

STRUGGLING ATTENDANCE

CALLING YOUR GROUP BACK INTO CONSISTENT DEVOTION

Source Texts: Romans 12:1-13, Acts 2:42-47, Hebrews 10:24-25, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Ephesians 4:11-16, Romans 12:4-13, Galatians 6:1-2, Matthew 18:15-20, Thessalonians 5:11-14

Scripture is clear on the necessity of believers meeting together regularly. While this is most directly applied to gathering for corporate worship with the body of Christ, we can extrapolate these commands and principles to the broader context of the local church.

At GBC, we have designed our small groups as the primary tool, outside of Sunday worship, that we use to equip the body of Christ for ministry. While equipping happens in part through the structure and leadership development overseen by the church staff, the large majority of this equipping occurs through life-on-life relationships, pursuing Christ-likeness together.

With intentional relationships in small groups at the core of how we equip our church, attendance becomes fundamental and vital to the Christian life within our congregation. The presence of each group member is not only a formative influence on one's own sanctification, but also a contributing relationship to the sanctification of every other participant in the group. If our faith is our most important relationship in life, and if God works primarily in and through His bride, the church, and if the church equips its people primarily through its small group ministry, then as followers of Jesus we cannot view attendance as an optional or secondary activity. Rather, it must be understood as fundamental and vital to our spiritual health.

Our participation and attendance matters for our spiritual health in many ways. Through our small groups, we experience God's gifts through His Word, prayer, and the fellowship of other believers. We also have the opportunity to express love for the body of Christ by caring for its members through hospitality, mutual care, encouragement, and edification. Through our presence, we provide the necessary community to endure hardship, celebrate God's sovereign work in our lives, and grow in faith together.

If attendance is poor then the whole group suffers. As leaders, then poor attendance should be addressed in a twofold manner. First, the discussion should be held corporately with the entire group on a consistent basis. My group, for instance, has this conversation each September, again in January, and, if necessary, once more in mid-March following our Spring Break fellowship night. Second, individual conversations should be had with participants who appear to have lost sight of the value and purpose of the church's small group ministry as described above. These expectations should always be communicated with warmth, humility, and a posture of invitation.

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THE CORPORATE DISCUSSION

- At GBC, we often remind leaders to set the bar high and keep it there. Lowering the standards of the group for short-term gain ultimately does a disservice to the group as a whole. We do not operate with a “suggested attendance percentage,” as is often requested. Rather, we expect participants who have signed up for a small group to be devoted to the small group above most other commitments, with the exception of family matters and genuine emergencies.
- Leaders may communicate this expectation clearly and plainly, for example: “Unless you’re outside the city limits, we intend for you to be here each week.” “Your presence is valuable not only for your own sanctification, but for the other participants in this group. Being present truly matters.”
- Finally, leaders should approach attendance issues with both conviction and discernment, recognizing that inconsistent attendance may reflect a variety of underlying issues. Not every absence indicates poor prioritization or apathy. Some reveal hardship, life exhaustion, or poor spiritual health. The goal of these conversations is not merely compliance, but shepherding.

THE INDIVIDUAL DISCUSSION

- There are several appropriate ways to initiate an individual conversation regarding attendance. This may include arriving early or staying late at the next group, meeting for a meal or coffee, or a short phone call. Regardless of the format, leaders should seek to address the issue promptly rather than allowing it to compound. In most cases, there is sufficient opportunity to have this conversation within a few days and prior to the next group.
- During the conversation, ask for honest transparency regarding attendance challenges and listen carefully to the reasons offered. Where issues of prioritization appear to be present, speak clearly and graciously. Then, call them back into consistent relationship with the group. Provide clear, tangible ways for them to engage meaningfully with the group amid whatever scheduling conflicts. For example, if someone is unable to spend time outside of group meetings, consider encouraging regular contribution to the group text, consistent prayer for the group, and intentional presence by arriving early and staying late at group. What you’re initially looking for is verbal ownership and a desire to grow in their investment in the group. As the group progresses, be intentional leading this participant into deeper integration and ownership of the curriculum and relationships.
- In some cases, consistent inability or unwillingness to participate may indicate that this particular group is not the right fit for a given season. Leaders should view this not as a failure, but as an opportunity to help individuals align their commitments honestly and pursue growth in a meaningful context.