



Stay Connected Through the Summer



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How to Use This Resource

As the days get longer, people may find it difficult to attend small group regularly. With so many different activities and priorities vying for their time, members may let small groups fall on the priority list. So should small groups cease to meet over the summer? Or are there reasons to keep the group going—even if attendance is less than perfect? Use this resource to help you answer these questions and maximize the summer months.

To Meet or Not to Meet?

These articles will help you decide if taking a break this summer is appropriate for your small group. Pay attention to the valid reasons for both staying together and choosing not to meet. Whether or not you have official "meetings," you can continue your relationships through the summer.

Stay Connected

These articles offer great ideas for connecting with your group members in creative ways this summer. Think outside the two-hour meeting and consider going to a baseball game, serving in your community, or having a fun cookout. Plus, learn how Facebook can help you stay connected.

—Amy Jackson is Managing Editor of *SmallGroups.com*.

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To contact the editors:

E-mail SmallGroups@christianitytoday.com

Mail SMALLGROUPS.COM, Christianity Today
465 Gundersen Drive, Carol Stream, IL 60188

Does Your Small Group Need a Vacation?

How to tell if and when you need to take a break

Mark Ingmire

I have not always been a fan of small groups taking vacations at specific times during the year. However, the longer I am in ministry with groups, the more I relax and understand the benefit of these short or extended breaks. And the more I understand the benefits, the more I am willing to even encourage groups to take a break—under specific situations.

When Group Members Can't Attend

Your group may need a vacation during seasons of the year when group members have difficulty attending small-group meetings. Such hiatuses are most common during the summer months and the month of December.

Taking a break during the month of December takes much of the pressure off the holiday season—a time filled with many other demands and activities that take place in our churches and communities. During the summer, many families take vacations, need to spend extra time doing yard work, or want more time for recreation activities that can only happen when it's warm. As a result, many groups see sporadic attendance. Rather than making people feel guilty for not showing up, a vacation may be the best option.

When There's a Shift in Focus

Small groups may also need a vacation to provide a distinct break in the purpose or function of a group. Whether we notice or not, any small group can lose sight of its original focus and purpose. Or, the purpose of a group (as determined by the group leader or larger authority within the church) can change—even when group members don't want it to. So taking a break can assist in giving the old purpose some closure and providing space between the memory of the old and the potential of the new.

When the Group Becomes Stale

Small groups may also need a vacation to keep things fresh. It's easy for groups to get in a rut, and one of the best ways to get out of those ruts is to change things up a little bit—even if only for a short time. That doesn't mean group members need to take a break from ever seeing or contacting each other; it may just mean a break from the normal meeting time and agenda.

For example, groups may consider meeting once or twice a month for fun and fellowship, instead of always focusing on a study of Scripture. The idea is just to provide something different than the norm as a kind of "refresh" button. Go camping, go to a sporting event, gather in someone's home for games, share a meal together, do an outreach project, and so on. The ideas for fun and fellowship are endless.

Not for Everyone

Not every group needs to take a vacation. If group attendance is strong and growing, and has momentum behind it, then a vacation may be counter-productive. To make the best decision, group leaders simply need to be sensitive to the collective attitude of the group—especially the level of commitment when it comes to attendance.

—Mark Ingmire is the Small Groups and Adult Education Pastor at Savannah Christian Church in Savannah, Georgia; copyright 2001 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. When was the last time you was refreshed by a summer vacation? What did you do, or where did you go, that made the time so invigorating?
2. When was the last time your small group took a break from regular meetings? What were the positive and negative consequences?
3. Does your small group currently match any of the criteria above? If so, what should you do about it?

The Pros and Cons of a Summer Break

And why it's best to maintain some kind of connection as a group.

Michael C. Mack

Most groups do one of two things over the summer—stop meeting until September or keep going even if attendance is inconsistent. But neither of these extremes may be healthy or strategic.

It's true that schedules change in the summer. Vacations, sports, and other events can disrupt a normal small-group plan. Many people fill their schedules with activities through the summer months, so attendance can be shaky. Some weeks it doesn't even seem worthwhile to have a meeting. Besides, as the leader of the group, you need a rest—and there are lots of other things you'd like to do when it's warm outside!

But summer is also a great time for building relationships in relaxed social settings. Among the primary purposes of small groups is the building of relationships, caring for one another, and reaching out to unbelievers. None of these purposes cease to be important from June through August.

One of the best metaphors of a small group is a spiritual family. A family does not stop being a family during certain times of the year. But some families, like mine, do make adjustments over the summer. We do more picnics and other outdoor activities. We make new friends and build existing relationships through a variety of social activities. Eventually we begin to prepare for the upcoming school year.

Summertime can actually be the *best* time of the year for spiritual families to launch, grow, and make an impact. Whatever stage of life your small group is in, you can utilize the summer months productively.

Launching

Surprisingly, spring and summer are fruitful seasons to launch small groups because leaders have time to pray, wait, and listen to God. Here are some great ways to use the summer as a launching pad for a new group.

- Spend time praying about your group—really listening to God about his plans and purpose. Remember that the group is his, not yours, and you will lead it as an act of stewardship. Surrender it all to him and then listen for his reply. One of the first things to ask God about is who should be on your core team.
- Form a core team of three to four others and spend some quality time together barbecuing, history-sharing, praying, discussing, and planning. Take your cue from Jesus, who had a core team of Peter, James, and John within his larger group. Share leadership from the very beginning of the group if possible.

- With your core team, begin to pray together and plan for the future of the group. As you picnic or play games together, ask God to show you who he wants in the group, what the focus should be, and what goals and plans he has for the group.
- Plan backyard barbecues and invite old and new friends to build relationships and hang out. Look at these events as opportunities to see who God will put in front of you as a potential member.
- Get ready to launch the new group toward the end of the summer or early fall. You've built a foundation over the summer. Now it's time to carry out the plans God has given you.

Growing

One of the saddest things I've observed over years of directing small-group ministries is when existing groups that have stopped meeting over the summer fail to re-launch in the fall. And I see this happen often. Even though the leader and group had all the best intentions to start meeting again in September, many find it hard to get back into the practice and rhythm of meeting together. Doing life together in community is influenced by momentum. When groups lose that momentum, they often also lose their focus, purpose, and vision.

Perhaps that is why God encourages us to "not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another" (Hebrews 10:25). Here's how to do that with all your summer plans:

Pull out a summer calendar at your next meeting and plan to meet as many times as you can when some or most of the group can attend. (You can print out the summer calendar at the end of this resource.) Then plan more social events at which you can hang out together and invite some new people to join you. Here are a few ideas a group I led several years ago came up with:

- Play games such as Pictionary on a white board on the deck or back porch.
- Go to baseball games together and invite neighbors.
- Go to open-air concerts in the park and invite neighbors.
- Attend your kids' sporting events together.
- Go to a July 4 fireworks show together with neighbors.

Suspend the deep Bible study, but still discuss where you are spiritually, do devotional studies, share what you're learning from your personal study times, or find other creative ways to grow spiritually together. Meet other times than usual. During the summer months you can be more flexible than usual.

Go camping or take a group retreat. Or serve together at a Christian summer camp for youth. What a practical way to deepen your relationships and have fun together!

Many churches plan all-church picnics or other summertime social events. These are great opportunities to bring your group, invite some friends and neighbors, and enjoy the

day together. Build new relationships with other people at these events, especially those who are not yet connected at your church.

Keep praying for neighbors, both individually and as a group, whenever possible. Pray especially that the Holy Spirit will open their hearts and that you will have an opportunity to take the next step with them spiritually. In the autumn you can work toward a harvest!

Leaders need breaks, too. If you are a leader who needs a break over the summer months, this is a great opportunity to let others in your group facilitate whatever you decide to do as a group. Part of shepherd leadership is developing some of your group members to become leaders. Here are a few strategies to try:

- As summer starts, announce that you need to take a break from leadership, but that you will remain a part of the group. As you plan your summer activities, ask volunteers to take ownership and leadership over planning and executing events.
- Help the group plan a devotional Bible study for each meeting time over the summer. Either use a devotional study guide or come up with an overall topic that each person can study on their own. One idea is to talk through the “one another” passages of the New Testament. One summer my group studied these passages and came up with an action-oriented activity for each one, like doing a progressive dinner for “be hospitable to one another.”
- As people take on leadership roles, be sure to set up debriefing sessions. Provide lots of positive feedback and watch for teachable moments.

Making an Impact

Summer is a great time for your group to make an impact in your community for Christ. Opportunities abound to get outdoors and serve people with all kinds of random acts of kindness, like handing out cold water at sporting events. You can also partner with your church or other community ministries to lend a helping hand as a group. Be creative. Discuss what tools, gifts, talents, and passions God has given uniquely to your group to impact your community.

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven” (Ecclesiastes 3:1). How will your group use the summer season for God’s kingdom?

—Michael C. Mack is the founder of and an advisor for SmallGroups.com; copyright 2008 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What are the potential benefits of your group continuing to meet together this summer? What are the potential dangers?
2. How can your church help and support potential leaders who want to launch a group over the summer?
3. Which of the suggestions above is best suited for your group? How can you make it happen?

Should My Small Group Take a Summer Break?

Use these questions to decide.

Rick Howerton

Taking a break in the summer can actually energize a group and make it stronger over the long haul—but that isn't always the case. There are many pros and many cons to shutting the group down for the summer.

So, rather than giving a Yes or a No on this question, I think it may be best to provide some thoughts for consideration and questions for evaluation. No one knows your group better than you do. And after reading through this information you should be able to make a good decision.

Here are a few valid reasons to consider shutting down the group for the summer:

- It would be impossible to have consistent attendance at group meetings due to vacations, ballgames, mission trips, summer training camps, and so on.
- The group you are with is made up of overwhelmed professionals. They are consistently involved in group life September through June, but they need some breathing room for a season to re-energize and have time with family.
- The church is involved in or preparing for a major emphasis that will involve group members through the summer months.
- You, the group leader, are burned out and considering giving up leadership of the group. You need a break!

Here are a few valid questions to ask before deciding to stop meeting for the summer:

- Are there pre-Christians on the verge of choosing to become Christ-followers?
- Are any group members experiencing a trauma or life situation that would require the continuing support of the group at this time?
- Is the group just beginning to experience relational connection?
- Are group members consistently involving themselves in the spiritual disciplines for the first time due to the accountability of the group?

If the answer to any of these questions yes, I would keep the group together this summer.

Even if you decide to close the group down for the summer I would suggest you do the following:

- Consistently e-mail group members to ask about their prayer needs. E-mail all prayer requests to the rest of the group members.

- Get together once a month for a cookout, day at the pool, or some kind of fun activity. Make sure to invite pre-Christians, un-churched friends, or church members who need to be in a group.
- Get the group together to attend a professional sporting event and/or the ball games of kids whose parents are in the small group.

—Rick Howerton is a discipleship and small group specialist; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today.

Discuss:

1. How are you feeling as the leader? Do you need a break?
2. Which way are you leaning: taking a break or not? Why?
3. What can you do to keep consistent communication between group members this summer?

Connect Throughout the Summer

Practical ideas to help carry your group's momentum into September
Sheila Ely

It's fast approaching summer, and group members are increasingly absent as kids' soccer and baseball teams begin to practice and gardens—along with weekends away—begin to beckon. What's a small-group leader to do? How does a group maintain a strong sense of community, closeness, and care if they are to be apart for the better part of June, July, and August? How do they continue to respond to each others' needs?

One thing to keep in mind during this season is that small groups are about relationships—not meetings. You can break from regular meetings, but a group should never break from doing life together. Also, group members need to be intentional about making plans for the summer *before* calling a break from regular meetings. Don't wait for summer to hit and attendance to dissipate before talking over what you want to happen.

Here are several creative ways to stay in touch during the summer:

- Sending cards and notes through old-fashioned snail mail is a great way to correspond in a different and noticeable way.
- Take pre-summer photos of group members and post them on the fridge as reminders to pray for and stay in touch with one another.
- Arrange for all the members of your group to sit together in church on the weekend.
- Summer socials and get-togethers are the perfect time to include new people in your group, so don't forget to draw in neighbors or new folks from church who would like to connect.
- Put together a summer calendar with each group member's vacation schedule and availability for social events, then use it to map out evenings, days, or weekends when the whole group can get together. (Also include birthdays, anniversaries, or special occasions within the group.)

We all know the old adage that "a change is as good as a rest," so perhaps your group simply needs to do things a little differently in order to thrive over the summer. Take into account the life stage of your group members. Change will look different for a group of retired folks, empty nesters, and families with young kids. Here are some ideas:

- Continue to meet weekly, but skip the living room in favor of a pool deck, park, or patio.
- Come together to watch the sports games of group members' children. Use the casual time to catch up, and take turns bringing cold drinks.
- Take turns planning a variety of summer socials, and make sure they are family friendly.

- If you know your attendance will be down for much of the summer, plan to meet with one or two other small groups in the same boat.
- One summer, our group was so close that we continued a bi-weekly meeting all the way through. We just decided that whoever could come, would come.

Whatever you do and however you do it, stay connected throughout the summer. Some of your group members might not be crazy about the idea at first, but they will soon appreciate the relaxed contact and continued support and encouragement. And they will be amazed at the level of intimacy that carries through into September.

—Sheila Ely; copyright 2008 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How has your group approached summer in the past, and what were the results?
2. What questions do you need to ask to begin addressing your summer plans before attendance starts to drop in your regular meetings?
3. Which idea above is the best fit for your group this summer? What else can you do to stay connected?

Use Social Media to Connect Through the Summer

Facebook can keep group members close—even if you don't meet as often.

Amy Jackson

Does social media have a place in cultivating real friendships? My answer is a resounding "yes." While many view online tools like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram simply as ways to keep up with distant friends and relatives, they can do a lot for your close relationships as well. And they can be especially helpful over the summer months.

Whether you break for the summer, follow a different schedule, or have sporadic attendance, a private Facebook group can keep all group members in the loop and feeling part of the meetings, even if they can't attend.

Confidential Sharing

When setting up a Facebook group, be sure to make it a "secret" group. This will ensure that only the members of the group will be able to see posts. This means they will not show up on newsfeeds or on individual members' profiles. A secret group will allow your group members to share with confidence. They can share prayer requests, struggles, and more with that knowledge.

Smart Phone Ready

If you're looking for a way to instantly contact all your members at once, look no further—especially if your group members have smart phones. Group members' phones will alert them that there's a new message for them on Facebook.

Easily Add and Remove Members

When someone new joins, it's easy to add him or her to the group. I was once part of an e-mail chain that constantly added and removed people. They were always sending out e-mails with the updated information so that all the members could update their e-mail address books. With Facebook groups, there's no need to do this. Simply add a new member and all messages are sent to him or her. In the same way, if people leave the group, you can easily remove them.

Connect Throughout the Week

Set posting permissions to allow all group members to post on the group's page. This allows all group members to like comments, post comments, and share photos and documents. Let everyone contribute to the online discussion just like in your actual meetings. This will help anyone who wasn't able to attend feel like part of the group discussion. Group members can share prayer requests or other needs throughout the week. On a practical note, you may want to set up some guidelines for what to share—for instance, you may want to make it clear that posts about personal businesses are not welcome.

Comment Strings

No long reply all threads to read through on Facebook! Simply scroll through the comments posted. It's a lot cleaner and easier to look through than a reply all e-mail. Even better—you won't "lose" comments by accidentally deleting your e-mail. Simply scroll down the page until you find the information you're looking for.

See Who Has Read Posts

Have you ever sent out an e-mail and wondered if anyone actually read it? With Facebook groups, you'll never wonder again. The page will show you exactly who has seen your post. I once had to cancel our meeting last minute. I posted the information to our page and could check to see who had seen the post. Everyone quickly saw the message, and I could rest assured that no one would show up accidentally.

Keep the Conversation Going

I love being able to write a quick post about the chapter we'll be discussing at our next meeting. Something like "I loved her description of grace on page 45" can spark discussion before you even get together. One week I came across a YouTube video that was on the topic of our study and posted it. It came out in our discussion that week.

Post Links to Resources

I've found myself frequently saying "Let me get back to you on that" in meetings. One of the great things about Facebook groups is they allow you to get back to them sooner. For instance, one woman asked me how to access the podcasts our church offers. The next day I posted a link to them on our group page. Or perhaps your church is putting on a special event and has a webpage with more information. You can link to the page so everyone in your group can check it out.

Poll Feature

This is one of my favorites. Instead of talking about when to have our Christmas party in a meeting when no one has calendars to look at, I asked a poll question on our Facebook page. The poll feature allows you to ask a question, offer several possible choices, and allow group members to add their own choices. So, I asked when we should meet. Within a few hours, all my group members had seen the post, checked the box for when they were available, and even left comments with other ideas.

Share Videos, Photos, and Files

Whether it's a group picture, a video from a recent service activity, or the PDF of your next study, you can share it through your Facebook group. No need to send it over e-mail and worry about file sizes. Plus, how often do we say we'll share our photos from an event but never get around to sending them out? Now you can each upload them to the page and let other group members use them as they'd like.

Create Events

Have an event coming up: a party, service day, or prayer walk? Create an event on your page that allows members to RSVP, comment, and see all the details in one place. This is especially helpful over the summer months so no one is left out. Take advantage of this feature and plan a fun summer activity for your group today.

Empower Connections Between Group Members

Sometimes leaders can serve as a bottleneck for relationships between group members. When you're all connected through the Facebook group, though, members can contact one another directly and deepen relationships. The healthiest groups are those where group members have relationships outside of group meetings, and being able to easily contact one another is a huge help.

Information in One Place

If your group members are already using Facebook, their birthday, interests, and work information are already entered. Learn more about your group members and their interests and passions. And let group members get to know one another too.

Share Ownership

Too often leaders do all the work. Facebook groups send the message that everyone has something to contribute. If one person has an idea for a service project, he or she can post about it. When someone shares a prayer request, group members can respond themselves through a comment or private message. Not only does this take the pressure of the leader, it also helps group members contribute in meaningful ways.

—Amy Jackson is the Managing Editor of *SmallGroups.com*; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What excites you about using a Facebook group to connect? What makes you nervous?
2. What fun event could you post to your Facebook group to build excitement for the summer?
3. What kinds of posts could you create that would keep the discussion (and connection) going on Facebook?

Take Your Group Public This Summer

Learn how going out into the community can keep your group refreshed and useful at the same time.

Reid Smith

It's not uncommon for groups to wrap up their spring focus and feel somewhat depleted. That's why many groups view the summer as a perfect opportunity to get refreshed before school, ministries, and so many other things restart in the fall. Consequently, the prospect of beginning a new Bible study for the summer can sound as inviting as an IRS audit. However, we're missing easy but effective opportunities for building our group life if we only see the summer as a chance to unplug. A snapshot from our nation's history of space travel illustrates how we can use the summertime to continue building biblical community.

Two days after the launch of America's third manned lunar-landing mission, the Apollo 13 spacecraft was debilitated by an explosion that caused it to lose oxygen and electrical power. (Yes, go ahead and say it: "Houston, we have a problem.") The astronauts and NASA flight controllers knew they didn't have enough power to turn around and rocket back to Earth. Their solution was ingenious, but it required a lot of skill and courage to pull off. They decided to use the moon's gravity to slingshot the little spacecraft back to Earth.

In the same way, small groups can use the summer season as a way to slingshot themselves into the fall with tremendous momentum by "going public" with their group.

Go Public

I highly recommend that group leaders take advantage of the change of pace, good weather, and increased receptivity to new things that summertime can bring and "go public." Ask the Lord to raise your group's evangelistic awareness as you branch out. He can and will open doors to reach the lost when your group seeks different ways of living out your faith together in the world.

So what can your small group do this summer to engage with the public hemisphere? One of my favorite suggestions is for groups to gather outside of their living rooms and have a conversation (or two) about God's mission in the world. If you want to try this, be sure to choose a location that's different from your usual meeting place, because doing so can inspire more creative reflection. Also, meet in a public place that experiences regular people traffic. This can prompt more outreach ideas within the discussion and can even provide immediate evangelistic opportunities.

Once everyone has gathered together, the following discussion questions can really get things rolling:

1. What do you want to see happen in our group this summer?
2. In what areas do you want our group to grow as we look ahead to the fall?

3. In what ways or areas do you want to grow as you look ahead to the fall? In other words, how do you want your life to be impacted this summer, and how do you want your life to make an impact?
4. As you think about our local community, what groups of people do you think would be most receptive to the gospel? *(Note: Give people the opportunity to respond to this question before you provide examples, such as those who are sick, poor, incarcerated, families experiencing a difficult season, homeless, and so on. Ask people to be specific.)*
5. How can our small group bring the light of Christ to the people living in our community? *(Note: Ask people to suggest specific and practical ideas. Set a summertime date and determine who is going to run with the initial action items.)*
6. Finally, pray about what was just discussed. Ask the Lord to open doors to reach the people you just talked about, and invite your group participants to be prayerful and share insights they might receive from the Lord about how your group can increase their saltiness and luminosity.

Before asking these questions, assign someone to take notes on the ideas that receive a positive response from the entire group. Remember, the goal here is to connect your small group with the needs and desires of the people in your community. And who knows—as you spend time in public dialogue and prayer, you just might stumble upon some outside observers that have an interest in your group.

Mix It Up

Of course, different groups will harmonize with summertime's gravitational pull in different ways. Here are some other ideas that can help your group become refreshed over the summer, while at the same time maintaining positive momentum by going public.

Morph into a “shared-interest group.” If your group is already organized around some affinity—such as age or marital status—there's a good chance that many of your members have similar interests. If so, your group could become a shared-interest group for a season. In other words, you could center your group around activities or hobbies instead of a Bible study in a living room. Use these questions to find out exactly what those shared interests might be:

- What do you most enjoy doing with your free time?
- If you could invite a few others to join you in an activity, what would it be?
- What sport, creative hobby, topical study, or special interest do you love?

Note that you don't have to choose just one activity. You can create a “mixed shared-interest group” out of the ideas that were shared. In that situation, you might do a topical study one week and then softball the next.

Appoint a community liaison. Select someone from your group to find out what's happening in your surrounding communities during the summer—farmers' markets, festivals, outdoor concerts, and so on. Have everyone bring their calendars to a group

meeting at the beginning of the summer and commit to attending at least a few of these events as a group.

Engage in servant evangelism. One great way to “go public” as a group is to meet one or more needs within your local community. And that’s the beauty of servant evangelism—it’s as simple as connecting something that needs to be done with people who are willing to do it. For ideas about specific projects, I recommend ServantEvangelism.com. Be sure to select a project that is non-threatening for the members of your group.

Serve where you are. You don’t necessarily have to go somewhere new in order to “go public.” Another alternative is to bring the public to you. Consider hosting an event in the neighborhood where your small group meets, for example. You could set up a barbeque in someone’s backyard, or even an outdoor movie with popcorn at a local park. Simply put up flyers in key places and invite families to join you.

Piggyback on a church event. If your church is putting a lot of time and money into planning an event, your group can benefit. Use the larger event as a bridge to interest seeking friends or coworkers and introduce them to the rest of your group. Another option is for your group to volunteer to help with the planning or execution of the event.

—Reid Smith is the Community Life Pastor of Christ Fellowship Church in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida; copyright 2008 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What most appeals to you group about being a “private” small group? How can you maintain these benefits once your group decides to “go public”?
2. What are the main obstacles that will need to be overcome in order to “go public” as a group this summer? What are some possible solutions?
3. Which of the suggestions above is the best fit for your group this summer? What steps can you take right now to get things in motion?

Make the Most of Your Summer Break

Take your group beyond typical meetings for a season.

Eric Bryce-Johnson

As a small-group leader, I have found four vital activities that groups can use during summer breaks to draw closer together and build a deeper sense of purpose.

Take Time for a Deeper Connection

Over the course of a year, it's natural for small-group members to question whether their group is an effective model of a biblical community. *Are we truly a community, they wonder, or do we just "meet"? Are these meetings worthwhile? Do they produce fruit and life?* When these issues are in question, group meetings can turn into "just another obligation"—something to be prioritized out of our schedule. So it can be helpful to use the summer as a season to break from meetings, and instead provide group members with time to focus on fellowship and connection.

As a group leader, be sure to facilitate time for the whole group to come together, but also one-on-one time to connect with group members individually. Hang out with each other and develop personal relationships. Go to the movies, to the beach, or to see a special speaker.

Bring Life to Others

Jesus said in Matthew 28:19: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations." One of the most exciting things a group can do together is to fulfill this commission and disciple a new believer. God's blessing is always with a group that will open their circle to mentor a new believer, and nothing is more rewarding than watching someone bud and grow in their relationship with God. Plus, doing so gives everyone a chance to see how much they have grown—both individually and as a group.

As you "do life together"—barbeques or movies or whatever your group enjoys—simply invite the new believer to come along. Take the time to get to know the person on a personal basis, and clearly communicate the message that "we accept you in our group." The new believer has probably considered small groups before, but may not feel they have time for yet another meeting. So show them that your group is not just another meeting, but a community—a lifestyle that brings worth and a sense of purpose.

Serve Someone Together

If your group lacks a sense of purpose, find someone who has a need and serve them together. It doesn't matter if the need is within your group or outside; it doesn't matter if the need is large or small. For example, some of the members from my small group recently reached out to a Christian woman in the hospital. We prayed with her, helped take care of her home, and met a variety of other needs. She benefited, but so did our

group as we all recognized the power of working together. Remember: A group that serves together stays together, because they've seen the value of true community.

Connect with Other Leaders

Being a small-group leader can be lonely at times, because group members don't always share the vision or level of commitment that leaders do. That's why I recommend group leaders get together to fellowship, minister, and teach each other. We need shared moments that keep our vision and our drive alive, and we need to be reminded not to attempt leadership from our own strength and efforts, but from the overflow of love that God has given us.

—Eric Bryce-Johnson; copyright 2004 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. When do you usually feel refreshed as a result of time with your small group?
2. What specific ways can your group serve together? What new believers can you include?
3. What steps can your church take to help group leaders connect with and support each other this summer?

Share Your Personal Stories

Grow closer together and learn more about God by spending time sharing extended personal stories.

Amy Jackson

One of the most memorable small-group activities I've been involved in is telling our personal stories. When we share our personal stories with one another—especially related to our faith journeys—we learn to be vulnerable, grow closer to one another, and better understand how and why certain topics hit people in unique ways.

While anytime is a great time to share our personal stories, summer is a perfect time to set aside several meetings to allow more lengthy storytelling. Plan for two or three group members to share their stories per meeting. Here's how you can help group members prepare to tell their stories. Ask them to consider these questions. They don't have to answer them all, but it will get them moving in the right direction.

- How role did faith play in your upbringing?
- What memories of church do you have from childhood?
- When did you start following Christ? What were the circumstances?
- When do you feel like you “made your faith your own”?
- When did you start questioning your faith? What were your questions?
- Who has especially impacted your faith (in positive or negative ways)?
- When were you baptized? What was that experience like?
- What struggles or hard times has God brought you through?
- What causes you to doubt?
- When do you feel especially close to God?
- When has God felt especially distant? What did you do?
- What is God teaching you in this season of life?
- What are you struggling with now?
- How are you leaning on God in this season?
- Where are you seeing growth in your life?
- Where are you hoping to see growth in your life?

Remind group members that their stories don't need to be neat and tidy. Real stories have messy parts and they may not be all resolved yet. Rather than try to present a clean, all-fixed-up story, encourage group members to share authentically.

If you have non-believers in your group, ask them to share openly about where they are—even if that's just having a lot of questions and doubts. Let them know that it's okay that their stories aren't finished yet. They'll learn that others' stories aren't finished yet either. Plus, chances are that they'll feel closer to other group members as they hear about others' struggles and doubts.

Tips for Listening Well

The other important aspect of these special meetings is having other group members listen well. So often in groups we listen for a short time and then interrupt with our own stories, questions, or advice. Refrain from saying anything while the story is being shared. After, group members should be encouraged to respond in affirming ways (Thanks for sharing in a vulnerable way. Wow, I never knew that about you. I'm so sorry, that must be hard for you.). They might also ask some questions to clarify parts of the story (How old were you when your parents divorced? Who helped you in that time? How long was it between those events?). Group members should not be allowed, however, to share advice, tell their own stories, or give "Sunday School" responses (Well if you just have faith, God will bless you and it will all turn out okay.).

Finish the time by praying specifically for the person who has shared. Be careful not to pray for the things you think you would want if you were in their shoes. Instead, pray for God's will in their life, praise him for his presence throughout, thank God for how this person contributes to your group, and pray that your group would be able to support the person effectively.

Then transition to the next person who is sharing at that meeting.

Growing Together

You'll be amazed at how much you learn about each other, and how much closer you grow to one another as you hear each other's stories. Plus, you'll learn more about God as you hear from different perspectives and what he's teaching each group member.

I was part of a group that had been together for two years when we took the time to do this. I thought I knew them before this activity, but I learned so much, and I felt so much closer to each person afterward. It also helped to give background to some of the struggles that many of the group members were facing. Plus, I learned unique attributes of God through others' stories that I doubt I would have learned on my own.

Sometimes it's hard to find the time to do an activity like this during the year, but summer provides a little more flexible time. Plus, it brings a fresh activity to your group when things may feel a little stale. It also helps group members feel more ownership of the group, as they realize what they have to contribute. More than anything, it gives you real reasons to praise God as you hear about all the ways he is working in and through your group members.

—Amy Jackson is managing editor of *SmallGroups.com*; copyright 2015 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. When, if ever, has your group spent time telling extended personal stories?
2. How might your group benefit from taking time to tell your stories?
3. What might you do if group members respond with advice or their own stories?

Restart with a Bang

Don't let a summer break turn into a sluggish fall for your group.

Robert Damon

August is upon you. School days are fast approaching. Summer vacation hours and savings have been spent, and plans are being made for the winter holidays. Gasp! It's time for small group to start up again after the summer break, but you haven't had time to prepare. It's way too soon!

Have you ever found yourself in this situation? Are you wondering how and when you can get your small group back together? If so, you're not the only one. Many groups take a break during the summer, either not meeting at all or focusing mainly on social events. There are benefits to these breaks, and people often prefer a defined "ending" and "beginning" to their activities for the year—including their small group. Yet such breaks do create one fundamental problem: How can we effectively re-start our groups after a break in momentum?

Build Anticipation

First, it's important for established small groups to resume regular meetings with the same energy and enthusiasm as a new group. Use phone calls and notes to generate and share your anticipation of what God will accomplish this year in your community. Start planning special events now—including holidays—and share them with your members so they can adjust their calendars accordingly and get involved.

The goal is to re-awaken a hunger for small-group community—both in you and your members—based on past experiences. You also want to begin developing an openness in the group for whatever new and exciting experiences God might have in store.

Tackle the Details

Second, start working on your group's meeting schedule by confirming the best place and times for everyone. See if group members have ideas for new people that can be invited. You want to solidify as many details as you can now, and then bring a list of the remaining items to your first group meeting. Tackling the smaller issues now means you won't clog up that first meeting with a lot of energy-draining administrative questions.

Part of this preparation includes checking out what study material your group might enjoy or benefit from this coming year. Start gathering ideas now, and research any special needs that might develop within the group. If your group hasn't been together during the summer, be ready with sample studies or ideas at the first meeting so that people will not be choosing content "cold turkey." Even if the group doesn't ultimately choose any of your suggestions, it's always a good thing to be ready.

Don't Delay

Third, set your group's start date and get going. Don't delay. Restart with a bang, and consider gathering everyone first at a special event, such as a picnic or barbeque. This is a great way for everyone to share what God has been doing in their lives over the summer, and to ease back into the grooves of community.

Plan for the Future

Fourth, if you haven't done this already, start developing a leadership team for your group. This should include an apprentice leader, or someone you can mentor in the coming year. Start casting the vision for shared leadership—with both your apprentice and group—as a way to participate in the expansion of God's kingdom.

The start of a new ministry year, complete with new ideas and a new vision, is a great blessing and benefit to the entire small-group ministry. Enjoy it. Get creative. Have fun!

—Robert Damon; copyright 2006 by Christianity Today.

Discuss:

1. Has your small group restarted well in the past? What obstacles did you have to overcome?
2. What details are appropriate for you as the leader to decide? What items need to be decided by the group?
3. What steps could your church take to help groups restart effectively?

Further Exploration

Resources to help you connect as a group

[SmallGroups.com](#). We specialize in equipping churches and small-group leaders to make disciples through life-changing community.

- [Connecting Newcomers](#)
- [Develop Real Relationships](#)
- [Helping Group Members Become Great Listeners](#)
- [Making Small Groups Fun!](#)
- [Missional Small Groups](#)
- [Plan a One-Day Retreat for Your Small Group](#)
- [Planning a Group Service Project](#)
- [Spiritual Disciplines for Small Groups](#)

[BuildingChurchLeaders.com](#). A website with practical training tools for various church leadership roles.

[LeadershipJournal.net](#). A website offering practical advice and articles for church leaders.

[GiftedforLeadership.com](#). A website ministering to women leaders.

Creating Community: Five Keys to Building a Small Group Culture

Andy Stanley and Bill Willits

Multnomah, 2004

The authors describe how they established a small-group culture at North Point Community Church.

Making Small Groups Work

Henry Cloud and John Townsend

Zondervan, 2003

This is a one-stop small-group leader's guide for gatherings of all sorts.

Summer Calendar

A simple tool to help keep everyone on the same page

June

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday

July

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday

August

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday