

# Basics of Small Group Ministry – Leading and Hosting

## I. How to Lead a Small Group

The success of any small group starts with the leader. Effective leaders are not teachers or lecturers. They are *facilitators* and catalysts whose primary job is to get people to interact with each other. Almost anyone can lead a dynamic discussion by following certain guidelines.

- 1. Come to the study prepared.** Ask God to help you understand and apply the passage to your own life. Unless that happens, you will not be ready to lead others. If you are using a good study guide, it will probably take you an hour to read the passage, work through each question in the guide, and become familiar with the leader's notes.
- 2. Pray for the members of your group before the study.** If the Bible is to have an impact on their lives, the Holy Spirit must be at work in their hearts before, during, and after the study.
- 3. Begin the study on time.** If people know the study begins on schedule, they will work harder to arrive on time.
- 4. Explain that the studies are meant to be discussions, not lectures.** Encourage everyone to participate, but realize some may be hesitant to speak during the first few sessions.
- 5. Encourage more than one answer to each question.** A good question should have more than one possible answer, and each person has his or her unique perspective. Ask, "What do the rest of you think?" or "Anyone else?" until several people have responded.
- 6. Affirm people's answers.** People often are reluctant to speak up unless they know you appreciate their insights. Simple words such as "That's a great insight," "Good response," "Excellent idea," or "I hadn't thought of that before" are enough to show people you value their comments.
- 7. Don't be afraid of silence.** It usually seems longer to you than to the other members of the group.
- 8. Resist the temptation to answer your own question.** Rephrase the question until the group understands what you are asking. A group will become passive and silent if they think you will do most of the talking.
- 9. Never reject an answer, even if you think it is wrong.** When you reject people's answers, they feel rejected as well, and they may decide it is too risky to give their opinion again. A better response would be, "Which verse led you to that conclusion?" Or let the group handle the problem by asking them what they think.
- 10. End the study on time.** A healthy small group will do more than study the Bible together, so leave enough time for other activities such as sharing and prayer. If these are merely tacked on at the end, the health of the group will suffer.

## II. How to Host a Small-Group Meeting

If you've never hosted your small group in your home, I highly recommend it. Even if you live in a tiny efficiency apartment and your fellow small-group members will have to sit on the floor or bring a folding chair with them, it will be great. I've sat on hardwood floors many times during small group, and have seen God move powerfully in our midst.

There are a few things you need to know about hosting a meeting in your home. Some are practical considerations; others are spiritual.

## Before the Group Arrives

1. **Vacuum day before.** Vacuum creates dust. Let it settle down the day before guests arrive.
2. **Clean and organize public areas of home.** Be sure bathroom, den, meeting area is clean.
3. **Adjust seating in circle.** Have enough seats for everyone. Arrange so no one has permission to sit "outside" the circle.
4. **Box of tissues.** Have a box of tissue readily accessible.
5. **Phone.** Turn down answering machine or unplug phone extension in meeting room so as not to be a distraction.
6. **Refreshments.** Get drinks and light snacks ready and prepared.
7. **Pets.** Put Fido or Fife in other room. Pets can be a major distraction in the meeting and people may have allergy issues.
8. **Physical environment.** Adjust the room temperature accordingly. The more people in the meeting the warmer the room will get.
9. **Spiritual environment.** Pray for each of the guests that are coming that night. Pray for the meeting. Ask God to fill your home with his peace and invite him to come in power during the meeting. Also, settle yourself down. Avoid the hustle and bustle of preparation right up until people arrive.

## During the Meeting

As the host for the evening, make sure everyone is comfortable in your home. You're not entertaining on these nights, but offer hospitality. If everyone is feeling fine with the temperature, but you see one woman shivering, ask if she'd like a shawl or blanket. If everyone is warm, maybe quietly slip out and turn down the air conditioning a degree or two. Be proactive when possible.

## After the Meeting

1. **Fellowship.** When the concluding prayer is offered ensure the snacks and drinks are ready so folks can congregate in that area of the house to fellowship. Folks may want to hang around and visit a little longer. Maybe ask some of the guys to help rearrange the furniture.
2. **Spiritual environment.** Once everyone is gone pray through the house again, asking God to fill it with his presence and leave no room for anything that doesn't belong. Why? People may share hurts or confess sins to one another, or at least maybe silently to God. You want to cleanse your house after the guests leave. This isn't out of fear but just setting the order of the Lord in your home.

Remember, Ephesians 6:12 says, *"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."* Ask God by his spirit to come and sweep through and cleanse your house.

## It's Eleven o'clock! What Now?

It's important to recognize that the last person lingering to leave may be lonely or has something heavy to share and can't get around to it easily. Follow up with them in the days to come and ask them if they were the last person out the door because they needed to talk about something specific that they just didn't grasp that night. If the person did stay late to discuss a heavy issue with you, it's not wrong to tell them that you need to set a time to talk with them more and pray with them about it versus trying to get it all out late at night. Just remember that your small-group leader is available, and if you don't know what to do, give him or her a call.

## Basics of Small Group Ministry – Group Discussion and Conflict Resolution

### III. Tips for Facilitating a Group Discussion

#### Handling the Challenging People

The hard part of small groups is that they involve people, and dealing with people is always messy. Here are some of the common "challenging people" that you may encounter, and some tips on approaching them with grace:

**The over-talker.** This person always has plenty to say, and loves to be the first person to say it. Remind everyone in the group guidelines that this is an equal participation group. So if you have 10 people in the group, you want each person to contribute their 10 percent to the discussion.

If the problem continues, talk to the person outside of group. Affirm them in what they do contribute, and tell them you need their help in getting some of the other people in the group to open up and share. Sometimes you can go as far as to ask them to commit to not being the first person to answer a question, or to only answer when you call on them—or to even work out a subtle signal you can give them when they are talking to much.

**The non-talker.** This is the quiet person in the group who never wants to share. If you think that doing so won't scare them off even more—that they just need a little prompting—try calling on them periodically to share an answer. Also, be sure to affirm them big-time when they do respond.

If that doesn't work, talk to the person outside of group. Again, affirm them in what they do contribute, and let them know that you want more people to get to hear their perspective. Remind them how valuable all of the different perspectives are to the entire group.

**The tangent-starter.** This person loves to get the group way off track by starting random tangents and rabbit trails. First of all, don't get upset at the tangents, and feel free to go off on them once in awhile. When the time comes, firmly bring the group back on track.

If the problem becomes excessive, again, talk to the person outside of group. Affirm them in what they do contribute, and let them know about the challenge you have in trying to facilitate a good group and bring across certain points each week, and how the tangents make your job harder. Ask them how they can help you.

**The insensitive person.** This individual gives advice, makes fun of answers and people, cuts people off, or does a variety of other things to offend members within the group. This person is dangerous to the health of your group! They can keep it from being a safe group more quickly than anything else. So remind everyone of the group guidelines again, and definitely have the one-on-one conversation outside of group to let the person know how important a safe group is, and what they can do to help make that happen.

Remember—the end goal of a group discussion is life change, not perfect discussions or getting through all the material. So stay open to the Holy Spirit during each group meeting and follow where he leads. Some of the most memorable group meetings occur when the leader is willing to scrap the plan for the night and address a specific need, or do something fun and spontaneous.

It's also important to spend some time in prayer before each group meeting. Ask that God would lead the discussion where he wants it to go. Remember that God is the one who does the work in people's hearts—we are not responsible for it! We are simply creating an environment for community and life change to happen.

## **IV. Common Errors in Leading Group Discussion**

- 1. Too little control.** Explain what you expect the group to do. You are in charge. Don't hesitate to bring the discussion back if it gets too far off the topic.
- 2. Too much control.** If the group "takes off" don't worry as long as it is in a direction you want to go. You may need to step in from time to time to clarify the direction.
- 3. Asking a question which can be answered either "Yes" or "No".** Learn to ask "What", "Why", "Where", "When" and "How" questions.
- 4. Asking too complex a question.** State the question simply and clearly.
- 5. Being afraid of silence after asking a question.** Don't be impatient and don't launch into a lecture to fill the void.
- 6. Immediately answering a question directed to you.** Learn to kick the question back to the group. Ask, "What does someone else think about this?" After the group has participated, either affirm their answer or handle the question directly. (Don't be the answer man.)
- 7. Being afraid to admit you don't know the answer.** Be honest. Do your best to find the answer and bring it to the next meeting.
- 8. Limiting yourself to asking questions and leading.** The leader is also a participant in the group. Share your observations but do not dominate the study.
- 9. Tending to stress your own personal application.** The leader should not expect the rest of the group to be impressed deeply with the same things that deeply impress him. Remember, God meets us where we are.
- 10. Being too concerned with getting through the material.** Be open to the moving of the Spirit and the needs of the group. There are times when the lesson must be laid aside in order to follow the Spirit's leading or minister to someone in the group.