

CONNECTING Inward

Helping your group members
develop a deep love for one
another

A book of cell agendas by Mark Collins

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Introduction

Imagine if you will ... a place, a place where you can find true acceptance, a place where you can be yourself without fear, a place where you can serve people with best intentions, a place where you really know and are known by others. You unlock the door to this place only with the key of God's favor. Beyond it is another dimension, a dimension of truth, a dimension of trust, a dimension of love. You're moving into a land of both shadow and substance; you've just crossed into the "community zone."

I'm probably being a little over-dramatic, but I believe that God calls all Christians to such a place, and it's not as allusive as you might think!

God created us to have close relationships; a relationship with Him, relationships with other believers, and relationships with those who don't yet know Jesus. The difficulty is moving past superficial things like the weather, hobbies, or the dog to share deep things that really matter: who we are and who God is.

The cell agendas in this book are designed around the five stages of cell group life that bring people into productive biblical community. The "forming" stage is characterized by being committed to one another, but not knowing each other very well. It's like a honeymoon of sorts, lots of fun, but shallow. The "storming" stage hits when a group discovers how human everyone in the group is, and conflict can arise. People's true colors are now evident. The "norming" stage comes when a group takes on Christ's love for one another and embraces the differences in each person. The next stage is "performing," where the bonded group reaches out to unchurched persons and harnesses the power of biblical community to become salt and light to this world. The last stage is the "reforming" stage, characterized by giving away the leadership of the group to create new spiritual families. This last stage is much like watching your children grow up, move out of the house, and start a family of their own.

The goal of these cell agenda guides is to move your group deeper into community to see God's larger purposes. While you will not move through each stage of cell group life in five consecutive weeks, it's a highly valuable time for your group to learn about the stages of healthy cell group life together. So, move through the week's agendas and as a

group, learn what you can about one another while seeking God's mission for your group.

Authentic biblical community is experienced when a group of Christians have moved from being just biblically informed to something much greater ... life-transformed. Unfortunately, our 21st century culture has replaced these simple but profound joys with a quest to fill every moment of every day with an activity or event which promises to enrich our lives. Sadly, it only leaves us more fragmented and detached from the body of Christ. Cell group life "defragments" our lives and gives us a reason to live in authentic biblical community to build the Kingdom of God.

My experience in cell group life hasn't always been perfect, but it has been incredibly real. Over the years, my groups have laughed together, cried together, experienced great victories, and suffered the agony of defeat. We've said things to each other that we later regretted. We've spoken profound truths into each other's lives. Through it all we've come to understand God in ways that we would never have experienced on our own. And we did it together. My prayer for you is that you will be able to say the same after you use these agendas to embrace biblical community.

— Mark Collins
Small Groups Pastor, Faith Promise Church
Knoxville, Tennessee

How To Use This Book

Devotionals

Each agenda begins with a personal devotional for you, the cell leader. The best way to use this devotional is to meditate on it each day between your meetings. For example, if your group meets on Thursday evenings, use the next week's devotional to begin your daily time with God on Friday morning, meditating on the scripture each day until the next Thursday. Ask God how the truths discovered in the scripture and devotional should shape how you facilitate the meeting and work with your group members one-on-one.

This Week

The devotional is followed by a brief overview of the agenda, goals for the meeting, and instructions. Reading this insures your group will get the point of the agenda and you'll be prepared.

Agendas

The agendas are organized around four W's, which are *Welcome, Worship, Word, and Witness*. These four areas are designed to help your group experience Christ's presence, embrace His power, and understand His purposes for your lives to the point of practical application.

- **Welcome:** An opening question to get your group members involved in the weekly meeting.
- **Worship:** Practical ways for your group to enter into Christ's presence.
- **Word:** Applying God's Word to your everyday lives that results in member-to-member ministry in and out of your meetings.
- **Witness:** "Putting feet" on what you've discussed so your group can live out Christ's purposes for your lives.

Leader's notes and tip boxes

We've included helpful tip boxes and author's notes under many of the discussion questions to help you understand their meaning. Read through the agenda a few times in the days before your meeting to grasp the direction and outcome of each agenda. *Use the notes and tips to prepare, but don't read them aloud during your meeting.* They have been placed within the agenda to help you become a better facilitator.

Questions in the Word section

Each numbered question in this Word section of the agenda has been written so you can simply read it to your group. To increase involvement, write each question on a slip of paper and distribute them to various members of your group to read aloud in smaller groups. If you feel these question should be rephrased to better fit your group or make the meeting more powerful, go for it!

Keep the last questions in each agenda for yourself as the main facilitator. These are ministry questions that require follow up.

Between-the-meetings options

Because healthy cell group life is more than a once-a-week meeting, it will be important for you to look over these ideas, possibly share them with your group, and then determine which option or options will help your group grow.

If you find implementation to be especially challenging, remember these practical things are what make cell group life so powerful and different from other kinds of small groups you may have led before. Work as hard at your "between-the-meetings" activities as you do preparing for your weekly meeting and you'll see growth in yourself and your group.

Scripture memory verses

Each agenda ends with a scripture verse, which we highly recommend your group members memorize. There's nothing like scripture memory to keep your mind on glorifying God! Feel free to copy this verse and pass it out to everyone as your members walk out the door after each meeting. To make it fun, offer a small prize (a candy bar, etc.) for the first person who can recite the verse to you when you next meet. When you celebrate scripture memory, everyone will join in.

At the back of this book you'll find an appendix with each week's scripture verse on a time-saving, easy-to-duplicate page. This is one area of cell group life that you can easily delegate. Ask a member to duplicate the scripture verses and distribute them for you for the next six weeks as the meetings conclude.

Discuss the stages of cell group life with your group!

Read the introduction to this agenda book to your group and discuss the five stages of cell group life before you use these guides. This will help everyone know what the group will learn and experience in the coming weeks.

Your Devotional

“Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: ‘Let him who boasts boast in the Lord’ ”
(1 Corinthians 1:26-31)

If you are birthing a new group or leading an existing group, you may be feeling like Paul did when he came to Corinth. 1 Corinthians 2:3 reveals Paul’s mindset: *“I came to you in weakness and fear.”* One of the hardest things in life is starting something completely new, and giving it shape and form. That’s what the forming stage—the first stage of maturity for a cell group—is all about. It’s a very scary, faith-provoking time.

What made the forming stage hard for Paul was that right before coming to Corinth, he had just suffered a horrible time of leadership failure in Athens. (See Acts 17:16-34.) Paul looked at his young church and saw little potential. Few were educated, none were influential, yet the apostle knew that God could receive great glory from their humble state. Paul remembered that God has a funny criterion for choosing those He will use to change the world. Think about the disciples ... what a dysfunctional bunch! Most were uneducated, one was a braggart, and Thomas was skeptical, even *after* Jesus performed miracles. The true irony of it all is that the most competent member of the group turned out to be the betrayer.

Do you feel inadequate? Do you see very little potential to change the world when viewing your group? Remember that God truly loves to use what we’re lacking to demonstrate His ability, not ours. In fact, God’s loves to manifest His strength in your weaknesses. Praise Him for your weakness! This week, spend time daily asking God to reveal specific tasks that He wants you to give away to others in your group. Ask Him let you see the members of your group through His eyes and not your own.

This Week

The Objective

This agenda will help the members of your group:

1. Understand the potential your group has to change the world.
2. Prepare those who are beginning community life to avoid pitfalls that accompany the “forming” stage of life together.
3. Internalize the purposes of group existence: community, transformation, evangelism, body care, and birthing new groups.

The Point

When a group comes together on a mission to experience true biblical community, it naturally follows several steps before authenticity and true acceptance are experienced.

Authentic relationships in group life develop through a process that begins with superficial interaction and progresses to deep affection and hopefully, agape love. The first step is the forming stage. The forming stage is characterized by anxiety (will they like me?), superficial relationships (are these people genuine?), and pseudo-commitment (I don't know if I really want to sacrifice for these people!).

In this stage it is important to communicate the purposes of your group, which will help the members see a need to bond. One of the best ways to get the entire group on the same page is to develop a group covenant. A group covenant defines the boundaries of the group and helps members understand the group's purpose. (If you already have a group covenant, take some time to revisit it.)

Preparation

1. Read the first two of chapters of 1 Corinthians.
2. Make copies of the group covenant.
3. Copy the ministry questions from Appendix A so everyone who attends will have their own set.
4. Copy the sample group covenant from Appendix B to hand out at the end of your meeting.
5. Copy the scripture memory verse from Appendix F, page 62.

The Agenda

Welcome

Icebreaker activity: 15-20 minutes

Ask each person to respond to the following question: Have you ever been a part of a life-changing small group? If so, take one minute to share with the group what kind of group it was and how the group impacted your life.

Many kinds of small groups are life-changing ... boy or girl scout groups, Alcoholics Anonymous, etc. Challenge your members to think "outside their religious box" on this opening question.

Worship

Silence can become praise when we realize God's presence among us. After a time of silence (1-2 minutes), ask the members of your group to use one word to describe God's activity in their lives this week. Instruct your worship leader to have two worship songs ready to close this unique time of worship in your group.

Tip:

Don't be afraid of silence. A minute may seem like an eternity, but it's time well spent if you use it to pray, asking God to speak to your group members.

Word:

Ask someone to read 1 Corinthians 1:26-31:

"Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: 'Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.'" (1 Corinthians 1:26-31)

Week 1: Community Makes a Difference

1. Have you ever taken on a new responsibility only to find out that you were totally unqualified? What happened?

The idea behind this question is to get your members thinking in the right direction for this week's topic ... just don't let them talk too long!

2. Can anyone briefly describe the first time you realized that God was pursuing a relationship with you?

Tip:

Two or three responses are enough for this question. After each person shares, thank them and ask if anyone else would like to share.

In this week's passage, Paul reminds his readers that people don't chase after God, rather God chooses them. Feel free to answer this question first by sharing a brief testimony and then encourage others to do the same.

3. Can you think of people whom God used greatly that didn't feel they would be able to complete their assignment?

There are many biblical characters your group may share aloud if they are familiar with the Bible, such as Moses, Abraham, or Esther. But, encourage your group to share a few modern day examples, such as Billy Graham. At 19, he was told he his preaching style was too simplistic and he would not be effective as an evangelist!

4. Why do you think that God likes to use ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary tasks?

He does this because it brings Him glory and the person being used powerfully begins to see his or her purpose in life.

5. Despite many mistakes and trials, God used the small group at Corinth to change the world. How do you think God can use us as a group to change our world?

It will be easy for you group to share answers that are general in nature, such as "Be a blessing to those around us." If this happens, ask the person to follow up their response by sharing a specific way the group can be a blessing to others.

Week 1: Community Makes a Difference

Your Ministry Time

Hand out the ministry questions found in Appendix A. Ask group members to break up into subgroups of no more than 5 persons to answer the questions and pray for one another. They'll need approximately 30 minutes.

6. In what one area of your life do you feel most inadequate?

After each person shares, one person from your subgroup group should pray for him or her. Then, ask the person who shared to pray as well, asking God to use him or her powerfully in the situation or relationship.

7. Think of a person who needs a powerful touch from God. Take time right now to ask Him to use you powerfully in their life.

Remember to focus this prayer on yourselves, not the person God brings to mind! While you are listening to others pray, ask God how He might use you as well.

Call the subgroups back together when you have fifteen minutes left in the set meeting time to do the Witness portion of the agenda.

Witness:

Hand out a copy of the sample covenant found in Appendix B. Share with your group that you can indeed become world-changers by making a commitment to become a loving community.

Ask the group what changes should be made—if any—to the covenant, reminding them that covenants like this one should be kept simple. If no changes are required, ask them to keep the covenant in their Bible, sign it, and bring it next week's meeting. If changes are required, ask someone in the group to include the changes and bring copies for each person in the group next week.

Tip:

For some, signing a covenant is huge! So, call each of your members this week and ask them what they think about it and if they've signed it. Let them process aloud if needed.

Week 1: Community Makes a Difference

Between-the-Meetings Options

You don't have to choose just one of these options if your group is energetic! Read them aloud and let the group decide which ones they'd like to do.

Option # 1

Take time to pray daily for each group member, especially that they would find a family of true acceptance and love in your group.

Option # 2

Invite a couple of members in the group (or the whole group) to a game night at your house before your next meeting.

Option # 3

Set up a phone tree (a pre-arranged system for activating a group of people by telephone) and distribute it to your members. Then play "blessing tag" by calling the next member on the list and praying for them, their home, and their family.

Option # 4

Sit together during your worship service this weekend and then go out to lunch together afterward.

Option # 5

Ask someone in the group if he or she would keep an "answered prayer journal" for the group. They should bring it to the next cell group meeting and start using it immediately.

Scripture for the Week

*"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."
(2 Corinthians 4:7)*

Ask a member to copy the scripture verse from Appendix F and cut them into strips and pass them out to each member after the meeting.

Week 1: Community Makes a Difference

Leader's Weekly Journal

This week, I learned God wants to use me in the following ways ...

Dream about what your group would be like if all the members loved one another as true friends. List the kinds of activities they'd do individually and what your group could accomplish together...

(Share your thoughts with your coach or pastor when you next meet.)