

# Shepherding Broken People

*When your group shares their deepest hurts, how do you respond?*

By Dan Lentz

One of the small groups in my church has been together for a few months now. Recently, the leader asked, "What's your biggest battle in life right now?" The small-group leader was expecting fairly benign responses, typical of other responses he had received in recent weeks from the group. Instead, people began to share from their souls some heart-wrenching battles they were engaged in: past and present addictions, struggles with guilt, and more.

As a group leader, what do we do with this type of information? When our group members, who may appear to have it all together, suddenly seems desperately in need of professional help, what's our natural reaction? Chances are, like Jesus, we feel their pain and want to see them experience healing. Since we often feel inadequate to help, we might say: "Have you considered seeing a counselor?" or "Maybe you should join a support group for people with these issues." Either one of these options could be a sufficient response.

But, consider this.

As Christians, should it be our goal to always figure out a solution so that people won't experience the pains of life? Or, should it be our goal to walk with them *through* that pain so that ultimately Jesus becomes a stronger influence in their life than their pain and suffering? Christ said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

That is precisely what Christian community is all about. True community happens when, through our honest and transparent relationships with God and one another, we see and desire God's presence in our lives more than blessings or freedom from suffering.

When we struggle, we look for wise, caring people who will respond to us in love rather than spurt out rules or clichés. If we don't find any, we sometimes turn to professionals. Rather than bring our doubts, questions, and struggles to others in our religious community, we bring them to the person paid to deal with issues. The rest we work out with God on our own. Religion, we often hear, is a personal matter between us and God, where we keep our distance from others and relate openly only with God. One problem with that philosophy is that when we are less open and honest with people, we end up being less than honest with God as well.

But Christian community is to be a place where broken people gather to love on and support one another. So how can we best care for and shepherd people in their brokenness? Larry Crabb offers four suggestions:

## **Encourage and model the value of being known.**

For the folks in my church's small group to have that time of transformational sharing, someone had to model an open and honest response to the initial question. As the group leader, you have the most influence regarding the level of honesty in your group. How open you are when answering hard questions will strongly influence how open your group will be.

## **Explore your group members' spiritual stories and heritage.**

In this day and age, many people don't live near their family. Unless we ask about people's families and background, we may know very little of what has shaped an individual's life. Much of our joy and pain stems from memories of past experiences. I suggest selecting icebreaker questions during group meetings that allow people to share pieces of their story like: "Who was the center of warmth in your life when you were growing up?" or "Who are you most like, your mom or your dad, and why?" Questions like these can help you understand group members more fully.

**Discover how God is at work in group members' lives.**

A great tool to discover God's work in others' lives is to have your group members share their testimonies. In our small group, we often take turns sharing our 3–5 minute testimony with the others in the group. This exercise allows people to discover the ways in which God has worked in each group member's life.

**Be willing to speak into people's lives so they can experience the touch of the Holy Spirit.**

When we make ourselves available to people and constantly consider how we can encourage one another as Hebrews 10:24–25 suggests, there is a powerful relational connection that occurs. Coupled with the Holy Spirit's work, our encouragement and friendship can be a source of supernatural healing.

—DAN LENTZ is author of [\*Let's Get Started: How to Begin Your Small Group Ministry\*](#); copyright 2001 by Christianity Today.

**Discuss**

1. When have you been unsure how to respond to a group member who was really struggling? What did you end up doing?
2. How can your group members become more familiar with one another's stories and backgrounds? How will this knowledge be helpful when walking through a difficult time with someone?
3. Do you agree with Lentz that our goal should be to walk with each other through pain and suffering so that God is glorified rather than look for ways to avoid or escape suffering? Why or why not?