

Making Your Group Real "Friends"

Follow these principles to help people fulfill their longing for true community.

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Don't we all long to be a part of something fun, exciting, and life-giving?

The sitcom *Friends* captured this desire. Every week 50 million people watched six actors pretending to have relationships with one another. Its popularity was fueled by the deep longing we all have to be connected in community.

The advertising world has caught on to this yearning as well. Ads like MCI's promise to connect us with our family and friends. The "felt need" is clear. But the real need is found in the biblical word, *koinonia*, which means "fellowship." God's plan from the beginning was that each one of us would belong to a spiritual community, where we all would be known and we would know others.

How can we create a community like this? How can we connect with one another?

Here are seven principles to help you CONNECT with the people in your group and to help them connect with one another.

1. **Create a one-another community.** In the New Testament there are over 50 different references to "one another": love one another, bear one another's burdens, pray for one another, and serve one another are just a few. This can't happen only on Sunday mornings; it needs to happen in other settings, like small groups.

Once you've invited your circle of friends and they show up, remember you don't have to be a Bible scholar to create a one-another community. Your job is to ask the questions, look around the room, and wait for someone to respond. When someone voices a response, affirm them, no matter what they say. Don't feel like you have to answer every one of the questions yourself. It's like a ping-pong game: just get it started and keep the ball in play.

Another way to create a one-another community upfront is to schedule socials and meals together. Pull families together and get to know each other. Schedule casual gatherings, like a pizza dinner, before the meeting starts. During this time, your group has time to check in on prayer requests. Throughout the six weeks, rotate homes, so that people embrace the group as their own.

2. **Open your heart.** Being authentic lets your group know you don't have it all together either. When we communicate openness, that makes it safer for everybody else to be open as well. It's healthy to say, "You know, good question. I don't know," "I'm not sure," or "I'm lost."

You are the role model, and they'll follow your example. When you're authentic, your group will be more authentic.

3. **Naturally group members together for deeper discussion.** It's important that every meeting permits discussion time. When your group gets larger than 7, it's more difficult for everyone to share. So break into discussion groups of 3-4 people. The more airtime an individual has leads to greater life application; and that's when you'll see lives transformed.

Also, this allows time for people to share prayer requests. You don't want to get halfway around the room during prayer request time and suddenly say, "Oops, we ran out of time." Break into smaller groups so you have time to share prayer requests pray as well as for one another.

Remember when people feel heard, they feel loved; when they feel loved, they return; and when they return, life transformation happens.

4. **Never run from challenges, questions, or even conflict in your group.** Remember, the Bible says, "Iron sharpens iron." The group that doesn't have sparks actually doesn't have as much life. Healthy groups have conflict.

There are practical things you can do, however, to ensure that conflict doesn't dominate your small group. First, agree to make a small group covenant. This agreement outlines the ground rules for your group. If you write down your expectations early on, conflict will occur less later on.

Second, facilitate discussion to help evaluate the progress of your group. After a few weeks, assess how things are going and just throw out the questions: "How's it going? What is one thing you like, one thing you think you'd change if you could?" You may want to have them do it on 3X5 cards to make it safer. Issues that arise from these responses are ones to address immediately so controversy doesn't ensue.

5. **Encourage shared ownership.** When this happens, the group moves from being "your" group to "their" group. Remember to rotate the facilitation of the group at least by the 2nd or 3rd week. Get out your group calendar and record where the group will meet, who will host, who will lead worship, and who will bring refreshments. This will develop ownership on a variety of levels.

Also make sure that each group member has a responsibility. Some people may not be ready to lead worship or plan a ministry project, but everybody can take a responsibility by teaming up and doing something together. It could be planning a social, or following up on absent group members, or participating in a ministry project. Sign them up, pair them up, and follow up. If you don't follow up, it won't happen.

6. **Cultivate a group of friends.** The Bible says that early believers gathered in temple courts and house to house, week to week. This model ensured members would always connect with one another, even if they missed a meeting at the temple.

Because the early church embraced this model, they added to their numbers daily. Everyone wanted to be a part of the fellowship. Who are you going to add to your circle? If you invite friends to join the group, they'll have a greater tendency to come back themselves because they'll be surrounded by friends.

7. **Take time to do life together.** Don't miss anniversaries, wedding parties, baby showers, job promotions, and even house closings. Celebrate one another's lives.

I recently had a birthday, and when I got to the group they made my favorite dinner and favorite dessert. They asked how they could pray for me. Though the group isn't supposed to be about me, on my birthday I wanted the whole night to be about me. The beauty is that they loved on me and made me feel special. This is the longing in each of our hearts.