

Review, Renew, Recommit

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One tenet of the Branches covenant is to "give attendance [of meetings] a very high priority in our lives." Of course, everyone begins with the best intention to do just that, but attending regularly can be challenging for even conscientious members.

Attendance certainly became an issue in my own Branches group. Initially, my co-leaders and I ignored the erratic attendance due to our special circumstances: the group was organized around church-provided child care and each of us were parents of small children. In other words, we were in desperate need of thoughtful, adult conversation small group ministry could provide, but we were busy and tired. We came to tolerate irregular attendance as we could all commiserate with a parent's schedule being upended by a sick child, a child's activity, or exhaustion. But as time passed, it became increasingly clear that while a Branches group might continue to exist if its members did not attend regularly, it would not thrive. It was impossible to build a community and foster a sense of intimacy among members who did not show up on a regular basis. The issue had to be addressed.

After consulting with our church's program director and Branches coordinator, Diana Dorroh, the leaders decided to renew our covenant with an emphasis on the need for regular attendance. To that end, we did the following:

1. We picked a number: 9. Our group meets 11 times during a year. We concluded that no matter the reason--work schedule, soccer schedule, travel schedule--if a member did not envision she could attend nine of the 11 meetings in the upcoming year, she should consider resigning from the group.

The number might seem reductive, but it's useful. To say one will make attendance a "high priority" is a bit abstract. To say one agrees to attend a specific number of meetings sets clear expectations. We acknowledged that life might (would probably) intervene to prevent a member from attending nine meetings, but we believed that if one's schedule at the outset did not allow her to plan to attend at least this number, she would not be able to fully participate in the group. And that member's inability to fully participate didn't just affect her own experience. It would undermine the entire group's experience and prohibit potential new members from joining the group. A goal had to be set.

2. At an informal meeting, we discussed the purpose of a Branches group, how our own group was falling short, and the plan to renew our covenant to address these shortcomings, emphasizing the need for regular attendance--mentioning nine meetings as a guideline--as key to our success. We asked our members to review the covenant, carefully consider whether their schedules would allow them to fully participate in the group in the coming year, and decide whether they were in a position to recommit to the group. They were to notify us of their decisions by the time of our next meeting. The group leaders followed up with emails or phone calls to individual members if necessary to receive a response.
3. At the next meeting, the remaining members discussed why each of us initially joined Branches and what we hoped to get out of it in the coming year. We reviewed the covenant and made some minor changes. And we conducted a session carefully adhering to the suggested protocol--discouraging cross-talk, ensuring each member had an opportunity to share, and staying on topic. And with that, we began anew.

A few members chose not to recommit, and while it is always a little sad to see a member leave, I think the outcome was best for all and probably a relief to those who did resign. I suspect at some point, if one's schedule is too hectic or one is emotionally stretched, a Branches meeting no longer offers an opportunity to connect and rejuvenate but becomes a burden. Asking members to recommit provides them the opportunity to objectively consider whether they are in a position to fully participate and fully benefit from the Branches' experience.

Thankfully, most members did recommit to the group and though it's only been several months, all have kept their commitment to attend regularly. Moreover, the group appeared energized by the determination of those who remained to build a community that provides the safe space critical for thoughtful conversation. Will it hold? Time will tell. In light of this experience, I believe calling for members to recommit should become an annual practice. It allows the members to objectively assess their lives and determine whether they have the time and energy to devote to the Branches group so that their lives might be enriched by the experience.