



Making Room for New Members

How to really help them feel welcome

It's happened to me, and I'll bet it's happened to you. You walk into a room filled with laughter and conversation. You have a smile on your face, ready to embark on the journey of relationships—except when you try to join in, all you hear are crickets.

When we promote small groups at The Simple Church, we constantly tell potential group members that "there is chair for you." And we tell our small group leaders that we always want to make room for one more. That's a core element of our small group ministry: making room for newcomers.

That's why I was surprised one Sunday when a woman approached me and asked if we had any life groups where she could meet people. I thought to myself: Well, that's what happens in all of our life groups.

I asked her if she had been to one of our groups, and she stated that she had—but no one talked to her. My mind ran through a number of scenarios about how that could happen, but they all tilted toward blaming this woman. Maybe she came in late or was shy. Maybe she didn't really engage in the conversations, and that's why she was unable to meet anyone.

Then a week later, I went to an event early to see if people needed help. I am no stranger to this crowd. But when I walked into the room, only 1 out of about 15 people even acknowledged me with a brief smile. "Chirp, chirp, chirp" was all I heard. Everyone was engaged in their own conversations and fun, and I was an afterthought.

I felt like God had given me a real-life illustration on the feelings of that young woman. In that instant, I realized what she meant. All of our mottos didn't matter. There had been room for her in the small group she attended, but there had been no effort made to include her in relationships.

Relationships Matter

That's an important word: relationships. Small groups are designed to build relationships. We make room for people so we can invest in them through relationships. Or at least, we are supposed to.

Oftentimes people come to our groups with broken hearts and lives. They come wanting to receive something: emotional, spiritual, or mental support. In some realm, whether in the church or secular world, they've become disenchanted with the relationships in their lives. When they enter a small group, they're looking for something different—something better.

The question is: Will they find it?

As small group leaders, it's easy to become comfortable with the regular members of our group. We essentially form a miniature family. We create room in our home and lives so that we can invest in this family every week, which is good.

Still, we must always be aware of the new person in the room—of the chair now occupied, and the life now eager to change.

Rather than hash out who is responsible for what in relationships, let's consider Jesus' words: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31) and "Whatever you do for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). It's up to us to welcome and comfort the new people in our small group.

Practical Steps

Here are a few steps to ensure that no person is left out of your small group:

Don't forget to see. As people arrive at the group and conversations begin, we tend to become engrossed in our circle of dialogue and forget to monitor who is around us. We can become blind to anyone else who comes through the door because we are so focused within our conversations. But rather than wait for the newcomer to engage us when they arrive, we need to engage them. If you have a large group, consider enlisting the help of a few members to be greeters and to help new people feel welcome.

It takes more than an acknowledgement. A smile can be a wonderful tool of welcome; however, it's not enough for someone who is new to your group. They need to be engaged in conversation and introduced to other members of the group. These are the building blocks that form relationships.

Give them some context. Remember that a newcomer will not have access to the backstory of the different participants in your group. That means they may not be able to jump into an existing conversation without a bit of help from you. Therefore, give them context for the questions or ideas that come up or have been key topics lately.

Provide a guide. If someone has never attended a small group or knows little of small group life, he or she may not understand how the group meeting will work. This tension can be relieved by inviting the newcomer to sit with a guide that will be with them throughout the different activities of the group. This guide can be you, or it can be someone that you know will do a good job of welcoming and easing fears for the new attendee.

These steps are simple, but they also can be overlooked as we grow more comfortable with the people in our group. It's important to keep these steps in the forefront of our minds as leaders so that room is always available for newcomers, and new relationships are always possible.

Think about:

Think back on the last time your group had a newcomer. How well did the group welcome him or her?
How can you model proper welcoming of newcomers to your group members?
Who in your group can you enlist to help you welcome newcomers?

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