 2008; ISBN 978-0801071539).

[Together in Prayer: Coming to God in Community](#) by *Andrew Wheeler*. Establish a meaningful prayer ministry in your small group (IVP Connect, 2009; ISBN 978-0830821143).