

Five Summer Strategies for Small Groups

Preserve group strength and cohesion during the summer.

Allen White

Summer can be a tricky season for groups. Once the days get longer and the temperatures rise, participation tends to decline. With more outdoor activities, indoor group studies can easily go by the wayside. Still, let's not throw away our summer group plans just yet. Most people take a couple of weeks for vacation, but few people have the luxury of taking off the entire summer.

Each group should decide how regular summer meetings would serve their group, or if it could potentially decrease momentum for the fall launch of small group meetings. Keep in mind, the ebb and flow of the calendar is not necessarily a bad thing. Life happens. It's important to maintain the integrity of the group while recognizing other priorities. Here are some summer strategies that may work for your small groups, with pros, cons, and possible solutions for each.

1. Continue On As Usual

I started a men's group about 10 years ago and we continue to meet year-round. We get together every Wednesday for lunch at a restaurant, and use a sermon-based discussion guide from the previous Sunday to focus our conversation. Attendance is up and down, but even with the fluctuations of summer schedules, most of the men still show up on Wednesdays.

Pros

There are positive implications for continuing as normal throughout the summer. In the spontaneous ups-and-downs of the season, the group could be a welcome stabilizing factor. The awareness that meetings don't take a backseat during the summer months demonstrates an ongoing commitment to the members. The group remains available for those who can attend, even if not everyone can be there every week. Regardless of the weather, the group still requires care, support, study, and accountability all year. If this is a possibility for your group, consider meeting during the week when attendance seems to be more consistent, rather than on the weekends when people might take mini-vacations.

Cons

As might be expected during the summer, group meetings can become disjointed. If people miss one or two lessons in a study guide, as with any time of the year, they can usually pick up where they left off and continue with the group. If they miss too many lessons, however, they may feel they can't catch up and skip the rest of the study. To alleviate this "all or nothing" mentality, an alternative would be to choose a six-week study, and then decide which six weeks group members can meet over the summer months—even if it's not six weeks in a row. Coordinating calendars before summer starts in order to establish when most of the group is available has proven beneficial for many groups.

2. Focus on Relationships

While some groups will decide to continue their study, other groups will turn from formal meetings to informal get-togethers over the summer months. These groups will have barbecues and arrange other social activities just to relax and stay connected. Many churches encourage their groups to meet together socially at least once a month over the summer, and then prepare to dive into another study in the fall.

Another idea is to go on a trip together. Over the years, I have had groups go camping, plan a vacation, or just take a day trip together. In fact, one group from the church I served in Greenville, South Carolina, went on a cruise together; they met another couple from Greenville on the cruise, who ended up joining their small group when they returned! Keep in mind, you *really* get to know someone when you travel together—the good, the bad, and the ugly—as you spend a lot of time together in a small window, rather than just a few hours each week. With a little patience and understanding, very deep bonds are likely to form.

Pros

Taking a break from formal group meetings over the summer gives members an opportunity to actually live out what they have studied the other nine months of the year. Summer group socials are also a great opportunity to invite prospective group members. The prospects can get to know the group in a casual setting before they decide to join the group in ongoing meetings. A break also provides a refreshing reprieve from the regular meeting pattern between September and May. If group members have taken a break over the summer, they will be excited to hit another study hard in the fall.

Cons

Of course, the downside of cancelling meetings is that the focus on discipleship through study is limited to about 30 weeks of the year (September to November, then January to May). Some will suggest we are disciples 52 weeks of the year, so why do we only focus on growth for roughly two-thirds of the year? The tension lies in equating Bible study with discipleship, suggesting the absence of group meetings indicates an absence of discipleship. Personally, I believe discipleship is more holistic. Discipleship does not develop solely through studies, but also in life's interactions, like praying for group member's needs and living out what has been learned. Spiritual growth is influenced not only by the Bible, but also by encounters with other people as well as our own attitudes, actions, feelings, circumstances, backgrounds, and more. Group life, even without formal meetings, contains many opportunities for discipleship as group members encourage each other to live out God's Word in practical ways. While the group may not be participating in a formal Bible study, they can be actively involved in care, support, and accountability in the practical outworking of biblical principles in the lives of each group member.

3. Commit to Summer Service Projects

If groups plan to change up their meeting pattern over the summer, a service project might be a great opportunity for the group to serve, learn, and grow together. Opportunities exist for group members to serve in one of the church's ministries, with a non-profit organization, or even find a need in their own neighborhood and fill it.

Pros

A service project can help groups focus on living out their faith in a practical way. Not only will those being served benefit, but the group will benefit in several ways as well. Often, God speaks to us when we are serving others. God can certainly work "in" each group member as he is working "through" them in their service. The best part of serving others is taking the gospel from a discussion to a practical expression. By serving as a group, everyone can get involved, and individuals may feel more comfortable serving with those they know.

Cons

Organizing projects can create a challenge. If groups depend on the church to schedule projects for them, then summer may be a complicated time to begin coordinating efforts. Whether the church recommends a project or the group identifies one on their own, synchronizing busy summer schedules could cause a potential roadblock to serving. Start communicating early.

4. Form Groups around Summer Interests

A number of churches create groups formed around sports, hobbies, or other shared interests. The idea here is that particular summer interests and activities easily lend themselves to the formation of new groups.

Pros

The more people have in common with each other, the better chance the group will solidify. Offering a short-term commitment focused around activities people enjoy could provide a great introduction to group life.

Cons

If you are looking for long-lasting groups, summer is probably not the best season to start, as many interests formed during the summer do not always start smoothly or enjoy longevity. If the goal is a short-term bonding experience, then it can prove beneficial. Understand, having a common interest does not guarantee participants will "gel" into a group. For the best return on investment, start groups by leveraging existing relationships; it creates a stronger foundation for groups than common interest.

5. Take a Break for the Summer

As the old song goes, "summertime, and the livin' is easy..." Many people will cast aside their additional obligations in exchange for the freedom to enjoy the lazy days of summer. Many churches, in turn, will cancel their groups over the summer. They simply agree not to meet in June, July, and August.

Pros

If this is a decision agreed upon by leadership, groups can plan their summer break as they eagerly look forward to what lies ahead in the fall. There are no feelings of guilt for not meeting, since the expectation has been set.

Cons

Foregoing meeting over the summer could have negative implications when starting back up in the fall. A complete lack of connection and interaction with one another might cause a divide too great to easily overcome. Once fall arrives, the new task may be starting completely over and forming new groups. To avoid this, it might be easier to encourage groups to continue through the summer in a way that best suits the members. For those desiring a summer Bible study, they may have to take the initiative to put one together on their own, (which is not necessarily a bad idea, and may provide opportunities for leadership, both now and in the future).

Summer, with the right strategy, can boost group participation and satisfaction. How this is accomplished will vary from church to church, and possibly from group to group. Offer several options to your groups, letting them choose what would work best for them over the summer months in order to continue the group, while allowing for a change of pace.

—Allen White is a pastor, teacher, writer, and speaker.

Note from Neil: While we're aware that many of our groups take the summer off, we encourage everyone to meet at least once a month for either oikos-friendly social gatherings or service opportunities.