**Make Your Discussions Fun**

**It goes beyond avoiding boredom**

By Rick Howerton

If you'd like to see your attendance at small-group meetings dwindle into oblivion, just make sure your discussions are boring and that fun is ousted any time it happens to show up. That's because fun and laughter are a necessity for life transformation and essential if you want a healthy small group.

I know you may be thinking, *Howerton has lost his mind*. But when a group is laughing together, a few amazing things are happening: 1) group members are becoming a community by creating memories, 2) a healthy environment is being established because healthy communities experience all emotions together, and 3) each heart is being pried open, making it possible for God to do a work in each individual in attendance.

But how do we do this? How does a non-comedian create a fun environment?

**Host Experiences, not Meetings**

Many of us see our small-group gatherings as "meetings." The term in and of itself connects with something most people hate: "another boring meeting." Just changing this concept in your own mind will help you as a leader begin to plan an experience that is more emotive—and it may help if you change the term, as well.

**Make Laughter Welcome**

Group leaders need to create an environment that lets attendees know laughter is welcomed. Do this early in the gathering. Every great communicator knows that if they want the audience to laugh throughout their talk, they must let the audience know that laughter is welcomed. They do this by creating laughter in the first few minutes of their talk.

We must embrace this principle in our small groups also. Many group leaders use effective icebreakers to accomplish this goal. Some groups eat a meal together before diving into the Bible study. If you eat together, bring up something during the meal that happened to you or you saw on television that was funny. In most instances, others will follow your story with stories of their own and the environment you're looking for will be established.

**Remember the Spice of Life**

That is, variety. Many groups do the same old, same old every week. But you can relieve a lot of boredom by keeping your group members on the edge of their seats. If you typically have snacks at the beginning of the gathering, for example, have them later—just before you start the biblical conversation. Surprise attendees upon arrival by giving them something they can hold that will tie to the Bible study later. Meet in the local park sometime. The list of ideas is as far reaching as your imagination and your courage. Some will balk, but no one will be bored if you vary the way you do group.

**Go Beyond Talking**

Do more than just have discussions where people talk back and forth; inject activities into the experience. For instance, when discussing the "full armor of God," give attendees aluminum foil and have them clothe one group member in "full armor."

I promise there will be laughter if you do, and no one will forget the experience.

**Take Advantage of Special Days**

Use holidays and special events as excuses to enhance the group experience and build communal memories. If your belief system allows it, ask group members to dress up for Halloween as someone who has greatly affected their story.

Or, if the Super Bowl is coming up, take a poll concerning who will win and what the score will be. Have a prize for the person who chooses the winner and gets closest to the final score. (By the way, those who balk about guessing often win.) Again, the options are as open as your imagination.

**Use Outside Sources**

Most of us are not comedians. We watch others who are captivating teachers or humorists, and wish we could be like them. The truth is, we don't have to be. All around us are images, statements, jokes, and stories that we can use to create fun in our group meetings.

Here is a quick list of things that you can find that may create laughter and fun during your group gathering:

* **Bumper stickers.** When you see a hilarious or thought-provoking bumper sticker, pull over and write down that statement. For some reason funny stuff on bumper stickers resonates with people.
* **Jokes.** When a group member tells you a funny joke, ask him or her to repeat it at the next group gathering. This encourages the group member as well as helping to create the free environment you want to establish.
* **Stories.** Stories from childhood and youth will often evoke laughter and will almost always lead to others telling their own. If you can get this ball rolling as people are showing up for group or during a meal, you've got a winner almost every time.

**Use the Bible**

Many of the historical accounts in Scripture open the door to laughter. As a leader, be especially careful not to inhibit laughter when it happens in these situations, unless it gets to the point that the laughter keeps the group from understanding and embracing a truth God is unveiling. Let laughter happen when it is natural, normal, and doesn't diminish the glory of God.

**Keep It Natural**

Remember, fun and laughter are normal and natural. In many instances the only thing keeping a group from experiencing the joy God offers is when someone (often the group leader) subtly stifles that joy.

Here are a few final things to keep in mind as you seek to maintain a natural environment for fun:

* **Laughter is contagious.** When someone laughs, allow yourself to join them in their laughter. Others are almost certain join the two of you.
* **Empower those who contribute laughter.** In most instances someone in the group is known as being "the comedian" or "funny." Empower that person to live out that role as long as they don't take over the gathering. You can silently empower them by simply allowing them to be humorous without stifling them.
* **Have fun outside the group, too.** Remember this: the more fun and laughter group members experience together away from meetings, the more fun and laughter they will experience during group meetings.
* **Enjoy yourself!** Enjoy life, laugh with your group members, don't take yourself too seriously, and remember that a healthy follower of Christ is joyful. Leaders model and others follow; if you laugh, others will laugh with you.

Small-group leader, one of the marks of a community that is closely bonded is laughter. Utilizing some of these ideas will aid you in creating a healthy community and will make your group a place that others want to join.

So, laugh, linger in it, and enjoy the outcomes!

—Rick Howerton is the Global Groups Environmentalist for NavPress Publishers and [a regular blogger](http://blogs.navpress.com/rickhowerton/My-Blog); copyright 2011 by Christianity Today.