**Session 3**

**Connecting with Others (Forming & Fellowship)**

Fellowship is a heart attitude that seeks to welcome others just as Christ welcomed you (Romans 15:7). It’s an experience of being embraced while simultaneously embracing others. Fellowship is more than a social gathering because it’s built upon a shared devotion to the Word of God and is “others-focused” by nature.

# Forming

# Meeting Preparation

# As a Growth group leader, some focused hard work on meeting preparation and planning will make your group much more effective and successful. Preparation accomplishes three things:

#  Communicates to members that you have a sense of direction and leadership. The last thing that we need to happen is for people to come to a growth group that has no sense of direction. People can quickly pick up on whether or not you are prepared.

# Gives the group confidence in your overall leadership. When you are prepared people will trust you. If you are just trying to wing it, people will not trust you. People want to know that you have put some thought into that meeting.

# Allows you to alter the course of a meeting (if necessary) because you are able to make choices regarding what issues you will cover during the meeting.

# Before the First Meeting

It’s best to take some steps toward building with the core values of community and fellowship *before* your first Growth Group meeting. This may sound obvious, but is overlooked by many new group leaders. Throw a party and invite as many of your friends as possible—you can even encourage them to invite theirfriends. As people do the work of building relationships on a social level, you can extend invitations to further those relationships in a growth group setting.

After people have committed to attend your group, call ahead and confirm they are coming. Additionally, send out an e-mail or facebook message a day or two before the first meeting reminding them of the logistics, and tell them you are looking forward to seeing them. Don’t be afraid of seeming pesky or pushy. People usually appreciate these good-natured and thoughtful reminders at the onset of a new group experience.

Be sure new members know how to get to the host’s home. In addition, two seemingly minor matters can play a large role in ensuring that people actually show up: food and childcare. Be sure to provide refreshments for the first couple meetings, at least, and ask members if they need any help arranging for childcare.

# During the First Meeting

Part of the growth group leader’s job in building an environment of fellowship is to create the right atmosphere within the meeting place. This might sound trivial, but physical space affects people on many different levels. You can help members feel more comfortable by arranging the seating in a circular fashion, having snacks and drinks ready before people arrive, minimizing distractions, turning off the ringers on your phones, and even providing soft background music.

All of these steps should be taken whether you’re meeting in a home or part of the church building. The important thing is to have them accomplished well before people arrive. This way you can greet them at the door and spend some quality social time with them as others show up and settle in.

Let the first meeting be a time where people get to know each other. This will take time, so be intentional about it. Facilitate the conversation so that each member has an opportunity to share his or her story. For example, you can ask questions like: “What brought you to our church?” “What motivated you to check out this group?” “What do you hope to experience in this group?” After everyone has had the opportunity to respond, share your hopes for the group and express thanks to everyone for coming.

It’s not vital to hold a Bible study or work from a curriculum during the first meeting. If you do, however, make sure that it is fellowship-friendly. Finally, the leader should take the initiative to close the group’s time in prayer, giving thanks for each person present and asking for God’s continued blessing on the group.

Shortly after your first meeting, follow-up with those who said they would come but didn’t. Place a no-pressure call just to let them know you missed them. Inform them about what the meeting was like, and reiterate that you hope to see them the next time.

# Brief Options for Childcare

A big consideration when bringing families together, especially those with younger children, is childcare. While it’s the parents’ job to make arrangements for their specific children, it’s important that the group leader be ready with several options as suggestions. Here are a few options:

* Children are integrated into part or all of the group’s life (intergenerational or family-friendly groups).
* Children gather in a separate room. In this situation, they may entertain themselves (by watching a video, for example), or rotating members of the group may be responsible to provide an activity.
* Children are watched by a care-giver outside of the group meeting. There are several options for this. Each family can arrange their own babysitter, or they might pool their resources to hire a common sitter for all of the children. Another option is to use the church as a base for childcare.

The most popular option tends to be parents setting up their own childcare arrangements with a babysitter. Churches can assist in this process by: 1) Providing a list of qualified childcare workers who have gone through an official background check, 2) Offering financial assistance through a predetermined rate reimbursement, or 3) Offering a safe play area for the kids to occupy at the church building.

# Key Skills for Facilitating Fellowship

Growth group leaders are responsible for creating an environment where biblical community can grow. They are not responsible for making it grow—that’s God’s job. The same is true of fellowship. However, there are bedrock skills any group leader can employ that will nourish its growth.

First, group leaders are called to mix the active ingredients God has already provided for each group. They can encourage fellowship by looking for points of common ground between people and then creatively connecting them. This ability grows with practice. In addition, be intentional about involving every person in each aspect of group life—don’t allow for strays (1 Corinthians 12:12–26). This skill is strengthened each time you obey the biblical commandment not to show favoritism.

Remember that group leaders are the greatest influence in the dynamics of group life. If you want a warm and hospitable atmosphere in your group, then you must be transparent and vulnerable yourself. The more open you are, the more open others will be. By being real, you help make the group feel safe and inviting—you encourage fellowship. People want to go to a place where they can be themselves.

Next, acknowledge and affirm each person’s input. Keep in mind that 90 percent of communication is non-verbal, so watch your body language. Make eye contact with the person speaking and let them know you hear what they’re saying. You might even restate what they just said to make sure you’ve heard them correctly.

To the best of your ability, start and finish each meeting on time. You can alleviate some of the pressure that comes with time-keeping by building a cushion into your meeting schedule. Have social time serve as bookends to your group format. This helps the group dynamic feel less rushed and more relational.

Finally, you don’t have to cover every question you plan for each group lesson. This is especially true with opening questions or exercises (like icebreakers). Some group curriculum automatically includes these as a part of each session, assuming they are needed to overcome some initial barrier to connection and conversation that does not always exist.

Simply put, if a question or activity doesn’t seem to work for your group—or if you don’t think they’re necessary—ignore them. Release yourself from the unnecessary burden of covering everything that’s been prepared. Feel free to skip around. Every group is different, and you’ll learn what kinds of questions and activities work best for your group in time. Remember, nobody knows your group as well as you.

# A Sample Agenda

Schedules will vary from group to group, of course, but here is a reliable format for each meeting that you can use as a starting place:

* Fellowship/social time: 15 minutes
* Bible study and discussion: 40 minutes
* Prayer and mutual ministry: 15 minutes
* Closing/announcements: 5 minutes
* Fellowship/social time: 15 minutes

Always remember that fellowship is birthed out of a gathering that exists to do what the Lord has called and commissioned it to do (Matthew 18:20). The power for life-changing transformation grows as a group lets itself be guided by the complementary interplay between God’s Spirit and His Word.