

No More Mr. Nice Group-Spiritual Transformation in Community

Five practices that take small groups beyond polite sharing to the disciplines that change lives.
By John Ortberg

God has entrusted us with his most precious treasure—people. He asks us to shepherd and mold them into strong disciples, with brave faith, and good character. I would not give my life to any church that was not serious about this calling—the transformation of human beings. God has decided, for his own good reasons, that people are not transformed outside of community.

Years ago, while on vacation, I was going to fix something on the grill. I made a pile of charcoal, I poured a few gallons of lighter fluid over them, and I started the fire. My son was just fascinated by fire, as most young boys are. He asked what I was doing, and I told him.

"There's something about the way these little briquettes are constructed that when you put them together, the fire glows and they get real hot. And if you isolate one it cools off quickly. It loses the fire. But when they stick together, there's fire, because they feed off each other. God designed them to work that way."

This fits what Dallas Willard has said about the Christian life: "Personalities united can contain more of God and sustain the force of his greater presence better than scattered individuals." Think about that. Personalities united—people in community—contain more of God and his transforming power than isolated individuals. We should not be surprised that transformation requires community; it's how God designed us.

When we are alone, it's easy to think, incorrectly, that we are spiritually advanced. I can watch a Hallmark commercial alone and find myself moved to tears. I tell myself that I am a very compassionate person. But when I spend time in community with a person who annoys me, it's amazing how quickly I experience "compassion fatigue."

In community we discover who we really are and how much transformation we still require. This is why I am irrevocably committed to small groups. Through them we can accomplish our God-entrusted work to transform human beings.

However, experience tells us that simply meeting with a small group does not automatically result in spiritual growth. There are certain practices that must be present, spiritual disciplines that must occur, to facilitate the transforming work of Christ in us. The presence of these things is what makes the difference between all-too-typical small groups, and life-transforming communities of spiritual formation.

What are these practices? I asked Dallas Willard that question once because he's forgotten more about spiritual formation and church history than I will ever know. His answer surprised me. He said, "I don't know." Rather than being discouraged, I saw this as a rare opportunity to discover something Dallas Willard didn't know. I launched into a time of deeper reflection and study.

After months looking at Scripture, reading church history, talking with respected people, and meeting with leaders of small groups, I don't think I have the definitive answer, but I have observed five essential practices:

Confession: remove the masks

We all wear masks. We hide from each other. It's part of our fallenness. That is why one of the most formative practices in a small group is confession. Confession is the appropriate disclosure of my brokenness, temptations, sin, and victories for the purpose of healing, forgiveness, and spiritual growth. Without confession we are a community hiding from the truth.

I know what it's like to do church with people who wear masks. I've attended very nice churches where people smiled, talked about their jobs or the weather, but never really removed their masks and revealed themselves.

I recall one couple, pillars of the church, whose marriage fell apart when the wife ran away with another man. The church was shocked; the couple had hid the reality of their troubled marriage for years. Another woman in the church was well liked by everyone, but one day she landed in the hospital to have her stomach pumped of the poison she had taken. She was so miserable she felt unable to face another day. And no one in the church knew.

I will not invest my life in a community that doesn't value truth and confession, and neither should you. Without confession we cannot accomplish our God-given calling to transform people.

Throughout church history, whenever God has done great things, confession has always been present. In the church, confession must be freely offered—never manipulated. A small group serious about transformation should be moving into ever deeper confession—removing masks to reveal our core feelings and fears, sins we still struggle with, and areas where we're not growing.

We need to avoid "confession killers" in our groups. These include the inappropriate use of humor. Some people are embarrassed by deep honesty, so they may mock the person confessing or diffuse the atmosphere with a joke. It sends a signal that this is not a safe place to confess, and the masks go back on.

Judgmental statements also shut down confession. I recall a small group where a man admitted his struggle with lust. That was a risk, and then someone else said, "I can't relate to that struggle at all." I wanted to say to that guy, What kind of hormonally challenged, repressed robot are you? His statement shut down an opportunity for new openness in the group.

To see real transformation, small groups must begin with reality. By removing our masks through the discipline of confession, we acknowledge the reality of who we are and open ourselves to God's transforming work.

Application: look in the mirror

James 1:23 says, "Those who listen to the word, but do not do what it says, are like people who look at their faces in the mirror, and after looking at themselves, go away and immediately forget what they look like." A small group is a place for people to look into the mirror, discover who they are, and then ask, "How do I apply God's word to my life as it really is?"

As a teacher I am regularly astonished by people's ability to hear a sermon, nod at it, be moved by it, write it down, and then do precisely the opposite of what they heard. This frequent occurrence shows the extent to which people need painstaking, patient, and careful application of Scripture to their daily lives.

We may hear biblical instructions like be gentle, be loving, be faithful—but how do I actually apply that to my boss, spouse, or kids?

What would Jesus do if someone cut him off in traffic? Would he say, "I don't condemn you; go and sin no more"? Or, would he roll down the window and shout, "Woe to you, you whitewashed sepulcher, it will be better for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for you"? What would Jesus do? A lot of people have heard about Jesus, but many have not been taught how to apply Jesus' teachings to their real lives. Small groups can address this gap.

What we desperately need are small groups to be schools of life. Imagine someone has a problem with anger—a small group leader should ask them: "What kinds of situations tend to get you angry, and how do you respond?" Give them some alternatives to sinful patterns of anger. Roleplay these situations in the small group. Then next week ask, "How did it go?" If they got it right, celebrate it. If they didn't, investigate what happened, and encourage them to do it differently next time.

If this kind of application doesn't happen in small groups, it may not happen anywhere, and people will not be transformed.

Accountability: stand on the scale

I have made certain commitments about food and exercise in my life, but how serious I am about those commitments is difficult to determine without measuring my progress. A scale serves as a tool of accountability for me. Am I achieving my goal, or am I missing it? Ultimately the scale reveals how effective I have been in living up to my commitment.

Small groups are the place for people to get on the scale and reveal how intentional they have been to pursue transformation into the image of Christ. William Paulson writes, "It is unlikely that we will deepen our relationship with God in a casual or haphazard manner." I think he understates it. People do not drift into full devotion to Christ. People do not drift into becoming loving, joy-filled, patient, winsome, world changers. It requires intention and effort.

But the default mode of the human heart is to drift. If a person has experienced real transformation, it's typically because someone else has cared enough to say, "I want you to live God's way, and I want to help you know if you are serious about it."

We need to make some key decisions on our journey of transformation: what are my commitments about prayer, about Scripture, about my use of money, about evangelism, about servanthood, about truth? Keeping these commitments requires a community of accountability to serve as a scale revealing how we're achieving our goals or missing them.

During the spiritual revolutions of 18th century England, the Wesleyan movement thrived on small groups. When those groups originally formed, they existed to hold

people accountable to their commitments as followers of Christ. They gathered in little bands to ask one another how their obedience to Christ was going. History notes, however, that over the decades the focus of the groups shifted from accountability to vague "sharing," in the process the power of the revival was lost, and eventually the groups died out.

Guidance: follow the map

When people need directions to a place they have never been, they use a map. Too often when people have major life-forming decisions to make, they make them alone.

In every church there are people facing decisions about vocations, ministry involvement, finances, relocation, and relationships. How sad if they make these decisions without the benefit of community. Their decisions may be impulsive, emotional, based on too little information. The result is too many broken lives.

The small group is to be where we find guidance, where we help each other learn how to listen to God. Small groups who rely upon God's Spirit serve as a map for us when making important decisions. In his book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster talks about guidance as a corporate discipline—something that groups should be doing together.

In the early church, the Spirit guided believers as a community. In Acts 13, for example, the church fasted, prayed, and listened to God. Then, in response to the Spirit's guidance, they sent out Saul and Barnabas to minister.

In Acts 15 the church faced a major decision about the behavior of Gentiles, and they listened to the Spirit's guidance so carefully that in the letter explaining their decision they were able to say, "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us ... "

Small groups should be places where people gather to hear God through prayer and listening. Every small group meeting should include the question, "Is anybody facing a significant decision this week?" And in community the group should seek the Spirit's voice for the person facing the decision.

Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., practices this discipline by what they term "sounding the call." When someone has a significant decision to make, the community enters a time of prayer and listening to God. They speak openly with each other about their sense of what God is saying. They take seriously the leading of the Spirit while avoiding any sense of superiority or control.

Encouragement: embrace each other

A hug is a gesture of love and encouragement. An embrace represents what we all need from a community of transformation. We need to know that someone is committed to us and loves us. That cannot happen when we are alone, and it cannot happen in a large gathering. It's going to happen through smaller communities.

Today small groups have the privilege of loving and accepting human beings for whom Christ gave his life. In these groups we can supply the love, encouragement, and embrace people need to continue their journey of transformation.

A long time ago I decided I wanted to talk to someone honestly about my temptations, where I had messed up. I wanted to practice the discipline of confession. So I asked my friend Rick if we could meet. By that time, I had known him for about ten years.

When we sat down together, I told him everything there was to tell about me—all of the darkest stuff and everything I felt the most embarrassed about.

When I got to the end my confession, I could barely look up at him. When I finally did, Rick looked me in the eyes and said, "John, I have never loved you more than I love you right now."

Those words were so powerful; they felt so good that I wanted to make up more bad stuff to tell him. To have someone know everything about me and still love me was truly life giving.

That kind of love is what we ultimately need in small groups to transform lives. We can make small groups so complex and difficult, we can build the perfect small group strategy, but if we do not have the love of Christ present, we are not really engaged in transforming people into his likeness.

Spiritual formation in community is mostly about loving people, and that is something we can do.

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