

Revitalizing A Struggling Small Group Prayer Time

There are few things worse than a struggling small group prayer time. This is the cry and lament I hear from many a small group leader. Since prayer is a vital means of grace and since our God appoints our prayers to accomplish His purposes, small group leaders and members rightly desire that it should be one of the highlights of the small group and not the one thing they all would rather leave behind. The good news is that a struggling prayer time can be revitalized and that you, the leader, can be used by God to do it. Here are five tips for small group leaders to revive a flagging prayer time.

1. Lead by Praying About Prayer Time

Pray personally about your personal prayer life and your group's prayer times. This may seem too obvious to state, but too often we *talk* about a problem more than we *pray* about a problem. So, yes, pray about better prayer time. Ask your Father to make you and your group more child-like in their humility and dependency upon Him in prayer. Ask, as the disciples did, "Lord, teach us how to pray!"

2. Lead by Planning To Pray

As the old adage goes, "Aim at nothing, hit it every time." If prayer is not a priority in your small group's schedule, either it will not happen or it will get tacked on the end as a quick formality. Practically, for leaders, this means that at a certain pre-set time, no matter what, you shift the small group to a time of prayer. I tell the small group that I lead, "we're going to have discussion up until 8:30 and then start a time of prayer." I'm fairly time conscious by nature, but some might need to set an alarm or have a co-leader let you know when the time has come. If you won't plan to pray, you won't pray.

Related to this, the group I lead used to struggle with having enough time to share *and* pray. Even when we made time to pray, we ran out of time too quick. Our solution? When it is time to pray, we all write down our name and prayer requests on a piece of paper that goes into a hat. The hat goes around and, after everyone then draws a name out of the hat, I ask, "Does anyone want to explain more about what they wrote before we pray?" Then, during our prayer time, we pray for the person on our slip, including the requests they wrote down, and, when we are done, we take these slips with us to continue to pray for that person throughout the week.

3. Lead With Biblically Informed Questions and Priorities

Leaders can dramatically and immediately improve a faltering prayer time by asking better questions than, "So what can we pray about?" I group these better questions into "up" and "out" kinds of questions that reflect the priorities of the Great Commandment and the Great Commission, the love of God and the love of neighbor. "Up" questions include "What do you want the Lord to do in you this week?" "They all grow at once, but if you could pick one fruit of the Spirit you seem to especially lack, what would it be?" "How have you been growing spiritually?" "How do you want to grow spiritually?" "How do you want to grow as a follower of Christ?"

"Out" questions include, "Can we all share the names of a few folks we want to come to know the Lord?" "How can we be praying for our neighbors, neighborhood,

communities, etc.?” “What do you want to see the Lord do in your co-workers lives this week?”

One way to build an outward focus into your group is to, at your first formal meeting, distribute slips of paper and ask people to write down the names of as many people they know who don't yet know the Lord. These names then go into a fishbowl and, each week before prayer time, you pull a few names from the bowl and the group makes praying for their salvation a routine part of your prayer time.

Another concrete way to build an outward focus into your group is to ask your pastors or church ministry leaders what they are praying for, or what major events are coming up in the life of the church, or by adopting a missionary whom you routinely support in prayer.

4. Lead by Dividing The Group

As a chart-tipping introvert, I understand that for many people there are few things as anxiety producing than being put on the spot in front of a large group to bare their souls in either sharing or praying. One quick way to adjust for this and revitalize a lame prayer time is to divide your group into smaller and smaller prayer groups. For example, one week split up men and women and pray in different areas of the room or the house. Another week, ask an 'up' or 'out' question and encourage groups of three to respond to it and pray in their groups. Even something as simple as, “turn to the person next to you and ask how you can pray for them to grow spiritually, and then take turns praying for each other,” can lead to rich times in prayer for even the most timid of us.

5. Lead by Praying From Scripture

Praying the prayers of Scripture (Psalms, prayers of Paul, etc.) is not a magical formula, but opening your group prayer time in a prayer from Scripture has tremendous spiritual benefit. One major benefit of reading a Biblical prayer is that it broadens the kinds of things God's people can and should pray about. Too often our scope in prayer is limited to overcoming personal trials and asking for healing mercies while the prayers in Scripture also reveal a concern for God's global kingdom, prayers for social justice, agonized cries of loneliness and sorrow, triumphant praise, recounting God's words and works, pleading for His church, etc. Praying the prayers of Scripture broadens our prayer horizon. Another major benefit is that praying a prayer of Scripture gives your group words to speak. For many people, the challenge of prayer, especially public prayer, is not knowing what to say. When you anchor your prayer time in a prayer of Scripture, you give your group divinely inspired words to boldly speak back to God.

There is certainly more to say but I have seen the Lord use these five principles to revitalize, sometimes dramatically, struggling small group prayer times. If you're a leader, put these into practice and let me know how it is going. If you're a member stuck in a struggling prayer time, pass this article along privately to your small group leader, or volunteer to help lead the prayer time for them and slowly introduce what is here. May our Father bless you as you pray and lead others to the throne of grace!

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