

*BUILDING  
COMMUNITY IN  
SMALL GROUPS*

**7.1 CULTIVATING CAMARADERIE**  
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**F**ifteen years later most people will not remember specific lessons but most likely will remember the relationships within the group. Hopefully God's Word changed the lives of those gathered in your home, but undoubtedly, the weekend discussion would be dominated by fond recollections of good times and friendships in the group.

Relationships are the glue that hold small groups together. If they happen, the group not only survives but flourishes. If they don't, the group is short lived.

The Scriptures are full of teaching, advice and admonishment regarding relationships. Solomon writes, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17). The author of Hebrews commands, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:25).

The Bible, research studies, and the personal experiences of scores of small group-leaders confirm: relationships are crucial for learning and spiritual growth. Relationships within a group help move it from being the "leader's group" to "our group." So, as a group leader, work hard to provide an environ-

ment where dynamic and encouraging relationships can be developed.

In this chapter we'll offer suggestions on how to build a sense of community by fostering relationships within your group, both between you and the group and among the group members themselves. We'll also provide ideas for icebreakers (relationship-building activities) and fun activities to do as a group. As you use these resources to get started, you'll gain experience in this aspect of small group dynamics and will soon add your own ideas to this list.

## 7.1

### CULTIVATING CAMARADERIE

**I**n many new groups, the members don't know each other well. Meeting new people can be one of the most uncomfortable things a person can experience, except maybe flunking a test or being overdrawn at the bank.

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If individuals are anxious about simply attending the group, it will be difficult to get them to study God's Word together or come back. On the other hand, once the group is comfortable with each other, the relationships within the group will help stimulate the study of God's Word.

Initially, the leader is the key ingredient to building cohesiveness among group members. If you wait for the group to come together on its own, it usually won't. You will often need to take steps to create the kind of atmosphere in which committed relationships can flourish. There are six ways you can help create a sense of community and build camaraderie among group members.

#### 1 *Be an involved and caring leader.*

Group members catch and model the attitude of the leader. If the leader is interested in everyone in the group, looks forward to being with them, and genuinely cares about helping the group learn and grow, the members will pick up on his or her attitude—it's contagious. Here are a few ways a leader can demonstrate a caring heart:

- **Pay Attention.** People want to know they are being listened to when they're speaking. Don't look ahead in your lesson or stare out the window.

- **Be Responsive.** When a member gives an answer or shares an insight or opinion, don't just nod and go on to the next person. Instead compliment the person or ask a follow-up question to show your interest.
- **Value Others' Opinions.** Everyone's input and opinions have value. Don't judge what they share and avoid giving pat answers or quick fixes to their problems.

### **SARAH'S CARE**

*My group had been together a couple months and the women in the group were becoming friends. We knew Mary Anne's parents were divorced, but one night in group she began to share the painful details. She said she hadn't seen or heard from her mother in two or three years and had no idea where she lived. She retold a very painful conversation when she, her brother and sister tearfully begged their mother not to leave them, but she walked away anyway. Mary Anne was so embarrassed and hurt that she hadn't felt free to tell her story to anyone at school. The group comforted Mary Anne and her vulnerability brought the group closer together. From that night on the women in the group felt they had a safe place to go.*

For example, if someone says they are struggling with being homesick don't fire back, "Well, you know you have a friend in God." No one wants pat answers. One of the best ways to show you value someone's opinions is to ask a follow-up question. So, you could ask this person, "In what ways has it been hard?" or, "What do you miss most about home?"

- **Encourage Interaction** by asking for their input. What do they think? Do they agree? Disagree? Does anyone else have any input?
- **Be Real** with your group. Laugh with them, share your struggles and victories, and share your life and love for the Lord. Let them be your friends. You don't have to spill your deepest secrets, but let them know you too are a real person who's in the process of becoming like Christ.
- **Maintain Confidentiality.** If someone shares something confidentially, honor their request and don't share it outside of the group. Ask the rest of the group to do the same. If the group violates this principle, it will seriously deter others

from sharing about their lives.

- Work through conflict. Tension in a group discussion is inevitable. Agree to work through any disagreements. You may have to act as a mediator to make sure all points of view are heard.

## ***2 Regularly plan group time for members to tell each other about their lives.***

In the initial stages of a group, an icebreaker is a good way to let people share experiences from their lives.

## ***3 Maximize group interaction.***

Prepare questions which help the group interact with each other and God's Word. Provide opportunities for the members to state their observations and thoughts about what they're learning from the Bible. As group members interact with each other it will help facilitate self-discovered learning.

## ***4 Show tangible concern for those in your group.***

At the end of the group you could ask if anyone has a need for which they would like the group to pray. Perhaps it is a need that you, or the group, could help meet. When people begin to share about their lives, it draws a group

together. As group members pray for one another, their concern grows. (Note: Young believers might be hesitant and feel apprehensive at first, but a group will most likely pray more as its members grow and feel more comfortable with one another. See the appendix on how to teach a group to pray.)



## ***5 Do something together as a group outside of the normal meeting time.***

Group activities are great for building unity in the group. Even something as simple as going to Starbucks or sitting together at a football game can help a group bond together. Involving a group in some kind of outreach can also unify a group (see Chapter 10).

## ***6 Do activities with individual group members outside your group time.***

As group members become more comfortable with you outside of group,

they'll be more open and honest inside the group. The third section of this chapter will have some ideas on building relationships with your group members outside of group.

## 7.2

### CREATIVE ICEBREAKERS

Icebreakers encourage people to get to know each other. It is important that icebreakers be non-threatening. What is non-threatening to some group members could terrify others. For example, the question, "Who would you like to go on vacation with for one week and why?", would be threatening to many groups. However, the question, "If you could go on vacation anywhere, where would you go?" is not as threatening.

Here are some suggested icebreakers. The first few are easiest and most helpful for a beginning group. Many of the later ideas are useful for building relationships in groups that have been together for awhile.

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#### 1 *Best / Worst*

Have each person share their best and worst moments from the previous week. Try to steer your group away from school items. It can get boring to hear, "My best was an A in calculus, and my worst was a D in biology." This icebreaker is an easy one to use at first and gives you good feedback concerning their life at the moment. Some veteran groups do this every week. Their bests and worsts will become more honest.

#### 2 *Most Unique*

Go around the room and have each person share something that makes them different from anyone in the group, like, "I've never left the state I was born in" or, "I am one of ten kids."

#### 3 *Two Truths and a Lie*

Have each person make three statements about themselves: two true statements and one lie. For example, "I've never broken a bone. I have five sisters. I was born in Yugoslavia." The group tries to guess which statement is the lie.

#### 4 Personal Scavenger Hunt

Take five minutes and find the following items in your wallet or purse—something that:

- You've had a long time.
- You're proud of.
- Reveals a lot about you.
- Reminds you of a fun time.
- Concerns or worries you.

Have each person share the first item. Go around again on the second item, and again until you have gone through each one. Don't feel like you have to use the whole list because it may take too long.

#### RACHEL'S BESTS & WORSTS

*When I started my group we always did "Bests and Worst." Usually the women gave safe answers, such as, "My best was a date to the football game." As their sense of community deepened, we kept doing Bests and Worst, but their answers were more personal. One week after Christmas break, Tracy said her worst was that her parents told her she could never read her Bible in their house again. Her best was the peace she felt from the Lord during this difficult time. Whenever anything good or bad happened during the week the women would remember it, wanting to tell the group the next week. Bests and Worst were a highlight every week.*

#### CHRISTINE'S PIZZA

*I had a pizza party with my girls. When the pizza got there I put a toothpick flag on each slice. On each flag I wrote a "getting to know you" question. Each slice you picked had a question to answer! It was a great icebreaker!*

#### 5 Get to Know You Questions

- What do you do for fun?
- What would be your ideal vacation?
- What is the most memorable activity you did with your family when you were a child?
- What quality do you appreciate most in a friend?
- What is one characteristic you received from your parents that you want to keep, and one you wish you could change?
- What is a good thing happening in your life right now? What makes it good?
- If you knew you couldn't fail and money was no object, what would you like to do in the next five years?
- What would you like said at your funeral?
- When, if ever, did God become more than a word to you, and how did it happen?

### 6 *Did You Know?*

This is great for a group that doesn't know each other well. Find interesting facts about individual group members before the group meets. Try to discover information that sets each person apart from the others, such as "I have a tugboat named after me" or, "I once wrecked the same quarter panel of my car four times" or, "I have a twin." Then make a sheet with one fact from each person and a blank beside this fact. Give everyone in the group a sheet and five to seven minutes to find who goes in each blank. When they find the right person they must also learn one other fact about that person. At the end, introduce everyone in the group in the order on the list.

### 7 *Chart Your Life*

Thinking back as far as you can, draw a line graph to represent your life. Consider the high points, the low points, moments of inspiration, moments of despair, leveling off times, and where you are now. The line will probably be a mixture of straight, slanted, jagged and curved lines. After you've drawn it, share what it means to you with the group.

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### 8 *M&M's Game*

Pass a bag of M&M's around and tell everyone to take a few. Then, before they eat them ask them to share something for every M&M. For example, something about their family for every red one, something about their plans for the future for every green one, etc.

#### **STAN'S BOWLING**

*Our Bible study went bowling with a group of women on some old-fashioned lanes where we had to set up our own pins. We took turns in the back setting up the pins. It was a riot. Afterwards we all went back to our leader's room at the fraternity house for dessert. It was a great bonding time because it was the first thing we'd done as a group outside of the regular meeting.*

### 9 *Most Deprived*

Buy a large bag of M&M's and give each person the same amount (try ten M&Ms). Start by stating something you've never done that you think everyone else has done (thus the name "Most Deprived"). For example, you might say, "I've never had a birthday party," or some other true statement about



yourself that you think everyone else has surely done. Then, everyone who has had a birthday party pays you an M&M. You pay everyone who has not had a party. Keep playing until everyone has a turn or until someone runs out of M&M's. Obviously the idea is to come up with the most M&M's and be most deprived. This activity will take more time.

### **10 *You Write the Question***

Give each person a 3x5 card. You pick the topic and let them write the questions. For example, you choose "friendship" as a topic, and they each write out a question for anyone in the group to answer about friendship. For example, "What do you value most in a friend?" or, "Who was your best friend growing up and why?" Then pile all the cards face down in the middle of the group and let people draw.

You can do this for weeks by changing the topic. Topic ideas on the lighter side: jobs, life goals, funny stories, hobbies, etc. Topic ideas on the more vulnerable side: family, fears, dating issues, significant relationships, relationship with God, etc.

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### **11 *My Life in Pictures***

Bring a newspaper or magazine. Have each person tear out a picture, article or anything they think tells something about themselves. If there's enough time they can make a collage that tells more about themselves.

### **12 *House on Fire***

Ask, "Your house is on fire, and everyone is safe. You have thirty seconds to run through the house and collect three or four articles you want to save. What would you grab? Why?" After everyone has done this, the group can discuss what they learned about the things they value.

### **13 *Make Believe***

If you could go anywhere in the world now, where would you go and why? If you could talk to anyone in the world, who would it be? Why? If you could talk to any person who has died, who would you talk to and why? If you could wish one thing to come true about your upcoming summer, what would it be?

### **14 *Deserted Island***

Ask, "You've been exiled to a deserted island for a year. You are told you may take three things you want, apart from the essentials. What would you take and why?"

### 15 *Spiritual Journey*

After the group has been together for awhile, take turns sharing your testimonies and discussing your spiritual pilgrimage.

### 16 *Heroes*

Ask each member to name three people, past or present, they admire. Why? Or, ask them if they could interview anyone in history, who would that be and why? What one or two questions would you want to ask?

## 7.3

### DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS

If you want to be an effective small group leader, you need to know your job doesn't stop after the group meeting is over. The small group meeting is a structured, time-limited activity that's focused primarily on learning and applying God's Word. A sense of belonging and community can be developed in such an environment, but it has its limits. Involvement with members outside the official small group session is crucial for significant relationships to develop.

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#### *Roles*

There are several different roles you may play as you make friends with those in your group. Foremost, be sure you are a friend to them, someone with whom they feel they can be themselves and enjoy. You must therefore make

#### **JARVIS' FRIEND**

*I wasn't very faithful in attending my first group as a freshman at Ole Miss. Brad, my leader, continued to come by and spend time with me. His commitment to our relationship influenced me a great deal more than he would have imagined. Over the last four years, Brad has become my closest friend.*

#### **TOM'S GREAT FRIENDSHIP**

*I was in Ralph's group at the University of South Carolina. He would meet with Tom, Jimmy and me to talk about what God was doing in our lives or share Christ with friends on campus. On Saturday mornings we'd hang around his dorm room and pray about anything and everything for a couple of hours. Ralph was much more than just my small group leader, he was a great friend. In fact, he was the first person outside of my family that told me that he loved me.*

sure you are not condescending or aloof. Initiate with them and enjoy being with them.

A second role you may play is that of an older sister/brother. Older sisters and brothers tend to look out for the younger siblings. Younger siblings also tend to come to older brothers and sisters for advice. This is a relationship you can't force, just like you can't get your younger brother to do what you want him to do. Hopefully, over time those in your group will come to you for help.

You will also play the role of a coach at times. A coach instructs, but also cheers on his team. Everyone needs a little encouragement. A pat on the back or communicating respect when they make good decisions will go far.

### **BENEFITS OF BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS OUTSIDE THE GROUP**

- *You can identify and meet their needs.*
- *They'll begin to see you, not as just their group leader, but as a friend.*
- *God's Word comes alive as you live it out practically day-to-day before them.*
- *Informal times together builds trust.*
- *Character and depth builds as you discuss truth and deal with life and each other in a natural, non-structured setting.*

### **MELVITA'S RAID**

*I was in a women's Bible study and we decided to bust into guy's Bible study with care packages. We wanted to encourage them in their walks and have some fun.*

### **SUSAN'S CAMPING**

*At Appalachian State we used to rent a huge tent from the school and go camping with the girls from my Bible study and girls from the studies they were leading. We'd go to a state park near school and have a great time out in the mountains. It was amazing how much they liked this and how often we did it. It created unity and was a blast.*

### **Common Concerns & Frustrations**

You may find that you don't have a lot in common with some members of your group. Sometimes there isn't a natural affinity or even the desire to make friends with some in the group. Usually you'll be drawn toward some in your group more than others. This is normal. Take opportunities to let everyone

know you care about them and don't feel guilty about not being best friends with everyone in your group.

Another common frustration is time limitations. How do you find time to pursue your own friendships and still make friends with everyone in the group? One answer to this dilemma is to try to do activities with those in your group that you do anyway. For example, eating, going to class, doing laundry, attending Campus Crusade events, etc. See the following page for more ideas. Try some of these suggestions or come up with your own activities to get to know each other and build memories together.

### *50 Ways to Build Relationships*

- *Give them a call just to talk.*
- *Kidnap them for a coke, ice cream, shoot some hoops or take a walk when you know they are in the midst of heavy studying.*
- *Drop by with some cookies.*
- *Do laundry together.*
- *Go to church.*
- *Grab lunch or dinner together.*
- *Drop by for a brief, unscheduled visit.*
- *Go shopping.*
- *Walk to class.*
- *Play sports.*
- *Go to an athletic event.*
- *Go to a Campus Crusade function.*
- *E-mail them to tell them you're praying for a test they are having or a concern they have shared.*
- *Play a not too brutal practical joke on them.*
- *Drop by their room before their 8 a.m. class, bearing orange juice and a doughnut and walk with them to class.*
- *Run errands.*
- *Share Christ with someone.*
- *Ask for their help on anything: studies, a ride, advice, etc.*
- *Wash cars.*
- *Exercise.*
- *Have dinner at your place.*
- *Ask them if there is anything you could pray about for them.*
- *Make a midnight doughnut / coffee run.*
- *Go to a movie.*
- *Attend a concert.*
- *Go to a coffee shop between classes.*
- *Rent a video.*
- *Go on a summer project.*
- *Do something special for another person in the group.*
- *Join the same club.*
- *Go to a park and go hiking.*
- *Study together.*
- *Take some classes.*
- *Play on the same intramural team.*
- *Ride to a conference.*
- *Room together at a conference.*
- *Cook something.*
- *Go on a double date.*
- *Take them to your hometown.*
- *IM with them.*
- *Call them during school breaks, like Christmas, summer, etc.*
- *Have a video marathon with trilogies—like Star Wars, Anne of Green Gables or Lord of the Rings.*
- *Take a bike trip.*
- *Lay out in the sun.*
- *Go camping.*
- *Work on a project.*
- *Make a video.*
- *Pizza & studying.*
- *Watch a favorite TV show.*
- *Do volunteer work.*

### Activities to Do Together As A Group

- Go to an athletic event.
- Go shopping.
- Go to a movie.
- Attend church.
- Play sports together or challenge another group.
- Go to a lake, the mountains, or to an amusement park.
- Go to dinner out-of-town.
- Do an outreach together.
- Plan a creative date.
- Volunteer for Habitat for Humanity or Big Sisters/Big Brothers as a group.
- Spend the night at a group member's home.
- Have a car wash to raise money.
- Have a progressive dinner.
- Go on a road trip.
- Go to a group member's hometown.
- Go on a scavenger hunt.

### Creative Group Dates

- Dessert in the park, or on top of the parking garage, or anywhere.
- Scavenger hunt with tape recorder, video camera, or Polaroid.
- Dinner on the quad.
- Go on a picnic.
- Make a video.
- Dinner on the beach—"The Sands" restaurant.
- Game night.
- Classic movie night.
- Progressive dessert.
- Kidnap someone.



### How to Kill the Relationships in Your Group

- Send portions of their personal journal to the school newspaper.
- Punch them out when they foul you while playing basketball.
- Date their boyfriend or girlfriend.
- Have fun with your friends, but be serious with your group.
- This is important: never call them except to transmit information.
- Criticize their music, clothes, dorm room, major, family, hometown, girlfriend or boyfriend, weight, hair color or size of nose.

## 7.4

### ***JESUS, PAUL & THEIR “SMALL GROUPS”***

Jesus had a great set-up for His small group: He traveled, ate, slept, and spent hours teaching and ministering with them. There were structured times, like on the Mount (Matthew 5) when He taught them in a sermon, but many other important lessons were learned in settings outside of a formal teaching situation. Jesus shared His life with the twelve.

Paul wrote this to whom he ministered, “We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well” (1 Thessalonians 2:8).

We don’t have the luxury of spending the kind of time Jesus or Paul spent with their small groups, but we can follow their lead of not only sharing God’s Word, but also sharing our lives as well. In order to do this, we must develop relationships with our group members outside the group context.

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### ***CONCLUSION***

This chapter has said a lot about relationships. This shouldn’t surprise you, since relationships are central to small groups. You can’t separate content from relationships. Christ brought the truth of the gospel, and He modeled a selfless love and concern for people. Likewise, God has given us both the message and ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:11-21). Lives are transformed by the gospel in the context of relationships and it’s crucial that group leaders understand how important relationships are to the process of “presenting everyone complete in Christ” (Colossians 1:28-29).

### FOR THOUGHT / DISCUSSION

1 *Think of a group you've been in. How did the relationships in that group help your own walk with the Lord?*

*Read 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12.*

*Answer questions 2, 3 and 4 using this passage.*

2 *How would you describe Paul's heart toward those to whom he ministered?*

3 *Paul shared both the gospel of God and his own life with the Thessalonians. How can you also do both of these for your group?*

4 *What are some specific ways you can encourage, comfort and urge those in your group to live lives worthy of God? (1 Thessalonians 2:12)*

5 *Choose one or two group activities that might be fun for your group. Plan a time to make them happen. Choose some specific activities you can do with individuals in your group.*

#### BEVERLY'S FRIENDSHIP

*One person who had a real impact on my life was my small group leader my senior year at the University of Texas. I hesitate to call her my small group leader because she was much more than that...she was a good friend. Lou Anne believed in me and gave me ministry opportunities most people thought I wouldn't be able to handle. Besides being involved in my life, she let me be involved in hers. Most of the year she was dating Steve, a guy at Rice University. One weekend we drove down to Houston together for a double date. My date was a guy in Steve's small group. Talking while traveling together really deepened our relationship. Lou Anne did more than just lead the small group I was in, she extended her life to me.*

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*This chapter isn't a magic formula for building friendships, but suggestions of what's worked in the past. Maybe you'll have to take a different approach to building relationships or maybe God will have to do some miracles to bring your group together. Maybe it will never develop the sense*



*of community you desire. You can't control what will happen, but you can still take responsibility for initiating with those in your group. If they know you care about them, they will overlook your shortcomings. A group leader who honors God, cares about those in the group, and points others toward Christ has three of the most essential qualities in leadership.*