

Small Groups and the Holiday Spirit

There are two reasons why Small Group leaders might want to do something fun for specific holidays and holy days of the year. First, extra joy and laughter can deepen relationships and bond group members more closely together. Second, these especially festive Small Group meetings open the door even wider for timid newcomers to join for the first time.

Remember that the most important spiritual moments in North American culture include (in chronological order) New Year's Eve, Valentine's Day, Easter, Mother's Day, Independence Day, Labour Day, Halloween, and Christmas Eve. Different regions may also have special "sacred" days, ranging from the local fair to the homecoming parade. Canadian small groups may want to observe Victoria Day, Canada Day, and the August "Long Weekend". These are all occasions when the daily routine becomes more transparent to the in-breaking of Spirit. Why not take advantage of the opportunity to celebrate life and hope that comes with these occasions?

Each Small Group needs to observe the holiday (or holy day) in a manner that fits their affinity as a group. For example, a Recovery Group will celebrate New Year's Eve with an extravagant dance *without* alcohol, drugs, or tobacco. A Singles Group may celebrate Valentine's Day with a romantic, catered dinner, but modeling extraordinary respect for human rights. In a sense, the public holiday gives the Christian small group a golden opportunity to demonstrate how to have fun *and* preserve Christian values at the same time. You can be cultural and counter-cultural at the same time ... and that captures the attention of a lot of seekers.

Since I write this in October, Christmas is just around the corner. It is not difficult for small groups to imagine how to make this an especially fun time. Small groups carol together, share presents with each other, or just party in a member's home. You can also have fun and bless strangers to grace. The group can host a worship service for seniors, visit hospitals, host a children's party, or raise money for mission. It is usually more meaningful to bless folks beyond the church than within the church.

Even in the midst of fun, always maintain the basic structure of the small group meeting. You will still take time for prayer; and still refer to scripture; and still encourage intimate sharing of your daily intersections with God. This may be simpler and more creative than the usual routine, but it is important to still observe the routine. It is the thread that maintains the integrity of your small group as a Christian community even in the midst of holiday celebrations.

I am reminded of a small group that decided to do something special for Halloween. In many regions, Halloween now rivals all other holidays as the most significant community celebration. The affinity of this particular group "being a single parent with young children". It made some practical sense to get together at one parent's home for a combined celebration. They went all out to decorate the front yard with scary images, play eerie music, and distribute great treats. However, a large, illuminated, white cross towered in the center of the yard. Group members deliberately dressed up in non-scary costumes to project positive images. They provided free coffee, purchased from the best coffee shop, to all the adults shivering in the cold while they escorted their kids house to house. The positive vibe and sensitive hospitality was remembered long after the event.

There is a difference between *real* holidays and *obligatory* holidays. The small group should celebrate the former, but resist the latter. Let me be plain. Church institutions often want you to celebrate dates of the Christian year like Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, Pentecost, and other traditional Christendom observances ... but these are not really heart-felt celebrations for many people (even Christians). The small group does *not* want to "celebrate" a holiday that they do not really "celebrate" in their hearts. A "forced" holiday is really drudgery, and will actually discourage the small group members, undermine group unity, and deter participation. People pretend to be happy, but may just be feeling guilty.

There are some simple rules to follow whenever a small group breaks their normal routine to have fun for a holiday.

- The celebration must emerge from the prayers of the group, and not be imposed by the pastor or church. Small groups are always "self-determining", and they should be trusted to design a celebration that is consistent with group life. If they include outreach in their activity, it should be their own collective heartburst and not a response to an ecclesiastical request.
- The celebration must intentionally reflect the core values, beliefs, vision, and mission of the congregation to which the small group belongs. This is their connection with the larger community of faith. Their behaviour and witness should reflect the values and beliefs of the whole congregation; and their fun and outreach should be aligned with the overall purpose of the congregation.
- Plan it well in advance, and do it right! Let the celebration be a memory that will be cherished for a long time. Small groups shouldn't do anything half-heartedly, and the same applies to fun. Go all out. Have a *really* great time. Make yourself an advertisement of how Christians have a good time.
- Be especially sensitive to others. People in our culture associate "fun" with "selfishness". We tend to indulge ourselves and neglect others. We tend to play with our immediate friends and ignore outsiders. Prepare the group in advance to resist these temptations. These special holiday celebrations can be hard for introverts, visitors, and strangers. So go out of your way to include people you don't know well, and encourage people with less social confidence.
- Connect your fun with some strategy to bless others during or after the event. The joy you share in the small group should be too big for its container. It should spill over to bring joy to someone else. I recall a Bible Study group of empty-nesters who celebrated Mother's Day with husbands presenting their wives with elaborate corsages, escorting them in a limousine, paying for a lavish dinner, and dancing at a great restaurant. The next day the entire small group bought infant toys for every mother currently in both hospital maternity wards in the city.

Some of the best conversations start when you are having fun. Even the most intimate relationships deepen when you are having fun. Many of the best friendships are formed when you are having fun. Yet despite all the parties and boisterous laughter happening around us, I think very few people are really and truly having fun. They yearn to be with people who know how to *party well*. Since Christians have more to celebrate than anyone else, we can show them the way.

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