

# GROUP AGREEMENT

Remember, this agreement is just a tool to help you clarify the goals and expectations of the group so that everyone is on the same page.

*We Agree as a Group to Strive to...*

- 1. Be Authentic.** No masks, no facades. To be people who are free to be ourselves, and to be open and honest with one another.
- 2. Seek Spiritual Health.** To give group members permission to help me live a healthy, balanced spiritual life that is pleasing to God through being connected to Christ and his community, being nourished by the word, and being active in service and mission.
- 3. Give Priority to Group Meetings & One Another.** A primary responsibility of community is to prioritize for specific relationships. This requires a willingness to be available to meet each other's needs inside and outside of the formal group time, & means that I'll call if I'm going to be late or absent.
- 4. Be Confidential.** For authenticity to occur, members must be able to trust that issues discussed with a Small Group are not to be shared outside of the group.
- 5 Show Respect.** Group members should never say anything that will embarrass their spouse or members of the group. Get permission from them before you share.
- 6. Resolve Conflict.** To avoid gossip and to immediately resolve any concerns by following the principles of Matthew 18:15-17 which begins with going directly to the person with whom you have an issue.
- 7. Welcome Newcomers.** To invite our friends who might benefit from this study and warmly welcome newcomers.
- 8. Build Relationships.** To get to know the other members of the group and pray for them regularly.
- 9. Other:**

## Group Guidelines

1. The group will meet on \_\_\_\_\_ (day of the week)
2. The group sessions will begin at (time) \_\_\_\_\_ and end at \_\_\_\_\_
3. Review date of this agreement: \_\_\_\_\_

## Member Commitment

I covenant together with the other members of this group to honor this agreement.

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*Signature*

## USING THE SMALL GROUP AGREEMENT

*A resource for small groups*

Small groups have the potential to be places where God works powerfully to impact the lives of everyone in the group. But not all small groups live up to this potential. Why is it that some groups provide rich experiences, satisfying relationships, and meaningful life change, while other groups struggle to find their grooves or maintain their purpose? There are two common problems that frequently undermine a small group's development: unmet expectations and the natural tendency to drift. Fortunately, we have developed a tool that, when used well, can avert these problems and set the stage for a healthy and gratifying small group experience. This tool is the Small Group Agreement.

### In this resource, we'll discuss:

- What the Group Agreement is
- Why your group will benefit from using the Agreement, and
- How to use the Group Agreement effectively

## WHAT IS THE SMALL GROUP AGREEMENT?

In short, the Small Group Agreement is a guideline for helping people have the best group experience possible. It's an agreement among group members of what they want and can expect from a small group. More specifically, the Group Agreement communicates the purpose, values, and goals of small groups and provides a framework for establishing the practical expectations of group members. The stated purpose of small groups is to see every person, from the core of our church to the ever-growing community, connected in a healthy small group. The stated values and goals of small groups are:

- Be Authentic.** No masks, no facades. To be people who are free to be ourselves, and to be open and honest with one another.
- Seek Spiritual Health.** To give group members permission to help me live a healthy, balanced spiritual life that is pleasing to God.
- Give Priority to Group Meetings & One Another.** A primary responsibility of community is to prioritize for specific relationships. This requires a willingness to be available to meet each other's needs inside and outside of the formal group time, & means that I'll call if I'm going to be late or absent.
- Be Confidential.** For authenticity to occur, members must be able to trust that issues discussed with a Small Group are not to be shared outside of the group.
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- Welcome Newcomers.** To invite our friends who might benefit from this study and warmly welcome newcomers.
- Build Relationships.** To get to know the other members of the group and pray for them regularly.

The Group Agreement briefly explains what each of these values and goals mean in the context of a small group. The Agreement also discusses logistical details, including the time and recurrence of group meetings, length and programmatic breakdown of group meetings, and just basically what your small group is striving to be all about. Finally, because the Agreement is an agreement among the members of the group, it includes a place for all members to sign, signifying their commitment to honor the Agreement.

Before we discuss the reasons for using the Group Agreement, let's examine the hesitations that keep some groups from using the Agreement:

***They don't see the value in the Group Agreement.*** Because the layout of the Agreement somewhat resembles a form, it is sometimes viewed as an administrative formality—just something that the church wants each group to complete for management purposes.

***They assume everyone is already on the same page.*** People often assume that everyone in the group has the same basic beliefs and the same expectations of what a small group should be. They may also assume that everything in the Agreement is common sense and therefore unnecessary.

***They are scared off by the word "Agreement."*** We live in a culture that doesn't like to commit, and an "agreement or group covenant" sounds like a serious commitment. And because this terminology can be used in a legal sense, some people fear that it will foster legalism in their groups.

Some groups don't use the Group Agreement for these and other related reasons, while other groups are simply unaware that the Agreement exists. Whatever the reason, we have found that most groups are more willing—even anxious—to use the Agreement once they understand the Agreement and its purpose. And for that to happen, first the small group leader must first understand the Agreement and its purpose.

## **WHY SHOULD YOUR GROUP USE THE GROUP AGREEMENT?**

The primary reason to use the Small Group Agreement is to protect the health and development of your small group. The Agreement does this by:

- Clearly establishing expectations
- Giving predictability to the group experience
- Increasing group members' commitment and sense of ownership
- Providing focus to the group
- Serving as a tool for accountability and evaluation

### **Establishing Expectations**

Each member carries into the group a unique set of expectations. As a church, we have attempted to provide a clear picture of what small groups are all about. But the reality is that each person, based on his or her own past experiences and what has been heard from other people, enters the group looking for a particular experience. If the group members don't discuss their expectations early in the life of the group, there's a good chance that those expectations won't be met, leading to frustration, disappointment, and dissatisfaction with the group experience. The Agreement provides a vehicle for discussing expectations by calling attention to the purpose of small groups, the guiding values, and group logistics. As the group discusses these areas, each member gains a clearer understanding of how the group will operate. This helps align the various members' expectations, as well as clarifying how those expectations will be met.

### **Building Predictability**

Part of the small group's stated purpose is "to provide a predictable environment." Why is predictability important? We believe that the ideal environment for fostering growth is characterized by a high level of trust and commitment. When group members experience a predictable environment—that is, they know who will be there and how the group meeting will go—they feel a sense of comfort and confidence that will allow them to be more authentic, which sets the stage for life change to occur. A predictable environment can actually encourage flexibility, because when bumps in the road arise, group members feel free to adapt, knowing that the group will return to its predictable state when the crisis is over.

### **Increasing Commitment and Ownership**

Typically, when people fear commitment, it is not actually commitment they fear, but rather one of the following:

- Fear that the object of their commitment will let them down
- Fear that the object of their commitment will reject them
- Fear that something better will come along, but they'll be trapped by their commitment

As we'll see, the Agreement can actually serve to limit the causes of these fears. For example, much of the feeling of being let down comes as the result of unmet expectations. As we've already discussed, however, the Agreement encourages the communication of expectations, reducing the likelihood that they will go unmet. The fear of rejection can be allayed by the group's commitment to the values of building relationships, availability, and respect. When these values

are pursued, there is less risk of rejection. The fear of feeling trapped by a commitment will be alleviated in part by revisiting the Group Agreement once or twice a year (such as January and July/August) to see if everyone wants to continue forward as a group, or if they need to step out for a season, or to step out so that a new small group or several groups can be birthed. As these fears are alleviated and the group members experience the benefits of community, their desire for commitment will actually grow.

The Group Agreement also instills a sense of ownership because it's an agreement among the group members. The commitment each person makes is not to the church or even to the group leader, but rather to the other members of the group. When group members agree to honor their commitments to each other and to the purpose, values, and goals of the group, they are agreeing to take responsibility for the growth and development of the group. For example, by agreeing to value relationships and availability, group members signify that they are committed to prioritizing and investing in each other personally—not depending on the group leader to make these relationships happen.

### **Providing Focus**

By clearly outlining the purpose, values and goals of the small group, the Group Agreement helps set the focus for the group. It defines success—group members experiencing authentic community and spiritual growth—and provides a path for getting there. For example, in order to experience community, group members must prioritize relationships and availability. In order for it to be authentic community, they must value authenticity, confidentiality, and respect. In stating welcoming newcomers as a value of the group, the Agreement helps remind the group about the need to reach out to those who are disconnected from the Christian community.

### **Allowing Evaluation and Accountability**

As we said earlier, one of the problems that undermines a group's development is the natural tendency to drift. As group members grow more familiar with each other and the structure of the group, they may pay less attention to the values and guidelines that seemed so important when the group was first establishing its rhythm. Not only does the Agreement give a small group focus, it also provides a tool for evaluating the group. The Agreement sets forth the criteria by which the group's health and development can be monitored. Whether the group is developing well or somehow missing the mark, the values, goals, and guidelines will help determine why. For example, the value of respect is described as follows: "Group members should never say anything that will embarrass their spouses or members of the group." That's something that can clearly be evaluated. Similarly, if a group that agreed to start at 7:00 pm finds attendance a problem, it may be because group meetings have started to delay until 7:30 or 7:45, causing them to end late as well.

The Agreement also provides a platform for accountability. Because group members agree to honor the values and guidelines, the Agreement serves as a point of common ground when things go awry. In the previous example, if the group meeting is consistently starting late, reviewing the agreed upon start time will serve as the first step toward starting future meetings on time.

## HOW CAN YOU USE THE GROUP AGREEMENT EFFECTIVELY?

There is no one "right" way to use the Group Agreement, because each group is different, having its own set of distinct personalities. However, here are some practical tips for using the Agreement to your group's advantage.

### Introducing the Group Agreement

Most leaders find it works best to introduce the Agreement organically. Start with a question, such as "What is most important for you in this group?" or "What are your hopes and expectations for the group?" As the group members share their desires and expectations, you can explain that the Agreement is a great way for the group members to make sure they're all on the same page, and that they get the most out of their group experience. You can also address the tendency of groups to drift, and present the Agreement as a way to protect against that tendency. Finally, you can explain that the purpose and values expressed by the Agreement not only ensure a positive group experience, but also support the mission of the church in changing everyday people into a community of passionate Christ-followers.

### Tips for introducing the Agreement:

After you've introduced the concept, give each member a copy of the Agreement, and then pass around a master copy for everyone to sign.

Mention the Agreement near the end of the starter period, or when the group becomes a long-term regular group.

Consider doing a trial 8-week Agreement during the starter period to get group members used to the idea of a Group Agreement.

### Revisiting the Group Agreement

If the purpose of the Agreement is to protect the group and keep it on track, then the Agreement should not be a one-time-only tool. You will want to revisit the Agreement periodically (at least once every six months) throughout the life of the group in order to evaluate the group's health and development. Take advantage of natural opportunities to review the group's progress; if your group breaks for the holidays or for the summer, plan to spend one meeting prior to the break revisiting the Agreement. If you notice that the group is drifting or that problems are beginning to arise, that may also suggest that it's time to revisit the Agreement. Use the **Small Group Agreement Check Up Form** on the next page as a tool to facilitate a conversation about how your group is doing at fulfilling the small group agreement.

## SMALL GROUP AGREEMENT CHECK-UP

Directions, please rate how you feel the group is doing in each of the following areas with 1 meaning it's not taking place or rarely is, and a 5 means that it is usually present.

### **1. Be Authentic.**

*No masks, no facades. To be people who are free to be ourselves, and to be open and honest with one another.*

1 2 3 4 5

### **2. Seek Spiritual Health.**

*To give group members permission to help me live a healthy, balanced spiritual life that is pleasing to God through being connected to Christ and his community, being nourished by the word, and being active in service and mission.*

1 2 3 4 5

### **3. Give Priority to Group Mtgs & One Another.**

*A primary responsibility of community is to prioritize for specific relationships. This requires a willingness to be available to meet each other's needs inside and outside of the formal group time, & means that I'll call if I'm going to be late or absent.*

1 2 3 4 5

### **4. Be Confidential.**

*For authenticity to occur, members must be able to trust that issues discussed with a Small Group are not to be shared outside of the group.*

1 2 3 4 5

### **5 Show Respect.**

*Group members should never say anything that will embarrass their spouse or members of the group. Get permission from them before you share.*

1 2 3 4 5

### **6. Resolve Conflict.**

*To avoid gossip and to immediately resolve any concerns by following the principles of Matthew 18:15-17 which begins with going directly to the person with whom you have an issue.*

1 2 3 4 5

### **7. Welcome Newcomers.**

*To invite our friends who might benefit from this study and warmly welcome newcomers.*

1 2 3 4 5

### **8. Build Relationships.**

*To get to know the other members of the group and pray for them regularly.*

1 2 3 4 5

### **9. Other:**

1 2 3 4 5