

Icebreaker: What Comforts You?

Group members take turns discussing where they go for comfort.

Tami Rudkin | posted 4/12/2003

Bring a heating pad, an old hot water bottle, a plate of chocolate chip cookies, or all three as symbols of "comfort." Use this item as an illustration of our need for comfort. Pass this item around the group while each person answers this question: Where, or to whom (besides a spouse), do you turn for comfort? A follow-up question might be: Why do you turn to this person? What is it you look for when you're in need of comfort?

4 Challenges That Kill Community Part 2

How to grapple with time, avoidance, strange people, and unrealistic expectations?

Bill Search | posted 3/01/2010

The Challenge of Strange People

The third challenge to cultivating relationships is what we in pastoral circles are often tempted to call "weirdoes." Some call them ECR (extra care required) or EGR (extra grace required) people. Some gently refer to them as Emotional Black Holes. But to put things simply, they are strange. We don't want to give these people our email addresses or cell phone numbers, much less spend time in a group with them.

Most of us have a weirdo or two in our lives. Maybe it's End Times Larry, who sees the imminent return of Christ in every newspaper headline. Or it could be Needy Ned, who "just wants a special woman to share his life with." Maybe it's Steve the Bible Expert, who always knows more about the intricacies of the Bible than anyone else in the history of humanity. Or it could be Bill the amateur comedian (okay that's me). Some of us have the weirdo in our small group. And as the saying goes, if you can't identify the extra grace required person in your group, it's probably you!

I think John Ortberg said it best in his book Everybody's Normal 'Til You Get to Know Them. Ortberg writes that we all have an "as-is" tag. Like the seconds rack at the back of a department store, we are all slightly imperfect. We are all weird. But you know what? Odd people have a lot to teach us. Jesus says that "When you [take care of] the least of these my brothers and sisters you were doing it for me" (Matthew 25:40). It's the castaway people that often provide the best opportunity for us to learn to love. In fact, the more we love them, the more we love God.

John puts it this way: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:20-21). Strange people are a gift to your group. They are a gift from God. Part of our job as cultivators of community is to help group leaders learn from

the strange people in their groups. Yes, some unique people might not fit in a group. But most odd folks can be part of a group—if the group learns to love like Jesus loves.

The Challenge of Unreal Expectations

The fourth challenge to cultivating relationships and building community is unreal expectations. Let's face it: we all have expectations—we just usually think ours are reasonable. But here are a few of the expectations often placed on small groups: intimacy, accountability, evangelism, deep fellowship, deep worship, emergency service personnel, and so on. Sometimes our church leadership expects a small group to take a person from unbeliever to missionary in two years—in a group that meets every other week and takes summers and holidays off!

But perhaps the biggest challenge is the expectation of intimacy. Let me ask you: how often have you tried to "sell" small groups based on intimacy? You know, you promised deep friendships; you told perspective members that if they joined a group, they would grow closer than a family. Does this happen often or rarely?

In his book *The Search to Belong*, Joe Myers points out that human beings only need a few intimate relationships. We need lots of social and personal relationships, but intimacy isn't required to enjoy a relationship. In fact, intimacy can deter it. Imagine you're in a couples small group and one of the men shares that he really struggles with lust. He tells the couples circled around the coffee table how difficult it is not to look at women and take a sensual snap shot. That's an intimate level of sharing! But do you think that would help the group or harm it?

It's not that a small group shouldn't be intimate, but when people expect a certain level of intimacy they will usually get ticked off if the group stays on the surface. Some people expect their small group to be an intense Bible Study, for example—especially people who have a background in Bible-Study Fellowship or Campus Crusade or The Navigators. If you expect a typical small group to morph into an in-depth exploration of biblical texts, you will be disappointed. It's not that we want "shallow," it's that we can't agree what deep is!

In order to address these unreal expectations, it's important for a group to honestly talk about what each member hopes to experience in the group. And when a member voices an unreal expectation, it is more than okay for the leader to set expectations that are more reasonable.

One final thing concerning community killers in our small-group ministries: there are no barriers that can't be overcome with the help from God's Spirit and the willing hearts of group participants. So go out and knock some down.

*—Bill Search is the author of *Simple Small Groups* (Baker, 2008) and writes regularly at www.simplesmallgroups.com; copyright 2010 by the author and Christianity Today International.*