Cultivate Relationships

A resource for Community Group leaders

Community Groups are intended to "create a predictable environment where participants experience authentic community and spiritual growth." We might even say that spiritual growth takes place best within the context of Authentic Christian Community. Leader Essential #2, Cultivate Relationships, focuses on the sense of community or belonging inherent in every good small group experience. This sense of shared experience is the essence of authentic community, and it is at the heart of what it means to be the church. It is also quite difficult to find in our culture. In what follows we will attempt to shed some light on what it looks like to cultivate relationships in a small group environment. We will explain:

- Why cultivating relationships is important;
- What we mean by cultivating relationships;
- What some of the obstacles are to cultivating relationships; and
- How to overcome the obstacles and succeed in cultiva

ting relationships.

Why is cultivating relationships important?

We believe that life change happens best in the context of intentional relationships. Since the first part of our mission as a church is "to help people Discover a personal relationship with Jesus Christ," it makes sense that we would focus our energies on the most effective way to make that happen. We believe that is through small groups. At the risk of stating the obvious, community of any type is built on relationships. A small group can only be as good as the relationships within it. That's why cultivating relationships is so important. If life change really does happen best through small groups—and we're convinced that it does—and small groups are comprised of relationships, then it is easy to see why it is so important to cultivate those relationships.

The benefits of cultivating relationships are many and they extend beyond simply supporting our ministry strategy. Small groups allow people to experience authentic community where accountability, belonging, and care take place. In fact, a small group is uniquely capable of supplying these things to people living in an individualistic culture like ours. Small groups also help people increase their levels of self-awareness and better understand their life purpose and calling. We all have major blind spots and need the encouragement of others in order to live up to our God-given potential.

Of course, none of this matters much if it's not biblically based. In Matthew 22, Jesus issued the greatest commandment: "to love God and love your neighbor as yourself." We can hardly love our neighbors as ourselves if we're not in community with them, if we don't have some kind of relationship with them. Further, the New Testament is filled with "one another" commands: accept one another (Rom 15:7); encourage one another (1 Thess. 5:11); and serve one another (Gal. 5:13), just to name a few. It is impossible to obey these commands apart from being in community with other people, and relationships are the foundation of community.

To really grasp the importance of relationships in the Bible, we need to understand that God himself is a relational being. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit comprise a "divine community" of self-giving love. It follows that we, who are made in God's image, are relational beings to the core. We are never more ourselves than when we are connected to other people through life-giving relationships. In Genesis 2, God said, "It is not good for man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18). In that context he was primarily talking about Adam's need for a helper, his need for a wife. Even so, the principle extends beyond just the marriage relationship. It really is not good for us to be alone. We all need other people.
From a biblical perspective, loving relationships among believers show a watching world that Christianity is true, that Jesus is who he says he is, and that we are who we say we are. Theologian Francis Schaeffer famously said, "Our relationship with each other is the criterion the world uses to judge whether our message is truthful—Christian community is the final apologetic." 

The Apostle John said it like this: "A new command I give you: Love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35). That last verse (and others like it) suggests that how we treat one another is the church's greatest witness.

Before considering in a little more detail what cultivating relationships means, it's important that we grasp firmly in our minds what's at stake when it comes to this whole subject. As we explained before, the successful execution of the mission of our church is contingent upon our small group strategy. Since life change occurs best in the context of intentional relationships—the kind of relationships people experience in a small group environment—it's important that we do everything we can to cultivate those relationships. None of us is capable of becoming or doing all that we can apart from the support and encouragement of other believers. As members of the body of Christ, we are commanded to "spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24). A small group is the best place for that to happen. Finally, small group relationships have the potential to connect us socially and spiritually, while at the same time putting an end to our isolation. There's a lot at stake.

What do we mean by cultivate relationships?

Being in "relationship" has sometimes been described as "knowing and being fully known." The only way people truly get to know each other is by spending time together. This means "doing life" together with other small group members. It means having some shared experiences. Of course, this will require some effort. Shared experiences don't just happen. We have to be intentional. If we want deeper, more rewarding relationships, we will have to make consistent deposits into them. They won't just grow on their own. At times, this will involve sacrifice and inconvenience. Most of the time, however, life is rather mundane and routine and our relationships are no exception. Half the battle is just showing up. The great thing is that God uses small group relationships in ways that are almost imperceptible to us. Over time we discover that we've changed, other people can see it, and yet we're hardly aware of it as it's happening. That's how relationships work.

Before we jump into the real practical "how-to" stuff of cultivating relationships (and overcoming the obstacles), it's important that we return briefly to the "ABCs" of small groups: acceptance, belonging, and care. Everyone wants and needs to feel accepted. Christians should be the most accepting group of people in the world, because we know that God has accepted us, not based on our performance or worthiness, but on His grace and mercy. From a practical standpoint, people are not open to having their beliefs or lifestyles challenged until they feel accepted. Regarding belonging, many recent observers of our culture have pointed out that most people today need to feel like they belong before they will come to believe. Truth is discovered and embraced more through the influence of a community than through intellectual argument or reasoning. Finally, all of us experience times when we need the care and support of others. As members of the body of Christ, we are called to, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2).

What are some of the obstacles to cultivating relationships?

Cultivating relationships in a small group environment can be challenging because relationships involve people, and let's face it, people (us included) can be challenging. We'll touch on a few obstacles (and solutions) before leaving you with a few more practical ideas for how to cultivate relationships.

One common obstacle for many people is that the kind of community experience found in a small group is an entirely new thing for them. They may come to group with some apprehension and guardedness about the whole thing. At first they may find the transparency and vulnerability a little unsettling. Hearing other people talk honestly about their lives can make them feel uncomfortable. They may wonder what they've
gotten themselves into. A good leader can sense this and direct the conversation in such a way that everyone is reasonably comfortable with the level of intimacy. To minimize the initial discomfort some may feel, it is a good idea to try to quickly develop some natural affinity among group members by doing icebreakers, sharing stories, sharing experiences, etc. A leader's own appropriate transparency and "realness" will go a long way toward putting everyone at ease.

Personality differences and a lack of understanding between members can create difficulties in a small group environment. Everyone is different and all of us are works in progress. From time to time we will rub each other the wrong way. An introvert may seem distant and cold when he's really just more cautious and reserved and needs more time to process his thoughts. An extrovert, on the other hand, may tend to dominate the conversation or get easily sidetracked. The leader must get to know the different personalities and learn to treat each person accordingly. It is important that everyone feels heard and valued. At times, this may mean encouraging a quiet person to speak up a little more. Other times, a leader may need to gently rein in an over-talkative member so others can get a chance. While not everyone will get along equally well or have a lot in common, it is important for the leader to guard against the tendency for cliques to develop. Excluding others is the very antithesis of Christian love and hospitality.

Practical issues can make cultivating relationships difficult. For example, some members may be required to travel a lot with their jobs so they end up missing a lot of meetings. It may be that some members live relatively far from the other members of the group, and because of traffic or conflicting work schedules, etc., it's difficult for them to spend much time with other members outside of the group. In some cases, "season of life" differences can make it difficult for members to relate to one another. We could go on. Overcoming these obstacles will require some creativity and effort. Each situation is different. It may mean staying in touch by phone and e-mail. It may mean calling a prayer partner every morning before work or in the evening. Carefully scheduling "planned interruptions" to do something as a group makes it easier for members to clear their schedules in advance. Life is busy for all of us, so we need to be very intentional about getting together.

A few more ideas for cultivating relationships

- Do a service project together. This could be anything. Ask around. Be creative.
- Go hiking or camping or do some other outdoor "bonding" activity together. Any "planned interruption" or group excursion can be helpful...even shopping!
- Celebrate each other's successes together. Somebody gets a promotion...celebrate it! Somebody wins the lottery...really celebrate it!
- Celebrate birthdays.
- Choose to go through a relational curriculum. This is a very helpful way to start people thinking about their relationships.
- We already mentioned this, but it bears repeating since it's easy to do and very effective: stay in regular contact by phone or email. Encourage one another!
- Get a prayer partner and follow up on prayer requests.

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