

Small Group Blessings

What I've learned through my small group

by Brett Eastman

When I met with my new small group for the first time, I was so reluctant. I didn't know if I could ever find the sense of belonging and spiritual family I had enjoyed with my previous groups. But they welcomed my wife and me into their lives with arms wide open, and we soon became family. It has become a circle of life, love, and learning. Here are a few things I've learned over the last few years with them:

Laughter is the fuel of life. I can't tell you how many times I was going through a hard time with my wife, my kids, or work, and I came to my small group with tanks empty. There were times when I was tired, sad, or pressured at work, and they just made me laugh—knee slapping, tear-producing laughter. From practical jokes to the ironies of life, I just love how we can take what we do seriously, but not take ourselves so seriously. There were so many times I drove home saying "I needed that!"

I long to belong. I love being "in." I love being "a part." I love being "included." My group has consistently reminded me that this isn't only the needy, group-happy Brett, but a God-given desire, a divine calling, a pathway to a healthy, balanced life.

Pain is universal. It's just not always visible. When I've seen my group share their pain (as in hurts, struggles, temptations, etc.), it makes me want to share on a whole other level. We have had cancer, parent health problems, marital issues, teenager chaos, emotional brokenness, job transitions, children leaving home, surgeries, heart scares, financial fears, and more. And when we go below the water level of our hearts, there has been gold there for me. Why? Because it makes me feel I'm not alone.

I am a beginner when it comes to listening. I am realizing anew how much I talk—many times out of insecurity—wanting to fill the space with words. My group has helped me see this and is showing me how I can learn and grow as I simply listen more. The best part about this reminder is that I can hear more of what God is saying through them.

Sometimes the best curriculum is the curriculum of life. I used to feel guilty about not doing a big, long Bible study each week, especially with all the teachers and Bible scholars in the group. But I have discovered again that as the Word became flesh in Christ, so it does in them—through their hands, feet, hearts, and hope poured out for Christ to me.

Confession is the primary pathway to community. As John Powell once said in his classic book, *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?*, "If I tell you who I am and you don't like me, I will be alone!" But my group has not done this to either my wife or me. When we told them we were struggling with going to church this past year, they accepted us. When we said we didn't want to come to group one evening because we were having marriage problems, they embraced us, making it safer to show up more and more. What a gift! The Bible verse, "Confess your sins to one another and you will be healed," became real to us.

Everyone has something to teach me. The childhood loss of one serves as comfort for me and others today. Cancer in one serves to support cancer in another. Intimacy of one grew intimacy in another. Additionally, those who have "triggered" me have become my greatest teachers. Sometimes one person in the group has made me mad, another sad, and both have grown to be gifts to me.

Bad days are sometimes the best days. This truth has taken me from days of not wanting to go to small group to anticipating what I will learn when I do. I am most proud of my own wife, who takes more risks than I ever do. I just watch the group love on her and breathe life in her like few things I have ever seen. I've come to realize that it's not a question of whether they care but if I'll let them care. I've learned that if I am going to try and live my life alone I can, but I don't have to. And if I do, it's my fault. I make myself alone by not making myself known.

It feels cruel for God to allow pain in my life for someone else's comfort until I am comforted by someone else's pain. Honestly, I'm tired of the pain that results from sin and circumstances I cannot control. However, the profound lesson in all of this is when I said to my group, "This feels crazy and nothing short of insane," they didn't try to fix me. They didn't say I know your pain (because no one fully can). But several of them had a look of understanding. They didn't and needn't say more. But oh how big, how deep that was to me.

Yes I am crazy. Yes I am overly passionate. But there is something sacred in the circle, and it's my place, my path and my purpose in life! They have helped authenticate my calling in life. You know how sometimes you wonder? Well, I don't wonder anymore. In fact, I dream more and more. I am honored and privileged by what God has given through my group and what I sense he will give in the future. I look forward to what's in store in the next year.

—BRETT EASTMAN served as the Small Group Champion at Saddleback Church and Willow Creek Community Church; copyright 2004 by Christianity Today.