

COMMUNITY GROUPS AT RCC

The modern practice of small groups has been around for about 60 years — relatively new as far as the church goes. While the outcomes of the small group movement have been mixed, we intend to engage in a thoughtful and flexible approach suited to the needs of our whole community. But that approach needs some clarification in order to keep us all headed the same direction as a single body of believers.

I'd like to suggest at the outset that while community groups are not *essential* they can be very *useful* if they're done well. This quick help will be aimed at discussing what success can look like in hopes that community groups in our church will reflect these characteristics.

A healthy community group is a group of people who regularly gather to pray, pursue real spiritual growth, and live on mission together in their everyday lives. Put more succinctly, we're looking for our community groups to be places of **mission, formation, and confession**.

Mission:

Somehow or other community groups seem to end up floating in space and people are left wondering something like "what exactly are we doing here?".

In Matthew 28:18-20 Jesus gives his disciples the "great commission". That commission is to go make disciples of all nations, to baptize them, and to teach them to obey everything Jesus commanded us. That's a tall order! But it's one that's much more possible with help and a group of people all committed to trying. Community groups should have as *their primary goal* the equipping of people to fulfill the great commission.

The goal is to make our groups places where we can pray for the people in our lives who don't know Jesus yet. It's a place where we can ask one another questions about whether we're being intentional about trying to live out the great commission by loving and serving and getting to know people, where we bounce ideas off one another, and offer encouragement in our pursuit to be disciples of Jesus. Something more that's often missed — *these groups themselves* are meant to be an inviting place to people who don't yet know Jesus.

You might think "won't that be weird for them to hear about us talking about loving our neighbors and coworkers and others?" Maybe. Or maybe it will pleasantly surprise them that the main reason we meet is to talk about how best to love and serve people rather than being merely

inwardly focused. The main point here is that when community groups are actually on mission together they're full of life and good fruit. Leslie Newbigin said "If you aim for community, you'll rarely get mission. If you aim for mission, you'll almost always get community."

Some practicals for your community group:

1. Regularly talk about and pray for the people who you're trying to love, serve, and point to Jesus. Pray for people by name regularly.
2. Develop a culture of encouraging accountability towards intentional action. Come up with goals and plans to carry out the Great Commission. (eg. Go have dinner together and invite your friends who don't know God, serve somewhere together, etc.) Be the kind of group that believers and nonbelievers alike actually want to be a part of.
3. Bring up questions, difficulties, and praises. Use one another as sounding boards. "Spur one another on towards love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24).

Formation

Spiritual formation is referencing *actual intentional spiritual growth*. In modern Christian culture there's very little in the way of expectation regarding real growth at a personal level. There's a lot of "maintenance" done in small groups today — it feels drab and unproductive because it usually is.

We're people who have the Spirit of the living God within us, and we're meant to be "transformed into [Jesus' image] from one degree of glory to another." (2 Co. 3:18), to "put off [our] old self...to be renewed in the spirit of [our] minds, and to put on the new self..." (Eph 4:22-24).

Unfortunately, many Christians don't take seriously Jesus' offer of real seismic changes of heart and behavior. That's led to an epidemic of serious proportion in the church: lots of people that don't really have a "Jesus has truly changed my life" testimony because...well, he hasn't. I can say confidently it's not because Jesus lacks the power or the desire to free us from sin and use us to build his kingdom. The problem is on our end. We don't experience transformation because we fail to pursue any type of real formation. That's where community groups can truly help.

I'd highly encourage groups to read books together regularly — books of the Bible, commentaries, really anything that points them to God so they can discuss with one another and pursue spiritual formation. Podcasts, videos, and other resources can be immensely helpful too. Groups can and should discuss beforehand what resources they think might be most helpful to their group depending on their needs. Adding material from established authors and teachers also keeps groups of people from becoming too dependent on their own views and expertise.

In addition to all this, spiritual formation occurs when we make plans to grow and practice living like disciples of Jesus. Me telling myself "I should pray more" is not nearly as effective as a group of believers making a commitment to begin every day with prayer and then asking one another about it weekly. Formation is often slow, uneven, and seasonal — faithfulness matters more than visible progress.

The main point here is that we can grow tremendously when we're aided with a community group who is also pursuing growth.

Here are some practicals:

1. Discuss common problems, gaps, or interests that your group has. Then choose resources that your group can go over *outside of your group* so that when you come together you can discuss (and hopefully put some things into practice).
2. Speak into one another's lives. This one is the riskiest and also the highest pay-off. As you spend more time together getting to know one another it's important community groups don't become places of reporting with no feedback. Develop a culture of honesty and openness that allows you to tell one another hard truths in addition to encouragement.

Confession

This component could probably fit into "formation" but it's so often misunderstood or ignored that it's important it gets some careful attention.

James says "confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed." (James 5:16). The apostle John in 1 John 1:5-10 describes the relationship between fellowship and what he calls "walking in the light". His main point is that we can't really have fellowship with one another unless we can come clean about all our sinful thoughts and behavior.

The goal of confession isn't "getting it off our chest", nor is it some transactional fix for sin. The goal of confession is first and foremost to be freed from sin by experiencing forgiveness from God. That freedom causes us to actually *want* to walk away from sin and towards God. And when we confess our sins to one another, experiencing forgiveness and acceptance despite our flaws, something amazing happens: we have true fellowship, depth and closeness to God's people.

I'm convinced that we need to engage in this practice regularly. Many people fail to grow because they fail to see their own sin and where it comes from in their hearts. Sin unnoticed is sin run amuck in the human soul, affecting the entirety of a person. We need a safe place to confess our deepest and most transient sins alike — to process where they come from, how to battle them, and experience the support of not fighting alone. The main point here is that we need to be really honest with one another about our sins if we ever hope to overcome them.

Here are some practicals:

1. We have to be completely vulnerable. We need to share what we've really thought, what we've really done in detail with no "fixes" or sugarcoating. Walking in the light is about being truly seen and still loved and accepted. This can take time for some groups to develop and that's ok, but don't go without it long. Confession should be voluntary, wise, and paced by trust — never forced or rushed.
2. When people confess, it's important that we process where the sin comes from rather than simply trying to create quick fixes. Ask open-ended questions and let people process in real time.

3. Pray for one another *and* encourage one another. God alone heals, we need to ask him to help us along in our battle with sin. We also need to be encouraged. Sometimes that means saying “you can do this” and other times it might mean saying “that sounds a lot like an excuse”. Ask God for grace and insight as you navigate what that looks like

Let me suggest three final guidelines for community groups that will help us ensure these things are possible.

Learn to balance.

Bear in mind that each group will hardly have the time to do all of this every single week. It’s important that each group learns to strike a balance depending on the people who are a part of it. Be purposeful about evaluating what components may be lacking in your group.

Smaller is better.

3 to 4 people is the ideal size for a group like this. The larger the number the more easily people are overlooked, the less depth a group can have, and the more hurried it will be. This will also mean that groups will need to evolve and change with some regularity and that’s not a bad thing. If people add on to a group it would be a good idea to think “divide and grow” rather than “get bigger”. This idea is intentionally *mission first* thinking, not *comfort first* thinking. No one is banning larger groups, nor is anyone saying you can’t still spend time with people if your groups grow and divide. But consider how we rarely grow when we’re comfortable!

Be consistent.

Hebrews 10:25 encourages us to “not [give] up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but [to encourage] one another”.

It’s easy to let seemingly more important “life stuff” get in the way of our community groups. Don’t. Commit to meeting together regularly and not becoming lax about it. I strongly suggest that your groups are weekly; if they aren’t, these groups risk becoming life update sessions rather than intentional growth catalysts.

Here’s a phrase that can capture all the above easily: stay balanced, stay small, stay consistent. If all of this seems difficult to keep track of, come back to this article with regularity and remember this is something we’re building towards, not something we’ve already built. It’s ok for it to take time, for you to get used to it, and to be imperfect along the way. With God’s help we’ll end up right where we need to be.