

When Your Group Is Ingrown

We love to stay together—but it may be time to break up.

By Allen White

Most groups in North America like to stay together. That was shockingly clear to me when I arrived at the last church where I served and discovered about half of the groups were closed. I was informed that my predecessor made a rule that any group with more than 12 people had to divide into two groups. To avoid this, groups hovered right at 12 members, refusing to add anyone new.

Staying Together Is Easy—But Hard on the Group

We can call it "multiplying" or "birthing" groups, but let's face it, splitting up a group feels more like a divorce. We enjoy our togetherness, and we don't want to go through the pain of splitting up. But, this leads to other problems.

Groups Eventually Lose Their Edge

Group members want to feel accepted and understood. They want a familiar place where they can discuss the current chapter of their story without having to recap the first 36 chapters. When a group has spent a lot of time together, the group members become more like family. They've been through highs and lows together, and they've walked together through it all. They've learned to love and accept group members just as they are.

But every group must maintain a balance between truth and understanding. Group members need to be accepted, but they also need people to tell them the truth. One of the most liberating days for me came when I shared a real worry about my future with my group. One of the guys looked me in the eye and said, "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard you say." The truth set me free. What a relief! I didn't need to worry about it anymore, because it was stupid. Simple as that.

When a group has been together for a while, however, the understanding tends to go up, and the truth telling tends to go down. When once upon a time we might have been less understanding about someone's behavior, pointing out the issue, now we tend to lapse into, "Well, that's not good, but we understand why he does that." Acceptance of the member has now morphed into acceptance of his behavior. Unfortunately, this is a sign that the group has devolved into a social club and is making no difference in the lives of group members.

Not all long-term groups fall into this lethargy. Some groups maintain their edge, but it takes concerted effort. Without that effort, groups slip toward being lukewarm.

Long-Term Groups Shrink in Size

Every group loses members. People move away, aren't able to make it to the meetings anymore, or choose to get involved in other groups or ministries. While a few members pledge to stick together, the group eventually shrinks and may simply die out. Unless the group is making a consistent effort to bring in new members, the beginning of the group starts the clock for its end.

Long-Term Groups Have Difficulty Adding Members

If a group has been together for a while, it's hard to get new members to stick—even if they're regularly inviting new people. Several years ago, a group leader came to me concerned about the decline of his group. Originally, the group started out with six couples, but over time several couples could no longer participate in the group. When the leader approached me, they were down to three couples which included him and his wife.

They were good group leaders, and they led a good group. But now as they tried to rebuild the group by inviting new members, they discovered they couldn't get new members to stay. They were warm people. Their group was made up of solid believers. There was nothing wacky going on. But no one seemed to stay very long.

With a little examination, I figured out the problem: New members felt like outsiders. There were inside jokes and nods of understanding that eluded new folks. While no one did anything intentionally to drive these new

members away, their close-knit dynamic was deflecting new members from the group. Without intentionally helping new people feel welcome, they'll likely leave.

The Remedy for Ingrown Groups

Many small-group pastors and directors like to simply "blow up" ingrown groups. They ask that the group comes to an official end, and the group members find new groups to be part of. But this definitely makes group members uncomfortable. The remedy can be much simpler, though, and less painful. Quite simply, the remedy to being ingrown is reaching out and inviting new group members.

Many people point to the natural group life cycle and explain that groups that have been meeting 18 months or more will simply dwindle and die at some point. But I know of healthy long-term groups that have been meeting longer than that. The key is prayerfully inviting new people into the group on a regular basis. New people breathe new life into groups.

One way to continually send new people to existing groups is to have sign ups at church events. The small-group director then assigns new people to existing groups. It's also a good idea to have church-wide series once or twice a year where all small groups participate in the same study. All groups are starting a new study, which makes new people feel welcome. This provides a great opportunity to add new people to existing groups. It also becomes a regular rhythm for groups to invite new people.

But, as I've mentioned, adding new people to an existing group can be difficult because many long-term groups unintentionally deflect new members. What can be done to stop this? Rather than just keep sending new people to an existing group, especially one that is ingrown, the group needs to take ownership of inviting new people.

Carl George, author of *The Nine Keys to Effective Small Group Leadership*, told me once, "There is no such thing as a closed group. They're just exclusive." While we tend to see this as a negative, it could be a real positive if they're regularly inviting people into such a close-knit, loving community. The key, though, is that they invite people personally. When group members invite their friends to a closed group, the new members already have a relationship as they join the group. The group member can fill in the friend on inside jokes and help explain the group dynamics. When group members of a closed group feel ownership of inviting new people, new members are more likely to stick.

Hold Loosely to Your Group

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus once said, "No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man." The same could be applied to groups. No one visits the same group twice. There's always someone missing, someone visiting, or a change to the group dynamics. It's never quite the same.

Several years ago, I started a men's group. The first week we had 12 guys. We sat around a big table in the middle of Panera Bread. For a variety of reasons, that was the first and only day that group of 12 guys ever met. Some left. Others joined. We continually added new people from our church sign ups. Today, the group has a steady 10 members, but only one original member remains. In fact, even I've moved on. Another leader took my place when I left, and has been leading for several years. And the group is still going strong. As they continue adding new people, it leaves room for others to move on to other groups and ministries. They enjoy the benefits of an established group, though only one person has been there from the beginning.

If I or the original group members had held too tightly to "our" group, the group would have died long ago. Instead, it continues on, reaching new people.

Some Groups Prefer Comfort

Some people appreciate an ingrown group. It's a comfortable place. They're not pressured to change or grow. They can remain the same and enjoy a circle of friends. The question is: Are safety and comfort always good?

I do understand why we seek out places of comfort. We live in a world that beats us up on a regular basis. But groups that only offer a comfortable place of acceptance miss out on the call to help one another grow in Christ. Healthy groups both accept and confront. Ingrown groups aren't healthy. They're on the path to death.

If an ingrown group isn't willing to reach out to new people, the group will run its course and eventually disappear. Sadly, there's nothing a coach or director can do to change this. The group must want to change, and for some, the comfort and safety of a long-term group is too much to give up. Hopefully, though, ingrown groups can see the benefits of reaching out to new people and growing spiritually in a group.

—ALLEN WHITE is a pastor, teacher, writer, and speaker; copyright 2015 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What healthy long-term groups do you know of? What are they doing that keeps them healthy and thriving?
2. Why do you think so many groups become ingrown?
3. How can you turn your group outward so you don't become ingrown?

