



Making your small groups models of fellowship

by Steve Gladen

Fellowship is a misunderstood purpose.

People often think they're enjoying fellowship together when actually they're only experiencing a small part of what fellowship is meant to be. Too often, the parts that are missing are the elements of true community. And Christian community is what provides the strong foundation for living out all the other purposes:

*“Genuine fellowship helps us move from just sharing coffee and cookies to being a safe community where we can be transparent”
with one another.*

Steve Gladen

True community fosters discipleship. That's because when the people in your small groups experience open, honest relationships together, they have an easier time asking hard questions and challenging each other to grow.

True community fosters ministry. That's because when we care about one another and we know one another's needs, it's easier to put love into action. We don't hesitate to help.

True community fosters evangelism. When we know that a small group member is hurting over loved ones who don't know Christ yet, we're more able – and more motivated – to pray for them to be saved.

True community fosters worship. Those who experience genuine community and unconditional love with one another are willing to be more vulnerable. This includes honesty in worship. When we are part of true community, we're apt to talk more openly to our friends and to surrender ourselves more freely to God.

The Bible offers its own reasons why Christian fellowship is so important. Hear for instance what Hebrews 10:24-25 says: "Think of ways to encourage one another to outbursts of love and good deeds. And let us not neglect our meeting together as some people do. But encourage and warn each other, especially now that the day of his coming back again is drawing near."

We tend to think of good deeds as being aspects of ministry. But fellowship does indeed prompt outbursts of love and good deeds.

Fellowship is the glue that keeps us in relationship with one another. Ephesians 2:19, another key verse about fellowship, talks about how we are members of

God's family. It says, "You are no longer foreigners or outsiders, but citizens together with God's people and members of God's family." Godly fellowship enables us to experience true family.

Genuine fellowship helps us move from just sharing coffee and cookies to being a safe community where we can be transparent with one another. Here are some simple but effective steps a small group in your church can take to build this kind of fellowship and encourage genuine community:

Purpose Driven Small Group Conference, Feb. 20-22

Whether you want to improve an already existing small group ministry or start a new one built around God's eternal purposes, after [this unique conference](#) on the Saddleback Church campus, you'll leave with a plan to do just that.

Offer new people a history of the group. Have everyone – including the first-timers – share a little bit about their family and a few of the activities they enjoy doing in their free time.

Provide ice-breakers. Sometimes the silliest questions or activities are best. These help people get to know one another in a safe way.

Celebrate milestones. Help foster community by celebrating birthdays, anniversaries, long-awaited adoptions, and other special events in people's lives.

Celebrate victories. In addition to job promotions and other achievements, make sure you celebrate spiritual victories and answers to prayer.

Plan an overnighter. Arrange for an "adults only" weekend or a family getaway. The time spent together on an overnighter is equivalent to three months of nightly group meetings.

Host a "Fun Night." Instead of the usual study time, surprise the group with a night full of games and fun. Such a change of pace is both healthy and refreshing for the group.

Institute a hot seat. Sit a person in the center of the circle and have everyone shower him or her with heartfelt affirmation. Statements can begin with, "You're important to our group because ..." Everyone needs this kind of affirmation from time to time.

Tell stories. Plan a brief activity that encourages face-to-face interaction between members. This could be as simple as letting people share a story from the heart such as when they got saved or engaged or married. It could also be a time of sharing a personal story that is relevant to the study. When people share about their personal stories, community deepens.

Pick up the phone. Follow-up calls strengthen community. When people are absent from the group, call to check on them. If a prayer need has been brought up, follow up to let them know you're still praying.

Those phone calls can go a long way toward affirming community. Be sure, too, to call or send a card to people who attended your group for the first time.

Print a directory. A group roster is a simple but important tool for building fellowship and fostering community. Make it easy for people to connect outside of group time by sharing e-mail addresses and phone numbers.

Keep a scrapbook. It's very cool to be able to turn the pages of the book and retrace the journey the group has traveled on together. Of course, the person encouraging small group fellowship can find help with this assignment. And maybe even be able to delegate it entirely to another member of the group.

Fellowship shouldn't be superficial and shallow. When genuine Christian fellowship offers a safe context for knowing and being known, community will result. And when a person with a vision for genuine Christian community volunteers to build the fellowship of a small group, he or she is choosing an exciting ministry opportunity. God – who wired us for community and wants to see true fellowship occur – can and will use that person in a powerful way to help people move beyond merely just doing activities to becoming a community of brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Recommended resources

- [Purpose Driven Small Group Conference, Feb. 20-22](#)
- [Building Healthy Small Groups by Steve Gladen and Lance Witt \(on CD\)](#)
- [Don't Lead Alone: How to Enlist and Support Purpose Champions in Your Small Group](#)
- [250 Big Ideas for Purpose Driven Small Groups by Steve Gladen](#)



[Steve Gladen serves as the pastor of small groups at Saddleback Church.](#) ©Copyright 2006. All rights reserved.