

# Small Groups

*(make a big difference!)*

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**A small group is a gathering of people who meet together on a regular basis to accomplish a specific purpose.**

- "a gathering of people" - the most effective small groups are made up of 6-12 people. Too many or too few will stifle meaningful discussion and prohibit growth.
- "who meet together" - the most effective small groups see themselves as a group - they have an identity.
- "on a regular basis" - the most effective small groups are committed to meeting together consistently. A lack of consistency can damage group unity.
- "to accomplish a specific purpose." - the most effective small groups have a shared sense of purpose or a common goal.

## What's The Purpose Of A Small Group?

**One of the most exciting passages in Scripture is Acts 2. Luke gives an eyewitness account of the birth of the Church, and describes God's work in and through this family of believers:**

### Acts 2:42-47 (NIV)

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. [43] Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. [44] All the believers were together and had everything in common. [45] Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. [46] Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, [47] praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

**Much of what we see in Acts 2 happened because they were together. Their commitment to each other was a key characteristic of the early Church. When we live our lives separated from other believers, we limit God's work in our lives and damage our potential for growth and effective ministry. Growth and ministry happen most effectively in community with other believers — and small groups are part of this.**

**So what is the purpose of small groups? While each group may differ on specific goals, the overall purposes and mission are the same. A small group should be:**

**A place where growth happens (v. 42)**

Small groups provide the opportunity for people to interact and learn together through Bible study, discussion, fellowship, and prayer.

**A Healing Fellowship (v.43)**

God is taken seriously and great things are expected. A small group is a place where needs are taken seriously and people minister to one another.

**A Caring Community (v. 45).**

A small group is more than a group that meets together for a Bible study - it becomes a family. These are the people you can call at 3 AM when your world is collapsing and you need someone to talk to.

**A place where people meet God (v. 47).**

A small group should be a place where unbelievers see God at work, new believers can grow spiritually, and all can sense God's presence.

**A home base for mission (4:23-24).**

A small group should be a place where believers are spurred on towards love and good deeds (see Hebrews 10:24-25). It is a place where we are encouraged, challenged, and prepared to serve in God's power.

**I would encourage you to pray for your group to be an Acts 2 kind of group — pray for unity, growth, mission, and an outpouring of His Spirit. Pray that through your group lives will be changed for eternity.**

# What Happens In A Small Group?

## 1/ BIBLE STUDY/DISCUSSION

**Small groups provide people an opportunity to interact directly with the Scriptures - sharing how God is teaching them, asking questions, and learning from each other. Discussion is key** (small groups are not about a leader lecturing or teaching, but facilitating meaningful discussion). **Questions typically include,**

- What does this passage say to us?
- What can we learn from this?
- How would our lives change this week if we obey what this says?

**Group members have an opportunity to share their insights as well as ask questions, share related needs, etc...**

## 2/ SHARE BLESSINGS & NEEDS

**Small groups provide people an opportunity to encourage and pray for each other. Sharing questions typically sound like,**

- Where have you seen God at work this past week?
- Where do you need to see God at work this coming week?
- What situation are you facing that you want to know you are not alone?

**Pray for one another conversationally** (short, simple, specific), **and encourage everyone to pray. Your group may want to keep a prayer journal to record prayers, praises, and answers.**

## 3/ REFRESHMENTS and/or INFORMAL VISITING

**Acts 2:46** — They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity...

**Food was a big part of the early church gatherings. Why? Food promotes fellowship. People enjoy talking together when they have a cup of coffee in their hand or a piece of pie** (come to think of it, people enjoy anything better with coffee and pie...).

# Leading the Discussion

## **CREATE A COMFORTABLE SETTING**

An informal atmosphere will improve the group dynamic. If possible, arrange seats in circle, not rows. Make sure eye contact with each other is possible. Be sure the room is well-lit and the temperature is comfortable.

## **BEGIN ON TIME.**

If you wait for habitual latecomers, others may become frustrated, or they too will develop the habit of being late. One solution is to begin with 10-15 minutes of informal visiting time before the discussion actually begins.

## **MAKE SURE EVERYONE KNOWS EACH OTHER.**

Go out of your way to welcome newcomers and introduce them to others.

## **EXPLAIN THAT THESE ARE DISCUSSIONS, NOT LECTURES**

Each person is encouraged to participate so we can share and learn together.

## **THE BIBLE IS THE TEXTBOOK, EVEN IF YOU USE A STUDY GUIDE**

Leave reference works and commentaries at home.

## **DON'T DOMINATE THE CONVERSATION**

You can learn a lot from others. Remember the purpose is not to disseminate your knowledge - it is to learn together, grow together, and foster a caring community.

## **DON'T BE AFRAID OF SILENCE.**

Learn to discern between fruitful silence (*thinking about the question*), and empty silence (*blank stares because the question is unclear or irrelevant*). If people are thinking through an issue, resist the temptation to jump in and solve it for them.

## **MODEL ACTIVE LISTENING.**

An effective leader must be an effective listener (*see James 1:19*). It's not enough just to **hear** what someone is saying... a good listener **listens to understand**.

Respond to people – this shows you are listening.

**NON-VERBAL RESPONSES:** Face the person, make eye contact, sit attentively, nod...

**VERBAL RESPONSES:** ask questions; paraphrase; feedback; "yes, uh-huh"...

# Handling Problems

**How would you deal w/ following difficult situations?**

**1) THE TALKER – who monopolizes & dominates the discussion.**

let's find out what some of the others think...

what about those who haven't spoken yet? (don't single anyone out, though)

talk with the person privately, help them understand the importance of balanced participation

**2) THE DISTRACTER – who pursues unimportant tangents...**

you know, that's a good point – let's get to that later

let's get back to what we were talking about

ask a question to draw the discussion back

**3) THE STRONG, SILENT TYPE – when your group refuses to talk**

use silence – it's not always bad

re-word the question if needed

present opinion questions – bring up a subject they feel strongly about

make eye contact

**4) “OOOPS!” - Wrong Answers**

I can understand why you would think that, but...

That's an interesting way of looking at it

Which verse led you to that conclusion?

What do the rest of you think about this?

**5) Tough Questions**

What do others think?

I don't know - that's a great question - let's talk about it

Turn it into homework - let's find out what we can and come back to it next time...

## *The Ten Commandments For Small Group Leaders*

Thou shalt include everyone whenever it shall be possible. Thou shalt attempt to urge each person to participate, however, thou shalt not force any to talk if they wish to remain silent.

Thou shalt be aware of new people and include them forthwith.

Thou shalt not monopolize the discussion. Thou shalt refrain from answering thine own questions, else thy group grow silent straitway.

Thou shalt create a casual and relaxed atmosphere.

Thou shalt refer to people by name, rather than, “Hey, you!”.

Thou shalt not request a person to read a passage of Scripture, nor shalt thou request a person to lead out in prayer unless thou art certain they are verily able and willing.

Thou shalt establish goals – know where thou art heading as a leader, yea, even as a group.

Thou shalt treat others with respect. Thou shalt not interrupt a person, nor shalt thou ignore a statement made by another person. That which hath been spoken by another is worth listening and responding to. And, thou shalt not be harsh or judgmental, not shalt thou treat a person in thy group as a jerk.

Thou shalt not repeat in public that which hath been spoken in confidence.

Thou shalt stick to the schedule as much as is in thine power. Thou wouldst rather hear people say, “Behold, I cannot wait to learn more!”, than to hear them ask, “When will yon windbag ever be silent?!?”. Thou shalt be ever mindful of the constraints of time. However, thou shalt also be flexible. If any person art having a difficult time, thou shalt alter thine format to minister to such a one.

## When Someone Arrives in Pain

We had all settled in with our coffee, ready to begin our Bible study. But it soon became obvious that one group member was fighting back tears. So we stopped and said, *"We'd like to listen if you want to talk."* The floodgates opened, and we spent the next half hour ministering to this woman.

Small group ministry includes bearing one another's burdens. Here are some considerations for the next time someone comes to your group in pain:

- If possible, acknowledge the person's pain privately before your meeting and ask if he/she wants to let the group know what's going on. If not, keep it confidential.
- Remember that this situation is not a surprise to God. He is in control.
- Be careful not to jump in immediately with well-meaning advice. Ask questions and give them a chance to express what they are going through before you respond.
- Be sensitive to anything the Holy Spirit may bring to mind - share it but also be sensitive to the timing.
- Pray for the person as a group. Laying hands on the person can be a powerful reminder of God's love and compassion. Ask permission first - hands on shoulders or back.
- Before you leave, ask how the group can help. Check back periodically to see how they are doing.

-Marsha Crockett

# Breaking The Ice

**One of the best ways to break the ice is to use sharing questions. These invite people to tell the group something about themselves. The purpose is to help the group move beyond chit-chat & shallow conversation. In the beginning the questions should ask for information that is nonthreatening - everyone should feel comfortable participating. As the group progresses, questions should become more personal. Below are some examples:**

1/ Past Tense - questions about personal history. These should be used in the early stages of the group.

- where did you live/grow up?
- what is one vivid memory of growing up/childhood?
- what was the most memorable holiday/vacation & why?
- who was an influential person in your childhood & why?
- what is one experience of success you can remember & what did it mean to you?
- what is one quality from your parents you wanted to keep?
- when did you first hear about JC & what did you think about Him?
- when was the first time the Bible became real to you?
- what has been a significant spiritual experience for you?
- what was your relationship to the church as you grew up and how did you feel about it?

2/ Present Tense - these focus on experiences & feelings that are part of the person's life now. These should be used after the group has been together for a while.

- what spiritual discipline do you find the easiest/most difficult?
- what do you like about your job/classes? What do you dislike?
- where are you changing/growing in your life? what helps/hinders in that process?
- what is one good thing happening in your life right now?
- when you have free time what do you like to do & why?
- what is one thing you are good at & why important to you?
- what is one thing you would like to be good at?



- what is one thing you worried about/struggled with this past week?
- what are you looking forward to/reluctant to face this next week?
- when was the first time the Bible became real to you?
- what has been a significant spiritual experience for you?
- what was your relationship to the church as you grew up and how did you feel about it?
- what is one meaningful/satisfying thing you accomplished in the past month and what makes it significant to you?
- what is one decision facing you that you find difficult & why?

3/ Future Tense - These questions focus on what's ahead. They enable people to talk about their dreams & expectations, and things they want to change.

- if you knew you could not fail and money was no problem, what one thing would you like to do in the next 5 yrs.?
- if you could change one thing about yourself or develop one quality that you do not now have, what would it be?
- if you could change one thing about the world, what would it be and why?
- what would be a perfect vacation for you? where would you go, what would you do?
- if you could accomplish one thing for good in our church, community, what would it be?
- if you won ten million dollars, how would you spend it?
- what would you like to have said about you at your funeral?
- what one change would you like to make in your life in the next 2 years?
- what is one anxiety you have about the future & how will you deal with it?

4/ Affirmation - These give group members the opportunity to say some thing about each other. They help us to tell our friends why they are meaningful to us and why we value them. Important during last meetings of a group.

- what is one quality that you value or admire in one or more of the members of this group?
- what spiritual gifts do you see present in one or more members of this group? How are those gifts being used in a helpful way?
- what has been meaningful to you in this group?
- how has this group been important or helpful to you?

5/ Accountability - These deal with the implications of living out our faith. These should be used only when group members choose to make themselves accountable to the group.

- who would you like to share the good news of the Gospel with this week?
- what difficult spiritual discipline do you intend to observe consistently this week?
- how is the Holy Spirit prompting you as a result of our study? What will you do about it this week?
- how did you do with your commitment to God this past week?
- what relationship should you work on this week, and how will you do it?
- what changes do you believe you should make in your habits/actions this week? How will you tackle these?
- what do you believe God wants you to do this week? How & when will you do it?