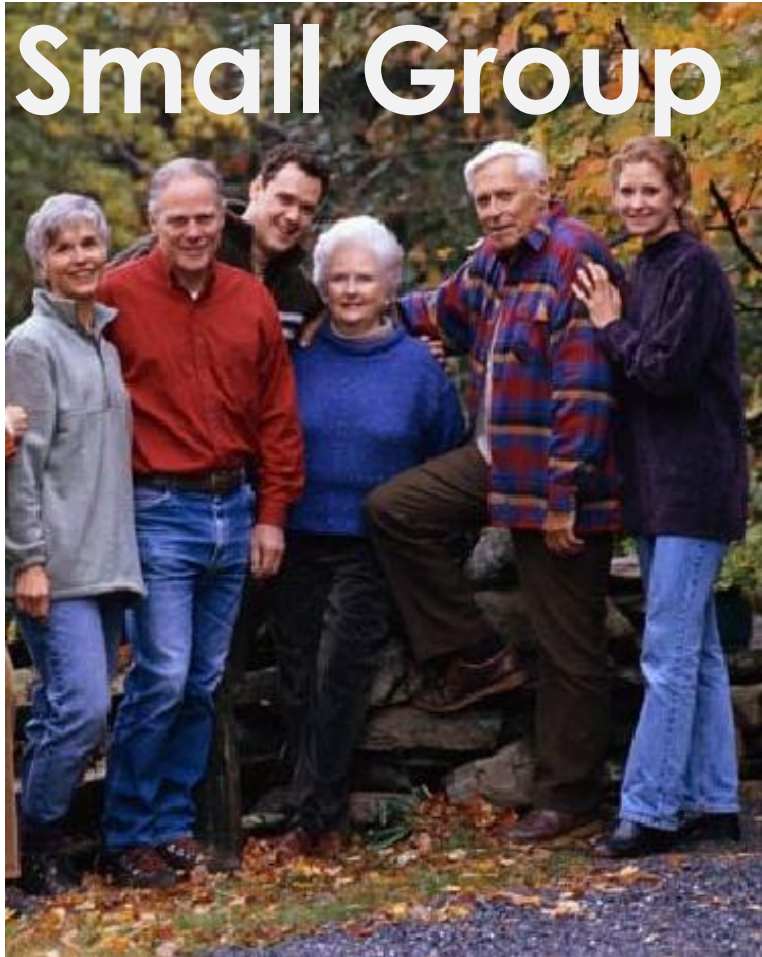


## How to Lead a Successful

# Small Group



### I. Thank You!

**F**irst, let me express my heartfelt gratitude for your interest in leading a small group. Whether you have already committed to leadership or are just considering the possibility, you are among a rare breed. Small groups are more frequently joined than led. For every leader, there are dozens of people eager to learn. So thank you.

It's not hard to understand why small group leadership seems daunting to so many. Reasons abound. Some, like myself, are introverts by nature and feel uncomfortable being the center of attention. They'd much rather blend in than stand out. The thought of leading prayer can be especially frightening.

Next, most of us are beginners when it comes to the Bible and related theological subjects, so we may lack confidence that we'll be able to guide others. We feel more in need of assistance ourselves than able to help others.

Then there's the time commitment. We fear getting in over our heads and discovering too late that the study, preparation, etc. will negatively impact our other responsibilities to job or family.

Not least, we may be intimidated by leaders we've studied under and think, "I could never be as effective as that, or as well prepared."

Finally, the challenge of selecting study topics may set your head spinning. There are literally hundreds—maybe thousands—of studies and seminars out there. Which are good and which aren't? What topics are important for my group to learn and which should I avoid?

If you are considering leading a group, one or more of these thoughts and fears has probably occurred to you, and it may well be hindering you from proceeding. This short guide is designed to put your mind at ease and equip you with the strategies and confidence you'll need to succeed.



## II. Taming Fears

Let's begin by taking a look at each of the obstacles listed above and considering how we can overcome them.



### **Fear #1. All Eyes Are on Me**

As we learn how to get over the fear of being the center of attention I'll offer some perspective that I'll come back to again and again in this guide. It's probably the most important thing a new leader needs to keep in mind: Leading is not necessarily the

same as teaching. So don't let your preconceptions about what's expected of you get in your way.

As a leader, you don't need to stand out if that's not your style. Groups don't consist of a leader and then everyone else. Rather you, as a leader, are just another member of the group. You don't need to talk any more than any other participant. You don't need to sit at the head of the table. You don't need to have answers to everyone's questions. Once each meeting begins, feel free to blend in.

Much of what a small group leader does will take place outside the group meeting when no one else is watching. Leaders often (but not always!) provide a home for the group to gather in. I'll talk more about the options for where to gather later. If you chose to open your home, you'll want to make sure everyone has a comfortable chair, knows where the bathroom is, and is aware of where they can conveniently park.

Similarly, it's a leader's prerogative to set meeting times and to decide how often the group will gather and for how long.

Finally, leaders are free to delegate responsibilities, and should. Exercise your authority freely. Don't force anyone to do anything they aren't comfortable with, but ask, for example, if someone would be willing to lead prayer each week,

or provide the snack. By finding things for everyone in the group to be responsible for, you'll accomplish a number of important goals:

- a. First, you ease the load you personally have to carry and reduce prep time;
- b. No one is good at everything and if you can find some capable assistants to handle things you struggle with, things will go more smoothly and the whole group will benefit;
- c. One of your goals as leader should be to encourage others to become leaders in turn. By delegating responsibilities you will be giving others a taste of leadership, building their confidence, and encouraging them to grow.

Whether you chose to meet in your home or at the church, your primary responsibility at each session will be to get things started on time, start the DVD player if you will be using a video study, and wrap things up on time.

Almost every study you might chose to lead will come with a leader's guide containing lots of discussion questions. Pick a handful that you can pose to the group, then sit back and let the discussion unfold.

Pay attention not just to what people are saying, but to facial expressions and body language. Very often you'll see, for example, a puzzled expression on someone's face. When you do, say, "You look like you have a question," or "Do you disagree with what's been said so far? Share your thoughts."

Or if two people start talking at the same time, your job as leader is to politely say, "John, we'll hear from you first, then Sarah can chime in because she has something to offer, too."

Or if one or two people are doing all the talking, say, "Who else has any thoughts?"

In short, you are a referee who guides the discussion, rather than a teacher who supplies the facts. Teaching is the job of whoever is talking on the video. I've found that more often than not in the groups I've led, I can show the video for the session, then say, "What do think about what you've just heard?" And for the rest of the session I hardly need to say another word.



### **Fear #2. I Don't Know the Answers!**

As I've already said, you don't need to. The video presenter or the study guide will provide the expertise; you are just a facilitator.

Naturally, as leader, people will often tend to address their questions to you, but don't feel compelled to answer them yourself. Not only is it not necessary, but it tends to put a damper on good discussion because once you've spoken your mind, people are likely to think, "Well, there's the final word. Discussion over." Instead, the best answer a leader can provide is often, "That's a great question. Does anyone have any thoughts about that?"

Of course, not needing to answer every question doesn't mean you shouldn't come to each session prepared. Preview any videos you plan on using so you can anticipate what's coming. Oftentimes questions will come to your own mind while you're watching and you can jot them down and use them to start a good discussion when the group gathers. Read the accompanying leader's guide that comes with most studies. Preview any questions you find in the workbook, if one is being used—so you can get an idea of the direction the discussion is liable to take.

If there are good questions in the study materials you'll want to be sure to leave adequate time to address them. Often I'll say something like, "We're having a good discussion and I hate to move on, but there's another good question in

our book that I'm anxious to talk about."

By the way, I recommend against trying to go through study guides question by question and trying to answer them all. There usually just isn't time. Instead, ask "Which of these questions really got you thinking?"

Very often someone will say, "This question isn't in the book, but I've always wondered about it." I almost always lay the book and any prepared questions aside when this happens and invite feedback from the group on unanticipated questions. Questions posed by members, even if tangential, usually result in more compelling discussions than arbitrary discussion points printed in a workbook. The workbook will always be available to fall back on if no one offers questions of their own, but let the conversation go in a direction that members are truly interested in.

I have often thought that a group led by a leader without any answers could be the basis for a really vibrant and exciting experience. Here's how it could work. As people prepare for each session by reading or watching a video, ask them to jot down, say, three questions that occur to them that they'd like to have an answer to. This would work especially well when they are assigned a Bible passage to read.

When the group convenes, go around the table and invite everyone to share one or two of their questions. Write them all down as they do. Then ask everyone to vote on the 3-4 questions they find most interesting.

When you've narrowed the group's questions down to 3-4, break the group up into pairs, or groups of 3 and assign each breakout group one of the questions to research. Have a table ready with stacks of Bible atlases, dictionaries, commentaries, etc. You can find these in the church library. Give everyone 15-20 minutes to look for an answer to their question, then spend the remainder of the session sharing what everyone has learned. This way you can have a really deep session without ever having to answer a single question yourself!



### **Fear #3. Where Will I Find the Time?**

Small group leadership can take as much or (very nearly) as little time as you chose to devote to it. Excessive preparation doesn't necessarily make for a better group experience.

I'll share a personal experience from my own very first leadership experience that demonstrates this. It was the best lesson about leadership and trust I've ever been taught.

I was tabbed to lead a 2½-hour Bible study and spent days assembling notes so if necessary I could talk non-stop for 2 ½ hours and not run out of things to say. I spent the day of the meeting at my office getting no work done but instead typing up all my notes so I'd be set when the group met. That evening I headed to the church to set up and realized to my horror that I'd left my briefcase in my office in Harrisburg. After a momentary panic I told God, "I'm trusting you to make this work." And I had a great discussion without any notes. Most of the things I'd prepared I didn't need anyway. The discussion went in its own direction—one I'd never anticipated. So don't over-prepare!

A great way to prevent overwork or burnout is to find a willing co-leader. This can work a number of ways. The two of you can alternate who leads each session, giving each of you one week out of every two when you can be just another member with minimal responsibilities.

Alternately, you can share each week's duties. Or one of you can lead an entire 4-6 week study, and then the other co-leader can handle the next short-term study. This works well if one leader has travel plans and will be away for an extended time.

And again, by finding a co-leader you will be advancing every leader's goal of equipping others to lead as well.

When looking for a co-leader there are a few things to keep in mind. One of the biggest hurdles for a new leader to

overcome is gaining a level of familiarity among the congregation. Once you've led a few studies you'll have developed a following and people who have been part of your past groups will be more likely to study with you again, but first-time leaders can't depend on a loyal following. It often works well for an established leader to partner with a new volunteer. The veteran will draw past members into a group and during the course of the study they'll build a relationship with the new leader that will bear fruit in the future.



### **Fear #4. I Can't Do It that Way**

The first time I ever led a small group, I had just completed the very same study under the leadership of a pastor who'd been teaching and preaching for 30 years. He had a great leadership style. He'd take stories from the Bible and compare them with personal experiences he'd encountered during three decades of counseling people and being a spiritual leader. He had a heartwarming real-world case study for every lesson the Bible teaches.

I had been attending church regularly for about a year, and had zero leadership experience. The very first thing I recognized as a leader was that I couldn't lead the same way he did. I needed to find my own style. That realization paved the way for a successful group.

Don't try to be someone you're not. You may have seen lots of other leaders be successful with a certain approach. If their style suits your own personality or experience, great. But if not don't try to copy it. Find your own style.

For me, that style was just the opposite of what I've recommended so far. I'm an avid reader. While my personal, real-world experience was non-existent, I'd read through Bible commentaries extensively and in doing so had encountered answers to hundreds of common questions people ask when they read the Bible. So I became "the Answer Man."

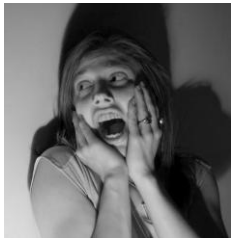
You don't have to be that guy, but for me, it was a style I was comfortable with.

I typically had multiple answers for any question the group was liable to ask. When fielding a question, I'd say, "I've come across three different interpretations of this passage. Let me share them each with you and you can decide which seems right to you." That way, even people who thought they understood a scripture passage were exposed to new meanings that they might not have considered before.

Your job is to find a style the works for you, not to copy someone else's approach. Again, I rarely follow study guides question by question. But that approach might help provide some leaders with a sense of security and predictability that they find essential. Great. Go with it.

I described above a leadership style that might be adopted by folks with just the opposite background as myself, who haven't got lots of ready answers to questions. This approach turns a leader's lack of expertise in the Bible into an advantage by, hopefully, making it a fun challenge first to stump the group and then for the whole group to work together to find answers. That's just one more style.

I've had leaders who did the majority of the talking during their sessions and leaders who said very little. I've had leaders who used prepackaged studies and leaders who've created their own material. In this regard, use whatever you find in this guide that you find helpful, but consider all of it just suggestions. If you have another preference for how to lead your group, run with it.



### **5. Where Can I Find Study Materials?**

MCC owns dozens of prepackaged studies on a wide variety of topics. I've compiled a list of what's available in our own library, as well as some inexpensive short studies that are available for on-line download. Copies are available at the information desks.

## **III. A Multiplicity of Options**

"Small group" is a generic term that encompasses a variety of formats you can choose from. The following descriptions will provide you with some of the more proven and popular ones. Each has some advantages and disadvantages. I'll briefly outline each and offer some suggestions for avoiding some of the common pitfalls.

### **1. Location**

#### **a. Home Groups**

Most of our ongoing adult small groups meet in members' homes. This format has the advantage of creating an informal, friendly atmosphere where relationships might develop more naturally than in a formal classroom setting. Relationship-building is an important outcome of small groups and meeting in homes is most conducive to this end.



Keep in mind that some potential group members are likely to have had bad church experiences. It's not at all uncommon to have people say, "I don't mind meeting to talk about the Bible, but I have no use for the church." Meeting in homes makes it easier to form connections with people of this mindset. Homes also make it easier to plan cookouts and other recreational events that help groups cater to their members' social needs.

A potential downside to residential groups is available space. Groups that meet in members' homes are typically limited in number by the size of the host home and may have trouble growing by welcoming new members, which should be a goal of all our groups. We don't want to form cliques and that's a danger when groups go off-

site and exclude newcomers.

Also, not everyone lives in close proximity to the church or to other members, so they may feel excluded from hosting a group, or find some residential meeting sites inconvenient.

### **b. Church Groups**

The alternative to home groups is to gather at the church. This offers the advantages of releasing yourself from the burden of having to spend the hours prior to the meeting making your home presentable, providing a location everyone is already familiar with and knows how to get to, and gives you ready access to equipment and resources you might not have in your home.



On the other hand, there are few rooms at the church that offer the sort of intimate, comfortable atmosphere that you can create at home. I'm hoping to create more such spaces at our three campuses, but for the time being, most of the available rooms are rather cold and sterile. When meeting at the church you may also need to contend with other groups and activities that could potentially cause a conflict or distraction. If you chose to meet at the church, it's important that you arrange well in advance to reserve a room.

## **2. Duration**

### **a. Long-Term Groups**

The next thing you'll need to consider if your group is a new one is its duration. Some groups come together on an ongoing basis with no pre-planned date of conclusion. They chose one topic of study after an-



other, or one activity (i.e. breakfast groups) and continue to meet as long as the members keep coming out. One goal of groups is to build deeper relationships, and long-term groups are typically better equipped to accomplish this than short-term groups. Members of ongoing

groups have plenty of opportunities to learn not just what other members think about scripture, but also about their hobbies, their peeves, their families, their dreams, etc. In short-term groups, members rarely get to know fellow participants so well, because just as friendships begin to form and people begin to open up, the group disbands.

On the other hand, a common danger long-term groups face is a loss of purpose. It's easy over time for such groups to continue to meet simply for the sake of meeting, or to avoid a sense of failure if they should quit. To be on guard against losing direction and forgetting their purpose, I recommend that every long-term group draft a mission statement to serve as a personal reminder of what it is they're all about.

It's also very important to get past the presumption that it's somehow a failure if a group decides to disband. Sometimes that's the very best thing they can do. People have busy schedules. They can only take on so much. If they're trapped in a group that no longer meets their needs or has no purpose, they need to be freed to use their time more productively. In my experience, most groups have a limited shelf life, and knowing when to say, "You know, it's time to move on," is important. Another goal of all groups is to take what you learn and apply it out in the real world. Ongoing groups can easily get caught up in their agendas and forget to

go into all the world. Sometimes disbanding is a necessary step.

### b. Short-Term Groups



By “short-term” I mean any group that convenes for a predetermined length of time (even if that time is a year

or more) for a particular study topic, and then disbands according to plan.

Some short-term groups are fairly intense. Disciple Bible studies, for example, run from 32-34 weeks for 2½ hours per week. That’s plenty of time to get to know what makes people tick. Other short-term groups, however, meet for an hour to 90 minutes per week for 4 weeks. It’s hard if not impossible to build deep relationships in that context, so short-term groups are at a disadvantage when it comes to building relationships. This is not always inevitable and a good leader can usually think of ways to supplement formal meetings with cook-outs and such, but it takes some extra effort to accomplish what tends to happen naturally in groups that meet for extended lengths of time.

The advantage short-term groups have is that there is typically a strong felt need that brings such groups together so a sense of purpose is easier to maintain.

Short-term groups can also be easier to recruit because they call for a more modest commitment, both from leaders and group members. Short-term groups are a good way to “test the waters” of small group ministry without finding yourself in over your head.

### c. A Hybrid Model

I personally favor a sort of compromise between these two models that avoids most of the pitfalls of either. I like to think of it as the “toy train around the Christmas tree” model.

Everyone knows what a model train layout looks like. It makes a loop around the base of the tree and then comes back to where it started.

Typically, there’s a station situated somewhere along the loop.

Every trip around the tree represents one short-term study. When the train comes back around to the station, that study ends, and everyone has the choice to get off the train if they want a breather, or if the next study doesn’t interest them. Their departure is an opportunity for some others to get on board for a trip or two around the tree.



In this way many more people can be brought into the group than would be possible if everyone was expected to participate in every study or activity. Not everyone is always present, but after a few trips around the tree, everyone has had a chance to get to know everyone else, and even when folks hop off for a turn or too, they aren’t forgotten, but are included in our prayers and such. They’re always welcome to come back, and before too long they almost always do.

There’s no sense of guilt or disappointment when someone hops off, but cause for celebration whenever they return. Because of all the reshuffling, the group never grows stale. It’s format I’d be happy to see utilized more often.

### 3. Purpose

From what I've said already I hope you are beginning to get the idea that there are multiple purposes behind small groups and that most



are common to all groups. One of the most common mistakes leaders make is to focus exclusively on one of the purposes while neglecting the others. In a healthy group all should be addressed from time to time.

At the same time, most groups have a primary purpose that will take center stage. All the other purposes will be complimentary. Let's briefly consider each of these outcomes that all groups should keep in mind and describe each so you as a leader can decide which should be your primary emphasis.

#### a. Study

This is the most common type of group. Typical gatherings and discussions revolve around a formal video study, or book, with the aim of learning what it means to follow Christ, what the Bible says, and how to apply it to our daily lives. Personal enrichment is the primary goal.

#### b. Fellowship

Groups can play a key role in people's lives by providing a context for social interaction. Even when ostensibly joining a study group, very often a member's real motive for participation is the opportunity to pass time with some like-minded friends. Groups can be a great form of relaxation, or a diversion in an otherwise lonely or overly busy day.

This becomes the primary purpose, for example, of breakfast groups. In contrast to study groups, fellowship

groups often provide a better context for learning about each other on a personal level. In a study group, focus will most often be on what's going on in a particular passage of scripture. Less often will talk turn to what's going on in each other's lives. Fellowship groups recognize that there is a time to lay textbooks aside and focus on each other.

#### c. Support/Mentoring

In any given congregation, some members will be experiencing crises and looking for guidance and encouragement. Again, every group should include time for members to express prayer concerns, but sometimes people are going through issues that require more than a quick prayer.

Because of the nature of the issues members may be facing, confidentiality (important in every group) is absolutely crucial in support groups. It's also a good idea to undergo some formal training before attempting to lead such a group as the issues will be far from trivial and any advice that's offered should be well-informed.

#### d. Service

Another danger faced by small groups is to focus exclusively on the needs of group members, and thus become self-



centered. While groups certainly should cater to the spiritual needs of their members, they should also look beyond the walls of their own meeting place and remember that every Christian has a call to serve those in need.

Small groups are potentially the church's greatest tool



for outreach. They provide ready-made teams with existing communication networks, established relationships, and compatible schedules. They can thus be mobilized at a moment's notice with a minimum of fuss. Yet too few groups emphasize community service.

Small groups can become Satan's most effective tool for rendering Christians ineffective if he succeeds in using them to keep us behind closed doors with our heads in our books or our breakfast menus.

#### **f. Multi-Tasking**

It's not hard to incorporate many if not all of these purposes into any group's ongoing activities. For example, if your fellowship group is weak when it comes to learning, assign someone to kick off each gathering with a brief, 5-minute devotion, using *The Upper Room* or some similar devotional guide.

If your study group has been neglecting service, consider devoting one month per year, or one week per month, to doing a service project rather than studying.

If your members are learning more about what was happening in Job's life than in each others' plan a summer barbeque or family campout that provides a context for informal, friendly banter and a chance to meet family members.

### **IV. Recruiting and Retention**

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In my experience, there are two equal and opposite issues when it comes to building a new group. The most immediate is likely to be finding willing participants. Small group membership is a big commitment that not everyone is eager to make. Consider some of the suggestion outlined above in regard to the duration of your group in order to avoid having your group perceived as one that's too demanding.

Once you begin actively recruiting, there are several

strategies to keep in mind. The first and easiest way to recruit is simply to announce your group in the worship bulletins and church newsletter and hope for the best. In fact, this strategy is so simple and easy that it's often all leaders do in the way of recruiting. But while this is a necessary step, it's not really a sufficient one if you want to maximize your chances for success.

First-time leaders, or leaders who are new to the congregation have a tougher job. When it comes to leaders, familiarity breeds not contempt, but rather a certain level of comfort among participants. New leaders will have to try harder to get folks to join them. Printed announcements probably won't be enough.

Fortunately, there are other ways to build a group. Most of us already have connections with other churchgoers that we can leverage. If you sing in the choir, extend a personal invitation to all the choir members. If you serve on a committee, recruit from among your fellow committee members.

Don't forget to leverage your relationships outside the church as well. The guys and gals on your bowling team might be open to meeting together. Or invite some neighbors to your house for a monthly cook-out and chat. This is often a great way to connect people who wouldn't normally attend church. By picking study topics like managing money, building better marriages, or coping with rebellious teens, even those who might not be interested in overtly Christian topics like "Images of Christ in the Old Testament" may be willing to give your group a try.

Again, we live in a world filled with lots of competing opportunities, so don't neglect the needs of group members once you've successfully recruited them. Most veteran leaders have had the experience of members who show up for one or two sessions and then vanish without explanation. You can reduce dissatisfaction with the

group by inviting feedback. After one or two sessions, I typically ask the group to let me know whether the schedule is working well for them. Occasionally, I've adjusted our start time after being told that some members are having trouble getting to the sessions on time. More than once, I've even had groups tell me they wanted to meet longer, because they wanted more time for discussion! Be careful not to disrupt a functioning group for the sake of one disgruntled member, but be flexible and if there's a consensus, consider adjusting your schedule.

*Peace,  
Bruce Heydt,  
Director of Adult Discipleship Ministries*



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