

Creating Community



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Leader's Guide

How to use "Creating Community" by SMALLGROUPS.COM in your regularly scheduled meetings.

Welcome to SMALLGROUPS.COM. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you train and direct the leaders of your small-groups ministry. Selected by the editors of *Ministry Resources at Christianity Today International*, the material in this download comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.

SMALLGROUPS.COM Training Themes are not just another program. Each theme contains materials on the topic you choose—no tedious program to follow. The materials work when you want, where you want, and the way you want them to. They're completely flexible and easy to use.

You probably already have regularly scheduled meetings with small-group directors, coaches, and leaders. SMALLGROUPS.COM Training Themes fit easily into what you're already doing. Here's how to use our material during your training meetings:

1. Select a learning tool. In this theme of "Creating Community," you'll find multiple types of handouts from which to choose:

- ◆ Bible study
- ◆ case study
- ◆ activity
- ◆ interview
- ◆ devotionals
- ◆ resources
- ◆ assessment tools
- ◆ how-to articles
- ◆ sample retreat

2. Select a handout. Suppose, for example, you want your board or church to move toward more positive, open communication. You could select one of three assessments in this theme: "10 Rules for Respect" (p. 6), "Willing to Be Honest" (p. 7), and "What's Your Encouragement Style?" (p. 8). From these options, select the one that best fits what you want to accomplish.

3. Photocopy the handout. Let's say you selected "10 Rules for Respect." Photocopy as many copies as you need—you do not need to ask for permission to photocopy any material from SMALLGROUPS.COM (as long as you are using the material in a church or educational setting and are not charging for it).

4. Prepare for the discussion. We recommend you read the Scripture passages and identify key discussion questions. How will you apply the principles to specific decisions your church is making?

5. Lead the discussion. Each handout can be read within 5 minutes. After you have allowed time for reading, begin the discussion by asking one of the provided questions. Be ready to move the discussion to specific issues your church is facing.

Most SMALLGROUPS.COM handouts can be discussed in 15 or 20 minutes. Your board, committee, or team will still have plenty of time to discuss its agenda.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at Smallgroups.com.

To contact the editors:

- E-mail SmallGroups@christianitytoday.com
- Mail SMALLGROUPS.COM, Christianity Today International
465 Gundersen Drive, Carol Stream, IL 60188





The Power of Like-Mindedness

A study on how to obey the Bible's words, "be like-minded."

Philippians 2:1–11

Introduction *The apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians, "Make my joy complete by being like-minded." This appeal to unity is the peg upon which everything else in the passage hangs. Verses 1-4 offer explanation, while verses 5-11 offer a real-life example in Jesus Christ.*

Study **1. According to verse 1, what factors in a believer's life make like-mindedness possible?**

[Leader's Notes—Verse 1 identifies four factors: (1) the encouragement we have in our relationship with Christ; (2) the difference love has made in our lives; (3) the fellowship (partnership) produced by the Spirit; and (4) any tender, compassionate feelings we might have.]

2. How have you experienced these factors in your life? Give examples of times you've had encouragement in your relationship with Christ, or times you've seen the difference love makes in your life.

3. From verses 2-4, which traits make like-mindedness work, and which traits work against like-mindedness?

[Leader's Notes—The positive traits that work for like-mindedness include mutual love (v. 2), mutual purpose (v. 2), and humility (vv. 3-4). From verse 3, the negative traits that work against like-mindedness include selfishness (preoccupation with my agenda) and empty conceit (preoccupation with my glory). Verse 3b describes the attitude that accompanies like-mindedness, and verse 4 describes the action that flows from it.]

4. How do traits like selfishness and empty conceit work against like-mindedness?

[Leader's Notes—Ask people to give examples of when they've seen selfishness in others (without naming names). If your group is open, ask them to give examples of when they've seen selfishness or empty conceit in their own lives.]

5. From verses 5-11, where exactly do we see humility in Jesus' life?

[Leader's Notes—Jesus' example demonstrates that humble people refuse to take advantage of their position (v. 6), set aside privilege to function as servants (v. 7), place no limits on their obedience to God (v. 8), and wait to receive honor according to God's timetable (vv. 9-11).]

6. How would you explain to a child what like-mindedness means? What it doesn't mean?

[Leader's Notes—Like-mindedness does not require sameness of ideas and opinions. It means relating to one another with the same mindset Jesus had, to love, sacrifice, and humble himself.]

Closing Pray that you will become more like-minded.
—STEVEN D. MATHEWSON



None of Us Are Sinners Emeritus

Why many people are scared of true fellowship—and what to do about that.

Galatians 6:1–4; Philippians 3:12–16

Bruce Larson coined the phrase “relational theology.” A graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary, he pastored various churches, including University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, where he is now pastor emeritus. Bruce served as president of Faith at Work and has authored over 20 books, including No Longer Strangers, The Relational Revolution, and Mastering Pastoral Care. In this interview, Larson opens up about why Christians don’t open up.

When did it dawn on you that Christians were missing something in the area of fellowship?

I was a student minister at a little church up on the Hudson River, and one weekend I found out some shocking news: a teenage girl in the congregation had left town to go to her older brother’s home. She was pregnant. I said to the dear woman who told me, “Could I go and see her?”

“Oh, no,” she replied. “You’re the last person she wants to know what’s happened.”

Suddenly it hit me: That’s what’s wrong with the church in our time. It’s the place you go when you put on your best clothes; you sit in Sunday school; you worship; you have a potluck dinner together—but you don’t bring your life! You leave behind all your pain, your brokenness, your hopes, even your joys.

How much have we changed since then? Have we made progress?

I think in almost any church of any size there are now at least some people trying to be real, asking, “What does it mean for me to belong to Jesus Christ and also to belong to his family?”

You see, God asks us three questions when we try to get close to him. First, he asks, “Will you trust me with your life?” That’s what he said to Abram: “Will you leave the familiar, sell your house, pack up your goods, and move out?”

Next God asks, “Will you entrust yourself to a part of my family?” I was in seminary when I finally opened up and entrusted my secrets to a fellow struggler, and it was like Pentecost for me. The power of God was suddenly released when I gave up being invulnerable.

Finally God asks, “Will you get out and be involved someplace in the world?” When people say “Yes” to all three questions, we have an alive church.

But why is church still a lonely place for some people?

The church, unfortunately, has become a museum to display the victorious life. We keep spotlighting people who say, “I’ve got it made. I used to be terrible, but then I met Jesus, got zapped by the Spirit, got into a small group, got the gifts and fruit of the Holy Spirit ...” and the implication is that they are sinners emeritus. That’s just not true.

What we need in the church are models who fail, because most of us fail more than we succeed. That’s why we need to remember that the church is not a museum for finished products. It’s a hospital for the sick.

How do believers solve their loneliness problem?

Many Christians think that if they read their Bibles enough or go to enough meetings and groups, they can be “cured” of loneliness. Yet even Jesus on his last night in Gethsemane was excruciatingly lonely. Had he ➤



Bruce Larson

“The church is not a museum for finished products.”



None of Us Are Sinners Emeritus *continued*

taken the wrong road? Could he endure the crucifixion? He had only two choices: he could hide his loneliness or share it. He chose to share it with three trusted friends ... and they kept going to sleep on him!

We know Jesus is our supreme example. Yet how many churches would welcome a pastor who, late on a Saturday night, would call three elders or deacons and say, "Would you mind coming over to the parsonage? It's been a tough couple of weeks. I haven't prayed in ten days, my wife and I aren't speaking, I'm full of self-hate, and tomorrow is Sunday. I thought if you three came along and just kept me company while I prayed. ... You know, I really want to make it somehow."

A real New Testament church would say, "This pastor is like Jesus."

But we're more prone to say, "No, you've got to have it all together, Pastor. Smile a lot. Be successful."

Some say mission is what's important—Christians need to focus on the urgent tasks rather than their feelings.

This is like a person saying, "I don't need to eat—just work."

It is true that we are to be productive people. Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches. But the branches must have nourishment through connection. In other words, Christians, to be productive, need to be nourished, and we do this in community. We have no choice—God made us this way.

Do small groups help?

Church leaders ask me, "How do you get small groups going in a church?" There is only one infallible way. You start one group because you need it.

How does a group become a place of true fellowship?

It begins when people can't stand the façade anymore. See, it doesn't do any good to know someone else's secrets unless he tells them to you. And it doesn't work for me to say to you, "I know what your problem is." That just destroys the relationship. You have to come out with it first, and then I can minister to you.

Even in a small community, though the hiding places are few, there's no release until the person voluntarily says, "You know, I've been unfaithful," or "I've defrauded someone," or "I'm a closet homosexual," or whatever.

It's like when Jesus said to the man in the tombs, "What's your name?"

The fellow said, "Well, I've got a lot of them. My name is Legion."

Only then could Jesus start helping him. The Lord doesn't barge into a person's life, and neither can we.

Discuss

1. What does it mean to bring our lives to church?
2. Do you agree that we need models who fail? Explain.
3. What is positive about the fellowship in our church? What could we do to enhance it?



10 Rules for Respect

A communication covenant to help leaders build trust.

Proverbs 25:9–15; Ephesians 4:15–16

These ten rules have transformed the way one church communicates. The rules form a covenant signed each year by all leaders. Mark how well you live by each rule.

	<i>not well</i>				<i>very well</i>
1. If I have a problem with another person, I will go to him privately.	1	2	3	4	5
2. If someone has a problem with me, I want him to come to me privately and will try to be open when he comes.	1	2	3	4	5
3. If someone has a problem with me, and comes to you, send the person to me. (I'll do the same for you.)	1	2	3	4	5
4. If someone hesitates to come to me, say, "Let's go together. I'm sure he'll see us about this." (I'll do the same for you.)	1	2	3	4	5
5. Be careful about how you interpret me—I'd rather do that.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I will be careful about how I interpret you.	1	2	3	4	5
7. If it's confidential, I won't tell. (Unless someone is harming himself or someone else.)	1	2	3	4	5
8. I won't send or pay attention to unsigned letters or notes. Information should always travel with a person's name so it can be cleared up if necessary.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I will not manipulate; I will not be manipulated.	1	2	3	4	5
10. When in doubt, I will bring up my concern or question.	1	2	3	4	5

Recently two people asked a staff member to tell the pastor about a problem. She said, "I know the pastor would appreciate your telling him yourself. If he doesn't respond, then we'll go together." That afternoon, the members came to my office, and we worked through their concerns. Our communication rules let that staff member communicate her confidence in me. And I was able to strengthen two relationships.

—CHARLES W. CHRISTIAN

Discuss

1. Which of the above rules do we generally live by? Which do we need to observe more closely?
2. What rules would you suggest we add to this list?
3. How can we improve our communication as leaders?



Willing to Be Honest

Winning the struggle to open up.

Zechariah 8:16–17; Colossians 3:9–10

Why We Wear Masks

1. *We think people won't love us if they know what we're really like.* If we feel our parents' love is conditional, we might carry into our adult relationships the fear that others will reject us if they find out we are "unworthy."

I often believe this *I sometimes believe this* *I rarely or never believe this*

2. *We're afraid people will think we're not "good Christians."* "If I tell my non-Christian friends about my struggles, they will think I'm a hypocrite," Roxann explained. "And how can I tell my Christian friends? They might think I'm not a good Christian."

3. *We think people don't care.* When people ask, "How are you doing?" we perceive they are asking out of politeness and not because they want to know.

4. *We're afraid of gossip.* Gossip at one time or another has probably affected all of us. As a result, we are reluctant to confide in anyone.

Reasons to Unmask

1. *We are called to honesty in our relationships.* "Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (Col. 3:9-10). To Paul, deceit is incompatible with the Christian walk. His honesty leads him to confess his failings to entire groups.

2. *We can't receive help if others don't know we need it.* We are to "bear with each other" (Col. 3:13); "encourage one another and build each other up" (1 Thess. 5:11); and "love one another deeply, from the heart" (1 Pet. 1:22). But how can people support us if we pretend to be just fine?

3. *Our honesty frees others to be honest.* If we admit that we grapple with questions of faith, we give others permission to do the same.

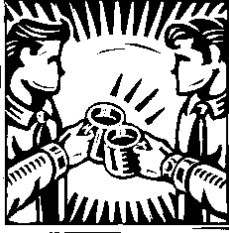
4. *Our honesty gives God the glory.* Paul boasted about his weaknesses, "so that Christ's power may rest on me." We may think God will be glorified by our appearance of perfection. But God is truly glorified by our admission of weakness and our full dependence on His sufficient grace.

—SANDY SHEPPARD

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Discuss

1. Which of the above statements stuck out for you? Why?
2. When was a time you opened up to someone and felt good that you had?
3. How can we encourage greater openness among ourselves? Among the congregation?



What's Your Encouragement Style?

8 ways to affirm others.

1 Thessalonians 5:10–15; Hebrews 3:13

We can uplift and affirm one another in a variety of ways. Circle the two ways you most like to encourage others:

- 1. Speaking.** Proverbs 16:24 says, “Pleasant words are ... sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.” The number of ways we can encourage one another through our speech is almost limitless. One way is to recognize verbally the positive qualities in others’ lives.
- 2. Writing.** The New Testament epistles are proof of the power of written communication. Sometimes a short note to someone who’s discouraged can mean so much. Think creatively. For example, I sometimes leave “I love you” notes in my husband’s lunch bag.
- 3. Being present.** “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted,” says Psalm 34:18. Sometimes God asks us simply to be with others in person on his behalf. We don’t have to speak much; our presence itself can be a deeply encouraging gift.
- 4. Touching.** Jesus often touched people. Scientists are just starting to document the positive effects of touch, which God has known about all along. From a light touch on the forearm to a tight hug, these gestures encourage others wordlessly.
- 5. Praying.** “You help us by your prayers,” Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 1:11. Everyone can have this ministry. My friend Kenneth was immobilized by a stroke as a young adult and can move nothing but his eyes. Yet he’s known as someone who prays for others.
- 6. Showing hospitality.** “Practice hospitality,” says Romans 12:13. The Greek word for hospitality denotes “brotherly love of strangers.” Practicing biblical hospitality means reaching out to the “emotional strangers” who need to experience the heartfelt compassion that comes with the extra plate on the table.
- 7. Giving.** “A generous man will himself be blessed,” says Proverbs 22:9. God wants his people to share their lives with others—their time, their money, their possessions. Any of these can be used creatively to encourage others.
- 8. Helping.** Common jobs and chores—housework, yard work, mending, shoveling snow, baby-sitting—become holy in the ministry of encouragement. “Whatever you do,” says Colossians 3:23, “work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.”

—JEANNE ZORNES

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Discuss

1. What encouraging things have other believers done for you? What effective acts of encouragement have you extended to others?
2. What things don’t seem to work when we’re trying to encourage a hurting person?
3. Have you accepted and thanked God for your encouragement style?



Healing from a Painful Past

How can a congregation move beyond the times of difficulty?

Philippians 4:2–3; Romans 15:1–7

The Case A spirit of distrust of boards has pervaded Parkway Church. The church had to call business meetings on three consecutive Sundays in an attempt to pass a budget. People believed the board was “up to something” or “trying to pull a fast one.”

Several people in the congregation have said, “Our church doesn’t know what it wants to be when it grows up. Who are we? Where are we going?”

Finally, there is nagging criticism of the pastor. One member wrote a 15-page epistle correcting his view of baptism. Another complained that the Sunday evening service was dull. Plus, the board chairman has mildly criticized the youth pastor.

The church atmosphere became a topic at board meetings. The pastor proposed a retreat to rehearse and evaluate the history of the church. During that retreat, stories from the church’s early years came out, marvelous ones: the church was a training ground for evangelism, and pastors came from across the country for training. But those stories aren’t told in the church now, because about 22 years ago the church went through a horrific split. The whole board resigned. In the course of a month, half of 500 people left the church, about 125 one Sunday alone.

Some leaders wept as they remembered the pain.

- What Would You Do?**
- ♦ Twenty-two years is a long time. Can a church split from that long ago be the source of problems now? Why or why not?
 - ♦ What is the value in bringing up the past? The danger in bringing it up?
 - ♦ What would you recommend this board do next?

What Happened The church leaders felt they needed to do something publicly to begin the healing process. The church’s 40th anniversary was their opportunity.

The pastor preached a series on learning from Israel’s history—how God works in good times and bad. He started his first sermon by reading the minutes of that church-splitting board meeting. Some people did not understand: “Why are you dredging up the past? There are so few here from that time.”

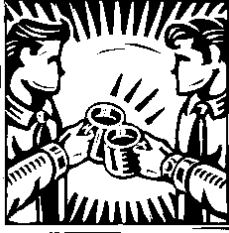
The church also decided to create a service on Good Friday to bring healing. One of the most painful events in the split was when the entire choir joined another church. So the congregation joined in worship with that congregation where the choir members had gone. The service was packed. The sermon was on “By his wounds, you were healed,” and the service included Communion.

“There was a sense of both sorrow and repentance followed by healing, unity, and joy,” the pastor reports. One couple spoke to people they hadn’t talked to in 22 years.

Through this process, the pastor says, the church has become a safer, warmer, more open community.

—KENNETH QUICK

- Discuss**
1. What things can a church’s leaders do now to help a church heal from its past?
 2. What has caused pain in our church’s history?
 3. What have we done, if anything, to bring healing? What could we do?



The God Who Shares Your Pain

“God-with-us” is our best and deepest comfort.

Matthew 1:21–23; John 1:1–14

Read
(Matthew 1:22-23)

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us”.

Comprehend

We have lost the simple but difficult gift of being present to each other. We say, “Why should I visit this person? I can’t do anything anyway. I don’t even have anything to say. Of what use can I be?”

We have forgotten that it is often in “useless,” unpretentious, humble presence to each other that we feel consolation and comfort. Simply being with someone is difficult because it asks that we share in the other’s vulnerability, enter with him or her into the experience of weakness and powerlessness, become part of uncertainty, and give up control and self-determination. And still, whenever this happens, new strength and new hope are being born.

Those who offer us comfort and consolation by being and staying with us in moments of illness, mental anguish, or spiritual darkness often grow as close to us as those with whom we have biological ties. They show their solidarity with us by willingly entering the dark, uncharted spaces of our lives.

Likewise, God is a God-with-us, a God who came to share our lives in solidarity. It does not mean that God solves our problems, shows us the way out of our confusion, or offers answers for our many questions. He might do all of that, but his solidarity consists in the fact that he is willing to enter with us into our problems, confusions, and questions.

That is the good news of God’s taking on human flesh.

As soon as we call God “God-with-us,” we enter into a new relationship of intimacy with him. By calling him Immanuel, we recognize that he has committed himself to live in solidarity with us, to share our joys and pains, to defend and protect us, and to suffer all of life with us. We will never really know God as a compassionate God if we do not understand with our heart and mind that he lived among us (John 1:14).

How do we know this as anything more than a beautiful idea? We know this because in Jesus, God’s compassion became visible to us. Jesus has embraced everything human with the infinite tenderness of his compassion.

—HENRI J. M. NOUWEN, DOUGLAS A. MORRISON, and DONALD P. MCNEIL

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Discuss

1. When has someone comforted you by simply “being there” during a tough time?
2. When did you realize that God really is present with us?
3. How can we encourage people in our church to support each other even when they think they don’t have anything to offer?



Why Join a Church?

A defense of an old-fashioned idea.

Acts 2:41–47; Ephesians 5:29–32

Read *Those who accepted [Peter’s] message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. ... And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:41, 47).*

Comprehend Why emphasize church membership? Because every Christian is a member of the church, that’s why. “The same act which sets us in Christ,” writes P.T. Forsyth, “sets us also in the society of Christ.” When a Christian joins a particular congregation, he or she merely bears witness to a union that is already the case spiritually.

The rejoinder is: “If we all are already spiritually joined together in the body of Christ, what’s the big deal about membership in a local congregation? What can a membership card add?”

Paul’s metaphor of the church as the bride of Christ can help us here. Can you imagine a man saying to his fiancée, “Dear, we are spiritually one. Please, let’s not spoil it by having a public ceremony and moving under the same roof and making love and opening a joint checking account and getting all organized to live together. Let’s keep this lovely thing spiritual.” The fiancée might well doubt the future of their relationship.

In the New Testament, the reality of the spiritual is measured by the degree to which it becomes physical. To join a particular part of the body of Christ is not to bring something into existence that was not there before. It is simply to make actual what is spiritual, to prove that the spiritual is real.

It is true that a name on a membership roll makes for nothing in itself. But how seriously can we take a person who says he wants to be part of the church but doesn’t want to sign his name publicly?

It is true the organized church is filled with foibles. But are those who shun a commitment free of foibles?

Yes, the church is blemished. But Christ still loves her, says Paul, not because she is without blemish but that he might one day present her so. He sees the church, warts and all, and knows he must first love that which he would change.

The church on the corner is not the church it should be, but it is the church that will one day be all God has called it to be. To go public and join is the first step in loving it as Jesus does.

—BEN PATTERSON

- Discuss**
1. How is church membership a form of Christian witness?
 2. What does your own “membership card” mean to you? Why?
 3. What message would we like to send about membership in this church?



6 Ways to Care

Varied strategies for a church to help people in need.

Luke 10:25–37; Ephesians 4:11–13

Every church wants to be known as a church that cares. And most congregations realize the key to effectiveness is having lay people respond to a wide variety of members' needs. But how? Which structures work best?

- 1. Friendship Strategy:** When Nancy and her family moved to our town, her husband, John, wasn't a Christian. His first involvement with our church was playing on our softball team. He made several friends, and six months later, when he was injured in an auto accident, the first people to visit the hospital were his softball teammates. Any program that develops relationships increases the availability of care.
- 2. Shepherding Strategy:** The congregation is divided into care groups (often on a geographical basis), with each group assigned to one official representative of the church, usually a deacon or deaconess. The representatives contact the people on their care lists to inquire about needs and to offer help.
- 3. Counseling Strategy:** A counselor may be lay or professional, but the care provider has a well-defined role. The agenda for the relationship is therapeutic. Care is provided at scheduled times, and people needing care take the initiative to make an appointment. Counseling has a place in any comprehensive care plan.
- 4. Body Life Strategy:** Unlike other strategies, which provide care in private, this one offers care in public, community settings. Some churches regularly set aside a worship service (or portion of the service) for sharing needs. People may come forward to receive personal ministry; others lay on hands and pray.
- 5. Support Group Strategy:** Alcoholics, victims of sexual abuse, people with fragile sexual identities, people with cancer, people with physical disabilities—the list of people who could respond to support group ministry is long. Because care is offered by people who share their struggle, many see support groups as safe places to receive care.
- 6. Team Strategy:** A team responds to a specific need. One team takes care of shut-ins. Another responds to families experiencing medical crises. Other teams focus on new members, people at risk of leaving the church, and other recognizable pools of people.

—DALE S. RYAN

Discuss

1. Which strategies have we tried? Which have worked best for us?
2. Which support groups seem most needed?
3. How would you suggest we improve our approaches to caring for people?



When Members Cry for Help

How to recognize and respond when people are about to drop out of church.

2 Corinthians 13:7–10; Ephesians 4:26–27

Ninety-five percent of inactive church members have experienced a cluster of “anxiety-producing events”—a snub, a lack of care when really needed, a moral lapse by a church leader. If we learn to hear and respond to people’s cries for help, we can usually prevent their dropping out.

Recognizing cries for help

A verbal cry for help may sound like this: “I don’t know if I want to continue coming to this church. If there is one thing I can’t stand, it’s hypocrites.”

Or it could be more subtle: “You know, all the men but me in our Sunday school class have had promotions at work.”

I worked with a woman in Christian education for two years and never once heard a complaint. Then one day in the midst of a long paragraph she let slip just one sentence: “I’m not sure I can do this job much longer.”

If we miss the verbal cries for help, we at least have a string of nonverbal cries to alert us to the problem:

- ◆ Leaving worship
- ◆ Leaving committees
- ◆ Leaving Sunday school
- ◆ Pulling the kids out of Sunday school
- ◆ Sending a letter of resignation
- ◆ Dropping their pledge

Responding to the cries for help

In one church I served we took fifteen minutes at the end of every board meeting for board members to report who, in their estimation, was crying for help. We gave the names to a team of trained callers.

When we call on an inactive family, or one heading that direction, we’re probably going to deal with anger. If we are willing to hear some pain, reconciliation will often occur.

When I heard that woman in Christian education say, “I’m not sure I can do this job much longer,” I didn’t say anything right then. But when I saw her the next Sunday morning in the hallway, I said, “Sally, I have a feeling you might be upset about some things in church, particularly in the Christian education area.”

“Can I talk with you this week?” she said.

She came in the following Thursday with all her teaching materials. Even before she sat down, she said, “You’re not going to like what I’m about to tell you, but I’m going to resign.”

I listened to her story for an hour and a half, and I heard from her the classic phrase of one who is thinking of leaving: “I don’t want to leave the church. I love the church, but I’m tired.” She was overworked, so we renegotiated her workload, and she stayed.

The key is hearing the story first.

—JOHN S. SAVAGE

Discuss

1. Why is listening so important with people who are about to drop out?
2. What has worked best to encourage inactive members to return to our church?
3. What first step could we take to reach out in a more effective way?



Why 40 Is a Fellowship Barrier

What size should church groups be? That depends.

Exodus 18:14–24; Acts 6:1–7

Whenever human beings gather in a voluntary association that emphasizes relationships, there's a natural tendency to limit the size to fewer than 40 people. Here's what church leaders should know about this "Rule of 40" and what to do about it.

Four sizes of groups

1. *The face-to-face group.* Nearly every researcher on small-group dynamics reports that when a group grows beyond seven members, the benefits of the small group begin to erode. That is one reason why most committees naturally consist of five to seven persons.

2. *The "overgrown" small group.* If members are well-acquainted with one another and see each other at least once or twice a week, this group, which may range between 8 and 17 members, can still enjoy many of the small-group dynamics. This is the most common size for a church choir, a youth group, or church council.

3. *The middle-sized group.* The Rule of 40 begins to apply: 35 or 40 is about as large as a group can become with the relationships of members as the basic organizing principle. As a group moves toward 40, most techniques and principles for strengthening cohesion in a small group lose their value. These include using a circle as the basic seating arrangement, asking participants to introduce themselves to the entire group, encouraging everyone to share in the discussion, expecting each member to relate to all of the other members, and assuming that each member will develop a strong loyalty to the group.

4. *The large group.* The group consists of more than 40. The focal point tends to be the leader or the task, not the relationships of the members to one another.

What should church leaders do?

In congregations where groups, classes, or choirs have leveled off with 24 to 36 regular participants, leaders have three basic choices:

- ◆ be content with the status quo;
- ◆ expand the number of small and middle-sized groups; or
- ◆ introduce large-group procedures to enable some of the groups to grow.

These include: (a) requiring a commitment from each member to the common task, such as the special Easter anthem; (b) taking a strong leadership role; (c) utilizing a longer time-frame for planning. If a choir, for example, fluctuates in size between 35 and 45, the group will need to shift to greater reliance on large-group techniques or the group will continue to fluctuate.

It's also time to consider the need for large-group techniques when:

- ◆ interviewing candidates for youth director or program director;
- ◆ in a period of rapid growth;
- ◆ contemplating a building program; or
- ◆ preparing a church-growth strategy.

—LYLE E. SCHALLER

Discuss

1. If a group is middle-sized, how should we decide whether to (a) do nothing, (b) start more groups that size, or (c) introduce large-group approaches?
2. Which groups in our church are feeling the Rule of 40? What would you recommend for those groups?



Thankful Connections

Listing the reasons you appreciate others can solidify your bond with them.

Philippians 1:1–8

Let's take a cue from the words of thanksgiving in Paul's prayer for the Philippian Christians. He began by thanking God for his fellow believers, thus deepening his connection with them in the most foundational way. When believers today follow his example, expressing thanks for one another, the bond among them also grows stronger.

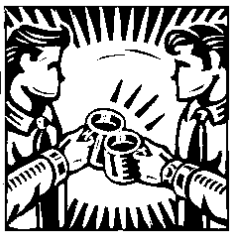
Setting

Use this exercise in board meetings, small groups, staff retreats, Sunday school classes, ministry teams, or other small group settings.

Exercise

1. Read Philippians 1:3-8 aloud.
2. Explain to group members that you'll use the next 30 to 45 minutes simply expressing thanks for each member. When we affirm fellow Christians, we honor God, who has placed these people in our lives.
3. Start with one group member and say something like: "Let's take a few minutes to thank God for Jeff. What do you see in Jeff's life that prompts you to thank God for Jeff? What brings you joy when Jeff comes to mind?"
Be prepared with a comment or two if no one speaks up immediately. After one or two comments, the affirmations should start bubbling forth naturally.
People should tell brief stories or share brief descriptions of qualities in the person's life. For example, "I thank God for Sarah because she always has a kind word even when she's having a tough day." Or, "I thank God for Ron because he's always volunteering his time to help people with their computer problems." Or, "I thank God for Linda because she prays so faithfully for friends who need the Lord."
4. Budget your time so each group member will be the subject of discussion for 4 to 6 minutes, depending on the number of participants and the time available. Be careful not to spend inordinate time on the first couple of members. Otherwise, you may run short of time.
5. At the end of the session, ask group members to join hands as they sit or stand. Lead in a closing prayer that reflects Paul's words in Philippians 1:3-8 and offer praise to God for the believers in the group. Close by asking God to solidify the bond that holds you together in the unity of the Spirit.

—STEVEN D. MATHEWSON



Further Exploration

10 resources to guide you in creating warmer fellowship.

LEADERSHIP Journal Special Issue on “Church Atmosphere”

The premier practical journal for church leaders devoted an issue to developing an inviting and healthy biblical community. Read this issue online for free: www.leadershipjournal.net, click on “Archives,” scroll down and click on the issue.

Building a Contagious Church by Mark Mittelberg

Mittelberg gives guidance for helping your church become a magnet that draws people and holds them together (Zondervan, 2000; ISBN 0310221498).

Christian Community by Rob Suggs

Through Christ’s body, the church, we find our gifts and experience worship, healing and power. The twelve lessons in this Bible study explore how we can grow in loving one another (InterVarsity, 1994; ISBN 0830810714).

Community 101: Reclaiming the Church as Community of Oneness by Gilbert Bilezikian

Building the church as a family that works together (Zondervan, 1997; ISBN 0310217415).

Discovering the Church: Twelve Studies for Small Groups; Becoming Part of God’s New Community by Don Cousins

You can use these studies personally or in a group to find out how your church can build unity (Zondervan, 1992; ISBN 0310591732).

Ephesians: Building a Community in Christ by John Stott

Community is a special focus of Ephesians. Stott tells how this message applies in our churches (InterVarsity, 1993; ISBN 0830820337).

Leading the Team-Based Church: How Pastors and Church Staffs Can Grow Together Into a Powerful Fellowship of Leaders by George Cladis

This book enables pastors and church staffs to build teams within the church (Jossey-Bass, 1999; ISBN 0787941190).

Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Martyred by the Gestapo in 1945, German pastor-theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer left writings such as this classic on true Christian community (Harper San Francisco, 1978; ISBN 0060608528).

One Anothering: Building Spiritual Community in Small Groups by Richard C. Meyer

Meyer specializes in helping churches build closeness within small groups (Innisfree Press, 1999; ISBN 1880913356).

Relationships: Resolving Conflict and Building Community by *The Navigators*

This Bible study examines the community God has designed for us (Navpress, 1997; ISBN 1576830233).



Sample Retreat Schedule

How to use this theme of “Creating Community” at a weekend retreat.

SMALLGROUPS.COM Training Themes expand easily into a retreat format. Here is a sample retreat schedule you may follow for the Creating Community theme. The purposes of this retreat are (a) to build a greater sense of community in your leadership team, and (b) to teach how to create greater community in the church.

Friday Evening

- ◆ 8–8:45 P.M. **Opening Session:** Hand out copies of “None of Us Are Sinners Emeritus,” the interview with Bruce Larson on pages 4-5, and allow time for each person to read it. Then form groups of three or four. Have each group discuss the questions at the bottom of the page. Reconvene for the last 20 minutes and have the groups share their comments and consider what it may mean for the church.
- ◆ 9–9:45 P.M. **Assessment:** Then pass out “10 Rules for Respect,” which lays out guidelines for constructive and healthy communication, on page 6. After discussing those, if your group is ready, have them sign a covenant to communicate in this way during the coming year.

Saturday Morning

- ◆ 9–9:45 A.M. **Devotional:** Set the tone for the day by handing out (or presenting) the devotional, “The God Who Shares Your Pain” (p. 10).
- ◆ 10–11 A.M. **Article:** Hand out “6 Ways to Care,” a how-to article on page 12, to each participant. After each person has read it, discuss the questions at the bottom. Ask, “Based on this discussion, what are some practical ways we can improve the way we care for people in the church?”
- ◆ 11 A.M.–NOON. **Bible Study:** Then use “The Power of Like-Mindedness,” a Bible study on page 3. You can either photocopy and pass out the study or use the handout as your notes.
- ◆ NOON–**Lunch.**

Saturday Afternoon

- ◆ 1–2 P.M. **Final Group Session:** Close the retreat with the activity, “Thankful Connections,” on page 15. This activity builds closeness in your team and models the kind of affirmation that can spread throughout the church.

Pray together, asking God for help as you continue to create community within the church.