

Orientation Guide: Small-Group Leader



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Leader's Guide

How to use "Orientation Guides" by SMALLGROUPS.COM.

Welcome to SMALLGROUPS.COM. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop leaders who can think strategically and biblically about the church. The material selected by the editors of Leadership Resources and Christianity Today International comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.

"Orientation Guides" are easy-to-use ways to help prepare people to take on new roles in church leadership. Each guide focuses on a practical area of church ministry and comprises brief handouts on specific aspects of that ministry. The handouts first present an overview of the ministry and of the leadership role, including an interview with a successful practitioner. The second section provides focused, practical information.

This specific guide is designed to help you provide orientation and basic training to new small group leaders, and to help seasoned small group leaders refresh themselves on their responsibilities. You may use it either for a group training session or to give individually to small group leaders. Simply print the handouts you need and use them as necessary.

For example, examine a sample small group leader job description (pp. 9–10) and use it as a basis to draw up your own documents. Help that all-important initial group gathering run smoothly by examining "The First Meeting" (pp. 11–12). Get a jumpstart on difficult situations that may arise by learning from "Small Group Problem Solving" (pp. 15–17).

We hope you benefit from this guide as you equip your church to get new small group leaders off to a great start and to bring experienced leaders back to the foundations of their ministry.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.SmallGroups.com.

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The Big Picture of Small Groups

Leader, get ready to take part in a savory slice of real life.

Psalm 34:3

BY ANGIE WARD

Imagine something small, starting something big.

It happened once, when a simple carpenter shared his life with 12 close friends. For three years, they ate together, played together, learned together, traveled together, laughed together, cried together, and even fought together.

Their lives were changed, and then they went out and changed the world.

Do you believe it can happen today?

Imagine the direct descendant of that group of followers—the Church—doing the same thing today. Groups of a dozen people—sometimes a few more, sometimes a few less—sharing life together. Eating together. Playing together. Learning together. Traveling together. Laughing together. Crying together. And even fighting together.

Whatever you call them, small groups have the potential to change lives. And your church. And the world. It can be done. It *has* been done.

Small groups have been known to:

- Hold an entire church together when its leader confesses to moral failure.
- Transform neighborhoods, communities, and even entire cities by selflessly demonstrating the love of Jesus in practical ways.
- Laugh together ‘til the wee hours of the morning.
- Hold a broken member with strong arms of support – physically, emotionally, spiritually, and even financially – during a time of crisis such as divorce, death, or illness.
- Spur individuals to greater personal spiritual growth.
- Instill a knowledge of scripture and a hunger for prayer.
- Share breakfast, lunch, dinner, dessert, high tea, midnight snacks, and pizza of all sizes, styles, and temperatures.
- Foster spirited discussion on matters both eternal and earthly.
- Introduce scores of friends, neighbors, and co-workers to a newfound relationship with Jesus Christ.
- Become (imagine this!) best friends.
- Transform the entire culture of a church by moving its attention outside its own walls.
- Serve as a laboratory for developing greater relational skills and health, sometimes even through conflict.
- Pool their financial resources to impact the life of a child, another family, or a missionary.
- Celebrate! Births, birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, graduations, accomplishments—anything from new babies to national championships.

Small groups can do all these things, yet are even more than the sum of their parts. Small groups are more than “just” a Bible study, although they provide the opportunity to study God’s word. They are more than a prayer group, although they can provide a “bridge line” to the throne room.

More than just a fellowship time or social hour, small groups can serve as the foundation for deep, truly life-changing relationships.

Healthy small groups have the potential to serve as a microcosm of the church, in its purest form: a safe place where people can encounter God, and find the resources and relationships to nurture their spiritual growth.

Starting or maintaining an effective small group ministry is not easy, of course. Relationships never are. “Successful” small group ministries—the kind that change lives—are clear about their purposes and intentional about their programs, yet remain focused on people. Having a small group *program* does not automatically equate to changed lives. Relationships cannot be institutionalized. Growth cannot be manufactured.

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Yet while every church is uniquely called to minister in a particular setting, there are some commonalities to effective small groups:

1. They take *commitment*, and that commitment must spring from all of the church's key leaders, from the senior pastor on throughout the entire organization. If the Small Groups Pastor is the only person committed to small groups, they will at best become a niche program for a few others in the church.
2. They require a *clear purpose* based on an understanding of biblical principles and an understanding of the spiritual growth process. How do small groups fit into the mission of your church, how are they different from a Bible study, a support group, or a social club, and how will you determine whether or not they're effective?
3. They require *leadership development*. This is different from just recruiting people to fill roles; it involves reproducing the vision of fully functioning, "mini-churches" into a growing contingent of mature Christ-followers who are then equipped and released to help make it happen.
4. They take *time*: time to pray through the best approach for your setting, time to communicate the vision of small groups, time to implement a strategy, and—most important of all—time to allow relationships to grow.

No, small groups aren't always easy. But the benefits are worth the effort. Participants build deeper relationships than would ever be possible on Sundays alone. People stay connected to the church, even when they can't always attend church. Pastors are able to share the responsibilities of spiritual care. The church grows bigger, smaller, and deeper, all at the same time. Lives are changed, and then those people go out and change the world.

Imagine something small, starting something big.

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Casting Vision from Day One

As the leader, endorse a balanced approach for life change and group health.

Isaiah 43:19

One of the keys to any successful small group is casting the vision from the beginning. Two ways to accomplish this are to create an atmosphere for real life change, and instill a balanced perspective.

Creating a Life Changing Group

- **Multiplication.** Begin your group by talking about multiplication and you will create a group with “multiplication DNA.” Begin on day one talking about how over the next year some of the people in the room will lead their own groups. When you begin talking about it on day one, and often thereafter, people know it’s part of what is expected and the “multiplication DNA” is created.
- **Give everyone a role.** Don’t try to do everything yourself because you will spoil your people and burn yourself out. Among the tasks you can delegate are: making calls to potential new people, arranging for childcare, food coordination, in-home hosting, prayer requests, sending e-mails, and planning outside group events. The key is to get everyone involved in some way. If you do this, your people will begin to call the group, “my group” or “our group” instead of “the group.” When that happens it means they have taken ownership of the group.
- **Confidentiality.** “What is said in the group stays in the group” is the most important rule of every group because you will not see life change without trust. No one will talk about the tough issues of life unless they are sure what they said remains in the group. Discuss this rule on day one and often after that. Every time a new person comes to the group it should be talked about again.
- **Safety.** Create a safe environment where people can feel loved enough to talk about tough issues.

Balance

The right balance in a group is extremely important. There are three basic types of groups. Each alone will fail, but together they will produce a healthy, growing group where real life change can happen. Let’s look at each and see why alone they usually fail, and then look at the group that incorporates these three types.

- **The shepherding group.** This group focuses all its energy on meeting the personal needs of the attendees. Of course each group should be caring, but these groups can potentially become therapy sessions for whoever has the biggest problem that week. People will become weary and leave if the group’s main business becomes attending to the personal problem of the week. We should certainly care for each other, but you need to make sure that the group doesn’t become only about shepherding.
- **The teaching group.** This group focuses completely on the Bible and teaching, and is often led by someone who believes knowledge is the key to a walk with God. However, small groups are not only Bible studies. They are groups of people growing closer to God through shared life experiences based on God’s Word. Most groups have a Bible study aspect but a group’s health comes from God-centered relationships, not seminary-type Bible teaching.
- **The fellowship group.** This group eats together, laughs, has game nights, goes out together during the week and has a ton of fun. What they never seem to do is get to anything meaningful with regard to life change and God’s role in it. These groups start strong but people get bored because no real life change is happening. Fellowship is not bad, but too much of any good thing can become a bad thing.
- **The life change group.** This group understands that each of the other kinds of groups has something that people need. They learn how to have a healthy balance of all three parts of the other groups. The life change group has awesome fellowship because they know that people will not open up and share their hearts with a room full of strangers. This group is committed to meeting the needs of their people when they are in need but they understand the difference between helping and enabling. This group uses a curriculum but knows that healthy discussion and shared experiences are what life change is all about. In short, this group is balanced.

—Adapted from the training manual of Bay Area Fellowship Church in Corpus, Christi, Texas. Used with permission.



Advice From an Experienced Leader

Build confidence as you care for your people and guide exploration of God's truth.

Philippians 4:9

AN INTERVIEW WITH KEVIN RAPP

Kevin Rapp is a small group ministry coach for Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky. He leads his own weekly small group, which has been together for three years. He has led small groups for five years and has been in groups for ten years. Here are Kevin's insights and coaching tips about issues that most affect a new group leader.

What are the three most important things a new leader should keep in mind?

First, be assured: there is a purpose for you being the group leader. Remember you are doing this as a service for God and know he will empower you to do his work. Second, be prepared. The best way to feel comfortable is to be prepared. Study what you will be covering, prepare the questions and think through how people will respond. Third, pray for the members of the group, that they will benefit in the way God desires. Pray for your wisdom and discernment and for the health and growth of the group.

What are the most important character traits of a small group leader?

Be someone who can speak the truth of the Bible or the subject being discussed as it relates to the Bible in a way that makes it relevant. Be able to relate well with the members of the group. Many leaders are fearful of not knowing the answer to the questions. Saying, "I do not know" is far better than hoping to give the right answer. Following up with the answer at the next meeting shows you care enough to research the answer.

A leader must know how to breathe life into others, have a love or growing desire for sharing God with others, and have a desire to see others grow spiritually. I fully believe people do not care how much you know until they know how much you care. It is also very important to know how to guide discussion by commanding attention rather than demanding it. This is often done in a very gentle style. Remember that the people attending the group are typically there for fellowship and learning, in that order. If they are not enjoying the experience they more than likely will not return.

How can I contribute to a welcoming atmosphere in the group?

Greet people by name with a warm smile, ask them how they are doing and follow up on prayer requests: "John, great to see you, how's it going...how's your mom doing?" Make sure the room is comfortable, clean, and has food and drink out. Let everyone know they have refrigerator rights. Let people feel your house is their house.

How can I get the group off to a good start in the first meeting?

Share great food and drink along with great stories. Get people to share and laugh by asking some great icebreakers. Some of the best I have used are, "Tell us about yourself, your job, where you go to church," and, "What was your first job as a teenager and what stood out the most for you about this job?"

I usually make the first meeting about introduction and going over what we are going to study, including a lesson to introduce the topic. If the study is 90 minutes long, I spend 30 minutes for social fellowship, 30 minutes in study time, then 30 minutes for discussion. The study time during the first meeting is usually 10 minutes shorter due to having some good introduction questions for the group.

How much should I talk and how much should I let group members contribute?

I do my best to talk less than 25 percent during question and answer or sharing time. I am only there to guide. Do not be afraid of silence. Silence will drive others to share. It helps to smile, nod, or just look down in the book or Bible during the silent periods. People will open up and the sharing will take place.

How can I keep the discussion on track when it wanders?

Say something like, "Great point. Thanks for sharing. Let's see what others have to say about ..." Affirm the person. Offending someone may cause others to avoid sharing, or hurt attendance and growth of the group. Jon Weiner, small groups pastor at Southeast Christian Church, suggests during the first meeting to let everyone

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know when the leader tugs on their ear, it is time to wrap up your answer or sharing. Do this in a very light-hearted but serious way.

What if the discussion wanders to a place more fruitful than the curriculum?

I enjoy letting it go where it needs to go. I have to remember God's ways are greater than mine. People love it, grow from it, and become more involved in the group. This is often when community really takes place and the group as a whole is taken to a new level. The only caution is making sure that when the Holy Spirit has done his job, we get back to the matters at hand after giving thanks for what just happened.

How can I help shy people open up and contribute to the group?

Make an effort to get to know the shy people. When they ask you a great question or share insight in a one-on-one situation, ask them to share during the session. If they don't want to, don't push. If they do, let them know you would like to let the group know who provided you with the question or insight. When they speak others tend to really listen, because the quiet ones typically have something very valuable to say when they talk.

What do I do with the person who dominates the conversation?

Speak with the person alone on the side about this. Have the talk while still at the meeting if possible. Otherwise make a call within a day or two after the meeting. Affirming them for sharing is important. You can also get the "talker" on your team by asking him or her to share and open up. This can range from the "talker" just not talking as much or enlisting the "talker" to ask others in the group their thoughts regarding the topic.

What can I do when someone becomes disruptive or rude?

Let them know they are being disruptive or rude by giving a nod or tugging on the ear, as I mentioned earlier. If this does not work you may need to take a break and let the person know what they are doing is disturbing. Not letting this get to you and softening the blow when a rude or hurtful comment takes place is important. Change the topic, if needed.

How can I build prayer and spiritual formation into my group's life?

Ending the group time with prayer is a great way. Have the men and ladies break off and pray for each other as a group. Have the men take home a handwritten prayer request from another man and the women do the same. Include a phone number or e-mail to keep in touch. This was used in one of the first groups I led and the results were amazing. Five of the twenty people came to Christ. I had very little to do with it. Instead, the Holy Spirit did it through the group caring about each other and helping each other grow.

How do I measure success in my group?

The most important and simplest goal is for the group to grow closer to Christ and one another. It is also a great success if the group meets for more than a season and develops leaders from within to start new groups. However, the group I mentioned earlier where five people came to Christ and made lasting friendships only met for one season.

I really want to stress not measuring the success of the group with too high a standard or expectation. The first group a person leads may be a smashing success and the next not so much. Either way the success goes to God and the work is done for God.

What has been your biggest surprise as a leader?

People coming to a Bible study for their first time. The questions they ask are typically incredible because they are simply seeking the truth. They are also often intimidated about not fitting in. Treat them no differently than the others. Make them feel welcome.

What has been your biggest continuing challenge?

Keeping up with everything going on in the lives of the members of the group on top of my own day-to-day commitments. It is important not to overcommit. I need to plan my week and make sure I make time to pray for folks and stay on top of studying and preparing for the group. Having a routine and some level of organization really helps to make this not only doable, but also incredibly rewarding.

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How can I build and keep confidence as a group leader?

Reading the Bible to gain understanding and deepening the relationship with God is my greatest source of confidence building. God is my greatest encourager. It has always been good to have a friend as an encourager near me. It is humbling to remember you are the one who is not only being led to do this, but you are the person the members of your group look up to and have decided to join. This is a great responsibility and privilege.

God wants you to be wildly successful. He trusts you with his children. Be excited about this and know that your confidence comes from the creator of the universe. He has confidence in you to do his work. How cool is that?

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Job Description and Standards of Performance

Personal Ministry

Objective—To maintain a strong personal walk with the Lord by continuing in the spiritual disciplines that are necessary for spiritual fitness and growth in the grace and knowledge of God

Goals

- A. Spend time in the Bible each day, pursuing personal growth and maturity.
- B. Have a consistent prayer life that focuses on praise, thanksgiving, personal needs, the needs of believers, and the needs of the lost.
- C. Spend time in spiritual fellowship with others for the purposes of mutual love, encouragement, and growth.
- D. Be involved in fulfilling the Great Commission by reaching out to the lost, both in word and deed.

Small-group Ministry

Objective—To lead and disciple a small group of believers toward maturity in Christ

Goals

- A. Plan a schedule of small-group meetings for approximately six months at a time.
- B. Have small-group meetings at least twice a month.
- C. Be responsible for making sure that each small-group member knows where and when each meeting takes place.
- D. Develop a format for the small group that embraces the three vital experiences necessary for spiritual growth:
 - a. Dynamic learning experiences with the Word of God (Bible study)
 - b. Vital relational experiences with one another and with God (worship, sharing, prayer, meals, “one another” concepts, and so on)
 - c. Vital witnessing experiences with non-Christians (evangelistic gatherings, personal evangelism, community outreach, mission emphasis, and so on)
- E. Plan for social times (children included) that will promote friendships.
- F. Be available to teach, caution, and counsel one-on-one with group members when the need arises.
- G. Be available to advise or help meet the physical and material needs of group members when the need arises.
- H. Maintain personal communication and contact with each group member.
- I. Pray regularly for the needs of the small group both personally and corporately with other leaders.
- J. Be committed to attend ministry leadership meetings.
- K. Be accountable to your care pastor for your small-group ministry.
- L. Attempt to develop and disciple potential leaders within the group to help fulfill the future growth needs of the church.
- M. Delegate small-group responsibilities to an apprentice leader and other committed people in the small group.

SMALL GROUP LEADER**STANDARDS OF PERFORMANCE**

RELATIONAL STATUS

Relationship with God

1. Spends regular time in prayer
2. Spends regular time in the Word
3. Is a mature believer (Reflect on Galatians 5, 1 Timothy 3, and Titus 1)

Relationship to the Church

1. Is committed to the church and to the small group
2. Shows commitment financially
3. Is willing to be held accountable

Relationships with Others

1. Has a strong and loving relationship with family
2. Has a good reputation in the community and in the workplace
3. Is financially responsible
4. Shares faith

MINISTRY AND LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Administrative

1. Manages self and others
2. Leads effectively

Small-group Dynamics

1. Leads a good discussion about a Bible passage or other curriculum
2. Can facilitate relationships in a group

Personal Relational Skills

1. Is a good listener
2. Shares faith skillfully

KNOWLEDGE

Of the Word

1. Has a full understanding of the gospel message
2. Knows his or her way around the Bible
3. Understands and supports our church's doctrinal statement

Of the Church

1. Understands the ministry philosophy and strategies of our church
2. Understands the nature of the small group and its goals

Of the Community

1. Knows the demographics of our area
2. Has a feel for the issues facing our community

—Adapted from *Filling the Holes in Our Souls* by Paul Meier, Gene A. Getz, Richard A. Meier, and Allen R. Doran (Moody Press, 1992). Used with permission.

SMALL GROUP LEADER**The First Meeting**

Tips to make your first group meeting succeed.

1 Corinthians 3:10

Quality groups don't just happen. They are developed by leaders who carefully and thoughtfully seek the Lord for guidance. Please review this tip sheet two weeks prior to your first meeting.

Tip 1: Pray for God's blessing

Leading people is an awesome responsibility and a huge challenge. Pray daily for God to give you insight into his Word. Have a servant's heart as you lead your group. If the Lord has called you to lead the group, don't worry, he'll give you the skills to lead it.

Tip 2: Understand the context of your first meeting

People may be a little hesitant to being there. Don't be discouraged if they come and then don't continue. You are feeling each other out.

Tip 3: Prepare the meeting with an apprentice

Prayerfully recruit an apprentice who is willing to help lead the group. Partnering with an apprentice spreads the load of leadership responsibility. Identifying an apprentice also reinforces the multiplication value as God adds to the numbers. If you can't identify an apprentice prior to your start-up, God will provide one soon.

Tip 4: Prepare the environment

Make sure the meeting area is prepared before the arrival of group members. Leaders need to be at the door welcoming guests and assisting with name tags.

Review this checklist before the meeting:

- Name tags and large markers
- Remove all outside noise distractions such as cell phones, pagers, TV's and so on.
- Absolutely no pets in the meeting area
- Light refreshments (Group members should volunteer to bring refreshments to subsequent meetings.)
- Seating, lighting, comfortable temperature

Tip 5: Warm up the group with an icebreaker

Icebreakers help develop the group's relational component. Early on, they should be light and humorous. As the group deepens, you can move toward deeper sharing icebreakers. Don't rush through this, especially early in your group life. Relationships are what will keep people coming back.

Tip 6: Share the nuts and bolts of a small group

- Groups often meet two to four times each month
- Leaders host meeting in their homes—don't rotate too much—people may drop out because they don't know where the group is from week to week
- Meetings should last from 1.5 hours to 2 hours—begin and end the meetings on time
- Basic group agenda:
 - 30 minutes of conversation, icebreakers, refreshments
 - 30 to 40 minutes for group study discussion
 - 20 minutes for sharing of prayer requests and group prayer. (People may be quite hesitant to pray out loud. Help reduce the fear and intimidation by spending a week sometime in the first couple of months focusing on the concept and practice of prayer. Don't randomly call on someone to pray—check with him or her beforehand to make sure they're comfortable praying in a group.)

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- Homework in the study discussion is optional. It is usually perceived as a positive thing, but becomes a burden if it is too time-consuming or intense.

Tip 7: Allow time for questions

Clearly state the details of the group. If members sense that you are unclear about the direction of the group, they may back off. Don't be fuzzy about the details. Be as specific as you can when answering questions.

Tip 8: Follow up the first meeting and invite everyone to the next one

Pursue your group members after the first meeting. Often people need personal communication from the leader to realize that they are wanted and valued. Your follow-up phone call is a high touch relational message. It is incredibly vital to the growth and life of your group.

Tip 9: Build a scriptural foundation

At some point in your first meeting, you may want to place the role and importance of groups in a biblical framework:

- Exodus 18:19–27—Jethro gives Moses advice on how to care for the nation of Israel. Notice that the plan is to divide people into groups, each with a leader.
- Acts 2:42–47—This passage represents a description of the early church and its values. Explore what that first church did and the impact of their life together. How could this group follow this model?
- Acts 5:42—The early church had two places to meet and gather: temple courts, and houses. That church understood the value and role of both as they sought to grow in their faith—supporting each other, learning from each other, simply living life together. Group community is the relational heart of Christianity.

Tip 10: Aim high

Cast a vision and set goals for the group. Here are several examples:

- To grow a relationally close group that uses the Bible as a guide for life
- To discover and deepen friendships that apply biblical values to our lives
- To learn to pray for and with each other
- To go the extra mile in caring for each other
- To be the church of Jesus Christ in its smallest form

—Adapted from the *small-groups training manual of Crossroads Church, Loveland, Colorado*.



Take Your Group Deeper

Five practices that take small groups beyond polite “sharing.”

Ephesians 3:14–19

BY JOHN ORTBERG

In community we discover who we really are and how much transformation we require. This is why I am irrevocably committed to small groups. Through them we can accomplish our God-entrusted work to transform human beings. However, experience tells us that simply meeting with a group does not automatically result in spiritual growth.

Here are five essential practices that must occur to facilitate the transforming work of Christ in us. The presence of these things is what makes the difference between all-too-typical small groups and life-transforming communities of spiritual formation.

Confession: Remove the Masks

We all wear masks. We hide from each other. It’s part of our fallenness. That is why one of the most formative practices in a small group is confession. Confession is the appropriate disclosure of my brokenness, temptations, sin, and victories for the purpose of healing, forgiveness, and spiritual growth. Without confession we are a community hiding from the truth.

We need to avoid “confession killers” in our groups. These include the inappropriate use of humor. Some people are embarrassed by deep honesty, so they may mock the person confessing or diffuse the atmosphere with a joke. It sends a signal that this is not a safe place to confess, and the masks go back on.

Judgmental statements also shut down confession. I recall a small group where a man admitted his struggle with lust. That was a risk, and then someone else said, “I can’t relate to that struggle at all.” I wanted to say to that guy, *Why would you say that?* His statement shut down an opportunity for new openness in the group.

Application: Groups as Schools of Life

What we desperately need are small groups to be schools of life. Imagine someone has a problem with anger—a small-group leader should ask them: “What kinds of situations tend to get you angry, and how do you respond?” Give them some alternatives to sinful patterns of anger. Roleplay these situations in the small group. Then next week ask, “How did it go?” If they got it right, celebrate it. If they didn’t, investigate what happened, and encourage them to do it differently next time.

If this kind of application doesn’t happen in small groups, it may not happen anywhere, and people will not be transformed.

Accountability: Stand on the Scale

A scale is a tool of accountability. Small groups are the place for people to get on the scale and reveal how intentional they have been in their pursuit of transformation into the image of Christ.

We need to make key decisions on our journey of transformation: what are my commitments about prayer, about Scripture, about money, about evangelism, about servanthood, about truth? Keeping these commitments requires a community of accountability to serve as a scale revealing how we’re achieving our goals or missing them.

Guidance: Decision-Making in Groups

In every church there are people facing decisions about vocations, ministry involvement, finances, relocation, and relationships. How sad if they make these decisions without the benefit of community. Their decisions may be impulsive, emotional, based on too little information. The result is too many broken lives.

Small groups should be places where people gather to hear God through prayer and listening. Every small-group meeting should include the question, “Is anybody facing a significant decision this week?” And in community the group should seek the Spirit’s voice for the person facing the decision.

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Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., practices this discipline by what they term “sounding the call.” When someone has a significant decision to make, the community enters a time of prayer and listening to God. They speak openly with each other about their sense of what God is saying. They take seriously the leading of the Spirit while avoiding any sense of superiority or control.

Encouragement: Embrace Each Other

A hug is a gesture of love and encouragement. An embrace represents what we all need from a community of transformation. We need to know that someone is committed to us and loves us. That cannot happen when we are alone, and it cannot happen in a large gathering. It’s going to happen through small communities.

Today small groups have the privilege of loving and accepting human beings for whom Christ gave his life. In these groups we can supply the love, encouragement, and embrace people need to continue their journey of transformation.

That kind of love is what we ultimately need in small groups to transform lives. We can make small groups so complex and difficult, we can build the perfect small-group strategy, but if we do not have the love of Christ present, we are not really engaged in transforming people into his likeness.

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SMALL GROUP LEADER



Small-group Problem Solving

How to respond when people act up, act out, and ask tough questions.

Philippians 2:1

Any time you bring together a group of people with different backgrounds, histories, and personalities, conflict and problems are almost inevitable. As a leader, you will need to deal with these issues both before and after they occur. This training is based on actual situations and personality types observed in small-group ministry.

Dealing with Criticism

The proper way to deal with criticism, backstabbing, or gossip, is clearly spelled out in Matthew 18:15–17. Let's look at how this Scripture can be used to deal with a common problem: criticism of the church and its leaders. As leader, you must deal with this problem before it gets out of hand. Use these talking points:

- Acknowledge the person's problem or conflict with the church. However, as the group leader, express your total support of the vision and pastors of our church. Encourage the person to share their concerns with church leadership.
- If an individual has a problem with a specific leader, you should be prepared to invoke Matthew 18:15–17 by asking the question, "Have you talked to him or her about this issue? I would love to talk to you about this but Matthew 18 says you are to talk to them first before I can even discuss it with you."
- If the person has followed Matthew 18 and gone directly to the person but nothing was resolved, then you're to take two or three others with you for the next conversation. However, even at this point this is still not now or ever an open discussion for the group meeting.
- The same procedure applies when the criticism is of other people in the church or in the group.

Types of Disruptive Behavior

Disruptive people are those who, for a variety of reasons, want to make themselves the center of attention. These types can include:

- **The single person who has a history of dating the wrong people.** These people will use the group as their personal counseling session each week, and there is always a new issue or problem. There will also be people who are coming to the group to learn how to change so they can make better choices in the future. These people are worth the group's time.
- **The person who is very lonely or completely alone.** These people are usually great people. The problem is that the group is often the only thing they have in their lives, so they use it to talk about how unhappy they are. You may have to take this person aside and help them understand the impact they are having on the group. This can be a great time of personal and spiritual growth for this person. The group must stay positive and full of hope so lives can be changed.
- **The people who just like to hear themselves speak.** These people will overwhelm anyone who wants to talk and always have to top every story with one of their own. If you're not careful this person will be the only one talking every single week. People will grow weary of this and leave.
- **The person who shows no respect for the rest of the group.** This is the person who shows up late every week and disrupts the proceedings. This is selfish behavior and must be addressed. This is not a person whose schedule makes them late each week and comes in quietly and joins the group. Nor is this someone who is regularly on time but occasionally has disruptions come up.
- **The parents that allows their kids to run wild through the group.** Each group must have some sort of childcare arrangement. Even with childcare, a child will come in from time to time, so make sure each parent knows that if this happens, they are to quietly take the child away so the group can continue.
- **The person who will stay around for hours after everyone else leaves.** Have a starting and ending time. Hold your ground and tell everyone from day one that you need their cooperation.

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God loves people and so should we. However, if these issues are not addressed and solved then the selfish or even legitimate needs of one person will destroy the needs of the rest of the group.

How to Confront Disruptive Behavior

These issues must be confronted for the benefit of the entire group. Most people don't want a confrontation so when issues like this aren't dealt with, they just leave and look for another group. Keep these points in mind:

- How a message is delivered sometimes can be more important than the content. A message delivered in love can help someone change. A message delivered in judgment will always be rejected.
- Confronting someone on an issue that is hurting your group is not easy. However, for the health of the group, and to grow your leadership, you must do it.
- People cannot change until they recognize that they need to.
- People will not change unless they want to. If the message is valid and delivered in love then how they respond to it is not your responsibility.
- Successful groups are those that work together as a team. They support each other, love each other and, many times, have to confront each other.

Answering Tough Questions

One of the greatest fears any new small-group leader has is being asked tough questions that they don't know the answers to. When that happens, remember:

- No one has all the answers.
- Saying, "I don't know" is okay. But follow with, "I'll do my best to find that out for next week." You will find that your people will respect you for that honesty.
- Don't give an answer if you don't know the answer especially when it comes to the Bible. Giving the wrong answer is much worse than saying you don't know.
- Often leaders make honest mistakes and give a wrong answer. Be humble and admit you made a mistake. People will respect your humility and honesty.
- When you get a tough question and don't know the answer, research it yourself and see if you can find the answer. This process will grow you as a leader. If you are struggling, then consult your coach or pastor.
- When you come up with the answer make sure you discuss it in the group so everyone can grow from the exercise. Talk about the process of finding the answer.

Group Conflict

Your group should look and feel like a community. Communities have all kinds of people from different backgrounds and personalities. When you bring a group like this together, you will eventually have some relational conflict. Here are ways to keep these tough issues from harming the group:

- **Disagreements about biblical issues.** Try to understand where someone comes from and why they feel the way they do about the issue. This may be one of those times when you have to say, "Let's get back to this next week" so you can be better prepared to address what the Bible says about the issue. Remember that if biblical scholars disagree on many issues, then people in your group will disagree from time to time as well. Trying to prove who is right is a waste of the group's time. In these situations, change the focus to what we all agree on: the basic message of salvation through Jesus.
- **Disagreements about what the group should be.** Remember that you are called to lead this group. For you to be happy leading the group it must reflect who you are. If someone doesn't like the group as it is, then lovingly help them find a group that fits them better.
- **Dealing with tough family problems and issues.** Deal with these issues with love and care but be careful not to try to become a family counselor. Difficult issues usually require professional help. The group does not exist to counsel people through tough issues, it exists to love and support them while they're getting the professional help they need.
- **Dealing with relational issues in the group.** Conflict in the group must be resolved in the group. Let tempers settle down, talk about it before the next group, then come back and discuss it openly in the next meeting. There are times when the conflict isn't resolved and people have to agree

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to disagree on the issue while remaining friends. Sometimes it's better to find resolution outside the group, then come to the group and talk about the resolution.

As leaders, the best thing you can do is to establish healthy boundaries from the beginning. Make sure people do not come with an attitude of, "what can the group do for me." Instead, instill the principle that people are to come looking for what they can give to the group.

—Adapted from the training manual of Bay Area Fellowship Church in Corpus Christi, Texas. Used with permission.

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The Marks of Leadership Success

Monitor the health of your group by using this assessment tool.

Colossians 3:12–14

As your group begins to meet regularly, take time to use this assessment tool to periodically monitor its status. Give the grades yourself, and ask group members to participate as well. Keep your prior assessments and compare to see where the group has grown or to identify areas of challenge. For each category, rate the group on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest).

Shared Responsibilities

As the leader, you serve as the point person for the group, but you should not be expected to meet every need of the group alone. A healthy small group is a community of individuals who share responsibilities for accomplishing the tasks and meeting the needs of the group, with each person serving according to his or her spiritual gifts and abilities. Ensure that no group member receives an unfair share of the duties.

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hosting the group at home | <input type="checkbox"/> Intercessory prayer | <input type="checkbox"/> Maintaining group roster |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Providing refreshments | <input type="checkbox"/> Planning social activities | <input type="checkbox"/> Writing encouraging notes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Leading discussions | <input type="checkbox"/> Organizing service activities | <input type="checkbox"/> Visiting members in hospital |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Leading group prayer | <input type="checkbox"/> E-mailing updates/ reminders | <input type="checkbox"/> Preparing meals for ill members |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tracking prayer requests | <input type="checkbox"/> Following up with absentees | |

Offering Hospitality

In a healthy small group, members are considerate of one another's time, property, needs, and feelings. They go out of their way to make sure that other members are comfortable, included, and respected.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> New members are welcomed warmly and included in all conversations. | <input type="checkbox"/> Members are committed to attending every session. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Group members are seated in a circle to encourage conversation and fellowship. | <input type="checkbox"/> Group members respect each other's time by arriving and departing on time. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lighting and temperature of the gathering place are comfortable for those in attendance. | <input type="checkbox"/> Group members communicate needs openly (allergies to pets, special diets, and so on) and they are willingly accommodated. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> At the end of the session, all members help restore order to the home of the host. | <input type="checkbox"/> Distractions (noise, phone, pets) are kept to a minimum, or removed if appropriate. |

Connecting Each Session

The small-group experience is not meant to be one-dimensional. Healthy small groups are balanced and multi-faceted. They enjoy both study and fellowship; all members respect and learn from each other.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> An appropriate amount of time is spent socializing, discussing lesson, and sharing joys and concerns. | <input type="checkbox"/> Group members feel safe sharing their thoughts and feelings in a transparent manner. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> All members participate in group discussions. No single member dominates the discussion. | <input type="checkbox"/> Discussions are focused on the topic of the lesson, but flexible when a need arises. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Respect is given to each member's opinions. | <input type="checkbox"/> Sessions begin and end on time. |

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Maturing Spiritually

One of the primary aims of small groups is to promote Christian maturity within the context of authentic community. The goal is not simply to amass information, but to achieve life *transformation* as small group members grow toward spiritual maturity.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Group members practice spiritual disciplines to develop their relationship with God. | <input type="checkbox"/> Group members pray regularly for the joys and concerns that are shared each week. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Group members attend church regularly, and give in proportion to their income. | <input type="checkbox"/> The group members serve individually and together inside and outside the church. |

Growing Relationally

The Christian faith is not meant to be lived in isolation, but in community. Healthy small groups achieve true community as they build relationships with each other inside and outside of the group setting.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Members feel increasingly comfortable sharing their real needs for prayer and support. | <input type="checkbox"/> The group enjoys social activities together from time to time. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Members lovingly hold each other accountable for growing spiritually. | <input type="checkbox"/> Members actively seek opportunities to assist other members of the group as needs arise. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Group members offer ongoing encouragement to one another to serve in harmony with their spiritual gifts and abilities. | |

—Adapted from group training materials of United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, Leawood, Kansas. Used with permission.

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Prayer List

Prayer is an important part of the motivation and practice of a small-group leader. Use this list to help you focus your individual and group prayer time. Make copies and keep on using it throughout your experience as a small-group leader.

For The Group

Joys: _____

Concerns: _____

For Small-group Ministry Leaders

Joys: _____

Concerns: _____

For Myself

Joys: _____

Concerns: _____

Scripture: 1 Kings 3:7–10; Matthew 20:25–28; Titus 2:7; Hebrews 3:4–6; Jeremiah 3:14–15; Romans 12: 6–8; 2 Corinthians 1:24; Galatians 6:1–2; 1 Peter 5:2–5; Ephesians 4:1–6



Further Exploration

Helpful resources for small-group leaders.

SmallGroups.com: Training and insight on all aspects of small-group ministry from Christianity Today International . www.SmallGroups.com

- “Small Groups” Assessment Pack
- “Healthy Small Groups” Training Theme
- “Growing Small Groups” Training Theme
- “Shepherding Others” Training Theme

Building a Church of Small Groups by *Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson*. The why and how-to of becoming a church with small groups at its organizational core. Includes information on training group leaders. (Zondervan, 2001; ISBN 978-0310267102)

Experiencing Community by *Thom Corrigan*. Tools to build authentic community in small groups by moving beyond meetings to building loving, supportive and encouraging relationships. (NavPress, 1996; ISBN 978-0891099383)

How to Lead Small Groups by *Neal F. McBride*. McBride cuts out the theory to provide practical information and step-by-step guidance. Useful in several types and stages of small-group ministry. (NavPress, 1990; ISBN 978-0891093039)

Seeker Small Groups by *Garry Poole*. Focuses on drawing seekers into a deeper relationship with God in a small-group setting. (Zondervan, 2003; ISBN 978-0310242338)

Serendipity Encyclopedia, *Lyman Coleman, editor*. Creative ideas for small groups. (Serendipity House, 1997; ISBN 978-1574940497)

Small-group Fitness Kit by *Thom Corrigan*. Discusses the attitudes necessary to be an effective small-group leader, such as flexibility, ability to manage chaos, and willingness to make mistakes, and offers solutions to the ten most common problems that small groups encounter. (NavPress, 1996; ISBN 978-1576833261)

Small Group Qs by *Laurie Polich*. Features 600 questions designed to deepen community and explore Scripture. (Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2002; ISBN 978-0310240235)