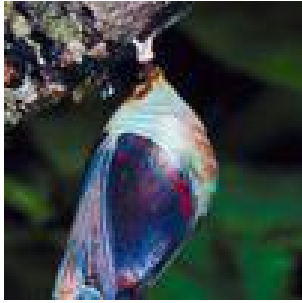


# Looking for Life-Change

How do small groups aid in the process of transformation?

by Jenn Peppers and Tara Miller | posted 3/02/2009



Transformation is our goal in small groups. At the same time, it is something that is not up to us. God is the author of transformation. We cannot, by following certain steps or doing the right thing, bring about transformation in our own life or the lives of others. The most we can do is simply be open to it—to put ourselves, and our groups, in the best position possible for God to do his work.

So what can small groups do to help bring about transformation? It would be nice to have "five steps toward transformation" or an acronym of the word transformation—"T" is for "take time to reflect..." But transformation cannot be wrapped up with a pretty bow. There's no formula. No way to plan for it.

Deep transformation is possible for people in small-group community, but skills and spiritual maturity on the part of the facilitator are often the vehicles the Spirit uses to get us there. Transformation is the end; skills are the bridge that helps us cross the chasm to get there. As facilitators, we develop skills and maturity to maintain openness to our own transformation and to be used by God as an agent of transformation in the lives of others.

Given the lack of a formula, we cannot make transformation happen. We lack that power. But we can open the door and invite God in. So following are a few scattered thoughts about how facilitators can help their groups maintain a posture of openness to the transformation that God will bring about as he chooses. Here are our thoughts—ways to try to maintain an openness to what God may be doing.

## Engage in Personal Transformation

First, we need to engage in our own transformation and notice how God may be speaking to us and respond to our own transformational opportunities in order to take notice of the opportunities in the lives of others. Viewing transformation as an activity needed by others but not ourselves moves us into dangerous territory.

*Spend time in prayer.* Since God is the sole source of transformation, we need to ask him to do his work in us. Prayer will help bring about a posture of openness, both individual and corporate.

*Take time to reflect.* We don't often take the time necessary to be transformed in our culture—we have an inordinate fear of free time. Without taking the time to reflect on our experiences, it's unlikely we'll gain wisdom from those experiences, much less transformation. Small groups provide the somewhat unique opportunity in our culture as a place to process with a group of people rather than in isolation or one-on-one. They provide space for reflection—take advantage of that.

*Be in deeper community with others.* Transformation rarely happens in isolation, but it's also less likely in a large group. It often takes a smaller group to help us see what's going on in and around us.

Kent was struggling with trust in his marriage. He had been burned in his relationship with his ex-wife who was unfaithful. So this time around he came up with a plan to protect himself. He tried to impose strict boundaries on his current wife in order to feel safe, but those boundaries became increasingly restrictive and unhealthy. He sought to prevent any interaction between his wife and other men. Kent's wife became increasingly worried and felt he didn't trust her. Eventually she started pushing back on the boundaries he was trying to impose.

Kent confided in a friend from their couples group. The friend calmly said, "I'm glad she isn't putting up with your rules. Who would?" Kent hoped to hear that he wasn't unreasonable, she was. Instead what he heard was, "Who would put up with me?" Kent continued to ask himself this question and came to the same conclusion: No one. And he began to experience transformation. He was freed to love and trust more deeply, and he did.

## Express the Spirit of Christ

*Show grace.* When a storm comes, it's a very different experience being shown grace instead of judgment. That's easy to say, but much harder to live out. Look back on your own life at your time of

greatest failure and ask what it would have been like to have been shown grace at that point, and what it would have been like to have been shown judgment. What would have been different? Grace in the face of failure is one of the most powerful experiences of God that we'll ever experience.

*Show faith in others.* Believe that God is at work in others' lives, even when you can't see it. Be patient and know that anything is possible. See yourself as one that walks alongside others rather than dragging them along like an unwilling donkey.

*Be curious.* Listen carefully as you read Scripture, pray, engage in conversations and ask questions. What does God want to reveal of himself? Or what is he revealing about us that we need to see?

*Show love.* Many people have experienced God in less-than-perfect small groups and in less-than-perfect churches, because love was shown. When a group cares about people and cares about God, God will show up.

Pam received an e-mail from an address she didn't recognize. Then she saw that it was from a woman who attended a small group her father (now deceased) had facilitated when she was a child. The woman wrote that she joined his small group in 1980, shortly after becoming a believer. She was writing to tell Pam how much her father had influenced her, how her spiritual life evolved over the years, and how she'd made a recent decision to lead a small group with the hope that she could pass on that experience to someone else.

She wrote, "I can't tell you how much he stressed his love for all of us and how he carried us on his heart." Now that the woman has begun leading her own group, she wrote, "I can honestly say that I have a deep love for each one of these people. Your father set an amazing example for me. And he left an amazing legacy."

## **Cultivate Awareness**

*Be aware of opportunities for transformation.* There are times when we are more open to change and movement than usual. Sometimes it's during a major life crisis, like a move or a breakup. Whatever the circumstance, look for ways those circumstances can propel us toward increased dependence on God. Watch for those opportunities and encourage people to engage with God as they weather the storm.

*Stay in touch with our experience.* We can tap into our own transformational experience to help others. This does not mean shifting the focus to ourselves or our own experiences—for God often works in very different ways with different people—but simply being in touch with our own stories brings renewed empathy and understanding as we engage with others.

*Be aware of our own sin.* An awareness of what we are capable of goes a long way. We all stand in need of grace and transformation. Pride does nothing but stand in the way. Modeling humility, honesty and an awareness of our own sin will open the way for others to do so as well. The group is a reflection of the facilitator. If the group members hear the facilitator talking about his or her sin and struggles, they are more likely to regard the group as a safe place and open up about their own struggles.

J. J. recently started attending a small group. Unlike many spiritual explorers who are comfortable hanging on the sidelines of churches and maintaining their anonymity, J. J. dove into the deep end. After visiting one or two services, he began going to social events, service events, and a small group. He built relationships and was up front about where he was at—a season of spiritual exploration. And he was checking out Christianity.

J. J. had been through a recent breakup with his girlfriend and had just been laid off from his job. He sensed that a season of potential transformation was upon him and he was searching for it, actively opening himself up to God. He used his sudden extra time to read about world religions. He came to group with questions.

One night, the group was taking time to pray and for the first time since he started coming, J. J. prayed aloud. The presence of God was thick in the room. Everyone could feel it. J. J. was praying, telling God that he now believed and wanted to take the next step, whatever it was. It was a step of faith, a moment of transformation.

—Taken from [Finding the Flow](#), by Tara Miller and Jenn Peppers. © 2008 by Jennifer Peppers and Tara Miller. Used by permission of InterVarsity Press, P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL, 60515-1426. [www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com).