

When You Have an Open Door

Here's how to incorporate new members into an existing small group.

by Reid Smith | posted 10/19/2009

Here's a question I hear quite often from small-group leaders: "Our group members are very focused on evangelism and often bring new people to group meetings. What is the best way to incorporate these new members into a group without interrupting that group's intimacy and momentum?"

If your group is in a similar situation, the first thing you need to do is recognize that it's awesome to have group members that are focused on evangelism and bringing new people to your group meetings. This is vital for groups to become healthy and fully balanced, and not everyone gets to experience that.

The second thing you need to understand is this: the belief that new members actually interrupt a small group's intimacy and momentum is largely unsubstantiated and unbiblical. It is a false premise that has become popular in the thinking surrounding small-group ministry because that's what most people *expect* will happen.

The reality is that new members feed into a group's intimacy and momentum. The idea they take away from it comes out of a kind of thinking that is protective, hoarding, territorial, and self-focused. Oftentimes, the group-life produced from that kind of "us four and no more" mindset eventually implodes after coasting to a slow and painful stop. On the other hand, I've observed that the groups with the greatest intimacy and momentum are the ones that are uninhibitedly incorporating new members into their fellowship. The Lord sources life into small groups that let his grace flow in and through them. This also protects your group from spiritual stalemate and relational irritants like pettiness or preoccupation with non-essential theological issues.

That said, there are things you as the group leader need to be sensitive to when incorporating new members, including the following:

- 1. Warmly welcome newcomers into your group.** Learn a little about guests as you greet them and walk them into your gathering space. Do your best to remember facts they share about who they are, their family and friends, and how they found your group. On this note, one of the most simple and powerful ways of helping a newcomer feel "at home" in your group is to call them by their first name each time you refer to them. Connect them with a few people as they come in and help to strike up conversations before your study begins.
- 2. Do not focus on them.** Most guests like to be acknowledged—but they don't like to stand out or be spotlighted in front of a group. If you keep things normal, the group will feel more natural and comfortable to newcomers.
- 3. Do not over-accommodate.** Just be yourself and allow the group to be itself. For example, do not hesitate to pray or worship in your group if newcomers are present.

(Sometimes this is exactly what God uses to gather spiritually-unconvinced people to himself; see [Acts 2:46-47](#).) If somebody needs prayer, pray for them. If you had planned on worshipping, just do it. Do not attempt to explain it for newcomers. They want to see things how they really are and would rather not have you disrupt the flow of what you do on their account.

4. The more people your guests sense a possible connection with, the more likely it is they will want to return. Help newcomers get to know a few others in your group. The likelihood of newcomers returning increases by at least 50 percent if they experience a sense of belonging through their connection with others. This can be cultivated by highlighting things your guests hold in common with other group members, and also by a timely follow-up from the group leader.

5. Find out what subjects your guests have an enthusiasm or expertise in and talk about that. People like to talk about things they know about. Newcomers will feel more empowered and comfortable talking about the things of interest to them. And if you listen attentively, you will show that you are interested in them as a person, not as a project or "mark."

6. When you have guests, leave plenty of time for people to socialize at the end of your group meeting. Newcomers tend to be more interested in being personal toward the *end* of a group rather than the beginning. This will give time to introduce your group members to guests and have relaxed conversations.

7. Follow-up with newcomers before your next meeting to let them know you hope to see them again. If a guest came with somebody, encourage their friend to welcome them back. Sometimes group leaders hold off from following up in this way because they're afraid of being intrusive or coming across as pushy. However, guests appreciate this act of kindness, and it makes your group more inviting overall. If you do not risk the remote possibility of coming across as intrusive in *your* follow-up, newcomers may feel like *they* are intruding.

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