

Does Your Small Group Need a Vacation?

How to tell if and when you need a break this summer

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I haven't always been a fan of small groups taking vacations during the year. However, the longer I minister in groups, the more I relax and understand the benefit of short or extended breaks. And the more I understand the benefits, the more I am willing to even encourage groups to take a break—under specific situations.

When Group Members Can't Attend

Your group may need a vacation during seasons of the year when group members have difficulty attending small-group meetings. Such hiatuses are most common during the summer and the month of December.

Taking a break during the month of December takes much of the pressure off the holiday season—a time filled with many other demands and activities that take place in our churches and communities. During the summer, many families take vacations, need to spend extra time doing yard work, or want more time for recreation activities that can only happen when it's warm. As a result, many groups see attendance become sporadic, at best. Rather than making people feel guilty for not showing up, a vacation may be the best option.

When There's a Shift in Focus

Small groups may also need a vacation to provide a distinct break in the purpose or function of a group. Whether we notice or not, any small group can lose sight of its original focus and purpose. Or, the purpose of a group (as determined by the group leader or larger authority within the church) can change—even when group members don't want it to. So taking a break can assist in giving the old purpose some closure and providing space between the memory of the old and the potential of the new.

When the Group Becomes Stale

Small groups may also need a vacation to keep things fresh. It's easy for groups to get in a rut, and one of the best ways to get out of those ruts is to change things up a little bit—even if only for a short time. That doesn't mean group members need to take a break from ever seeing or contacting each other; it may just mean a break from the normal meeting time and agenda.

For example, groups may consider meeting once or twice a month for fun and fellowship, instead of always focusing on a study of Scripture. The idea is just to provide something different than the norm as a kind of "refresh" button. Go camping, go to a sporting event, gather in someone's home for games, share a meal together, do an outreach project, and so on. The ideas for fun and fellowship are endless.

Not for Everyone

Not every group needs to take a vacation. If group attendance is strong and growing, and has momentum behind it, then a vacation may be counter-productive. To make the best decision, group leaders simply need to be sensitive to the collective attitude of the group—especially the level of commitment when it comes to

Discuss:

1. When was the last time I was refreshed by a summer vacation? What did I do, or where did I go, that made the time so invigorating?
2. When was the last time our small group took a break from regular meetings? What were the positive and negative consequences?
3. Does our small group currently match any of the criteria above? If so, what should we do about it?

Darryl's Dilemma #1

Darryl's group started this past fall. During the past 8 months, the group has gone well. It has lost one person and added three new people, one new person is not yet a Christ-follower. For those who were part of the original group, there have been several testimonies of spiritual growth as a result of their small community. Summer is now approaching and Darryl's not sure if the group should continue to meet over the summer? Darryl feels the group could lose momentum if they take the summer off, but he also knows that group attendance will be sporadic if they continue to meet. Darryl needs to facilitate a discussion about this issue at their next small group gathering. He's not sure what to suggest, or if to suggest a specific course of action about summer meetings. If you were Darryl, how would you handle the discussion of the summer break issue?

YOUR RESPONSES

I would gather everyone together with their schedules and plan a few meetings for the summer months. I would not start a new book series, but would have random lessons through the summer months. In connection with the small group meetings I would plan events. Depending on the age of the small group one could have a pool party or a cook out, etc...*Benjamin Joseph Szweda, CVCC*

Darryl should be up front with his group about the dilemma. Since his group is fairly new, he should assume leadership and confidently tell them his plan for the summer. (He is the leader, and will most likely have more wisdom on this issue than some others in his group.) He should be sensitive to the fact that some in the group will be desiring a change, while some will not. Therefore, a middle ground would be to continue meeting weekly, but change from a structured format to a more open one, such as having each member come prepared to discuss a different passage of the Bible each week, or to view and discuss video segments intended for Christian small groups. In this way, he maintains the momentum of the group while offering some degree of change that people often want for a laid-back summer. *Sara, Grace Community Church, Noblesville, IN*

This is almost exactly the situation our group found itself in as well. We took last summer off because as leaders we were exhausted, but the group wasn't happy not meeting at all. This year we shared much more of the group facilitation responsibilities so everyone seems to be at the same level of enthusiasm. This summer, we decided to meet every other week (instead of every week), with each family signing up to plan a meeting. They can have a fellowship, a service or outreach project, or just a regular meeting. This will keep the group connected, provide variety, and continue distributing the work around--so that in the fall we should all be ready to resume our normal schedule. (NOTE: We expect only about half attendance at any given meeting due to vacations, etc.) *Renee Newton, Calvary Baptist Church*

All of the ideas posted so far sound pretty good; it just depends on the group itself, the leadership, and how much leeway they have from the church body itself. I think for change of pace, several local ministry opportunities would be good, such as help clean up a parishioner's yard when they're not able to get it done, minor car repairs for single moms, etc. *Donna Rosenquist (Reader Response)*

One of our groups decided to pull together a "serving" or "project" mission team. They would meet once a month to do a community project of sorts. This takes at least one person in the group who is a planner of sorts. If you have this person then you should succeed. *Kevin Mann Jackson (Reader Response)*

We leave the decision to each group. Some of our hosts and leaders feel they need a break, but they all have included their groups in the decision. So I have asked that each group plan an activity, at least twice during the summer, and I am planning a large group gathering in August. A couple of our groups want to continue through the summer. The group containing some of our young couples and singles has decided they want to continue meeting. They plan to make it a little lighter and share responsibilities. *Nancy Harrison (Reader Response)*

How one handles the summer depends on how the small groups are viewed. Our groups are the core of who we are. Practically everything we think of as "church" happens in the small groups; we have little else going. We might sooner cancel the Sunday celebrations (which, of course, would never happen!) If, on the other hand, the groups are interest-based, do 3-month-long studies, etc., and are one of many activities happening in the church, then perhaps a summer break or a reduced schedule would work well. It just depends on how the small groups fit into the bigger program of the church. *Bob Hirsch (Reader Response)*

Darryl's Dilemma #2

A year has passed and Darryl's group is facing the same decision again. The group took a break last summer, but it almost killed the group. The group got together a couple of times over the summer last year but when it was time start regular group meetings in the Fall, half the group decided they were now too busy to commit to the group. Over the Fall and Winter the remaining members reached out to new people and grew the group back up both numerically and spiritually. Now the group faces the summer question once again. Several in the group have indicated they would like to take the summer off, but Darryl's not so sure this time. He's afraid the same thing might happen that happened last year.

If you were Darryl, how would you handle this dilemma?

Darryl should give the option to his group members if they wish to stay together during the summer or not. The people who want the break WILL take the hiatus. Suggest to those who wish to stay together to find a study that lasts just for the summer so when everyone returns in the fall, they can all be on the same page. *Gary Chupik, Court Street Christian*

Since God doesn't take the summer off, Darryl should keep the group going. Some people will go on vacation but they won't all go at the same time and they will be glad to have a group to come back to. We all still have problems and the need to share the word of God and visit with friends even if it is summer. *Mary Jane Griffin, Maranatha Fellowship Church*

Plan for a fun activity to do each month which involves the whole family; swim party, miniature golfing, family camping, bowling, etc., especially if children are involved. Our groups are dedicated to two meetings per month during the school year and are encouraged to meet at least once per month during the summer vacation time. Scheduling is so difficult during the summer so make small groups a part of the vacation experience. *Donald Mills, Grace Brethren*

He should continue to hold regular meetings over the summer. If the majority of members will be on vacation during the same week of particular meeting date then they may all choose to skip that one meeting but continue on the next scheduled meeting date. *Frank Kovalski, Providence Baptist Church Greencastle, IN*

I feel Darryl should gently and lovingly remind his group what happened last time they didn't meet regularly. They may want to try just getting together for prayer walks around their community and then have an ice cream social and invite their neighbors and friends. They may want to plan a short term missions trip for the summer. This would pull the group together for the summer. *Douglas Keener, Mitchell Berean Church*