

Choosing Trust

Why the hardest decision in a small group is also the most important

I've never had a great small-group experience. I've heard people talk about the depth of relationships, personal transformation, and meaningful fellowship that can only be found in a small-group context, but I haven't experienced it. My small-group experiences haven't been bad, but they haven't delivered the depth that others have found. One of the most important reasons for this is something that eluded me until recently—something I subconsciously chose that set me up for mediocrity.

My first long-term small group was formed with a few of my best friends in high school. We assembled, half awake, every Friday morning at a local restaurant for breakfast with our local Campus Life leader. Over hot chocolate, biscuits and gravy, and cinnamon rolls we began by discussing Scripture. This part of our weekly gathering was no sweat—we had all grown up in church and were very comfortable talking about the Bible.

But as our time together drew to a close, our leader would inevitably move toward the dreaded accountability time. One by one we would share the mildest struggles we'd encountered in the past week with somber faces and understanding nods. Then we'd pray for strength to resist our horrible sins—the whole time knowing the struggles we had voiced were tame compared to the real struggles we were facing. We were good friends, but we only trusted each other to a point. The potential depth of our relationships stayed hidden with the realities of life we refused to share.

My other significant small-group experience came later in life, after I was married. My wife, Michelle, and I joined three other couples from our church and began meeting every other week. This group also had the starting point of friendship as we chose each other based on established relationships. We started our meeting time with dessert and conversation, moved to a book study, and ended by sharing things about our lives and praying for each other. We thoroughly enjoyed our time with these couples, and Michelle and I both would have said that we trusted the others in the group—but our sharing of life struggles and issues was similar to my high school group. There was a depth beyond which we did not venture.

Why did these two groups, comprised of good friends, fail to move to the deepest level of relationship, sharing, and support? Put simply, we *chose* not to trust each other. We didn't make a conscious choice to keep our relationships safe, but we didn't make an effort to go beyond the established level of comfort. We believed that trust and new levels of intimacy would come with time.

The Choice

Until recently I had never questioned the idea that trust takes time to develop, but I should have. One evening Michelle and I were discussing our fledgling church plant and she shared her

newfound conviction that we needed to trust each other from the beginning. She said we should assume the others could be trusted unless someone proved otherwise. This was a revolutionary thought for me! If those who have put their faith in Christ really are a family, as the Bible says, then we should assume that we can trust each other.

Michelle's revelation came in part from time reflecting on the example of a woman who courageously chose to trust. Her name was Karen, and she was a part of the Sunday school class Michelle and I attended at our church in Denver. Karen's choice to trust was truly amazing. In a class of more than 30 people, she would regularly bare her soul, asking us to pray for things that most people wouldn't tell their closest friends.

The Benefits of Trust

Karen's choice to trust brothers and sisters in Christ, some of whom she barely knew, had a couple important results. First, she was deeply respected. I've often been afraid to share what's really going on in my life because I assume people will not respect me if I do, especially as a pastor. That fear comes straight from Satan. The few people I have known who chose to be radically trusting are among the people I respect most. I don't know of anyone who listened to Karen's honest requests for prayer and thought, "And she calls herself a Christian?" Choosing to trust has the opposite effect we expect it to have. Rather than making us a fool in the eyes of others, we gain their respect and set an example for them to follow.

The second result of Karen's choice to trust was that others began trusting her. Because she trusted first, most people felt safe trusting her as well. People didn't feel they needed to hide anything with Karen. There's something disarming about knowing someone trusts you. It gives you a desire to keep their trust and makes it seem natural to trust them in return. Even relationships with people you only see periodically are able to move past the surface.

Making the choice to trust is not easy, and it does carry inherent risk. People may prove untrustworthy. Someone may betray our trust, but any real relationship carries risk. It is likely that we will be hurt by someone we thought we could trust in our life, whether we guard ourselves or not. But choosing to trust others from the outset gives us the opportunity to have many more meaningful relationships than we would have otherwise.

There are many factors that go into the success, or lack thereof, of a small group. But choosing to trust is an important one. Sure, it's possible that over the course of years we will develop a mutual ability to trust others, but making the choice to trust from the beginning bypasses months and even years of the awkward relational dance of never-ending small talk. Someone just has to have the courage to go first.

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