



Develop Spiritual Friendships in Your Group

How to cultivate deeper relationships with a few

Years ago when I was a rookie small group director, I had the privilege of sitting across from a well-known pastor and expert in biblical community. I had many questions about what makes people change and how groups can help people grow. He answered patiently, and then made a surprising statement: "Perhaps the best thing that groups can do for people is help them meet one or two spiritual friends who will deeply encourage and challenge them to grow." I was both baffled and intrigued.

At first glance, his statement seemed to devalue small groups by using the group merely as a conduit, much like a dating service, to find a spiritual friend. Yet, over time, the wisdom of his observation became apparent. Although he valued the dynamics of a small group, he recognized the inherent limitations in a group of 8 to 12 for people to know and engage each other in mutual discipleship and true accountability. So along with pursuing mutual growth within a group, he was advocating going one step further: finding and developing a friendship of the soul.

Practically speaking, there is rarely enough time in a weekly meeting for everyone to talk and be heard fully. The level of being known and knowing others in a small group varies greatly by individuals, personalities, and group dynamics. Generally, the willingness to be vulnerable and the level of personal sharing in the group tend to reflect the least common denominator, the weakest relational link in the group. In addition, it wouldn't be comfortable, nor would it be appropriate, for everyone to share sensitive struggles with the whole group. Yet when we are vulnerable, when we can confess our sins and struggles to one another, we experience the power of the Holy Spirit to transform our darkness into light and bring his healing, freedom, and joy. Realistically, this will most likely happen in smaller clusters of two or three where people have invested intentionally in relationships with each other.

What is a Spiritual Friend?

Over the course of my life, I have been blessed with a handful of friendships that go beyond the usual definition of a friend. These relationships are marked by a mutual commitment to follow Jesus, reciprocal sharing, deep concern, desiring the best for one another, and a willingness not only to encourage but also to challenge each other. At times an anchor to hold us steady and sometimes a buoy to lift us up, spiritual friends journey toward Jesus together. Whether they last for a season or for a lifetime, these relationships profoundly shape us. More than simply sharing common interests or having fun together, a spiritual friend helps us move toward becoming more of whom God has created us to be. With love, encouragement, and exhortation, like "iron sharpening iron," (Proverbs 27:17) our spiritual friends connect the dots between what is happening in our lives and the work God is doing in us.

There's a poignant scene in *The Lion King* where Simba is discouraged, lonely, confused, and close to giving up. Then his father appears to him in a vision and declares, "You are more than what you have become." The King reminds Simba of who he is—son of the king—and exhorts him to become more, to live out that identity fully, and to take his rightful place in the kingdom.

Likewise, as we face the challenges of life, we sometimes lose sight of our identity. We forget that we are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), a masterpiece created for good works (Ephesians 2:10), freed from bondage (Romans 6), and a beloved child of God (Romans 8:14–17). We need a friend who sees into our hearts, into our deepest fears and longings, and speaks truth with grace into those spaces. We need a friend

hearts, into our deepest fears and longings, and speaks truth with grace into those spaces. We need a friend who reminds us that we are a work in progress being perfected daily by our Savior. We need a friend to give us hope when we have none, believe on our behalf when our faith stalls, petition God when we can't pray, celebrate God's goodness, keep pointing us to Jesus, and walk with us in the spiritual journey of life.

These friendships do not just happen by accident. They are cultivated through much time, effort, commitment, and sacrifice. To become a spiritual friend to another means being willing to disrupt schedules, experience discomfort, sacrifice time and energy, risk rejection or pain, work through conflict, speak tough truths with grace, and lift each other up in consistent prayer before God. In essence, it's a relationship that seeks to live out the "one another" verses in the New Testament.

Why Are Spiritual Friendships Needed in Groups?

For the leader of a typical small group of 8 to 12 people, it will be challenging to know all your members well enough to shepherd them and help them take appropriate next steps. Even for the most diligent leader, it's hard to pay attention to the activity and trajectory of God's movement in all the members' lives. However, these limitations do not exist in smaller clusters. Within a friendship pair or triad, there is time and space for deeper knowing, sharing, and discerning of God's work in each other. When these relationships form within the group, people can care for one another in ways beyond the abilities of the group as a whole. This will in turn enrich the whole group by increasing the general level of trust, commitment, and discipleship.

Leaders may inadvertently limit spiritual friendships from developing when they believe the myth that everyone in the group needs to be at the same relational level with each other. Although this may arise from their rightful desire to be inclusive and not cliquy, it can be unrealistic and unhelpful. It's possible to accept and love everyone in the group and still allow a few closer friendships to develop naturally. Jesus modeled this as well. He loved each of the Twelve, but he had an especially close relationship with three: Peter, James, and John.

So instead of feeling guilty that you as the leader can't give equal attention to every member, pick a couple of people with whom you can form deeper spiritual friendships. This will likely become a source of encouragement for you, a healthy model of mutual discipleship for the group, and will increase the general level of depth within the group as a whole.

How Do You Develop Spiritual Friendships in a Small Group?

Within a small group, you'll likely find one or two people with whom you just "click." You may have similar backgrounds, common interests, life circumstances, or related ministries that draw you together. As a leader, you can help members make those connections and nurture friendships that have a spiritual focus.

One popular practice in small groups is to assign prayer partners to pray intentionally for one another—and even check in with one another—during the week. Although this method is based on the best intentions of encouraging accountability, it often seems to devolve into a checklist approach of interaction with an assigned partner. These tend to create superficial relationships of limited scope with the goal of behavior modification. What if instead, we made spiritual friendship the goal and allowed the process to unfold in a Spirit-led, organic way?

We can encourage interested group members (not everyone will be ready or desire to participate) to pick one or two people in the group of the same gender whom they want to get to know better. Then ask them to make that relationship (or those relationships) a priority by interacting regularly (e.g., in person, by phone, online, by text) outside of group gatherings. Exhort them to be open, vulnerable, and take risks in speaking

and receiving truth in love. Ask them to commit to the relationship for a certain period of time to start and see how it develops. You might encourage them to do some of the following together:

- Follow up on the small group discussion by talking together about next steps God is moving them to take.
- Set goals for the friendship and a mutual level of commitment.
- Serve side-by-side inside or outside the church.
- Learn something together (perhaps using a devotional, book, podcast, or article).
- Ask each other critical questions.
- Share meals with each other's families to get to know them better.
- Set up regular times to meet or check in by phone, text, or social media.
- Pray regularly for each other.
- Pray and listen to God together.

The beauty of finding a spiritual friend from within the small group is that it expands on a relationship with someone who may already be doing life with you in multiple areas. By forming a spiritual friendship with someone in your small group, there's a good chance your time together will come naturally: through your small group meetings, serving together as part of the group or the whole church, and even living near one another. Living near one another might even mean that your kids attend the same school or sporting events. This gives you both continuity and a layered depth to your relationship that can cultivate greater openness, mutual discipleship, and accountability. Then you will experience one of the most powerful benefits of a small group: a place where you can find, develop, and cultivate friendships of the soul.

Think about:

- When have you experienced a spiritual friendship? What was (or is) it like?
- Who in your group do you naturally gravitate toward? How might you develop an intentional friendship with him or her?
- How might you help your group members make connections that could lead to spiritual friendships?

—Carolyn Taketa is the Executive Director of Small Groups at Calvary Community Church in Westlake Village, California, and an editorial advisor for SmallGroups.com; copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

—Article from SmallGroups.com